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Willy Haas in Bombay

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Abstract

This archival piece presents an excerpted translation from the memoirs of Willy Haas, *Die Literarische Welt* (1958). Haas was a Czech-German writer and scenarist who migrated to Bombay during the Nazi purge of European Jews. The translation, by Xan Holt, offers rich atmospheric and technical details about an underdocumented period in Indian film history. The framing commentary by Debashree Mukherjee goes deeper into the histories coded in the excerpt: of Bhavnani Productions, a studio founded by film director Mohan Bhavnani, and the first film that Haas wrote for him, a controversial adaptation of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, released in India as *Jhoothi Sharm* (1940).

Keywords

Jewish exile, Bombay, Wilhelm Haas, Mohan Bhavnani, Germany, Ibsen

Willy Haas and Mohan Bhavnani: The Eastward Exile of Jewish Artists in the 1930s

One of the most significant migrations in the Western modern world took place in the 1930s – the forced exile of thousands of European Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. While we are familiar with the westward migration of Jewish exiles to the United States, several others found their way to India. Indeed, just as German exilic filmmakers infused Hollywood with the aesthetics and psychology of German Expressionism, most notably with *film noir*, a handful of artists, musicians and screenwriters also made an impact on Bombay's creative scene (Bhatti & Voigt, 2005; Mukherjee, 2023). Among them was 48-year-old Wilhelm 'Willy' Haas (1891–1973). I first came across Willy Haas's memoirs in 2011 when I was working on my doctoral dissertation on Bombay's talkie film studios. I was instantly struck by the level of atmospheric and technical detail in the sections on India. I am presenting these excerpts here with the hope that future researchers will be able to find their own meanings in these words. The first translator I informally worked with on this text was Linnéa Hussein, at New York

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University, and subsequently I had the good fortune of collaborating on a more formal translation project with Xan Holt who was working on a PhD in the Department of Germanic Languages at Columbia University at the time.

A Prague-born, German-speaking literary critic, writer and film scenarist, Willy Haas arrived in Bombay in 1939 with help from another German exile, Walter Kaufmann who had moved to Bombay a few years earlier. Kaufmann, a music composer, worked at the All India Radio and frequently collaborated with the filmmaker Mohan Bhavnani on film scores. Kaufmann had arranged a scenario-writing job for Haas at Bhavnani Productions. By the time he returned to Europe, in 1947, Haas had scripted some of Bhavnani Productions' most successful scripts, worked on four Hindi film scenarios, published an anthology entitled *Germans beyond Germany*, and written several essays on Indian culture and mythology.

Mohan Bhavnani, Haas's new employer, was a well-established filmmaker who had spent a good decade as a producer–director of both silent and talkie features. Bhavnani studied filmmaking at the UFA Studios in Berlin, which is where he met Walter Kaufmann (Gangar, 2013). In 1933, he started his own production concern in Bombay, Ajanta Cinetone, which proved to be quite short-lived (1933–1939). Ajanta Cinetone mainly produced costume dramas: historicals, fantasy films (e.g., *Vasantsena, Veer Kunal, Afzal/Hoor e Haram*, *Jung Bahadur*), mythologicals and stunt films (*Dilawar*, *Zambo the Ape Man*, *Himalay Ki Beti*, *Yangrilla*). A notable exception was the controversially anticapitalist *Mill* or *Mazdoor* (trans. worker), written by the famous Hindi novelist Premchand, which was caught in a long and financially debilitating tussle with the colonial censors (Mukherjee, 2019). Perhaps it was this fiasco that led Bhavnani to start afresh, with a new company. The films produced by the new concern, Bhavnani Productions, leaned more towards the 'social' genre that took up contemporary social issues and emphasised a certain urban realism in mise-en-scene and dialogue.

Willy Haas was hired in 1939 to write Bhavnani Productions' debut film. He knew little English, though he had tried to learn the basics during his journey by sea from Aden to Bombay. However, he was quickly reassured by Bhavnani's excellent German. Haas recalls that the script discussions 'dragged on for months' and one of the main dilemmas was how to pick an appropriate subject for their first film. Haas was well-versed in Indian literature and mythology; he had attended Indology lectures in the University of Prague and continued his study autodidactically. It was appropriate, therefore, that he wanted to work on 'an old, classic Indian drama, preferably *Shakuntala*, which Goethe had prized so highly'.[1] But not only had *Shakuntala* been filmed by another company, Bhavnani had a different vision for his fledgling production house. At an early brainstorming session, Bhavnani reportedly said: 'We want to make something very modern!' Haas's debut screenplay for Bhavnani productions was thus an adaptation of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, released as *Jhoothi Sharm* or *Naked Truth* (1940).

It is surprising that the group settled on *Ghosts/ Revenants* a play that was notorious even in Europe for centrally discussing the social problem of sexually transmitted diseases. Ibsen's play is about a woman, Mrs Alving, desperate to protect her son, Oswald, from her husband's philandering ways. When the husband dies, she tries to squander away all his wealth so that her son does not inherit anything from his morally corrupt

father. Ironically, she soon learns that Oswald has inherited an STD from his father and is rapidly wasting away. Oswald is also in love with their housemaid, Regina, who is revealed to be an illegitimate child of Mr Alving and therefore Oswald's half-sister. The play closes with Mrs Alving having to decide whether to euthanise Oswald or not, an end he sorely desires for himself.

It is indicative of Bhavnani's revamped ambitions for his new studio that their first film was to be such a dark tale. The talkies were here to stay, and the social film attempted to situate itself as an alternative public sphere wherein one could debate topical social problems. Haas explains that 'STDs were – in addition to leprosy and plague' a serious social problem in India and thus they chose this subject. This too, was one of the agendas of the social film as a public sphere – to educate the emerging body politic on social and moral evils. The national discussion about venereal disease and sexual hygiene was not a new one. However, it had been polarised between organisations like the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene run by British functionaries who tended to characterise the root cause for the widespread existence of STDs as a problem of Indian society, and nationalist leaders who often portrayed it as a problem introduced by British soldiers and European prostitutes. Both parties agreed that commercial sex work was the root evil.

Released under the Hindustani and English titles of *Jhoothi Sharm* (trans. False Shame) and *Naked Truth*, the film received glowing reviews in the *Times of India* (1940b, p. 8) which called it

> [A]n extremely courageous and highly commendable attempt to present the vital problem of social vice on the screen in a manner that should help powerfully to direct public attention to it and to focus the light of commonsense upon a grievous cancer, regarding which there is both a conspiracy of silence and an ignorance which would be incredible, if it were not so tragically true.

Despite this lavish praise, the *TOI* critic still shied from actually naming the 'grievous cancer' the film centrally dealt with. The company's own advertisements publicised the film as being 'The sincerest film ever made!' and advocated that 'Young India must be told frankly about the greatest human problem – the fell disease that is more dangerous than death!' (*Times of India*, 1940a, p. 3). It is a shame that we have no access to this film today and it is considered lost.

Haas's memoirs also give us experiential details about moviegoing in 1930s Bombay, refracted through the lens of a foreigner. He recalls going to a cinema theatre with David (likely David Abraham, legendary thespian of Bombay cinema, who made his acting debut with Bhavnani). Haas's description of the film's plot and structure matches descriptions of Indian cinema as 'a cinema of interruptions', a digressive form with episodic plot structure, irruptive song sequences, and half-time intermissions. As I discuss in *Bombay Hustle*,

> [T]he working-class viewers in the Indian Bazaar neighborhood were quite at ease with the discontinuities of time, place and affect that so perturbed Haas. These historical viewers in Bombay cannot be fixed as naïve devotees or apathetic spectators. Rather, they routed their religiosity through the invigorating spectacle of cinema with a distinctly modern enthusiasm. (Mukherjee, 2020, pp. 213–215)

Ultimately, Haas was exhausted by his efforts to reconcile European modernity with his ideas of Indian cinematic authenticity. In the last words in this new translation, you will see what Haas, like many of his European (and some Indian) contemporaries, thought the 'real Indian film' ought to look like: 'I too wanted to make a proper Indian film, any film that took place in a village in ancient times and in which there appeared real gods. No more Ibsen.'

'New Homeland India', Excerpts from *Die Literarische Welt* (1958)

Translated by Xan Holt

Note: The following short excerpts are translations of sections of *Die Literarische Welt: Erinnerungen* published by Paul List, Munich, 1958. The excerpts are de minimis in nature and were translated by Xan Holt in 2018 for the purposes of illustration, research, criticism, review and academic use only. They are reprinted here with permission from Xan Holt.

The passage from Aden to Bombay was stormy – but storms, real storms, do not bother me much. Only once was I brought near death by the swerving of a small passenger liner in the Baltic Sea.

I awoke in my cabin. The machines were no longer running. I glanced through the cabin window and saw endless rows of giant white buildings in the red, green and orange glow of the Indian sunrise: the British banks and shipping companies in Bombay. A raspy and indistinct scraping sound forced its way through the thick panes of the cabin window.

I got dressed quickly and went on deck. There lay the rugged black cliffs of the coast of Bombay, well-nigh glistening in the fiery glare of the Indian sun and circled by hundreds of large ravens cawing wildly. Dark people shouted and unloaded gigantic crates, cars and machines. The gangplank had just been laid down and visitors were allowed onboard. A large poster hung in a clearly visible location:

'Whoever wishes to land in Bombay is requested to proceed to the parlor in order to receive a landing permit from the landing official.'

My friend Kaufmann was one of the first to come onboard. I could not find the words to thank him. He had done everything for me: he had gotten me the position in the Indian film company, the visa for India, my salvation from the claws of the Gestapo in Prague. We embraced, as had been customary in the Austria of old after a long separation.

He said,

> Listen well, W. H. Everything has been prepared. My car is waiting by the quay. I am taking you and your cabin trunk with me – Cook will deliver the larger luggage to your boardinghouse this very day. For the time being you have a room in a German-Jewish boardinghouse. Later you can seek out what you want. You will come to my home for dinner this evening. There you will be introduced to your employer Mohan Bhavnani and his wife. Now you must first go to the landing official, who will give you the permit for landing.

'But I have the Indian visa from the British consulate in Prague.'

> That is of very little interest to the British authorities in Bombay. War is looming. Everyone here is being very cautious: India is dangerous territory. Pay very close attention: behind the landing officer, who is an Englishman, stands another European in plain clothes. That is Mr Rosenfeld, an esteemed member of the European-Jewish local authority. Introduce yourself to him immediately. Nothing will happen to you.

I went into the parlor somewhat anxiously. There sat an Englishman with his Indian clerks – standing behind him was, in fact, another European. I said my name loud and clear. Mr Rosenfeld said to the officer:

'We know this man very well, *very well indeed*. The local authority assumes responsibility for him.'

The official immediately stamped the landing permit in my passport, nodded and muttered, '*Good-Bye*'. The entire ceremony had lasted no more than thirty seconds. I was let out into the burning sunshine without the official even glancing in my passport. He knew Mr Rosenfeld personally. He trusted him. Period. I was saved.

[…]

At any rate, over dinner at Kaufmann's that evening I met my new boss Mohan Bhavnani, producer and director, and his wife Enakshi Rama Rau. The tall, thin, amiable man had a slight hunch, an extremely delicate chin and grey hair. Outwardly, he was the most European, civilised and debonair, inwardly the most Asian and unfamiliar man you could possibly imagine. You could not help but love him. Though sometimes he resembled a cat lying in the sun, languidly blinking its narrow eyes, letting itself be roused by nothing, neither blandishments nor blows. His wife, who was a film actress, journalist, photo reporter and a major adept in the history of Indian art, had once been one of the most beautiful women in Bombay. And she still was. Hailing from South India, she was much darker than her husband. She was wrapped in an enchanting golden sari that displayed a strip of naked brown skin between the blouse and the skirt, in accordance with the old Indian tradition.

'Mr Bhavnani, I am afraid I won't be of much help to you initially', I said in my very mediocre English. 'To be sure, I speak a little English, but at the moment it is not good enough for me to write an English film scenario [orig. *Filmszenario*].'

'No need to overexert yourself, my dear W. H.', my friend Kaufmann interrupted. 'Mr Bhavnani speaks German as well as you do.'

'We have at our disposal two elderly German ladies', Bhavnani said in accent-free German, 'who have lived in India for nearly 30 years and who will translate your German works directly into Hindi. We do not need English here.' It was his first trump card: Bhavnani was an extremely anti-British nationalist, a supporter of Gandhi and Nehru.

It took a load off my mind in any case. I had been studying up on my English day and night – even during the sea voyage – but I felt like a conman. I had taken the position knowing full well that I could not write English newspaper articles or film scenarios.

'Unfortunately, I will not be able to pick you up in my car every day', Bhavnani continued,

> but our friend Kaufmann did a splendid job picking your quarters. You can take the city railway from Church Gate Street Station to the suburb of Dadar. From there, you cross the Dadar Bridge and continue down Dadar Street to get to the office. You will get your bearings quickly. It takes about half an hour. Of course, the first few days my car will pick you up.

The Dadar Bridge! She became a source of fascination for me during the first months of my stay in Bombay. I likely spoke about nothing else with my European acquaintances. 'What's the news on the Dadar Bridge?' they all asked, like Shylock: 'What news on the Rialto?'

[…]

I have not been in India very long and have yet to see much of the country. But if I had seen nothing more than this Dadar Bridge, this path, merely 200 paces long, that I must walk down every morning at 10 o'clock, be it in the blistering heat or in the midst of a monsoon, then I would have seen enough of India for 10 years' worth of dreams.

[…]

Deliberations over the first film production of the year dragged on for months. I would have gladly adapted an old, classical Indian drama, ideally *Sakuntala*, which Goethe had valued so highly. But another film company had already produced *Sakuntala*.

'We want to do something entirely modern!' Bhavnani said.

Aside from Bhavnani and myself, the chief participants in the deliberations were Prince Sri Ganchamaharaja [?] of Limbdi, the clear capitalist of the production company, and the very wise chief executive, an Ismaili in the following of Aga Khan.

'Ibsen!' this man threw into the debate one day.

'Mr Haas, can you give us an impromptu overview of Ibsen's most important social dramas in order to jog our memory a bit?' Bhavnani asked me.

Fortunately, I could, and I gave them a rough summary of *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *Rosmersholm*. I soon learned that it was really just meant to jar their memory: none of these dramas were unknown to these men. They had all seen them on the stage once.

Finally, we focused our interest on *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. 'They really are the most current', Bhavnani said. And that was the absolute truth. The problems faced by the well-educated, modern Indian housewife around 1940 indeed overlapped with the themes of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

That was even truer of *Ghosts*. We consulted a renowned Indian specialist from the Bombay Medical Association. 'These damn South Indian temple dancers!' he cursed. 'They contaminate the entire country. There are villages in South India where not a single person is free of venereal diseases!' This man was certainly no orthodox Hindu, otherwise he would not have spoken in this tone about temple dancers; but he was presumably right.

Venereal diseases – alongside leprosy and pestilence – were a plague on the people of India. What Ibsen dealt with in his *Ghosts* was for India at that time, and perhaps still today, a very intense and current social problem. So, we decided on *Ghosts*.

Of course, Bhavnani first insisted that I expose myself to Indian films. In the Indian bazaar of Bombay, there were four gigantic buildings beside each other, all of them

cinemas. In fact, they were the same size as the large cinemas that used to be found on the west side of Berlin.

Mr Bhavnani had one of his best actors accompany me. He was a member of the sect of Indian Jews that had been living in India for thousands of years and had come here immediately after the Babylonian exile. This man, Mr David, later became my friend.

'When and where should we meet?' I asked him.

'The film starts at nine o'clock. We should meet in the bazaar in front of the cinema at 93.'

'Why so late?'

'You will have more than enough time to enjoy the film.'

So, at 93, we met in front of the cinema – a colossal, old bazaar building filled to capacity with a loud and excitable audience. Women came with small children and infants, equipped with dinner, milk and utensils necessary for babies. Europeans never entered these cinemas.

We went home around one o'clock in the morning. The film – only a single film was shown – was not even finished yet. It was a railway tragedy. Many dances and songs – most of them of a religious nature – had extended the plot to a not insignificant extent. At the dramatic climax, the wife of the poor railway man, plagued by hunger and concern for her children, lies down with them on the tracks to commit suicide. And, as the train began to approach, the god Krishna appeared on the screen, brightly coloured, his longhaired head topped with a golden diadem. He was entirely covered with jewellery and held a flute in his hand. The audience welcomed his appearance with frenetic applause. First, he held up the oncoming express train with a majestic hand gesture. Then he spoke to the desperate woman with mild words and instilled her with newfound optimism and faith in God. She returned home. The audience rejoiced and raved.

'Our cinema audience is very religious. They love mythological motifs. It would be good if you incorporated some of that into your new film!'

'And the dances and religious songs?'

'You won't be able to get around that. No Indian film can be produced without them.'

And so it was. Ibsen's *Ghosts* – five hours long, with mythological episodes, Indian dances, and religious songs – there was no way around it! And I was supposed to write the finished screenplay. I slept uneasily that night.

How can one adapt Ibsen's *Ghosts* this way? I didn't know. I was desperate. In my desperation, I went to the film company's chief executive, the young follower of Aga Khan. He consoled me.

> But my dear friend, why are you so worried? I saw Ibsen's *Ghosts* in Bombay twenty years ago: with prayers and songs and dances.… What, you did not know that Ibsen was staged twenty years ago in Bombay? The actress who is supposed to play Mrs Alving in your film played Regine, Engstrand's daughter!
>
> Where is this theatre, anyway? I have never heard of it!
>
> Oh, it's a sad story. Before film came into fashion, there was wonderful, rich theatre scene in India. In Bombay alone we had around 20 Indian stages. In fact, all of the enormous cinemas that you saw in the bazaar used to be theatres! The premieres were sold out months in advance. The cost of tickets sometimes rose to four or even five pounds sterling. Whole

> families travelled for days from the countryside to Bombay in order to attend a performance. This was the case in all large Indian cities. Film wiped everything out. That is why I too went into the film business.

'But is not that exceptional? In no country in the world has cinema completely obliterated the theatre scene. Only in India. How do you explain that?'

The grey-haired man shrugged.

'What else did they perform?'

'Anything and everything. The Indian classics, of course: Kālidāsa, *The Little Clay Cart* by Śūdraka, and so forth. Molière, Shakespeare, Piñero, Shaw, Sardou, Sudermann's *Honor* and *Homeland*. Everything imaginable.'

'All of them with prayers and songs and dances?'

'Of course.'

'The performances four to five hours long?'

'The Indian audience wants something for its money.'

It is indeed exceptional that Indian cinema completely devastated Indian theatre, which has a history older than Christianity and, over a century ago, produced one of the greatest dramatists of world literature. Misgivings of this kind were admittedly raised in every country as the artistic, dramatic film became more and more popular, particularly after the invention of sound film. In no other country have they proven justified. On the contrary, cinema has fuelled the creation of new dramatic forms in the theatre. It has fructified European and, above all, American theatre. In India, however, cinema has destroyed theatre – or nearly destroyed it, as we shall see.

I began to work on the screenplay slowly and very carefully. It was to be my masterpiece. According to my calculations, I had approximately five hundred pages to write.

[…]

The script slowly reached its end. Bhavnani let me work without interruption; he never monitored what I was doing. 'I want to take it in in its entirety', he said. A wise man!

Only occasionally, when I actively sought out his advice, did we speak about the work. In this way, we found a few places in Ibsen's *Ghosts* where one could incorporate a prayer and some music – the incubus of my nights. When Mrs Alving learned of her son's illness, she prostrated herself before the image of Krishna and sang an old mantra. And while Regina Engstrand was setting the table, she warbled a little song to herself – and straightaway a small Indian string orchestra came in and played the melody with her. It was never intolerable. – Of course, all of the names were Indianised. And my friend Kaufmann, a connoisseur of Asian music, had contributed two very lovely compositions, half Indian, half European.

I delivered my 500 pages to Bhavnani and he immediately began reading. He read without interruption, the entire day and a good part of the night. He was excited. His wife Enakshi read along with him.

'It is much too good for me', he told me. 'I really cannot do it. You don't belong here, you should go to Hollywood.'

'You can do it, and you will do it excellently, Mr Bhavnani.'

If he truly liked it so much, then I do not understand why he filmed something completely different. Once in the studio he never cast a single glance at my script; he clearly did not have precise knowledge of it and appeared to simply work away. To my horror, whenever I appeared in the studio, he was almost always filming scenes with which I was not at all familiar.

'Do not worry, do not worry!' Bhavnani reassured me. 'You do not know the mentality of the Indian audience. When you see the film in its entirety you will be satisfied.' He was Indian and, indeed, knew the Indian audience better than I. When I later saw the whole film, I could no longer fathom the connections between entire sequences of the dramatic action. That seemed to leave Bhavnani cold. 'I did not bother you during *your* work', he said.

The film ran in one of the largest Indian cinemas under the title *The Naked Truth* (which I did not much care for) and was a great success. But I had had enough of this fare. If gods and miracles and religious songs and old dances are supposed to make an appearance in an Indian film, then I too wanted to make a real Indian fairy-tale film, a film that takes place in a prehistoric village and in which real gods come to the fore. No more Ibsen.

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Note

1. This is a reference to the famous Sanskrit play, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* written by Kalidasa sometime between the 1st century ABD and 4th century ABD.

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