The Competition Virus / Keval Arora



Who Wins ?

As one bleakly contemplates the prospect of yet another theatre season at the university getting under way with the IIT Delhi festival in a couple of weeks, two comments heard some time ago come back to mind. One was at a press conference several years ago when Mahindra & Mahindra was the main sponsor of the Old World Theatre festival at the India Habitat Centre, and the other had cropped up at a seminar organised during the Sangeet Natak Akademi Golden Jubilee Theatre Festival.

At the seminar where several speakers had bemoaned the absence of a comprehensive theatre policy for young performers and audiences, a delegate had contested the pessimism by praising the vibrant theatre culture in Maharashtra, and had offered an annual, popular theatre competition as evidence of the same. Regardless of the kind of theatre that could be on offer here – which I'm willing to assume, for argument's sake, is of the best quality – I found it curious that this otherwise

insightful theatre person had no qualms in advocating a competition as proof that the young have a vibrant theatre culture of their own. In a similar vein, a happily earnest representative of the Mahindra & Mahindra group had sought to impress journalists and participants alike about his company's commitment to supporting youth theatre by declaring that the collegiate section of the Old World Theatre festival would henceforth be run as a competition and the best college play would be awarded a very large sum of money. In other words, college teams congregating at a theatre festival would suddenly find themselves pitched into competing against one another!

Both comments were striking for their facile assumption that competitions are places where theatre can be expected to thrive. On the contrary: competitions are the most unlikely of places for a culture of performance to take root. Competitions stifle: locking us into exclusionary zones, they cajole even those charitably inclined into antagonistic mindsets. They spawn argument rather than analysis, sniping rather than sharing, sniggers rather than joy, and putting down rather than pulling together. If we're all willing to sing happy hosannas of theatre as a collaborative activity, why then do we blithely accept the antipathy that competitions generate? Sure, there is something called 'healthy competition', that gloriously (oxy)moronic phrase in which an all-knowing apprehension lurks unsaid beneath the thin disguise of amiability. Sure, many of us have fond memories of the fun there is to be had at theatre competitions during cultural festivals. But, pray tell, are these memories of togetherness, of the sweat and joy of a common triumph, even remotely dependent on the besting of an opponent? Our abiding memories of pleasure come from the collaborative project called theatre, from the thrill of a job well done rather than from the petty triumph of being designated lord of the little heap of the day.

What’s worse is that such faith in the salutary benefits of competition is often directed exclusively at young performers and audiences, and rarely extended to all theatre activity. Take, for instance, the Old World Theatre festival. One of the nicest things about this festival is the space it allots to college theatre. In fact, this annual festival which is now all of 6 years old is unique in being the only mainstream theatre festival in Delhithat showcases youth theatre alongside the regular kind. But, the manner in which the festival sponsor put pressure on the organisers to run the youth festival as a competition suggests that our general regard for youth theatre is more well-intentioned than well thought out. It’s sad enough that most colleges, in the absence of alternatives, end up channelling their theatre activities into and through competitive face-offs. It’s sadder still to see festival organisers gratuitously inject competitive tension into a festive occasion, and rob the event of that very quality that makes it precious to college theatre groups.

That the man from Mahindra & Mahindra was probably convinced that he was only doing college kids a favour goes to show how habituated we are to seeing children as racehorses meant to do us proud. It’s interesting that the sponsor didn’t extend the same favour to the amateur/professional theatre groups from Mumbai and Delhi invited for the festival. Obviously, he didn’t think what’s good for young performers is a good idea for those who have already ‘arrived’. Why? Probably because most of our theatre worthies (performers and critics alike) would justifiably balk at the prospect of being ranked alongside their fellow professionals. It’s another matter that many of these worthies would, at the same time, have no compunction in blooding new talent in this very manner. Why is it that we look upon the young as a sub-species of ourselves, like us and not quite like us, people who have to be taught the value of our rules even as they are controlled and manipulated by different ones?

Why do we assume that the right way to motivate young people towards the theatre is through the blandishment of competitions, prizes and the 'glamour' of winning? A theatre programme organised by Katha in 2001 as a tribute to Vijay Tendulkar is a classic instance of how infectious this virus called 'competition' can be. Last-minute nervousness about whether enough colleges would respond to their invitation prompted Katha into adding a competition element – with prizes, judges and all – into their programme that had originally been conceived on the lines of 'Forum Theatre'! Katha's transformation of even the Forum Theatre – a model of critical interchange and collaborative responsibility – into a race for marks and prizes continues to be for me the final obscenity in our blind regard for the inspirational virtues of 'competition'.

Lest I be charged with whitewashing the young as angelic innocents smarting under the yoke of an inhospitable system, let me quickly declare that I have seen enough malice and viciousness amongst young performers to last me a lifetime. But that is precisely my point, for it is in the nature of competitions to breed bloody-mindedness, not to mention mediocrity (more of that later). Yet, it seems that competitions are here to stay. They're here to stay as far as college organisations are concerned because they are the easiest option. A one-off theatre event is so much easier to manage than sustained year-round activity, plus you get more mileage out of it. They're here to stay as far as college drama societies are concerned because competitions provide the only opportunity for students to circulate their work without the massive expenditures they would have to incur were they to take their play out on their own. Many college auditoriums – where colleges do have one – are not geared to host theatre performances; many drama societies do not have the finance to attempt full-scale productions. The short play drama competition has therefore over the years become the definitive opportunity for college students to showcase their theatre

skills.

How much of an ‘incentive’ is the money doled out as prizes in these competitions? It’s difficult to speak with finality but I am aware that college drama enthusiasts rate inter-college competitions by the quality (attentiveness, knowledge, discipline) of host audiences, as also the quality of the competition. The money offered is surely a factor, but it’s never an over-riding one. The primary motivation is always that of ‘putting up a good show’, of earning the respect of the peer group, and of receiving critical feedback from knowledgeable spectators. There is obviously a thrill in coming ‘First’, in being adjudged the ‘Best’, but it’s obvious that such rankings are valuable only insofar as they accurately record the considerations cited mentioned above.

It is not true that these motivations can be addressed solely through a competition format. The fact that many of these competitions are mismanaged adds to the frustration of performers, but that is not my concern here. This piece is about the idea of Competition – competitions as they come off that great mould (rather, mold) in the sky, perfect forms in a perfect world – rather than the hijacking of existing competitions through ego, nepotism and cupidity. A festival shorn of the competitive element does in fact offer a more suitable opportunity in these very areas. Take, for instance, the common rationale for a system of competitions: they are supposed to be good because they spur you on to greater heights by giving you an incentive to do better. Better than what, I ask. Better than your neighbour? That’s no mountain to climb. How does it matter that I’m better than my neighbour if I’m still a shit? Better than what you did before, is the much greater challenge. Besting one’s neighbour, fellow participant or pet enemy can often end up rewarding only mediocrity. Competitions can leave you content with being just that one rung above your neighbour. There is no learning curve here: only a complacent, gloating one. Surely, your best competitor

is yourself, just as your fiercest critic is that voice within you that leaves you in a state of constant dissatisfaction.

As one who interacts closely with college students, I'm aware that their biggest grouse is the lack of critical feedback, the sense of a vacuum in which they grapple with questions concerning their theatre. In dealing with this issue, it is as important to enable their engagement with professionals in the field as between themselves. A festival that encourages all participants to sit down together to discuss their work, to bounce their questions and comments off an expert in the field, a festival that judges each production separately in terms of its own merit instead of lumping them together in some order of relative worth, is a festival worth emulating. Given the general gloom that permeates most discussions of the future of urban Indian theatre, it is important that we teach tomorrow's generation of theatre workers respect for others' work as well as their own, and encourage them to practice critical plain-speaking regardless of whose work it is. We've been running a theatre festival of this kind at Kirori Mal college where I teach for some years now. Believe me, it works.

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