

GIRISH KARNAD

Brittingham Visiting Scholar
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The Department of Theatre and Drama and the Center for South Asia are honored to welcome celebrated playwright, actor, director, and screenwriter Girish Raghunath Karnad to the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus from 19-25 October 2009. Karnad has been a commanding presence in Indian theatre, film, television, and cultural life more generally for more than four decades. His early plays—*Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), and *Hayavadana* (*Horse-Head*, 1971)—were a seminal part of the effort by a whole generation of playwrights to reshape Indian theatre as a major contemporary national tradition in the later twentieth century. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Karnad emerged as an important figure in the “parallel” or “middle” cinema movement, with leading roles in such groundbreaking films as Pattabhi Raman Reddy’s *Samskara* (*A Rite for a Dead Man*, 1970), Shyam Benegal’s *Nishant* (*Evening’s End*, 1973), and Manthan (*The Churning*, 1976), Basu Bhattacharya’s *Swami* (*Husband*, 1977), and Jabbar Patel’s *Umbartha* (*The Threshold*, 1982). Over the same period he was the screenwriter and/or director for a number of acclaimed feature films: *Vamsha vriksha* (*FamilyTree*, with B. V. Karanth, 1971), *Kaadu* (1973), and *Ondanandu kaaladalli* (*Once Upon a Time*, 1978) in Kannada; and *Godhuli* (*Dusk*, with B. V. Karanth, 1977), *Bhumika* (*The Role*, 1978), *Utsav* (*Festival*, 1984), and *Cheluvi* (1993) in Hindi. Karnad returned actively to playwriting in 1987 with *Naga-mandala* (*Play with a Cobra*), and the classic plays of this second period include *Tale-Danda* (*Death by Decapitation*, 1989), *Agni mattu male* (*The Fire and the Rain*, 1994), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), *Bali* (*Sacrifice*, 2002), and *Broken Images* (2004).

Karnad’s unique position as a front-rank playwright, media celebrity, and public intellectual rests on the skill and imagination with which he has balanced his various artistic and cultural roles. As a playwright he belongs perhaps to the last generation of urban Indian writers who encountered the “great” and “little” traditions of myth, poetry, history, legend, and folklore at first hand in their earliest childhood, and whose adult authorial selves were shaped profoundly by this cultural legacy mediated by colonialism. In plays such as *Yayati*, *Agni mattu male*, and *Bali* Karnad employs myth not merely as an archetypal narrative to be reinscribed in the present, but a structure of meaning worth exploring in itself because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection on human relations without the constraints of theatrical realism or a contemporary *mise-en-scène*. His history plays, notably *Tughlaq*, *Tale-danda*, and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* use events from India’s premodern or precolonial past to uncannily parallel “the trials of the nation” in the postcolonial period. The major plays based on folk narratives—*Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*—are iconic examples of the use of “traditional” performance conventions in a new, quintessentially Indian “modern” urban theatre; by giving women characters a centrality and freedom largely absent in urban realist drama, they also contribute in important ways to the theatrical discourse of gender. Karnad’s major drama thus acknowledges and evaluates the presence of the past in Indian politics and culture. His work in film and television, however, is mainly a critique of the entrenched power relations, especially in the quasi-feudal countryside, that contribute to the problems of economic and social justice in post-independence India. As an actor, director, and screenwriter, he has focused repeatedly on coercive sociopolitical structures that eventually create effective modes of resistance among the powerless and dispossessed.

Karnad's plays and films have been a formative part of performance and media culture in contemporary India since the mid-1960s. The plays have been performed in every major Indian language, including English, with such nationally-prominent directors as Ebrahim Alkazi, Vijaya Mehta, Satyadev Dubey, B. V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Shyamanand Jalan, Amal Allana, and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. They have also been translated into Hungarian, Polish, German, and Spanish, and have had productions abroad at the Deutsches Nationaltheater (Weimar), the Leipziger Schauspielhaus, and the Berlin Theatre Festival in Germany; the Festival of India, the Leicester Haymarket Theatre, the Young Vic, and BBC Radio in Britain; and the Guthrie Theatre and the Ark Ensemble in the USA. Karnad's films have represented India at the International Film Festival (New Delhi), the Festival of India (London), the Tashkent Film Festival, the Festival de Trois Continents at Nantes (France), the Gotenberg Film Festival (Sweden), the London Film Festival, the Toronto Film Festival, the Film India program at the Museum of Modern Art (New York), and the First International Festival of Documentary Films at Islamia City (Egypt).

Karnad's work in his multiple artistic fields has been recognized since the 1970s with numerous state and national awards, fellowships, and appointments. Following a three-year stint at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar (1961-1964), he won a Homi Bhabha Fellowship for creative work in folk theatre in 1970, and the annual playwriting award from the National Academy of Performing Arts for Hayavadana in 1972. Tale-danda was recognized as the best play of 1989 by the Karnataka Theatre Academy, the Karnataka Academy of Letters, and the National Academy of Letters (1992-94). Karnad was Co-Chair of the Joint Media Committee of the Indo-US Subcommission on Education and Culture from 1984-93, Visiting Professor and Fulbright Fellow at the University of Chicago in 1987-88, and an honorary doctoral fellow of Karnataka University, Dharwad, in 1994. In 1999 he received India's two most prestigious literary prizes—the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award and the Kalidasa Samman. He has also received two of the highest civilian honors conferred by the Government of India, the Padma Shri (1974), and the Padma Bhushan (1992). Awards for his work in the medium of film include the President's Gold Medal for Best Indian film for Samskara (1970), the National Award for Excellence in Directing for Vamsha Vriksha (shared with B.V. Karanth, 1972), the National Award for Best Screenplay for Bhumika (shared with Shyam Benegal and Satyadev Dubey, 1978), and the National Award for Best Film on Environment Conservation for Cheluvu (1993), aside from national and state awards for acting, directing, screenwriting, and documentary film-making. Karnad has served as Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (1974-75), as Chairman of the National Academy of Performing Arts (1988-93), and as Director of the Nehru Centre, London (2000-2003). Most recently, he has been appointed a World Theatre Ambassador by UNESCO's International Theatre Institute in Paris.