



## Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

Vol: 1(3), 2019

REST Publisher

ISBN: 978-81-936097-3-6

Website: <http://restpublisher.com/books/cllrm/>

### Invigorating stage spaces: A study of Badal Sircar Third Theatre

Felicit Beneta, MarGregorios College Moggapair, Chennai - 600037

Email id: [felicitbene@gmail.com](mailto:felicitbene@gmail.com)

#### Abstract

Badal Sircar is one of the preeminent playwrights of the contemporary times. Having a strong socio-political commitment, Badal Sircar wrote plays whose meaning heavily depended upon the stage spaces on which they were performed. Rejecting the conventional fourth wall realistic theatre of the nineteenth century, Badal Sircar created a unique aesthetics of drama, which he termed Third Theatre. His plays *Evam Indrajit* makes a significant departure from the fourth wall theatre in which the gap between the acting area and the spectating area created a distance between the play and the audience. In other words, plays belonging to the fourth wall theatre presented constructed realities which had to be observed with an aesthetic distance. For Badal Sircar such a preoccupation with theatre was a facile exercise. He firmly believed that the actors themselves must have an emotional connect with the characters they portrayed, which was the source of genuine sensitizing. Sircar also expected his audience members to have the same emotional connect with an acute self-consciousness. In other words, they did not lose themselves in the artistic world but made theatre a site for dialectical thinking which sent the audience home with an acute awareness of the socio-political conditions of which they were apart. He moved away from the proscenium theatre to explore other possibilities for putting on the boards his plays. So he created what is called, the 'Anganmancha' and 'Muktmancha' from close door interactions to interactions in open spaces to examine and interrogate the living conditions of people. This paper titled, *Invigorating stage spaces: A study of Badal Sircar Third Theatre*, will deal with Third Theatre with particular reference to the stage spaces in order to show that the theatre spaces became hugely political as it became a place for debate and concrete social action. Besides the theory, the paper will site instances from his plays, to argue how the themes in the plays and the theatre space on which they were performed are well integrated.

Keywords: Fourth Wall Theatre, Aesthetic Distance, Emotional Connects, Anganmancha and Muktmancha.

#### Full paper

Theatre of the Roots, a label coined by Suresh Awasthi in 1981, is often used to describe modern Indian theatres' encounter with tradition. Decolonisation of lifestyles, social and cultural practices and institutions in the 1960s were significant consequences of this creative and critical encounter. This rigorous effort dealt with the politics embedded in aesthetics by probing the adoption and canonising of western theatrical conventions. The breaking away from realistic theatre — considered a western importation — is considered the foremost of these efforts to search for the roots: Of the several factors important for an understanding of the aesthetics of the theatre of the roots, none supersedes the rejection of the proscenium theatre by most of the directors and their use of a variety of performance spaces. This innovation allows the dramatic text to find and create an environment appropriate to it, brings about a closer relationship between the actor and spectator, and affords a new perception of the performance by the spectators. The first feeble efforts to liberate the actor from the inhibiting influence of the proscenium theatres were made by violating their conventions even while performing in them. (Awasthi and Schechner 50). One of the first and foremost considerations in the construction of a modern Indian theatre seems to have been space—an entity Sircar constantly explored and experimented with. Contemporaneous with Sircar, playwrights such as Karnad and Thiyam also fully realised the importance of space in shaping a performance and the role that the spectators play in nonaligned and informal spaces. Besides space, theatrical modes were also questioned during this time. Habib Tanvir, a noted director in the mid 1950s, brought in music, poetry and a sense of vivacity by synthesising folk elements and modern theatrical traditions in his popular *Mitti ki Gadi (The Toy Cart)*, an operatic version of the Sanskrit classic, *Mrichchhakatikam*. This trend of using folk elements in urban performances is not a new phenomenon. In the 1940s, producers like Shombhu Mitra, Dina Pathak, and Balraj Sahni of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) turned to folk theatre forms to address contemporary concerns. Among the playwrights of the twentieth century in India Badal Sircar's position as a revolutionary playwright is preeminent. A town planner by profession, Badal Sircar took to theatre with an avowed intention of reflecting with sensitivity the happenings in society with their political underpinnings. Besides the choice of subject matter which for him came from the ground realities of life, Badal Sircar invested his creative energy not only in shaping the materials into drama but also on the stage spaces on which they were to be represented. With the sound knowledge of the theatrical traditions of the Europe, particularly that of Bertolt Brecht and Grotowski, Badal Sircar created his own theatrical model which he called the 'Third Theatre'. From Brecht he learned the importance of alienation effect which both sustained and destroyed theatrical illusion. For Sircar, theatre space was a place for dialectical thinking and debate with regard to the socio-political realities. He completely rejected the notion that theatrical illusion should overwhelm the minds of the audience which led to a kind of self-forgetfulness; on the contrary, he wanted to make the theatrical space a dynamic one, where the usual occurrences in life were problematised in order to foreground the political subtexts that underlie our everyday experiences. From Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' he understood that the human body had an enormous potential to convey the

truths of existence and so he spent a lot of his energy in actor training through workshops. This was a means to genuinely sensitize actors to the issues embedded in the play and not see actor training as a mere skill in donning the role of a fictional character. Poor Theatre also taught him that through minimal materials one could achieve optimal results in bringing about a change in the mindsets of people which for Badal Sircar was a dire need of his time. Shayoni Mitra observes "Third Theatre had turned into "free theatre" in three ways: First, there was free expression - it promoted direct and therefore uninhibited communication; second, it was free from the paraphernalia of conventional theatre; and last, it was offered at no cost to the audience" (Scripting a Movement 6). Badal Sircar also meditated on the dynamics of play making which vitally included theatrical spaces. Initially he made use of the proscenium stage space with its Fourth Wall conventions to dramatize his thematic concerns. While doing so, he felt the breach between 'the acting area' and 'the spectating area' as the desired impact of the play was not seen on the audience which actually created a void. The play became a kind of spectacle for aesthetic relish and informed criticism. The stage space itself failed to create a rapport between actors and spectators which for Sircar led to proactive possibilities. The idea of losing oneself in the performance or in other words indulge in a self-forgetful preoccupation with the playworld on stage was not the best way for theatrical interaction and its natural corollary concrete action. Because of this drawback, Badal Sircar rejected the proscenium theatre space and started looking for alternative theatrical spaces which would involve the audience in the play and enable them to ask and answer relevant questions about society. So he chose a theatrical space called 'Anganmacha'. This theatrical space was an indoor space within a building where the distance between the actors and audience was minimized so that the difference between the playworld and the real world was nearly obliterated. Since he staged the everyday concerns of humans and the situations and occurrences that happened on social spaces, though with the difference, the binary of the real world and the non-real world of art was completely lost. Audience participation for Badal Sircar was not an aesthetic one but a sociopolitical one. It was an involvement that led members of audience to do their part in bringing about changes in society. Believing in the efficacy of proactive theatre, Badal Sircar decided to take his theatrical program to larger audiences. So he decided to move away from Anganmacha to what he called Muktmacha, which implied and comprised the freedom of large and expansive spaces. He performed in parks, on the fields, on the open spaces outside factories and on street corners to rope in audience members only to get them sensitized and to contribute to societal changes though in a limited sphere of action. In 1972 Satabdi, a unique theatre group with a different aesthetics, performed *Spartacus*, its first Anganmacha piece, presented in a room at Kolkata's Academy of Fine Arts, which in itself was an established venue of conventional theatre. This is considered to be Sircar's first major experiment in the direction of Third Theatre. The play in itself is about a slave who masterminds an amazing revolution. For Sircar this would have given him his whole theatrical plan which is the belief in the common human's ability to get sensitized which enables her/him to bring about changes in society. The open-air performance, records Sircar, opened up a new kind of involvement for the performers as well, 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 grass and patches of dirt on the bare bodies of the slaves covered with sweat, accentuated by spots of blood from scratches caused by pebbles on the ground, made it a play of blood and sweat as it was supposed to be" (*On Theatre* 38). Convinced of the effectiveness of their productions in both the intimate theatre (Anganmacha) and open-air theatre (Muktmacha), Satabdi passed a resolution in 1973 to permanently move away from the proscenium theatre. Satabdi, an avant garde drama troupe, performed Sircar's plays in Kolkata's Surendranath Park, now renamed Curzon Park, to involve the audience in the performance process. In 1976, Satabdi started giving free of charge performances at central Kolkata's Curzon Park. Around this time, it began its gram parikrama (village visits), travelling to rural areas, performing for those who were often the subjects of Sircar's writing. For Sircar his stage spaces were actual social spaces energised by a huge sensitization process involving both actors and audience members. This decisive move from the city stage led to what may be called 'participatory theatre', where the audience members were proactively involved in the theatrical programme which was not 'aesthetics of pleasure' but 'aesthetics of change'. The members of Satabdi charged no fee but moved around with a chador (sheet) collecting voluntary contributions from villagers and city audiences. Sircar says When our theatre became free, the contributions that audiences made were neither donation nor price. That is their participation which is why even when we performed at poverty-stricken places we would go around with the chador. Why should we deny them the chance to participate? (an interview with Adhrish Biswas). The other plays specially written for Third Theatre were *Michhil* (Procession), *Bhoma*, and *Basi Khabar* (Stale News). Of these plays *Michhil* was performed in 1974, two years after *Spartacus*, in Ramchandrapur, a village in West Bengal, the first play designed entirely for the open air. In *Micchil* (Procession) Badal Sircar added a new dimension, music while dispensing with more or less all dialogues. *Micchil* may be considered a street play in the proper sense of the term. Not a play in the conventional sense, it is an image of life in Calcutta comprising its cheerfulness and sadness, its internal conflict of the refugees, and its diurnal existence of events that consistently have socio-political-cultural resonances. . The play *Micchil* (Procession) was performed on open public spaces which were regularly used by large number of people. The play brings out the pointlessness and purposelessness of protest marches as they had become an empty ritual not having any meaningful consequence. Badal Sircar himself acted in the play and told the members of society that the means should not be confused with the end. He portrayed on stage police brutalities, discriminations of various kinds and the hollowness of ideological constructs in order to make people understand the society in which they lived. An acute awareness regarding society led to the destabilizing of unwanted structures and to the puncturing of the illusions in ideologies which are characterized as grand narratives. In other words, one can say that the play performances of Badal Sircar provided the audience members with a deconstructive bent of mind which enabled them to see through the world of appearances and understand the motives behind certain societal actions. So Muktmacha catered for the emotional and the intellectual needs of a wider audience thereby creating a possibility of sensitizing more number of people who in turn will impact society through their conscientious and sustained social actions. Anshuman Khanna in her article "Theatre of Badal Sircar: Pedagogy and Praxis" observes. The first script of Sircar's Third Theatre phase was *Michhil* (Procession, 1974), performed on 14 April 1974 at village Ramchandrapur in West Bengal. One

of the common features of Kolkata, procession becomes a facile political ritual to register protest against the Establishment. The play concentrates on the way procession has lost intent and purpose over the last few decades and ends on an optimistic note, with performers and spectators joining hands together in the form of procession that the instinctive coming together of people will usher in an era of hope and change. The last action in the play highlights theatrical event as the real event in the life of the people - "They all call upon the audience to join in the procession. They walk out with those who join them from among the audience. The play *Stale News* is a vivid commentary on the relationship between the social media and human consciousness. The play brings to the fore the idea that the news that matters is normally relegated to a footnote in media representations. News items which are inconsequential to intelligent human beings normally occupy the centre stage. This is a strategy to keep human beings in society beclouded as they will not ask relevant and serious questions about life. A Third Theatre play, *Stale News*, embeds a proscenium stage space within the Third Theatre space to create a dialectical conflict between them. In the play, a petty officer narrates his woes and worries about his middle class life, especially issues of the chain of command within the office; there is also a self-pitying homemaker in the play, who recounts her experience of issues she faces as a woman. She talks about the insults and humiliations she faces on a daily basis in gendered spaces governed by patriarchal structures. The Dead Man, a character in the play, listens to these and moves away. This could be interpreted as the Dead Man's telling commentary on the 'representation' of social issues on the proscenium stage. Issues on the proscenium stage merely evoke a sentimental response. The audience's sympathy or empathy with the character only perpetuates the status quo. Therefore, the Dead Man, from his Third Theatre space, rejects the representation of news on the proscenium space. About his theatre and its alliances with street theatre, Sircar's states. Some people argue that although street theatre is necessary to propagate something, it is not really art. This concept is based firstly on the mistaken notion that anything done in a 'proper and decent' theatre hall automatically becomes art, and anything outside is non-art by definition. Secondly the term 'propaganda' is associated with non-art by some people who think that art should have an ivory-tower purity.... Whether theatre would be art or not depends on the theatre workers, irrespective of their working in theatre halls or working in streets. And as for propaganda, every theatre, in fact every art, is propaganda, as it propagates something or other. Street theatre propagates change, the so-called 'pure' theatre propagates status quo. ("Our Street Theatre" 18). Sircar was for political theatre and so was neither interested in aesthetic totality or aesthetic delectation. He believed that theatre will definitely bring about a change in the lives of people if it is properly employed. To effect a change in the mindsets of people, who were desensitized and so were apathetic to the chaos in modern life, Sircar presented germane themes on relevant stage spaces which impacted people. Sadanand Menon says that Sircar's search was never for something as abstract as coherence. He was to say, "I live in a fragmented world, a chaotic world full of contradictions; is it not absurd even to seek coherence in such an absurd world?" Instead, he made a virtue of disjointedness. For his themes he adapted liberally from available and already published material. He took random passages from his own extensive notebook entries (Book of Feelings). He employed cut-and paste methods. He revelled in montages and collages, both verbal and physical. He made a fine art of the short, punchy vignette. He freely jumped from idea to idea, concern to concern. He pooh-poohed the overhyped virtues of structure and form and technical virtuosity. He dismissed the importance of sets, props, costumes, lights. To an extent, he even questioned the need for learning any acting or performing technique. He had no need for continuing with that mainstay of naturalistic theatre - the creation of the illusion of reality. (A Curtain Call for Political Theatre 18). A space that offers the possibilities of unmasking the supposed and alleged selves and that which brings to the fore the real self was the true theatrical space for Sircar. Focusing on the close connection between identity and theatrical space, Max Herman in his article, "Theatrical Spaces and Places" says "Theatrical art is a spatial art. This should not be understood in the sense that the representation of space could be an end in itself in theatre. . . in the art of theatre we are not dealing with the representation of space but with the execution of human movement in theatrical space" (qtd in Balme 48). In "Masks in Theatre", Sircar rejects the deceptiveness that is often perpetrated in the name of art and firmly associates art with a confrontation of the truth: Real art can never be a mask; it is an expression of and communicates with true, innermost feelings. The identity of real art is in its integrity, its truth. In the crass commercial world, masks might seem indispensable; but this just shows that it is only untruth and dishonesty that the world needs. If one has to strive towards a world where there would be no need to be untruthful or dishonest, where there would be hindrance in the expression of one's essential spirit, one has to seek out all the untruths and dishonesties in this crass, materialist world – both within one's own being, and without. This is possible in the field of art – a valuable field where, perhaps, even in the present situation, some honesty is possible. (69). So it is the stage spaces that decide on the efficacy of a performance which for Sircar is the performance space that explores and exposes "all the untruths and dishonesties in this crass, materialist world – both within one's own being, and without". Interpretation of the plays of Badal Sircar will, then, depend on the semiotic understanding of the stage spaces which foreground the most relevant thematic concerns of his plays.

#### WORKS CITED

- Awasthi, Suresh, and Richard Schechner. " 'Theatre of Roots': Encounter with Tradition." *TDR* 33.4 (1989): 48–69. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 April 2010.
- Mitra, Shayoni. "Badal Sircar: Scripting a Movement." *TDR* 48.3 (2004): 59–78. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Apr. 2010.
- Sircar, Badal. "The Third Theatre." *On Theatre*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2009. 1–54.
- Michhilye Badal Sircar—interview had initially appeared in the *Amritalok* magazine in 1996.
- Khanna, Anshuman. "Theatre of Badal Sircar: Pedagogy and Praxis" *Indian Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (265) (September/October 2011), pp. 24-34
- Sircar, Badal. "Our Street Theatre" *Sangeeta Natak* 69 (July-September 1983)
- Menon Sadanand. Badal Sircar (1925-2011): A Curtain Call for Political Theatre *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 22 (MAY 28-JUNE 3, 2011), pp. 16-20
- Balme, Christopher B. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Sircar Badal. *Masks in Theatre*. 1978. Trans. Sudeshna Banerjee. *On Theatre*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2009.