

Book Review

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Sangeet Natak, No 107, Sangeet Natak Academy, Mumbai, Jan-Mar 1993)

The Theatre of Yesterday and Tomorrow : Commedia Dell' Arte on the Modern Stage

James Fisher

The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992

408 pages, Price not mentioned

James Fisher's well-documented study is devoted to commedia dell' arte, a theatric genre of mainly Italian origin. The music-dance-drama package identified as commedia assumed a definite form during the 16th century, even though some of the features of commedia are traceable to earlier eras and other traditions. Features such as depiction of stock-characters (e.g. Harlequin), improvisation of dialogues as well as stage business, recourse to typical dramatic situations, conflicts or tangles attained such a stature in the commedia that it became "the rarest of the rarest of theatrical forms-a non-literary theatre that emphasized the skill of the improvising actor" (p.9). Fisher maintains that the original Italian inspiration proved its theatric durability as well as pliability because it moved from country to country and prospered. Further, it attracted most of the modern, new and revolutionary theatre personalities - whether they were playwrights, actors, set-designers or musicians. Finally, Fisher feels that commedia has the inexhaustible capacity to generate creative pulses in theatre irrespective of time or clime. This is the background against which he titles the book 'The Theatre of Yesterday and Tomorrow'.

Fisher goes about his task methodically. The first eight chapters describe how commedia fared in Italy, Spain, England, Russia, eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Germany, France, and the United States. Ten pages at the end argue about the impact commedia made on other aspects of contemporary culture, particularly the fine arts, film and television, literature and music. An extensive bibliography and notes, which follow, complete the story. Though the fifth chapter (dealing with eastern Europe and Scandinavia) is rather thin, the author generally succeeds in bringing out aspects of commedia which proved theatrically liberating in different countries in various degrees.

Fisher's thesis, persuasively put forward, gains considerable support from the view and work of some major figures in theatre from the recent past. Among those who enthusiastically welcomed commedia as a form of great theatric potential are Luigi Pirandello and Eduardo de Filippo (Italy), Jacinto Benavente, Federico Garcia Lorca (Spain), Edward Gordon Craig, Harley Granville Barker (England), Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov and Eugene Vakhtangov (Russia), Max Reinhardt (Germany), and Jacques Copeau (France). Apparently the influence of commedia extended over various departments of theatre. Fisher therefore holds up commedia as an all-embracing philosophy of theatre considered as experience. It may help to summarize why major theatre personalities had high regard for commedia. Pirandello admired the function of masks (p.22), the improvisatory acting playwrights' complete absorption in the quality of the performance and the accent on communication with the audience (p.25), which involved doing play within a play (p.38). He also noted the emphasis on the illusion of the actors' creativity as contrasted with any realistic happening (p.39). Giorgio Strehler viewed commedia as "a unique and marvellous phenomenon: a moment when the actor, having no good texts, had to take the entire responsibility upon himself" (p.43). Dario Fo emphasized the significance of the audience, his involvement with it as an actor, and the audience's engagement in the subject of the play (p.55). Lorca stressed that all of the arts should combine in the art of drama (p.71).

Craig insisted: "I am strongly inclined to think that the theatre of Europe is the Italian theatre" (p.78). He also felt that commedia actors were responsible for "helping Shakespeare, suckling Moliere and creating Goldoni" (p.84). For Meyerhold, commedia "became the central inspiration in his quest for new formulas to combat realism" (p.111). He further believed in the centrality of the actor who combined the skills of the mime, the athlete and the improviser (p.112).

Finally, Reinhardt, who sought to make what he perceived as the original comedic spirit come alive to a modern audience, valued the actor as poet (p.171). Music and light were two unifying forces in his huge "symphonic productions." He was so comprehensively involved that he seemed to usurp the work of the playwright as the actor (p.180)! Brecht's interest in "depersonalizing" actors led him to clowns and clowning and thus indicated his liking of the comedic vein. Further, his working in a sharply caricaturing manner, partly learned from commedia... techniques, was also notable. Copeau urged "each of his actors to find a specific stock character directly inspired by commedia masks, with the intention that each actor would play a basic stereotype" (p.214).

Instances can be easily multiplied, though it is hardly necessary to do so. That so many should think a particular theatric mode so significant testifies to its essential fecundity. Fisher's historical account is both lucid and impressive. However, he is less illuminating when it comes to analysis. For instance, all admirers of commedia have been selective in their assimilation of comedic influences. Expectably, they 'deviated' by giving different weightages to different theatric strategies and components. Their varied cultural backgrounds and individual approaches in a way compelled them to claim some freedom from a free form! These meaningful deviations or modifications needed explanations in this book. Pirandello's stance that the kind of theatricality he was advocating meant an "improvising playwright rather than an improvising actor to realise a comedic spirit" certainly necessitates a discussion. The fact that Pirandello rehearsed for several days in order to improvise on a theme should prompt one to examine the kind of improvisation that he aimed at. The aspects of commedia included in the syllabi for dramatic training at the Bologna Theatre School or Tag Teatro company-usefully or otherwise-also demanded some analysis. One would have wanted to know how the evanescent and nuance filled improvisatory aspects of commedia could be taught without taking away their essential character. It should also be obvious that a playwright's perception of the commedia mode would differ from that of an actor or a set-designer, etc. These different readings of commedia should have been analyzed at some length.

The less impressive impact of commedia on England, or the 18th-century attempts (in France) to revive commedia through recourse to written texts, or Meyerhold's attempt to 'bind' the entire performance with music, call for explanation, analysis, and conceptualization. Unfortunately, these are not offered in Fisher's book.

The reason for the author's weakness in analysing a free form perhaps lies in his failure to attend to two realities of performance. Firstly, in all performances both verbal and non-verbal channels of communication operate, and no form, style, or school of performance would yield its secrets unless both these channels are examined in depth. Secondly, the 'freeness' or otherwise of a form is in relation to the prevalent performing norms of the culture to which the form belongs. Therefore, in discussing a mobile or boundary-transcending mode such as commedia, it is extremely important to explain the causes that lead to deviations contrasted with examples of conformity. Fisher is more keen on finding resemblances than on placing them in the perspective offered by differences. The book should prove absorbing reading for Asian theatre-lovers as they are verily surrounded by free forms.