

Dilemmas of a Contemporary Theatre Practitioner

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This will be more of a personal chronicle of my development as a theatre director than any erudite observation on the status of contemporary theatre. I venture to write this because the dilemmas and challenges facing a theatre person in India today remain more or less the same throughout the country. Therefore I believe my experience has a general character, and recording it may be of some value.

I was not conscious of any inspiration or a specific model when I started working in the theatre. Of course, I had some examples to follow. As a young man, I was lucky to see *Avanavan Kadamba*, one of the best plays ever produced in Kerala, written by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, directed by G. Aravindan, and performed by a host of celebrated actors like Nedumudi Venu, Natarajan, Krishnan Kutty Nair, Jagannathan, and Gopi. Similarly, productions by R. Narendra Prasad at the Natyagriham, and the works of young directors and writers like T.M. Abraham, Omcheri, Indukumar and P. Balachandran opened up new vistas for me. These works represented various trends in theatre practices in Kerala during the 1970s.

Over and above this was the cult figure of G. Sankara Pillai, who inspired a whole generation of theatre workers in Kerala. Together with S. Ramanujan and other theatre persons who came to teach and do productions at the School of Drama, Trichur, Professor Sankara Pillai instilled in us the passion and the courage to pursue theatre as a career. I was not a regular student at the school but a frequent visitor. The workshops, lectures, writing, and regular interactions with other theatre persons helped me develop a new sensibility and aesthetics in regard to theatre, and a certain discipline and ethics too. If I am to name one single source of inspiration, which at any point of time is a difficult task for any artist, I would still think of Professor Sankara Pillai and the Trichur School of Drama. The workshops and lecture sessions introduced us to Stanislavski, Artaud, Beckett, Ionesco, Brecht, Pinter, Grotowsky, Genet, Shaffer, Edward Bond, Robert Wilson, and many others. We came to know about new trends, theories and happenings in the West, as well as the rich heritage of India and other Asian countries. More importantly, theatre was taught to us as seriously as any other academic discipline. It helped us approach all aspects of theatre in a methodical manner, be it selection of a script and its interpretation, blocking and designing, preparation of the performance text, work with actors, or mobilization of resources. Theatre became an activity which called for expertise and professional experience. Like a silent and invisible god, the National School of Drama remained far away, in the North. Now I understand that it is from this unique institution and the great Alkazi that the new system and sensibility came down to us.

There were other influences too — the influence of contemporary poetry, fiction, culture, and doctrines of philosophy. Again, the West set the trend in the 1970s. Political activity was no longer a worthy pursuit, and my generation got more and more disillusioned and detached from this activity. Literature was filled with surreal, metaphysical narratives; fantasy and personal images drifted more and more towards the abstract. Narrative was replaced by

expressionistic and other new techniques. Even language was handled in such a manner that an original work in Malayalam often looked, read, and sounded like a translation from an alien language. This no doubt elevated the artistic expression and helped the writer deal with complex layers of life, but the native flavour was lost. With a broader spectrum of authorship, a new sensibility and equipment, our literature became 'international'. It was only natural that these new trends in literature should affect the theatre and its aesthetics.

Exposure to contemporary Western literature together with formal schooling in theatre led to modernistic experiments in the Kerala theatre. Many plays of Brecht, Beckett, Pinter and Genet were performed on rural stages to astounded villagers. In 1986, I produced *Deathwatch* for a village theatre group; we felt that the theatre in Kerala had now become experimental and modern. But the excitement did not last. The villagers refused to appreciate these abstruse experiments in theatre. They could not relate their experiences and day-to-day life with the situations portrayed in the *avant-garde* theatre. It failed to express their culture, history, and aesthetic sensibilities.

The attempt to build up an indigenous theatre was going on simultaneously with these experimentations. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar was going ahead with his own search, and G. Sankara Pillai told us that "the theatre of the earth is never dead" — we have to explore our own roots. But many of these inquiries lacked the emotional energy characteristic of a true theatrical experience, and did not relate to contemporary experience. The proscenium was abandoned and the theatre moved to non-conventional spaces. Folk performances were revived to fashion new tools of expression. Many youngsters, including myself, joined this quest. Various art forms — archaic or recent, crude or fine, rituals, dance-dramas—were revisited with a new purpose and energy.

Through this process, I clearly understood that my theatre had to be moulded on my life and environment if I really wanted to communicate with my people. The style, the form, and the technique had to evolve from my encounters with the past and the present, with my specific culture. That is, my theatre had to be rooted in the small village in Kerala where I was born and brought up. The colourful festival procession going up the winding village path, up the little mound, had to give me my movement patterns; the fierce rites of black magic and the exorcist rituals witnessed in childhood had to be the source of my emotional ecstasy; the music had to come from the songs of the paddy-field and the songs of the wavering drunkard; the ecstasy of the devotee dancing with an arrow piercing his cheeks, like one possessed, had to give me the energy to withstand the pressure and strain of performances. The narrative style and technique had to come from the stories the village told me; the scenic design had to come from the paddy-field, playground, secret meeting places in the bushes, and the awesome graveyard surrounded by high walls. The heroes, gods, and demons of childhood, the ancestors, and simple living mortals had to be the characters; the idols and icons carried in church processions, and by the pariahs during their festivals, had to be the source of my images. The reality of village life had to give me the story-line; and the subtlety with which the villager communicates his agonies, anxieties, and reactions to the world had to teach me the essence of the art of theatre. The village with all its colour, emotions, tragedies and celebrations did in fact inspire my theatre.

But even this search for our roots was not free from the influence of the West, its

perceptions and aesthetic understanding. Rustom Bharucha criticizes this indigenous theatre, referring to the work of Ratan Thiyam in these words:

Thiyam's theatre, I would say, has been strongly influenced by his exposure to proscenium theatre, as represented to him by his mentor Alkazi at the National School of Drama. His framing of action, timings of exits and entrances, lateral groupings, use of cyclorama, above all, his tacit refusal to confront the audiences with a break in the narrative or direct addresses—these are conventions that strongly uphold the illusion of the fourth wall.

I quote this because, as a general observation, I feel it can apply to any contemporary theatre practitioner in India. The fourth wall is not the basic problem. It is the aesthetics and conventions followed to achieve 'professional' standards in theatre which constitute the real block. These standards are set somewhere in the West — in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), in the professional houses on Broadway, or elsewhere in America or Europe. Professional excellence is measured in terms of perfection of the craft of the actor and perfection of stage technicalities; designed to create a smooth and pleasing product. The practices and priorities of our own theatre have been reset to achieve a perfect 'process' and 'product', as dictated by Western sensibilities. Thus theatre has become more and more an elite and urban activity, moving away from the soul of the rural Indian heartland. The political and cultural features of India's histrionic tradition, and Indian sensibilities, have been ignored in this mad race for professionalism. Even our native ethos has been reinvented to meet the demands of the West. Many of our myths and folk tales have been retold and refabricated to suit Western perceptions of sensuality and sexuality. Producing glossy literature to sell the show has become the liability of the artist. The primary features of Indian theatre — spontaneity, an informal ambience, the invitation to the spectator to join in and complete the creation, and the sense that the meaning of theatre extends beyond the production — have been lost. But theatre after all is not 'presentation', 'representation', or a mere exhibition of craft — a 'show' — as understood by the West today.

Unfortunately, our theatre education was modelled on RADA, and imparted by RADA-educated gurus. Indian narrative and performance practices which could transcend the barriers of class and caste were forgotten. Our theorization is today limited to urban reality, often focused on Mandi House. Our schools of drama, including NSD, refuse to accept or aim at an audience outside the city limits. In fact, we are always addressing the non-audience in a few Indian cities. We are catering to the fake sensibilities of urban academics and intellectuals, creating arty, spectacular, expensive productions full of abstract imagery, symbols, and slippery 'sub-texts'.

Western agencies which finance theatre activities in India encourage us to research into the 'universality of temporal experience' by alienating native practices from their roots and context. Productions with a fake physicality, involving a lot of wasted human activity — even exercises bordering on gymnastics — are encouraged. Many of these productions are only of academic interest. At least in Kerala, many theatre persons who have been funded by these agencies have stopped doing theatre altogether! They seem to have lost all reason, and don't even seem to understand their own words or actions. And the tragedy is that they

were radicals in their 'pre-funded' days, and did powerful and meaningful theatre.

We should be aware that the resources of our theatre are adequate to address the demands of our time, to deal with contemporary issues, and to communicate directly and effectively with the audience. We should not forget that one of the masters of Indian theatre, Shri Habib Tanvir, parted ways with his RADA training to work with the tribals of Chattisgarh and develop his own theatre. We should also recall the statement of Badal Sircar — for theatre to be meaningful, it has to be amateur and not professional.

I feel that a conscious attempt has to be made to revitalize and reinvent an alternative Indian theatre free from the formalistic, urbanized, elite aestheticism which is the hallmark of 'good' theatre today. A more direct, simple, open, transparent, vital and energetic form must evolve in tune with our life and culture. Theatre has to address the problems, the ecstasies and agonies of our people, and take into account the India outside city limits while formulating its theory and practice. Even our schools of drama have to free themselves from their overwhelming aesthetic concern with continuity, texture, composition, balance, and visual gibberish.

We have to rediscover our villagers and their sensibilities, as opposed to the values of a globalized theatre which the new colonial forces are trying to create. We must stress that we cannot accept a single model of theatre practice, a single set of tools or technology, a single aesthetic governing play and playing area, text and performance. We must emphasize too that Indian theatre cannot be one monolithic structure. We have to accept the experience, cultures and traditions of the many peoples coexisting in this country. That should be the guiding principle for a contemporary theatre practitioner who joins in the quest for an alternative Indian theatre.