NIRDESHAQ

Production Notebook

Skand Rawat | Director and co-writer

The Players | 2025



Photo 1: The final image. The company has left; only the characters remain, in green light.

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1. Production details

Play	*Nirdeshaq* (Hindi for “director”)
Written by	Arjun Sethi, Aditya Oberoi and Skand Rawat. The script was finished before staging began.
Based on	Mohan Rakesh’s *Aadhe Adhure* (*Halfway House*, 1969) and Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)
Directed by	Skand Rawat
Lighting design	Skand Rawat
Company	The Players
Cast	Fifteen actors. Eight play the theatre company and seven play the characters (Appendix C).
Form	One continuous act, with almost the whole cast on stage throughout
Languages	Hindi and English
First performed	2025
Performances	Eleven, over one year, at theatre festivals and other platforms
Full recording	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUkRvnbquKU (English subtitles not available)
Excerpt	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY61WhvCsiY (English subtitles)

2. Director's note

Before *Nirdeshaq*, I directed *Cutaaksh*, a bilingual play structurally inspired by Ed Monk's *Cut*. It placed one rehearsal inside another. Audiences enjoyed following the layers so much that many missed the question underneath, about who controls a story. For *Nirdeshaq*, I wanted a structure that would carry that question instead of competing with it.

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* gave me that structure. What drew me to it is that its characters come to life and claim control over their own existence. They refuse to stay only fiction. The theatre company in front of them sees them as two-dimensional figures. For me, that company stands for our society's habit of treating "mere stories" with detachment, the way we watch other people's lives from a distance. Pirandello's family also has no single truth. The stepdaughter and the father each have their own version of events, and the rest of the family adds its own.

I wanted a family of our own with the same kind of complexity, and Mohan Rakesh's *Aadhe Adhure* gave it to me. Its household let us ask questions about the politics of the society we live in. I used the unstable frame of Pirandello's play to question the dysfunctional relationships in Rakesh's text, and in the process to expose the politics of both plays.

I call the central question of the production the badi baat, Hindi for "the big topic". Can a person claim control over a story that someone else has written? Under it there is a second question, about what we owe the people whose lives we watch from a distance.

Aadhe Adhure is often read as a feminist play. In our version, Savitri complains that her playwright never gave her the words to express her own mind. Had Rakesh written her freedom, or only her blame? The production leaves that question open. My aim was a bilingual performance that is both comically playful and deeply introspective. A light-hearted opening lets the evening move slowly from comedy into something more serious.

3. Synopsis

An amateur theatre group is rehearsing when a family walks in through the auditorium, looking for a director. They turn out to be the characters of Mohan Rakesh's *Aadhe Adhure*. Savitri, the leading lady, complains that her playwright did not let her speak her mind, and she wants a director who will help her change that. Her husband and children are also unhappy with how their lives have turned out.

The Director agrees to work with them, mostly because he sees their lives as material to make his own name. The company rebuilds Savitri's home from whatever it has, and the family summons Manoj and Juneja from its story. As the characters challenge the situations they were written into, questions of personal and social morality are raised, along with questions about reality and fiction. The Director refuses to change Rakesh's words, so Savitri answers Juneja here, in the rehearsal.

Towards the end, Kinni meets with a bad accident, but her family is not disturbed, because it is not part of their "play". The theatre group falls apart under this paradox. The characters remain, suspended in their search for freedom, inside and outside their stories.

4. The source plays and why I joined them

Aadhe Adhure (*Halfway House*, 1969) is Mohan Rakesh's landmark Hindi play about a middle-class family in an Indian city. Savitri is the only one in the house who earns. Her husband Mahendranath has been out of work for years, her son Ashok will not look for a job, her elder daughter Binni ran away with Manoj and is unhappy in her marriage, and her younger daughter Kinni is restless and rebellious. Savitri holds the household together, and she is still the one who is judged. In the last scene, Mahendranath's friend Juneja lists her failings in front of her daughter, and she stands almost silent.

Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921) gave us the frame, a rehearsal interrupted by characters who want to control how their story is told.

I joined the two plays because each one let us question the other. Pirandello's unstable frame gave us a way to examine the relationships in Rakesh's family, and Rakesh's family gave that frame the complexity to ask about the politics of the society we live in. *Nirdeshaq* picks up from Savitri's silence in that last scene. In our version, she complains that audiences clap for Juneja and make him the hero, while all she gets is four words, "Binni tu andar ja" (Binni, go inside). We kept Pirandello's structure and built it around her. The story came from Rakesh, and Savitri is at its centre.

5. Script analysis

The central question

The badi baat (the big topic) of *Nirdeshaq* is whether a person can claim control over a story that someone else has written. The script tests this on almost every character, and the answer changes as the play goes on.

Savitri comes to ask for her own words. From the moment she describes her house, she starts to direct her own scenes. She decides how the room should look and which objects are needed to call Manoj and Juneja, and in the Juneja scene she skips through his lines and asks the company to read out what Rakesh wrote for her.

The script also shows the limits of this control. Ashok tries to walk out of the rehearsal and is stopped by some force at the edge of the stage. Manoj, who exists in Rakesh's play only in what others say about him, can repeat just one sentence when he is asked to explain himself. Even Savitri falls back into her written behaviour when she slaps Kinni and locks her in.

The company has an author it will not disobey as well. The Director refuses to change the words of such a great writer, and Kabir adds that it is Rakesh's centenary year and people will curse them for it. Savitri answers bitterly. "Isi liye main keh rahi hun iss saal gali gali *aadhe adhure* khela jayega. Harr baar ki tarha iss baar bhi mujhe zalil kiya jayega." (That is why I am saying it. This year *Aadhe Adhure* will be played in everywhere, and like every time, I will be humiliated again.)

In the end the question returns to the characters. When Kinni is hurt, her family says nothing can happen to her, because the play is not written beyond this point. The world outside their text cannot hurt them, and they cannot leave it either. Savitri's complaint gets no clear answer.

The second question, about what we owe the people whose lives we watch from a distance, is carried by the company. The actors are the first audience of the family's life, and they judge Savitri from the text before they hear her. Gautam says, "Inke bhi toh ghar ke baahar chakkar the." (She also had affairs outside the house.) The company asks to see her most private moment so that it can decide who is right. When Savitri says that her husband used to beat her, the Director is shocked, and then he asks for it to be written down. In the Juneja scene, the company comes down from the stage to watch from the front, and the actors become an audience inside the play. In the final image, the family faces the real audience, and the question is left with them.

The two worlds

Nirdeshaq puts two worlds on one stage, the theatre company and the characters. The audience must be able to tell them apart at every moment, because most of the comedy and most of the tension come from the way they collide.

Each world has its own markers. The company speaks today's urban mix of Hindi and English, works in general working light and wears everyday clothes. The characters speak Rakesh's older, formal Hindi, wear costumes that stay truthful to his text, and get their own light when they are summoned and after the rehearsal closes. In rehearsal, the actors playing the company

improvised an ordinary working day, while the actors playing the family built their roles from Rakesh's text, so the two groups also behave differently on stage.

The play has rules about how the two worlds touch. The characters cannot leave their story. Ashok tries, and he is stopped at the edge of the stage. The company controls the objects. When the family needs its home, the company gives it rehearsal furniture, a Fanta for Roohafza (a rose syrup drink) and a deodorant for itr (a traditional perfume), and the characters have to accept this version of their own lives. At the end the company leaves, and the characters stay.

Scene-by-scene breakdown

The script has no scene headings, so I have divided it at the points where the action turns.

Scene	Who is on stage	World	Light	What happens	How it serves the central question
1. Setting up	The Director (on the phone), Abhimanyu, Gautam, Kabir, Tanvi and Aryan; Rahul runs in late	Company	General working light	The pre-show announcement is interrupted by the Director's phone. He guides a lost delivery man to the hall while the company carries in the furniture. A stool falls in the wings, and Rahul pants only when the Director is looking.	Light comedy introduces an amateur group with little money and a Director who controls everything. It offsets the audience's expectations before the questions arrive.
2. Tanvi's monologue	The company; Sana is called up from the audience; Aryan returns with a parcel	Company	General working light (Photo 5)	The Director rehearses Tanvi's monologue and tells her which emotion to play on each line. Her speech is about the group's own life, a year given to a play that is never selected. The parcel interrupts the scene, and then Aryan says someone has come to meet them.	A director controls an actor's words and feelings, the same power the family will soon question. The monologue also shows the struggle of an amateur group.
3. The interruption	The company; the family (Savitri, Mahendranath, Ashok, Binni and Kinni) comes in through the auditorium	Both	General working light	Savitri asks for a director and is turned away. A member of the company tries to throw the family out, and they quarrel below the stage, in front of the front row. When Mahendranath hints at something between Savitri and their son-in-law, the Director stops everything.	The characters arrive looking for a director, as Pirandello's characters look for an author. The Director ignores them until there is a scandal, because their life interests him as material.
4. We are characters	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Ashok explains the gossip, and Savitri introduces her family. Two actors recognise the names from *Aadhe Adhure* and retell the play, judging Savitri as they go. Manoj is only mentioned in Rakesh's script, so he has not come. The rehearsal turns into an argument about whether a character can be as real as an actor.	It sets up the question of reality and fiction. It also shows that the company has judged Savitri from the text before hearing her.
5. Savitri's complaint	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Savitri has come with a complaint against her author. He did not take her side or give her a voice, and in her last scene with Juneja she stands like a statue. She offers the Director the credit for a new reading of Rakesh's play. He sees an "X factor" and agrees to try, and Tanvi's rehearsal is put aside.	The central question is stated openly here. The Director accepts for the sake of his own name.

Scene	Who is on stage	World	Light	What happens	How it serves the central question
6. No way out	The company and the family	Both	General working light	The Director keeps steering the talk to Manoj, while Savitri insists the complaint is about her. Old grievances come out, from a pyjama left on the sofa to Ashok being brought by force. Ashok tries to walk off and is stopped by some force, and he asks to be written out of the family. Savitri says that people who clap for Juneja made him the hero.	A character cannot walk out of his own story. Savitri also points at the audience's part in deciding who the hero is.
7. The accusation	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Savitri says she and Manoj were only friends. Mahendranath says there was a relationship, and the Director is pleased that they are now "on the same page" (section 9). Savitri says that ten years ago he beat her in closed rooms, and the Director has it written down. The company wants to see the incident, and Savitri says Manoj can be called.	The company becomes a jury and an audience, asking to watch a private moment. Even violence turns into a note for the production.
8. Building the house	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Savitri describes her room, with two red curtains, a table, a sofa and a door. The Director says he is not a builder, and the company uses moodhas (low cane stools), chairs and a durrie (cotton rug) over a block for a sofa. A Bluetooth speaker replaces the radio, a Fanta replaces the Roohafza, and Savitri asks for "Lag Jaa Gale".	Savitri begins to direct her own scene. The Director turns down a stand-in, and the real Manoj is called up, the way Madame Pace is called up in Pirandello.
9. Manoj	The company to one side; the family; Manoj, who steps out from behind the actors	Both	Manoj's lighting shift	Manoj brings sweets for his promotion. He holds Savitri's hand, and she takes it back after a moment. Binni stops the scene, and the company argues about propriety and about women's lives today. Asked to explain himself, Manoj can only repeat one sentence, because Rakesh never gave him other words. He leaves without anyone noticing.	A character written with one line can only repeat it. It is the clearest picture of an author's control in the play.
10. After Manoj	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Binni questions her mother. Savitri admits she had feelings for Manoj but says nothing happened. Binni asks whether something could have happened if Manoj had not married her, and Savitri answers, "Shaayad. Mujhe nahin maalum." (Maybe. I don't know.) Binni walks away, and Mahendranath says she could have lied for her daughter's sake.	Savitri answers in her own voice, and it costs her. The play leaves the moment open.

Scene	Who is on stage	World	Light	What happens	How it serves the central question
11. Satyavan's Savitri	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Mahendranath says a mother has to make these sacrifices, and Savitri asks where that is written. He holds up the Savitri of myth, who fought Yama, the god of death, for her husband. Ashok and Savitri fight about his job and his painting. Savitri says that when a family makes a person dance like a puppet, one day the string breaks. She decides to show what she felt on the day Juneja came.	An older story, the myth behind her own name, is used to judge her. Her puppet image names the problem of the whole play.
12. Page 112	The company and the family	Both	General working light	Two actors argue about the order of Juneja's scene, and Savitri settles it with a printed copy of *Aadhe Adhure* from her handbag. She asks the company to put her answers to Juneja into their production. The Director refuses to change the words of such a great writer, and Kabir adds that it is Rakesh's centenary year. Savitri asks at least to speak here, in the rehearsal.	The question meets the theatre's own rules. The text and the author's name stand above the character, and the company also has an author it will not disobey.
13. Calling Juneja	The company and the family; Kinni is dragged into the wings; the company then leaves the stage	Both	General working light	Savitri arranges her own stage, with the sofa forward and Binni on it, and a deodorant stands in for her itr. Kabir agrees to read out the replies Rakesh wrote for her. Kinni refuses to go inside, and Savitri slaps her and drags her away. The company goes down to watch from the front.	Savitri now directs the set, the props and the reading of her lines. With Kinni, she falls back into the behaviour her script gives her.
14. Juneja	Savitri, Juneja and Binni on stage; the company in front, with Kabir reading; Kinni heard from the wings	Both	Juneja's lighting shift; warm light (Photos 2 and 4)	Juneja speaks Rakesh's lines. Savitri stops him and asks Kabir to read her written reply, which is often only a stage direction or nothing at all. Then she answers in her own words, skipping ahead through his text. When Juneja leaves, the Director praises the scene and imagines a fade-out, a pool of light on Savitri and a standing ovation.	Savitri answers her author in front of everyone, and the Director at once turns her answer into his own staging. Her complaint is heard and stays unresolved.
15. Kinni's accident	The company and the family; Kinni offstage, locked in a room; the actors run into the wings; the Director leaves	Both	General working light	The family carries on with its story. Ashok says Daddy has come back ill and needs his stick. Kinni will not open the door, there is the sound of a fall, and the actors find her bleeding from the head. The family is calm, because the accident is not in their script. The ambulance does not answer, and the Director calls "Pack up".	For the company, an injured child is real. For the family, nothing can happen outside the text. The group that treated their lives as material falls apart when it has to act.

Scene	Who is on stage	World	Light	What happens	How it serves the central question
16. The last light	The company packs up and leaves; the family stays; Kinni walks back in	Characters	Lights go out one by one; the real-life light fades and turns green on Kinni (Photo 3); the last light holds the family in green (Photo 1)	Kabir tells the person on the lights that he is going to call the guard. As he lifts the last box, the script of *Aadhe Adhure* falls, and Savitri puts it in her bag. Kinni walks back in from where the family first entered and gives her father his stick. The family turns to face the audience.	The characters stay, with their script back in their own bag, still suspended in their story. The final image leaves the second question with the audience.

Character notes

These notes are based only on the script.

The family

Savitri. The leading lady of *Aadhe Adhure*, who runs her house alone. She has come to complain that her author did not give her a voice, and from the moment she describes her house, she starts to direct her own scenes. She will not lie, even to spare her daughter. Yet she slaps Kinni and locks her in, as her script asks.

Mahendranath. Savitri's husband, who, she says, has been sitting at home for ten years. He wants family matters kept inside the house, yet he discusses them with his friend Juneja. He accuses Savitri of a relationship with their son-in-law and uses the myth of Satyavan's Savitri to judge her. Savitri says he used to beat her in closed rooms.

Binni. The elder daughter, who ran away with Manoj and is now his wife. She tries to keep the peace and defends the characters' truth against the actors. The Manoj scene turns her against her mother, and her question leads to Savitri's "Shaayad" (Maybe). At the end, she says calmly that Kinni will come back when the play begins again.

Ashok. The son, who wants to paint and is told that he only draws cartoons. He was brought to the rehearsal by force. He tries to walk out of the story and cannot, and he asks the Director to write him out of the family.

Kinni. The youngest daughter. She teases Ashok and refuses to obey anyone, so Savitri slaps her and locks her in a room before Juneja comes. Her accident breaks the rehearsal, and at the end she walks back in with her father's stick.

Manoj. Binni's husband, who exists in Rakesh's play only in what others say about him. In *Nirdeshaq* he is summoned with a song and a bottle of Fanta. He brings sweets for his promotion, holds Savitri's hand, and can only repeat one sentence, "Ghar ki hawa mein kadwahat hai." (There is bitterness in the air of this house.)

Juneja. Mahendranath's closest friend. Gautam calls him the hero of *Aadhe Adhure*, and Savitri says the audience's applause made him one. He is summoned with a deodorant in place of itr, speaks Rakesh's lines and is cut short again and again. Kabir jokes that he behaves less like a character and more like a narrator.

The company

The Director (Arjun). He leads the amateur group and controls everything, from the delivery man's route to the emotion on each of Tanvi's lines. He ignores the family until he hears a scandal, and then he sees an "X factor" and his own name in their story. He refuses to change Rakesh's words, claims Savitri's scene as his own success and calls "Pack up" when he cannot handle the accident.

Abhimanyu. The production in-charge and the Director's assistant. He sets up the stage, tries to get the family out, and takes notes for the Director through the play, which is where the page turn came from. When Kinni is hurt, he tries to call an ambulance.

Kabir. He studied *Aadhe Adhure* in a course, so he knows the text better than the others. In the Juneja scene he reads out the lines and stage directions Rakesh wrote for Savitri. He is the last of the company to leave, and the script falls from his hands as he goes.

Gautam. He has seen *Aadhe Adhure* on stage and is the first to judge Savitri from it. He argues with Kabir about the text and is proved wrong by Savitri's own copy. He is the one who finds Kinni in the wings.

Rahul. He arrives late and plays the dholki (a small drum). He offers to improvise Manoj, defends Savitri after the hand-holding, and is the first to call the family mad after the accident.

Aryan. He collects the delivery and interrupts the rehearsal with it. He praises Rakesh's famous line about masks, and he leads the company down to watch the Juneja scene from the front.

Tanvi. The group's lead actor, whose monologue opens the rehearsal and is then put aside. She takes Savitri's side and speaks about dignity and respect.

Sana. She is called up to the stage from the audience. She sides with Savitri, tells Mahendranath that today is much better than his time, and offers her deodorant in place of Savitri's itr.

6. Approach and structure

An amateur company. I turned Pirandello's professional company into an Indian amateur theatre group, because amateur groups are far more common in India. Their struggles are familiar to Indian actors, who work without a repertory system, with little funding and with no financial stability. The script keeps these struggles in view. Tanvi's monologue is about giving a year to a play that is never selected, and when Savitri describes her house, the Director reminds her that the group has its limitations too.

The opening. The play opens on an amateur rehearsal in general light, the way real rehearsals happen. The usual pre-show announcement is interrupted by the Director's phone. He is guiding a lost delivery man to the hall while his actors set up around him, and one actor turns out to be sitting in the audience. I staged this opening as light-hearted on purpose, to offset the audience's expectations. By the time the characters arrive, the audience is already part of the room.

The interruption. Savitri and her family interrupt the rehearsal and demand control over their own stories. I brought them in through the auditorium, the same way the audience had been drawn in, and staged their first quarrel below the stage, in front of the front row, while a member of the company tries to throw them out. Before the audience knows who these people are, the quarrel shows where each of them stands.

Summoning Manoj and Juneja. Here the play borrows Pirandello's way of calling up a character. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Madame Pace appears once her hats and coats are set out. In *Nirdeshaq*, the company builds Savitri's room from what it has, and Manoj and Juneja are introduced through distinct lighting shifts. Their appearances are more stylised and theatrical than the scenes around them, which marks them clearly as part of the family's story.

After the rehearsal. When the lights shut down, the rehearsal is over, but the characters stay in their own world. The green light begins, and they go on reliving incidents and searching for an author, as in Pirandello. In the final image the company has left, and only the characters remain, in green light.

The ending. Pirandello's play ends in death, and *Aadhe Adhure* does not. I introduced an action for Kinni, drawn from a vague stage direction near the end of Rakesh's play, the sound of a fall, which in his story belongs to Mahendranath coming home. We gave that sound to Kinni, who has been locked in a room offstage. Her accident lets her disrupt the space and makes the staged reality less stable.

Using the auditorium. The performance used the whole auditorium through spatial and live elements. The pre-show announcement, the Director's phone call, the actor called up from her seat, the family's entrance and their first quarrel all happen in the audience's space. Later, the company comes down to watch the Juneja scene from the front, and at the end Kinni returns from where the family first entered. In this way the company's rehearsal and the audience's evening become one event.

7. Tone and rhythm

The tone moves in four stages, from light-hearted to serious, then uncanny, and finally to a sombre resolution. Savitri's complaint is left without a clear answer.

Most of the comedy comes from the theatre company, because the company is closest to who we are. Rakesh's play is never the target of the comedy. We laugh at the habits of our own theatre, at a director who hears a family's pain and sees an "X factor" in it, at actors who have read *Aadhe Adhure* and still argue about how it goes, and at a group that rebuilds Savitri's home with whatever it has.

The play also uses structural meta jokes, often about the venue it is performed in. When Savitri finally says that Manoj can be called, the Director complains, "Yeh baat thora aap pehle bata dete yeh 1 ganthe ka natak 40 minute mai kardete." (If you had told us this earlier, we would have finished this one-hour play in forty minutes.)

The serious stage begins with the family's own arguments, when Savitri says that her husband used to beat her and when Ashok blames both his parents. The uncanny stage comes when the rules of fiction become visible. Ashok cannot walk off the stage, and Manoj can only repeat one sentence. Later, the family stays calm while Kinni bleeds. The resolution is quiet. The company packs up and leaves, the script goes back into Savitri's bag, and the family turns to face the audience.

The appearances of Manoj and Juneja are more stylised and theatrical, and they change the rhythm of the evening. Rhythm was the hardest part to control, because the play runs as one continuous act with almost everyone on stage. The Juneja scene in particular has a stop-and-start rhythm, which I come back to in the Reflection.

8. Design

I usually bring designers in early with the central idea and a few images, instead of a fixed design. On *Nirdeshaq*, I designed the lighting myself. The production toured to different festivals and venues without expensive equipment, so I looked for simple elements that could travel with us.

Light

Light is the border between the two worlds. The company works in general working light, the kind of light a real rehearsal has, because this is the real world of the play. Juneja and Manoj are introduced through distinct lighting shifts. After the rehearsal closes, the green light belongs to the characters. In one transition, the real-life light slowly fades and turns green on Kinni (Photo 3).

In the script, light is also part of the joke. After the Juneja scene, the Director imagines his own lighting cue. “Yahaan pe aayega ab fade out. Aur Savitri pe reh jaayega ek tight pool of light.” (Here the fade-out will come. And a tight pool of light will stay on Savitri.) The real end of the play also finishes in a single pool of light, but it falls on the whole family after the company has gone. Before he leaves, Kabir calls out to the person on the lights, so the lights going out one by one belong to the company’s world, and the green that remains belongs to the characters.

State	When	Colour or quality	Purpose
General working light	The rehearsal, from the opening until the company leaves, apart from the Manoj and Juneja shifts	General, even light, like the light of a real rehearsal	It is the real world of the play, so the opening reads as an ordinary rehearsal.
Manoj’s shift	Manoj steps out from behind the actors as “Lag Jaa Gale” plays	Its own lighting state, separate from the working light	It marks a summoned character, whose appearance is more stylised and theatrical.
Juneja’s shift	Juneja appears after Savitri sprays the deodorant	Warm (Photos 2 and 4)	It marks a summoned character, while the company watches from the front.
Green on Kinni	Kinni walks back in after the company has left (Photo 3)	The real-life light slowly fades and turns green on her	The rehearsal is over, and the characters’ own world takes over.
The last light	The family turns to face the audience	The lights go out one by one, and the last one holds the family in green (Photo 1)	Only the characters remain, still inside their story.

Space and set

The set had to be simple and easy to move, because the production toured to different festivals and venues. The photos show the main pieces, a sofa covered with striped cloth, a dark trunk, a

wooden table, and stools and folding chairs on an open black stage. Appendix A gives an approximate layout.

The furniture belongs to the company's rehearsal, and the characters' world is built out of it. When Savitri asks for her room as it was, with two red curtains, a table, a sofa and a door into another room, the Director tells her he is not a builder. The company pulls moodhas (low cane stools) and chairs into place and throws a durrie (cotton rug) over a block to make a sofa. A Fanta stands in for her Roohafza (a rose syrup drink), a Bluetooth speaker stands in for her radio, and later a deodorant stands in for her itr (a traditional perfume). Each substitution is a small joke about our limits. It also shows who has power in the room, because the characters must accept the company's version of their home.

Costume

The company wears everyday clothes, so the actors look like any theatre group at a rehearsal. The characters are in costume. Savitri wears a saree, Binni a salwar kameez, Kinni a school uniform, and Juneja a shirt with suspenders and trousers. The audience can separate the two worlds even before anyone speaks, and the characters' look stays truthful to Rakesh's text.

Language

Rakesh's characters speak an older, formal Hindi, and the company speaks today's urban mix of Hindi and English. The audience can tell which world a person belongs to as soon as they speak. The difference is clear in the very first exchange. Savitri says, "Ji hum log ek Nirdeshak ki talaash kar rahe hain." (We are looking for a director.) The Director answers, "Ji haan main hi director hoon, batayiye kyaa kaam hai." (Yes, I am the director. Tell me, what is it?) She uses the Hindi word, and he uses the English one. Later, when they argue about whether characters can be real, the Director talks about an "actor" playing a "character", while Savitri talks about the abhineta (actor) and the kirdaar (character).

9. Rehearsal process

We began by reading the script together two or three times. We agreed on the rules of the production and discussed the play before we started staging it. With two worlds on one stage, everyone needed the same understanding of those rules before we could start to experiment.

Once we had agreed on the boundaries, the actors were free to experiment inside them. The hard part for me was deciding when to fix a moment and when to leave it open.

I rehearsed the two groups separately. The actors playing the company improvised an ordinary working day from a basic script, so their behaviour stayed loose and everyday. The actors playing the family built their roles from Rakesh's text, so their look and speech stayed truthful to it. When the two groups came together, the main challenge was this collision between the company's everyday behaviour and the family's world.

Because the script was finished before staging began, we did not rewrite scenes in rehearsal. The work was about what the script needed from the actors, the movement, the timing and the space.

Most of the staging problems were about people and space. The cast had fifteen actors, the company outnumbers the family, and almost everyone is on stage for the whole play. The first task was to find space for everyone without masking anyone. The text is also static, because people mostly talk, and I did not want it to feel like a radio play where the audience can only listen. So I looked for the ordinary things people do in a rehearsal room. Like people anywhere, they half-listen while doing something else, and we gave the company that kind of business, placed so that it never pulled focus from the main scene.

Time was the other pressure. The play runs as one continuous act, so I needed the whole cast most of the time, and I also had to respect the actors' time. Keeping the staging consistent from one venue to the next, with a cast of fifteen, needed the same care.

The page turn

One moment in the play came from rehearsal. When Tanvi asks whether there was any relationship between Savitri and Manoj, Mahendranath says there certainly was, and the Director is pleased to get a clear answer at last.

> **DIRECTOR**
> "Bas yahi toh puch rahe hain hum, badhiya. Now we're on the same page!"
> (That is exactly what we were asking. Great. Now we're on the same page!)

One day in rehearsal, just as he said this line, the actor playing his assistant filled a page in his notebook, turned it and kept taking notes. I stopped the rehearsal, and we fixed the page turn right after the line, so that the audience could see the contradiction. The Director announces that everyone agrees, and at that very moment his assistant moves on to a fresh page. It happened by chance, and I chose to keep it.

10. Key moments

The key moments below follow the order of the script.

The company's rehearsal



Photo 5: The company's rehearsal, before the characters enter.

> **TANVI**
> "Yaar iss point pe mazaak mat karo. Mai apna already ek saal de chuki hoon iss natak ko aur phir bhi hum kahi select nahin ho rahe hain."
> (Please don't joke at this point. I have already given a year to this play, and we are still not getting selected anywhere.)

I staged the opening as a light-hearted rehearsal on purpose, to offset the audience's expectations. The company works in general light, and the audience watches what looks like an ordinary working day. At the same time, the Director tells Tanvi which emotion to play on each line, so the first thing the play shows is a director controlling someone else's words.

The family arrives

> **SAVITRI**
> "Ji hum log ek Nirdeshak ki talaash kar rahe hain."
> (We are looking for a director.)

The family comes in through the auditorium, the same way the audience was drawn into the room. Their first quarrel happens below the stage, in front of the front row, while a member of the company tries to throw them out. I wanted the quarrel to show where each person stands before the audience knows who they are. The Director wants them gone until Mahendranath accuses Savitri of a relationship with their son-in-law.

The Manoj scene

> **SAVITRI, TO BINNI**
> “Shaayad. Mujhe nahin maalum.”
> (Maybe. I don’t know.)

The company builds Savitri’s room from rehearsal furniture, and as “Lag Jaa Gale” plays, Manoj steps out from behind the actors under his own lighting shift. After he leaves, Binni asks her mother whether anything might have happened between her and Manoj if he had not married Binni. Savitri pauses before she answers. I kept this moment in a grey area, so the play gives the audience the circumstances and leaves the judgement to them.

Juneja, Savitri and Binni



Photo 2: The Juneja, Savitri and Binni scene.

> **SAVITRI**
> “Mujhe toh shabd diye hi nahi gaye. Bas inn ajeebon gareeb stage directions mein fasaye rakha.”
> (I was never given any words. I was kept trapped in these strange stage directions.)

Before Juneja comes, Savitri arranges her own stage, and the company goes down to watch from the front, so the actors become an audience inside the play. Juneja enters through his own lighting shift and speaks Rakesh’s lines. Each time he accuses her, Savitri stops him and asks Kabir to read the reply Rakesh wrote for her, which is often only a stage direction, and then she answers in her own words.

Savitri's laugh



Photo 4: Holding the end of her saree (pallu) in her hand, Savitri shakes her head and laughs.

> **SAVITRI**
> "Hahahaha, chup ho jaao."
> (Hahaha, be quiet.)

Juneja has just described Manoj as her last attempt to get somewhere, and Binni has heard it. Savitri laughs, and then she turns to the company and asks, "Ab iska kya jawaab dun mai?" (Now what answer should I give to this?) Kabir searches the script and finds that Rakesh gave her no dialogue at this point. Earlier in the same scene, Kabir has read out the only reply she was given at another point, a stage direction in which she holds the end of her saree between her teeth, shakes her head and laughs in a voice between laughter and tears.

Kinni's accident

> **BINNI**
> "Usse kuch nahin hoga, kyunki natak iske aage nahin likha gaya."
> (Nothing will happen to her, because the play is not written beyond this point.)

Near the end of Rakesh's play there is a vague stage direction, the sound of a fall, which in his story belongs to Mahendranath coming home. We gave that sound to Kinni, who has been locked in a room offstage since before Juneja's scene. The company rushes into the wings and finds her bleeding, while her family stays calm, because the accident is not part of their play. This kept us close to Pirandello, whose play ends in death, and it let *Nirdeshaq* find its own ending.

The light turns green



Photo 3: The real-life light slowly fades and turns green on Kinni.

> **KABIR, TO THE LIGHTS**
> "Sun, mai guard ko bulane ja raha hun. Bahar aajaio."
> (Listen, I am going to call the guard. Come outside.)

The Director has called "Pack up", and the company clears the stage and leaves. As Kabir lifts the last box, the script of *Aadhe Adhure* falls from his hands, and Savitri picks it up and puts it in her bag. Kinni walks back in from where the family first entered and gives her father his stick. As she comes back, the real-life light of the rehearsal slowly fades and turns green on her.

The final image



Photo 1: The final image. The company has left; only the characters remain, in green light.

> **SAVITRI**
> "Kirdaar kabhi marte nahin, jab jab kahani dobara shuru hoti hai, hum sab phir aa jaate hain."
> (Characters never die. Whenever the story begins again, we all come back.)

I turned the family to face the audience while the lights went out one by one, until the last one held them in a single pool of green light. The actors of the company can switch off and go home, and the characters cannot leave their story. Savitri says this line a few minutes earlier, while Kinni lies hurt in the wings, and the final image shows what it means. Her complaint is left without a clear answer.

11. Performance history

Nirdeshaq was first performed in 2025. Over one year it had eleven performances at theatre festivals and other platforms. Because the play is set in a rehearsal that is happening wherever we perform, it changed with every venue. Some lines, some sequences and the concluding character were adapted for different auditoriums and staging conditions. Each venue needed its own version of the opening phone call, the references to the space, the internal jokes and remarks, and the points at which the characters enter.

In the script, for example, the Director guides the delivery man past places near our own rehearsal space. “Aap seedha chaliye croma se, haan hansraj ki ore aayiye. Arre yaar, aana KMC hi hai, main bas rasta bata raha hun.” (Go straight on from Croma, yes, come towards Hansraj. You have to come to KMC anyway, I am only telling you the way.) At every other venue, this call had to lead him to that hall instead. We also had to plan for malfunctions in every new space.

The full performance is recorded at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUkRvnbquKU (no subtitles). An excerpt with English subtitles is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY61WhvCsiY.

12. Critical response

> "Skand masterfully uses the unstable frame of Pirandello's meta-theatrical world to interrogate the dysfunctional relationships in Rakesh's *Aadhe Adhure*, exposing the politics of both texts with razor-sharp insight. This is theatre at its most innovative and alive."

Himanshu Kohli
Actor; Alumnus, National School of Drama

> "Skand's *Nirdeshaq* pushes the concerns of both the original plays in deeper, more meaningful ways. As a director, he does not hesitate to question the power and practices of his own position inside the play – building conditions in which a character can emerge authentically, with an earnestness that allows humour to reach the audience before opening up profound questions about the need for telling stories itself."

Dhwani Vij
Actor, Director and Theatre Educator; MA, Royal Holloway, University of London; META Awardee

> "The heart and soul of a play lies in its plot, and for me, this play works. Mohan Rakesh, if he was alive, would have loved to work on this script and see this play."

J.P. Singh
Former Deputy Director, Sahitya Kala Parishad; Recipient, Sahitya Bhushan Samman

> "Mohan Rakesh, across his plays, creates a shared platform for both male and female characters, yet by the end, that sense of equality often fades. I have seen productions in professional and amateur circuits alike where Savitri is portrayed as a villain. This interpretation was different. The care taken to explore her perspective, line by line, gave her a voice that had not been explored before."

Harvinder Kaur
Alumna, National School of Drama

13. Reflection

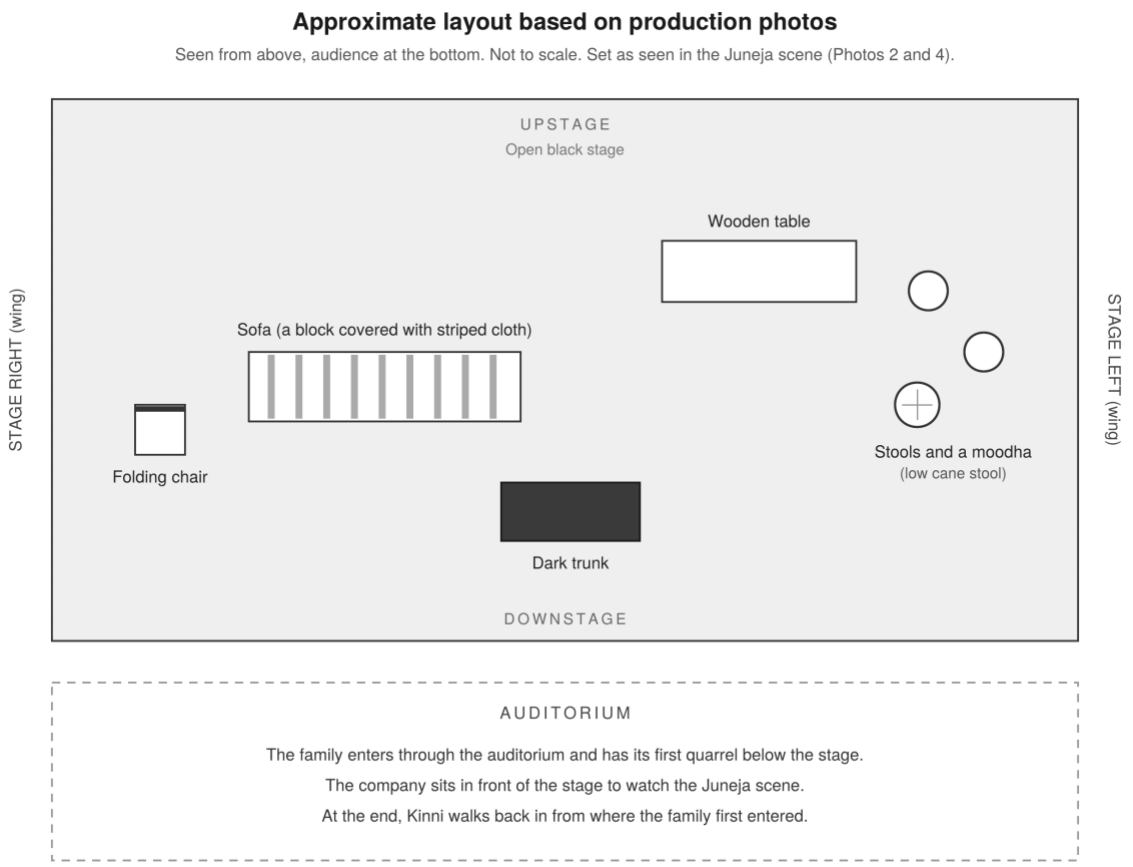
What worked

Performing *Nirdeshaq* eleven times showed me that a structure can explain an idea to the audience, or it can let them go through it themselves. In this production, the second happened most clearly through light and language. Nobody on stage had to explain which world a person belonged to. The audience could see it in the light and hear it in the first sentence a person spoke.

What I would change

The Juneja scene comes when the play is already tired. When I trimmed it, we lost material that gave the scene its texture, and what remained were the beats the argument needs. Savitri stops Juneja, skips ahead, waits while her stage directions are read out, and answers. The scene needs this stop-and-start rhythm to make its point, but so late in the evening it began to feel like a checklist. Next time, I would start by looking again at the rhythm of the whole play, and come back to this scene from there.

Appendix A. Ground plan



Approximate layout based on production photos. The pieces are shown as they stand in the Juneja scene (Photos 2 and 4).

There was no ground plan sketch, so this layout is drawn from the production photos. It is seen from above, with the audience at the bottom, and all positions are approximate. The company moves this furniture during the play, so the layout changes from scene to scene.

Appendix B. Lighting cue list

The script has no numbered cues. This list is built from the stage directions in the script and from my production notes.

Cue	Moment in the script	Light	Notes
1	The start of the play. The pre-show announcement is interrupted by the Director's phone, and the company sets up for rehearsal.	General working light	From my production notes.
2	Savitri asks for "Lag Jaa Gale", the song plays, and Manoj steps out from behind the actors.	Manoj's shift	Ends when Manoj exits, and the working light returns.
3	Savitri sprays the deodorant, the company leaves the stage, and Juneja appears.	Juneja's shift	Warm (Photos 2 and 4). Ends when Juneja exits into the wings, and the working light returns.
4	Kabir leaves after his last line to the lights, "Sun, mai guard ko bulane ja raha hun. Bahar aajaio." (Listen, I am going to call the guard. Come outside.) Kinni walks back in.	The real-life light slowly fades and turns green on Kinni (Photo 3)	From my production notes.
5	The family faces the audience.	"Lights start to shut down one by one; the last one to be switched off catches the CHARACTERS in a pool of light." The last light is green (Photo 1).	Stage direction from the script.
6	End of the play	Blackout	Stage direction from the script.

Appendix C. Cast and crew

The theatre company

Role	Actor
The Director (Arjun)	Janamejay Pandey
Abhimanyu, production in-charge	Akarsh J Naik
Rahul	Abeer Chandeshri
Kabir	Kajit Dhingra
Gautam	Krish Sharma
Aryan	Sarthak Bhayana
Tanvi	Rishika Singh
Sana	Unnati Verma

The characters

Role	Actor
Savitri	Chisha Kapoor
Mahendranath	Aditya Oberoi
Binni	Kumkum Brijwal
Ashok	Preetam Kumar Bharti
Kinni	Ananya Luthra
Manoj	Raghavan Goyal
Juneja	Sufi Siddharth Kabir

Production

Credit	Name
Script	Arjun Sethi, Aditya Oberoi and Skand Rawat
Direction	Skand Rawat
Lighting	Skand Rawat
Poster	Skand Rawat and Preetam Kumar Bharti