

Documenting a performance

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An idea often acquires clarity when significant or critical terms related to it are translated. The lesson was re-learned with benefit recently when two terms, archiving and documentation, were being discussed for the specific purpose of documenting a particular dramatic performance. A general conceptual understanding combined with the challenge of a specific case always provides fresh insights into processes involved. A few truths perceived are noted.

Of the two related processes, archiving obviously succeeds documentation, at least when the documented subject has not already been relegated to history! Objects, personalities or processes are documented first and then archived. To archive is to store systematically and ensure retrieval. Yet all that can be stored systematically does not ipso facto become worthy of archiving. This is because archival material (in addition to being storable and retrievable) needs to have the potentiality to generate cultural data. Wrong notions on this count would force an archivist to accept anything and everything - thus losing in the name action!

The next step is that of documentation. When archival material is recorded through a process which ensures 'translation' of the maximum number of its important characteristics, the operation is described as documentation. In the present context, translation means conversion of the experience into audio-visual modalities irrespective of the original stimuli and their nature. Till the recent past, writing and printing have been the favourite documenting media on account of the advanced stage of their development and familiarity which the documenting fraternity had developed with them. This is the reason why the term 'to document' is being translated (and often understood) as दस्तावेज तैयार करना.

It is a common knowledge that the pervasive, efficient and also user-friendly technologies in photographic, audio and video recording have today resulted into a certain broadening of the scope of documentation. To that extent the exclusive (and also a little naive) reliance on writing and the written has decreased. However, whatever may be the term selected to describe the operation, all documentation would aim at

creating a flexible reference-base. The term should therefore be translated (and understood) as संदर्भ साहित्य निर्माण.

A realization should follow as a corollary. In a perceivable similarity with literary- and art-criticism, documentation also avoids recreation of the original experience. Documentation is a sympathetic and primary analysis of an experience undertaken for conversion (through recording and 'translating' processes) into audio-video printed stimuli. Objects, personalities and processes are documented in this manner to be archived later. Documentation is therefore expected to create a comprehensive base for additional and future creative/critical work with reference to the documented entity. Cultural documentation of the kind discussed so far cannot be restricted to performing arts and in fact to arts as such. Various sensory fields and the data supplied by them, crafts, behaviour patterns with an inlay of value-experience - all would qualify for being documented. The origins of the documented entities would demand change in approach to the process even though all documentation ends up in audio-visual-video-printed modalities. With this qualifying clause in mind, a procedure for documenting a dramatic performance is suggested below. Suitable modifications can of course be introduced according to requirements.

To put it briefly, every performance is characterized by antecedent, contemporaneous and subsequent phases. A comprehensive documentation base is created when these three phases are recorded. For a particular dramatic performance following items would suggest details to be taken into consideration.

- 1) Script (author's version). The original text is to be procured in case of an adapted/translated version.
- 2) Author's and director's views on the play as well as the dramatic possibilities.
- 3) Participants' responses to the script prior to the commencement of rehearsals (participants would include author, director, designers in make-up, costumes, set, lighting and music and back-stage workers).
- 4) Director's rehearsal schedule, participant's periodic notes, written statements etc.
- 5) Noting on changes made by the director/author during the rehearsals from time to time and the rationale prompting them.
- 6) Censor certificate, publicity-material (including posters, hand-outs etc.) and photographic coverage of the rehearsals.
- 7) Sketches, costume-plates, perspective drawings, scores etc. prepared by the technical experts; their interpretation of the play-text and strategies formulated to meet the needs are also to be recorded.
- 8) Director's stage script.

- 9) Performance-details (place, time, date, attendance, gate-receipts, special events if any). Of importance is the photographic coverage of sets, costumes etc. prior to and during the performance. Audience responses while the performance is in progress also to be included.
- 10) Post-performance responses of the audience from various strata of the society Participants' comments to bring out their assessment of the gap between the proposed and the actual performance.
- 11) Video-recording of the entire performance.

Obviously it is a tall order to achieve the tasks as indicated. Moreover the danger of carrying them out mechanically always remains around the corner, especially in case of interviews! It is also difficult for the participants to be candid and clear in the analysis of their own responses particularly when the performance is taking shape through discussions, rehearsals etc. The abundant use of cliché-descriptions, routine references to aleatory elements and too ready a recourse to raising the bogey of technical problems in presentation would have to be guarded against! Things are also bound to be problematic in the matter of audience-research. Unfortunately there are no foolproof methods of selecting representative auditors. However, it is desirable that persons not actually and professionally involved with theatre and drama-making are chosen for the post-performance recording of responses etc. This seems to be the best way to get an idea of the proportion and quality of the dramatic content communicated to the lay audience directly through the actual performance (and less through write-ups, explanations, publicity-events etc.)

The most disturbing aspect of the whole enterprise is the repeated appearance of some haunting questions.

First, each performance is bound to be different at least in some respects. Under the circumstances is every performance to be documented?

Secondly, how far can documentation go as far as the quality-aspect of the total experience of a performance is concerned?

Thirdly, documentation being a primary analysis in itself, is it not essential that documenting categories have a direct relationship with the expression-category analyzed? In that case is the format outlined above adequate?

Some other time these and such other issues need to be tackled.