From the Proscenium Stage to the Non-proscenium Theatre Space: The Beginnings of Sircar's Experiments in Dramaturgy

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Abstract: Badal Sircar's experiments in dramaturgy involved an intriguing journey from the proscenium stage to a non-proscenium theatre space. This transition was made possible through an unconventional approach to the making of a play, namely, the workshop process. The result was an interesting amalgamation of postmodern plurality and incipient social consciousness that ushered in a new phase in the political theatre of Bengal. Sircar, motivated by his outlook on theatre as an act of social commitment, fostered the idea of a free theatre – the Third Theatre – that would no longer be confined to the proscenium stage.

Keywords: proscenium, non-proscenium, workshop, free theatre, Third Theatre.

The first breakthrough in Sircar's attempts to organise a non-proscenium play came in the production of *Sagina Mahato* – a play he had formerly produced on the proscenium stage. By the time he had written this play in 1971, Sircar's concept of the Third Theatre[1] had sufficiently developed to make *Sagina Mahato* "fundamentally different" from all his previous plays. During its initial stage production, Sircar had done away with the usual features of conventional drama such as "the mechanical division . . . into scenes and acts," and "the sequence of time and the barriers and limitations of space." Also, "group acting, pantomime, rhythmic movements, songs and dances" were given more emphasis than dialogues; and "Sets were of the simplest kind that could easily be carried about and erected."[2] As Sircar has observed:

> The first experimental production of the play outside of the proscenium theatre took place on 24 October 1971, at the All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA) hall in Calcutta. It is a small hall with a tiny stage on one side, seating about 200 people when used as a conventional auditorium. We arranged the chairs in the hall and on the stage in such a manner that a central arena was obtained for acting. But we did not restrict the production to arena-acting or theatre-in-the-round but created acting areas amidst the spectators. Thus, the separation of the spectators from the performers was further broken, and a sense of being 'within' the performance was imparted, helping induce a considerable degree of involvement.[3]

By flouting the usual sitting arrangement and placing the audience on all sides of the acting arena, the dramatist not only reduced the distance between the actors and the spectators, but was also able to generate an intimate atmosphere in the hall. As the performance took place on the floor, it was possible for the actors to come face-to-face with the audience just as a spectator could see another spectator's reactions. This heightened the intensity of the emotional connection between the actors and the audience. "The essence of theatre, a live communication between artistes and spectators, could thus be achieved."[4]

A particularly interesting "accident" happened during the performance of the play. The electric fuse of the ABTA hall blew off at an intriguing moment, but the act continued unimpeded for about half a minute in absolute darkness! After that the ordinary house lights were switched on (not the spotlights which were being used for the play), and the show continued in this light for another five minutes, after which the theatre lights were reactivated. "During this period," wrote Sircar, "there was not a comment, not a murmur, not even a sigh or rustle of movement from the audience."[5] This incident confirmed the dramatist's opinion more than anything else that the involvement achieved in non-proscenium theatre is much more than that achieved during a conventional stage performance. In order to provoke the consciousness of the spectators, it is necessary that the actors have their absolute attention in the first place; this was accomplished in the way Sircar produced *Sagina Mahato* in the non-proscenium theatre space.

Spartacus was the first play written exclusively for "Anganmancha"[6] or the non-proscenium theatre space. It was *Spartacus* that led to the beginning of a new mode of theatre production that came to be known as the workshop[7] process. Based on Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus*, this play dramatized the story of the great slave revolt of BC 71 that shook the foundations of the mighty Roman Empire. It revolved around an uprising in the gladiatorial school of Capua which gradually developed into an organized slave revolt under the able leadership of Spartacus, the gladiator. Thousands of slaves rebelled against the deplorable conditions of their existence, and fought for freedom and dignity in a do-or-die situation. Unfortunately, their mutiny ended in failure and the majority of slaves either died on the battle-field or were taken captives and crucified. Yet, the spirit of protest continued to survive in the defeated rebels; they vowed to keep the memory of their leader and martyr alive in their future struggle for independence.

The major drawback of Sircar's initial production of *Spartacus* was its lengthy "score" or script, which led to a four-hour performance. This necessitated a pruning down of the score for future performances. Instead of editing the script himself, the playwright approached Satabdi[8], and the group began working on it right away. In this context, the dramatist has noted –

> That was the time when a new approach to the preparation of a play was tried out and a new methodology began to emerge. We call it the 'workshop' process . . . . Initially, I was introduced to it by several people from the West who were involved with theatre or dance. Very soon, the process was modified and enlarged through its application, first through the work of our group and later, through the workshops I conducted with theatre and non-theatre people.[9]

This new approach to dramaturgy proved to be an unusual experience for the dramatist and his group, and the play underwent a remarkable transformation in the process. The resultant "text" was no longer the product of Sircar the playwright-cum-director, but the creation of the members of Satabdi who collectively handled the script to give it their desired form and effect. Sircar did not go on to assign roles and rehearse his actors according to the demands of the play. Instead, he "put it to the group who confronted the script, tried it, tested it, accepted, enriched and rejected it and gradually began to build a structure that was much more than the written script."[10] This involved an improvisation of dialogues as well as substituting parts of the same with gestures and other visual modes of representation. The entire episode became a workshop, wherein, the members realized their potential as performers in the process.

Sircar initially felt incompetent to conduct workshops on the training of his actors, so he accepted the invitation of Dr Richard Schechner and his wife Joan of The Performance Group to go to New York and participate in their rehearsals. This visit proved to be inspirational as it honed his ideas of a non-proscenium theatrical performance. Through the Schechners, Sircar came in contact with prominent personalities of the new theatre in America, such as Julian Beck and Judith Malina of the Living Theatre, and Andre Gregory of the Manhattan Project. These groups, specially the Living Theatre, rarely used halls in the production of their plays, and even when they did so, the division between the stage and the auditorium was absolutely disregarded. In other words, "the distinction between the performers and the spectators [was] more or less done away with; the performers [went] to the auditorium and the spectators [found] a way of going on stage to participate."[11] While observing Schechner conduct workshops and rehearse *The Tooth of Crime* with his Performance Group, Sircar learned several useful techniques, exercises, and games that he later incorporated into the training process of his own actors. Besides, many other elements were borrowed from the American avant-garde theatre such as "the fragmentation of the script, the coupling of the actors' bodies in the formation of "machines" and image-structures, certain contortions of movement, some nonverbal sounds and cadences".[12]

When this unconventional dramaturgy was implemented in the preparation of *Spartacus*, it brought about significant changes. First and foremost, it was possible to trim the original script to a considerable extent as vast portions of the dialogue were substituted by sounds, gestures and movements. The crux of the play being "the sweat and blood of the slaves and their revolt"[13], no accoutrements superfluous to the actor-spectator relationship, was needed. The actors acquired the ability to express the note of toil, struggle and hope of the slaves, and the non-proscenium space greatly enhanced this effect.

Even before Sircar had left for New York on July 01, 1972, Satabdi had found a suitable place in Calcutta to set up a centre for their Third Theatre productions. It was "a room of 850 square feet area on the second floor of the Academy of Fine Arts [rented] for three consecutive days of the week – Sunday, Monday and Tuesday."[14] Despite its poor acoustics and limited capacity of sixty to seventy-five spectators at a time, the room was an apt locale for

workshops and non-proscenium performances. Satabdi named this theatre-space "Anganmancha" and prepared a manifesto which summed up the theatre's structure and organization:

> Anganmancha, run by Satabdi, is an intimate theatre in flexible form where performers and spectators are much closer, sometimes intermingled, so that the barriers and the distance between them are minimized.
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> Anganmancha is run not as a commercial theatre house, but as a theatre established and developed by the efforts of a community of theatre-lovers comprising performers, organizers and spectators. Hence the usual ticket system is replaced as far as possible by a system of membership.
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> Although the terms of membership have been kept at a minimum to enable all genuine theatre-lovers to participate, it is expected that a member joins the organization as a positive participant in this community effort of building a new theatre, and not in the spirit of calculating value for money.[15]

Spartacus was produced at the Anganmancha on January 28, 1973. As a production, the play had no prior model in Bengali theatre, and the audience response to it was overwhelming. The universal nature of the theme – revolt against oppression – made the story of Spartacus "relevant in any part of the world at any time."[16] This had induced Sircar to take up the tale, his own purpose being the awakening of social consciousness in his audience. Besides, the attempt to represent in theatre the vast setting and complex theme of Howard Fast's novel had always been a challenge to the dramatist. Sircar decided to get rid of the conventional plot-oriented approach; choosing, instead, an unconventional treatment of the theme. Consequently, the actors were divided into two major factions – the slaves and the Roman soldiers; others impersonated minor Roman characters who were more prototypes than individuals.

The action of the play comprised of several short scenes performed simultaneously, with the same space representing different times and locales, without being demarcated by a single set or prop. There was no chronological development of the plot, and events leapt from one scene to another, both forward and backward in time. The role of Spartacus was not played by an individual performer; rather, the lines of this character's speeches were divided between all the slaves. These slaves were bare-bodied with "knee-long shorts of cheap coarse cloth"[17] (the only woman among them being dressed in short pants and a shirt of similar material), while the "Romans" were clothed in contemporary Indian costumes. Ordinary lighting was used throughout the performance, with the exception of a single blue light that was used twice in the course of the play.

From the very beginning, *Spartacus* created an ambience of horror and cruelty as a throng of slaves dashed out from a single entrance to fill the performing arena completely. Five scenes – "(1) people being captured to be sold as slaves (2) slaves being sold in the market (3) slaves toiling (4) gladiator-slaves fighting in the arena and (5) a slave being crucified for an act of defiance"[18] – were depicted simultaneously through the use of sounds, gestures and limb movements. These movements of the actors as they lifted their hands and beat them down in unison in recurring gasps gradually built into a climax, expressing the utter anguish of the labouring slaves. "The only music used was a refrain without words sung by the group slaves without any instrumental accompaniment."[19]

The performers representing Roman soldiers looked like "the military police in Calcutta – impassive, steely eyed, and ruthless."[20] The slave-buyers appeared aristocratic in pristine "kurtas" and "pajamas"[21] as they checked the teeth and limbs of the slaves with cruel indifference. Brilliantly choreographed scenes brought out the savagery of the slaves combating in the arena. "There [were] no gladiatorial movements, no virtuosic somersaults and throws, no sadistic tortures of limbs"[22] as the actors wrestled with their bare arms. Sircar's production did not, however, make use of aggressive images for creating a disturbing effect. The raising of the body of the crucified slave in the air, and the outspread hands of the other slaves looking upwards in a semicircle, were poignant images that lingered with the audience till long after the play ended.

The contorting movements – "hands, arms, and legs . . . interlocked as they drag their bodies along"[23] – of the actors as they budged in and around the audience, along with the evocative tune of the refrain, hammered home the agony of the slaves. Needless to say, flowery dialogues or high-sounding rhetorical speeches used instead would have been less effective in stirring the consciousness of the audience; most of who "confessed that they felt the direct impact of the play in a way that they had never experienced in theatre before."[24] Once again, the innovative sitting arrangement designed for the spectators, facilitated connection between them and the audience. As the dramatist has elaborated,

> For this production, groups of spectators were seated at different places, like islands, one group being right at the centre of the room. The spaces in-between were used for acting. . . .
>
> The island arrangement of seats brought the spectators within the performance, instead of keeping them in detached sanctuaries from which they could just watch.[25]

When *Spartacus* was being produced at the Anganmancha, Sircar came to know about a group[26] doing free open-air theatre at Surendranath Park (formerly known as Curzon Park) in Calcutta. Satabdi invited this group to perform their plays at Anganmancha, and were invited in return to act in the park. On March 17, 1973, Satabdi enacted *Spartacus* at the said venue, using a shorter version of the play which took about eight minutes to perform as compared to the two-hour long Anganmancha production. Sircar was initially apprehensive about the response of the audience (which comprised of casual strollers at the park); but circumstances proved otherwise, and all his qualms were quietened.

Spartacus being "more complex and sophisticated in structure" compared to the plays which were usually performed at the open-air theatre, it required more attention from the audience, and so, it was assumed that the play would be best performed in an "intimate atmosphere".[27] This assumption of the dramatist proved incorrect as hundreds of spectators watched the play with "absolute silence and concentration during the entire performance"[28], even amidst the informal open-air milieu of the park. Sircar later recalled the reason behind the tremendous appeal of this performance:

> The grass-covered earth, the sun in the sky, the people sitting on the ground – all these gave a new meaning to the play . . . The bits of dry grass and patches of dirt on the bare bodies of the slaves covered with sweat, accentuated by spots of blood from the scratches caused by pebbles on the ground, made it a play of blood and sweat as it was supposed to be.[29]

The audience response to *Spartacus* proved beyond doubt that the Third Theatre – free from the shackles of all elements extraneous to the actor-spectator relationship – was conceivable in reality. This inspired other theatre groups such as Sri Bidusak, Sapath, Batanagar Theatre Workshop and Theatre Libre to organize open-air productions, and a new theatre movement gradually began to develop.

Sircar had always been of the opinion that if theatre was to play a genuine role in creating mass awareness about prevalent socio-economic oppression, it had to reach the working class people who could not usually afford to go to the theatre. Even if the Anganmancha productions were offered almost free of cost, yet, people from distant places could not travel all the way to the city. The open-air production of *Spartacus* proved beyond doubt that plays could be produced under all conditions, and so, Sircar no longer needed to "wait for the spectators to come to his theatre; instead he took his productions to where the masses were"[30]. This ensured that his plays were no longer restricted to the sophisticated urban audience, as they could now reach even remote and negligible areas such as the villages and the slums.

Spartacus thus marked the beginning of a definite process of change in Sircar's paradigm of creating and producing plays. Not only did it involve a movement from the proscenium stage to a non-proscenium theatre space; but it also demonstrated the gradual diminishing of the autonomous authorial voice leading to the rise of other voices in the text. A remark made by Sircar in this context is significant:

> . . . we were not just *rehearsing* a play set down in definite terms by the playwright but *confronting* a script to create live theatre out of it. What we were learning was useful not just for this play, but for other plays to be taken up in future. We were preparing a base whereby the next play may not be *written* by Badal Sircar or any other playwright but *created* by Satabdi – the entire group.[31]

This denial of authorial dominance and the subsequent incorporation of other "voices" – the viewpoints of the other members of Satabdi that went into reshaping the original score of *Spartacus* – led to the emergence of a note of "plurality" that became more and more prominent in Sircar's later plays. Understandably, there is an undermining of the authorial presence in theatre, as the playwright, by remaining behind the curtain, can never really impose himself on the play. But this is more so in the case of Badal Sircar, in whose plays, the dramatist's voice included other voices, leading to the creation of poly-vocal texts.

The note of plurality was also induced in the Third Theatre in the way Sircar no longer remained concerned with individual anguish and the loss of identity (found in his early plays such as *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas* and

Tringsha Satabdi), but became more and more interested in social atrocities (*Michhil*), dislocation of rural population (*Bhoma*), and urban and rural mass struggle (*Bāsi Khabar*). Consequently, the figure of a single, well-defined "protagonist" (Indrajit in *Evam Indrajit*, Saradindu in *Baki Itihas* and *Tringsha Satabdi*, or Sumanta in *Shesh Nei*) got replaced by a group or mass of people (the slaves in *Spartacus*, or the villagers in *Bhoma*) who collectively voiced their opinions in their attempts to convey the ideas embedded in the texts.

Notes and References

1. Sircar defines his "Third Theatre" as a synthesis of the "first theatre", i.e. the indigenous folk theatre, and the "second theatre", i.e. the urban theatre imported from the West.
2. The quoted sections in this paragraph have been taken from page 19 of Sircar's book, *On Theatre*.
3. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), pp. 19-20.
4. Subhendu Sarkar, *Badal Sircar: two plays* (New Delhi: OUP, 2010), p. xviii.
5. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 20.
6. "Anganmancha" is the name of Sircar's non-proscenium theatre which roughly means space theatre.
7. Sircar used the term "workshop" to indicate the process of the production of plays in his Third Theatre.
8. Satabdi is the name Sircar's theatre group.
9. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), pp. 102-103.
10. Ibid. 24.
11. Ibid. 26.
12. Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Hawaii: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983; Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983; New York: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 144.
13. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 105.
14. Ibid. 30.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid. 35.
17. Ibid. 36.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Hawaii: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983; Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983; New York: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 149.
21. Indian wear.
22. Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Hawaii: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983; Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983; New York: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 150.
23. Ibid. 152.
24. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 37.
25. Ibid. 36-37.
26. Refers to Bir Sen's theatre group Silhouette which pioneered open-air theatre at Surendranath Park on December 11, 1971. The group did not use stage, curtains, costume or sets, and the performances took place in broad daylight.
27. The quoted sections of this sentence have been taken from page 37 of Sircar's book *On Theatre*.
28. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 38.
29. Ibid.
30. Subhendu Sarkar, *Badal Sircar: two plays* (New Delhi: OUP, 2010), p. xxiv.
31. Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 25.