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The Performative Tradition in Girish Karnad's Theatre

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This paper is an attempt to place the performative practice of Karnad in the context of the tradition of Indian theatre. The Natya Shastra as a virtual encyclopaedia of performance practice is mentioned just as it is shown that the tradition of Indian theatre is mainly performative in nature. The performance practice of Karnad then comes up for discussion, how he writes his plays keeping the stage in mind and also how he respects the autonomy of the director. Theatre as a live, interactive and participatory medium, Karnad points out, has a head start over other performance forms and the paper through examples from his plays shows how he makes use of those qualities to enhance the performance experience.

The performative aspect is very strong in Girish Karnad's theatre as he works in the postcolonial theatrical tradition which being mainly ritualistic in origin and communal in nature is performative in character. The full extent of this performative element, however, we find in the works of Panikkar, Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam. These three have moved away from the dramatic text/playscript mode wherein the playwright has a written text he has worked towards with him at the rehearsals. The concept of performance has overtaken this earlier notion of a play staged with an unchangeable fixed script. For example, Kanhailal in neither *Pebet* nor *Memoirs of Africa* had a prior dramatic text. As Rustom Bharucha points out, "these productions have evolved through an organic creative process involving improvisation, song and dance with no documentation or playwriting whatsoever" (1). What we find here is the replacement of the dramatic text by the theatrical/performance text.

Though Karnad's theatre is not a performance text in the strict sense of the word, yet there is no disowning that Karnad is very much alive to the privileging of performance in Indian theatrical practice as enshrined in the Natya Shastra. A compendium of performance practice, the Natya Shastra elaborates in detail the origin of performance, the architectural construction of play house, ritual preliminaries to a performance, and copiously describes different kinds of performance experience. Rather than either imitation (particularly the concept of imitation inherent in late nineteenth century realism) or art (an interpretation of a play - presumably a written text - moving in an ordered progression to produce an effect) that are individual in nature, performance, according to the Natya Shastra, is a shared, mutual experience of the performer and the spectator. And the Natya Shastra assiduously itemizes all the various ways by which the performance experience is brought about - the various kinds of literary structures for performance, movements, metrical patterns, languages, forms of address and intonations,

production styles, music, costumes and make-ups, performance structures, performance and musical theories, roles and characters.

Karnad affirms this tradition of performance in our indigenous theatre while drawing a distinction with the erstwhile Western theatre practices: “We have never had any real tradition of playwriting at all; after Sanskrit plays, where are the texts? As for our folk theatre, it has been a tradition of performance, not of playwriting. Only the West has had a playwriting tradition” (“I am trying”). The presence of plays in Sanskrit apparently disproves the argument but the reason behind this, as Karnad indicates, is socio-political in nature. “Sanskrit plays were written from the third century B.C. to the 8th century A.D. I think they were written because they were in Sanskrit, and the actors didn’t know Sanskrit. They were essentially Shudras and not Brahmins, so probably they had to learn their lines and couldn’t improvise, and therefore the plays were written down” (Karnad, “Young playwrights”).

The argument therefore that the playwriting tradition in Sanskrit is an extraneous one, an aberration forced by the peculiar socio-political condition of the time is further confirmed by the fact that important performative forms like the Yakshagana and the Kathakali don’t possess any pre-written texts. In the case of Yakshagana the Bhagavata (interpreter) sits on stage and improvises during the performance. As Karnad makes the point, “from eighth century till 19th century there were no playwrights. In mediaeval times you get epics, you get bhajans, you get stories but you never get plays. The whole notion of plays is a foreign one” (“Young playwrights”). Taking on the argument that wishes to drive a wedge between classical (Sanskrit) and folk theatre forms like Yakshagana, Kathakali and others, Karnad contends: “I am convinced that there is no difference between the theatre conventions of classical drama and those of folk drama. The principles that govern their dramatic aesthetics are the same. It seems to me that among 10 forms of drama identified by Bharata, some must have been folk forms. ‘Bhana’ for example” (Chatterjee). The important thing, as he maintains, is that “plays are ultimately what comes alive on stage. And if you look upon it as a performing art, you know, theatre, then” (“Young Playwrights”). Karnad feels that in the aftermath of the realist, naturalist tradition, the winds of change are discernible in the West also. “In fact, more and more, the playwrights are moving away from written plays towards theatre” (Karnad, “I am trying”). And this privileging of performance receives further boost when performance theorists like Erika Fischer-Lichte point out “that the concept of performance, that performance theory is in the centre and at the heart of all debates in cultural, social and art studies” (1).

Karnad’s commitment to theatre and the primacy of performance can be visible in his general hands-off policy once he has written his plays. He doesn’t normally interfere in his plays’ production. “I find it more convenient . . . not to get involved in the productions of my plays” (Karnad, “Interviewed”). His praxis has however undergone a change over the years. Earlier he used to “write a play and hand it over right away to my publishers – Manohar Grantha Mala,

Dharwad – for publishing” and then as he saw a production on the stage, he would make corrections, which were incorporated into later editions. Nowadays he likes “to work with a dramaturg, and then with the director and actors, correcting, rewriting during rehearsals” (Karnad, “The sacrifice”). His long association with Madras Players has been particularly fruitful in this regard. As he says, “Now, even as I write, I can visualise what the scenes could be like on the stage” (“Realism, a myth”).

Even so, he refrains from encroaching on the autonomy of the director. As in the case of the high profile Guthrie Theatre production of Nagamandala (1990) he gave the actors and the artistic director, Garland Wright full freedom to interpret it in their own way (Raman). Similarly in the case of the Leicester Haymarket Theatre production of Bali (2004), he scarcely made his way to the rehearsals at Leicester from London where he was stationed at that time as the Director of the Nehru Centre. “As I live in London and the rehearsals were going on in Leicester, I couldn’t attend too many of them. But I would drop in once in a while to check if there was any rewriting required, any additional dialogues etc” (Karnad, “The sacrifice”). Other than The Fire and the Rain (1998) production of Prasanna about which he raised objections, he has more or less kept himself aloof from his plays’ stage productions. With the Prasanna production, the problem was that Prasanna had deleted the entire Brahmarakshasa episode and had changed the ending. Moreover, it being a prestigious production (mounted by the National School of Drama) Karnad felt he needed to intervene (Rajagopal). As far as his late foray from playwriting to direction is concerned, it is, as he himself says, not to usurp the authority of the director but to have a grasp of the technology summoned up for use in the play, Broken Images (2005). Co-directed with K.M. Chaitanya, the play “posed peculiar technical problems – a woman talking to her image, and finally morphing into that image”. He therefore thought it best to sort it out on the stage himself, see how – or whether – it works (Karnad, “Director’s Cut”).

We need to mention in this context how in theatre different productions of the same play can differ widely in their thrust and focus. Examples abound. For example, Hayavadana (1975) has been presented variously. A review of the play’s three different stage productions “Last Month in Delhi: Hayavadan Triad” by Avik Ghosh shows how the Dishantar production (Delhi) directed by B.V. Karanth, Theatre Unit, Bombay’s production directed by Satyadev Dubey and Anamika, Calcutta’s production directed by Rajinder Nath completely differed from one another. While in the one by Karanth the folk element was pre-eminent, Dubey mounted the play as a realistic production. Rajinder Nath trod the middle ground making use of both the elements in his production. And not just Hayavadana, even Tughlaq (1972) conceived by Karnad on the Parsi stagecraft model comprising alternating shallow and deep scenes was in the Purana Qila production of Ebrahim Alkazi transformed into a grand spectacle. The same Tughlaq underwent a change of a different type in Arvind Gaur’s Asmita production just as in the Alyque Padamsee production of the play with Kabir Bedi in the title role there was a marked iconization of the

actor's masculine features. And Karnad is comfortable providing directors the space to manoeuvre.

Look at Hamlet, probably more has been done with Hamlet as a play than with any other; that's because the play can take it. It's a tribute to the versatility of the play that different people see different things, and can bring it out differently. And if someone can do that with Tughlak or with The Fire and the Rain, I would take it as a compliment. Tughlak and Hayavadana have been performed so many times, with so many variations. (Rajagopal)

In keeping with the post-independence tradition in Indian theatre of the omnipotence of the director, "One distinct feature of the modern theatre since 1947 has been the emergence of the Director on the scene" (Deshpande 9), today a dramatic text has become an "ananta patha" text – "a multiplicity of texts arising out of a set of words and sentences" (Deshpande 10). Whereas earlier the play had a father (author), now in the director and author the play has proper parents.

Add to all these, the human element in theatre and you know why theatre is so fascinating. As Karnad indicates, "It is there for keeps. Whatever happens, theatre will be back. It will withstand the rapid changes in technology; anything and everything can change but human beings are irreplaceable" ("Theatre will survive"). Confronted with the suggestion of having two technologically simulated images talking to each other and no human actor in the dramatized enactment of Broken Images he has his finger right on the dramatic pulse when he points out that technology can only augment the dramatic experience, not replace the human element in it.

Ultimately the technology should talk of a human issue. If I have Rs 25 lakh, I can make a technological wonder, but it's not a technological circus. Ultimately theatre touches if it touches. It's theatre if there is one actor, the human element. Otherwise you could be looking at computer-generated image, a moving image on video, a hologram, a three-dimensional laser image . . . it must react to a human situation, otherwise it's not theatre and I'm not interested. (Nanda Kumar)

Being a live medium theatre carries with it a sense of unpredictability that adds to its romance. Talking about the Hindu myth of first performance by the gods that was vandalized by the demons, Karnad remarks:

The myth, it seems to me, is pointing to an essential characteristic of theatre . . . that every performance – however carefully devised – carries within itself the risk of failure, of disruption and therefore of violence. The minimum that a live performance requires is a human being performing (that is, pretending to be someone else) and another one watching him or her, and that is a situation already fraught with uncertainty. ("Theatre Day Message")

Ephemeral in nature, “It belongs to the moment when it is being watched” it can still transcend the here and the now as it does in the following example Karnad provides.

For instance, in Tughlak, there’s a line, one of the watchmen on the fort says to another one ... A fort may be however strong, it doesn’t matter. When it collapses, it collapses because of internal weakness. The play was written in 1964-65. But I saw a show a month after Indira Gandhi was assassinated. And when the watchman said this line, the whole audience said ah as though I had written it for that purpose. (Rajagopal)

It is this human element, the unpredictability of the whole exercise that, according to Karnad, gives theatre an advantage over other performative forms. Radio, films, television and video for all their durability are frozen forms lacking the live vibrancy of audience participation that is such an important feature of theatre.

But while these forms can engage or even enrage the audience, in none of them can the viewer’s response alter the artistic event itself . . . in theatre, the playwright, the performers and the audience form a continuum, but one which will always be unstable and therefore potentially explosive . . . theatre will continue to live and to provoke. (Karnad, “Theatre Day Message”)

The example of the BBC which has made Shakespeare’s theatre available through filmed versions does not enthuse Karnad much, for to him, they lack the magic of Shakespeare’s theatre (Karnad, “In His Own Voice” 47).

I am not convinced that good recordings can be made of theatre performances. Films can be made by transforming a play text into a film script. But the film is a different medium with a different meaning-producing mechanism. One can watch a film and respond to it but the spectator’s response does not affect the film text. I accept that film of plays text can be useful pedagogical tools but they cannot compensate for the experience of theatre. (Karnad, “In His Own Voice” 47-48)

Karnad rues the fact that Indian theatre which saw a kind of resurgence from the mid sixties to the mid seventies with the emergence of Badal Sircar Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar and himself on the scene has not been able to keep its pace and is presently not at the best of health. “I don’t know the reason for this change. I think it is because theatre somehow could not become professional. People who depended on theatre could no longer make a living out of it” (Karnad, “Enter”). The amateur status of theatre has been its biggest bane. He feels, “amateurs . . . found it difficult to consistently work in theatre. Moreover, most of them have gone into films and television, thus perpetuating the amateur status of theatre” (“I see myself”). That Karnad himself gravitated to acting in films and television in order to sustain is enough of a pointer. For all the satiation of creative urge, theatre still is not a financially profitable exercise. And until that

happens, all the head start that theatre has over other performative media will come to nothing much.

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