

THE ROLE OF CIVIC THEATRES

*Some views on the Subject*¹

J. C. Mathur

Back in 1954 in the columns of the journal *Bihar Theatre* (now defunct), I had proposed a role for Municipal and Corporation bodies in promoting theatre activity of the kind mentioned by Dr. Charles Fabri in his article, "The Role of Civic Theatres". I have since heard of a very practical arrangement which Municipal towns in Scandinavian countries have been following. They not only have small theatre-halls but also organise Theatre-goers Associations. These Associations invite groups from metropolitan cities, guaranteeing a certain number of seats for particular repertory groups. The members of the Associations buy up a number of seats in every season and thus ensure a minimum income to the visiting troupes who are, thus, able to organise their new plays with a sense of confidence. It is this confidence without which a theatre group cannot survive.

Brick and mortar theatres may take some time to come up. There are about a dozen towns in the neighbourhood of Delhi and similar numbers in the neighbourhood of other big cities. There are also smaller towns which need the theatre even more than these bigger towns. I would, therefore, favour provision of subsidies for "theatres-on-wheels". Both in U.K. and in U.S.A., such mobile theatres were the first step in the movement to carry theatre to small towns. The Century Theatre in U.K. was a remarkable feat of theatre engineering. The entire stage, property, and chairs for the audience along with the members of the team could be accommodated in a number of vehicles that were especially designed. I had obtained some material on this mobile theatre and had

1. See Dr. C.L. Fabri's article, "Sangeet Natak"⁴

passed it on to the then Department of Culture in 1964. I think, at this time, the mobile theatre is the answer to our immediate need. Each such theatre may cost about rupees one lakh or so. I think that some of the promising groups in Delhi and in other big cities deserve this facility.

Audiences for Indian drama lie scattered in small towns and villages. Audiences in New Delhi are primarily for the experimental and the avant garde theatre. Facilities are needed for both, but priority should be given to the former.

My suggestion will, therefore, be that (a) theatre groups in big cities (where sufficient talent is available) may be provided the facilities of mobile theatres, so that they can seek paying audiences in neighbouring small towns, (b) simultaneously, Municipalities and Block Development Committees may be encouraged to form theatregoers' associations which could book seats in advance every season for visiting theatre troupes, (c) funds should be made available with the Akademies to enable them to subsidise the performing troupes. It is better to concentrate on competent groups in big cities instead of encouraging the formation of municipal troupes in all towns. Amateur troupes may continue to perform in those places. But it is more necessary to feed the small towns by entertainment provided by competent troupes from the big cities.

I could not favour immediately heavy expenditure on modern theatres. That should be the next step after mobile theatres have enabled performing troupes to come up and to establish themselves as commercially viable units. Performers should come *before* the buildings. We have unfortunately been thinking mainly of buildings so far and not of troupes.

Adya Rangachari

When I read the New Theatre Building's quoted in translation from the German Cultural News of January 1967, in Dr. Fabri's article I did not know whether I should hang my head in despair at the comparison. The next moment I decided to face facts and take up the challenge.

What are the facts:

We have an ancient Theatre which grew up for centuries, we lost it with our political independence and now, with Independence, we are urbanizing our folk theatre and vulgarizing our urban theatre.

We have regional academies all over the country which are mostly with bureaucratic authority and where the only music is that of the type-writers and the main drama that of group-conflict.

And, finally, we have Rabindra Theatres which are normally booked for functions presided over by politicians or for Seminars on animal husbandry. (I am also tempted to mention the natya sanghs with their branches where it is all 'sangh' and very little 'natya').

And what is the challenge?

Theatre is ingrained in the tradition of the Indian people and contemporary Indian Theatre is bound to play its part in our cultural growth.

But what about the theatre buildings? It is the absence of these that is throttling the very first breath of modern Indian Theatre. For the last three years I have been shouting myself hoarse that a municipality which does not own a well-equipped theatre should feel ashamed to call itself a civic body since good drama is as essential to the mental health of the citizens as good drainage to the physical. Unfortunately we are all looking up to Governments and Academies and to grants and donations in lakhs. But our Governments which can afford to offer cash prizes and subsidies to films happen to be too poor to help drama-theatres; and, besides, by building monster Rabindra Theatres they have disqualified themselves for our purpose. But nothing prevents us from beginning with a covered platform and an enclosure but with determination, self-confidence, a powerful script and talented artists.

Theatre-building in India should have a two-fold purpose; one, to provide a conveniently equipped stage and auditorium and, two, to enhance the quality of the stage and the audience. We should preferably have a small capacity auditorium so that by being compelled to give repeated shows the standard of the artists is improved and the intimacy with the audience maintained. The Academies should try to foster repertory troupes on district-basis. Nominal theatre-rent, exemption

be met only by having a permanent civic theatre of the type recommended by Dr. Fabri.

What we desperately need in Delhi is a civic theatre with its own professional company. When I asked the Lt. Governor about such a possibility he said that the New Delhi Municipal Committee was building a civic library, why not build a civic theatre on the ground floor and the library on the first floor? Why not indeed. An excellent idea and it has been recommended to the NDMC authorities, but will anything be done about it? Who will make the ultimate decision? Why have large sums of money been wasted on a Tagore theatre on the Ridge in Delhi when our great need is for small, intimate theatres not amphitheatres? Rather than spend further lakhs on securing lighting equipment for this 'white elephant'¹, will not someone save the situation and direct this money towards the building of much needed civic theatres and the establishment of small professional companies?

Dr. Fabri has stated that what we need is a small organized group round a director, a contract, the municipality to offer a theatre building, a season of six to eight months and a modest salary to the director and players. The amount suggested by Dr. Fabri is too modest and somewhat impractical. In addition to the Rs. 2,500 per month suggested by him as payment for the director and players, I should suggest from experience, an additional Rs. 2,500 to underwrite the costs of production. Then, whatever profit is made on the sale of tickets could go towards building a reserve fund. But it must be realized that not every play is a financial box-office success. And until a professional company has such a reserve fund to underwrite losses for productions, the choice of plays becomes limited.

I think the idea of setting up small professional companies can work. If our experiment in Yatrik has proved successful and worthwhile, it could be a basis for the functioning of other small companies throughout India. Dynamism we have *within* the theatre — what we need is dynamic action by the Central and State governments, at this

1. This equipment has already been installed—Ed.

very crucial period of our theatre development. We need civic theatres and we desperately need subsidisation of small professional companies both by Government, by big business firms and by the community. Until this civic responsibility is realised we will never have a live professional theatre in the country. I am not pleading the case of Yatrik alone — I am pleading the case of the many small professional companies that should and *must* be established in the States to man the Tagore theatres with talented and competent persons from the National School of Drama and elsewhere. But is there anyone in the Government who will accept this dynamic leadership and responsibility?

Mohan Maharishi

In his article "The Role of the Civic Theatres" Dr. Fabri has said something very important. I hope this article attracts the immediate notice of the serious theatre workers and the authorities concerned and some effective step is taken, without delay, in the direction of establishing Municipal Theatres in this country. I very strongly feel that without the assistance and encouragement of the Government it is virtually impossible to rehabilitate theatre in India.

I am in entire agreement with Dr. Fabri's demand of forming small groups around experienced directors. In the present circumstances I find this suggestion eminently practical because a number of young and enthusiastic graduates of National School of Drama who are waiting to be absorbed in the theatre, will be readily available for the formation of such groups.

I also agree with him that the rents charged for various halls are ridiculously high and if the theatre has to be planted in our country then this unnecessary financial pressure on amateur companies would have to be removed. But I wish to point out that the Rabindra Theatres in most of the States are criminally misused by some of the non-serious companies. In the name of dramatic performances sheer vulgarity and tastelessness is displayed on the stage. With the result these buildings are robbed of all their dignity and the audience is beginning to identify them with cheap entertainment halls. Therefore, giving theatre halls free to all amateur companies might prove extremely dangerous.

J. N. Kaushal

There are no two opinions regarding the utility and the role which civic theatres can play in the life of a community. But the problem is not as easy as it is put forth by Dr. Fabri. It is not enough to get a band of 6 actors and a producer and sanction them a sum of Rs. 2,500 p.m. and ask them to start putting up plays around the year. There will be more problems which have been cropping up in the theatre since the days of Thespis. The problem of the aesthetics of theatre. The problem of dedication to the theatre. The problem of personal motives and the problem of exploitation of 'theatre arts' by civic authorities for their personal benefit. If you just take the economics of such ventures into account it needs more than what Dr. Fabri has suggested. Parsi companies toured the country at a period when movies had not crossed their way and once movies appeared the Parsi companies became a thing of the past. Prithvi Theatres was incurring quite a loss which was compensated by Prithvi Raj Kapoor's earning from his participation in the movies.

The real problem to my mind is that we are not theatre-minded. Leave alone small towns such as Hoshiarpur or Jullundur, even the city of Delhi is not able to help a local amateur organisation to complete its theatre. With all the support this group could muster from the State and public they are not in a position to complete the roofing. Their repeated requests to other theatre groups, who would definitely benefit if this theatre is completed, to assist in this project to put on joint productions to raise money for the building fund did not stir even a leaf. In the circumstances we do not expect to have a theatre like Shakespeare Festival Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon and Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

What we need is to make our people theatre-oriented. For that we should introduce dramatics in schools at a very early age. The taste for theatre cultivated at an early age will pave the foundations for a theatre-oriented audience who will be glad to spare money for theatres from their pockets and also use such civic theatres as are already available to the public.

State built Tagore Theatres are the best example of the lack of theatre-consciousness. Most of them are badly designed, shabbily kept and things are out of order most of the time because they are not manned by trained personnel such as the graduates of the National School of Drama or other technical persons but by retired civil servants who have nothing to do with theatre or for that matter with any kind of art form.

Alyque Padamsee

Dr. Fabri's article on 'Civic Theatres' is right to the point.

I quite agree that the Tagore Theatres all over the country have become municipal mausoleums. Theatre by its very nature is an intimate medium. Not for us the mammoth halls that cinema audiences need! Twenty years experience in the Theatre both as an actor and as a member of the audience has made me conscious of one indisputable fact. If there is to be any real 'rapport' over the foot-lights, the distance between the performer and the spectator should not exceed 50 ft.

A plea, then, for small well-equipped theatres with a seating capacity of 250 to 300. Two to three such small auditoriums could be built for the cost of one Tagore Theatre.

one tell if the same fate will not befall the proposed civic theatres due to lack of proper planning and co-ordination?

But commending the idea for all its merit, I think it is time that we extricate theatre from its dependence on 'well equipped' halls, which for all our wishes, may not be forthcoming for years. I do not conform to the view that such halls are an essential pre-requisite to the growth of theatre in this country. Over-elaboration of technical devices and an increasing dependence on them, in the given conditions here, is more likely to retard the growth of theatre and confine it to a groove that may not let it expand into new and original shapes through its own dynamism. For our theatre to grow, we may welcome all the technical aids wherever and when they are available, but not by pinning it down to such aids. That will be like pinning down one's writing to the aid of an electric type-writer, which though a useful instrument, can certainly not be thought of as an essential pre-requisite.

While talking of theatre here, I am conscious that my thinking is determined by drama and not the other forms of theatre. Be it so; my prime concern is this form of theatre only. While attending the East-West Theatre Seminar (October '66), I was puzzled by the emphasis laid on technical elaboration by some of the delegates who thought that to be the only way theatre could survive. They looked upon theatre as a competitive form of entertainment, while to most of us it is a form which, if developed according to its own logic, has no reason to be be-devilled by competition from many other. The logic of this form does not lie in its aspiring to achieve what cinema and television will always do more competently through greater technical magic; nor is it different from them only in as much as it is 'live'. It is a form just as distinct from them as painting is from photography and has, therefore, to assert itself by emphasising the elements of its distinction from, and not of its likeness to those forms. This means that it has not to vie for its growth in terms of a 'spectacle', but in terms of an art form of 'human abstractions' with the exclusive element of 'thinking' while growing. Theatre, no doubt, is the only art form that really *can* think as it grows, and grow through its thinking, the process being continued from the beginning of a performance to its end, and from one performance to another. The