

Training In Performing Arts:

Dramatics

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India enjoys a durable tradition in the three major performing arts, namely dance, drama and music. However, for a variety of reasons only dance and music can claim to have traditional models for training performers. Training and related issues have, therefore, posed some problems in dramatics.

A number of attempts have been made to meet the need with varying degree of success. The NCPA under its TDC project conducted a series of three workshops on Voice and Speech, Set Design and Light Design respectively. Holding workshops merely underscored the necessity of attending to the training aspect of dramatics.

All training models (to follow an ancient lead) are expected to deal with three basic phenomena: of upadesa, abhyasa and prayoga. In rough interpretation, the terms would refer to imparting of knowledge, practicing or self-studying that which is imparted, and finally a performance of what is learnt.

In the contemporary training in dramatics, are these taken into account? And if so, to what extent? Could it be said that in absence of a traditional training model, the very process of training in dramatics has suffered in terms of efficacy and relevance?

For all practical purposes it may be argued that a model did emerge during the British period when regions such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal, Karnataka etc, saw the rise of professional drama companies/troupes. Scores of biographies of theatre-personalities of the period reveal the nature of the emerging training-model. Some characteristics need to be stated, though in brief.

Firstly, it seems that two types of persons were recruited: those bitten by the bug of acting and those who were reportedly useless for any other worthwhile occupation!

Secondly, boys were recruited often at a very early age to be trained, initially for the female roles. They were shifted to male leads after coming of age and were

continued in the profession if found suitable. However, there are instances of direct recruitment of good-looking and good-voiced male actors for the required male-female roles in exceptional cases.

Thirdly, the boys' education was comprehensive. Diet, exercise, dance, music and literature were the chief components. Time-tables were laid down and strictly adhered to. Punctuality, hard work and obedience were the key words.

Fourthly, the boys' aptitude was finally tested in actual performances. All the boys were involved in actual performances and those who made a mark were taken up for intensive and specialized training in acting. Memorizing and imitating were regarded important as strategies.

Training in other aspects of theatre did not form a part of the training model followed by the companies/ troupes.

Things started changing because of the new education, 'English Learning' as it was often described. The adequacy of the established model was questioned. Realism and naturalism had acquired significance on account of the new education. As a consequence, the prevailing performing model was viewed with dissatisfaction. More methodical training was deemed necessary to meet the demands of the new sensibility. Also a more professional approach was advocated towards all departments of theatre. By the beginning of the present century, courses were prepared and a need to create institutes for imparting training in dramatics was repeatedly voiced in many quarters. It is of interest to note that the demand for a new approach towards performing arts was a part of the nationalist outlook that characterized all activities of the newly educated.

This is not the place to go into the details of the curricula etc. However, features that distinguished the new model from the not-so-new one are indicators of the quality changes demanded and hence worth a look.

1. The new model laid stress on the academic aspect of theatre. Hence theatre-history, introduction to Indian masterpieces etc. were incorporated in the study-plans outlined.
2. Great stress was laid on the correctness of speech. In fact, it was pointed out frequently that the lack of academic education of workers in theatre was generally responsible for the low quality of content as well as expression in performances.

3. In contrast to the conventional training model, the new one did not remain confined to acting. The importance of other theatre-departments was recognized.

However, by 1931, the older companies had become a spent force. No other agencies were keen to finance the training aspect of theatre. As a consequence attempts at institutionalizing dramatic training received a setback.

What followed is symptomatic of the miniaturizing, shortening forces that have characterized the contemporary scene. Short-term training camps covering a very wide ground came into vogue. However, they were directed at amateurs and the other sympathy groups constituting college-students, school children and people interested in culture etc. These training programmes were highly academic in orientation. They were also sponsored by government or non-government agencies interested in cultural activities. In other words, those engaged in the dramatic profession were no longer initiating the aspect of training. They were at least not promoting it directly. Such training camps, with a more pronounced bias of actual performance, soon came to be described as workshops. They gained a wide currency. It is symptomatic that they continued to disregard the technical aspects of theatre such as light, set, costume, make-up. It was obvious that the concentration was on 'acting'. As things stand today, workshops are treated as practical and viable substitutes for long term and institutionalized training in dramatics. Is it advisable to do so? Granted that the trainee-material is better equipped in the general sense of the term. The trainees are also better educated. They have a wider awareness of culture, arts etc. and their grasp is above average.

However, this cannot be a substitute for their lack of background training in the basic aspects of theatre such as projection, movement, designing, recording etc.! In all creative work there is a fair amount of preparatory and repetitive activity. It is no use trying to avoid it. Directors and trainees alike seem to consider the short-term workshop as escape routes from the demanding processes in training.

The situation is further complicated when performers are sought to be involved in training. Associating 'real' performers in actual training is in fact a corrective measure to be adopted with greater enthusiasm. On account of their first-hand experience in 'making' theatre, performers are able to bestow content on otherwise empty verbalizations. Their theorization is less likely to suffer from academic anemia! And yet our performers compound problems encountered in training; chiefly because the contemporary Indian performers are perhaps the least well-read among artists in

general! Knowledge of the regional traditions, awareness of the ancient heritage, consciousness of the modern non-Indian traditions can hardly be expected of them. (They also seem to equate the non-Indian with the Anglo-American!) Indian performing artists and craftsmen appear to question the very necessity of going beyond a particular performance they have in hand. As creative artists they evince abundant insights that have a direct relevance to the performing tradition. But instead of connecting insights with linking ideas they remain content with weak generalizations. Their entire expositions revolve around personal (and at the most individual) experiences in need of placement in a continuing tradition. Flashes are a poor alternative for a framework.

The dilemma is that a sound training in performing arts could result only if a generous contribution is made to it by performers, but that the contribution is to meet certain conditions! Performers should cease to be a part of an assignment culture sweeping over the land. They must pause, try to go beyond personal achievements and inculcate in themselves a greater sense of history. There was a time in India when performers theorized about their respective arts and did not allow mere verbalizers to distort the performing truth. To achieve the feat again would, however, mean educating ourselves!
