

The 'Felt' Space in Theatre

Ashok Da Ranade

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Theatre in India was a tight fastening together of dance, drama and music for long periods. Performances of the three arts could hardly be separated. It is natural that they had often the same performing space. Efforts to trace independent histories of dance, drama and music take the researchers to the same theoretical texts, nurturing mythologies and aesthetic ideologies because the triad was a unified entity. In the modern period the vogue of the proscenium deserves a special mention because it meant a re-channelising of the performing impulse into three separate tributaries (even though the process had begun earlier). Successive changes in performing spaces contributed towards a substantial alteration in the character of compositeness. A better understanding of performing spaces leads to a better understanding of theatre as a developing, evolving reality.

Theatre-space relationship requires to be examined ideally in the historical, architectural as well as regional perspectives, a task which demands combined attention of many experts. However, analysis can be initiated by focussing on spatial experiences offered, associated traditionally with specific and different kinds of theatre-experiences. In India five streams of theatric expression flow side by side. They seem to enjoy longevity and wide geographic distribution. The streams represent basic moulds of theatric experiences and hence can be legitimately described as theatre-categories. They are primitive, folk, devotional, art and popular. Each category is endowed with numerous genres and the scene becomes more densely populated if 'forms' developed in various linguistic and literary traditions are taken into consideration. It is however easier to discuss performances representative of categories and illustrative of spatio-theatric relationships.

Primitive Theatre (Example: Acrobat)

The very nature of performances in the primitive category precludes use of standardized spaces. Adequate open space seems to be the only requirement on most of the occasions, for example, for acrobats! In case a performance is arranged by/for a

patron, the acrobats may face him/them at predictable high points of a performance but for all practical purposes the performing space is open i.e., not directed or bounded by a precise and invariable location of entry and exit-points. The flexibility as well as the non-formal quality of the performing space in operation is easily noticeable. This same property allows receivers to move forward/backward in response to moments of suspense, excitement and wonder generated by the performers. Performers in the category often draw a line to mark areas 'activated' for the duration of the performance. Such actions/procedures together with the performing items create performing spaces out of areas which would have otherwise remained mere physical entities.

A very important feature of acrobat's achievement relates to one specific effect, produced by his skills. An acrobat's feats apparently affect spatial perceptions of his spectators. On account of his performances the acrobat seems to 'free' the performed space. Bodylines of the performers and outlines of spaces 'containing' their performances become blurred. In the final analysis, performing spaces, manipulated by performers, can be said to be subjected to temporary expansions or contractions. The main devices employed to attain these effects are: speeding of action, diversion of attention, deliberate blunting of selected sensory perceptions and the general arousal of receptivity through evocative use of language, references to religion etc. As a cumulative result of performer's initiative and receiver's contribution, the atmosphere becomes 'charged' with a touch of supernatural. The charged atmosphere influences exploration as well as perception of the performing space.

Folk Theatre (Example: Bharud)

The composite character, accent on collectivity, mixed motivation and other such features of folk theatre indicate a more deliberate use of the performing space compared to the primitive. The performing space is not only chosen but it is also 'arranged' to a great extent. Entry, exit points, patron's seat, audience location are all determined more consciously. Even though there is no 'standard' performing space, the selected space is expected to satisfy criteria more formal in nature and also expressed more intentionally than in the primitive theatre. Manipulation of space is aided in folk theatre by body-movements and gestures which are not entirely dependent on speed or the special wonder-producing skills but on suggestivity and symbolism. The performing space in the folk dramas is expectably full of 'created' locations. River-banks, rivers, mountains, houses, roads, palaces et al are created at will, the power rests with characters to begin with and finally with the actor. In other words, assumption of a

role or representation of a character becomes a force (that being the essence of theatre). However the folk element brings in significantly things more mundane or earthly in nature. Space-management in folk dramas is distinguished by the spirit of casualness while that in primitive theatre is marked by a charged quality. Space is subjected to manipulation for effect in both the categories but in differing modes and also to attain different aims.

Devotional Theatre (Example: Naradiya Keertan)

Naradiya Keertan, Harikatha (in vogue in Western India) and other similar forms are known for their intermittent use of representational strategies, composite nature (i.e., their inclusion of music, dance, drama etc. in the performance-format), solo modality and distinctive use of narrative techniques. These features are to some extent connected causally with the formalized management of space in a keertan-performance.

The Keertan-performance is very often, directed towards a deity and/ or a patron. Both the performer and the receiver are placed therefore at definite locations. The performer, during the performance, is invested with a sanctity, he thus assumes a sacred role. In addition, the narration in progress introduces segments where 'roles' are expected to create an impact. The performing set of the keertankar is distributed with definiteness expected of an effect-oriented genre. Spaces allocated also reflect the concern felt for the

a) sustained receptivity of the audience. b) continued linkage between religious feelings and the day-to-day demands of life. c) perceptible 'human' nature of the entire endeavour.

The Proscenium as the Popular Theatre

With the well-entrenched proscenium, the division between performers, audience and the others becomes complete. The separation is accomplished chiefly through allocation of rigidly marked spaces to the three theatric components mentioned earlier. The space division is symptomatic of the near-total passivity of the audience as receivers of experiences initiated by actors to the accompaniment of numerous staging devices. It is noticeable that a majority of theatric ventures described as experimental today are engaged in eliminating the aforesaid space-divisions. The distancing spaces between artists as also those between artists and audiences are felt to be barren or

unproductive. The flow of dramatic impact is weakened by these spaces and hence the near-uniform thrust of the experimentalism in theatre.

Performing theatric spaces can of course be analyzed further, however certain deductions follow from the arguments put down so far:

1) The traditional theatric spaces are not necessarily conducive to performance. For example, they may be cramped, noisy, ill-lit, badly shaped etc. Yet a number of them yield successfully the final result, rang as the performers describe it.

2) Till the vogue of the proscenium stage, the performing set (i.e., the actors, performing-assistants and the audience) was distributed spatially in a manner that compelled the audience to contribute more actively - chiefly through controlled participation and self-focussed attention.

3) Memorization, aesthetic literacy, cultural perspective and widely-accepted procedures of heightening receivers' sensitivity featured more regularly in the traditional performing situation. Their combined action set in motion a compensatory mechanism which integrated the experience of all events, theatric as well as the theatre-related.

4) In the final analysis, performing space or the rangavakasha consists of three kinds of spaces, namely:

a) The space in which the performer initiates the activity (that is the performed space).

b) The space which performers cannot cover unless they convert the initial 'felt' act into impact-oriented, creative and co-ordinated activity (that is the sympathetic space).

c) Spaces adjacent to the two mentioned earlier (that is the influenced space).

5) The modern architectural vision has created specialized spaces i.e., spaces allocated exclusively to music, dance and drama. This has made the issue under discussion a little complex as the modern theatric idiom is inclined to go back to a more composite expression bringing the three together (once again!).

In sum, 'felt' space cannot be entirely explained by 'spatial' discussions in acoustics, architecture, sculpture etc. Performers feel spaces as an all-embracing performing reality which may or may not be equated with conditions conducive to performance. If the concept of 'felt space' is appreciated better our performing spaces would become more than 'efficient'!