

Primitive, Folk etc. and the Elite Theatre

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Workers in urban and/or proscenium theatre often turn to primitive/folk or other non-elite theatre-categories in their quest of something new and original. By all accounts there are two major motives in their recourse to such unfamiliar categories. Firstly, there is an irrepressible desire to get free from the spatio-visual shackles imposed by the proscenium arch theatre on movements, composition, set-design and the like. Secondly, there is an urge to enjoy formal liberties by deviating from conventions of the proscenium. It cannot be forgotten that stage-conventions are directly linked to storyline, plot-construction, characterization, dialogue-use and other content-oriented theatric aspects. The two motives combine to prompt theatre-worker's deviation from many accepted norms of the elite theatre. This moving away is deemed primarily to be conducive to a kind of permeating flexibility. This in turn leads to a greater and better theatrical impact. The play, it is argued, is 'liberated' and hence enables both performers and audiences to enjoy a qualitative gain - the goal of all theatric aims, strategies and techniques. Prima facie the intentions behind the category-shift are honourable and yet success eludes - why?

An important reason is that a rather simplistic correspondence is sought between authenticity of the non-elite material and the aesthetic richness of the entire endeavour. It should be remembered that all non-elite material is, by its very nature, highly contextual and as a consequence the very act of presenting diminishes (if not destroys!) its authenticity. Giving non-elite material a context other than its own brings about a critical (and not natural) change in its character. From a living impulse it is turned into a performing element. A change in theatric category introduces art-processes in place of life-procedures. Art-processes are artificial in a good sense while life-procedures are ritualistic with equal validity. No false notion of realism should tempt theatre-workers to accept and follow the chimeric doctrine of authenticity of presentation if material from non-elite categories is taken to the elite. (A reverse flow has other considerations, but this needs a separate discussion.) Instead, attention should be given to the quality of experience obtained - a criterion which makes possible distinctions between art, popular, primitive, folk and devotional theatres. The question

next is: what could be the aim of categorial shift from non-elite to the elite? In brief the target is reconstruction of art-experience normally created by modes and means at the disposal of the elite theatre and not a recreation of folk or primitive theatre. The act could better be described as translation of a performing culture. All merits and demerits associated with translation are bound to be present in this performing venture.

What is translation? Ordinarily it would be an essential, purposeful and deviant transfer or reproduction of a work in a language different from that of its original appearance. In the context of a performing categorial change, how to define translation? I would define it as an intentional, aesthetically oriented and systematic distortion of the original performing model. The distortion is designed to setting up of a parallel, new and intermittently allusive performing structure which accommodates features regarded essential to the original model embedded inevitably in a different cultural milieu. Taking off from the field of telecommunication, the kind of performing distortion under discussion could be taken to suggest a unique process of transmitting original signals selectively in a characteristic non-uniform manner to produce an altered wave-form combining traces of the original signal with recognizable marks of the new. The resulting art /an-experience is enrichingly allusive. How is the feat achieved? The answer is by judiciously bringing together constants and variables from both the categories. In actual operation the question 'what to change/keep unchanged' is answered by a broad distinction between the main and auxiliary channels of expression in the first instance, as also between verbal and non-verbal channels of communication. These four pathways are neither affected in a similar manner nor to the same extent. However, some changes resulting from the categorial shift could be enumerated as common to them.

Firstly, expression would generally be compressed. Secondly, a more deliberate sense of arrangement would control the operations. Thirdly, on the whole an orientation towards impact will prevail, it being a necessary condition of all performing arts. Fourthly (in comparison with the original), the categorically changed presentation will create more distance between initiators and receivers of the experience. Finally, translation of the non-elite into the elite will involve expansion of the thematic palette in an effort to touch levels of the nonrational, symbolic and extreme conditions of human existence otherwise regarded non-dramatic.

Some general strategies can also be listed as helpful. Firstly, indulge in an unusual spatio-temporal distribution and exploration. With an aim to shock audiences out of their habitual, unobserving self-conditioning. Secondly, emphasize the overt, broadly classifiable, stressful and power-projected to 'disturb' audience-sensibilities (in

a multisensory mode if possible). Thirdly, scatter performing suggestions all over to break blind loyalties to logic, non-contradiction and such other regularizing features. Fourthly (while making transition from non-elite to the elite), take care to portray the former as a positive pattern of human behaviour with an enviable capacity to digest extremes of good-bad, beautiful-ugly, reasonable-absurd, human-nonhuman etc. And finally, let there be persuasive as well as a pervasive declaration of faith in ultimate values such as truth, justice, mercy, love and tolerance.
