

Actors and Performing Entertainers

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For all practical purposes actors are the main initiators of a dramatic experience. Playwrights, directors and audience have their own contributions to make, but with less immediate intensities. The actor's influence over dramatization is greater because in all performing arts it is the performer who has the final say. Performing arts are highly distinguished by the freedom they afford to the performers to change the original and structural orientation of a work. For example, a particular play might finally turn out to be a director's or an actor's play irrespective of the original intention. (An audience's play is, to date, a partially realized fact.)

In a majority of cases, the isms and philosophies of theatre owe their origin and development to such changes in the original orientation. Coming back to the initiators it is repeatedly felt that actors can make or mar a play. Gordon Craig sought to create a director's theatre by relying on masks to literally efface an actor!

One may ask: What is in the actor's make-up which enables him to change the original design? Briefly stated, actors would seem to achieve the feat by reinforcing the inbuilt tendencies of the original play beyond expectations. They may also explore lines of development which remain underdeveloped in the pre-performance phase. An able actor improvises extensively. His exploitation of the nonverbal channels of communication introduces, as it were, unheard notes. To him every performance is a new challenge as well as an opportunity.

The reason is that the present-day actor represents a peak in the evolution of a histrionic institution. He is the summation of many functions associated with different kinds of performers who share certain common characteristics. Actors in fact, stand out as the epitomes of assimilation. Many contemporary actors would be well advised to identify and develop skills absorbed by their vocation during the course of history. They might then become more effective agents in the dramatization processes. The directors too, will benefit from the exercise as it would enable them to handle the varied expressive channels at their disposal purposefully. What are the diverse skills suggested?

Certain reportive definitions might help the discussion. An actor is a person who acts as on the stage, in television, in a motion picture etc. A related term, acting means any performance, especially of a part in a play. Interestingly, the term has also come to mean 'make a pretense or simulate'. To act is to play the part or impersonate in drama. Action refers to the use of gesture or attitude represented to express passion or sentiment. It also indicates a series of connected events on which the interest of the audience, reader etc. depends. All these terms form a family and the Adam is agere (Latin) 'to do'!

The collective thrust of the terms clearly indicate the actor's responsibilities. They have to do something actually from a stage for others. 'Doing' involves pretense or simulation of something which otherwise would not exist in a particular place, time and manner. Further, an attainment of effect through acceleration or special arrangement of events is the ultimate goal. It is at this point that a little historical thinking becomes relevant. A look back in reflection reveals that a variety of performers precede the modern actor. The earlier performers isolated and perfected a range of skills which the modern actor is in a position to employ and exploit. As the actor's predecessors, jongleurs, (the wandering singers and storytellers) goliards, (the makers of satirical and ribald songs) would come to mind. Minstrels, who sang and recited poetry to the accompaniment of the harp;/: mummers, the mask-users;/: and acrobats, the skilled practitioners of balance and agility; also carried on the same task. The Indian scene is expectedly varied on account of the predominant oral tradition. While a mere doer is described as kari or karak, a stage-performer is usually called abhineta, one who does or rather carries out abhinaya. Abhinaya, though customarily translated as acting, enjoys a much wider connotation than the latter term. Abhinaya is defined as imitation of reality in four ways: through movements, vocalizations, external use of costumes and internal manifestations such as perspiration, body-tremor etc. The performing tradition related to stage-drama is brought out by terms in Sanskrit and other sources and agencies detected all over the country.

The two fundamental terms in this respect are rangajeevak or rangajeev. They apply to a person making a living through performances on stage, in theatre, playhouse, arena or any place of public amusement. Obviously many kinds of performers are subsumed under the two broad class-names. Brief descriptions of some of the specialist performers would make the relationship clearer:

Charana: Singers of praise-songs. They were also known for their dancing prowess and capacity to compose poems/ songs extempore.

Nata: Initially reputed for their capacity to assume different guises, the natas came to be identified as expert narrators in the times of Patanjali (200 B.C.). In contemporary Rajasthan, a caste of professional acrobats is called nata. However, in other Indian languages, the term also denotes actors, professional singers/dancers. It is instructive to remember that the word is often traced to the root meaning 'to dance' indicating thereby an abundance of graceful and controlled movements in the early dramatic presentations.

Kushi-lava: Ballad-singers. Apparently they specialized in composing verses to incorporate news as well as stories. Musical accompaniment on vina, a string instrument, formed an important feature in their presentations.

Bhaat: Chiefly keepers and singers of genealogy, they were capable of extempore compositions and expressed in their versifications fearless attitude to the patrons.

What has been suggested so far can now be put forward as a hypothesis. It is felt that the present-day actors exemplify an institution of an inclusive character. It has incorporated in itself performing solutions found by other agencies which flourished in the by-gone ages as components of the cultural mainstream. The performing solutions were chiefly related to skills, techniques and the stylistic formulae employed to imitate, narrate and finally represent the mundane as well as the metaphysical content. To this end the performers explored the avenues of language, music, dance, movement, gesture, costume and such other appeals to sensory and perceptive capacities of the concerned human groups.

Stage-actors came to be regarded as the dominant entertainers on account of the unprecedented cultural confrontation which characterized the nineteenth century India. In the normal course of evolution, actors would have combined, assimilated and used the performing strategies of the earlier entertainers. However, they preferred to be swayed by isms, styles and techniques that followed dictates of an alien logic. In the process, the native entertainers were forced to assume secondary roles especially in the folk category. In the course of about 150 years, however, our stage-actors and directors are seen to make a bee-line for the folk-ways! What is the reason?

Perhaps the procedure is an instance of self-correctives applied by a community of performers in need of a new synthesis. In this case recourse to folk forms would be interpreted as a back-stepping in search of original components. The dependence on the native traditions may also be taken as an open admission that the practiced drama-package is found to be a cultural mistake and hence the need of a

thorough dismantling is felt before a new, Indian identity is attempted. In other words, our directors seem to have undertaken a cultural penance in disowning the naturalistic drama! Will they succeed? They may, if they and the actors acquaint themselves with the perspective of a long tradition of performing entertainers. Failing to do so would mean abnegation of responsibility on the part of the directors and nostalgic attempts of the urbanized actors to become 'folks' on ad hoc basis!
