

# Small is Beautiful / Keval Arora



When listening to people speak of how difficult it is today for theatre groups to survive, and therefore of the feasibility of theatre itself, I find it difficult to share the general air of regret that envelops such discussions. Sure, it isn't easy to produce plays on a regular basis, especially for those who intend to make a living solely off performance. But it probably never has been – at any rate, far longer than many doomsayers would care to remember. Theatre today is pushed into a corner. The sooner we accept that fact as a given condition, and make our adjustments and interventions with such shrinkage in mind, the better we will be able to renew our appreciation of theatre's strengths and possibilities. Hankering for a return to glory days is a nice theme for lazy winter afternoons, but not for the evenings when rehearsal time is upon us.

Is this an unfounded optimism? I think not; in fact, it's not even an 'optimism' in the first place. If anything, it's

impatience with the habitual passivity, the automatic funereal tone of the way we think about our work. If 'the death of the theatre' will ever come to pass (the way in which there has been talk for some time about 'the disappearance of the playwright'), I suspect it'll come from the failure of its aficionados to look forward from the present. By this, I do not mean that we accept the current scenario as a value in itself, for there is no need to infect our appreciation of theatre's function with the market-driven models of today. But, we do need to see where we can go from here, rather than talk as if our future lies in returning to the past. I sometimes hear the 70s being spoken of with some fondness. But I began watching theatre in the 70s, and I don't ever remember feeling free of the same anxieties then, the way retrospection today persuades us to believe. Unfortunately, for many people, the past has always been a better place, much in the way that the dead have only good things said about them.

There is always an audience available for plays. Correction: there *will* always be an audience available for plays. In the several years that I have been attending performances, I have not come across too many instances of plays running to absolutely empty houses. It is another matter that some plays that deserved fuller houses did not get them, while others that ought to have been less popular had spectators arriving in droves. (Given the troubled state of theatre attendance and solvency, comments on such anomalies were rarely aired aloud, being more a matter for internal envy rather than for public pride.) The point is not whether there is or isn't an audience for theatre; rather, what is our expectation of an audience – what is the minimum number required for spectators to be regarded as an audience?

It is essentially a numbers game. An 'empty house', or a 'FULL House', is a relative term, relative to the capacity of the auditorium and varying in tone according to the amount paid out as rental. Take a 500-seater, sell 50 tickets and you have

a cavernous hole that depresses producers, deadens actors and embarrasses spectators by its silence. Place the same 50 people in a space designed for 75, and there is no way you can remain immune to the palpable buzz of togetherness. Performances in smaller spaces get charged in a manner that is impossible to replicate in the bigger auditoria. Amidst all this talk of dwindling attendance, why then do we insist on opting for large auditoria as our venues?

Admittedly, 50 tickets (not a terribly inspiring number in itself) is still only 50 tickets, irrespective of whether the number left unsold is 450 or 25. In the 75-seater auditorium, it still adds up to the same absolute number of spectators, and generates roughly the same amount of income; so why is this supposed to be a rosier picture? Before I am accused of dipping into the bag of ingenious tricks perfected by finance ministries to manufacture their statistics of health, let me quickly say that it is the economics of play production that makes me see in smaller venues an answer to our woes in the theatre. That is, even if we disregard the value of such space in terms of performance and spectating, there are still financial advantages to working in the 75-seater auditorium.

Smaller theatres cost much less to rent than the bigger ones. As hall rentals form a substantial and recurring portion of production expenditure, any reduction in this area will contribute substantially to financial health. What most theatre groups do when they book the 500-seat auditorium is express a hope for attractive returns; what they end up doing is investing in 450 empty seats.

Small auditoria cannot of course meet the needs of all plays. Some texts require the machinery of large stages, or the space required for big casts. Such productions will necessarily have to exclude the 75-seater auditorium from its range of options. But, the majority of plays are geared for, or amenable to, intimate stagings. Especially contemporary plays, for playwrights too have wised up to the need to cater to groups

with few actors and limited means.

The other advantage to performing in small spaces is of course enough to make such venues attractive even if they were by some quirk more expensive to hire. In the small theatres, the proximity of the actor to the spectator confers an intensity and directness upon performance that is difficult to match in the anonymity of larger spaces. When I think of performances that got under my skin when I saw them and are still with me now, I am struck by how many of them were played at intimate venues: *Woyzeck* and *Adhe Adhure* at the NSD Repertory's Studio Theatre, *Nagamandala* at the Prithvi in Mumbai, *Mother Courage* at the Modern School Gym.... How much of their magic owed to the setting in which they were performed, whether that quality would have been preserved had they transferred to larger, more conventional spaces, are difficult speculations. Productions are conceptualised with physical spaces and visual relations in mind; the best actors play within the altered chemistry that proximity brings; and therefore it is naïve to think of theatre productions as manufactured items that function with the same stability no matter the shop in which they are sold.

Such intensity may not always be comfortable or desired. First time actors quickly experience the disorientation of performing in close-up, and learn to tone down volume and gesture, cull emotion of its theatricality, and re-locate their focal centre within themselves; in other words, they learn to work pretty much as actors do for a camera. Spectators can sometimes be discomfited too, especially when actors fail to work within the reduced scale – as in the case of performances at the now unavailable for theatre IHC Basement, where actors sometimes project their voices and bodies as if they are addressing back rows 75 feet away, they effectively end up bombarding the audience rather than speaking to it. But, there is no denying that special feeling of being sucked into the fiction when spectators are virtually

thrust into the performance space.

This sensation is heightened in those small theatres that are not designed as the poor cousin, mimicking the proscenium methods and apparatus of the Big Brother. The real strength of the small stage lies in the flexibility that reduction in size brings – in its potential to leave seating and lighting arrangements to the director and the set designer and to let them determine the physical and visual relation best for their production, as in the Bahumukh theatre at the NSD. However, even when the audience seating area is physically demarcated and fixed (as in the case of Bombay's Prithvi Theatre and the NSD Sammukh Theatre), the fact of being seated at an informal distance, at virtually the same level as the actors (the Bahumukh) or at scattered angles (the Prithvi) makes watching a performance here very different from the regular experience. The effect of a heightened intimacy, a direct (and sometimes even private) connection with fictional space, powerfully underscores theatre's function as a persuader.

That's why it's not the same thing to being seated in the first row of a regular auditorium. If you've had the misfortune of being stuck up front, you'll know what I mean when I say that it's possibly the worst row in the house. Great for being looked at perhaps, especially if you make arriving late a habit; but lousy if you've come to look at the show. The angle at which you have to look upwards is all wrong (especially at the Kamani), and it's virtually impossible to take in the width of the stage without feeling that you've wandered into a tennis match. (Great exercising for the neck, of course, so let's not trash the hidden benefits of the theatre?) Watching a street performance in the round does not produce a similar effect of intimacy either, though there is little physical distance between the actors and spectators, and the performance area does not call for callisthenics of any sort. I'd imagine that it is the 'public' nature of such theatrical practice that overlays all such 'proximity' with a

public air.

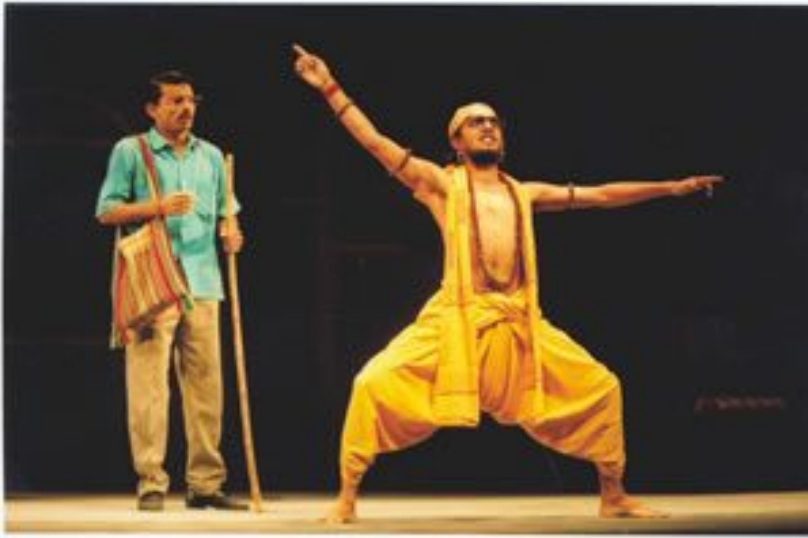
Where are such performance spaces in Delhi? The SRC Basement is the first name to crop up, but that apology of a performance space merits first mention only because it's been around a long while – no longer, though: it closed down some years ago – and a home to several theatre groups. There is no other comparable space. The Basement Theatre at the IHC had begun to witness a lot of activity, but that was mainly because of a dearth of venues at that price. For the IHC Basement to have fulfilled its potential, it had needed to alter the performance space to allow multiple-entry access to actors, to install a lighting grid that covered the entire space and to install more lights of much lower wattage. I speak of all this in the past tense because today the IHC Basement Theatre is unavailable to theatre performance courtesy the objections of some municipal committee. Other spaces such as the Sammukh and the Bahumukh theatres are performance-friendlier spaces but unfortunately available only to programmes run by the NSD.

That makes this discussion on the merits of small performance spaces a purely academic one. The small auditorium, like so much else in the theatre, sadly exists more as idea than as fact.

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## Keval Arora's Kolumn



Come admission time in Delhi University, a strange ritual involving drama is enacted every June and July in several colleges. This ritual concerns admissions where the minimum marks required for entry into various courses are lowered for candidates with a demonstrable talent in theatre. Well, not just theatre: other Extra-Curricular Activities (generally described as ECA) such as music, debating, dance, the fine arts and photography also qualify. I'll confine my comments to the situation concerning theatre, though much of what happens here is broadly true of the other activities as well.

The ritual is interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is the keen interest shown in it by those members of the University community who do not subscribe to either its aims or its methods. For those who do, it's a gratifying time because artistic activity is now granted however grudgingly some place in the sun. For the greater majority of those who don't, it's gratification time when non-academic achievement becomes the means by which academic under-achievement can be given the go-by. And, at a time when eligibility criteria and admission irregularities are being closely monitored by the media and sometimes even mediated by the courts, the little 'discretion' that ECA admissions allow seems to go a long way indeed!

As for the candidates, it goes without saying that this

opportunity is embraced gladly by those who stand to benefit, without any grumbling of the kind that 'reservation quotas' inspire from those who don't. It must be remembered though that ECA admissions have always been used by candidates as an insurance against their not getting admission into the course/college of their choice rather than as a first-choice option. In fact, if one were to go by the quality of most of the applicants, being unable to secure an admission through the general channel appears to be the main eligibility criterion! Yet, listening to these applicants introduce themselves as being driven by a great thirst for theatre, one can see that the *natak* begins well before they have mounted the stage!

That's the questionable underside of such admissions; but there are other questions, more legitimate and no less problematic for all that.

For instance, these admissions bring to a head the difficulty of evaluation and ranking. A prickly procedure at the best of times, acts of ranking becomes decidedly iffy when it involves no more than a one-off stab at serialising creative achievement and potential. Moreover, with subjectivity being both dominant practice and cognitive tool in art appreciation, how does this intermesh with a policy of ranking which necessarily invokes the application of some kind of objective or at least commonly acceptable criteria? Also, is it possible to set up a grid of checks and balances to shape and circumscribe such evaluation?

Of course, art activity is judged one way or another all the time, by way of reviews and commentaries in the media, or through selections for scholarships, grants and festivals. But rarely do such judgements, upsetting as these are sometimes, stamp actors or grade performances with the kind of hierarchical finality that is found in the admissions process. ECA committees are known to blithely wield axes that even the most rabid of reviewers would flinch from using.



After all, the one thing that loosens a reviewer's tongue is the comforting lack of tangible consequence. The knowledge that reviews (often published after the event and therefore having a negligible impact on ticket sales, as in Delhi) are primarily cud for discussion enables reviewers to offer free and easy critical response. In contrast, the hardening of subjective opinion into summary judgements that slam the door shut on young hopefuls cannot but be a frightening responsibility. Sadly, it is rare to see this responsibility being judiciously exercised. All too often, ECA committees make their choices, unperturbed by the insufficient evidence on which these are based.

Another interesting aspect of this admission policy lies in what it reveals of attitudes towards and the space given to cultural activity within our educational institutions. (There is surprisingly little difference between schools and colleges in this regard.) At first glance, the fact that provision is made for such admissions appears an enlightened measure, for it implicitly acknowledges that artistic achievements can be factored into determining the worth of a candidate. The obsessive pursuit of better and better marks in the Board examinations has made most schools downgrade non-academic creative activity as a secondary and even irrelevant practice. Students who spend time nurturing diverse interests and talents do, in all probability, end up with lesser marks than single-minded swotters, but they are not poorer students for that. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be true. So, what's the harm if extra-curricular talent is used, in a little reverse flow, to enhance the candidate's chances of admission, right?

No harm at all, especially as you can't remember the last time when you saw cultural practice command a premium in the marketplace. Yet, things aren't quite hunky-dory. A second glance reveals that this 'enlightened measure' is riddled with contradictions that float around unacknowledged as

institutions blunder on with quaint notions of the education process. Why, I sometimes wonder, do colleges embark on these valuations of artistic worth if nothing changes down the line? It is the rare college that takes theatre activity seriously enough to offer realistic support in terms of scheduling, administrative support, budgetary grants and end-of-term honours. When institutional calendars designate cultural activity as mere recreation, it is understandable why admission processes too value and evaluate creativity in confusing terms.

The real problem, therefore, with this process is not, as is commonly argued, chicanery or the underhand attempts to buck the system – great Indian malady that: “have system, will buck!” – but that it lacks clarity of purpose. It is far easier to tackle the depredations of corruption or nepotism than it is to tackle the mess created by a muddle-headed approach to sports and cultural activity.

An instance of this mess is the divergence in the methods employed by different colleges to select candidates. The fact that there are no University guidelines for such admissions doesn't help because it leaves college administrations free to flounder. In the absence of tested procedures, the time spent on evaluating an applicant's artistic ability varies enormously. At some colleges, theatre candidates are disposed of with brutal efficiency in a flat 10-15 minutes each: 5 minutes for a brief performance of a prepared piece and the balance for displaying their general knowledge ('name three Indian dramatists') and their certificates to an interview panel. On the other hand, at another college that I shall leave unnamed, some 40 candidates are processed through several elimination rounds (comprising prepared pieces, extempore performances, text-analyses, solo and group improvisations, and interviews) that add up close to 30 hours over 2 days.

Unlike a casting audition where the playscript provides some

framework for selection, general testing for talent in drama is fraught because of the absence of clear-sighted goals, the procedures by which these can be sought, and a level playing field where applicants from different backgrounds and schools are played off against one another. For instance, does one or does one not distinguish between applicants who have studied in schools that possess a reasonable equipped auditorium, employ a drama teacher and place theatrical activity in the weekly timetable and those whose schools have no time or money for such things? This is probably why admission committees rely on applicants' certificates and brief presentations as a safe option. This procedure has the merit of appearing so objectively quantifiable that its inadequacy never ever comes to the fore.

Relying on certificates merely transfers the problem elsewhere, for then how does one assess the worth of such certification? In the absence of recognised inter-school drama festivals or training institutes, the drama certificates that most applicants produce relate to internal school activity, often indicating no more than the school's initiative in matters cultural. This is a far cry from the creditworthiness of certificates produced by sportspersons to gain concessional admissions into colleges. With several tournaments organised for different age and proficiency levels in which students of different schools compete on relatively more level playing fields, sports certificates are fairly reliable indicators of achievement and potential – reliable enough, in fact, for forgery to have become a regular proposition!

It is equally risky to judge these young candidates by their prepared pieces alone, for it may be someone else's ability – an adult teacher/director through whose hands the candidates have passed – that gets judged. (Of course, this cuts both ways when you consider the quality of drama instruction available in even our best schools.) Another problem is that these presentations often drip with mechanically heightened

emotion – in the mistaken but understandable conviction, given the all-pervasive television soaps in which whole generations are being rinsed, that powerful acting is always exhibitionistic in intent. Finally, the ‘prepared piece and certificates’ formula is inadequate because it merely ascertains, however dubiously, the candidate’s past achievement without assessing her future potential. Admissions determined through these criteria end up looking like rewards for work already done, like certificates of merit that conclude rather than initiate a new activity. Surely the purpose of special admissions is the benefit that the college aims to derive from the student’s stay at the institution. What is therefore needed is a selection process that offers a more accurate picture of the candidate’s potential to work in the college – a process that tries, in a manner of speaking, to get beneath the skin, with the aim of observing individuals at work rather than superficially evaluating the packaged product that they make of themselves.

Such a process will still acknowledge past achievement, but only to the extent that it throws light upon the candidate’s potential. It will focus on assessing individual creativity by challenging it through the unpredictable structure of solo and group improvisation exercises. Apart from checking the candidate’s ability to work within a group, to accept direction and to critically analyse his own creative choices, the fact that all this takes an enormous amount of time will also make this process a test of stamina. The pressure to be creative under conditions of tension and fatigue is arguably the best test of performance ability, though one has to be careful not to overdo such terms of endurance.

Finally, the efficacy of any selection procedure, even the most enabling one, depends upon its rationale being understood and its implications worked out. The selection process’s emphasis on ‘potential’ and ‘usefulness’ rather than ‘past achievement’ means that in the case of over-qualified

candidates, some hard decisions have to be taken. Some years ago, the son of a renowned violinist, a budding violinist himself, was granted an ECA admission at the college where I teach. But, between his classes and his tours with his father, he had no time left for playing in or for his college, and finally graduated from the institution having graced it with his instrument just a couple of times during that period. In drama too, many applicants today pop up with some experience of having acted for television. That sounds impressive alright, but this can be a real pain in the neck. For, not only are such candidates infected by the work ethic of the television studio, their commitments to the small screen leave them with little time for participating in college drama activity. Only colleges which bask in the reflected glory of their alumni welcome such stars. Others, with work goals defined in the present, continue their work with ordinary mortals and realisable potential.

Potential for what, is another question altogether. The academic year begins well with ECA admissions, but a couple of months down the line cultural activities get treated like the proverbial stepchild. For sports, there is a hectic University calendar; culture gets left to college students and their fizz-drink sponsors for whom culture is confined within Ramp Displays (ubiquitously christened Fashion Shows') and Rock Shows. (The University does have a Culture Council in place but that is badly in need of some counsel and resuscitation.) Sports budgets are large and inviolate; ECA budgets are less than a tenth and constantly eaten into. Sports activities are run by faculty members appointed for the purpose; cultural activities are supervised, if at all, by regular teachers on a voluntary basis.

It is therefore not unusual to find that the categories under which the ECA admissions are made have precious little to show by the end of the year. Lack of accountability is in fact built into the system with teachers not being directly

responsible for ensuring that the ECA students work, in the same manner in which they are accountable for taking classes or finishing their courses. In such a context, it is not out of place to wonder why colleges go through the trouble of having these admissions in the first place. The answer, I'm afraid, is not flattering at all.

If this is an unrelievedly depressing picture, let me point out that all cultural initiatives in the University have not collapsed. It is merely the system of the ECA admissions that has not delivered, not because it has been hijacked by vested interests but because the anxiety to *appear* just (more than the desire to *be* just) has led to the selections being carried out in thoroughly unimaginative fashions. Meanwhile, plays have been staged, instruments played, sketches made and photographs displayed, often on the strength of students who have not had to declare their artistic talents in order to gain admission.

Interestingly, the ECA admissions have worked when college administrations have not shied away from acknowledging the subjectivity of the selection process, and have insisted merely on it being an informed, committed and transparent subjectivity. In that lies the only insurance against possible abuse of such 'licence'. Testing has to be entrusted to those teachers and senior students (and alumni) who have formulated projects for the year and will be responsible for carrying them out. An audit of each year's activities will also prove useful. Finally, as in so much else, the viability of the system boils down to the integrity and commitment of the persons involved. There is no getting beyond this basic fact. At any rate, are these not crucial ingredients in any form of cultural practice?

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# Who's afraid of the documentary film / Keval Arora



Remember the cynical manoeuvring by which the Film Federation of India had, some years ago, denied entry to video documentaries in their festival? And how this had brought home the threat that this medium can pose to vested interests? After initially denying space to video films in its international film festivals, ostensibly because these were 'in a different format', the Federation had inserted a censorship clause for all Indian entries to the festival. The row that ensued had been extensively reported in the media, so a bald re-iteration should do for now. Film-makers had come together to form an organisation named VIKALP with the aim of safeguarding the rights of documentary film-makers. Launching a Campaign Against Censorship (CAC), they had run a widely attended 'Films for Freedom' programme of screenings and discussions at educational institutes.

This proactive initiative has had an interesting spin-off. It has placed the agenda of activism and its methods on the

front-burner for a generation that is often written off as a self-absorbed 'I' rather than a 'why' generation. (By the way, what is this generation's current alphabetic habitation? Is it still Generation Y, or is it now staging its last stand as Gen-Z?) The video documentary has, as a result, been so comfortably privileged as the conscience keeper of the nation that I'm tempted to play the devil's advocate and ask if theatre isn't a better mode of communication through which activist agendas can be carried out. However, before outlining crucial differences between the video documentary and theatre, let's identify some strengths that both share.

The video documentary and theatre performance have, unfortunately, often been disparagingly prized as no more than a handmaiden to other activisms – as techniques by which grass-root actions extend or advertise their interventions. Such a view has treated video and theatre as little more than a courier service, as blandly variable vehicles of a relentless messaging. Put another way, the medium has been equated with its message; and has therefore been valued, from its aims to its achievements, for the literal directness of its effort. NGOs have been particularly susceptible to this lure of social advertising, perhaps in the belief that generating the same message through a variety of formats extends its effectiveness, even though all it really does is relieve the tedium. If Doordarshan was obsessed years ago with televised puppet theatre as its favoured mode of disseminating advice to farmers and pregnant women, it's the NGOs' turn now to patronise street theatre with a similarly deprecatory optimism.

Why puppet theatre and street theatre is anybody's guess. I don't think the social sector's preference for these two forms is based on any insight into their potential. Rather, these forms are trivialised when used as a platter for pre-digested data and handed-down attitudes, as a dressing-up that goes hand in hand with a dumbing-down. Obviously, state television



and the NGO sector rate the urban proscenium stage as the 'true' theatre, and puppet theatre or street theatre as cute country cousins suitable for rustic and other under-developed tastes. (Not that its performers have seemed to mind: in a shrinking market, even wrong attention is welcome as preferable to none.)

Yet, it must be pointed out that there is a faint glimmer of wisdom in the social sector's choice of theatre and documentary film for carrying out its activist agendas. This wisdom is hinged on two features common to all performance: greater accessibility, and the affective power of storytelling. Performative cultural modes are accessible to audiences in a special way because they circumvent the barriers of literacy and the drudgery of reading. Such accessibility is then magnified through the affective power of stories that theatre and film usually place at their centre. To the extent that the theatre and the documentary film tell stories, they can never be reduced to mere data transcription codes. It is immaterial whether their stories are real or fictional, or whether these are particular instances or typical cases, because performative modes that tell stories irradiate even simple statements with a penumbra that deepens, authenticates and often problematises the business of a literal messaging. Clearly, the potential of theatre and film for activist causes remains unrealizable if these are used merely to sugar-coat mundane fare.

It is when we define accessibility in physical terms that differences crop up in the respective potential of film and theatre as activist space. Film is unrivalled in its ability to reach out to vast numbers of people. There is no gainsaying the seduction of spread: if maximising contact with people is vital to the activist impulse, the medium that reaches out more effortlessly will obviously be regarded as the more enabling one. In contrast, theatre performances exist in the singular and have to be re-constituted afresh for each act of

viewing. Not only does this call for much more forward planning, it also implies that there can be no guarantee that later shows will work exactly like the earlier ones. Films, on the other hand, travel to venues more rapidly than do theatre troupes and offer an assurance of stable replication (every spectator gets to see exactly the same thing as created by its crew, give or take some transmission loss on account of projection equipment).

Of course, problems of technology and finance do cramp film-makers, sometimes so severely that I think 'accessibility' should be defined not just in terms of audience comprehension and taste, but also in terms of the artist's access to the tools of her art. However, recent developments in video technology have ensured that these twin pressures are less burdensome to today's film-maker – high-end digital cameras have become cheap enough for independent film makers to acquire their own hardware; sophisticated editing software, faster computer processors and capacious storage disks now enable footage to be processed at home. The result: a fresh impetus to the documentary film movement which is evident in the range and number of films being made today.

It is interesting to note that if this celebration of accessible technology and reduced expenditure were to be taken to a logical conclusion, it is theatre rather than the video film that would shine in an advantageous light. It's cheaper to make plays than films, and it's possible to make them without recourse to equipment of any kind other than the human body. Most theatre performances can be designed without technological fuss in a way that even the barest film cannot. Such a theatre gains a quality of outreach that far outstrips the reach of film. For, what technology can ever hope to compete with the affordability and the portability of the body and the voice? Sure, this isn't true of all theatre productions. But I would argue that productions which depend on technological assists for their effects (take, for

instance, the romance with projected images that most plays glory in nowadays) end up shackling themselves in ways that erase their fundamental nature. I say this fully aware that some of us believe that the facility which technology brings in some ways is well worth the price that has to be paid in others.

Take another difference between film and theatre. Films possess a huge advantage in terms of authenticity in reportage. They have no peer if the business of activism is to disseminate images and narratives of actuality, to show things as they actually are. But, if the primary purpose of activism is to persuade and engage with people, then the advantage that film enjoys over theatre is considerably neutralised. The very attractions of the film medium – stability, replication, transportability – become limitations from this point of view.

It is a truism worth repeating that the uniqueness of theatre performance is that it is a live event. People come together at a particular time, to a particular place, for a transaction where some people show things to others who watch. In film, there is no equivalent scope for interaction and therefore no lively relation between actor and spectator. The idea of a collective spectatorship – where the audience becomes a prototypical community – is of course common to both film and theatre. But, in the latter, this ‘community’ includes the actor as well. It is not just the audience that watches the actor, but the actor too who ‘reads’ his audience and subtly alters his performance accordingly. Interaction, engagement and persuasion between the performers and audience is so central to theatre that it is often the richest source of dialogue in the performance event.

Where, pray, is any of this possible during a film screening? The film spectator remains more or less a passive recipient of a fixed structure. The film may well ‘play’ with the spectator’s responses, but even such playing is welded to a grid that is frozen unalterably on videotape or celluloid.

Interactions in the theatre between performer and spectator are, in contrast, dynamically dependent on the particulars of that performance. In other words, the fragile instability of theatrical performance becomes a powerful opportunity for an activist intervention, as is evident in the way Augusto Boal has actors interrupt the performance and address audiences directly in his Theatre of the Oppressed. Techniques used in Theatre-in-Education methodologies ('Hot-seating', for instance, where spectators talk back to 'characters' in the play and offer their comments) is another case in point.

As I said, where, pray, is any of this possible with film?

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## Curtain Call / Keval Arora



For most of us, the curtain call is a ritual that marks the close of a performance. As a ritual it cuts both ways. It's gratifying when we've enjoyed the show and wish to demonstrate our appreciation. Or, it's a tiresome chore when we haven't and are keen to duck our heads and run. Understandably, this spectacle of playmakers lined up to receive applause is often regarded as simply an appendage to the main event, a polite form of 'goodbye' and nothing more. But, I sometimes wonder if we have anything else, amongst the wide variety of conventions that govern the theatre, to match the curtain call in the way

it underlines, with economy and assurance, the 'live' aspect of theatrical performance.

For, until that moment when performers shed their fictional selves and return to the stage in their own persons, the actor-spectator relation in the theatre is essentially no different from that found in other kinds of performance, such as the television or the cinema. That is to say, it is a relation where performers and audiences are hermetically sealed off from each other, each inhabiting qualitatively different zones of being. Sure, when compared to the actor in cinema/television who is a fixed and unvarying aggregate of pre-recorded decisions, the theatre actor is available as a 'live', volatile presence that forever holds out the promise of doing things differently in each performance. However, the degree to which the spectator is separated from the 'character'ised actor in both these cases is remarkably similar. It is only with the curtain call in the theatre that the boundaries which segregate the two are comprehensively dissolved.

When actors slip out of their 'characters' and step up to receive the audience's applause, when spectators gesture their appreciation directly to the actors, the world of make-believe finally ceases to be. The actor re-enters his own (and the audience's) world, so to speak, and a different, informal, and more 'real' compact between the two parties in the performance equation comes into being. On the occasions when performers and spectators have interacted after the show, either through Q&A sessions or in cocktail-fuelled get-togethers, such cohabitation has taken on a life of its own. But, even when there is no post-performance transaction, the curtain call remains an acknowledgement, albeit brief and perfunctory, of the basic contract that underlies all theatre performance and consumption. As a gathering together of distinct strands of being, the curtain call affirms in its own way the communitarian nature of the theatre – a place where people

come together to enact and to witness. It is therefore possible to celebrate the humble curtain call as a distinctive marker of theatrical performance.

Am I reading too much into what is today an automatic practice rather than a deliberated expression of pleasure and praise? Perhaps. But, the fact that we often feel guilty when we do not play our part as spectators (and therefore compensate by applauding the actors' effort even when there is little of merit in their achievement) is proof that we attach value to such gestures, even when they are at their most mechanical.

Incidentally, we ought not to confuse such transitions, as formalised by the curtain call, with similar moments in the work of Bertolt Brecht. In Brecht's theatre, we do find transitions from a fictive world peopled by actors to the everyday world of the audience, from the magic of 'another place, another time' to the reality of the 'here and now', but here these categories are sequential and mutually exclusive. Brecht's theatre challenges the conventions that separate actor from character, and embeds the performer's political responsibility within such equivalence. However, he works it out mainly as an interruptive device – that is, as a rupture which is most effective when it subverts the common assumption that the best works of art ought to possess an organic unity. The sequential and exclusionary quality of transition that is intrinsic to the curtain call is thus completely alien to the Brechtian project both in method and intent.

It is interesting to note that in Ebrahim Alkazi's time at the National School of Drama, the NSD Repertory did not take curtain calls. Not (though one can never be sure of the reasons for this policy) in spite of its celebratory nature, but because of it. For, the one danger with curtain calls is that these can be hijacked, by performer and spectator alike, into re-structuring relations in terms that are quite inimical to the collaborative nature of theatre production. An

instance: curtain calls, especially in our English-language theatre, are often arranged as a series of separate entrances, with actors in the leading roles being the last to complete the line-up while minions in the minor parts are thrust in right at the beginning. The purpose may well be to lead the audience into a swelling applause which culminates in a final burst of appreciation for the lead actors. But talent isn't always marked by such an easy lineage – the lead may have been boringly flat, whereas a small cameo may have provided the production's abiding memory. Also, when audiences are encouraged to applaud each actor's contribution separately, and when the play's cast is stratified in a hierarchy of minor and major actors, theatre groups' claims to being ensembles of equal contributors stand embarrassingly exposed.

It is now the accepted thing, after the clapping is over and done with, for actors to call the backstage and production crew on stage, to gesture towards the lights and sound booths, and then to invite the director onto the stage. Which most directors do after a decent pause, as if caught short by an unexpected request. Apart from the peculiar arrangement of this credits sequence, I've always found it interesting that directors preface their arrival on stage by an 'invitation' extended by the cast, especially as it is usually the director who orchestrates the curtain call in the first place! What is this – humility, coyness, or self-celebration?

Role-playing of course isn't confined only to the performers. You can find it even in something as uni-dimensional as applause. The recent tendency of Delhi's English-language theatre audiences to offer standing ovations – or, as a friend pointed out the other day, "an ovation while standing" – to even mediocre productions, in apparent deference to the pedigree of the performing group, is evidence of yet another kind of hijacking of the curtain call, and that by the spectators this time!

One spin-off of austerity such as the NSD's is that it

reminds actors to look at the work at hand as something to be done for its own sake rather than for the plaudits that could come their way. I must however confess that, despite my belief that this is a good thing (especially in the environs of a training school), I too have felt cheated and resentful, when I have thoroughly enjoyed a production, at being denied an opportunity to demonstrate my appreciation. Perhaps the mainstream theatre too needs a dose of such self-denial, for it could do with less self-congratulatory preening and greater attention to quality.

The curtain call, like most artistic conventions, can be employed to great effect. Either through silence and a no-show (as in Rabih Mroue's *Looking for a Missing Employee*, performed at NSD's Theatre Utsav 2006); or through a technique of ironic quotation (as in the TAG production of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* several decades ago).

The curtain-call Peter Brook devised for his well-known production of *Marat/Sade* closed with the chorus of asylum inmates breaking into a slow handclap in mimicry of the audience's end-of-show applause. Each time this happened during the TAG production at the Kamani (Barry John had picked up the idea from Brook's production, lock, stock and barrel), the audience's applause had petered out, as if to demonstrate that audiences are capable of lapping up even the most savage spectacles of non-conformism only so long as they aren't made to feel they're the victims. By thus undermining the sanctity of this 'last of meeting places' and challenging the comforting superiority that spectators usually feel in their capacity as observers, Brook seemed to have made his audiences experience a truth which was till then for them only an aspect of the fiction.

It's of course another matter that Brook's decision to make the actors, who played the inmates of the lunatic asylum, stay within their characters as they mimicked and parodied the audience's behaviour during the curtain call dilutes its



subversive thrust considerably. With spectators finding it easy to deflect whatever discomfort they may have initially felt (these guys are mad after all!), Brook's innovation shows up as surprisingly inelastic, an innovation that agitates the surface but leaves the essential structure placidly intact.

Mroue's *Looking for a Missing Employee* was a solo narration of a man trying to piece together – through print and TV news clippings, interviews, and of course logical deduction – the story of a real bureaucrat who suddenly went missing in Beirut. The performance's highlight lay in the narration being delivered entirely through live and recorded videocam feeds projected simultaneously on three video screens. The stage, consisting of just a table and chair, remained unused throughout the performance. What then could be a more fitting conclusion to this brilliant performance of a tale of a missing man, by an actor missing from the stage, than a no-show by the performer-director during the curtain call? The audience at the Abhimanch that January night had hung on, applauding no one in particular and testing Mroue's determination to stay away from the stage. But, as the minutes went by and the audience milled about confusedly, it struck me that we were experiencing an unscripted, impromptu performance that could be titled 'Looking for a Missing Performer'. As in the case of *Marat/Sade*, this production too extended its thematic dynamics into a space that properly does not belong to the fiction, but for precisely that reason can be used to extend meanings in a different and perhaps more resonant register.

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# Presence Perfect / Keval Arora



1. Barry John as Iago in 'Othello'

2.

Naseeruddin Shah in 'Prophet'

Mulling over oddities that years of familiarity have lulled us into accepting as normal, one curious habit that comes to mind is the way we respond – or, to be specific, don't respond – to the physical presence of the actor in our estimation of plays and performances. It is strange that this dimension of playmaking rarely crops up in reviews and analyses. Even if it does, the enormous contribution that the actor's physical presence makes to his role or to the play's meaning is often insufficiently acknowledged. We tend instead to focus on such qualities as are amenable to correction, training and control. (This is understandable. If skill is to be celebrated, surely skills for which we can claim authorship will come higher in our estimation than will those over which we have little control.)

Yet, our immediate experience and our lasting memories of the performances we see are mediated by and interwoven with the actor's physical presence – the actor in the flesh, so to speak. Think of Barry John's fleshy middle (he even punned on

the Shakespearean word “pate” with the Hindi word for stomach) in Roysten Abel’s *Othello: A Play in Black and White*, and you realise a leaner actor just couldn’t have intimated that whiff of seedy corruption which Barry’s Iago did. Or, remember the classic reviewer’s comment about how a pimply actor in the role of Hamlet completely alters our understanding of the line that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Jokes apart, this last comment is suspect because it suggests the argument that the core meaning of plays needs to be freed from the tactless exigencies of their performance. To my mind, this is not simply a defensive position but also an odd one, for it leads directly to a contradiction in the practice of theatre criticism.

Theatre scores over cinema through the simple fact of corporeal presence. Its qualities of face-to-face contact and physical proximity give theatre a visceral power that the technologically disembodied cinematic image can never possess. (Does that explain the pressure on the cinema to push towards greater and greater realism?) Naseeruddin Shah often speaks of the high that actors experience when performing in front of a live audience. Audiences experience an equal if not a greater high when watching Naseeruddin Shah live on stage. This compact of physical immediacy is the true strength of the theatre. Deny it, and you dilute the medium.

How then can we speak of the physical presence of the actor as a threat to the production of meaning? Worse, how can we not speak of it at all? Theatre criticism and play reviews in Delhi tend to tread a safe path by ignoring physical and stage presence altogether. Reviewers go into all kinds of intricate details, but commenting on the physical attributes of the performers, even when it is germane to the play-text, is apparently a “no-no”, and akin to an invasion of privacy. But, can one avoid commenting on the physical, in a performance art that is of the flesh? The actor’s medium is his body. No analysis of a product can ever be complete if the

critic fights shy of talking about its tools.

Take Yatrik's *Harvest*. Ginni, an American who contracts the body of a poverty-stricken Third World "donor", is described in the stage directions by playwright Manjula Padmanabhan as "the blonde and white-skinned epitome of an American-style youth goddess. Her voice is sweet and sexy". The actress cast in the role, Monsoon Bissel, did a competent job of emoting her role. But even with only a close-up to go by (we see only her face on television monitors), it was apparent to all that the director had taken liberties with the playwright's vision of a cellophane-packaged desirability.

Surprisingly, not a peep about this was heard from the critics who otherwise tore up the production. Probably because any comment on the actress's appearance would inevitably imply, no matter however politely hedged, that she isn't the type to fuel a fantasy ride. Such comments, though valid as a response to the production, could appear as a personal and therefore an unwarranted attack on an individual. The fear of appearing tasteless makes cowards of us all.

Considerations of taste and tact prevent issues from being tackled head-on, even when facts stare you in the face and remaining silent becomes a sign of professional ineptitude. No one, to the best of my knowledge, has yet pointed out that much of the popularity of the English-language 'Musical' theatre rests upon its flagrant display of nubile bodies dancing in gay abandon. That this is an unstated premise of the musical was unwittingly revealed by Delhi Music Theatre when it advertised its *Fiddler on the Roof* by plastering Bengali Market with posters which read in effect that 5 broad-minded girls were on the look-out for men!

Such blurring of the critical gaze becomes evident in those cases where comments on physical presence would in fact be appropriate. For instance, in the English language comedy that came to be known as the Sex Comedy in the shorthand of the

print media. In a script where the male roles are envisaged as dogs on a leash, the female leash, sorry lead, usually went to an actress in whom acting talent was a bonus but the requirement of "oomph" was non-negotiable. The reviews, however, treated these productions like any other. When talking about body parts would have been far more attuned to the aesthetics of the show(ing), their focus on acting skills seemed perversely cruel to the audience, the director and the 'act'ress. Especially as (like in *Harvest*) the gap between intention and fact was often embarrassingly acute.

What is ironical about such silence is the fact that everybody on the other side of the curtain trades extensively on the physical in shaping textual meaning and audience response. After all, playwrights, directors and performers don't go through casting auditions with their eyes closed. But, when it comes to concluding the pact from this side of the curtain, the protocols of viewing shift from the aesthetic to the social. Decency and propriety suddenly stake a claim as aesthetic criteria. Comments on physical presence are derided as "nasty" reviewing, and banished to gossip boudoirs. What better proof does one need of Delhi's theatre community being a large club (of course there's much heartburn amongst its members, but which club is free of squabbling?) than the fact that even its reviewers observe the social protocols?

I can understand analyses being circumspect if the actor's physical attributes are, as seen from a mainstream perspective, socially disadvantaged. Saying that an actor has too thin a voice to play the swaggering bully is a 'no-no'. But laudatory descriptions bring other problems. For example, there's no denying the fizz in Rahul Bose's stage presence. But, in *Seascapes with Sharks and Dancer*, this strength militated against his role as a reclusive writer. Bose thus seemed to play a man who was quiet by choice rather than situation, cool rather than conservative, and sexy rather than scared stiff. Much praise was heaped on Bose as if stage

presence is a talent in its own right, regardless of the way it mangles the script.

The real complications in critical response occur when a production does not fit neatly into the black and white categories of convention. When normative perceptions of the physical are inverted, when what is conventionally regarded as 'inferior' is celebrated and the 'superior' is destabilised, the degree of difficulty gets too much for polite reviewers to handle.

Maya Rao, for instance, wouldn't win anybody's vote at a beauty contest (I say this with all the presumption of a friend), and it is this absence of the 'media'ted sense of the feminine that imparts a hypnotic quality to her stage presence. Whether it is Maya cupping her belly and speaking of the distinctive female muscles of the underbelly and the thigh in the course of her stage performance of Bertolt Brecht's short story *The Job*, or Ritu Talwar similarly challenging cultural codes of the feminine by physically emphasising the masculine aspect of her presence (in Anuradha Kapur's production of the same Brecht short story), the principle is the same. Both refuse to conform to picture-frame ideals of the feminine as endlessly replicated by the media and internalised by a whole generation of anorexic feel-gooders, (This feminine icon is seen best in our younger film heroines. They are such clones – physically, mentally: who can tell – of each other that like quality assembly line products, it is difficult to tell them apart.) Maya and Ritu's refusal to conform marks the primary source of these actresses' challenging, transgressive power.

How can any discussion of such performances be complete if the critical discourse makes no accommodation for the body as a site of meaning? Obviously, the body is not just fair but necessary game in the business of reviewing. If sociality and its norms are allowed to thus infect the critical will, reviews may end up displaying the very symptoms that such

productions seek to challenge.

Not that this solves the problem, for there is another side to the tale. Steven Berkoff explains why actors will forever be sensitive to criticism that accommodates discussions of the body: “The actor’s working material is his own body. With painters, sculptors, etc, your work is separate and distinct from you. Criticism is therefore far more personally wounding to the actor that it is for other kinds of artists.” In fact, in talking so carelessly of the actor’s physical presence, I too may have presumed upon the insurance of friendship. It’s another matter that Maya may cancel the insurance. Or, she may insist as a well-known director had declared at a workshop, that there can never ever be friendship between performer and critic.

Which simply begs the question: Why in that case should protocols of the public and the personal be so religiously observed? The actor’s medium is the body. The critic must factor that into the analysis. Amen.

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## **The Sense of an Audience / Keval Arora**

Most discussions – *and* demonstrations, now that the next edition of the Bharangam is upon us – of what ails contemporary theatre rarely take into account the role of the audience. In an environment where the audience’s contribution

to the making of meaning is barely acknowledged, it is unlikely that its responsibility for the state of the theatre will ever be admitted. Audiences do of course get noticed, but only in the context of dwindling attendance at plays, or strategies to entice spectators back to the theatre. Such 'concern' for the audience masks a worryingly patronising attitude. It sees spectators as little more than passive receptors of other people's intention, dry vessels waiting open-mouthed for the filling. One may as well not invoke the audience for all the insight that such invocations offer.

At first glance, it seems logical to exclude the audience from analyses of the theatre, for the audience does not concoct the brew being poured down its gullet. In fact, it often resists being bottle-fed and sometimes even resents the after-taste. So, on the face of it, no audience can be held *directly* responsible for the spectacle that theatre often makes of itself.

However, theatregoers cannot thereby wash their hands of the matter. The sense of an audience – an expectation of whom the play is being performed for – creeps into the decisions that performers make, both before and during the enactment, to such an extent that it shapes the final outcome as directly as if the audience had sat in on the creative process. This happens all the time, regardless of how accurate or credible the group's idea of its target audience may be. There is, therefore, a point beyond which audiences can no longer claim 'innocence'. Spectators cannot escape responsibility for what is performed for them. Or, put more accurately, for what they accept as passable in performance. Complicity is structured into the relation between performers and spectators, even if the relation is a silent one.

Perhaps, the fact of complicity stems from such silence. No complicity is as demeaning as that in silent acquiescence. This is especially glaring in the theatre where performers and spectators inhabit the same physical space, and where exchange



is immediate, tangible and therefore possible. It can be argued that it is naïve to expect a dialogue between patrons and performers when there is so little traffic between theatre groups themselves. Some groups attempt to reach out and 'talk' to its spectators beyond the footlights, but most are content or resigned to interpret their audience through ticket-sales and applause.

Nevertheless, I'd imagine that the responsibility for creating a stimulating theatre rests equally – if not finally – on those who dole out good money to see these performances. The failure of a play is often the failure of its audience, especially when spectators are unwilling, whether through politeness or indifference, to call a spade a spade. When was the last time a Delhi audience collectively protested against the quality of a production? In silently ingesting whatever is on offer – or, in protesting quietly and privately – spectators do a great disservice to those who have stopped going to the theatre, as also to those who stay away from it.

The argument that audiences are powerless to effect change is not as reasonable as it initially appears. Accomplices do not have power handed to them on a platter. What sullen accomplices do have is unlimited opportunity to seize power for change. 'Ticket-sales' and 'applause', for instance, are two vocabularies through which spectators can register their protest. Theatre groups understand these vocabularies, for no group can afford to alienate that miniscule minority which still visits the theatre. Can you imagine any group churning out tripe, production after production, if nobody sat through it all? (As the old Sixties slogan ran: 'Suppose they gave a war and nobody came<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>'.) It is all very well for us high-minded types to have criticised Aamir Raza Husain and his theatre group Stagedoor for having inundated Delhi with a particular variety of prurient bedroom comedy a decade ago. The fact is that the Kamani auditorium had then run to full houses, and night after night, you couldn't get tickets half an hour

before the show. Husain was merely giving the audience what it wanted; it's the spectators who turned out to be the idiots and the fools.

But Stagedoor is a soft target, one about which it is impossible to disagree. A less obvious arena of disaffection is the NSD Repertory. With most of its productions bearing the *chhap* of vintage years, several of the Repertory's productions today seem like museum pieces that are not noticeably different from the memories of past productions enshrined in its theatre museum. Yet, the Repertory manages an audience, an army of the faithful that sees nothing wrong about being caught in a time warp. So, the NSD Repertory blithely continues on its narcissistic path of self-imitation.

In both these cases, the audience's uncritical acceptance of the plays pre-empts self-evaluation. Surely the idea that theatre ought to reflect the aspirations of the people is not intended as a re-formulation within aesthetics of the law of supply and demand. But that is precisely how so much of so little worth gets by: after all, runs the argument, how can something be bad if the audience doesn't think it so? That old argument of supply & demand turns a contingent moment into a principle, and confers virtue upon the opportunist. Whenever there is a demand, there will always be somebody willing to supply the need. As to which is the cause and which the effect, you can argue yourself blue in the face and remain none the wiser. One way out of the trap, as some do-gooders have tried, is to unilaterally decide what is beneficial for the audience, irrespective of what the audience thinks is good for itself, and sanguinely offer just that for the edification and pleasuring of a benighted public. And, in the process, move from undermining the theatre from below to corroding it from the top.

Why should a group of seemingly normal people lapse into appalling taste when assembled? What is the combustion that makes otherwise alert individuals metamorphose into an

uncritical, slumbering mass that is content to be led by the nose? A common explanation is that Delhi's theatre-going fraternity is a large club; and it is difficult to be honest, even with oneself, within these spiralling circles of friendship.

But social niceties alone cannot explain an audience's generosity of spirit when confronted by a poverty of imagination and taste. Of the other reasons, the feel-good factor is surely relevant. In the peculiar arrangements of our mainstream theatre, it is remarkable how a public that is lukewarm about the prospect of taking plays seriously, actually finds its anxieties evaporating into a careless geniality once it walks through the auditorium doors. The reasons for such geniality may vary. It could be a media-fuelled expectation of a good time, the grapevine recommendation of a place where "it's happening", or simply a forced attendance with obligatory smiles in tow. The consequence, however, is always the same: a frame of mind conditioned by expectation or habit into evading any kind of alert and critical response.

Watching a play is not an autonomous activity. Peter Brook defines an act of theatre as, "A man walks across [an] empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged". But his definition leaves out the vital dimension of community that characterises the theatrical experience. (Isn't that why watching a play all alone in an auditorium leaves you feeling so terribly lonely?) The act of collective viewing has its own rhythm, which is distinct from, say, the rhythm of watching the TV by oneself. We've all sensed, as part of an audience, how our responses have been imperceptibly but steadily shaped by the responses of others in the auditorium. This is exhilarating when you are one with everybody else, but it can become enormously repressive should you find yourself out of sync with the rest of the crowd.

In non-consensual situations, collective viewing constricts free response by jostling and eroding individual stances of resistance to the performance. The invidious push 'n' shove between people of different persuasions and profiles reduces an audience's collective potential for reading a performance against the grain. This is why the spectator, as a member of that amorphous collective, has less interpretative control over the text than the single reader engaged in a private act of reading. Sanity is restored only when the individual spectator withdraws into looking upon his neighbours as another kind of text.

Surprisingly, spectators are often unwilling to exercise even a minimal control: witness our readiness to vocalise our appreciation of plays but not our dissent. Laughing and applauding are okay, but booing is out. By a similar compact, spectators happily exchange evaluations of the performance's technical features – acting, costumes, etc – but are far more circumspect in reacting to the meaning of the play.

Nowhere do we find a better instance of such degradation of individual spectator response than in the mass hysteria evident now when an entire nation of TV-gazers has been turned into one huge audience of the grand theatre called Mumbai 26/11. Such is the pressure of the people's response (as selectively promoted through privately-owned media channels) that the bloody, messy business of killing and revenge has been cleansed and glorified through the quavering rhetoric of patriotism and sacrifice into a superior civilisational activity. (Interestingly, the hawks talk of killing, while the doves talk of sacrifice. The distinction between the two remains blurred because for both, war as a routine response is here to stay.) There are a few sane voices that refuse to be swept up in this general feeling. But where are these to be heard in the clamour of the warmongers who glibly espouse counter-violence as a simple solution to complex problems?

Be it the larger theatre or the small play, failings in public

discourse can usually be traced back to the failure of audiences – and, to our irresponsible habit of lapping up whatever is served. So much then for our audiences' ability to make sense.

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## Dabbling In Babble / Keval Arora



Tim Supple's Production of Shakespeare's *Mid Summer Nights Dream* is currently touring India. Keval Arora takes on Supple for his comments (made earlier) on Indian Theatre and *multicultural collaboration*.

What is it about multilingualism that draws so many theatre practitioners to dabble in it, much like moths being drawn to a flame? And, what is it about multilingualism that makes many of them end up getting burnt by the encounter? Why is it that Tim Supple, who brought to India a perfectly competent production of *The Comedy of Errors* with the Royal Shakespeare Company some years ago, has ended up this time offering a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that makes all the right noises but falls woefully short of making sense?

Well, actually, not all these noises were politically correct. . Supple's comments on intercultural collaboration (carried in the brochure that accompanied the premiere production in 2006) may have been a shade too driven by the enthusiasm of a 'been-there-seen-that' cultural traveller, but did he really think he would win friends and influence people by his description of Indian theatre as "less tangible, less modern, less structured than ours and often fashioned with basic design and rough execution"? However, win friends he did, as can be gauged from Ananda Lal's comments (in that same brochure) about Supple's work. Says Lal, "Knowing the debates [revolving around issues of 'neo-colonial exploitation' in 'inter-cultural theatre'], observing him direct at close range and having asked members of the team, I can vouch for the fact that he is sensitive to the issue and its dangers. As corroborated by the performers...no appropriation occurred." (Lal also goes on to claim that Supple as "a foreign director has achieved national integration for Indian theatre before any Indian could", but I think we could let that pass as an instance of our Indian habit of being hospitable to the point of embarrassing everybody around!) The first statement is by itself a great Certificate of Merit, though it is difficult to fathom the authority with which assurances such as "no appropriation occurred" can ever be offered. Besides, the prospect of a post-colonial watchdog snooping around for evidence of appropriation during rehearsals can hardly be the kind of thing that leads to intercultural bonhomie let alone

transparency!

Cordial and collaborative dealings in work processes don't guarantee that the art thus produced will be free of appropriative relations. Plays aren't exactly processed on a shop-floor where one presumes hygienic procedures will result in non-contaminated products. Nor are 'appropriations' tangible actions that can be detected in the making, like embezzlements or fraud. You can monitor rehearsals all you want on CCTV, interview as many employees (read 'actors, technicians, etc') as you like, and still discover outcomes that are suspect in their negotiation of social and cultural identity. In other words, 'appropriations' don't have to be rooted in malicious intent: often, the best-intentioned at heart still end up stepping into shit.

Take, for instance, Supple's decision to go multilingual when asked by the British Council to create a production in India and Sri Lanka. He writes, "To restrict ourselves to performers who worked in English would be to miss out on a wealth of different ways of making theatre.... It would also be a lie." How can one not approve of such sensitivity towards our situation in the subcontinent where – and we can speak more freely than Supple feels he can – the best way of making theatre is not to be found in our English language stage. So, his decision to grant performers the comfort of working in their own languages led inevitably to *Midsummer* being conceived as a multilingual production. Though Lal is right in noting that "in the West, multilingual theatre has become fairly common, particularly in international projects", it is important to recognise that Supple's decision to go multilingual has been prompted less by the project's 'international' status than by his wish to make it accessible to the broadest swathe of performers. Not to mention his need to give the Shakespearean text its due: as he says, "whatever else a Shakespeare production might do, it should seek to reflect the time and place in which it is made with vivid

honesty.”

Laudable as this may sound, how true is it of Supple’s own work with *Midsummer*? Does its multilingualism, which lies at the heart of this intercultural project, reflect anything at all, let alone with vivid honesty? *Midsummer* has several languages – English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil and Sinhalese – operate indiscriminately in performance, cropping up and dropping out without evident purpose or necessity. With some characters speaking primarily in one language and others switching between languages for no apparent cause; with no patterns being discernible in the connections drawn between situation, character and the language/s used, Supple’s multilingualism add up to little more than a noble-hearted linguistic egalitarianism.

Egalitarian motivations of this sort can’t take you far, especially if none of these languages is textured as a living, cohabited entity. The idea that languages are grounded in socio-cultural spaces and are imbricated in personal identity, that they shape memories of shared pasts and imagined futures, that they are as much bones of contention as means of contestations – none of these, on the evidence of the performance, seems part of Supple’s plan. His production sails through the melange of tongues without once indicating that the bewildering mix of words and accents amount to anything more than a log of semantic equivalences. As a result, *Midsummer*’s characters are reduced to merely speakers of many tongues, and its text flattened to opaque displays of ‘otherness’, which lack even the resonance and difficulty that negotiating the ‘other’ brings in its wake.

Surely, a multilingual theatre has to foreground language as vital to its meaning, else why should any theatre strive to move outside the confines of its single, original language? An advantage with monolingual theatre is that when all characters speak the same tongue, it is possible, as writer Manjula Padmanabhan has averred in relation to her play *Harvest*, for



the language to be divested of social and geographical referents and to that extent become 'invisible'. (Writers then turn to vocabulary and intonation to bring in the desired social textures.) It is when two languages are made to coexist in the same text that questions arise as to why a character speaks in one and not the other language; questions that need to be answered even more urgently when the same character is seen to shift from one language to another.

Thus, multilingual productions pose issues of naturalness and probability in a deeper vein, and in the process demonstrate their potential to handle richer representations. But for that to happen, their discrete languages need to be tagged for difference and located in a socio-cultural hierarchy, in the same manner as these operate off-stage. If, as in *Midsummer*, the various languages on show are offered in a non-problematized, unified terrain, then I'm afraid this ends up as an aestheticised unity of the most banal kind.

Moreover, there seems to be some confusion here. Sure, Indian theatre is multilingual, as Supple claims – but only to the extent that India, by virtue of being a multilingual nation, has theatres in many languages. Texts, however, continue to be written and played mainly in a single language (including regional variations and dialects does not a multilingual theatre make!). Few theatre pieces shoulder on their back a hold-all of many languages for the simple reason that audiences aren't multilingual – at any rate, not in the broad range that *Midsummer* imagines. How does a multilingual theatre work then for audiences when its text is segmented into distinct clumps of speech which are alternately inaccessible to spectators (as they surely also were to the other actors on stage)? It's ironical that Supple's inclusivist gesture towards the individual actor ends up as an exclusionary experience for his spectators.

Not that the production is scrupulously caring about its actors either. For a project that kicked off with a view to

enabling the non-English speaking performer, it is strange to see almost every actor in *Midsummer* speak in English at some point, regardless of that actor's comfort with the language. I have no clue as to why this happened or what it is meant to achieve. All I do know is that the thick, regional intonation of English speech in such cases showed up speakers in a poor light, and left one silently willing the actor to retreat into the comfort zone of his native tongue!

As for the claim that multilingual theatre is the theatre of the future, let me point out two small cheat codes embedded in the zone of the multilingual. One, most multilingual theatre tends to remain closeted with the classics. In other words, with such plays where spectators' familiarity with the text functions like an insurance policy because it neutralises the risk of incomprehensibility that is inevitable when languages are used in a manner that makes them only selectively comprehensible to audiences. Two, most multilingual theatres tend to favour designs that have strong visual components and a physicalised performance style as staple features of its performance grammar, as if this is one way of working around the fact that large portions of the text may remain unintelligible to audiences. Compensations of this kind clearly signal that multilingualism of the kind favoured in international projects today is primarily a gesture towards inclusiveness and tolerance. And, like most gestures, it is unfortunately little more than that.

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FIRST CITY (May 2006)

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# 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 Delhi that 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 bleeding 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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**For Whom Nobels Toll / Keval  
Arora**





Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter passed away on 24 December 2008. He was 78 and had been undergoing treatment for liver cancer. Like most Nobel prizes for Literature, the choice of the British playwright Harold Pinter has also had its share of detractors. There have been all kinds of murmurings against Pinter getting the big prize, ranging from doubts about his literary worth to snide remarks about extraneous considerations having played a role in the selection. The prize for the slyest reaction – assuming that it wasn't the ghastly mistake it was made out to be – goes of course to the Sky Television newscaster who assumed that the breaking news about Pinter must have been to announce his demise (Pinter had taken a bad fall some days earlier) and therefore led off with an announcement that Pinter had died, before hesitating and then correcting herself to say that he had been awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature instead.

Well, to be honest, I'm not sure the word 'instead' was actually used, but given the bad grace with which his award has been received in some quarters, I wouldn't be surprised if it was. It's not difficult to figure out why Pinter's selection has been met with churlishness. On the one hand, a body of mainstream taste has tended to deride Pinter's theatre as just so much fluff. Pinter's departures from staple theatrical modes have often been seen as a thinning out of the

fundamentals of theatre, and even as evidence of his inability to get the basics right – much in the manner of the standard joke that Picasso's cubism springs from his lack of talent at drawing like everyone else. Pinter's technique of conjuring up dramatic tension and menace out of thin air, so to speak, has often provoked the incredulous suspicion that is bestowed upon all innovations and departures from the mainstream.

In recent years, Pinter's political activism has provoked another kind of ire. The ill-tempered outburst of John Simon, an old Pinter baiter, on learning of Pinter's Nobel prize, is interesting for the disarmingly guileless manner in which it reveals the prejudice that feeds its indignation. When Simon says, "I would have gladly accorded him the Nobel for Arrogance, the Nobel for Self-Promotion, or the Nobel for Hypocrisy – spewing venom at the United States while basking in our dollars – if such Nobels existed. But the Nobel for Literature? I think not", he exposes the burr that's actually prickling his behind.

Evidently, what has got Simon's goat is not Pinter's literary worthlessness, but the fact that the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to someone who has indefatigably campaigned against American and British adventurism in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, and has therefore shown himself to be of the 'enemy camp'. Evidently, Simon's tirade typifies the brand of opinion which wants artists to confine themselves to their work and desist from engaging in any form of activism, especially that which pits them against the weight of majoritarian opinion. (Perhaps this is why Arundhati Roy continues to raise the hackles of professional dabblers in that hallowed literary form, the Letters to the Editor.) And, evidently, Simon believes that he who pays pipers has the moral, nay spiritual, sanction to call the shots along with the tunes.

Nah, I shouldn't trash letters to editors. For, how else could I have gleaned that lovely nugget of information, contributed

by a reader to the *Guardian*, concerning “the sullen, deafening silence from Downing Street about the new British Nobel Laureate, Harold Pinter?” The British government’s wariness in celebrating the achievement of a countryman simply because of his vocal (and forgivably intemperate) criticism of state policy is just the kind of silence that would be familiar to Pinter, given the evocative treatment of silence in his plays. Of a piece with such silencing is an article lauding Pinter’s Nobel achievement that has been carried in the latest issue of *Britain Today*, a news magazine produced by the British High Commission in India. Unsurprisingly, it makes absolutely no mention of Pinter’s outspoken criticism of British foreign policy, a criticism that he has stuck to despite constant mockery and ridicule. How else can one read the title of that article, “Master of Silence”, except as a desperate act of wish-fulfilment!

Is one over-emphasising Pinter’s political stance as a factor in his getting the award and in the reactions to it? I don’t think so – and not simply because others have commented that the Swedish Nobel committee may have been inclined to favour a writer who has voiced his anti-war sentiments in no uncertain terms (Pinter has famously denounced Bush as a “mass murderer” and dismissed Blair as “that deluded idiot”), given the fact that the Swedish people too were extremely vocal in their anti-Iraq war protests. If this sounds like a slur on the literary credentials of Harold Pinter, it is interesting to see him make the same connection, albeit in a less whining tone: “Why they’ve given me this prize I don’t know. ... But I suspect that they must have taken my political activities into consideration since my political engagement is very much part of my work. It’s interwoven into many of my plays.” That this is a man speaking with a modesty characteristic of the greatest writers is par for the course. But, it is unusual to find a writer who values his political conscience as much if not more than his writing, especially as even readers are often uncomfortable with such privileging.

It's not as if Pinter needed the sympathy of political fraction. His credentials as a writer are justification enough for the Nobel award. He isn't the writer of whom no one's heard, as some previous Nobel awardees have been. Not when his plays are widely translated and performed in other languages; not when they pop up regularly in drama syllabi of Literature Departments; and certainly not when 'Pinteresque' is now staple lit-crit jargon for a patented blend of mundane but oblique dialogue, brooding silences and ineffable unease, all floating gingerly on a bed of sudden incongruity. (Anyway, what does the label "unheard-of author" mean? Surely, nothing more than the writer's works having not been translated (yet) into English, and therefore being unfamiliar to the international publishing scene....)

Pinter is now 75 years old, with a long writing and performance career of considerable range and distinction. He has acted on stage, film, television and radio. He has written nearly thirty plays since 1957, and has innumerable drama sketches, poems and prose published in several volumes. He has directed over 25 productions of his own and others' plays, adapted novels for the stage (notably Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*) and for film (for instance, Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Kafka's *The Trial*), adapted his plays for radio and television, written over 20 screenplays (*The Servant* and *The Go-Between*, both directed by Joseph Losey, being two delightful instances), and is now so immersed in speaking out on political matters that earlier this year he spoke of not writing any more plays in order to focus his energy on such issues.

Initially, things didn't look promising; Pinter didn't burst in on the scene in the manner of other path-breaking dramatists. The 1956 commercial and critical success of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, notwithstanding its combative indecorum, had suggested that British audiences were tiring of conventional fare, but Pinter's first plays in 1957-58 (*The*

*Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*) were received with bewilderment and hostility. (That this could happen despite the praise showered on the English premiere of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 is curious, given the several affinities that have subsequently been noted between Beckett's and Pinter's theatrical worlds.) It wasn't until 1960 that Pinter had his first success with *The Caretaker*. From then on, plays such as *The Homecoming* (1964), *Landscape and Silence* (1967 & 1968), *No Man's Land* (1974) and *Betrayal* (1978) established Pinter's reputation as a unique voice in contemporary theatre. To such an extent that *The Dumb Waiter*, along with Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, soon became an absolute must-do for budding thespians in college theatre societies.

Pinter's plays revolve typically around contestations for territory. Conflicts, sparked off by intrusions into a closed space by an outside force, are conducted with a strange mix of ferocity and dulled detachment. His characters and their dialogues are rarely explicated through conventional excavations of motivation and memory, and often viciousness and pain lurk submerged beneath an evasive surface composed of guilt, uncertainty, everyday phrases and restless silences. The 'facts' on which these contestations are pegged are usually unreliable, for there is little that is either 'true or false' in Pinteresque space.

The unnamed tension of these plays are located in such a claustrophobic, inter-personal space that Pinter's writing has been criticised for turning its back upon the political, an impression that was confirmed when Martin Esslin included Pinter in his seminal study, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. However, the later plays – such as *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) – are more distinctly political. But, here too authoritarian structures of repression and torture are evoked rather than articulated, and filter through spare exchanges between

oppressor and victim, and the slippages of memory and knowledge. Perhaps, this phase of Pinter's writing is less a 'shift' from his early work than an extension of earlier preoccupations into a wider territory.

Though the Nobel citation – Pinter's plays "uncover the precipice under everyday prattle and *force entry into oppression's closed rooms*" (my italics) – celebrates the dramatist as much as it does the political activist, the writer himself draws sufficient distinction between his preoccupations as an artist and as a "political intelligence" to not let the achievements of one absolve him of the responsibility enjoined upon the other. He recently had this to say of the road he's travelled: "In 1958, I wrote, 'there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal... A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' I believe that these assertions . . . do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?"

In an interview some years ago, Pinter had rued the bane of British intellectual life being the mockery directed at artists who take a stand on political issues, and had warned, "Well, I don't intend to simply go away and write my plays and be a good boy. I intend to remain an independent and political intelligence in my own right." What lovelier spectacle can there be than this – of a dramatist, who goes on to win the Nobel Prize, acknowledging that conscientious citizenship is a more urgent cry than any artistic calling?

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after Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

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# A Matter of Applause / Keval Arora



Suspense! – Will They or Won't They?

A critical difference between live and recorded performances (those in cinema or television) can be seen in the way we respond to them. Namely, in the matter of applause. When it comes to other kinds of reaction – laughing, being moved, being irritated, etc – it seems to not matter whether the performer stands before us in the flesh or as a projected image or digitised signal. (Well, some of us may fight our tears and laughter in the public space of the cinema hall, while comfortably letting go within the privacy of television viewing. But, that difference is a only a matter of public rectitude; and, in any case, it makes no distinction between live and recorded performance.) Applause, on the other hand, is a category of response that is found almost exclusively within live performance.

When a show is over, you clap. Duration, intensity and manner (seated or standing ovation) provide some variation; with

whistling being reserved for in-house audiences of friends and colleagues. The end result is pretty much always the same: as the house lights go up, you clap. The applause may well be tepid and mechanical; it may even be somewhat forced when performances are of indifferent quality, but you still clap. On the other hand, we rarely do that for films or television programmes – even when we have been deeply moved. The reason for this strange gap between our private response and our public gesture is obvious. Applauding a recorded performance is pointless because there's no one there to receive the appreciation, whereas live performances exert a kind of pressure on spectators when artistes return to the stage for a curtain call. Similarly, it's only at those screenings where someone connected with the film is present that applause is sometimes heard. Or, and this has been happening of late, when the film comes with a reputation for being 'controversial' or even 'alternative' – the applause that is then offered is usually a gesture of solidarity intended for others in the audience.

It's obvious then that applause, as compared to reactions such as laughter and tears, is not so much a private response as it is a social gesture, a protocol of communication with those around you. At the risk of schematising the division, one can perhaps argue that laughter and tears express us as individuals or as a group, and to that extent possess the authenticity of a self-authored monologue; whereas, applause, to extend the metaphor, has more the contextual push and pull of dialogue. The fact that, barring the case of a few theatrical modes, performers and their fictions tend to carry on regardless of what spectators vocalise during the performance, indicates the unidirectional nature of spectator response. Addressed to no one in particular and in no expectation of any kind of counter-response, 'laughter and tears' (I'm sorry, but you'll have to lump the phrase as a shorthand for some time) can be seen as self-articulations of the purest kind. Applause, on the other hand, occurs outside



rather than within the performance, when the actor has shed his character's clothes and comes before us as s/he is. That maybe a reason why, when viewing a performance with strangers, we hold back from what we perceive as 'excessive' private response and yet do not feel similarly vulnerable when we willingly demonstrate personal appreciation in the form of applause.

Applause is a socialised response in another sense as well. For, this is what you're obliged to do for these actors who have striven to give you, if one may invert that venerable line in *Waiting for Godot*, 'such a fine, fine time'. Isn't that why many of us clap automatically at the end of a performance, even when we haven't particularly enjoyed it? It's what is expected of you, it's your part of the bargain, and to not offer it at the end of a performance seems churlish. After all, 'putting up a play is no joke, 'we must applaud the effort and intention if not the achievement', 'it's the least we can do to encourage the few who keep the flag flying' and all that, are no doubt powerful arguments that only the culturally insensate can ignore. Such is the momentum of this socialised action that it actually takes willed premeditation on one's part to refuse even token applause.

Though much of what I've been saying relates mainly to the applause that greets performances at their end, it is possible to find a similar geniality at work at other moments as well. Especially in this terrible habit of spectators clapping in the middle of a performance. Applauding during a performance is certainly not as distracting in the theatre as it is in the case of a Western classical music – remember the bemused horror that Delhi audiences had evoked during the Zubin Mehta concert several years ago? – but it is violative nevertheless. And dangerous too, for, before you know it, such interruptive appreciation becomes the norm, for performers and spectators alike. I've heard it said so often that Western classical

music performances brook no interruption, even appreciative ones, that the implication these are acceptable within Hindustani and Carnatic music traditions has become something of a truism. However, it is equally intrusive in the latter case, especially when mid-performance applause comes to be regarded as more 'authentic' (it's 'spontaneous', you see) than its automatic, polite cousin that shows up at the end. For, then, performers are persuaded to play to the gallery, to chop their own creation into a series of effects, and to lose a sense of the whole.

One of the problems with applause – arguably the most insidious one, for this is seen equally in its 'authentic' and its 'polite' manifestations – relates to this problem of 'losing a sense of the whole'. What is it that we appreciate, and I'm now speaking of the theatre, when we offer applause to a performance? The text, the play, the analysis, the experience? Perhaps, sometimes; but only rarely so. More often than not, we offer applause to the performers rather than the performance, the skills on display and the effort that went into the making of the show. On the face of it, this appears consistent with the socialised aspect of applause I've mentioned earlier, but it is more than that. For, it is equally true of the cinema. There too we respond primarily to the actors' performances, and only secondarily to the argument the film may be offering (unless, of course, we are students of the cinema – in which case, it is the camera-work that sets our hearts pounding!). This aspect of applause is violative in fundamental ways because it compromises the integrity and cohesion of the work itself. Applause of this kind signals the constant deflection through which performances are received, through which texts are constantly reduced into an assembly of enactments, and plays into their playing.

It is difficult for most plays to survive the corrosive influence of such appreciation. Especially such plays which are not celebratory or light in tone. If they do survive, it

is because of the raw power of their texts, which not even the most enthusiastic appreciation can completely swamp. I remember one such play and one such audience when *Women Can't Wait*, a solo show by the US actress Sarah Jones, was staged in the open at the IHC amphitheatre. *Women Can't Wait* was originally commissioned by *Equality Now!* for performance before government delegates to the UN Global Conference on Women's Rights held in New York. It toured India courtesy *Crea* and *Tarshi*, NGOs working in the area of women's rights.

The play comprised a series of narrations by different women, addressed to an imagined assembly of government officials, as a reminder to governments and the people manning them that "they have promises to keep". The women, eight in all (from India, Japan, Uruguay, France, USA, Jordan, Israel and Nigeria) spoke of brutalising aspects of their lives, made doubly intolerable by the fact of their countries' laws providing no recourse. The fiction within which these monologues were couched was that of a rehearsal: the women were rehearsing their speeches for presentation before delegates, and in so doing, the actress presented them directly to the audience. One of the women played the role of coach and moderator, offering tips on presentation ("Speak with conviction because your audience is generally unsympathetic"; and "Smile at them. The UN people like that"), monitoring vocabulary and tone ("No, dear, I don't think you can use that word"), and generally boosting the morale of the nervous speakers.

These monologues had interesting layers worked into them, but I won't speak of that now because this is not intended as a review of the play. In fact, what I'm driving at is that *Women Can't Wait* is perhaps not even a play. Certainly, to equate it with what goes on regularly in the name of evening entertainments does it grave injustice. *Women Can't Wait* is more than a play: it is an intervention in civil space, and

therefore 'culture' in the best sense of the word.

Author-director-actress Sarah Jones played all the women, using nothing but phenomenal shifts in voice, accent and rhythm to mesmerise us with the sensation of there being actually eight different women on stage before us. Oh yes, much has been made of a scarf that she used in different ways to contribute some visual variety, but I'm sure that had there been no scarf, it would have taken little away from the convincing textures of her performance.

Jones' skill at bringing to life eight different speech, gestural, social, professional and economic profiles, and binding all of them into a common articulation of indignation and protest, was clearly a major strength of *Women Can't Wait*. Yet, it was also a profound handicap. Jones had the audience so eating out of her hand that, in the course of the performance, it became unclear what the spectators were looking at. Take the instance of the honour killing that Hala of Jordan narrated. Her story was raw and bloody, and the silence in that packed amphitheatre deepened with horror at the calm brutality of familial honour. Yet, as the character's voice trailed away, unable to complete her story, there was only the briefest of pauses before applause broke out and swelled – for what? The juxtaposition of the two moments – the character's yielding to silence and the spectators' applause – was obscene. (In hard, perhaps pedantic, terms, it was even undesirable.) But that is what Jones' ability to present yet another character movingly and "with conviction" achieved. Hala's story was picked clean of its emotional gore (mind you, these monologues were constructed from documented, real-life instances), and sanitised through our appreciation of a marvellous actress' command over voice and speech.

Instances of this kind make me sometimes wonder why so much time is spent in discussing the success/failure of performances even as we ignore the equally vital question of the success and the failure of audiences.

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