



BADAL SIRCAR'S DRAMATIC USE OF ENVIRONMENTAL THEATRE IN HIS PLAYS WITH REFERENCE TO PROCESSION, BHOMA AND STALE NEWS: A NOTE

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Abstract

This paper examines one of the notable playwrights standing in the fore-front of a new theatre movement in India, Badal Sircar who has successfully introduced Environmental Theatre through which there is a direct and immediate feedback showing the way of evolving new kind of plays and acting methods. The prime concept of Sircar's theatre is also reflected in this paper.

Badal Sircar, one of the notable playwrights standing in the fore-front of a new theatre movement in India, was born in Calcutta in 1925. Belonging to a middle class family, he was an educated Bengali who worked as a civil engineer first and then became a playwright, a theatre director and an actor. He is said to have established through his dramatic art and attitude a theatre group called **Satabdi** and performed both on and off the proscenium. During the year 1962, Sircar became famous in all the Indian Theatre circles and in 1973, the members of Satabdi passed a resolution and started concentrating on the direct communication with the spectators. During his trip to USA, Sircar's concepts of Theatre got influenced in particular by Richard Schechners' Environmental Theatre and Julian Becks' Living Theatre.

The prime concept of Sircar's theatre is to communicate the clear cutfacts, concrete truths, about what is happening in the villages at the grass-roots level such as the nature of exploitation in both the industrial and agricultural level, and the urban strange-hold in the rural economy. His mission is to create the awareness of the issues among the people with the sole intention of meeting the demands made by the new thrust in his theatre, he started writing a new set of plays like **Procession**,

Bhoma and Stale News

Born in Calcutta, Badal Sircar had developed a picturesque idea about the Calcutta city and in his plays, he had described the procession held in the road side and crowd in buses and trains and how people suffer in day-to-day life and also described the crisis of the individual. The social, economic and historical forces which create crisis in the Society are the main concepts in the dramatic world of Sircar. In order to show this rather picturesquely, he chose the Environmental Theatre. In all his three plays, Sircar had introduced the environmental design and his dramatic artistry raised theatre performance into a memorable experience. The basic aspects of environmental theatre design is the fullness of space; the endless ways of space which could be transformed, articulated and animated might be the basis of environmental theatre design. It is also considered as the source of the environmental theatre through which performers take training. If the 'audience' is one of the medium in which the performance takes place, the living space is another medium. The living space includes all the space in the theatre but we cannot call it as a stage. Here there are actual relationships between the body and the spaces the body moves through. Most of the workshops and rehearsals are devoted to discover these relationships which are very subtle and ever-shifting.

The first scenic principle of environmental theatre is to create and use whole spaces. Literally spheres of spaces, spaces within spaces, spaces which contain, or envelop or relate or touch all the areas where the audience is and or the performers perform. All the spaces are actively involved in all the aspects of the performance. If some spaces are used just for performing, this is not due to a pre-determination of convention or architecture but it is because of the particular production being worked on the needs of space which is organised that way. And the theatre itself is a part of the larger environment outside the theatre. These larger out-of-the-theatre spaces are the life of the city; and also temporal historical spaces modalities of time/space. At the start of the open theatre's terminal:

"We come upon the dying to call upon the dead; We tried many routes to call up the dead; We invited some, and we studied procedures used by people who believe in invocation. What we chose finally was to knock on the door of the dead by trapping with the feet on the floor, the door of the dead. There is no ground where under foot-below the wood, below the stone-are not the bones of someone who once lived. The guides invited the dead below the stage floor to come through and speak through and speak through the Dying" (Joseph 30).

There is no dead space, nor any end to space. Each environment has a different feel, though all are made from simple wood structures. The audience is arranged in different ways and the action flowing through the spaces will be different for each



production. Each environment grown from detailed work with the performers. Each Environmentalist begins his work after the work with the performers is well under way. They try to make the environment function of actions discovered by the performers. Due to this, reciprocity develops between space and idea, movement and characterization. Environmental design comes from daily work on the play. The environment develops from workshops, discussions, drawings and models. Models are important because no two-dimensional rendering can give an accurate feel of space. Rehearsals are held in partially finished environments because the performer's work will revise the plans even during the construction phase.

Most of the actions are single-focus but significant actions take place simultaneously. Some actions such as the sexual relationships and the initial meeting of the lovers take place entirely out of the site of audience privately. The spectator can choose his mode of involving himself with the performance, or remaining detached from it. The audience is offered real choices and the chance to exercise those choices several times throughout the performance. The spectator can change his performance in a very high or low or near and far. His relationship to the performance may be on the top of it, in it, or a middle distant from it, or far away from it, it is left to their own freedom. The spectator may have the choice of sitting along with the other spectators. He may be alone or with a few others or along with the crowd. The choice is with them, whether to be in an open space or in an enclosed space. These are some of the concepts of the actions, and the spectators regarding the Environmental Theatre.

Donald M. Kaplan, an environmentalist has carried "some ideas to the point and believes all theatre architecture is an expression of infant body states. He thinks that the prosecution is a perfected form where in the digestive guts seated in the darkened auditorium hungrily await the food, chewed and fed from the brilliantly illuminated stage (mouth). The interface of stage and auditorium is not a celebration of a maturational achievement, as certain other architectural forms are. A theatre reminds us of a dynamic condition "(P113).

This condition is a digestive tract from mouth to stomach. Thus, as the theatre fills up and the performance prepare to go on a voracity in the auditorium is to about to be shaped and regulated from the stage by an active. At this point, we can Legin "to answer the question of what a theatre does kinaesthetically, by observing that its geometrics and functions favour a juxtaposition of a visceral and executive experience" (PP 107-8)

The environmental theatre encouraged give-and-take throughout a globally organized space in which the areas are occupied by the audience. The audience here does not sit in regularly arranged rows, there will be one whole space rather than two opposing spaces. The environmental use of space is fundamentally collaborative. The action flows in many directions sustained only by the cooperation of performers and spectators. So Environmental theatre is multi-lingual in nature. The design encourages participation. It is also a reflection of the wish to participate. There are four principles of Environmental Design:

1. For each production, the whole space is designed.
2. The design takes into account space-senses and space – fields
3. Every part of the environment is functional.
4. The environment evolves with the play it embodies.

Badal Sircar had fullest faith in the power of theatre and believed that it can be made "Part of the forces working for change" (Personal Interview). The existing style of theatre did not satisfy him. "He was pained further by the Gulf between city and village theatres, foisted by colonialism" (Sircar 2). In his own words, "India has been a colonial country for so long that its cities have acquired a colonial character, having been created basically to serve colonial interests" (P 2). The same was true of its theatre. But "in spite of the popularity of the traditional and folk theatre, the villages, the ideas and themes, remain mostly stagnant unconnected with their own problems" (P 3) says Sircar.

Sircar's third theatre envisages a synthesis of the first and second theatres, uniting the best of both. An important feature of Badal Sircar's new theatre is its emphasis on audience participation. In his own words "third theatre is a composite of four way flow of influences; actor to actor, audience to actor, actor to audience, audience to audience" (25-26). The most important characteristic of third theatre is its anti-proscenium nature. Sircar denounces the safety cover of distance and darkness behind which the audience hides. There is therefore one stage or stage props. Instead performers and audience intermingle intimately. To quote Sircar on the issue, "With this break, I could see at once a link between what I was trying to do in my other activity and the theatre, I had now rediscovered. I could see that theatre could do it" (P 2).

Portability is another characteristic of the third theatre. In Sircar's words, third theatre is "flexible, portable and inexpensive" (P 34). Sircar ensured a tremendous reduction of production cost while promoting the use of imagination. Freedom of



movement in stage is ensured. The performers and the audience are given the freedom to move within the living place in the third theatre. Sircar can take his theatre to the people if they do not come to it. Thus, third theatre becomes free to move. It can be staged anywhere. It can unite the illiterate villager and the poor urbanite in the movement to change. Third theatre is also free in the literal sense, one does not pay to watch it. It is this nature that makes the third theatre strong and a human act. Anti-commercialism is a very significant attribute of third theatre. The novelty about this new theatre is its approach to acting. It is considered as a poor theatre in the sense that it uses only the human body to convey the message of the play. Sircar aims at self-development in his actors. His approach is one of group approach. There are no small roles, there are no less or important actors in his productions. Each actor is allowed to confront the text and interpret it himself. To quote Sircar: "the new theatre demands different language of performance altogether. The performer has to take off his mask" (P 28).

Like his American contemporaries, Sircar trained his performers with physical training and breathing exercises. In his plays, procession, Bhoma and State News, Bedal Sircar adopts the characteristics of his third theatre and the concept of the environmental theatre. Procession (1974) is a quint essential third theatre play. It is a play "that causes third theatre techniques to be adopted even by conventional directors" (P2). It is meant to be performed in an open space, with the streets, through which the processions of life will thread their way, intertwining themselves around the islands of seating spaces for the audience. The actors sit among the audience, who directly accost them at the end, invite them to join the symbolic procession that will "end all procession the real procession of real men that will show us a way. The way home" (Procession 42). About Procession, Sircar says that for a long time he had the idea of making a kind of mentage on Calcutta made up of scenes of Calcutta streets, chatting in tea shops, conversations in the coffee houses, different scenes in the offices. The idea that Calcutta was a city of processions came vividly upon him. In procession, the performance mostly takes place in streets. The streets get transformed into a railway compartment and then transformed into a crowded bus. In Procession, Sircar has designed the theatre as comprising of streets, where the procession marches an office of a factory, and then is transformed back into streets.

"In Procession; A Screaming Siren Three, Four, and Five take up positions and turn into machines in a factory. Six takes up position at a different point and becomes a telephone operator" (P 15).

Animation of the space makes the living space lively. For example, in Procession, the sound of train siren, transforms it into a train by making a round with the whistle, makes the scene lively. And Dalhousie, a place in Calcutta said three times by the performer, and the crowd does symbolize the transformation of train into a bus. And the bus is transformed into a factory by the sound of Siren. Animation solely cannot transform the living space. It needs to be articulated, that is, clear utterance by the positions and speech. In Procession, the articulation of space by the performers complete the process of transformation. Sircar made this transformation by showing the hawkers, beggars etc., Which suggest the scene as a railway compartment through the performers position and speech. In Procession, the living space has been transformed, articulated and animated that makes it a true Environment Theatre Production.

In Bhoma, there is no character, no story, no continuity. The performers whatever want to communicate say directly to the audience through words, sounds and through their whole body. The play starts with actors forming a circle and makes eye contact to each other and then after taking different positions try to make eye contact with audience separately:

"In Bhoma: a melody of four descending notes. Each actor crouches and becomes a seed, sprouting, standing up, stretching up and spread to become trees. Two of the actors turn into wood cutters, clearing the jungle. Paddy fields, ploughing, sowing, Harvesting. Then, the group forms into a machine, with the rhythms and sounds of the movement of a machine" (P 46).

In this play, the living space is transformed into one of a river and as a motor launch sailing in river. The transformation occurs through verbal and non-verbal expressions. They perform various movements and articulate the space as per the production requirements. In Bhoma, the performers stand in the middle, and others get scattered to different positions, some performers sit and others lie down, to represent who are still warm to others, who have self-doubt about human nature and men whose blood is cold like fish. They move in circles to convey messages. In the play, Bhoma, the main theme or message to humanity is the need for collective action to eradicate poverty, illness and illusion and to create a pure and better world. Here in State News, the transformation of space occurs from forest to factory:

"Two and Five sit side by side, as if in a park, Five is an actress. The two use tones that suggest a real conversation with two pleading and coaxing the woman for an outing together and five resisting and refusing in fear" (P 108).



The scene again transforms the space from a factory to park through which the performer shows a conversation between a man and a woman in a lively manner, as we see so often in our everyday life, like people sitting in pairs and chatting with their laylove is picturesquely shown through the aspect of environmental Theatre.

Thus, the three plays signify a definite process of change both in Sircar's philosophy of theatre and the whole group emerging matured, giving a practical shape to Sircar's philosophy. In brief, in his plays, Sircar has successfully introduced Environmental Theatre through which there is a direct and immediate feedback showing the way of evolving new kind of plays and acting methods.

Works Cited

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