

Safdar Hashmi: forever young

He recast theatre, in our age, as a means of protest, revolt, and entertainment for the masses. A new book retells the story of the man behind the legend

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Early death invests the departed with a particular halo. Possibly because it enshrines them with a longing for what they could have achieved had they lived longer, although it is impossible to imagine them in prosaic dotage. Che Guevara's murder, Bhagat Singh's hanging, John Lennon's assassination robbed them of their life, no doubt, but their killings also gave them an afterlife which might not have come their way had they lived long.

Safdar Hashmi (1954-1989), one of India's brightest modern theatre directors, was brutally murdered, allegedly by supporters of a political party, while he was performing a play ironically called *Halla Bol*, in support of workers. He was struck on the head 20 times with an iron road. Thereby he became a more potent symbol of resistance than if he had lived long. Undeniably, he had already forever changed the direction and fate of street theatre in India, but his persona acquired valence far beyond his work because of the way in which he was snatched away, so cruelly, so unnecessarily, so avoidably.

The lore around the death is stirring. Over 15,000 people marched with his funeral procession. His partner and wife Moloyashree Hashmi or Mala, perhaps the most indefatigable theatre activist in the country, led the troupe back to the site the next day, to finish performing the play; they toured the entire country afterwards.

Satyajit Ray, Ravi Shankar, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Utpal Dutt joined demonstrations; Dilip Kumar stood with Hashmi's picture in protest; and Hashmi's birthday, four months later, was spontaneously celebrated as National Street Theatre Day, with over 30,000 street performances across the country. Hashmi was the right man at the right time for transforming the grammar and content of street theatre in India.

He was born to an unusual political family which had roots in Jamiat ul Ulema, the clerical outfit that opposed the Muslim

League and Partition and fought against British rule but supported the Communist party. A peripatetic childhood, between Aligarh, where his father lived, and Delhi, where his mother pursued a career in education, provided a skein of uncommon experiences. The upbringing inclined Hashmi to the arts. He joined St Stephen's College in 1970 at his father's urging. But the times, they were a-changing. Students were killing and being killed in Bengal; there were jail breaks; even St Stephen's College was producing strikes, walkouts and the occasional Naxalite. Theatre across the country was changing shape.

Emergency found Hashmi in Srinagar, where he studied Brecht and other theatre masters. He conducted workshops, mounted enormously successful productions against the odds, and dabbled in television. On returning to Delhi, he found himself at a crossroads. His theatre company, Janam (Jana Natya Manch) had taken big plays to the people, but in the post-Emergency world it was groping for new direction. Then, a senior Communist leader asked them to write a play about a workers' basic demands for a canteen and a cycle stand at a chemical factory in Mohannagar, New Delhi.

Hashmi and Rakesh Saxena wrote *Machine* virtually overnight. After its initial success, they forced a performance on more than 7,000 unsuspecting workers at an All India Trade Union Congress session at Talkatora Stadium. The play was only 12 minutes long but it was perhaps the most influential 12 minutes in 50 years of Indian theatre history. In Hashmi's words: "After we sang the final song, the trade union delegates jumped over the rails. They lifted us on their shoulders. We became the heroes... within a month, *Machine* was being performed in many Indian languages"

Machine (1978) was Janam's most successful play, which heavily influenced its work, and in due course, influenced Indian street theatre. Other successful plays included *Aurat*, which has since done over 2,000 shows. Hashmi toured the country and his plays were translated and performed everywhere from Assam to Kerala. He had hit upon a new style of street theatre — consisting of songs, a new kind of popular language, and humour — which was like "a newspaper in action, to make explicit our



stand on contemporary events..."

In the first 10 years alone, Janam did over 4,300 performances of 22 plays in 90 cities. The energy and commitment required for this is breathtaking, of course, but it was not driven by politics alone. Hashmi knew the limitations of conventional theatrical performances, which, Ebrahim Alkazi and the

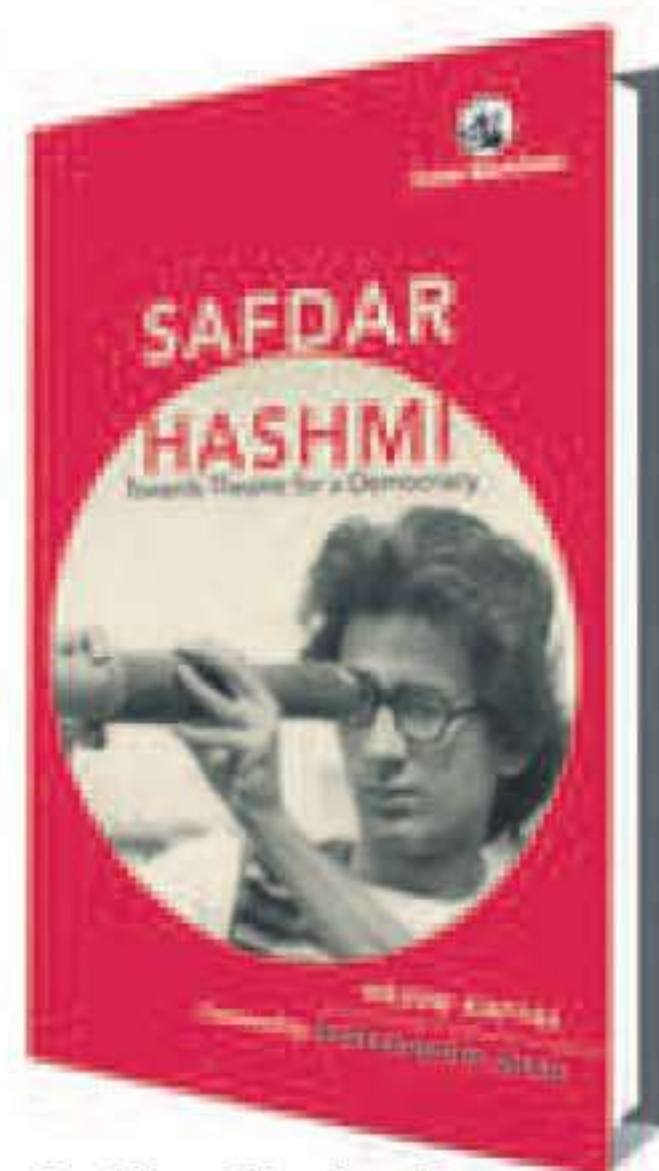
Massive protests followed the killing of Safdar Hashmi in 1989.
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National School of Drama notwithstanding, served only a minuscule section of the urban bourgeoisie and was neither a major cultural force, nor a living, popular art form. Janam met the need for a fully developed people's theatre, one that was available to the masses and could be taken to them.

Apart from his gifts as a writer-director-producer, Hashmi was blessed with the right temperament for the work he did. If street theatre is so universal in India today, it is because he transformed it from being a political propaganda tool to entertainment that could play a spiritual role for the masses. It could motivate people to become stronger in their resistance. All the rest

of us, content with wooing and wowing audiences in air-conditioned auditoria, as Naseeruddin Shah writes in his moving foreword, were shown up by him.

His martyrdom, in the act, has left the rest of us permanently consigned to the second class. After Hashmi, we will never be good enough, noble enough. We need more books, more plays, more films on Safdar Hashmi. We shall be permanently indebted to him, and shall long for him forever.



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Anjum Katyal
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Mahmood Farooqui is known for reviving *Dastangoi*, the lost art of Urdu storytelling