

Tradition All Around Us

Bansi Kaul

It is a difficult task to explain just why the traditional and folk arts have fascinated contemporary Indian theatre practitioners, young and old. Maybe some of them can explain the attraction and some of them cannot. My entrance in theatre is fairly recent and I have not been able yet to explain this attraction even to myself, because I am still going through the process of knowing tradition and what it holds for me.

I now look at tradition from a very different point of view than before. As a child, tradition to me was activity. As an adult, I look at it as performing expression.

Let us say we are talking about village theatre. If villages are living reality for us, village theatre is living performance. It is this duality which influences all of us; sometimes I, an urban performer, feel as though I have stopped growing, and fall back on the living condition of folk theatre.

Most of the folk forms are not cheap entertainment. They provide us with social wisdom. This wisdom does not work on obvious levels. We have to search for it with continuous concentration and ultimately find our own expression, so that we do not imitate but imbibe. My grandmother had a very interesting story to tell me about imbibing. She used to say all humans are like small pebbles rolling down a hill, collecting dust, mud and snow on the way. When these pebbles reach the foot of the hill, they come in contact with the wind of the plains, the snow melts, the mud dries, and the dust blows off. The pebbles come to rest. I am still rolling in search of an answer.

Do all of us live the life the folk forms have sprung from? We don't, so what do we do? We get influenced, we imbibe, and ultimately search for our own theatre, a product of our way of life. The new contents are used in a modern theatre. Traditional and folk forms inspire and support us to create newer idioms for communication. We are not using these forms to prove their purity. The question of purity, even here, is debatable. The folk forms fascinate by their content. Now, what do we really mean by 'content'? Do we

mean political slogan, political sermon, or the over simplification of a social order? The content of these forms, sacred or secular, is the shared myth of the community, not the experience of individuals. Now, when we introduce new content in city theatre, we have to find out whether it is part of the collective urban consciousness. The reintroduction of myth in contemporary theatre is necessary as it imparts a collective consciousness.

Now I would like to go back to tradition, not strictly performing-art tradition. We as children were never conscious of the fact that tradition was always around us. It was there in Mother's lullabys, in marriage ceremonies and like social occasions. Sanyasis who came to our home for alms would sing or recite a story. Was this performance or activity? It was both, and we were part of it. We would always wait for the Sanyasis, to listen to their songs and stories. All these activities are incorporated now in the creative expression of theatre.

The Pundit reciting Shlokas in rituals, Mother humming while putting coal in the Kangri, Bachha Nagma in the marriages—all these were physical realities for us. These realities, after years, have come alive as instruments of expression. Childhood activity has become adult theatrical expression. I had never imagined that one day I would be producing theatre. If I had become an engineer or doctor, how would I look at tradition, as history? Perhaps! To me, for that matter to any Indian, activity of the past becomes creative expression of the present. I am sure most practitioners of arts look at the past with a keen eye for buried jewels, which might be dug up and fitted in contemporary expression. Sometimes we fail, as we are not yet ready to accept the fact that whatever we produce is for the consumer of the arts.

Now I am supposed to be a trained professional and am pushed into the market to sell my ware to the consumer. The consumer himself is not ready to be a consumer, because art is still a way of life for him. He has one foot in art as activity and the other as consumer. Are we going through a transition where the struggle of activity and performance is still on?

I as a professional have learnt a few production techniques, but they are very limited. Very soon my ideas are exhausted. On the other hand this country, where art was activity, is turning into one of art consumers. So one has to search for new expression to satisfy the consumer as well as oneself. The new consumer has still the dust of activity on him. He wants something new, because the past still lives in his home, and without. He lives in a country of spaceships and mud roads, aeroplanes and bullock-carts. He has both

modern and ancient philosophy. Hence the much greater challenge for a performer in twentieth-century India. So what do we do? With adult sensibility we look around and upon theatrical and non-theatrical, traditional and folk art forms; we look at the present with the eyes of a child, and we look at the past with adult eyes. Thus we evolve new idioms for our complex consumer.

In traditional Indian theatre, abstractions are not permitted in design or language. Scenery, no matter how minimal, must represent something concrete to make sense. Space is created by narration and gesture. This is one of the important things modern theatre has imbibed from the traditional. One can see these concepts used in many modern Indian productions. Then there is the audience factor. In traditional theatre, creation of locale and space is the product of a reciprocal exchange of imagination between the audience and the performer. In most of the secular theatre forms the acting area is free of props. Realistic theatre, on the other hand, has always resorted to illustrational realism, using the acting area for elaborate sets.

There is another interesting factor, the non-static character of both design and actor. The two coexist. That is why Aharya is the attribute of the actor rather than design. If in a play I have to show a forest, to me the forest becomes an image in its infinity. It becomes difficult to project this infinitude on the dark curtains of a proscenium theatre. Though I cannot avoid the proscenium theatre in an urban situation, tradition comes to my rescue. It provides me with a sense of colour which transmits itself in costume, headgear, make-up, etc. Through colour the infinite image is created. This gives the spectator the right to comprehend an image his own way.

Given a chance I would remove all the black curtains from proscenium theatres. We love colour and colour has to be brought into the theatre. It is through colour that we can bring back the sense of festivity that our traditional theatre is infused with.

Let us now take a look at the very interesting theatrical experience of presenting pictorial tableaux, which for me has been the most interesting of communicative occupations. In Ramleela for instance, each scene is a complete tableau. I have tried in my productions to use these pictorial Jhankis in succession to project a complete theatrical experience. In the acrobatic arts, which tell us no story in the conventional sense, the burden of meaning, pleasure, lies in each acrobatic feat. So each feat in itself becomes a complete story. But in modern theatre these isolated Jhankis are connected to each other through sound and image. The visuals and sound on

stage, and those created in the imagination of the audience, combine to yield the meaning of the play.

It is with the aid of these sketchy ideas that I have tried to produce my plays in the last few years, searching uncertainly but honestly for communication. I am still rolling downhill, looking for solutions. □