

THE INDIAN THEATRE

Joginder Paul

If the spoken word at the theatre has been drawing on the written word for its vitality, the written word also owes its birth to the impression its writer gathers from the language spoken unpremeditatedly in actual situations of love, hatred, pity, compassion, joy and all other constituents of phenomenal human drama. To make light of the theatre as a lesser art is, therefore, but a platitude which an exclusive artist of letters must soon disown to own legitimately the essential supply of raw material of which he builds up his little world of fancy.

The theatre has a very, very long tradition, much longer than that of literature; for, man could speak very much earlier than he knew writing. In fact there was theatre even before the formal institution of the theatre in that the ancient man could frequently have lived many of his unforgettable experiences and played them unconsciously by himself. He was himself the spectator of the small dramas he thus played; or, the elemental man that he was, he played them involuntarily before those whom he loved. He would have them partake of his sentiment as he would, of the food he brought home for them. I believe and can visualise my belief that there was theatre even before man. It was laid in the whole universe in which the moon played freely with the sea, the mountains shook with joy when lightning sped rolling towards them and the animals and the trees stood in awful reverence in dense forests at the spectacle. At this fearful moment, an old deer perhaps would suddenly rush out of his protective bush to fetch his young one still gambolling in the open. It would have been very unfortunate indeed, if this heritage of play in spontaneous expression, as ancient as time, had not been developed into a specific, civilising institution.

It should be quite ticklishly interesting to imagine earliest phases of the theatre in India, the land of a people deeply rooted in tales, wonderful and diverse: a tree falling in love with and all its branches amorously bending over a pretty maid passing under it every morning on her way to a temple of Shiva; the humans and the animals furiously at war with each other, the animals heralding a human cause and the humans, an animal issue;

bored divinities descending bag and baggage from their calm abodes in heavens for permanent settlement on our mischievous earth in search of misadventures; and innumerable such other tales intriguingly breeding many more of their kind. Such a virile stock of humanity would surely have not stayed their native desire to rehearse instinctively experiences of their emotions for the amusement of their kith and kin. No, they would not have followed a script as such, nor would they have played inside their structures for those who paid but, in keeping with their life-style, in the open and free for all. I should imagine a moved spectator jumping, to the merriment of all present, into the arena and pushing an actor out to play his part. One generation would have taken up these plays from another only through words of mouth, each generation adding to or subtracting from a play some such substance as occurred to it topically.

As it were, assured freedom and informality right at the point of their origin gave the theatre wholesome seed, conducive to the growth of proportions large enough to contain the many-sided future of Indian life. Religious rituals, dear to everybody, formed into powerful dramatic narratives which plump Brahmins sang to hordes of rapt listeners. The professional Brahminic voice carved a vast stage, as vast as a listener could imagine, presenting the whole war scene of the great Mahabharata, or the entire Lanka of Ravana at fire. These Kathas (sacred tales) were translated from the oceanic Sanskrit epics into simple dialects for instantaneous access of the common people to them. Simultaneously their dramatic versions were also available for presentation during specific seasons. Many days before the festival, the all-time Ramayana is ritualistically played from the beginning to the ending in all the parts of the old country to mark the perennial victory of the godly consent over the clever dictum of the avaricious devil. Thus the association of God with the theatre as a leading actor, has always encouraged the religious Indian people to treat the theatre as a matter of conscience and faith.

The theatre has, ever since, carried itself like a native. That is, like the local stock of people, it has been getting modified in successive periods of time, assimilating alien knowledge and behaviour in a morality inherently its own. Our modern theatre has, on the whole, the same milieu as that of the country today: the bullock cart struggles patiently to move in crowded lengths while the sputnik luxuriantly shoots up to scale empty skies. Highways of science and paths of myth seem to cross each other as naturally on the stage as in our real Indian life. An institution so realistically rich in portrayals and rooted in the earth must continue to be tended by the best hands available and such hands must ungrudgingly be granted conveniences of uninterrupted probe so that this familiar vehicle of intimate expression may remain intact.

The art of drama has originally grown from the unlettered and untrained human will. And, although getting more and more cultivated, it still mainly depends on the simple human will to perform it. Not only this, it has also

the advantage of a direct communication between the performers and the spectators: the words start breathing, the shadows of thoughts are so clearly visible and the action lays itself bare direct and independent of report. The illusion of reality achieved through on-the-spot human feeling and effort removes all barriers of artifice in make-believe. One should not be surprised, therefore, if a spectator were moved to rush to the stage to extinguish a fire which would be part of the story only. It is in fact the instant human touch in stage plays that accords them a natural superiority to sophisticated arts. I happened to have witnessed an unpretentious dramatic performance of 'Kafan' by Prem Chand, for which the artists used but a desolate country spot as their stage. A very intricate story laid in its own surroundings and played by simple folks attuned to its purport, the play unfolded a meaning which, I must own, had remained hidden to me in mere written words.

This brings me to a very important point: a play is not a play unless it's played. The script of a play is just its part and the temptation to adjudge the whole game by a part only is being unfair to the game. A play in its script only is what has occurred to the playwright: the script must actually happen to the people involved and the happening be shown rather than merely reported, as if for the first and the last time like a real happening in life. It is, therefore, the performance on the stage marking conjoined creative efforts of artists in different fields, which flowers into—what a spectator knows as - a play. The perceptiveness of actors, the searching ingenuity of costumes and make-up-man, the imaginative inventiveness of the lighting in-charge, the assiduity of the stage-organiser, the fancy of the playwright and the comprehensive creative capacity of the producer to integrate all the components into an organic whole—all these factors work, in consonance to develop into a play of events which really happen. But a real happening does not take place for its show value and may pass off unnoticed, while a stage happening must be devised for showing. The failure in the device may work out into either an exaggeration or an empty effort. It is in this context that each stage action is deemed accountable and more real than one in life.

Quite a few of our modern plays, however, appear too accountable both in content and stage-movement. Although fully accountable, art consists in its apparent unaccountability. Self-conscious pursuits after complex meanings and meticulously correct movements of actors on the stage often appear rather too deliberate for a true happening. Even though movements of actors have to be conscious, they must learn from their art to conceal art. Similarly a meaning must emerge unmentionably from a play. If a play has to encourage participation by spectators, they should find its meaning in whatever they see rather than be told what the play is about. 'Aadhe Adhure' by Mohan Rakesh, otherwise a brilliant note on tragic failures in contemporary domestic relatedness, fails in dramatic presentation owing to its dependence on words rather than on action. The play makes an excellent reading but the spectator is stuck up, as if hearing it read to him all the while. He gets to know what

the play is about but it does not happen to him. For a play to be crucial to the spectator, it should not be presented to him just as a thesis, even a most plausible thesis: he should experience it. And, this is possible only when he discovers its predicament himself after a steady emotional involvement in it. Yet, it is perhaps easily said than done. I can fully appreciate the complexity of tensions implicit in a relaxed delivery of a piece of art. To create the illusion that a dramatic episode is happening on its own when it has, in fact, to follow a prescribed script in preconceived measures, is not a child's play. But, doesn't the modern man follow a script while partaking of the complexity of contemporary living? And, following a script, doesn't he play it up, laughing even when tense, if a situation so requires. A situation may be false but genuine involvement in it does not fail to afford an actor a real ground to stand upon.

The episode of the Roadman in the classic dime novel, 'Thirtynine Steps' beautifully illustrates my viewpoint: the fugitive successfully dodges the whole multitude of the intelligence of the country which has frantically been making a search for him. The detectives fail to see him, even when he is talking to them in the guise of a roadman. His spell consists in his becoming the roadman, not disguising himself to play the part.

Evergrowing modern techniques may certainly add to the secondary effectiveness of a dramatic performance but any technique is doomed to fail but for its personnel's artistic capacity to suspend their own personality and to identify themselves in toto with the persons they are expected to represent. Whatever its technical perfection, a play shall never click without a rigorous application of its original law: a total self-surrender on the part of the artist to become the object he seeks to play.

Today when our technological progress has almost gone beyond the proportions of human control and insists on its automatic functioning to make no other but us its prey, man never needed to be so human for his survival as he does at this juncture. All our institutions which promote fellowship, conscience and understanding must be looked up to 'to show kindly light'. The theatre is one such institution beyond doubt. I am sure we would continue to sustain mellower humanity and sanity from our participation in the theatre and thereby, to give sustenance to this refreshing medium to keep our natural parts safe from the conscienceless technology. Our tradition in the theatre is too long and vivid to justify our ignorance of its healing impact.

JOGINDER PAUL, an accomplished writer who, besides scores of articles on different subjects, has three Urdu novelettes and seven collections of short stories to his credit. His works have been translated into English and other Indian languages also.