Untangling the Script of Drama to Evolve Theatre of Many Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

The play is produced with the interpretation of the script. The script, in fact, is a mere scattering of words, sounds and visuals. The sound, words and visuals as parallel entities, all independent yet very much interdependent. Whatever meaning can be discovered in them is only in their collaborative totality. With any shift of emphasis, the meaning can, will and should change. In such usage, the term 'drama' is reserved for a printed work while 'theatre' denotes activity. This distinction is perfectly valid, for drama is read while theatre is watched; drama has readers while theatre has spectators. A writer writes the play—that is the beginning. If the play is the beginning, the performance is the end and the score is the connecting link. And all these three elements taken together—the play, the score and the performance—constitute theatre. In theatre, direct communication is possible. That is the strength of theatre. Theatre can also be result-orientated, as theatre committed to a particular cause. Such theatre desires to change the thoughts and beliefs of the spectators, lead them to some action. Thus, theatrical performance is potentially one of the richest and most rewarding areas in the arts for exploring the interplay of society and culture.

Keywords: Synchronic, Polysemic, Theatrical, Connotation, Semiotics

The word 'drama' comes from a word related to the Greek verb 'to do'; 'theatre', on the other hand, comes from a word related to the verb 'to see'. Drama, as words on a page, and theatre, as enactment on stage. Drama is most often written language, the words ascribed to the characters which in the theatre are spoken by actors. As a written form, drama is easily appropriated by literary theory; it is understandable in the same general terms as fiction, poetry or any other form of letters. Unlike drama, theatre is not words on a page. Theatre is

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performance, though often the performance of a drama text, and entails not only words but space, actors, props, audience and the complex relations among these elements. Literary theory has often ignored in theatre. Theatre becomes a system of non-verbal signs, non-verbal languages, non-verbal writing, yet dominated still by the hegemony of language and letters as master-patterns for the workings of the non-verbal. Theatre too is a literature.

The play is produced with the interpretation of the script. The script, in fact, is a mere scattering of words, sounds and visuals. It has certain patterns, but no preconceived design. In the script, the identity of sound and words could be separated from that of the visuals. The words could be released from their responsibility of sitting on the lips that are primary to a performance; they could be exploited as an endless source of fragmentation. Sound, which is already used in fragmentation as an effect, could also be elevated to the role of a principle entity standing almost parallel to the words and visuals. The sound, words and visuals as parallel entities, all independent yet very much interdependent. While they exist and grow in separation, they are not at all meaningful separately. Whatever meaning can be discovered in them is only in their collaborative totality. With any shift of emphasis, the meaning can, will and should change. To quote Mohan Rakesh:

> For evolving a different concept of theatre, one has to go deep into the study of words today, just because they happen to be so very treacherous...Like perpetual nomads words often exult the defying all efforts at harnessing them. Even to repudiate words one is led to find more words….Since there can be no escape from the words in theatre, how could a way be found of steering them effectively towards one's dramatic purpose rather being steered by them towards the yawning abyss of purposeless articulation.[1]

Words written in the script occupy space on 'Page' but when they are on 'Stage' they occupy a space beyond. Echoing John Whiting's views on language, Rakesh writes:

> Words are highly treacherous medium. They are quite often likely to connote much more or much less than the intended meaning. Sometimes even the contrary of it. Invoking varied associations at different centres of perception in different individuals,

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they can easily defy, or even belie, the intentions of one who may have wanted to use them as instruments of precise communication.[2]

Similar views are expressed by O.P. Budholia, as he points out:

> With the related aspects of contextualization, a word brings the manifold meanings of its usage. The association between the cognition and perception gives rise to the imaginative intuition and this unified process unfolds yet the cognized meanings of words explicitly before the readers. On the basis of the norms of Indian poetics, the suggestive meaning or *vyanjnartha* can be realized through the following components: (a) the speaker, (b) the person spoken to, (c) intonation, (d) the sentence, (e) the expressed meaning, (f) the presence of another, (g) context, (h) place, (i) time and space. Thus the word power through its connotative and indicative meanings leads finally to an awareness of cognized meaning or *dhvnyartha* (suggestive meaning).
>
> The grammarians of Indian poetics have divided the linguistic properties of the words into following constituents: *Abidha* (the expressive), *Laksna* (the indicative) and *Vyanjna* (the suggestive). The traditional meaning of any word lies in its expressive form. The grammarians do not accept the isolated meaning of the word. Apart from the traditional meaning, every word carries its indicative meaning too. The third meaning of the word is the suggested meaning (*vynjanartha*). However, the total properties of the word (connotative, indicative and suggestive) can be called the total essence of the word properties. The different meanings of word become causative to the finality of the higher concept of human thought.[3]

According to Elam Keir, "Every aspect of performance is governed by the denotation-connotation dialect: the set, the actor's body, his movement and speech determine and are determined by a constantly shifting network of primary and secondary meanings."[4]

In everyday conversation, we often use 'drama' and 'theatre' interchangeably. But sometimes we also use these terms to mean two different things. In such usage, the term 'drama' is reserved for a printed work while 'theatre' denotes activity. This distinction is perfectly valid,

for drama is read while theatre is watched; drama has readers while theatre has spectators. Drama's mode of existence is literary and it takes the form of a written text. The theatre's mode of existence, on the other hand, is predominantly visual and auditory. It takes the form of a live public event. As Dr. Mayank Ranjan writes, "Drama is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance."[5]

Drama is written to be staged, hence, apart from compositional accomplishments; technical requirements of the stage and the understanding of the psychology of the audience deserve equal attention and incorporation in its performance. Play-text, according to Kenneth Pickering is "the blueprint for performance."[6] George Whitfield explains drama as "a social art. No one can produce a play by himself. The words of the text are not the play, nor is the theatre in which it will eventually be produced. Even a dress rehearsal can hardly be called performance. A play is cumulative of many relationships."[7] Both the text and performance contribute to create a cathartic effect, i.e., entertainment, instruction, enlightenment, happiness, peace and moral upliftment. The success of the play is to be tested only on the stage, as M.K. Naik comments, "drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realisation only when it becomes spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience."[8]

Theatre is a live show. The events of theatre do not take place unless two parties of human beings, the performers and the spectators, gather at the same place on the same day at the same time, and stay together for some time. The performance is here and now, although the story or the theme of the play may be there and then.

A writer writes the play—that is the beginning. As such, it is the piece of literature written in particular language which is to be read by others knowing that language. But then comes the director who transforms the written play into audio-visual scenes with the help of several performers. These audio-visual scenes can be called as score. When the performers project the score to other people, it is no longer a piece of literature to be read and enjoyed privately and severally, but an event to be audio-visually experienced by a group of people assembled for that purpose—the spectators. This event is the performance. If the play is the beginning,

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the performance is the end and the score is the connecting link. And all these three elements taken together—the play, the score and the performance—constitute theatre.

The playwright therefore has to think of the final event, the performance, right from the beginning. He has to deal with two media simultaneously—literature and theatre. His language has to be a special language, different from that in other branches of literature, for it must be translatable into audio-visual scenes which can be projected by a group of performers to a group of spectators. These two groups assemble and stay together for a span of time by mutual agreement, and the play in its entirety must be expressed in audio-visual terms within that span of time. The playwright can do this through a story.

In order to be translated into theatre language, the story has to be expressed through the interaction of a number of inter-related people—the characters of the play—mostly by means of dialogue. Here, the language of the playwright is the language used by different persons in the story. The playwright is actually copying from life. The characters of his play are most believable when they speak, behave and react in exactly the same way as the spectator would expect them to under the circumstances created by the story of the play. Those circumstances must also be believable, that is, something that can happen in real life. The settings of the events of the story should also be as close to real-life situation as possible. But just a copy of real life does not make theatre; the playwright has to screen out those inevitable details with which life is encumbered, which are not relevant to his story, which are not interesting. He may decide to omit two hours, three days, several months or years from the life of the people in his play. This time lapse is indicated by a gap between two consecutive parts or 'scenes' of the play, usually created by closing the curtain or by making the stage dark. The change in the locales of different events is also indicated in the same way.

The performers' task in theatre is to speak and behave in the manner of the characters of the play, and the directors prepares the score accordingly. The idea is to make the spectator believe that the people on the stage are not performers, but the actual people of the story; that the stage is not just the raised platform, but the actual places where the events of the story occur. In short, an *illusion of reality* is to be created in the mind of the spectator, so that he

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can identify the characters in the play in terms of his own experiences in real life, feel for them, be moved by the events in their lives.

Theatre is live. In theatre, direct communication is possible. That is the strength of theatre. Theatre is the meeting place of two sets of human beings; something happens between them—a human act. Theatre is human event.

It is said that the source of theatre is ritual. Ritual is a theatre in which whole community participates. The play is not written but is known by the whole community; the score is also known; the roles are distributed according to convention. In ritual, everybody participates, but there are some performers who have special roles— 'shamans', guides and initiators, trance dancers, high priests, chosen seniors. They are allotted special action and speech, special costume, special make-up. It is true that ritual is mainly result-orientated—warding off calamity, bringing rain, increasing fertility, initiating a child into adulthood, transforming single status into married status, etc., but ritual is also entertainment. The elements of fun and fiesta are there for the entire community. Theatre can also be result-orientated, as theatre committed to a particular cause. Such theatre desires to change the thoughts and beliefs of the spectators, lead them to some action. In this respect, theatre is moving closer to ritual, inter-weaving efficacy and entertainment. According to Badal Sircar:

> In theatre, communication can occur in four ways: performer to spectator, performer to performer, spectator to performer, spectator to spectator. The performers always project to spectators that is what theatre is for. The performers communicate to one another, for they are inter-related in their roles in the play; even when there is no story and characters, they work as a team, complementing one another in action and speech. The attention of the spectator, concentration, the reaction to the performance reflected in his facial expression or the tension in his body—all these can be a form of feedback to the performer or to another spectator. And once the performers recognize the presence of the spectators by coming nearer, by putting them in light, other opportunities of voluntary and spontaneous participation on the part of spectators can be included in the theatre.[9]

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This process of exploration, of asking questions and finding possible answers, does not remain limited in his mind simply as a thought process. Being actively involved in theatre all through, he tries out many of the answers in his practice.

Any event that involves the interplay of time, space, performers, action and spectators may be understood to carry the possibilities of theatre. Theatre's capacity to give visual embodiment to ideas with its distinctive language/semiotics awards theatre a unique system of intelligibility. Artaud, as is well known, takes this as the major achievement for theatre and explains that "theatre's non-verbal language might incorporate but would not finally need the language of written text."[10] Hence, he argues, theatre provides an independent way of understanding the meaning of the play. This confers a special status upon theatre. The norms of verisimilitude, notions of 'theatricality'; which have been major pre-occupation of all theatre practitioners through the past history and adherence to the viewpoint that theatre existed only for and by itself would evidently make that very world of theatre ephemeral.

The point to note here is that these views deepen the gap between literature and performance as separate domains and rare are the occasions when the twain is allowed to meet.

It is obvious that while the 'literary approach' would insist on a 'written' text and confine itself to the thematic explorations of that text, the 'theatrical approach' would take theatre productions as interpretations of drama script even though they might or might not do justice to the script or the possibilities of the text. For the 'literary approach', the dramatist 'controls the meaning'; for the 'theatrical approach', the director and the performers have the ability to 'manipulate the meaning.' The theatre and drama researcher are expected to deal with apparently dissimilar—although intimately correlated—types of textual material: one that is produced for theatre and another that is produced in theatre.

To settle this contentious matter therefore, the ideal would be to reconcile the two 'types of texts' as being complimentary to each other and insist upon an accompanying theatre environment to give life to a dramatic text. This would mean that if indeed performance is to be accommodated within the concept of 'genre', it would entail the acceptance that each new

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performance is capable of carrying within it the potential of a fresh interpretation and the possibility of a new 'genre'.

As for the 'unique language' of theatre that is distinctive from that of drama, the role of the 'director' becomes essential here as the expert in language of the theatre to access the whole range of dramatist's language for performative 'application', in the manner of –thought not exactly as –a reader/critic of the drama interacting with the play-text in the literary domain. It should not be thought that a reader of drama will construct the dramatic world in the same way as a spectator. Not only will the latter have to deal with more varied and specific kinds of information conveyed through the stage properties, but the perceptual and temporal conditions in which the spectator operates are also different. Elam Keir views that the reader is able to imagine the dramatic context in a leisurely and "pseudo-narrative" fashion, while the spectator must "process simultaneous and successive acoustic and visual signs within strictly defined time limits."[11] Despite the given differences in reception, one could still propose that the activity of 'application/interpretation' could constitute the performance itself—of encountering the audience/readership whose response would identify and establish the 'text for contemporary times.' Discussing the function of the text in performance, Patrice Pavis sees the text in synchronic confrontation with other elements that constitute the performance. He says, "it is the interaction of various elements that is offered to the spectator and not their history, suggesting that the text emerges in performance and is not something located prior to performance."[12]

Semiotics is a methodology for studying the production of meaning through analysis of the signs that cumulatively form the messages and texts that that we understand as having meaning. As a methodology for analysis, it is particularly useful for studying performance, which is a written text that is communicated physically, vocally and emotionally. There is a set, an actual performance venue, there are lights, props etc. There is also time and place in the world around us that resonates with the time and place of the world of the performance. Within all these elements there are innumerable separate signs that combine in relation to each other to contribute to how we interpret and understand the meaning of any particular performance.

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Almost all semiological work in the twentieth century borrows basic tenets from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics.* Saussure defines the sign as having two parts: the signifier, which is the material phenomenon we are able to perceive (an object, a sound of a word), and the signified, which is the mental concept invoked by the signifier. A sign is anything that has cultural meaning. These signs cumulatively make up codes that we read and interpret. A code consists of particular signs from a paradigm of possibilities of all signs that are combined together syntagmatically (in a sequence) to form a pattern that is easily recognised and has a relatively stable meaning. The central relationship in semiotics is the relation between the sign and its object. Words do not take their meanings from their relationship to ideas or things, but from their relationships with other words, and these relationships are relationships of difference - 'tree' is tree because it isn't 'free' or 'thee' or 'tray'. Saussure is interested in language not only as a closed semiotic system but also as an abstract system rather than as a system used by people in a changing world. He is more interested in *langue,* a particular language system, than in *parole,* the individual use of language in spoken expression. Saussure is also more interested in the synchronic than in the diachronic aspects of language: in the abstract pattern of language as a system frozen in a moment of time rather than in history, change and event.

The second founding figure of twentieth-century sign theory is Charles Peirce. According to Peirce there are three ways in which the sign can stand for its object: as icon, index or symbol. An icon is a sign that stands for an object by resembling it, not merely visually, but by any means. Included in this category of sign are obvious examples like pictures, maps and diagrams and some not so obvious ones like algebraic expressions and metaphors. The essential aspect of the relation of an icon to its object is one of similarity, broadly defined.

Indexes refer to their objects, not by virtue of any similarity relation, but rather via an actual causal link between the sign and its object: smoke is an index of fire, a weather vane is an index of wind direction, a mark on a fever thermometer is an index of body temperature, and so forth. The relation between the sign and its object is actual in that the sign and object have something in common; that is, the object "really" affects the sign.

Finally, symbols refer to their objects by virtue of a law, rule or convention. Words, propositions and texts are obvious examples in that no similarity or causal link is suggested in the relation between, for example, the word "horse" and the object to which it refers. In this category especially the potential arbitrary character of signs comes to the foreground. If symbols need bear no similarity or causal link to their object, then the sign user can consider the signs in unlimited ways, independent of any physical relationship to the sign user. This point is of crucial importance and, in fact lays the foundation for the semiotic view of cognition in humans. In theatre there are added layers of complexity. A chair is not just a chair, but a chair within a theatricalised event and as such has added meaning. If a curtain pulls back and reveals a single kitchen chair we will run through a range of possible meanings for that chair before the performance even begins. As the performance progresses that chair will take on new levels of meaning that have been generated within the performance.

Theatre is a polysemic text, that is, there are many possible meanings. In theatre there are a number of source people transmitting signals to receivers. These signals are encoded by the senders (actors, writers, directors, designers) and then decoded by the receivers (audience) but with the possibility of changes in the meaning that is understood. Theatre has two main channels of communication, visual and aural. To analyse the complex signals being received drama theory attempts to formulate a taxonomy (list of categories) of the elements of performance using the concepts of semiotics. A basic taxonomy would include a range of elements: linguistic, paralinguistic, proxemics, kinesics, vestimentary, cosmetic, pictorial, musical and many others. These elements operate within a series of frames, the extra-textual, what we bring as receivers; a circumtextual frame, pre and post-performance experiences and messages; an inter-textual frame, the relationship between this performance and others; and an intra-textual frame, the relationship between the elements within the play. These frames contribute to the ways in which we structure or understand the meaning and significance of the signs and codes of performance.

Each element can be broken down into a range of subsystems. For example, proxemics is the study of the use of space to generate meaning. It can be divided into three sub systems. Fixed

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features, any element in the theatre that is fixed in position such as a proscenium arch stage. These fixed features contribute to the type of space that is environment of the performance. Some spaces are organised to maximise communal space between the audience and the stage and each other, this called sociopetal space. Other venues can be organised in a way that maximising the sense of being an individual in a space only really connecting with the performance, this is a sociofugal space. There are also the semi-fixed features, the set, the lights etc. Then there are the informal features such as the actors, props and any aspect that moves or changes in the course of the performance. The meaning of informal features changes depending on the interstitial distances between objects/people. Interstitial distances can be divided into four subcategories. They are: intimate (e.g. touching or near touching), personal (two person conversation), social (small group conversation), and public (large group meeting). These then intersect with theatrical and cultural codes in adding and generating meaning within the performance. Through analysis of these types of elements it is possible to examine the ways in which a performance generates meaning and the types of meanings it is generating.

Semiological studies of theatre have been undertaken by a number of theorists. A systematic work of theatre semiotics is Elam Keir's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama.* Elam displays the strong structuralist bent of much semiological analysis, attempting to provide a coherent system capable of accounting for all significant activity of theatre and drama: smiles, gestures, tones of voice, blocking, music, light, character development and so forth. Elam quotes the Eastern European semiotician Jiri Veltrusky, 'All that is on the stage is a sign.'[13] He presents elaborate charts to account for signification in the theatre and for the structures of signification in dramatic discourse: human affects, for instance, can be reduced to a complex system of gestures and tones. Theatre becomes eminently analysable, understandable and readable.

In his short collection of essays, *Theatre Semiotics,* Marvin Carlson adds three concerns to the semiotic theory of theatre which he claims have been generally underdeveloped, "the semiotic contributions of the audience to the meaning of a theatrical performance - in Peirce's terms, how the audience receives and interprets signs; the semiotics of the entire theatre

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experience - the 'appearance of the auditorium, the displays in the lobby, the information in the program, and countless other parts of the event as a whole'; and the iconic relationship of theatre to the life it represents."[14] Thus theatrical performance is potentially one of the richest and most rewarding areas in the arts for exploring the interplay of society and culture.

All playwrights—in fact all writers—make use of figurative language. Similes and metaphors are at the heart of figurative expression and most dramatists employ them freely and profusely in the speeches of most of their characters. They are used to make language more colourful and dramatic. Other figure of speeches commonly employed by the dramatists are: allegory, alliteration, antithesis, cacophony, epithet, euphemism, euphony, imagery, paradox, periphrasis and personification. According to Prabhajan Mane:

> In many plays characters speak in plain, straightforward terms, while in others they speak in longwinded baroque or ornate terms. Most plays lean on one way or the other and within most plays there are usually some characters who use figurative language a great deal while there are others who hardly use it at all. The language of play is after all no more than the language of the characters—and they are often characterized merely by the extent to which they make use of figurative language.[15]

Though drama can be enjoyed in isolation, in our private reading, its real spirit and degree of perfection can be enjoyed and understood when it is performed on the stage. Hence textual perfection and technical innovations collectively work to make it a successful one. Theatrical techniques or conventions include the devices which are used by the playwright to transform play text into performing art.

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