

## **WORLD THEATRE FORUM** **WHOSE THEATRE IS IT ANYWAY?**

### ***The Philosophical Viewpoint***

What is the relevance of the theatrical form in today's time? Is it becoming niche, an alternate expression with its outreach either cocooned in elitism or trivialized by a non-involved 'public'?

Is theatre primarily an aesthetic, artistic expression quite apart from life? If not, can it put society under the microscope and dare tell the truth to the entrenched? How do we re-formulate the space, text, technique and performance to make theatre meaningful to a society ever in transition?

How does the play reflect and direct the viewer's awareness of individuality and community? Even today, the themes of Shakespeare's Othello - racism, relationship, reputation, honour, deceit, jealousy and justice - remain relevant. In theatre, our personal and social conflicts are acted out before us. In real time, how effectively can it reveal us to ourselves, reinforce or challenge values, or invite us to other approaches and cultures.

The relationship between philosophy and the arts is complex. In the west, philosophers such as Plato or Nietzsche used artistic avenues to highlight their philosophical forays, while others were absolutely hostile to such practice. However, Plato did differentiate between reality, the knowledge of reality and the representation of reality through art. The artist does not make nature; he only holds the mirror up to nature. Hence, art stands on a wholly different plane, belongs to a different order of existence. How does theatre respond to this partition of reality?

In ancient India, put simply, art turned inward was religion, and religion turned outward was art. Aesthetics had its being in the concept of the Supreme identified with *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* or truth, goodness and beauty within oneself. The arts were about approaching and portraying the divine through philosophical and religious expressions of beauty. The *Natya Shastra*, the encyclopedic Sanskrit treatise laid the foundation for the country's performing arts. Sanskrit plays were the first representations of Indian theatre. Then, over the centuries, the creativity of so many regions, religions, languages and peoples, combined with the multi-layered panorama of social and historical experience, inspired and defined India's performing spaces.

To whom then does theatre belong?

### ***The Actor's Theatre***

An actor surrenders his or her personal skills, imagination, emotions and empathy in order to be transformed into a character by the creative process. Does this mean that actor has let the process own him or her? Some scholars say this transformation into a character through suspension of the actor-self makes the actor largely devoid of initiative as he is over-defined by the director's instructions. Does this mean that the director owns the actor?

A theatre experience requires actors and audience, the first being and speaking, the other watching and hearing. Each viewer, through the actor, seeks reflection of personal identity. An actor, called a privileged emotion manager, is the public face of a production that is actually the labour of many. But theatre is the experience of the moment and not of all that has gone before and behind it. The actor plays a dual role on the stage - a unique character at that instant but also a representative of many.

Only in communication with the audience is this dichotomy resolved. This is the essential alchemy between actor and audience.

So does the actor own the theatre? But is not the actor already owned by a process and a director?

### ***The Director's Theatre***

While directing is a relatively new phenomenon, the director has become the dominant figure in theatrical production. The director has his or her point of view seep through the entire production where the play is the material and the actor, in finely engineered space and time, is the medium. Briefly put, it is the gut-wrenching, time-consuming and arduous responsibility of making innumerable creative, practical and coordinated decisions. And then getting them meticulously implemented with and by a team. Understandably, a good director's objective is not to give the audience what it wants but to trust the audience to appreciate what it gets. In this scenario, does the director appear to own the theatre? To an extent, perhaps he or she does. It also implies, however, the ownership of responsibility. A great director is also greatly responsible.

There can be no outstanding play without the director. Does the director then own the theatre, or more subtly, the creative processes in theatre? Which is the greater ownership?

### ***The Theatre and the Audience***

Despite challenges from film and TV, theatre continues because it is in flesh and blood, the actors and audience partaking of the energy flowing back and forth across the footlights. The audience enters as individuals and good theatre can make it leave as a group. Even if a degree of aesthetic distance is necessary for theatre to be effective, and the performer and observer remain distinct, group experience is indispensable to theatre.

The audience is the final judge of theatre. A play does not exist until performed before an audience, which has inherent intelligence, curiosity, imagination and which also appreciates risk-taking. The play has the right to sell its vision even as the audience has to challenge it. An audience is not a natural inheritance. It cannot be cast, but has to be wooed, made a partner. Even as the audience sees and hears the stage, it is crucial to see and hear the audience to discover what unites it with you.

The illusion initiated by theatre can only be completed by the audience with its dramatic imagination. So can there be theatre without the audience? Does the audience then own the theatre?

### ***Infrastructure and Institutions***

Theatre is season after another of near-empty pockets, with money anxiety lined on the producer's forehead. But do libraries, parks and government schools make money? Like them, theatre too provides service to the community, but fewer speak up for it.

Ideally, fundraisers should be proud seeking money for theatre. For it is really about intense engagement at a human level on human issues. It could be a catalyst of change, a starting point of intellectual exchanges and participatory debates. With money being the controlling factor, is there the risk, however, of the funder dictating the role of theatre or the purpose of a particular production?

Theatre funding is also not a level playing field. Established companies stand a better chance, while the small or remotely-located groups have virtually no access to funding, however limited, which is available in the larger cities. Should not funding institutions

adopt plans to reach out to this unrealized potential, the theatre that never gets to happen, the would-be great artists of tomorrow?

Further, what is to be the infrastructure of training – for classical, folk, tribal, street, contemporary, educational and all other forms in the vast repertory of theatrical expression.

Friedrich Schiller, the German playwright, said that the stage is, more than any other public institution, a school of practical wisdom, a guide to our daily lives, an infallible key to the most secret accesses of the human soul. He added that of all contrivances of luxury, and of all the institutions of public entertainment, theatre reigns supreme. That the stage is the institution where instruction and pleasure, exertion and repose, culture and amusement are wed. Where we are given back to ourselves.

Whose is the responsibility for such an extraordinary institution? Whose responsibility is it – theatre funding, theatre training, theatre's unrealized potential, theatre's future?

### ***Represented and Representing***

Otherness is a truth seeking acknowledgement in a hybrid, fluid and trans-cultural world. Rather than transcending boundaries, does theatre tend to reinforce them by looking in from the outside? Can theatre negotiate the relationship between dominant and peripheral cultures, self and other, to serve community cohesion?

Otherness, in terms of national, racial, religious, cultural, sexual and other delineations, figures continually within the theatre space. But how best is it done -- being represented or by directly representing? How effective is the 'double of the other' in conveying the angst and the grit of the 'other'? Or can the 'other' only be truly projected by himself or herself? Will theatre expand its ambit to let the other be represented by those who actually embody that otherness? Of the performing arts, can theatre best project subjective perspectives? With its response and responsibility, can it meet the challenge of raising consciousness of otherness?

### **The Forum on Theatre**

The theatre is a living creature and suffocates quickly in bondage. Its narration is ephemeral, with no clear chart of how each moment has come to be. If theatre is not shared, it cannot be created. Then, how can anyone own theatre entirely?

Moreover, does one own theatre or rather wish to be owned by it? Passion for theatre is probably the best form of ownership, with plain ownership just a poor shadow of passion. Theatre demands – of the producer, the play, the director, the actor, the designer and the audience – that each give something to keep the ownership of this passion alive.

The two-day forum will comprise the following six sessions to discuss the full range of theatre-owner perspectives:

- 1. The Philosophical Viewpoint***
- 2. The Actor's Theatre***
- 3. The Director's Theatre***
- 4. The Theatre and the Audience***
- 5. Infrastructure and Institutions***
- 6. Represented and Representing***

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