



Third Theatre and Verbatim Theatre: A Comparative Study of the Theatre Practices of Badal Sircar and Paul Brown

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Abstract: The genre of the Third Theatre is essentially rooted in the Indian tradition. This theatre is known for its direct communication with the audience through its portrayal of vibrant social and political issues. Theoretically and practically it deviates from traditional Proscenium theatre or sophisticated urban theatre which are borrowed from the British and rooted in western culture. Third Theatre rejected any use of prop, light, make up, mike or any such theatrical aid. With the aim to raise consciousness among the masses through a direct communication with them this form of theatre portrayed naked realism perhaps at its best.

A more advanced and technologically sound realistic form of drama is the Verbatim theatre in Australia. It is a form of documentary theatre based on real words, expressions taken from recorded interviews and conversations. Now a mainstream theatrical genre, it is used in Australia to depict major social issues. This theatre uses real spoken words as its script to construct plays on stage. It is “not written in a traditional sense...but is...conceived, collected and collated.” On the stage the actors address the audience from interviewed transcripts. It shows not only what people say but also how people say. It aims to achieve authenticity with its direct use of materials rendered in ‘the tune of the spoken voice’.

Thus the Third Theatre in Indian context and the Verbatim Theatre in Australian context represent reality and authenticity in their heterogeneous techniques. In spite of their representational differences they somehow share uniform theoretical, theatrical and performing strategies. My paper critiques the nuances, uniformities, and sociological importance of both the genres with references to Badal Sircar of Third Theatre tradition and Paul Brown of Verbatim Theatre tradition.

Keywords: Third Theatre, Verbatim Theatre, Realistic, Authenticity, Representation.

Proscenium Theatre or ‘Picture Frame’ theatre with its traditional three wall stage, wings, curtains and pictured backdrops fell out of favour with many of the experimental theatre practitioners all over the world. Modernism has bestowed importance much on the reader rather than the writer; much on the audience rather than the performer. The experience, feeling, reaction of the spectators were what the modernist theatre practitioners cared the most. Communication with the audience through performance was given the priority.

Portraying Realism on stage and conveying social, political messages directly to the audience is the trademark of the modernist experimental theatre.

India and Australia have a great deal of share of this experimental theatre tradition. Both have two very unique theatre traditions which flourished and crossed their geographical boundaries. The Third Theatre of India and the Verbatim Theatre of Australia share a mutual prioritization of direct communication with the audience through performance but in slightly different ways. Verbatim Theatre seems to be more advanced, more direct and modified version of the Indian Third Theatre propagated by the stalwart from Bengal, Badal Sircar.

Third Theatre is perhaps the most significant contribution of India to the modernist experimental theatre of the world. Badal Sircar who always preferred to be identified as a 'theatre practitioner' rather than anything else was always revolutionary in his ideas and practices. He says that the Third Theatre is the Theatre of Synthesis as a Rural-Urban Link.

To him the Third Theatre was a necessity; a necessity to bridge the gap between the sophisticated westernized urban Proscenium theatre and the indigenous rural theatre of India. "One of the important characteristics of the socio-economic conditions of India is an unfortunate dichotomy between urban and rural life. This dichotomy is expressed in disparities in economic standards, services, educational levels, and cultural developments...the culture of the countryside, however did not die; and hence two cultural trends run parallel to each other giving rise to a fundamental dichotomy between rural and urban lives, particularly in the cultural field" (*Changing Language* 1). The city theatre in pre or post colonial India cared less about its indigenous traditional performances. It was modeled upon the Proscenium theatre tradition of the colonizers. The story, the treatment of the theme, the characterization, the stage, the lighting, the auditorium, the acting style- almost each and every aspect of the city theatre was influenced by the 19th century Victorian theatre of Britain, moulded and developed mainly by the Calcutta intelligentsia. But at the same time the rural India was practicing its traditional theatre forms like Jatra, Tamasha, Nautanki etc.

Financial back up has always been crucial behind the survival of theatre in general. In today's Calcutta much corporate sponsorship are available. In the last decade our city theatre has witnessed a sound financial back up which has been instrumental in the proliferation of theatre in general. The Calcutta theatre initially began with the patronage of the wealthy intelligentsia. Professional theatre came up with its heavy dependence on the patronage of the ticket-buying audience. In the mid 1940s Indian People's Theatre Association produced *Navanna* under the direction of Sombhu Mitra and Bijon Bhattacharya. Era of Group theatre followed with the establishment of 'Bohurupee'. But simultaneous proliferation of cinema in the 50s put theatre at stake. With the rise of the production cost along with the absence of audience theatre faced a serious threat. Sircar writes: "Theatre requires money. Money is needed for stage and auditorium, for sets, lights and costume, for publicity. If a theatre group does not have rich patrons, the money has to come through sale of tickets" (*Third Theatre* 13). In order to compete with the cinema, the commercial theatre of Calcutta started using lavish sets, complicated lighting, expensive costume, and film stars. It increased the financial risk and theatre faced a real blow to survive.

All these odds prompted Sircar to look for a way out. Being a revolutionary thinker and activist all throughout, he turned the odds into positive. He realized that unlike most other art forms especially cinema, theatre makes direct communication with the audience. He says: "In Theatre *a live person communicates directly to another live person*. This is the principal point that theatre must utilize to the maximum" (17). Sircar always believed that Theatre is a live show where the actors perform before live audience and this aliveness facilitate it to have a direct communication with the audience. But Proscenium theatre did not really encourage what he believed. And to utilize this live communication with the audience he broke the barrier of

Proscenium theatre and conceptualized the Third Theatre. The first problem of this communication was Proscenium theatre itself which he found very problematic. Firstly, the Proscenium theatre has different layers for the performer and spectator. The performer has a higher arena where the spectator has the lower one. The entrances for the two are different. Secondly, the performer is in the light and audience in the dark. Thirdly, it promotes pretension as both the performer and the audience pretend to be oblivious of each other's presence. Though it is a live show, the two sections cannot interact. The spectator has to listen silently to whatever is being performed on the stage without having any active participation. He felt a necessity to eradicate the barrier between the performer and the spectator. He first removed the layer and interchanged each other's position. He removed the chairs and introduced benches. He performed in the middle with the spectators around him. He used ordinary light and absolutely no prop. He used to directly address to the audience, talk to them and even bring them into his performance. He could actually involve the audience actively in theatre. The barrier between the performer and the spectator was removed. The audience was actively brought into the performance. This was his concept of the Third Theatre which always remained a unique contribution to the genre of experimental theatre.

This eradication of barrier could actually solve many difficulties also. He brought it into open daylight. He could perform in marketplaces, parks, fields wherever he wanted. He used neither prop nor make up. He brought the high production cost to almost zero. He could much well communicate with the audience as this was the thing he propagated till his last breath that the sole purpose of theatre should be to communicate with the audience. He made theatre Flexible (as it could be performed whatsoever), Portable (as he could travel even to remote villages as he had no pressure to carry heavy props) and most importantly Cheap (as he had almost zero production cost with the need of neither electricity nor stage as he would perform in broad daylight in the open ground under the sun). He literally brought the theatre from high stage to the plain ground and shared the theatrical space with the common men being one with them. In an underdeveloped or developing third world country where theatre means a luxury of the sophisticated ones in the city, he brought it into the street, amidst the common men.

He took Grotowski's concept of Poor Theatre with literal seriousness. Grotowski's concept was to go against the enrichment of theatre by borrowing from other art forms and techniques—such as background music, lighting, set and costume. He literally removed the use of sets, lights, costume and background music as it were creating financial barrier for him. He made theatre inexpensive in every possibility. He utilized the poverty and turned it into an advantage instead of a restriction.

It was not that he conceptualized Third Theatre and materialized it overnight. He also started with the Proscenium theatre tradition and as he carried on his thinking process started changing. He thought, practiced and experimented with theatre. He formed his theatre group Satabdi in 1969 and performed *Sagina Mahato*, his first Third Theatre production on 24th October, 1971 in ABTA Hall in Calcutta. He obtained the central arena of the hall for acting and placed the audience around. He utilized the passages behind the spectators for movements and acting. So he was actually performing among the audience in ordinary light. *Sagina mahato* was already his famous production on the Proscenium stage but when the same audience watched it in Third Theatre mode; they liked it better with greater intimacy, feeling and involvement. Almost all his productions like *Abu Hossain*, *Spartacus*, *Ballavpurer Itikatha*, *Ebang Indrajit*, *Michchil* are performed in the open air, amidst the audience in broad daylight. His usual approach was to present certain characters with definite identities and a story would develop through the interaction between the characters. It was done with the idea that the spectators would recognize or identify themselves with the characters performing and get involved in their problems and emotions. Social problems were posed as extension of the problems of the individual characters in the play. Thus he could communicate directly to his audience and share his ideas more closely.

An excerpt of a review of *Sagina Mahato* published in The Hindusthan Standard on 23rd February, 1972 may be mentioned here in this regard-

“...Sircar avoids spectacles and makes it almost a dialogue with the audience...with the nearness of the audience, the production achieves bareness and dimension of direct and immediate thinking; with the two rows of spectators arranged around the acting area, the actors move or stand between the rows at times, and the closeness itself becomes an experience that makes the issues more real; and the doubts and uncertainties are communicated more sharply...it is a pleasure now to see the Satabdi ensemble creating moments of visual structure almost out of nothing; in terms of physical acting on an unspectacular plane they have now achieved a rare discipline which is not marred by the individual imperfections that are still there...(it) questions the basic established convention of the theatre, in terms of an original approach to the theatre.”

This is where lies the similarity as well as the difference of the Verbatim Theatre with the Third Theatre. Both aimed the same but fulfilled it in different ways. Verbatim theatre tradition uses Proscenium stage yet at the same time communicates with the audience more directly. Unlike the Third Theatre it uses a great deal of technological advantage without which it is perhaps incomplete. This is a fact based realistic theatre based on interviews of real people. Interviewed conversations and expressions are used with the aid of tape recorder, projector to make realistic presentation of the fact to the audience. As a matter of fact it always keeps the audience actively engaged with what is going on the stage. Thus it makes the audience actively participate in the process of performance.

Verbatim Theatre was rooted in the Documentary Theatre tradition of Peter Cheeseman. It is widely accepted that Derek Paget first coined the term ‘Verbatim Theatre’ in an article where he says that it is:

A form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ordinary people, done in the context of research into a particular region, sub area, issue, event, or combination of these things. The primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place” (Paget 19)

In Australia it was Paul Brown who introduced Verbatim Theatre with his play *Aftershocks* in 1993. Now a mainstream theatrical genre, it is used in Australia to depict major social issues. This theatre uses real spoken words as its script to construct plays on stage. It is “not written in a traditional sense...but is...conceived, collected and collated.” On the stage the actors address the audience from interviewed transcripts. It shows not only what people say but also how people say. It aims to achieve authenticity with its direct use of materials rendered in ‘the tune of the spoken voice’.

Authenticity is a very important concern of both the theatre traditions. Both the Theatres create an aura of disillusionment through their realistic representation and thus draw the audience into the play. To create a Verbatim theatre a playwright first selects a topic then gathers facts from newspapers and interviewed conversations and make a collage of it. Actors standing on the stage address the audience from interviewed transcripts ‘in the tune of the spoken voice’. Verbatim shows not only the ‘what’ but also the ‘how’ as it shows what happened by performing it the way it happened. Thus it actually projects its factual authenticity. It blends fact and performance and thus becomes appealing to the audience. People get to know, realize and feel through visualization of the happening. Thus the actors directly communicate with the audience who happen to participate actively in the theatre performance.

Aftershock (1991) by Paul Brown is one of the most famous verbatim plays ever written. It is a verbatim on the Newcastle Earthquake which destroyed the Newcastle Workers' Club. The members of the club along with their friends gather to share their first hand experiences speaking directly to the audience. There is a total number of six characters (three male and three female) in the play. Tales of bravery, danger, loss of life, fear, anger, surprise and humour. The play ends with a message of coping with life's on-going chaos rather than trying to defeat it altogether. The play enacts the aftermath of the earthquake on the members of the club. The audience, who did not experience the earthquake first hand, gets to know, realize and feel it through watching it performed before them.

“There are three voices, speaking always in unison. First the real person, whose story is told. Second the voice that emerged in interview (determined by the relationship across the microphone), and third the voice of the actor, found through an archaeology of text and history but determined by a storyteller's commitment to entertain. Combined, and presented as theatre, these make up what might be termed an unofficial story/truth about the earthquake. Not the crudely distilled version of TV news, not the legalese of the official Inquiry, but something more closely resembling what people near the heart of the matter might want recorded as Australian history.” (Program Notes, Belvoir Theatre season of *Aftershocks*, 1993)

His other verbatim plays like *Half a Life* (2006), *Kahkwa Hakawati* (1991), *Murray River Story* (1988), *Room 207 Nicola Tesla* (2004) are all set in realistic background with interviewed transcriptions.

Thus we find that both Third Theatre and Verbatim theatre emphasize the audience to be directly communicated through and involved in the performance. Yet their ways are different. Third Theatre rejected Proscenium stage along with makeup, prop, electric light, background etc and came down to the audience to share an equal theatrical space whereas the Verbatim theatre retains the Proscenium stage but communicates with the audience with the aid of technological props. Both have been pioneering in addressing social issues and in both performance practices, focus has been given on plays to promote social cause.

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