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# THESPIAN

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Title: Theatre music opens a new gate for contemporary theatre

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## EXPOSURE

### Theatre music opens a new gate for contemporary theatre

Theatre bears an old relation with music and song. From the time of Bharata song and dance are combined together in theatrical arts. The expression “use of song in drama”, is not harmonious and sounds rather hoarse. This is because the relation between the two is not one of use but which is old and inseparable. But the expression “use of song in drama” is relevant because neither song nor playing musical instruments singularly demonstrate theatrical arts. It can be done only through a decent ‘use’ of various music and songs. The professionalism in Bengali theatre has led to the development of stage decoration and lighting as distinct branches of professions. There was a somewhat deficit in the matter of direction of the background score. The total execution of set light and make-up is fundamentally a technical education which requires a special kind of merit. But these factors need to have artistic quality to frame it in accordance with the dramatic thought. Similarly in case of music; musicians might be efficient in their respective fields but for the sake of drama a synchronized playing of all the instruments is not possible merely by an instrument player. It requires a special kind of merit which is essential for composing music according to the environment, time, mood and gravity of the play. But it is not an easy task. And that in this Indian subcontinent where there is definite theory and grammar for music and song. There is no separate curriculum for music and song of drama in our country which is why those who are singers or who have studied this subject and those who are travelling in various spheres of



music- their spontaneous movement in the field of theatre can bring new possibilities in background music of drama. That's why a little time with a contemporary background-music director in Bengali theatre to discuss about the possibilities in background direction in professional theatre:

***How were you introduced into music?***

Baban : Starting was without any concept. First performed in father's "Living Theatre" group at the age of 3 and half years. From then to the age of 17-18 years regularly performed in theatre; and in the matter of singing only that which was sung in the theatre group. It all began like this.....gradually dreams came. I have never thought earlier to become a singer or a musician. ....And then, keeping the theatre off, I was singing. Although performed in 1 or 2 shows, but the earlier involvement in theatre was totally stopped. ....Again when I returned to theatre, a strange role came upon me. As I could sing, the responsibility of the music of the group came upon my shoulders. While doing this some other groups also called me. Now I am composing music for several groups.

***Say something how the uniqueness that is seen in theatre music or background-score direction throughout the nation- is reflected in Bengali theatre?***

Baban : See .....Here in Bengal or rather in Bengali theatre the 70s was an important time. During the next two decades, going through a long infertile time in stage theatre, we are now getting into an auspicious time of renaissance in Bengali theatre. In this time, the people in background-score direction have somewhere proved the importance of theatre music before the director or the public and that fulfillment of drama cannot be attained without it. And not



only in music, altogether in music, backdrop, stage lighting- in all these fields Bengali theatre has immensely developed and still developing. Earlier, people who worked in these fields actually came to work in the theatre group and took the responsibility of light or took the responsibility of music because he could sing a bit. I am not however diminishing or insulting their endeavour, only want to show the unprofessionalism of that time and the professional attitude of the present. Not even talking about the few exceptional among them - they are genius and timeless. I am only trying to emphasize that the unprofessional attitude of the past is no more. Nowadays music is composed by professional musicians; as a consequence music is attaining or has attained a separate place. But earlier, what happened in these fields were.....‘fill the space a bit’ ..... ‘it seems empty’..... This casual approach is no more seen.

***Okay .... What are you thinking or doing about background-music direction nowadays?***

Baban: To say what I am doing..... No research on art can be done within a limited time; it’s a journey through which one has to walk. In this journey, having a scholarship of two years on Theatre Music from the Central Government, I am just carrying my research for a few days. India is known for its rituals and most of it are religious and in all these rituals, music plays an important part. When we perform a “puja” or deliver an “ajan” it has a wonderful music in it, or when we enter a church or a “gumpha” there is a music which creates a background. ....On entering a church don’t we experience a strange pure feeling? Is it only for the architecture? Music plays a crucial role in it. Again in our traditional songs and music- Baul, Sufi or in our Santhali songs, Gazi songs- create a special feeling of intoxication. And here lies the fundamental aspect of my research, what is in music which creates such a situation. It casts such a moment of spell upon us that it takes quite some time to come out of



it. And how music can be used in drama – this is another aspect of my research, therefore which note, the rhythm of which music will create that moment of spell, how can I create new kind of music with the aid of these, which musical instruments can be played. Thus it is progressing.....

***How much talent in classical music do the people who are coming into theatre music or doing it require according to you?***

Baban: We are creating a background by the means of theatre which creates an ambience, a task which has been done by classical music through ages. The Ragas composed on morning, evening, night or even with seasonal changes are purifying those environments or moments. If they are correctly expressed in theatre, then our work becomes easy. To work with music in India, might it be theatre or any other field of arts, one should possess the knowledge of classical music. Classical music is far more advanced..... Simultaneously one has to learn the folk songs. That is another genre of music. It is necessary to understand the nature and philosophy of that music. Theatre music is fundamentally dependent on theatre, how the individuals are doing it, what the main theme is- what the director wants to view, what the director is hearing inside- the external expression of it. The music director works with it which in turn is his self expression.

***You worked with Kanailalji – what type of musical work had been done there?***

Baban: Oh don't talk about it.... It was in a forest in Tripura called "Sipahijala reserve forest"- he kept us there for 1 month. There we were cut off from the outside world. There we did not work with anything worth talking about, yet it was one of the most important



workshops of my entire life. We began in the morning with physical exercise and vocal practice for one and half hours, then improvisation for the whole day- do whatever you want. In the evening we had to show what we have done throughout the day. In doing so, it was like a new finding in that environment with forest, trees, streams and rivers- learn whatever you can from them according to your wish. We worked with natural sounds - sound of air, water and total silence which probably can't be done except such a place. And the source of the sound were some alternative instruments, which were not actually instruments but something which can produce sounds, like the sound of water, dry leaves, sound of burning, blowing air through a thick substance - such funny tasks. Excellent experience.....

***What is it meant by alternative music?***

Baban: Speaking very acutely, alternative music can be described in two ways. Firstly, using instruments which are not commonly used, to produce a deep, meaningful and powerful sound or silence - using such instruments is one phase. Another one is, following an entirely different work procedure. That is, the process of producing the sounds or the music .... it can be done by mere tapping of the fingers or clapping.... similarly sound can also be produced by shaking leaves of a tree or flowing water- the fact is, searching for an alternative sound. Drums, guitars and violins are an available source. If these are combined with the alternative sound groups then the position of theatre possibly progresses a bit. Now, alternative music is one which is not only playing the role of music but it becomes itself a character. That is, if the music is removed from the theatre it seems that a character is missing. These are the two aspects. The fact is that music is not just making the theatre good or magical...



***So are we calling this alternative kind of music as theatre music?***

Baban: No, no there is no such definitions that alternative music is called as theatre music - it is not so. As the theatre is trying to tell the story, similarly the music tells the story in another form, which flows through the body of the play, it does not surpass the play or if required surpasses the play to present the message of the play more deeply to the audience. Take for example, silence - which is the most magnificent music.....greatest music. No music is as magnificent as silence if it is used properly. A thousand drums cannot bring the effect of silence. Actually both are complimentary to each other. When a pause is taken while playing a musical instrument, that is the point or moment where the feeling is communicated. Singing, singing, singing.....when you stop.....communicates. This is the fun of it. Without silence communication is nearly impossible. This rhythmic and lifelike combination of sound and silence makes the music from being common to rare and probably then we call it as background music or theatre music.

***A theatre musician who composes the music, does he need to be a good actor?***

Baban: See..... Theatre is a combined art. Everything combines to form the complete whole. While coming to do it, if one doesn't know the rhythm, colour and tone of the play, then how will it work? He might not act on the stage or may even do it but at least he has to understand acting. Without understanding acting how can he compose music? He has to understand the acting, the environment, the costume, the lighting - the lighting has some messages - without understanding them how can music be composed. On the other hand if somebody says "oh the music was excellent", it is somewhat uncanny for nobody does the music or the light



considering it as a separate aspect.

***Ok..... Music, drama, theatre and all performing arts today is not limited to art alone, it is working as a therapy in treatment. What are our possibilities in this field?***

Baban: Origin of therapy is nothing new in our country; it is going on through ages. The selection of ragas in classical music - is entirely therapeutic and pure biological. Our classical music is theoretical and based upon a particular grammar and so it has therapeutic features as the different ragas are composed differently depending upon the time of the day. It is not that the western world has invented it, what they have done is that they have theorized it, written on it, and determined a particular process of the subject. So they are advanced. We already had Music of Relaxation, Music of Deep Sleep; we have just not theorized it nor felt the need of theorizing it. But the western world has thought about it.

*It's exactly so. Discipline is a matter to be learned from them. It is not that we are undisciplined, we are not properly disciplined. The growing opportunity of work in the field of background music in theatre is giving it an independent position in professional theatre with time. In theatrical arts, live music is an extremely important matter because while acting, we see a lively presentation of life on the stage; the different colours and smell also touch us - background music plays an indispensable role in making these moments lively. We have seen that along with acting the sweetness of sound produced by a synchronized use of 'Pakhowaz' in background music makes our heart beat faster, creates a kind of ancient frenzy, one which can never be attained by track music. The use of track music in theatre does not display any extravagance, but reveals the poverty of creative art of the technicians. On the other hand, in the case of live music the feeling that is produced by the deep soulful relation between the actors of the play and the instrumental music enables a creative flavour in watching the play.*

Translated by : Bishwadeep Dutta, Assistant Teacher in English, West Bengal, India..