

On Voice and Speech Training

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It would be bold to maintain that voice and speech in theatre have not been studied scientifically in India! However, my approach as crystallized through the last fifteen years, displays, I imagine, assumptions that require some attention.

Firstly, I hold that training voice and speech for theatre must maintain a positive relationship with music and music-training. This is not to suggest that the twin arts of theatre and music use voice in an identical manner. Yet attention to the qualitative aspects, adoption of graded practicing techniques and the devising of exercises for self-study in music have a direct relevance to training in theatre. Whether in technical matters such as breathing methods, vowel production, postures and stances, or in aesthetic aspects of tonal quality, greater as well as subtler exploration of pitch ranges, expansion of the timbre-repertoire, music-cultures provide readymade solutions. A judicious reliance on musical traditions is a pre-condition for attaining speech-quality and ensure its progressive enrichment. It should, of course, be obvious that advocacy of recourse to music does not entail rushing to khayals and ragas in Indian music! The support that music provides to training in theatre speech is at a more fundamental level. Musical studies have, over a period of centuries, evolved a comprehensive basis for exploring the basic acoustic parameters of voice, namely pitch, intensity and timbre. Music has also formulated performing strategies to meet the demands of effective accentuation, pacing and intonation. Speech and diction modes need only to blame themselves if they do not take advantage of the highly productive and concurrent musical traditions. Performing arts should instinctively turn to one another because they are cognate entities and often face similar (if not the same) performing problems. For theatre to turn to cinema and literature is a symptom of an artificial aesthetic movement which (to use Coleridge's words) suffers from 'tyranny of the eye'. The pervasive aridity in the contemporary theatric-speech can hardly be removed unless the intrinsic theatre-music relationship is appreciated.

Secondly, the music referred to is Indian music. The basic (and not the lowest) common denominator of the Indian theatre traditions is adherence to the principle of continuity.

This is the reason why music in India is melodic (as opposed to harmonic) and Indian languages are characterized by a prolongation of utterance. Accent (à la English) is nearly absent and the evenness of the Indian natural diction is unmistakable. Indian speech rhythms, therefore, leave back a lasting impression of lilt than a staccato progression.

Speech-training would, therefore, be inadequate to meet challenges of the national perspective if the inherent portmanteau-logic is not properly appreciated. In this connection it is pertinent to note that the Indian oral tradition employs tonal contours and cadences for a wide array of activities from arithmetical tables to prosodic moulds—a sure indication of the pervasiveness of the musical impulse expressed through continuity. It is no exaggeration to describe musicality (in its widest sense) as a prominent characteristic of the Indian identity.

Thirdly, the linguistic diversity of the country and the fact of mutual influencing by languages in India must be recognized as factors that have determined Indian speech patterns. It is necessary to note that creative speech-rhythms in any Indian language tend to allude to rhythms of another, interlinked language. Training in speech should, therefore, manage to reflect the variegated texture of the Indian languages. Unfortunately, overreliance on print, ignorant disregard by the media for the regional distinctions (or their urbanized nostalgia for them!) have created speech which exhibits a series of clichés.

The situation warrants a flexible and a rational approach to speech. What is needed is an introduction of a standard methodology in training methods without confusing the measure with regimentation of speech-material. It should then be possible to differentiate in the weightages of words such as 'daru', 'sharab' and 'madira' etc. and not translating them as synonyms for the word 'drinks'! Speech training with an Indian orientation enables us to distinguish between 'bhoota', 'pishachcha' and 'sammandha', recognizing in the process the contribution of the regional associations and linguistic connotations.

A corollary follows. Indian theatre also suffers from an impoverished gesture-language. Actors/directors often fall back on the cliché gestures too easily! What is worse is that they seem to use urban-western gestures with Indian-rural expression, not sensing or overlooking the incongruity involved.

Trainees, whose attention is drawn to different speech-components and their respective regional hinterlands, find it easier to identify adequate and appropriate gestures. It is curious to come across leading directors/ actors struggling to 'find'

characters via gestures, movements, ambiance and so on, while the vocabulary selected by the playwright and his formulation of dialogues already hold a clue to the mystery. A spoken word is a package, and an expressive one at that. The three most important aspects of abhinaya, namely gestures, gesticulations and movements, are indicated by the spoken word. Creative and dramatic verbalization gets abbreviated in the process of writing down the original, spoken word. The full-fledged and multiple personality of the word is to be given back to it through performance. It is logical that words thus opened virtually open up deeper veins of dramatic experience.

This is no place to expound in full my method and philosophy of voice-speech training in theatre. However, before concluding this introductory statement I must add that voice and speech training finally leads one to matters of enrichment and realization of one's essential personality. It is through voice and speech that human beings are able to reach the submerged levels of consciousness. The dependence of the psychoanalytic procedures on 'speaking out' was in all probability a semi-awareness of the mind-speech immediate relationship.

I aver that, through better co-ordination of voice and speech processes, individuals are able to construe the inner and outer universes better. Life becomes more meaningful to those whose voices are at peace with themselves. The new-found co-ordination gives the trainees a new voice as well as a new personality. They become beings who are better attuned. That the psycho-physical discipline of yoga should play a great role in the procedures I follow, therefore, seems only logical. It is a pity that a lack of awareness of the Indian approach to theatre-speech is detected at individual as well as institutional levels.

Music-lovers in Maharashtra and elsewhere celebrate on June 26 the birth centenary of Balgandharva alias Narayan Shripad Rajhans, the legendary actor-singer.

Marathi music-stage in the modern period traces its beginnings from 1843 when Shri Vishnudas Bhave presented a performance of *Seetaswayamvar*, a mythological play with dance-dialogue-music and sword-fights etc. enlivening the procedures. Marathi prose-play made its entry in 1861 with a Keertane play written under the influence of the new English learning. Both these theatre-streams had a large clientele, though music-stage has a slight edge over the prose-play in popularity. The difference in popularity and other considerations created a debate among the followers.

A juxtaposition of opinions aired by protagonists on both the sides in 'Theme and Archives' makes an interesting reading.

Marathi stage music was and perhaps is characterized by prominence of the elaborate and 'singable' vocal music. This may need cultural analysis at a deeper level when parallel traditions of Hindi, Gujarati and Bengali theatre are examined. Some names, facts and figures noted elsewhere may prove stimulating.
