

Discussion or Dialogue

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Playwrights and directors often seem to disagree on one particular issue: the scope afforded to verbalization in dramatic performances. Directors tend to cut and prune the text, the aim being to make it more dramatic. Playwrights, on the other hand, would like to retain what they have written or modify it only to a limited extent. The director's line of argument is that everything cannot be and need not be said in a staged performance! Recourse to words is only one of the dramatist's ways of dealing with a situation of dramatic potentiality, it is pointed out. Further, it is maintained that a good play script will always leave room for the actor's abhinaya and the variegated contributions of lighting, costumes, set-design and makeup towards the final significance. A composite art such as drama becomes so because of a content which cannot be conveyed through any single constituent element operating on its own. Therefore, to aim at communicating a composite significance and yet to over rely on verbalization is self-defeating. In fact, the more we realise the efficacy of non-verbal communication, the more potent would be the use of the verbal! One of the major contemporary truths is that the improved technology and the related techniques of application demand a judicious use of all dramatic constituents, including language.

It would be obviously difficult to imagine objections to the position stated earlier. However, some reservations need to be expressed.

For example, it is pointed out that through the ages drama has aimed at portrayal of a more and more complete reality. Reality can hardly be described as 'dramatic' through and through! Eliot once drew attention to the fact that every line of a poem need not be and cannot be poetic! No use of language can insist on the meaningfulness of each and every word employed! In other words, there is a place, a role, for redundancy. Repetition to avoid error in conveying messages is an essential tool and the 'non-dramatic' verbalizations often carry out a similar function. Therefore, all verbalizations should not be made dramatic in the interests of an overall dramatic quality.

Yet another objection to the directorial bias in favour of the non-verbal is pitched at a more conceptual level. The battle is here newly joined because of the

concept of commitment that is gaining ground. It is instructive to remember that prior to independence the theatre activity often acquired an agit-prop orientation on account of a similar view of theatre. The primary aim to banish foreign rulers and gain socio-political independence, was accompanied by a concern for social reforms. As is to be expected, the process has continued. What is more important in the present context is to note that attempts to create/run 'theatre of commitment' invariably make the protagonists aware of the need of a clear statement of ideas. Now ideas are not mere cerebral events! They are forces which make human actions possible. If the actions are to be 'good' (and the sense of commitment is obviously a manifestation of that ethical value), they are to be identified accordingly. A judgement of value can hardly be formulated unless ideas get the attention they deserve.

The essential contribution of ideas having been established, the next step is to consider the modality of their appearance in drama. Because of their nature it is necessary that ideas are discussed. Every idea is a concerted effort to construct a model from the obtained/obtainable facts. Facts are to be examined as to their suitability or otherwise for the model concerned. To discuss is to examine, investigate and decide by argument. It is instructive to know that etymologically the term 'discuss' reveals its connections with acts of dashing something to pieces, a thorough taking apart! Obviously, in order to understand and resolve into a better arrangement; analysis, dismantling and such other processes are inevitable. It is necessary to reduce the relevant facts into a model to make them comprehensible. In absence of a model, facts remain isolated entities. In sum, discussion can hardly be avoided where ideas are at the centre to the stage. As a consequence, ideas have to be at the centre if and when commitment, or a similar, potent, centrifugal motivation is in operation. In other words discussion plays cannot be considered to be an outdated genre which has served its artistic purpose. The contemporary directorial dismay at an explanatory use of language does not seem to be defensible in all cases, because there has to be a discussion for a kind of theatric experience with a pronounced social purpose.

However, a further clarification may be required. Granting that ideas have a place in theatre, accepting that ideas cannot be brought into being without discussions, a question as to the contemporary stageability of ideas/discussion may be raised. Is it possible to assume that the prevailing pattern of theatric behaviour can clothe ideas with the right kind and proportion of physicality so essential for a performance? After all, discussion is, by definition, a free play of nuances and, therefore, the resultant verbal sophistication must be matched by abhinaya of all types if the discussion is to become adequately concrete for a dramatic performance. In other words, subtleties in

costume, make-up etc. also need to play a major role if the discussion-plays are to win a dramatic acceptance. Is our theatre tuned to these demands? The question gains legitimacy because in general our stagecraft is unvaryingly and mechanically controlled by the philosophy of realism. In addition, our interpretation of realism is tethered to the concept of authenticity of facts than that of the experience derived from them. Impressive rather than an expressive use of the non-verbal seems to be the rule! Under the circumstances, it seems incongruous to have discussion-plays costumed, lit, made-up etc. with a grosser kind of realism. It may further be asked: Do we have today a language which does justice to the complexities that mark a progress of ideas? Ideas take roots, engage in duels and finally register a spiral movement. The 'spectacle' asks for feats of linguistic sensitivity and craftsmanship. Unfortunately, contemporary writing can hardly be singled out for its linguistic accomplishments! Hence, an embarrassing question crops up: Are we avoiding discussion-plays because our linguistic sources have run dry? Is our accent on the non-verbal an act of making virtue out of necessity? Is our reliance on and encouragement of the folk-idiom an act of the urban confession of having lost a language capable of withstanding the relentless onslaught of mass-media functioning as levellers which flatten into mediocrity? Many such questions need to be discussed!
