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Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

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Author(s): Rabindranath Tagore

Translator(s): Dipankar Roy

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This essay, “Rangamancha” (1902), by Rabindranath Tagore is an important landmark of his thoughts on theatre. Apart from this essay he has discussed on theatre in many of his letters, interviews and in the introductions of his plays. But he has not written any other essay on this topic. That’s why the publication of this important document of his thoughts on theatre in this issue along with its English translation, “The Stage” will hopefully add another dimension toward the universalisation of Tagore and his thoughts on theatre.

Editor

The Stage

Rabindranath Tagore

There is a discussion of ‘the Stage’ in Bharata’s *Natyashashtra*. We find that Bharata does not mention ‘the Scene’ in it. I, however, do not think it to be a significant omission. Art attains her greatest glory when it is monotheistic. If Art has to share the households with a co-wife her stature is bound to be dwarfed: especially if the co-wife happens to be a really powerful one. If *the Ramayana* has to be set to a tune in order to be read aloud, the tune has to be a monotonous one, remaining unchanged from ‘the Adikando’ to ‘the Uttorkando’ (from the beginning to the end). As a *ragini* it can never hope to achieve any artistic growth. That what is true poetry will manage to ring its own music and will ignore any assistance in the form of musical embellishment from the outside world. And music which is of the highest order can speak its own words and does not have to depend on a Kalidasa or a Milton. It can very well do with the meager “*tome- taanaa- naanaa*”. One can create a combination of



painting, music and poetry in the realm of fine arts but that will be mere playfulness. That will be a cheap ware to be sold in the market: not fit to get a royal seat.

But, theatre, a form of visual art, by nature, is not as independent as aural art. For fuller expression, it has the necessity to take external help in-built in its very artistic fiber. It cannot but accept the fact that it depends on 'performance' all the time. We do not buy this argument. The virtuous wife does not need anyone but the husband; similarly good poetry does not need anybody else except a true connoisseur of poetry. We all turn performers in our minds when we read literature. If during any such 'performance' of poetry the true beauty of poetry is not revealed then such poetry would be unable to bring fame for the poet. On the other hand, one can say that the art of acting is anything but an independent form of art. This orphan art waits for the drama to come to it. It can only reflect the glory of drama, in the process making it its own. The uxorious husband becomes a subject of ridicule: similarly, if the drama becomes dependent on acting to a degree more than necessary, thereby curbing its innate generic possibilities it will end up encouraging nothing but criticism. The attitude of the drama should be, "If play is staged let that be: if it is not performed let that be a misfortune for the art of acting, the play could not care less." Whatever be the case, the art of acting must remain subservient to the art of poetry. But that is no way to say that it has to be a slave to all art forms. If it has to maintain its glory it must accept subjugation to other art forms to a degree that is necessary for the full manifestation of its nature: any additional dependence will only cause its degradation. It is needless to say that the dialogues in a play are absolutely essential for the actor in a play. He has to laugh with the words that the poet-dramatist has provided him with: the opportunities that the writer gives him are the only



opportunities for him to cry and to bring tears to the spectator's eyes. But, where is the need for the scenery? It simply hangs behind the actor; the actor does not make it happen – it is a mere painting. In my opinion, it merely represents the actor's incompetence, his cowardice. By taking help from a painting in order to create illusion in the mind of the spectator he tries to make his job easier: but, that is quite like begging from the painter. On the other hand, as for the spectator who has come to see your performance, do you think that he has no assets of his own? Do you think that he is a mere child and no more? Cannot we depend on him for anything artistic? If that is the case it is altogether wrong to sell ticket to such a viewer even if he is willing to pay twice the price. Dramatic performance is not something like a deposition in the court of law that one has to validate every single word that is uttered. Where is the need to cheat those who have come to believe in your words and be entertained? They have not come after having locked up their power of imagination back home. You will explain things to him up to a degree; he will comprehend things on his own – that is the manner of negotiation that you will share with him. Dushyanto listens to the conversation between Sankuntala and her confidantes hiding behind the trunk of a tree: that is all very well. Let the conversations be interesting. Even if the tree-trunk is not posted right in front of my nose I can well imagine its presence – the spectator possesses imagination to such a degree. It is difficult to fully understand the deft nuances, the finer shades of the characters of Dushyanto, Sakuntala, Anasua-Priyamvada, their attitudes, their independent voices; so it is necessary to see them in person. We feel enchanted to hear them speak when we see them. But, imagining the existence of a couple of trees, a house or a river is not a difficult task: if these objects are presented in the form of sceneries and are not left for us to imagine that will be making a grievous injustice to us, the spectators.



I like our village ‘jatras’ chiefly for this reason. There is no significant barrier between the actors and the audience in these performances. Mutual faith and dependence bridge the gap between the two parties and thereby, the performance comes to life. “*Kavya-rasa*” – the essence of dramatic experience – during the performance wells up like a spring and bursts forth to drench the enchanted audience. Where is the need to bring to erect trees on the stage to show that Malini lets time go by as she keeps searching for flowers in a garden where flowers rarely bloom? The garden should manifest itself through Malini’s self. If that does not happen during the performance what quality does the actor playing Malini have to show and what business do the spectators have in sitting like wooden statues?

If the dramatist who created Sakuntala had to plan sceneries for the stage the first thing that he must have done was to stop the running of horse-carriages when Sakuntala would be on stage. Of course, Kalidasa is a great poet: even if he had to stop horse-carriages from running his creativity would never have come to a standstill. But, my point is, where is the great need to put shadow on his self over insignificant trifles? The imaginative, the introspective has the stage inside his own creative self; and therein there is no dearth of space. There, by the skill of the wizard the sceneries keep on surfacing. That stage, those sceneries are the dramatist’s ultimate *telos*; no artificial stage, no artificial scenery is fit for the poetic imagination. Therefore, if Dushyanto and his charioteer, rooted in one spot, drive the chariot through their descriptions and their acting the audience would easily realise that the stage is small but the poetry is not. For the sake of poetry they would willingly overlook this limitation of the stage; and, in the process, by enlarging their mental horizon they would ennoble the stage. But, if, it is due to the limitations of the stage the poetry had to curb its



flight who would have forgiven the presence of those wooden blocks on stage? In the play *Sakuntala* we see no imperative to depend on external props: that is why in the play there is a full realisation of the poetic sceneries. The play does not give contract to any external agent for giving shape to the hermit's establishment in the forest, the world of clouds on the way to the heavens or the idyllic retreat of Maarich. It has done its self-creation completely, all by itself. Be it in the presentation of characters or in the moods the decision has been to depend entirely on the power of poetry. In another essay we have discussed that European realism could not be about anything but truth. For the Europeans, imagination would not merely entertain them; it would transform the imaginary into something very much life-like and would entertain in a child-like manner. They not only need the vitalizing sap of poetry but also the weight of life-likeness. Now we are in the middle of *Kaliyuga*; therefore, in order to create the effect of life-likeness the demand is to take help form the world of engineering. In England, the amount of money spent to play this game would have eradicated many famines in a poor country like India.

In the eastern world, the games and sports, modes of entertainment – everything thrives on simplicity. Because we take food in meager banana-leaves we are able to experience the real pleasure of the feast; which is the pleasure of bringing the world to our homes. If the arrangements were to be burdened with elaborate preparations the joy would have been killed.

The form of theater that we are trying to develop in imitation of the English stage is a burdened, bloated thing. It is difficult to move it, to take to all sections of the society. The goddess of wealth, instead of the goddess of knowledge, casts her long shadow over it. For



such a kind of stage the necessity for investment by the wealthy is greater than the genius of the poet and the creative mind. If the spectator is not initiated into the English childishness and the actor has faith in his own ability and that of the poetry his job of bringing back freedom and glory to the world of theatre and to his motherland as an Indian will be much easier by sweeping aside all the precious unnecessary garbage. Time has come to leave behind such savage English attitude which encourages one to believe that only a female-actor can play the role of a woman or in order to give an idea of the forest to the audience one has to paint one and put it onto the stage.

All in all, one can say with a degree of certainty that complexity is the hallmark of the ineffectual. If naturalism ('life-likeness') enters into the realm of art like a beetle in the end it eats up all the sap of the inner self of art like a cockroach. When due to dyspepsia there is lack of appetite in order to achieve real nourishment all kinds of expensive luxury piles up unceasingly – the rice gets swamped by the sauce completely.

Translated by: Dr. Dipankar Roy, Assistant Professor, Department of English and other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, W.B., India.