

THE ROLE OF THE CIVIC THEATRES

Dr. Charles Fabri

The following is a translation of a communication in the German monthly *Deutsche Kulturnachrichten* (German Cultural News) published by Internationes, Bad Godesberg, for the month of January 1967, p. 16 :

"New Theatre Buildings

"During the last weeks three new theatre buildings were handed over in towns of South Germany to serve their purposes. Worms on the Rhein inaugurated at the beginning of November 1966 her "Play and Festival House", erected on the ruins of a structure destroyed in the last war, at an expense of almost eleven million marks, in a building time lasting three years. As the theatre at Worms does not possess its own company, seventeen visiting stage troupes were engaged to play in the first season, among them those of Darmstadt, Heidelberg and Wiesbaden, Vienna, Basel and Zurich. Among modern dramatic works in the programme are those of Anouilh, Brecht, Dürrematt, Miller, Saunders and Zuckmayer. The new theatre provides seats for 840 spectators, and contains the most modern technical equipment for transformations and rapid change of scenery.

"The new city theatre at Würzburg was solemnly inaugurated at the beginning of December with a presentation of Wagner's *Meistersinger*. It offers seats for 750 spectators; the technical equipment is almost completely automatic. The facade of the cube-

shaped structure has been formed with cement concrete surfacing, natural stone and aluminium. It is a modern house for opera, operetta and drama, the central core of which, as the Intendant, Dr Herbert Decker wishes it, will be drama. The adjoining studio stage, "Forum of the Times", is intended to cultivate present day work, and to contribute to the building of bridges to the university and the State Conservatoire of Music in the city. The new theatre, with a company predominantly made up of freshly recruited players, has already obtained for this season 10,000 subscribers.

"A few days before Würzburg, on December 1, Schweinfurt on the Maine opened her new municipal theatre, with seating arrangement for more than 785 spectators. It is the first proper theatrical building in the history of this town, and they engaged for the inauguration of the new house the Munich State Opera House with Mozart's *Figaro*. The building, erected at a cost of thirteen million marks, emphasizes the horizontal lines, and holds in its flat complex the administration, the stage area, the foyer and the auditorium closely together; it possesses the finest technical installations. The present staging by German, Austrian and Swiss companies will be replaced by the theatre's own company in due time."

This brief news item from the *German Cultural News* must, I feel, have more than ordinary relevance to Indian conditions, the problems of the theatre in India today, in 1967.

For what you have here are three indubitably minor provincial towns, comparable perhaps best of all to three towns such as Jullundur, Amritsar and Hoshiarpur, but certainly less important than any of our State capitals. Trivandrum has more inhabitants than Schweinfurt on the Maine, and Bangalore is much larger than Würzburg, not to mention a vast and important city such as Ahmedabad, much larger in size than Worms on the Rhein.

Why, then, should it be so difficult to create municipal theatres in India, if not in these small market towns, at least in the major cities and State capitals? I have attacked this question earlier in a "Theatre Notebook" in *The Statesman* on December 5 and 6, 1966, under the title *How to Help the Theatre*; and in a much more detailed article entitled *The Real Problem of the Theatre in India*, published as a guest editorial in the December 1966 issue of *Design* magazine, New Delhi. Nevertheless, the subject has lost nothing of its interest, and some of the points mentioned in my previous communications can well bear elaboration. (See appended note at the end).

The fact to remember, first, is that during the centenary year of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore, every State capital has erected a Tagore theatre. We have, thus, in all these major centres of State activity (political, economic, educational, medical and the like) a brick-and-mortar theatre, entirely empty, or hardly ever used. Some may be poorly planned as theatre, due mainly to lack of expert knowledge among architects of the needs of the modern stage. Others need small alterations to make them fit for plays, though, naturally, none of them would have the "finest technical installations" that little Schweinfurt possesses in her new theatre. The fact, however, remains that we have a basic necessity to create a theatre, for the brick-and-mortar structures these fourteen theatres are hardly used at all.

Now what hampers any amateur company in India from offering good fare at a reasonable ticket rate, for a long enough run, is the enormous sums most of the companies have to pay for renting a hall. Both in Delhi and Bombay, where I have made enquiries, the usual rate for a good sized theatre hall is often Rs. 400 and Rs. 450; and if only this one, major burden on the pockets of amateurs could be eliminated, an enormous fillip would be given to the "theatre movement" in India, where dozens of small companies struggle and can make little headway, precisely because financial burdens are far too heavy.

Now it will be seen that two of the three provincial theatres erected in November and December 1966 in Germany have no company of their own, or not yet. And what they do is to invite stage companies from other towns, in the case of Worms, six companies for a single season, presumably each company playing a month or six weeks only. It would be preposterous to surmise that these companies are asked to pay rent for the theatre. Yet if anyone wants to put up a play in any city of India, it is considered natural that Town or society should demand the company to pay hire for every night. In Delhi one art society, exclusively devoted to the cultivation of arts, charges as much as Rs. 500 a night for letting the theatre—and what's more, they are not very obliging in allowing the company to use the stage for rehearsals. Should it not be part of the duty of a municipality, a corporation, a Town committee, to encourage dramatic arts by offering their theatre building free of all charge? As far back as ancient Rome, people demanded bread and entertainment (*Panem et circenses*) when the populace rose in rebellion against the bad management of the Town. Free shows is not what we advocate, for the citizen who is willing to pay for his cinema ticket, should be able to pay for his

live theatre show too; but should the owners of the Rabindranath theatres, the municipalities, make money on the art of drama? The idea of profiteering on the presentation of plays seems repugnant.

Surely it is wicked enough for some States to charge entertainment tax for theatrical shows, and then give back the money so obtained through academies as grants to support theatrical activities. This obviously, is a school example of taking with one hand and giving it back with the other. (On the way, goodly sums are spent on paperwork and administration).

But to vociferously advocate the merit of the arts on the one hand, and charging heavily for dramatic shows on the other, by letting out Tagore Theatres at a rent that no amateur company or, for that matter, no struggling professional company can possibly afford, is to stifle the entire theatrical "movement"; and I consider it the first desideratum of all that the State theatres at least should be let out free for playing companies.

The second step, obviously, must be the support of a company of players ready to offer regular theatrical performances in all the State capitals of India. Even if such companies are initially not supported for more than a few months of the year, (as it happens also in smaller towns in Europe) the remaining months could be spent in touring neighbouring cities. If Chandigarh had a theatrical season of five months, the same company could spend a few months each in Amritsar, Jullundur, Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur (each have higher educational institutions, colleges and university departments) as well as Patiala; why, they would be welcome for a brief season in Delhi too—and having prepared a repertory of four to six plays, they could repeat them and play them eleven months out of twelve.

If one remembers how the old Parsi companies toured most of India with their few plays, or how Mr Prithvi Raj Kapoor could take his company to a dozen cities of Northern India, the prospect of such a repertory company appears to be even brighter, if only one capital city would be willing to give sustenance to the company for a season of six months at the State Tagore theatre.

In my previous article on the subject in *Design* I suggested a minimum assistance to a Municipal Theatre Company, and, I believe I made out a fairly good case for initial support not exceeding Rs. 2,500 a month—surely not a very munificent assistance, nor can it be a crippling burden on a State capital's budget, when more than that is given in

assistance to any school or college in town. I am convinced that the company could soon add some profit from the sale of tickets to this amount, and the resultant sum would not only suffice for survival but also for the preparation of new plays with fresh sets and costumes. As India has ample theatrical talent, and as many amateur companies, with no money and only on borrowed time can present often astonishingly well staged plays, I have little doubt that theatrical life would rapidly develop once municipalities give such an initial assistance. The utter boredom of the popular films of Bombay and Madras, catering for the lowest tastes, would be relieved by live theatre, that could include the great plays of past and present days, surely a desirable aim for a Civic body to support. However experimental it might be for the first six months, it is the kind of beginning that cannot be done without some help; and if a Civic body could give the free stage and financial assistance, the commercial theatre could be avoided altogether.

APPENDIX

Note from the author's article written as a guest editorial in "*Design*" December 1966 issue

"What is really needed now is to get an experienced small group organized, round a proved director and a few of his players and helpers, turn them into a professional group of six, to start with, and offer them a contract for one year. Both figures are taken from Western examples of provincial companies, especially before the last war. The municipality offers the theatre building, demands a season of six to eight months, with regular change of programme, and pays a modest salary to the director and his company. In India I suggest a monthly 'subsidy' of Rs. 2,500—surely not a tremendous call on the coffers of a town such as Delhi or Calcutta or Bombay or Madras. Of this, five players ought to receive each a monthly salary of Rs. 300 to start with, which makes a sum of Rs. 1,500; the director a salary of Rs. 500, which makes Rs. 2,000 and the remaining sum is for starting the first show, to help with carpentry and stage property and the like. The idea behind it all is that the company will have every reason to make the theatre a box office success for the taking at the gate must make up the rest of the income of the company and pay for all subsequent productions. This little budget is modest, modest for the tax-payer, modest for the company, but will work, sooner or later. A good company is sure to make a few hundred rupees every month, and can add to the salaries of the members, as well as engage extra 'hands'. The place of the amateur should not be entirely excluded: I can well imagine plays with larger casts in which the 'extras' are amateurs,

perhaps offered a modest sum for conveyance. (At the present time the amateur theatrical groups have to pay for their own conveyance even to the rehearsals and the performances). I know of instances in Delhi in which a profit as large as Rs. 2,000 was made in six performances; naturally, I know of others that ended with a loss of that sum and more; with a professional company, playing for six to eight months, the gains, are sure to amount to a little more, especially if it has nothing to pay for the theatre!"

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