



MODERN STREET THEATRE

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Over the last 30 years there has been a gradual change in attitudes towards street theatre. Before that, whatever street theatre was there in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana was mainly the traditional street theatre. It was still popular in rural areas as a form of entertainment, though ritualistic and moralistic value system prevailed. Then came the traditional based modern street theatre practised by the Praja Natya Mandali and was greatly admired by rural and urban folk alike.

But modern street theatre has deviated from both of them, retaining some of the traits of both. Its subject matter is very contemporary like the Praja Natya Mandali and some of the techniques are borrowed from the traditional street theatre. The influence of Praja Natya Mandali on modern street theatre is quite obvious: its political learnings in the concepts, its heavy reliance on folk formats and the episodic structure of the plays have already provided a model. While early experiments like "Vettichakiri" (1949) have drawn their inspiration from IPTA and its Andhra Counterpart, The Praja Natya Mandali. The later plays show an impact of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre practice and Safdar Hashmi's political theatre ideology.

First of all, it has established for itself a separate identity. Today it is an Arena theatre form. Its structure is episodic. It plays in the theatre-in-the round with audience sitting or standing around it in a circle. It is played without music; without microphones; without stage settings and lights. The actors do not use make-up. Their costume is neutral and does not indicate any individual character. It is mainly an outdoor performance performed during day-time. These norms got established in a span of not more than 25 years and shows its content used by the performers and continuous witnessing by the audience.

Within the frame work of these general features, the Telugu Street plays has distinguished itself-with a wide variety of themes and bold techniques.

Their aim is to bring out the irrelevant and dangerous policies of the ruling party. They are highly critical of the selfish, corrupt and anti-farmer and anti-labour policies of the Government in power. For example, a play by the name VIRASAM on the change of Chief Ministers by the High command, 'Rajakeeya Kabaddi' and another play 'Politricks' written by Chiranjeevi are the typical examples of this.

Along with the political plays there are plays on economic aspects of the nation. One of the best among these is 'Appa? Ammakama?' which ridicules politicians for becoming slaves of Dunkel.

A distinction can be made between the political and economic plays in their use of techniques. While the political plays used a traditional folk format, say the 'Oggu Katha' or 'Palle Suddulu' the economic ones made use of a Sutradhara.

The reasons for such a choice are obvious:

1. The Content of political plays is in everyone's knowledge as the newspapers contain information regarding such news. In this case it is only how a happening is to be put across the audience so that it will have a thrust. It also has to be addressed largely to the common rural folk. In these circumstances the folkformat helps the playwrights and performers as it immediately attracts the rural people.
2. The Eye of Sutradhara in economic plays is also reasonable because of the nature of the subject. Since it is not easily understandable by the people, the Sutradhara becomes the commentator.

The Social Street plays occupy an important place in the history of Telugu theatre. Among the social themes, most plays discussed on corruption prevalent in almost all classes of power, centred people politicians, rich village administrators, industrialists, policemen etc.

From 'Yuga Sandhya' (1974) onwards, this trend is continuing. The treatment meted out to the women and to the other oppressed classes also finds favour with the playwrights. 'Gograhamam' is only one example of how the women are being treated by



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different sections of the society. 'Rythu, Collie', 'Addam', 'Mana Charitra', 'Pipeelikam' and 'Mammalni Bratakanivvandi' are a few examples of how the helpless common man, choosing to live an honest life by pursuing an honest job is being intimidated. The social inaction is made a central point in all these plays. The social plays have achieved the audience imagination and sense of humanity and made them think. All these plays tried to bring an awareness among the people regarding the injustice to different sections of people.

The earlier category of the political and economic plays and the later one of Social and Instructional or Educational plays can also be distinguished both in their use of content and techniques and also in the nature of the performing groups. While the former was largely performed by the politically oriented leftist groups, the latter ones were performed by non-political organisations. There are also many street plays on Education and Instruction. 'Pedda Bala Siksha', 'Elementary School' and 'Pratibha O'Prathibha' are the best examples of its kind. 'Aksharam', 'Chaduvenduku?', 'Panta Dongalu' are the good examples of instructional plays.

The instructional plays are larger in number because in 2 successive Jathas - the Literacy and the Science Jatha. The street play performers came forward and helped to propagate the problems of common rural people and how to overcome them.

Street play has found favour with Governmental and non-Governmental organisations for publicity purposes because it is easy to perform with direct communication. Charmed by the success of its use in Science and Literacy Jathas, the street play was used by non-Governmental organisations for propagating against the arrack consumption. A.P State Road Transport Corporation also used this format with a plea that the buses should not be made targets of easy attack. Consumer awareness organisations also propagated its ideals through the street play. Today the Government itself is using this medium to spread awareness to the people regarding the aspects of AIDS, Pollution in the recent Janma Bhoomi programmes.

Though there is still much scope for improvement, the major characteristics that signify the play-writing techniques are to be adopted which are:

1. To have an episodic structure in a constructive way.
2. To make the play short and pin-pointed.
3. To write short and crisp dialogues.
4. To use flexible approach towards time and space requirements.
5. To provide the proper exposition of each character.
6. To fill the play with ironic punches for the audiences applaud.
7. To exploit the regional folk forms, folk songs, folk music etc.

The actor in the street play must be prepared to put in extra energies in terms of creating recognisable and believable characters because they have to portray different types of characters according to the episodes.

Some of the important techniques that the actor has to follow are:

1. To be able to quickly change his role from one episode to other one physically and psychologically.
2. To throw his voice with clarity.
3. To be able to sing and if possible, to learn the folk songs and forms.
4. To get the flexibility in the body because he is the property, set and visual maker.

In the same way, the director's job in a street play production needs a new perspective. The proscenium plays demands from the director a knowledge of the illusionistic theatre. The street play director, on the contrary, should be aware of the non-illusionistic methods that are at the command of the theatre. The modern street play director has to concentrate more on the following aspects:

1. Mixing the illusionistic and the non-illusionistic methods.
2. Making the commentator's role more effective in an explaining way.
3. Strengthening the episode's subject matter.
4. Inventing new picturizational montages to suggest and project his ideas.
5. Perfect blocking of the play according to Arena circumstances.
6. Exploring the new folk forms and using them effectively.
7. Rotation order regarding the characters should be implemented.
8. Exploring the full potentiality of the body language of his actors.
9. Grouping and balancing of his actors in such a way that it itself will symbolize the conflict.



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FUTURE

Since the potentialities of the street theatre have been recognised and to a very great extent exploited, its future prospects seem to be bright. Its chief characteristic of providing an 'alternative theatre' must be explored further. It is right now, a novel experiment, capable of projecting an idea forcefully. But, in order to develop its flavour, its capabilities of theatricalism must be fully brought into practice. The wide variety of folk arts, folk music and musical instruments can be used at our advantage. The street theatre in future can be a rallying point for social action. Finally, street play has not only the potentiality to provide an 'alternative communication model' in the years to come but also street theatre can directly face its audience, question them, enthuse them and persuade them to action. This direct rapport between the 'performer' and the 'spectator' must be more meaningfully exploited in future. The scope for modern street theatre is endless.

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