

# Street Theatre: From Awakening to Activism

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## Abstract

Deviating from Aristotelian/proscenium/naturalistic form of drama, street theatre emerged as an alternative theatre, the sole purpose of this kind of performative theatre was to make the common man aware to his surroundings and stir him to raise pertinent questions related to social, economic and political issues. Based on minimalist props, centrality of the actor and other theatrical devices, this theatre establishes a direct communication with the audience / spectators which creates a close bonding between the actors and the spectators/ audience. The approach and mobile nature of these performances due to their indefinite temporal and spatial features increase the efficacy of this innovative theatre. These kinds of theatres influence masses massively by reaching to them, by voicing their unequal and discriminatory status in the society, by raising their consciousness to afflicting social issues and by showing their commitment to bring the required change. The paper proposes to explore how street theatre can act as a powerful medium to awaken people to raise their voice to social, economic and political issues? It will also discuss the aesthetics of this alternative performative theatre.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; Performative and Activism; Street Theatre.

Can theatre exist without an audience? One spectator is needed to make performance (Grotowski 32).

Deviating from the Aristotelian/proscenium/naturalistic form of drama, street theatre emerged as an alternative theatre, the sole purpose of this kind of performative theatre was to aware common man of his surroundings and stir him to raise pertinent questions related to social, economic and political issues. Based on minimalist props, the centrality of the actor and other theatrical devices, this theatre established direct communication with the audience / spectators which created a close bonding between the

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actors and the spectators/ audience. Safdar Hashmi founder of JANAM (Jan Natya Manch) defined street theatre as “a militant political theatre of protest whose function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations”. The approach and mobile nature of these performances due to their indefinite temporal and spatial features increase the efficacy of this innovative theatre. Breaking the imaginary fourth wall which created an illusion of reality for the audience simultaneously distancing the audience from actors, street theatre makes its performance in the open daylight without any paraphernalia of stage, light, costume or other technical theatrical devices.

The concept of street theatre abolishes the demarcation of separate spaces for the artist and the viewers and professes equality of all human beings. Street, a public domain belongs to people and is returned to them in the process of such performances. Such public places are never neutral and pure. They carry their own stories, histories, politics and memories with them. The spectators associate to these histories, memories and political content individually and collectively, which shapes the storyline/theme of the play. Influenced by these reminiscences, they receive and respond to the play creating new ideas and political views. These kinds of theatres influence masses massively by reaching to them, by voicing their unequal and discriminatory status in the society, by raising their consciousness to afflicting social issues and by showing their commitment to bring the required change. The active participation of the actors/ performers and spectators/ gathering at the end of the performances entails the success and serves the motto of these theatrical activities. Diversity of performances and diversity of venues in Street theatre renders opportunities to address diverse audience/spectators and offers different possibilities than conventional theatre.

In alternative theatres like street theatre, there is a shift in the actor/ audience relation and new paradigms are constructed and most importantly in these performances the audience emerges as a tangibly active creator in the theatrical event. Though the role of the spectators/audience unlike conventional/naturalist theatre cannot be always predetermined and it often depends largely on direct relationship with performance and performers. In such performances, the communication between the actor and the audience operate bi-directionally. This direct communication stirs the audience up from their passivity and they become ‘spect- actor’ (Augusto Boal<sup>1</sup>) as in the ‘theatre of oppressed’ and are motivated to challenge and struggle for their problems and thus the experience of these kinds of performance usually proves therapeutic to them.

The very use of the public spaces where public can meet, discuss and ponder over common issues lend a political dimension to street performances. Most of the street theatre carries the strong political connotation and because of usually subtle or direct connections, these plays/performances have always been looked suspiciously and the authorities have attempted to hamper these performances by certain legal imposition and other means in the past. Safdar Hashmi<sup>2</sup>, the founder of the JANAM (Jan Natya Manch) was fatally attacked during the performance of his most popular play *Halla Bol* (Attack) at Shahibad at the outskirts of New Delhi on 1st January, 1983. The next day, he succumbed to his injuries. As a tribute to him, his wife along with the JANAM troupe went to the same place and completed this revolutionary play. The play exposed the pathetic condition of the mill/industry workers and was a severe attack on insensitive and corrupts power structures. The play exploits slogan shouting as an effective technique to make the performance participatory. The song

Say it aloud, workers, say it aloud, halal bol.....halla bol!

Fight it back, workers fight it back...

Struggle is our slogan

The song and rhythm immediately touches the audience and they join the chorus and become a part of the struggle and then action. Street theatre has been considered revolutionary in this sense that they provoke the spectators to their rights and responsibilities. Due to this potentiality of street theatre, this form has been exploited for social and political protest. Relevant themes of these plays draw immediate attention of the readers/audience and spectators forcing them to think and voice their concerns to existing issues and problems.

Street theatre has a long history of its origin both in European drama and Indian drama. We can observe trace and influence of diverse range of theatres and performances on this collaborative theatre. In Russian Agitprop to the theatre of oppressed of Augusto Boal, in the poor theatre of Grotowski to Absurd theater of Samuel Beckett<sup>3</sup> and Eugene Ionesco<sup>4</sup>, and Epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht<sup>5</sup>, we can find elements and features of this alternative theatre. In London from 1500 to 1642, there were three most significant types of theatre. *Midsummer Watch*, *the Lord Mayor's Show* and *the Royal Entry*. These theatres were also recognized as The Earth or The People's theatre. In India, the formation or IPTA (Indian People's

theatre Association)<sup>6</sup> in 1943 in Bombay surged drama and theatre activities. It is believed that improvisatory street theatre mainly derived from an ancient Russian theatre, agitprop, and a portmanteau of agitation and propaganda which spread during the Russian revolution in 1917. Both the theatres take up social, economic and political issues of underprivileged and attempt not only to awaken them, but to make them think, question and active to their rights and concerns. In Bharat's *Natyashastra Lokdharmi* which 'refers to the realistic mode of dramatic representation (*Natyashastra*: 14:61)' shares a close affinity to the street theatre. These types of plays were simple in the plot and life oriented and were produced without any artificial behavior or costumes. In *Natyashastra* we get a reference of shifting of the open theatre to the closed enclosure. The purpose of which was to defend art and creative expression from political and ideological influences. Contrastively the concept of the street theatre is premised on raising voice for political rights of the deprived.

In 1944, the first street theatre named *Nibanna* was said to be staged by Bijon Bhattacharya. The play was based on the exploitation of peasants by Bengali landowners. IPTA contributed in popularizing this form in the early 1950's during Bandimukti Andolan and gradually it spread across India. Many politically motivated theatres adapted this powerful performative form to mobilize the marginalized groups. Initially folk tales remained at the centre of the street theatre and it was used by those playwrights and the artist who believed in the leftist/ Marxist ideology and they had a firm conviction that this subversive theatre form can prove catalytic in bringing a change in the society. They considered it as an empowering tool which can stir up the masses to their problems.

One of the major proponent exponents of this theatre was Badal Sircar. After *EbomInderjeet* (1963), *Pagala Ghora* (1967) and *Baki Itihas* (1965) Sircar moved away from proscenium theatre to 'third theatre'. Badal Sircar<sup>7</sup> (1925-2015), Bengali dramatist, theatrist, actor and performer is known for his anti-establishment plays written during the Naxalite movement. He was extremely influenced by the western dramatists and theatrists like Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and Ionesco. His innovative 'Third Theatre' synthesized the elements of folk theatre and urban westernized proscenium theatre. For him, theatre was a direct dialogue between the actors and the audience and it should have human connection between them without any hierarchy. In the play, *Tringsha Shatabdi*, (1966) a direct communication with the audience is achieved when the protagonist questions the audience. He asks, "And you? What are you going to do? Have you decided? You? You? You?" (TS6) This direct address to the

audience makes the performance a collaborative act and transforms the role of audience to decision makers and activist. This 'live immediacy' and theatricality are the features which separate theatre from cinema and render this art a primacy over other creative forms. Sircar rejected the structures, conventions and expensive nature of urban proscenium theatre and worked for theatre of conscience which is available and accessible to all. He believed in maximum use of human body as a prop to emphasize the theme of the play. For him, human body can convey different emotions and vistas of life successfully. In the changing language of theatre, he says that "the basic tool of trade of the art of theatre is the human body. It is the presence of human body that ultimately distinguishes theatre from cinema." (17). His actors as a member of 'ensemble theater' formed trees, arches, a railway compartment, a bus, a machine with their bodies to fulfill the demands of the narrative. In his seminal work *On Theatre* in the chapter on third d theatre he emphatically asserts, "theatre is a human act, hence all the human beings involved- whether as performer or as spectators- should be free in their relations with one another. (Sircar "The Third Theatre" in *On Theatre*.44)

Badal Sircar's play *Michhil* (Bengali word for the procession) was first performed on 14 April 1974 at village Ramchandarpur in West Bengal and since then thematic relevance of this play approves it for representation across the globe. The play is a seething attack on prevalent corrupt social evils, practices, and exploitative power centers which pave for class distinctions. The protagonist Khoka (a boy) is a non-existent common man who lives and dies with no identity despite his best efforts. In frustration, he announces, "I was killed .i. Me. Here I am .... I was killed today. I was killed yesterday.... Last week .... Last month... last year. I am killed every year." (*Michhil* 45). The Common fate and interest of the common man engages the spectators and finds an immediate response from the audience and they are forced to raise their voice and are ready to participate in the endeavor of social change. Similarly, in other plays like *Bhoma*, *Stale news*, and *Indian History made Easy*, Sircar comments and critiques contemporary socio- economic and political issues elaborately, analytically and theatrically and appeals to audience to take action against these problems.

Influenced by Marxist ideology and with firm belief in equality for all, Safdar Hashmi is another prominent propagator of the street theatre. After his separation from IPTA, he founded JANAM to stage/show the theatre to stimulate positive social change. His plays deal with the existential question of marginalized human beings and employ modes of

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performances as tactics of resistance and intervention in the day today struggles of their rights. Based on a real incident at the Harig India factory gate on the outskirts of New Delhi in 1977 in which seven workers were killed, the play *Machine* criticizes the selfish and relentless attitude of mill/factory owners, who do not care for workers' life to smash workers' agitation for wage rise and other facilities and exhorts the workers to struggle for their rights in unison like a machine. In the play 'Machine' is used metaphorically and the effective use of slogan again intensifies the movement and the mood of the play. Like Indian folk plays, the role of sutradhar/ narrator provides the link between the audience and the story and also raise certain very pertinent questions. In the play *From Village to City*, he discusses about the oppressive power structures prevalent in the society and is operative both in the village and in the city in diverse forms. The Common man suffers with poverty, unemployment, hunger, disease and other problems because of this corrupt system.

Street theatre is a distinct form of theatrical representation with aesthetics of its own. In theory and inspiration, street theatre has drawn majorly from the post 1917 political theater. Contemporary Indian Street Theater has been drawing in from our folk and classical dramas as well as from the western theatre. The political demonstration, pamphlets, wall posters, agitation speeches all have contributed in to creating the diverse forms adopted by street theater. However, in the last 20 years, street theatre have undergone drastic change, now it is not restricted to protest and political causes, but this form is appropriated for educational purpose, for commercials, for campaigning, for promotion of products, to spread social message, for creating environmental issues, for gender sensitization and for creating awareness of government schemes and so on. As a source of community entertainment to edutainment, the significance of this mode of expression cannot be undermined. In this digital and age of virtual communication, there is a desperate need for a platform where humans come across with shared problems and work with fellow human beings for positive and constructive solutions. Moreover, immediate feedback and response, another intrinsic feature of this art form, facilitates in evaluating and collecting opinion of the public and help in decision making for any important issue. To improve the range of the repertoire of good scripts and performativity of the street theatre, the playwrights, directors, artists and performers from the mainstream theatre have to show their interest and work for it. Certainly, Street Theatre can present public issues in public domain like the street, shopping mall, squares or other rural/urban areas and disseminate information, ideas, and views in a simplistic but effective way for awakening the masses for activism.

### Endnotes

1. Augusto Boal (16 March 1931 – 2 May 2009) Drawing inspiration from Freire, Brecht, and Stanislavski, Augusto Boal developed the 'Theater of the Oppressed' in practice throughout his career, starting in the '50s in Brazil and later in Argentina, Peru, Ecuador and France. 'Theatre of Oppressed' is neither theatre as entertainment, nor theatre for propaganda. It is a form of popular community based education which is based on the vision of Paulo Freire and his landmark work on education and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
2. Safdar Hashmi (12 April 1954 – 2 January 1989) was a communist playwright and director, best known for his work with street theatre in India. He was also an actor, lyricist, and theorist, and he is still considered an important voice in Indian political theatre. He was one of the major founders of the JANAM( Jan Natya Manch) which organized the radical plays following the ideology and guidelines of IPTA during Independence movement.
3. Samuel Barclay Beckett (13 April 1906 – 22 December 1989) was an Irish novelist, playwright, short story writer, theatre director, poet, and literary translator.
4. Eugène Ionesco was a Romanian-French playwright who wrote mostly in French, and one of the foremost figures of the French Avant-garde theatre.
5. Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht, known professionally as Bertolt Brecht, was a German theatre practitioner, playwright, and poet.
6. IPTA Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is the oldest association of theatre-artists in India. IPTA was formed in 1943 during pre independence India to promote theatre.
7. Badal Sircar (15 July 1925 – 13 May 2011), also known as Badal Sarkar, was an influential Indian dramatist and theatre director, mostly known for his anti-establishment plays during the Naxalite movement in the 1970s and taking theatre out of the proscenium

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