

# Theatre Theory and Performance



# Theatre Theory and Performance:

*A Critical Interrogation*

By

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The Theatre is two places with two entries, one for the audience and one  
for the actors.

There are two worlds. The people in the dark peer into another world.  
That is illusion. That is why they come.

—Peter Brook, *Threads of Time*, 41



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Chapter One..... Beginnings	1
Chapter Two .....	9
Signs and Semiotics	
Chapter Three .....	15
The Theatrical Text	
Chapter Four.....	25
Theatre and Politics	
Chapter Five .....	43
Performance and Performers	
Chapter Six .....	51
Three Theories of Theatre: Brecht, Artaud, Pinter	
Chapter Seven.....	65
The <i>Bhava-Rasa</i> Theory	
Chapter Eight.....	75
Syncretic Theatre in India	
Chapter Nine.....	83
Postdramatic Theatre	
Bibliography .....	91
Index .....	101





## PREFACE

Both theatre and theories on it have been there for ages. In fact, performance is an integral part of social living. Over the years theorists and practitioners have tried to emulate life – they have tried to include lessons, political thought, social normative thinking and many such in the plays and through the performances. But the purpose of theatre has never been merely aesthetic. Theatre, because of its unique participative nature, has always been a form with an agenda. The agenda has often demanded formal evolution and over the ages we have seen theatre growing into a separate iconic presence with its collaborative signification. This book tries to draw a line from Aristotle to the present day – a line that is not linear but contemplative and perhaps a little whimsical.

The dominance of the play-text and the playwright, particularly in the theorizations of theatre, faded away slowly and the focus slowly fell on the complex meaning-making through a language that is exclusive to theatre alone. Manipulation of this language no longer limits itself on the stage space but attempts to move beyond and include the audience—who becomes reader-participants in the making of the theatrical text—in the creation of the experience.

The role of politics is especially crucial in this meaning-making and this book looks and interrogates most theories from such a perspective. This book tries to prove that at one point the purpose of theatre was to provide warnings—against problematic impulses like ambition and so on—and this remained a function of the state-sponsored theatre. But with the advent of democracy and the modern/postmodern paradigms, theatre began to speak with a different voice. And in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries theatre broke away, at least in some cases and movements, from the traditional and became a major tool in introducing people to a cerebral response to the stage. Theatre was mostly emotional – focusing on the idea of *catharsis*. But in the last one hundred years, such closure has been questioned. It was felt that theatre, like the other forms of art, should disturb, should initiate thinking, rather than give the audience a release from pity and fear. Satisfaction is not what art should give.

Steering clear of theatre-history for the most part, the aim of this book is to raise certain issues. This is not designed to be a textbook of theatre-theory. There are many competent as well as extraordinary books for such study. What interests the present author is the politics of representation

that was there, and is very much here now. The movement of this political element connects the past with the present and certain phases—through certain texts—are dealt with in some analytical detail. This book essentially looks at the agenda of theatre and takes detours to include the classical and contemporary Indian contexts to see how they can be situated in the field of global theatrical innovation. The fact that the theatrical form is changing and the shifts are not yet going towards a definite direction is perhaps the key underlying movement of this book. There is a variety of possibilities and experiments, and it remains to be seen whether theatre will remain traditionally *dramatic* or it will settle into a distinct *postdramatic* form.

This project began as a series of lectures for the M.Phil class at the Department of English, University of Calcutta. However, over the four years that have gone behind this, the project took on a different analytical angle altogether. This was no longer a mere historical survey of theatre-related issues, but certain theoretical issues and new interpretations/angles began to form. Though the lecture structure remains, the project now contains mostly original observations that follow necessary outlining of theories regarding drama, performance and performers. Although this began as a discussion for a particular audience, now this project may interest both students of literature or of theatre and advanced researchers. This project does not claim to be comprehensive but is rather instigation for the inquisitive mind; a mind hoping to generate innovative research or just hoping for some food for thought. This project does not presume to speak for the entire globe, it looks at the European constant and brings in some Indian elements – and tries to posit both in their respective locations, as well as looking at the symbiosis that has been functioning for some time. There is no real movement from one chapter to another, they stand independent. This is not a treatise, but a collection of contemplations on certain issues. Quite deliberately, this book has neither an introduction nor a conclusion reaching a definite point. Theatre is a continuous process, and it is more than presumptuous to hope to find a static inference. This project aims to raise doubts and issues. The reader must do the rest.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My father, Salil Biswas, introduced me to the fact of life called theatre. His own love for the form and stories of his own experience of the stage were probably responsible for my own enthusiasm for it. In his younger days he was an active part of the Bengali theatre scene. He continues to be equally passionate. Our small apartment still overflows with books, journals and magazines, a whole lot of them on theatre. Audio recordings of famous performances (this was the prehistoric age before video recording was common) were regularly played and home is where I was first acquainted with luminaries of Bengali theatre such as Shambhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt. As a teacher of English literature, he established my firm interest in drama. His teaching along with his numerous articles on theatre and drama formed me from a very early time. And it is with my parents that I saw my first performance. But that is not all. Theatre criticism was also something I had experienced from an early age. My entire sensibility—including the capacity of reading politics within any text—was developed because he shared all quite freely, making me and the rest of the family see what is actually what. It is with great pride I can admit that I share both his passion for theatre and for photography. An accomplished translator, his translations continue to inspire my own translations. My mother, Sabita Biswas, has always supported all our passions, even when they often became strenuous vis-à-vis practical affairs of life. Her interests in photography and translation are no less inspiring. Her translations are now being appreciated by a wide audience. She still is the light that keeps all of us *together*. My wife Jaya is my muse. The confession of which she has always taken with amusement! She is a remarkable woman, a great photographer and an equally great teacher of Mathematics; and it is one of the great mysteries of the world how she has kept on tolerating me all these years. My sister Samata has always been a great support. Through her I have often found a semblance of normalcy in this insane world (and not only because of her training in psychology).

My teachers in College and in University have left a lasting impression on me. But it is Professor Dipendu Chakrabarti who shaped my research skills and taught me how to see and understand that which is often hidden, and that which is hidden in plain sight. Theatre is his passion. And it is my great fortune that I could borrow from this acutely analytical mind. His wisdom, his patience with me, his resilience in the face of incredible

adversity, have taught me not only how to tackle the academic side of life, but how to be a man of great positivity. Without him I would be much less than the little that I am.

My entire literary sensibility was formed by a number of legendary teachers. Professor Kajal Sengupta and Professor Kalidas Bose are no longer with us; from them I learnt how to love literature keenly. We learnt what scholarship was from Professor Arun Kumar Dasgupta. Professor Jayati Gupta, Professor Bhaswati Chakraborty, Professor Krishna Sen, Professor Jharna Sanyal, Professor Sanjukta Dasgupta, Professor Tapati Gupta introduced us to a world of possibilities, a world devoid of the usual reverence, a world which made us question everything. And I must mention my friends (and it is my good fortune that most of my colleagues also have become very close friends) who have been instrumental in shaping me. Without their support and love I would have been nothing.

At the beginning of my teaching career I met Sri Ratan Das. It is almost entirely from him that I had my early experience of the actual craft of theatre. He is now a major part of the Bengali theatrical scene, though he remains mostly offstage, and he still is someone from whom I learn a lot. Sri Amitava Dutta (and his amazing theatre company *Ganakrishti*) has been another influence. I have learnt much about the process from them. And my students have been perhaps the most significant influence upon me, challenging me to no end, and forcing me to look deeper into the life of theatrical things. Teaching is performance. And every lecture opens up a new vista and brings new insights into how collaborative/communicative performance can be. I must mention the 'little' magazine *Nillohit*. Sri Basab Dasgupta, Sri Subhankar Guha, Sri Sudip Das and Sri Sajal Ghosh were the creators of the magazine in its current form and it was under their watchful eyes that I slowly gathered the confidence of taking my writing to the public.

Of course, any work on theatre originating from this part of the world must owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Ananda Lal. My interactions with this great mind have mostly been through his superlative work. I need to thank him for teaching me a number of things regarding performance. I have been extremely fortunate to have as my mentors great minds such as Professor Chinmoy Guha. His support and his faith in me has been a guiding light. I can never repay him for the many opportunities he has gifted me with. However, the person who has been inspirational, in much of my academic career, and particularly as far as this book is concerned, is Dr. Sinjini Bandyopadhyay. It is she who had put me in the lions' den (also known as the University of Calcutta's M.Phil class) where I could explore and exchange most of the ideas that find space in this book. This

book owes its genesis to Dr. Bandyopadhyay. I must also thank Mr. Thakurdas Jana, who painstakingly combed the text and made it readable. I can never fully express my gratitude to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for accepting the manuscript. It is quite an amazing feeling to be associated with such an institution. And I must express my sincerest gratitude to Victoria Carruthers for bearing with me and guiding me through numerous issues that the manuscript had originally contained. I must also mention Sophie Edminson and Amanda Millar as they were absolutely integral to the creation of the book. The prepress team has also done a tremendous job. It is a privilege to be a part of such a wonderful team. There are many who remain unmentioned here, even though they have contributed much to this book, I offer to them my sincerest thanks.

Siddhartha Biswas  
Kolkata  
2017



# CHAPTER ONE

## BEGINNINGS

The major issue in going back to the beginning of theatre is the absence of written texts dealing with early drama, and the text of the plays themselves. The oft-called father of history, Herodotus, only has two descriptions of events that seem to present instances of theatre.<sup>1</sup> It is not before ancient Greece that we have tangible proof of theatre and theatrical organization. In fact Aristotle's writings are now accepted as hard evidence, even though they themselves were more a survey than anything else. But of course, he was nearest to the actuality and therefore can be reasonably trusted.

The gentleman who is responsible for the modern and so-called *scientific* research into ancient western theatre is Sir James Frazer. His *The Golden Bough* remains a major factor in our understanding of early ideation. His anthropological excursions into early human culture all over the world include an amazing amount of data. In fact, theatre was not his primary point of concern, but since early rituals and early drama are so much interwoven, *The Golden Bough* remains a vital element in any discussion on theatre. There are complaints against Frazer, and they are not pointless. For one thing, he equated technological progress with civilization and depended upon the easy equation between early and primitive. Also objectionable is his casual, and very Occidental, dismissal of dark skin as a sign of lack of civilization. His point of view was very orthodox and he compared all only with the yardstick of his contemporary European culture, and that too from a typical positivist outlook.

So, following positivistic principles and the dictum of evolutionary biology that species tend generally to evolve slowly from one type to another by proceeding through a series of transitional forms, those studying the religion and rituals of "primitive" peoples, which they presumed served as the forerunners of theatre, expected to see in them

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Damen, "The Origins of Theatre and Drama." *Classical Drama and Society*. 2012. Web. 30 September 2016.

<<http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/021origins.htm>>.

evidence of the state of early Western civilization and thus not only what early Greek culture and theatre looked like but the pattern of gradual evolution followed by all human societies. Of course, in the end they did not find those transitional forms nor, in fact, any compelling evidence for such an evolution.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, this kind of observation and the classification of folk/tribal art as the remnants of a primitive era are fairly objectionable. The fact that folk-theatre is also an evolved form has been concretely theorized by many a sane mind. Tom Pettitt, of the University of Southern Denmark, writes,

The place and significance conventionally attributed to folk drama in theatre history stem directly from this theory of its origins. Since the mummies' plays recorded in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries retain the fundamental structure of a pre-Christian ritual, something similar must have existed through the intervening centuries, even if "all unbeknown and hidden-like midst of the folk themselves." The folk plays preserve a proto-dramatic activity antedating the emergence of drama-proper in the Middle Ages, and so belong at the beginning of the story, but as degenerate forms of ritual rather than drama-proper they could have had only indirect significance: a possible influence on theatre history rather than a part of it.<sup>2</sup>

Such feeling is shared by many critics of our time. What they object to, and quite rightly as this writer would say, is the complete absence of appreciation for those forms for their own aesthetic excellence. They become merely the evidence and do not find any position in the greater canon as texts which can stand by themselves, or forms that can be accepted as different kinds of theatre.

From Frazer came the fascination with myth. This became relevant as early classical drama is almost entirely based on contemporary mythology. One of the major voices presenting myth as a social organ was Bronislaw Malinowski. According to him, myth was the theory/rationale acquired to explain the workings of different phenomena including those of nature and this was sanctioned and supported by social institutions. Of course, one may comment that such sanction always included certain politics, but that is not the present contention. Malinowski wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> Damen, 'The Origins of Western Theatre'.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Pettitt, "When the Golden Bough Breaks: Folk Drama and the Theatre Historian." *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. 2005. Web. 30 September 2016. <<http://ojs.ub.gu.se/ojs/index.php/njes/article/view/52>>.



Mythology, the sacred lore of the tribe, is, as we shall see, a powerful means of assisting primitive man, of allowing him to make the two ends of his cultural patrimony meet. We shall see, moreover, that the immense services to primitive culture performed by myth are done in connection with religious ritual, moral influence, and sociological principle.<sup>1</sup>

It was mainly the followers of Malinowski who applied his theories to theatre. They were called *functionalists* because, according to them, myth was a tool to justify the actions of the rulers. There is the idea that such interpretations are formed by the world the critics live in, and do not necessarily reflect the world of the past. Of course, there is a faction that thinks that just because politics shapes, all actions of today, one cannot say for certain that it was the same way thousands of years ago. They often argue that most classical plays were *aetiological* or seeking causal explanations looking at the actions of agents or agency; but even the explanatory components contained in them a factor of power-establishment.

Claude Lévi-Strauss spoke against Malinowski's functionalist approach, saying that a people cannot be defined merely by the basic needs of life.<sup>2</sup> There are other instincts at play. He promoted the idea that theatre was the negotiating space between conflicting ideas of dualities which usually make life unintelligible.<sup>3</sup> Such an idea remains true, but limits itself to the creative impulse and does not really look at the afterlife or representation of the text. The author, as well, is very much a part of the structure and consciously or subconsciously he would have been influenced. In fact, we see a distinct move towards liberal questioning when we reach Euripides. Unlike Aeschylus or Sophocles, he is more human-oriented and more challenging. The idea of power-holders as absolute remains, but there is the germ of a voice against that. At the end of the day, these are all speculation and theorization – the fact of the matter is neither the anthropological nor the structuralist method can with evidence discover anything about what many call proto-theatre. However, we can keep on speculating.

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Theatre has grown out of the elements commonly found in all human societies. It is indeed a comment on disparate human behaviour that even though these essential elements are shared by all human societies, complex

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<sup>1</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Edited by Robert Redfield (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1948), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Damen, 'The Origins of Western Theatre'.

theatre traditions did not evolve equally. Only in more sophisticated cultures do we have the germination of that which we understand as theatre today.

All societies depend heavily on ritual. The entire dynamic of a complex ‘civilized’ society is built on the many normative and patterned mode of behaviour which span from simple human contact to large political borderization. Not only is it a necessity for the continuation of culture/tradition, but also a vital cog in the creation of power equations and establishment of such on the psychological construction of the individual. Rituals originated as attempts to control life and time. The unevolved mind believed in sympathetic magic, both the homeopathic and the contagious kinds.<sup>1</sup> And such magic becomes entangled in elaborate ceremonies which in turn evolve into rituals. In fact, homeopathic magic is also known as imitative. The imitation of a successful hunt perhaps, or an activity that brought positive results – was designed to recreate the success of the first occurrence. It is here that we find the first instance of conscious imitation for a definite purpose. Since magic was soon to become a career, the spectacular value grew quickly and the entire construct became dramatic, involving major theatrics from the practitioner’s self. Imitation and impersonation were/are staples of rituals. And these theatrics invaded all phases of life, including death. These rituals then further evolved into religion. One can easily see why religion has so much theatre ingrained in it: religion and theatre are essentially siblings. It was only a matter of time since theatre separated itself and established a parallel, though not always unattached, formation for itself. The transition from ritual to drama happened with a fluidity that emphasizes their correlation, at least in the early days of theatre history.

From this discussion one may reach a slightly problematic conclusion that religion needs theatrics to survive. As a matter of fact, all organized

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<sup>1</sup> If we analyze the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. The former principle may be called the Law of Similarity, the latter the Law of Contact or Contagion. From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not. [James George Frazer, ‘The Principles of Magic’ from *The Golden Bough*. Web. 30 September 2016. <<http://www.bartleby.com/196/5.html>>.]

religions depend on some kind of performance to continue even if they all ultimately speak of an omniscient, omnipotent, formless divinity. Perhaps this evolves out of the human need for spectacle – and therefore the arts and religion have remained entwined throughout most of human history.

The second element is more psychological. It deals with the essential behavioral pattern of humanity. This is something Aristotle called *mimesis*. *Mimesis* has been traditionally translated as imitation. However, *mimesis* is much more than simple copying. A step ahead of ritual, *mimesis* negotiates with the aesthetic and consequently becomes the process of an aestheticized re-presentation of a particular event. Imitation is a fact of life. As Aristotle himself recognized, children learn through imitation and games. And the fact that Aristotle focused on imitation puts focus on the *instructive* part of theatre. There was considerable difference between Plato and Aristotle regarding this concept. Whereas Plato, and a few others, held *mimesis* to be wicked as it is essentially untrue, merely a reflection, which can be corruptly used, and used to corrupt, and which has the capacity of arousing various defiant sentiments/feelings in the population. Art as *mimesis* had tremendous potential to disrupt the social fabric. Therefore Plato wanted the poets banned from his Republic. Aristotle, on the other hand, was pro-*mimesis* as it could present noble and virtuous acts to people who failed to see them first-hand, as it could show moral violations and the consequent punishments and as it could purify through *catharsis*. Aristotle prescribed what kinds of people will inhabit which kinds of theatre. And he posited tragedy as the pinnacle of theatre as it showed only people of high moral possibility and their downfall which was designed to support norm and was clearly a warning against violation of any kind. Representation of the grotesque or the ugly also had aesthetic virtue and by their imitation society was given the establishment's approach towards the marginalized. In a way, the Platonic objections were re-framed by Aristotle in such a way that they functioned not as anti-establishment, but essentially as pro-structure.

In fact, if one looks closely at the theory of tragedy presented by Aristotle, and the contemporary tragedies, as well as the comedies, one would clearly see that the aim is one of cautioning. Transgression is unacceptable to the gods. The path of the hero is one of great pain. And the hero must suffer through incredible hardship and agony. Therefore, the audience might want to glorify and glamorize the heroes, but they will definitely not want to be one. Society is kept safe through *catharsis* not only because they purge the problematic emotions, but also because *catharsis* at the cost of others is acceptable, the ordinary citizen does not want to be the generator of *catharsis* amongst others. Even though

Nietzsche says that the Apollonian wins over the Dionysian by the time Euripides is writing and the choric impulse that holds the audience together gives way to the more individualistic 'judgmental' approach; yet even here the Apollonian in the sense of the pure intellectual does not gain primacy,<sup>1</sup> it is still a response that is primarily emotional and effecting *catharsis* takes away the "passion" of the viewer and thereby removes the possibility of true challenges to the structure. The individual feels empowered, but without influencing the power-fabric in any way. The proof that this theory works is nowhere better proved than in a postmodern play like *Look Back in Anger* in which the noise generated creates a lot of purgation of frustration, without really challenging the structure in any way. The structure can easily allow a little shouting, as long as the shouts contain pleading, the moment they become demands the structure begins to feel great unease. In many ways, at least in the Occidental paradigm, theatre has remained for a long time a great cleanser of public angst, presenting them with an illusion of protest, a veneer of discontent. It is not until the mid-twentieth century that we see any major departure in that approach. For the first time the "transhistorical poetics", as termed by Peter Szondi,<sup>2</sup> was altered and the essential structure of theatre as observed by the West till then was altered. And those who violated this norm of conformity were summarily discarded to the canonical margins.

Whether conforming or not, one of the essential elements of theatre is the core re-presentation: imitation of an action which is worth imitating. The process of imitating must take into consideration certain issues while forming the core storytelling text: whether it will be a case of re-presentation or presentation, whether it will be based on reality or mythology or mythical reality, whether the presentation will be shaped as flattery or sarcasm and which political purpose to serve. Of course these elements are basic to any form of storytelling and theatre is, ultimately, a sophisticated way of telling a story. Stories have had a significant position in the development of society as we know it, and in the development of ritualized religion. From oral stories, from (almost) gossip to formally structured literary instances, these stories have been the core of all literary activity. In fact, mythology itself is a series of once believed stories about super-natural ideas and theatre is but the elaborate collaborative performance factor added to the simple act of storytelling. The need for such performances arose as societies developed. Both the story and the

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65-69.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Ed. and Trans. Michael Hays (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 4.

audience needed more than verbal telling or songs; enactment came into being as a development from basic performance and as the receivers needed more. The theatrical storytelling became much popular because it was visual and because the imitation was presented through enactment—the figures from the text coming to life—and because actual human figures were involved the sympathetic connection between the story and the audience could work more efficiently. The story came to ‘life’ and the experience was not one of reading a text, but witnessing, and therefore becoming a participant, in an event that could leave a lasting impression. Not only did theatre give an extended life to already existing stories—the classical texts surviving give ample evidence—they also generated new stories. The theatrical space became a kind of a factory for new mythologies supporting the structure and was sponsored by the structure. One may say that theatre, from its very beginning, was used more as a tool than a simple form of entertainment. The essential storytelling instinct was not the only driving force behind the inception of this complicated form.

Speaking of storytelling, the primary element that we find in these ‘stories’ is the element of myth. Myth is fundamentally fantasy. We generally associate fantasy to be generated out of a need to create a parallel world far from reality – but the fantasies belonging to early civilizations were created to make sense of reality, to impose upon it a sense of structure. The stories of nature-gods and the methods of pacification-bribery all came into being from an instinct to prosper and not be limited to the process of natural selection. Fantasy, as a byproduct of intelligence, has a handsome amount of negative impacts too. The problem, of course, was when the fantastic was accepted not merely as the real, but also as the super-real that can dictate the merely-real. Soon the innocence of early humanity was manipulated by the pseudo-innocence of a number of people who were equipped with greater intelligence than most. And soon this sneaked in the equations of power, and once the significance of fantasy was realized, all tools available were used to their full potential to provide the populace with structural and structured warnings. Never challenge the gods – this is the key concept that one can find in most classical tragedies. The dignity of humankind and all that is very much there, but one must be prepared to be a tragic hero in order to reach that grandeur. In the history of humankind, martyrdom has remained seriously low in numbers, and behind many such one can see many inspirers. Normally, human beings want peace and quiet.



# CHAPTER TWO

## SIGNS AND SEMIOTICS

One should start this discussion with the question ‘why’. As a matter of fact, this question should be there in any and all discussion appearing severally. To answer this I refer to J. Hillis Miller; he had said there are two ways of reading: the innocent and the demystified.<sup>1</sup> The first allows the magic of literature to work, the second allows us to analyze. While the former is necessary, the latter is essential. Knowing the sign systems allows us a deeper glimpse into the working of theatre. And that, in turn, gives us a better understanding of the world created for our benefit.

As we know, sign systems have two major parts – the signifiers and the signified. The interaction, often compromise, between these two constitutes the divergences that delightfully complicate the whole idea. The Semiotics of theatre practically began with the investigations of the Prague School. Following which luminaries like Roland Barthes and Roman Jakobson engaged in a variety of ruminations on theatrical linguistics. Among the many thinkers contributing to theatrical semiotics, the greatest impression was created by Charles Sanders Peirce. It was Peirce who gave us the ideas of “icon” (the object/image), the “index” (that points to the object/image) and “symbol”/“interpretant” (pointing out to a different unlinked meaning altogether).

Icons are basically signs which are representative of the objects they signify. These signs may be visually similar or may not be. In fact, Peirce says that icons may be divided into three categories: image, metaphor and diagram. Images obviously carry sense-perception similarities. Advertisements often carry the painting or photograph of the concerned products. Metaphors are obviously indirect connections between the signifier and the signified. They may represent essential elements of the signified and not the signified itself. For instance, the image of a skull generally implies death. It is necessary to mention that icons, just as the other categories, are often culture-specific. Diagrams represent a structure or a system. The map of a country or the magnetic image of the heart

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hillis Miller, ‘How to Read Literature’, in *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 256.

represents the actual. Diagrams can have different encodings or different ways of depiction, but they point to the same object in different ways (the political map and the geological map denote the same country).<sup>1</sup>

Indices are rarely what they denote – they are indicative of the object they signify. They either refer or point to something other or more. As an example, one may mention gongs of a clock which refers to time; they are not primarily significant for their sound or musical quality. A similar sounding doorbell will not refer to time, but to the fact that someone wants the door opened. As with icons, Peirce classified the Index into three kinds. The first one is Tracks—as in animal tracks—which associate almost directly with the signified. Tire-tracks often, at least to the trained eye, can give away the car that had made them. Symptoms, the second category, are perhaps the most familiar – they are symptomatic of a phenomenon that they are generally associated with. Someone wearing spectacles will mean that there is something wrong with that person’s eye/s, a bandage would signify a wound. The third category, Designation, is the most disassociated sign. The Designators point to something entirely different from themselves. An arrow might give directions, the outline of a feminine form may signify a ladies’ toilet! Just like in verbal language, theatre language also depends much on the development of these signs and the translation of them into the audience’s psyche.<sup>2</sup>

Symbols are the most culturally specific. They depend entirely on convention. If esoteric symbols are used—as in the case of the poetry of William Blake—then the audience will fail to realize the significance. The most utilized symbol is, of course, language.<sup>3</sup> A person belonging to a different linguistic background may follow the new language, but the nuances and connotations will escape him/her. These symbols interpret the actions/motivations of the characters. They mass-communicate the same idea to the audience. In theatrical dialogue this is of no little significance. There are traditional cultural symbols that we all often use without realizing. These signs are the most frequent and of the highest importance since, usually, the theatrical communication depends quite handsomely on these.

Of course, to introduce such formulae in the analysis of theatre may seem constricting, yet it has its uses, at least from the academic point of view. Since theatre claims to have its own language, it is worthwhile to

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<sup>1</sup> Drew Huening, ‘Theories of Media’ in *Symbol, Index, Icon*, The University of Chicago. Web. 18 April 2016.

<<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/symbolindexicon.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> Huening, *Symbol, Index, Icon*.

<sup>3</sup> Huening, *Symbol, Index, Icon*.



look at it from the semiotic point of view. Just like in the case of language, theatre also comes with a pre-organized meaning. And the negotiation of that meaning and the interpreted meaning is what makes this whole study so interesting. The success and failure depends on how well the signs have been used or presented. And since communication is the keyword in theatre, all this becomes rather relevant. Of course, this is where the major paradox lies. Communication is never equal when we are dealing with a large audience. Each individual will respond differently. To demand the same response is to undermine one's freedom of interpretation. Simple issues like interest in a particular drama—pleasure/politics/nepotism—become rather important, and they colour the response to a play. To demand the same response from a production is equally restrictive. And it is a fact that each and every production would have its own agenda. Tim Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not correspond to any other production of the play and his use of seven languages—mostly Asian—speaks of a new objective, however global and extraordinary.

One must also remember the key elements in literature – form and content. A set of signs may vary with the change of content even if the form is the same. And I am not speaking of different plays. This is where theatre departs from the other arts. The content remains the same in the case of all other texts, but if we look at performance as a text it differs every single time. A play presented seriously and the same play presented experimentally (perhaps from a feminist angle or from a racial angle) or comically would change with the modification of a couple of elements or signs with the others remaining intact. And perhaps it is the very art of theatre that demands more from the audience since the form has to be taken into account while appreciating a performance. The content by itself remains inadequate – rather the content must include many extra-textual elements.

So, in the case of theatre, the dialogue, the setting, props, the body-language, costumes, levels of make-up, lighting, acting, music – and all the things visible/audible during performance become immediate signs. These signs sometimes act individually, but for a *perfect* performance, they must blend seamlessly. As a much respected technician of the Bengali stage had commented, if an audience criticizes the lighting then it is a flaw; if they praise it, it is equally a flaw. Lighting should not even be noticed if it truly blends with the theatrical presentation. Barring fanatics, it is understood that such use of signs would create the perfect communication between the presentation and its target. It is only in the case of analysis that these individual elements would be noticed. But the experience of theatre should remain comprehensive.

This is exactly the point of departure between a written dramatic text and theatre. Whereas, as a text, the play remains somewhat fixed—changing only in relation to the reader’s interpretation—the performance becomes a cooperative, and therefore various, enterprise. The other major departure is that the play takes shape in the imagination of the reader, while enactment involves real people, who act in corresponding real time, giving it the illusion of actuality. Sukanta Chaudhuri writes about the written text:

Hermeneutic and compositional inputs constitute a diffusing process that extends the boundaries of a text. The first is closely linked to the conditions of physical production. Its basic input is the specific text, which it showcases and holds forth. The second moves away from the material manifestation of the text and, very soon, from its specific form and wording into what Peter Donaldson calls the ‘expanded text’. New conceptual, ‘creative’ inputs begin to enter: there is new, independent verbalization. This can take derived, ‘secondary’ forms like annotation or commentary; but these link up the ‘original’ text with other, unquestionably primary texts, assimilating it to various discourses, making of it not a sharply defined, isolated work but a node in a web. It is extended in turn by redactions that are new creations, ‘modelled on’, ‘inspired by’, ‘drawing on’ or ‘alluding to’ the previous work, setting new cycles of origin in motion. Thus all texts participate in a total circulation, a total discourse. Individual texts rise from this continuum only to resume their places within it. It is this manifold process that I would call ‘participative’.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of theatre this ‘participative’ element becomes multidimensional. Everyone involved in the process becomes a reader and a performer and it becomes a conglomeration of interpretations even before it reaches the reader/viewer. Enactment itself involves both time and space, the latter being unnecessary in the case of a textual reading. It is not only the stage space that is significant—with the production unit’s ideas of setting—it is the very stage that creates the distance. It is no longer the inner-space of the reader, but something that he/she would experience outside. Reading *Macbeth* creates a sympathetic link with the protagonist that remains very different when one sees a performed version with a different man presenting the character—speaking, walking, and behaving—in his very own way. Theatre, more often than not, needs this distancing. Even in the case of performance, there are prescribed limits which are often tried and tested. Performance arts such as mime, the circus,

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<sup>1</sup> Sukanta Chaudhuri, *The Metaphysics of Text*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 107.

acrobatics, street theatre, and opera, among others – often invade the prim ‘theatre-proper’. Such challenges enrich more than violate.

The fact that the actors are aware of the audience, for whom they are performing, is an important issue. This is sometimes utilized as in breaking the fourth wall. On the other hand, the performances which do not have any contact between the audience and the action on stage often add to them the aura of voyeurism. Only in the second case the humanity/reality of the characters becomes more specified, and not that of the actors (unless they make mistakes).

Performance, in this case dramatic, is without a doubt iconic. Each and every action is a sign – that is the key concept of *mimesis*. An imagined reality reproduced. There are very few experiments–Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* for instance–which try to create the illusion of immediate time and space. Normally, both dialogue and gesture are *used* to create specific reactions – when they stand independently and are universal they are *iconic*. Often the lack of dialogue focuses more on the gestures – as in the case of most of the theatres of the Absurd. Those reactions may vary from person to person, but overall the general effect mostly remains the same. In the case of bad performances the result is incongruity and unintended mirth in the audience. Then there are the *index* signs – such as pointing a finger towards something to denote direction. Like personal pronouns, they are dependent on a set of previous events or words. The final category is the *symbolic*. Like language they are specific. The word ‘stage’ would denote the stage only to those who understand English. If we use the word *mauncho*, it would mean nothing to anyone but those who understand Bengali. Gestures also suffer from such cultural specificity – the middle finger perhaps can be a not so decent example.

The gestures, of course, can be intentional or unintentional. Umberto Eco had spoken of ‘natural signs’ and ‘non-intentional signs’. In fact, it was Tadeusz Kowzan, a Polish thinker, who applied the divisions of ‘natural’ signs having cause and effect relationships like smoke and fire and ‘artificial’ signs which are results of human action/will.<sup>1</sup> These, of course, can be mutually changeable. Putting a finger to the mouth would be a signal to stop speaking in almost any culture. But emotion inspired signs are very different and may vary even from individual to individual. An actor has to concentrate and adopt the possible gestures of the character being played. Often characters have specific eccentricities in their language or behaviour. In those cases, it becomes easy to locate and define that fictional person. But as in the case of plays by Pinter – one

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<sup>1</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 2002), 17.

needs to understand the whole class system before one can approach any of his characters. Even in the case of stage props the slightest presence/position can become very significant. The positioning of the door, a painting, flowers, colour of curtains and so on – each can add or defeat a layer of meaning. Eco himself moved away from this simplistic division and in the case of theatre he presented his support of Peirce and asserted the uniqueness of theatrical semiotics. It is necessary to quote him here:

So the semiotics of theatrical performance has shown, during our short and introductory analysis, its own *proprium*, its distinguishing and peculiar features. A human body, along with its conventionally recognizable properties, surrounded by or supplied with a set of objects, inserted within a physical space, stands for something else to a reacting audience. In order to do so, it has been framed within a sort of performative situation that establishes that it has to be taken as a sign. From this moment on, the curtain is raised. From this moment on, anything can happen.....<sup>1</sup>

To go back to the initial question – why we must deal with the signs, Martin Esslin has the perfect answer. Just as a cricket match is no fun to watch without knowing the rules, and much more enjoyable when one understands each and every nuance and gesture – drama can become even more appreciable with the knowledge of the signs. It then becomes not merely a story told on stage, but something that the viewer can completely grasp.

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance', *The Drama Review (Theatre and Social Action Issue)* 21.1 (1977): 107-17. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 April 2016. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145112>>.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE THEATRICAL TEXT

Theatre and performance are now considered to be texts in their own right. The difference between theatre and a written text, or a cinematic text, is that the theatrical text changes with each and every performance. It is a text that is truly ephemeral and therefore the value of such textuality is unimaginable. Each theatrical presentation is constructed of so many elements—each element modulating differently each time—that there can be no consistency from one to another. The written word changes with time and evolution of language – the theatre language shifts its meaning because it is made of human activity, including human speech and performance, which changes with the subtle changes in the performer’s self. The written text is merely the starting point of a performance and is fixed – barring, of course, interpretation which is and should be always variable. The written play turns into something else when presented on stage. Therefore, reading a play is one kind of experience and watching the same one is quite another. This may seem similar to the experience of reading a text and watching a film-version of it, but the difference is in the fact that every viewing of the film will be the same, whereas if one sees a play a number of times, the experience is bound to be different. This is one of the reasons many playwrights refuse to comment on their plays. Particularly the Postmodernists like Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter refuse to *explain* their work not merely because they would like their work to speak for itself, but also because the work itself changes with each production.

One of the most complicated issues in the world of Arts is grasping the reader’s final impression of any text. Historically, this has been quantified as *catharsis*, projected as the *sublime* and so on. In fact, it is in the twentieth century that the focus has fallen on the audience rather than on the author. Even with the primacy of the reader, the task of understanding the reading mind has remained practically impossible since the variousness is mind-boggling. Manipulations of the expectations of the audience have been attempted as the formulaic restrictions practiced traditionally have conditioned the viewer/reader to expect certain trends.

But with such manipulations now ceasing to be surprising, the dynamic of audience manipulation has drastically changed. If one uses the deceptively simple idea of satisfaction, then perhaps the idea of audience-response can be better understood. The new idea of a text is no longer limited to authorial authority; a new text is a collaborative construction of the author and the reader, and in the case of theatre, this becomes a much greater collaboration with the playwright, the director, the actors, the technicians and the audience-member coming together to create a final meaning for that performance. It is not merely a question of interpretation on the viewer-member's part, but also that of construction. The question of liking-disliking is very different as it depends on the psychological make-up of the individual and will certainly vary from one individual to another.

If we look at the individual viewer's experience, the first two elements that he/she will notice are the posters and the stage, quite like the feel of a book and its cover. In fact, the modification of the stage-construct has a significant impact on the viewing mind. The impact of a picture-frame stage is not comparable to that of a performance on the street. Quite a few plays demand such locational restriction. Tim Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its seven languages and different acting styles, was meant to be performed in the open. But when it was taken indoors and framed within a conventional stage the impression was very different and at least to this author quite diminished.<sup>1</sup> It was less satisfactory, although strictly in comparison. The audience member who had only attended the second instance would have a different experience, but which definitely will not include the advantage of the openness of an exposed and much larger stage. The whole idea of street theatre is designed to make the audience a more active participant in the process of signification. Unlike in the case of the picture-frame stage experience, where the audience members interpret and personally create their own individual texts, in street theatre the merging of the on and offstage presences create a different dynamic altogether. The illusion seems less of an illusion and the reality-value increases manifolds. This is why activist theatre prefers this form. Involving the audience in the action of the play in such manner is practically impossible in the case of the traditional stage-oriented performances.

The setting is the next element. In fact, if one was to extend the comparison of theatre with the written text, then in the latter acting, light, setting, sound, all come together to become words. However, it is

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<sup>1</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Tim Supple. Tolly Club, Kolkata. 30 Apr. 2006