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Merging the Real and Romantic Spaces for a Living: A Study of Surabhi Theatre Practices

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This article focuses on the internal management strategies devised and practiced by the Surabhi theatre groups in their struggle for surviving and continuing the one and only family theatre in India. Their model is a unique one because they have evolved these strategies of time, space and human resource management based on their century-old practices. Most of these are adapted, polished and chiseled through the ages by looking back to their own tradition and life experiences. This leads us to have a brief look at this intriguing tradition of theatre practice.

Like many traditions in India the Surabhi theatre also has its legendary stories of the beginning stages. A version describes the marriage function at Surabhi in Rayachoti taluk of Cuddapah district of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. As part of the celebration, vanarasa brothers were invited to perform their fantastic puppet show.

Vanarasa Govinda Rao was the eldest and a leather puppeteer to be precise. Once, he went to see a play and came back, feeling his art was inferior to the dramatists. He took this function and the sensible patronage from the wealthy Reddy family as a chance and promptly turned one of his puppet show, **Keechakavada**, into a play using improvised dialogues, music and costumes with his family members and met with instant success (Paturi Sri Rama



Satry 9).

The incident was way back in 1885; Govinda Rao set up a travelling theatre group and named it after his village in Andhra Pradesh. The first Surabhi Theatre Company's name was **Sarada Vinodini Nataka Sabha**. Then Rao never thought that he would pass on his passion for plays to his descendants. Surviving the hardships and turn of around 129 years, Surabhi's unique family tradition lives on. Members of the Rao's family play all roles. They belong to the **Aare kappus** with the maharastrian lineage and shared among them the four family names like: **Vanarasa, Aveti, Aatok and Sindhe**.

The obsession for playing roles and living with the fragments of grease painted faces started taking root. Govinda Rao's 13 children and grandchildren formed their troupes in due course and through marriage alliances among them. They shared and balanced the growth of the troupes. All these troupes work at the different places and conveniently allotted the geographical region for their tours and functions under the umbrella of **Surabhi nataka kala sangam**. Interestingly; "from 1910 itself they have agreed upon working at three domains. They are krishnaji's theatre function in Mysore state, Pedda Ramayya's group work at Nizam dominions and Venkoji took the Northern circas" (Moddali Nagabhushana Sarma 96-98). Thus the single vanarasa unit became three companies to share the pleasure and pains of performing theatre. As per their records during 1956 there were ten major companies and twenty six minor companies. In its heydays, during the early seventies, Surabhi had 2,000 artistes and 46 troupes. But lean times followed as the south Indian film and television weaned the audience away. Today, approximately 200 artistes and four active troupes remain. They are **Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali, Sharada Vijaya Natya Mandali, Bhanodaya**

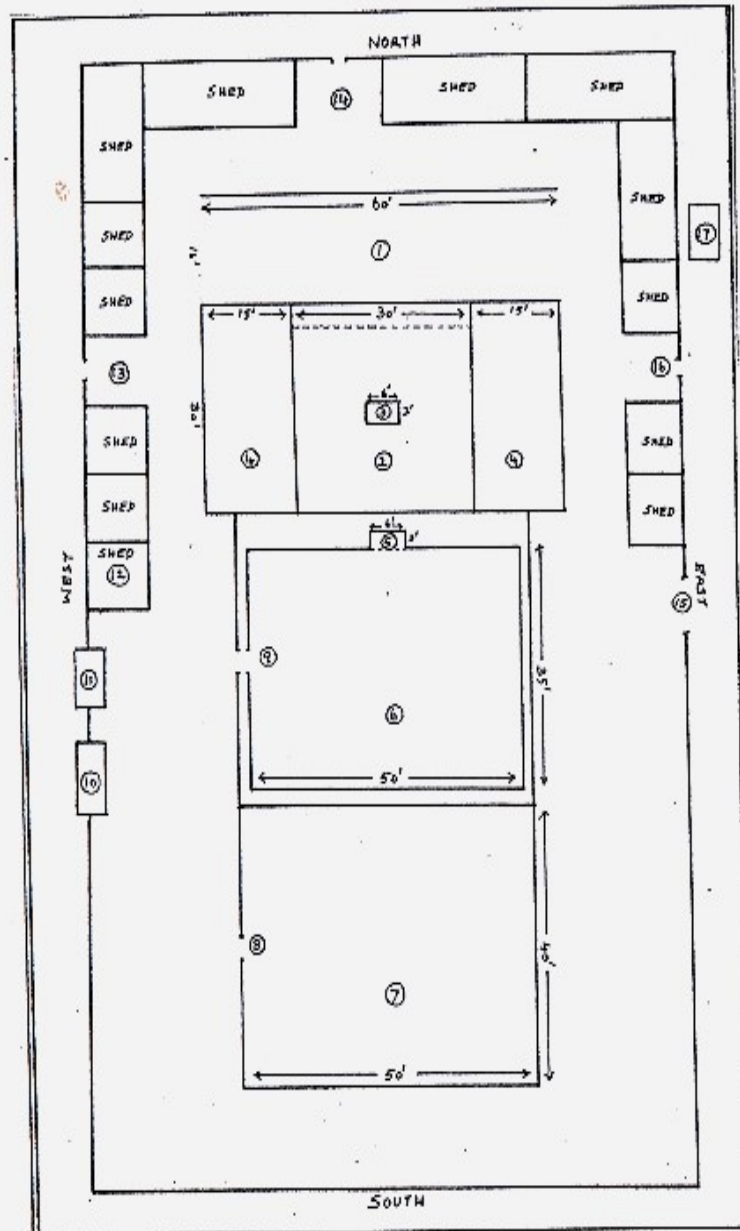


Natya Mandali, and Vinayaka Natya Mandali.

Time has wrought little change in the lives of the artistes. They travel through the countryside by bus and camp at a place for short periods. Earlier days it was the cloth tents, and now they use the galvanized iron tents constructed with the wood or iron angle bars. This temporary theatre space got divided into stage and the auditorium leaving some space between the stage and residential area, rooms are constructed around the stage with the same material. It is usual to allot one room for one family and the room is often used as their kitchen cum dining and bed room cum make-up room. As Babji of Sri **Venkateswara Natya Mandali**, proudly say's from its temporary hamlet at Lalitha kala thoranam, Hyderabad “we live in about twenty two sheds built around the performing area. We perform on every day and the collection we make are equally distributed among all members” (Rekander Nageswar Rao).

While touring and participating in the festivals, they perform in built up auditoriums where they convert the prosceniums into their own convenient space. While camping, the company always constructs its own theatre with corrugated tin sheets held together with ropes and wires. The construction takes a week to ten days. It is an interesting sight to see the men and women including the children work on building the stage, setting up the costume, stacking the set and props in appropriate places and rehearsing and warming up with music etc . This is a complete process of familiarizing, tuning up the site and getting in to unleash their talents for the shows to keep their life.

As seen in the following pictures of the ground plan and the temporary shed here.



The plan of a typical Surabhi Tent



2.

Image: 1 Ground plan for Auditorium with Proscenium Stage & Living Sheds

Source : M. N. Sarma

Image: 2 Theatre Tent in a rural place

Source: Surabhi Collection

Managing and sharing real and available space is very much part of their everyday life. The sketch of the ground plan and the old picture of Surabhi tent while camping at the rural place reveal, how real and available space in a temporary abode is an important aspect in their life. Their tent has specifically denoted spaces like: the elevated proscenium stage, seating place for the audience which occupy the maximum area in the tent with its special arrangements to facilitate the better viewing experience and their living rooms around the stage. Being an itinerant group with large number of family members cum performers they need to cautiously manage the space while touring, camping, staging (on and off) and storing (set, prop, costume and other equipments). Moreover, they live in the temporary rooms constructed around the stage and a thin layer of side wings separate them from the stage which is a space floating with mythological spheres of time. In a way the members of Surabhi



always negotiate with the private and public spheres in their daily life.

Surabhi is famous for Mythological and folk narratives from their repertory, with **Lav Kush, Maya Bazaar and Bala Nagamma** being perennial favorites. The other popular ones are: **chintamani, kanakatara, Bhakta prahalada, Sati Savitri, Satya, Jai pathala bhairavi, Harischandara, Bobbili yudham, Sri.krishna Tulabaram, Sri Krishna Leelau, Lanka Dahanam, Sri Rmanjaneya Yuddam, Rama Rajyam, Gayopakyanam, Bhatti Vikramarkka, Bhukailash, Bheeshma, Chandi priya, Bastidevata yadamma etc.** This incomplete list of plays itself gives one an idea about the vivacity of the themes in Surabhi repertoire.

Rural audiences throng the theatres; take a ticket for Rs. 20 and regally lounge on a chair, earlier pay half the sum one can squat on the floor. Soon a mind blowing make-believe world opens up before their eyes accompanied by the background music and effects - Ghatotkacha swallowing laddus that come flying towards him, Ganga springing up from the ground, Narada descending from the skies, Arrows flying in the air and lamps were lit by the them, A large white key making its way across the stage ,all on its own to reach the lock on the prison door, A grotesque face in a **mantriks** den with huge red eyes which shuts and open and a long tongue that rolls out, Bhishma ascending to the heavens, Subadra's cot is flying in the air while she is fast asleep and what not the tricks are the credo of Surabhi people. Their tricks with ropes and gauze curtains helped them in constructing a world of illusion for the audience and slowly those romantic mythological spheres got internalized in their own life. This helped them to forget the hardship of day to day survival.

The following back stage pictures reveal how their daily life is nothing but part of the



mythological world and how they effectively negotiate with the utopian make belief.



3 4



5



6

Image: 3, 4, 5 and 6 - From living rooms to the Mythic world.

Source: Pictures by researcher and form internet.

Proscenium curtain and the decorated arch with the ornamentations boldly have the figures of patron Gods which invites the spectator to the mythological world of illusion which is



beyond their imagination. Behind the proscenium curtain, the acts and scenes are set up like a deck of cards; through these things the story is sequenced and the narrative organized. Each scene within an act materializes by dropping curtains with distinctive painted locales that descend vertically or are flown down from the flies onto the stage. The painted drop is placed in such a way within the proscenium arch, in any one of several positions preset for a back scene, which leaves a wide acting area in front for the actors to perform on, so that depending on the way you look at it, the actors are always either against the curtain, or before it. The actors are, as it were, revealed nested within the painted scene.



7



8

Image: 7 and 8 Show the pictures of Balanagamma with her son in the cradle and Mantrik in



the play Balanagamma

Source: Surabhi Collection

This helps the super human characters to live in the illusionary world of make belief.

Creators of this illusionary world of Surabhi are its talented painters who make the sceneries or scenic curtains which is ideally suitable for their stage space.

The generalized backdrops of Surabhi Theatre include forest, garden, street, palace or durbar, anthapur (women's quarters), perhaps a cave scene especially for Surabhi's enormously popular play *Mayabazar*, and sometimes heaven. The curtains often used in the current performances have more parks for 'love scenes' and streets with modern buildings.



9

Image: 9 Life amidst the real and imaginary, a Scene from *Pathala Bhairavi*

Source: Surabhi Brochure

The curtains typically manifest locations analogous to the ones summoned through dialogue and song, and therefore interpolate the performers into physically defined, almost material

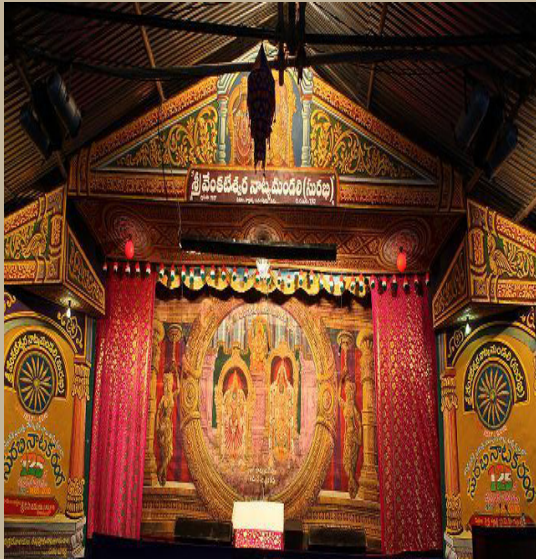


space wherein tableaux, which are the consequence of these locations, might be composed; but they also provide a spectacular and fantastic space beyond the illusionistic one. So on the one hand, the narrative is grounded by the atmosphere produced by the curtains; on the other, paradoxically, the world of romance and dream is released, indeed made practicable, only through their presence. So the actors clad in the costume and elaborate make-up enhance the stage picture for the narrative to progress aiming at the satisfaction of their target audience.

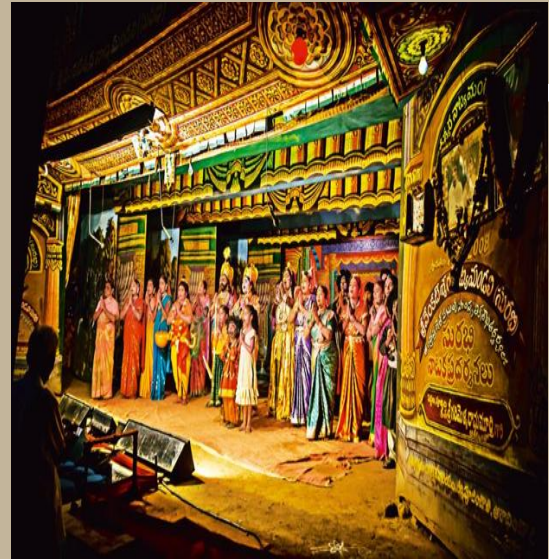
The spectators of Surabhi performances are already familiar with their visuals through their exposure with the other visual media including film posters from Bollywood and from Tamil and Telugu cinema, they may watch a great deal of visual media and TV soaps, and of course cinema. This wide-ranging visual plurality may well migrate to the picture-frame stage that Surabhi constructs today. Thus the Surabhi stage appears to accommodate several different spaces within it; several sites that are in themselves, and within the chronology of time, even unable to coexist with in the logic of time and trends. The costume of the characters might install them within the fashion systems of Telugu cinema. Interestingly the depiction of a courtly space painted on the scene curtain may chart a course through the notions of majesty obtained from provincial Mughal schools of painting; the foliage or even a particular tree, gained from the Deccani miniatures. Flatly laid out clouds as well as stoutly painted pillars, even if they appear to do very different things, do not cancel each other out, rather they point to the intent of garnering all means at hand to captivate the viewer. Often the costume also shows this variance in terms of material used the period or context taken in to consideration and the design pattern followed etc. But, the performer as well as the audience never bothered about these miss matches of space or style instead they completely immerse into the repertoire of stories told and retold to them over periods of time. The last



curtain call in which all the performers clad in their costume come on to the down stage along the lines of the proscenium arch displays the most glittering stage picture and they themselves say adieu to the created utopian world then and there .



10



11

Image: 10and 11- Architecture, Actors, costume and light together completes the visual

Source: Pictures by researcher

It seems to someone like us or a fan of Surabhi, who has followed the work of Surabhi for many years; it is the surplus of illusion in the performance that is compelling. The Surabhi stage creates a space of fantasy far in excess of the illusionist space that all theatres in any case create.

Each play fantastically revolves around the mythological texts which fluidly cut across spaces and time. Simultaneously the spaces are shown on the stage using scenery tricks with the changing of gauze curtain. Often one can see character sleeping and the dreamscape appear beside, in split of seconds the scene comes back to the dream again etc. In



way dreams of Nayikas play an important role in their themes which provide an opportunity for Surabhi to show its tricks and the narrative to grow. Interestingly, in many plays the character Narada who vertically descends on to the stage from heaven to earth becomes suthradhari to begin and bridge the events of the play.

For Surabhi as opined by Anuradha kapur, It is a 'floating space', meticulously and affectionately assembled, a 'place without a place', entirely illusory, that yet contains a performance enacted at once, simultaneously, in several time zones. It is a performance that is closed in on itself but is at the same time given over to the audience, so as to permit a viewing of its special treasures that are collected from diverse eras, styles, and grammars of theatre, visuality, and architectural convention; from folk traditions, painted scrolls, photographic backdrops, and cinema, audaciously modified and laid out for its present consumers. For most companies, including Surabhi, there is a set of stock curtains that migrate from performance to performance. Most companies do not get special curtains painted for each play, for two familiar reasons: as itinerant companies they have to travel light, and also because curtains, however closely they follow the rules of the rational construction of space, are never "actual locations but always a type of location, pristine romantic, historical, heroic and are semiotically standardized; where, natural settings often imply conjugality and romance, palace settings suggest status aspirations" (Arjun Appadurai 4-7). The densely covered caves and dungeons create awe and justify the magical powers unleashed through the stage tricks. The illusionary space created by the Surabhi for its audience, who is been charmed by the effects of pictorial illusionism eagerly waits to be part of it. What is essential in this regard is the creation of that world of make-belief in an actual



rectangular available stage space in their tents. This is, in fact, a labour-intensive in which carpenters, painters, lights men, makeup artists, stage hands all belongs to Surabhi push, pull, counter weight, hoist, and drop the curtain apparatus in order to play a part in producing an ephemeral, illusory and often breathtakingly self regarding stage picture. Surabhi is always proud of their creation and have absorbed in to this romantic utopia. This makes their individual names suffixed with Surabhi, family associated with Surabhi theatres and their profession often identified with Surabhi craft. This brands them to work with various creative media industries as designers, co creators, stage hands and laborers for the survival.

Leftovers of the old-fashioned theatre loiter in the troupe's garish make-up, pretentious dialogues and garish costumes. But the presentation goes with clockwork precision, with everyone plunging in. For instance, when they need an expectant mother, there is usually one for real. They can run a single production with five Krishna's of different age groups in one show. It is lovely to see a fourth generation family member is playing the role along with the seventh generation of Surabhi member in their century-old plays. This aspect reveals how immense their human resource potentiality is which helps them even to take up or divide certain single roles between two actors in an only show. Being in a family, learning the characters and craft from the early years under different specialists help the group members to empower themselves to take up any position at any point of time in their theatrical life. This makes them create a theatrical world sans hierarchy at that moment of play productions.

Another important aspect is how they manage the concept of time in their strictly scheduled life centre around the mythological periods surpassed in the show time. A single



day schedule will give one the clear idea of how they practically manage the time. Their performance starts at 6:30pm. At 4:30pm the whole group of Surabhi performs *puja* in front of idol's of god and Goddess and then they start wearing their costumes and make-up. At 6.15pm the curtains are lifted and the head of the troupe comes on to the stage, performs **puja** to the God and Goddess by ringing the bell. At 6.25pm again the head comes on to the stage and performs the *puja* ringing the bell. By the time the musicians and the lighting technicians reach their respective places. Sharply at 6.30pm all the actors, actresses, musicians, and the whole troupe comes on to the stage and prays. Immediately the play starts. They start the play exactly at the given time. In between the scenes there will be no delay, and the next scene is performed instantly. At the end of the play again the whole group comes on to the stage for the *Mangalam*. After the play each member takes part in the works of the theatre. They clean the stage and they pack all their belongings that they have used. The whole work is carried out without any noises. In the day time they practise for the evenings play. Set designers will do set work, singers practise their songs; the head of the group plans their next program and makes all the arrangements. The above said schedule is not an ideal one but indeed practised by the **sri .Venkateswara Natya Mandali** at their temporary abode in Hyderabad. Almost similar use of time is kept by the touring troupes of Surabhi too. Interestingly the present generation keeps up their studies and other extra professional commitments by squeezing the time by giving priority to the show.

Sadly, for all its attractions Surabhi was beginning to turn off the audiences. At a time when it seemed that Surabhi's disbanding was looming, due to the timely interventions by the cultural pundits, the organizers of the group asked acclaimed musician-director B.V.



Karanth to rejuvenate it with innovative theatre techniques. Alarippu, a Delhi-based NGO, economically supported his initiative. This initiation of influences and interactions started during the early 90's. The veteran director's task was daunting. **Bhishma**'s staging at the National Drama Festival in Kozhikode, Kerala, he found that the audience response as an eye-opener. The striking invocation with which the play started drew prolonged applause. But the eagerness soon flagged off because of the routine, repetitive sequences with no ingenuity.

Karanth realized that the only way to salvage the group's tradition was to put it in sync with contemporary reality. Later he tried to blend the old with the new. In Karanth's opinion "Typical characteristics like bright costumes, glittering crowns and artistic cut-outs will, however, remain" (as quoted in Amarnath K. Menon). The freshness in themes is the priority which made him to look for the contemporary interpretation of modern plays, he also felt, the group need to increase the artistes' awareness and improve their dialogue delivery. Unfazed by the apathetic response *Bhishma* received, Karanth next produced **Chandi Priya**. The play deals with the contemporary theme of female infanticide. It inspired the younger Surabhi members, especially the women, as it made them aware that they were as important as the male actors. The premiere of the third production *Basti devata Yadamma*, an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, at a packed auditorium in Hyderabad and the later shows especially many repetitions of the **chandi priya** production has proved that it has gone down well with the urban audience and in the countryside as well. These interventions helped Surabhi to be part of different theatre festivals in and around the country.



For the artistes, life is tough though they are paid paltry Rs 3,500-4,000 a month. Even though they have financial assistance in the form of repertory grant, changing aesthetics and Rising costs threaten the very survival of the troupes. Once Surabhi's adviser late Garimella Ramamurty said "We will be forced to ask them to leave if we don't get enough financial support" (Garimella Ramamurty). But the fact that Surabhi has survived for so long speaks volumes for the resilience of Rao's successors. Most of the youngsters aspired to make modern plays in Surabhi style which they hope will be appealing to rural audience. As Karanth equated, Surabhi's actors to 'uncut diamonds' with various influences, exposures and experiences which made them smoothen out the rough edges, the family always hoped to regain its former glory. And keep that leather puppeteer's legacy alive.

This hope and the industrial talents in managing the resources holistically helped them to survive and continue all through the years. By trade marking their plays like *Maya Bazaar* they could endure during the onslaught of television and the changing aesthetic sensibilities forced them to get into the cultural festival circuits in the urban cities in the times of globalization where different groups of Surabhi comes under one umbrella and conduct their festival of plays. In the digital era they are trying to be there with their presence in the social net work and have their web site and blog. The present strategy is branding Surabhi as the one and only family theatre in India .it is all possible because they are still proud of living in/with their theatre.

Surabhi as a single family includes many families have a similar lineage so it becomes a community of players and entertainers. They have their own understanding about space, time and event management through a set of practices they followed over a period of



time. These customary practices believed to be part of their life constructed their world view especially on the aesthetic realm, that's the reason behind their own creation of making their play productions as events out of everyday life. Be it a Marriage function, or *Ganesha puja* they bring in their exuberant play productions as a part. They have never undermined but cling on to their traditional repertoire for an extended period. They accommodate their set, costume preparation during the post lunch informal chat. In a way they have developed their space and time management system where all their personnel and professional needs collide but sail through positively. Born and brought up in the world of itinerant troupes, camping and travelling got internalized into their life. The concepts of space and place, on and off stage, real and romantic, personal and public got merged and managed through the practices appropriated by them through the ages. Their life and practice made them survive all through the years.



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