

Training in Voice and Speech: One Indian Approach

ASHOK D. RANADE

I have been engaged in working on voice and speech for the last twenty-odd years. I would have liked to describe my approach, in general, as Indian. However, the diversity and multiplicity of the training methods adopted and the methodologies advocated all over the country have driven me to the safety of a title less ambitious in scope. My approach is certainly Indian, but I am only *one* of the Indians working in the area! The time has come to compare and evaluate the rational bases as well as the efficacy of the current approaches. To facilitate the process it is essential that the individual positions—those that are performance-oriented—be stated clearly, comprehensively, and with due regard for larger cultural perspectives. I hope to do this as far as my own view-point is concerned. My statement is designed to put forward a conceptual framework for my theorization, as well as vocal practicals and exercises conducted during workshops. In workshops and practical sessions I tackle individual cases and specific issues arising out of the stated framework and the related theatric aspect. The present exercise is pitched at an abstract level, which is inevitable if the desire is to accommodate fundamentals as well as peripherals.

The Tenets

What are the tenets of my approach? Tenets require to be stated clearly as they are the basic principles one believes in. In this respect I would like to put forward a three-levelled hierarchical conceptual structure.

The first level is occupied by basic concepts, the second by the derived, and the third by the applied. The concepts at the three levels are distinct though there are logical overlaps and, consequently, a mobile class of marginal concepts also circulates. All concepts together make possible theories which are the inevitable concomitants of human actions or the facts they generate. There are no theory-neutral facts in human behaviour. This needs to be stated firmly and pressed home ruthlessly because artists, especially performers, are scornful of theories and theorization. Those mournful and frequent references to the wide and increasingly widening gap between theory and practice, or science and art, or technique and

artistry, etc., are the inevitable results of lax thinking and crude aestheticizing!

Artists, especially performers, are engaged in a kind of non-verbal conceptualizing. The ideal position is where performers verbalize these same non-verbalized structures. Alternatively, non-performers are expected to translate these structures with reasonable fidelity to the originals. Codification of performing practice (i.e., grammar) is bound to lag behind performance, but aesthetics does not. Aesthetic thinking, even though not verbalized, keeps abreast of performance. In other words, a valid performance is theorizing in action awaiting verbalization.

Basic, Derived and Applied . . .

The three concept-types need to be distinguished. I distinguish them, and that is the first tenet of my approach.

The following tabulation indicates the differentiating features:

<i>Basic</i>	<i>Derived</i>	<i>Applied</i>
1. Enjoys maximum abstraction.	Has a narrower range of abstraction, functions as a meeting ground of abstract and concrete.	Related maximally to a concrete work.
2. Inherently related to multiple life-areas and patterns.	Connected directly with specific art-activity.	Linked vitally to particular works.
3. Chief feeder disciplines are philosophy, logic and metaphysics.	Aesthetics and practical criticism are the mainstay.	Craft and technology function as the ruling agencies.
4. Enables establishment of and interconnections between different world-views.	Encourages inter-art relationship in creation and assessment.	Leads to mixed-media genres and art-forms.
5. Is responsible for offering cultural perspectives.	Generates isms and other aesthetic ideologies.	Forges methods and techniques.
6. Operates mainly at the ratiocinative level.	Reflects the psycho-physical processes that cover the performing triad: artist – work – receiver.	Exemplifies concentration on artists as initiators.
7. Indicates dimensions of experience irrespective of quality.	Creates and moves away from notional boundaries to define art-activity as qualitative experience.	Explores specified units according to the current norms of efficiency and artistry.

It is my contention that a sound methodology pertaining to creation, training and appreciation can emerge and prove workable only if the three conceptual levels are comfortably accommodated. Omission of concepts at any of the levels is likely to lure one into an undeveloped complex of ideas. An idea proves fruitful if and when it is worked out at all the three levels discussed so far.

Theatric Universality, a Tender Myth

A tenet which follows from the triad of conceptual levels pertains to the much-talked-about universality of theatric impact. Training methods and the underlying philosophy are necessarily conditioned by the theatric content which may be individual, societal, cultural and *finally* universal. It is to be noticed that the four levels become progressively wider but also more and more abstract. The universality of theatric impact is a myth in the sense that it is an intangible creative force. It is also tender in the sense that too frequent and gross claims to universality have a withering effect on the original import of a work. Hence my training model has adequate room for exercises designed for communication at the level of individuals, societal groups, cultural entities and transcultural societies. It is easy to understand that as one moves from the individual to the transcultural, the training-content becomes less and less dependent on language and more and more voice-oriented. The more abstract the theatric content, the more potential it has of transcultural communication. In turn, the more transcultural the import, the more it depends on non-verbal communication. Voice and vocalization are among the most important of the non-verbal tools an actor has, because, apart from gestures, the other tools such as make-up, lighting, set-design and costumes are not controlled directly by the actor.

Voice, Language and Gesture

The linkage between the three assumes special significance in theatric communication. Firstly because theatre enjoys/faces linguistic multiplicity even within the country. Secondly, language-based theatre continues to occupy a major place in the theatric world in spite of the frequent and varied rebellious stances of experimentalists. Thirdly, while language is obviously verbal and acquired, vocal and gestural explorations are non-verbal and largely innate. In other words, training methods are required to be devised and imparted in such a way as to strike a balance between personal and societal idioms, as also between well-defined meanings and suggested contents.

I therefore stress the distinction between voice and speech in my teaching. While improvement in and extension of effective ranges of vocal parameters is taken care of by a set of exercises, another is devised for the language-based units in theatric speech. It is here that training in pitch, volume, timbre on the one hand and vowel-sounds, consonants, nasals, etc., on the other find their respective places and weightages.

A special word is perhaps necessary about the language-gesture relationship, chiefly because it is a relationship that binds verbal activity with gesture, which is eminently non-verbal. And yet, a well-written/spoken word provides a matrix

for gestures of certain efficacy. A good theatric word is a seed-form and to unravel the mysteries of it is a sure way to unfold an all-embracing *abhinaya*. When I see actors and directors going about clumsily in search of 'business', I do not forget to pray for their continued literacy!

Music-speech, as a Continuum

The considerations put down so far have influenced me to regard music and speech as a continuum. I take it that to explore the fundamental properties of sound as a phenomenon is a valid quest in case of both music and speech, with an extra emphasis on tonal quality or timbre as in music. Language, though optional in music, is central to speech, while the high degree of systematization of acoustic dimensions effected in music is an alternative selectively exploited in speech. Therefore, to trace the music-speech continuum through language is to try to get the best of both the worlds — one dominated by a non-verbal quality and the ambiguous, and the other by narrative power, multiplicity of meanings, and an exclusively human connection. I have often wondered why theatre-thinkers and trainers have failed to profit by our knowledge about voice in music! Briefly, the lapse could be attributed to an ignorance of the wide variety of musical practices in the country as well as to an unimaginative adoption of the proscenium-based play, during the modern period, as the sole legitimate drama of the land. I must add, though on the side, that those who have relied mainly on language to solve the puzzle of the efficacy or otherwise of communicative models have erred because they have ignored communication in music! The non-verbal in gestures has attracted attention but not the non-verbal in music!

It is in this context that I would like to remind ourselves of the mature Indian tradition which places at our disposal an entire hierarchy of sound-connected manifestations. I am obviously referring to *shabda*, *nada*, *dhvani*, *swara* and *varna* as acoustic manifestations at different, though related, levels. While *shabda* is that property of the ether (*akash*) which is perceived by the ear (*shravana*), *nada* is that which is produced when something strikes something else. This *ahata* variety of *nada* is distinguished from the *anahata* (the unstruck), which is perceived only by *yogins*. *Dhvani* is *nada* produced by musical instruments, etc. When *dhvani* results in musical notes, it is called *swara*; and turning into vowels or consonants, it is known as *varna*.

It should be clear that workers in music and speech would benefit by an awareness of the four-fold Indian mapping of the world of sound. As one moves down the hierarchy, the acoustic expression tends to narrow in application. In a parallel action the criteria become finer, and finally the techniques arising from the operational concept assume a more specific character. The significance of this dynam-

ics can hardly be exaggerated. Whether in creation or reception, preservation or training, structural analysis or constructional sophistication—the four-fold manifestation functions as a guide to fruitful activity. It is pitifully true and truthfully piteous that the vigour displayed in the traditional formulation is hardly emulated in creative and critical endeavours today!

The Importance of Being Composite . . .

Yet another of my tenets concerns the nature of the compositeness theatre proverbially enjoys.

The term composite is from *com*, i.e., together + *ponere*, i.e., to put. The dictionaries seem content to note that 'composite is one which consists of parts'. Works on critical terminology are, however, silent on this. The obvious inference is that the contemporary connotation which refers to a composite art as one combining many arts is a case of useful accretion to the original meaning. However, the significance of the concept lies in its perceivable thrust in the direction of inter-arts relationship, an aesthetic issue with a direct bearing on every theatric process, procedure, method and exercise.

What Do We Mean by Composite?

The myth of the origin of drama in India speaks of Bharata's selective and sensitive borrowing. The recited, sung and ritualistic arts were borrowed from the *Rig-*, *Sama-* and *Yajur-vedas* respectively, while the *Atharva-veda* was the source of *rasa*, the ultimate impact each drama was to aim at. Is it because of the diversity of sources that drama becomes composite?

In my opinion it is not so. The comparatively recent usage of the term composite in aesthetic thinking suggests a phase of reversal after the contributing arts chose to follow paths of separate and intensive development for centuries. The reversal of strategies cannot be expected to give us the same, early kind of drama because during the intervening ages all the theatric arts were busily carving out their own autonomous areas, bringing about changes in our aesthetic perceptions. Under the circumstances a mere coming together of these arts cannot give a composite character to a product. To earn the rubric 'composite', the arts that come together must owe allegiance to different families. Art-families are formed on varied bases such as the medium used, explored sensibilities, audience contribution, the scope allowed to artists, etc. The following prominent art-families can be identified to make the point clearer:

<i>Art-family</i>	<i>Member-arts</i>
Literary Arts	Fiction, poetry, drama (read)
Fine Arts	Painting, sculpture
Performing Arts	Dance, drama, music
Combined Arts	Architecture, calligraphy, etc.
Composite Arts	Films, drama

Theatre is today composite because of the strategic reversal prompting it to bring together arts that are otherwise fully, independently developed and performed. This fact is important in our contemporary training which must aim at creating a composite sensibility. My training procedures therefore take into consideration the distances the human mind has covered since the time dance, drama and music were *one* expression to reach the present state — when they are *different* entities mingled into *one* expression. This is the reason why I delve deep into poetics, aesthetics, cultural musicology, musical acoustics, theatric history and other such disciplines to give shape to voice and speech studies in modern times.

These sciences/disciplines enable a willing performer to profit by what other sciences have earned. The insights obtained by musical acoustics into the nature of vowel and consonant sounds thus become available to a speaker. What musical aesthetics has to say about the essential ambiguity of sound liberates a speaker from the shackles of grammatical meaning. Cultural musicology opens new avenues to a performer by stressing the innate relationship between the art and the non-art areas of life. Musicology brings home the truth of the unexceptional continuity of the performing tradition as distinct from scholastic formulations. The codifications in their own turn bring to our notice the value of firm systematization as an element facilitating deviations. In the ultimate analysis, deviations are the royal road to creativity! The pooled resources of multiple arts and sciences make theatre a composite art without a parallel. If training methodologies do not explore and exploit the body of insights collected by theatric aspects as well as the theatre-related fields of life, they are fated to suffer atrophy! All multi-pronged attacks on the problem of theatre-training are significant primarily because they move beyond a mere passing on and acquisition of particular skills. Training of performers should take care of skills and craftsmanship as well as artistry and creativity.

Three Cheers for Creativity . . .

It is of course easy to put creativity on a rosary than to put it into practice! One

is also doubtful of the efficacy of a training programme planned to arouse creativity. And yet, on account of my musical training, I believe that it is both possible and desirable to take a trainee up to a take-off point by adopting a training programme worked out in great detail. My motto is to create an aptitude and strengthen the attitude! To put it briefly, improvisation, imagery-arousal, and generation of the *ashta-satvika-bhavas à la* Bharata (in relation to voice and speech) are my three cheers for creativity! I claim that the three have a valid application in other theatric aspects ranging much beyond voice and speech—though my own efforts have been less ambitious.

Improvisation

Improvisation, a skill much talked about, comes naturally and easily to musicians. It has been a mystery to me why Indian directors-actors-theatre-pedagogues should look elsewhere to understand and imbibe the phenomenon!

Improvisation came to the forefront as a reaction against stylized acting. However, the conceptual base of contemporary improvisation is absurdly narrow. Most of the improvisatory work limits itself to movements and gestures. It operates an extremely limited palette of sensory perceptions. I prefer to take my trainees through the paces to profit by insights offered in ancient as well as modern readings in perception-psychology. I encourage the use of a wider array of sensibilities, I add to that the acceptance and use of certain mental powers commonly not granted full legitimacy in theatre-pedagogy.

Finally, I advocate and put into practice the *yogic* methods of deliberate masking and concentration as tools to psycho-physical coordination aimed at creative expression. My improvisation exercises are object-based, music-based, and situation-based.

Imagery-arousal

A related strategy developed to take trainees towards creativity is, as I describe it, imagery-arousal. In times when we are (as Coleridge put it) "suffering from the tyranny of the eye", it is necessary to recall that imagery is not a monopoly of the sense of vision! Imagery is the creation of unified responsorial units by each individual sensibility in its own terms. The variety, succession and frequency of imagery leads to richness of experience and, as Henry James suggested, "to be creative is to experience". To image is, to some extent, a technique which can be taught. Imaging extends the area of an individual's capacity to feel, sometimes it deepens the existing feelings, and in rare cases teaching to image disturbs the trainee into a new consciousness of his own abilities as well as shortcomings! Verbalization plays an important part in the teaching of imaging and at certain

junctures imaging is coupled with language-learning procedures, though at subtler levels.

Ahta-satvika-bhava

The eight essential sense-expressions identified by Bharata are *stambha* (immobility), *sweda* (perspiration), *romancha* (horripilation), *vaiswarya* (voice-break), *kampa* (tremor), *vaivarnya* (losing colour), *ashrupata* (shedding tears) and *pralaya* (to merge, to lose consciousness). They are obviously non-verbal! For all purposes, the situation is therefore paradoxical!

To solve the problem I accept the paradox and, further, I adopt a procedure which uses words and verbalization, voice and articulation, to reach the wordless and the voiceless. In other words, the eight essential states are reached after words and vocalizations are fully understood and deeply felt. You then leave them behind to reach the state of *vachikabhinaya*.

Conclusion

In my training model a circle is thus completed. I begin by turning every stone to unearth layers of meanings in each and every sound and word. This passionate and agitated search takes me to many arts and sciences. But finally both voice and word are stilled into a nearly Buddhist silence impregnated with an artistic truth comparable to a pool of crystal-clear, clean and calm water. At the end of the training both voice and speech are at peace with each other as well as with the world without! □