

Drama criticism: a note

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One of the theatre-related activities to arouse passionate disagreement has always been drama-criticism. Playwrights, performers and, frequently, even readers have been vocal in condemning theatre-reviewers who should not be confused with drama critics. Does theatre experience pose special problems vis-a-vis evaluation? If so, what is the nature of the difficulties involved?

In this context two conceptual structures need to be noted. The first deals with grouping of various arts into different families according to the special qualities enjoyed by arts that are grouped together. The second formulation is connected with the multiple levels at which a work of art can be approached. Performance and performer in theatre can hardly be evaluated unless the two formulations are properly employed.

For example, an awareness of theatre and drama being performing and composite arts helps in selection and/or development of criteria relevant to evaluate a performance. The grouping of arts and the inherent logic would become clear in the following clusters:

Performing arts: Dance, drama and music

Literary arts: Imaginative linguistic expression

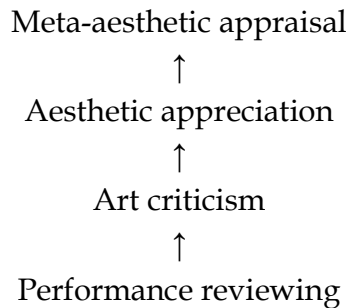
Composite arts: Drama, films

Fine arts: Painting, sculpture

Mixed arts: Opera, ballet, shadow-play, mime, mobile sculpture, etc.

The general principles and the particular distinctive features of the individual arts can of course be elaborated further. However, it is hardly necessary to do so.

The second operative structure is the multi-layered nature of evaluation. A diagrammatic presentation would bring out the various levels.



Even though the levels are interlinked, higher levels are notably more and more distant from an actual performance. The higher levels become progressively more abstract and accommodative to the extent of throwing up statements of philosophical import and including non-art life-areas within its scope.

For example, at the reviewing stage one may say, 'In Hamlet, Nanasaheb Phatak, the well-known actor from Maharashtra, effectively employed both low and high pitched voices in the closet scene.' At the level of art-criticism one can state, 'Conflict-situations in drama can be concretized through perceivable pitch-volume differences.' Moving a step further one notes, 'Depiction of conflicts/contrasts is valuable because it creates gravitation centres for the attention of the perceivers.' Finally one puts down a philosophical thought by saying, 'Conflicts/contrasts are as natural as is the duality of nature.' It is no exaggeration to say that the more one moves away from the reviewing phase the less widespread is the disagreement of the protagonists!

What is the reason?

I suggest that the most important reason is the nature of performing arts as a family.

Performing arts are so described (not because they include an action or actual movement but) because they are realized only through a performance. In my opinion performance can be defined as:

A physical manifestation of an intent to concretize a coordinated, pre-determined, psycho-physical and action-oriented design. The emerging design is a direct result of impulses consciously channelized to explore choric, choreographic and histrionic human actions which may or may not be aided by other agencies. The design becomes final subsequent to the audience contribution mode in accordance with the relevant norms established in the culture group concerned. The original conception of the design frequently undergoes substantial and qualitative changes on account of audience participation.

On this background it would become clear that dance, drama and music need to be performed to gain identity as dance, drama or music. In the present context it is important to note that initiators of a performance-experience employ numerous communicative channels to reach the receivers through non-verbal expressions such as movement, gestures, tonal patterns, voice-qualities etc.

A reviewer in performing arts has, therefore, to operate in a frame-work which makes complex and qualitatively rich demands on sensibility. Unless he has acquired a composite sensibility the reviewer finds it difficult to receive or even to feel the varied signals put out by a performance. On most occasions he is well-versed only in the linguistic and literary aspect of drama. He often misses the potency of the non-verbal to reinforce, contradict or cancel the messages conveyed through the verbal channels. Therefore, he (blissfully!) continues to use norms, criteria and strategies of the established or the reigning school/s of literary criticism. He attends to style and not so much to diction, to characterization and not to role-creation, to scene-construction than to histrionic dynamics and finally to sequentially construable effect than to a simultaneity of an ambiguous impact. For a reviewer the immediate provocation is of course a performance. And yet, what he writes is so text-bound and text-inferred that his physical attendance could easily be described as a formal and a courteous gesture! Even a cursory word-count of the reviews rolling out would prove the reviewer's habitual overreliance on the verbal, the verbalized and verbalization. The supremacy of the word-content at the cost of the final and the entire message is certainly to be regarded as damaging.

The main weakness that contributes to the literature-bias of the reviewers is their bookishness. By upbringing (not so much by aptitude) the reviewers succumb early to the pressures of the printed word and thus progressively block sensory communications of other types. As far as performing arts are concerned reviewers, therefore, begin with a double handicap. Firstly, their basic training is merely in one aspect of the many shaping the experience. Secondly, the aspect they are acquainted with too is impoverished due to absence of the associated sensory logic and magic. In the final analysis they are forced to rely on a rather bland version of the actual dramatic experience and pass a judgment! The activity, to say the least, is fruitless.

To review successfully one requires a sensibility able to receive impact of a multi-sensory presentation and make a primary judgment as to its valuableness or otherwise. Every performance can thus be reviewed. At the level of criticism a performance is to be placed in the total context of a particular art-tradition. It necessarily involves comparison, a historical perspective and a decision as to the lasting

value of the performed entity. Art-criticism obviously makes heavier demands and necessitates acquired learning in addition to an aptitude. Consequent to description of criticism noted here, each and every performance will not be a fit subject for criticism. Aesthetic appreciation highlights the wide setting of the totality of aesthetic experiences enjoyed by human beings. More than one art comes into consideration and the criteria acquires complexity and subtlety.

Finally, experiences move away from performances to the maximum at the meta-aesthetic level. Other non-art areas of life come into reckoning. Criteria applied at the four levels vary and display allegiances to different disciplines.

To enter into the performing tradition, however inglorious the entry might be, is to ensure first-hand experience not otherwise available through the verbal channels. Grace of movement, suggestivity of a gesture, depth of tone and such other dramatic manifestations and their language is understood better by doing things. One may do them badly but even then it accomplishes a critical gain!
