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PLAY REVIEW

Female, fat, and fifty: A review of Jyoti Dogra's play *Maas*

ANUSHA RAVISHANKAR

Maas. Writer, director and actor: Jyoti Dogra. 2023, 120 minutes. English and Hindi.

It takes a certain kind of confidence in your craft, and gumption as a theatre maker, to begin your play with a long sequence miming a strip tease, fully clothed, in absolute silence. The audience is rapt, almost transfixed in that eerie silence. It is clear that Jyoti Dogra is not afraid of uncomfortable silences. Rather, she is in complete control of them throughout the hundred and twenty minutes of her one-woman play *Maas*. The play is a meditation on shame that invites you to listen to its most raw, honest and heartbreaking conversations. The locus of her shame is her body. She is "female, fat, and fifty," and she plans to unpack that with us. There is no fourth wall. Dogra directly addresses the audience. *Maas* performed its first show for an educational institution at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, hosted by the Hebbbar Gallery and Art Centre. Playing to a packed auditorium full of young audience members, Jyoti spoke about everything from acne scars and diet culture to postpartum weight gain and menopause.

Dogra, who is the writer, director and sole actor of *Maas*, deploys her signature theatrical prose using nonlinear vignettes where various characters — some named, some not — march in and out to drive the point home. While it may seem like she is caricaturing some of them, they make vital contributions to the narrative. Her body is admittedly her strongest theatrical device. The motif of the wagging finger to denote shaming is recurring. You see the finger wagging long after she is finished talking. As if it were involuntary. The words

used to shame her melt into guttural gibberish reminiscent of ghosts in horror films. Her voice repeatedly transforms into bestial anger. Dogra wants you to confront her visible shame as a middle aged "overweight" woman. Her brilliance is in being able to evoke empathy for her characters from an audience less than half her age. She is somehow intimately aware of your insecurities and demonstrates that these insecurities are not yours alone. It is a show that is visually gruesome and violent. The violence is even more unsettling because she performs it on herself. You recognise it because you have probably treated yourself similarly. Simultaneously, it is a hilarious play; Dogra pulls the rug from under your feet and you find yourself laughing as you fall.

Her characters receive health and fitness advice from well-meaning friends and family. While some of the suggestions are harmless, like getting a gym membership or starting a yoga practice, there are also serious medical procedures like liposuction and abdominoplasty that are casually recommended by a friend. While cosmetic procedures are largely deemed as safe, there are risks involved that have devastating cosmetic outcomes and potentially life-threatening effects. Dogra returns repeatedly to a moment in the play that serves as the hook to bring the audience back to feeling a certain helplessness that she associates with her relationship with food — eating chips. It is performed through mime with a grim and vulgar gluttony that feels insatiable. Her insistence on returning to her cherished chips signals struggles with binge eating to regulate emotional pain. She is not able to articulate this as an addiction to food which feels familiar as it appears to be common among individuals residing in India; but lays bare

all the symptoms that point in that direction. She admits to being on some form of restrictive diet since she was a teenager — which would effectively mean she has not had a healthy relationship with food for over three decades as an adult. Like most addiction narratives her return to binge eating chips after curtailing her calorie intake is seen as a failure of willpower and hence intrinsically enmeshed with feelings of worth and worthiness gesturing to her possibly dealing with internalised weight stigma — the phenomenon whereby a higher-weight individual devalues themselves because of their weight. She is not offered any holistic help by her friends and family. Nobody seems invested enough to help her chart a recovery and healing process towards a healthier lifestyle suited to her needs and capabilities.

We are also invited to witness her body changing through the process of ageing. One of her characters called "Suman aunty" is a doctor who is going through menopause. While you would expect this particular character's experience to be slightly different, in that she might not succumb to the opinions and judgements of others in relation to what she is experiencing, you hear her nonetheless being repeatedly shamed by her family, and ostracised for how she chooses to express her sexuality and sexual desire during this period. Cultural norms have an influence on the women's attitudes. The very perception of self is thus dependent on how society perceives them. Studies have found body image and self-esteem are major contributors to the severity of menopausal symptoms and experiences owing to this transition. This is the point at which Dogra flips the script. The character progressively becomes what appears to be erratic, loud and unabashed. While this gets Dogra the desired laughs from the audience, there is also a palpable discomfort in the room because watching a menopausal woman completely shed inhibitions and reject external scrutiny and shaming is novel. There is also the question of how much agency women have when it comes to their own bodies and how they choose to treat them, because healthcare providers pay little attention to women's perceptions regarding menopause.

While *Maas* is entertaining, it can also exhaust the audience with the sheer amount of material and intensity of attention it demands from you. It is a long play. She is speaking about social anxiety, depression, patriarchy, body shaming, fitness, beauty and the health industry, all while inviting you into her inner world exposing the pain and turmoil housed there. Humour is perhaps the only respite. Using instances of unsolicited recommendations from social media applications, influencers, friends and family, *Maas* exposes how an individual in a vulnerable position absorbs this as legitimate advice on a wide range of health and often medical concerns. For instance, one of her characters subscribes to a "no carbs diet". The sources feel entitled to unwittingly pose as experts when it comes to health, fitness and especially weight loss. The person who is struggling does not, in their vulnerable position,

seek any form of authenticity and legitimacy before accepting and acting on these recommendations.

The fitness and wellness industries in India are growing rapidly. In the first two quarters of the year 2020 alone, India saw an increase in downloads for health and fitness apps by 157%. Dogra leaves you wondering about the motivations and intentions of these industries. Whether they benefit from the unrealistic standards of beauty and fitness they advertise. In one scene, Dogra, in tears, tells us about the advertisement banner outside her home, "on that banner there's this young stick-thin girl and she has this big packet of chips..." "I want to be that girl, you know, stick-thin, twenty-two or twenty-one, eating chips. I don't want to be the one making a play about fat."

Dogra is able to seamlessly guide the audiences to imagine scenes quite different from each other. You imagine her in a stadium, a playground, her childhood home, a dance club, a class room, even a wedding reception, without any set changes or props. This is largely thanks to Anuj Chopra's clever light design which when accompanied by Dogra's writing builds a compelling scenography. While Dogra is transforming herself into various characters, she is layering and shedding clothes constantly. Pallavi Patel on costumes has done a remarkable job. We are even formally introduced to some of the items of clothing.

Dogra, as a theatre maker, has consistently displayed the ability to articulate precisely what her audience has been thinking, but has not been able to put into words themselves. A finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist evident from her previous plays — *Notes on Chai* (2013) and *Black Hole* (2018) which were also one-woman plays. In a moving sequence, Dogra forces you to confront the question: Does your self-critical voice actually sound like you? She discovers that, for her, it sounds like her chemistry teacher cleverly drawing attention to the possibility that your self-worth is determined and shaped by forces that are external and not constructed by the self. *Maas* makes you feel seen, while also scaring you. Dogra, unlike most theatre makers, has found the sweet spot of making you uncomfortable while also taking care of you. It is a great place to be. As an artist and as an audience.

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