

Analyzing Manjul Bhardwaj's *Theatre of Relevance*

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Manjul Bhardwaj's Theatre of Relevance philosophy breaks through the dimensions of the stage and re-establishes theatre in the accessibility of common man and its implementation in day to day life. His plays are beyond the realm of entertainment, it intrigues, questions, pivots you to your thought processes and invoke you to set your own parameters of rationalising and reassessing your environment, the society. This is Manjul Bhardwaj's own cultivation.

Manjul Bhardwaj commenced his theatrical journey as a usual theatre practitioner. Those days witnessed his passion for theatre and aspiration to be better, but he lacked the vision for theatre, that would pave the path towards his goal, and which he desired to sub-consciously reach. Although he had imbibed theatre art but he was experiencing conflict in the contemporary theatrical practises. In the 60s, Indian history witnessed emerging artistic revolution in form of theatrical art, ironically confined to the boundaries of Delhi's National School of Drama. Other cities were struggling to keep theatre alive through amateur dramatics societies and groups. Theatre's identity remained nothing more than just a show. Although theatre artists were performing plays but true spirit of theatre was slowly buried.

Theatre was becoming a medium to either grab a role in television or cinema or to keep oneself simply self-content through it. Manjul Bhardwaj was searching for a third dimension than the existing two. In restlessness, he not only studied Bharatmuni's theatre philosophy, "Natyashastra", also researched on international theatre thinkers and scholars, and realised that global theatre thinkers emphasised on ideological aspects in comparison to both performance and behavioural facets. Whereas, behavioural aspects needed more attention because of the fact that theatre has infinite potential to enkindle mass revolution. Evidently, for some reason, theatre halted to the bounds of script and actor. Limiting theatre to its technicality and repertoire assuage the creative possibility and capability of attaining theatre excellence. It is an intentional ignorance of the substantive potential of theatre. Theatre deserves to go beyond the predictable.

Through the churning of these thoughts Manjul Bhardwaj cultivated Theatre of Relevance that moulds five definitive dimensions:

1. Theatre, which is committed to making the world more “Better & Humane” through its creative excellence.
2. Theatre, in which art is not just for art sake but is relevant to the context of the society and fulfils its social responsibility.
3. Theatre, which caters to human needs and provide itself as a platform for expression.
4. Theatre, which explores itself as a medium of change/development.
5. Theatre, that comes out from the stereotypical ‘limits of entertainment’ to become a way of living.

The course of societal processes does not limit Manjul Bhardwaj’s tryst with artistic and entertainment aspects of theatre and one observes him taking the legacy of renowned theatre thinkers like Bharatmuni along with the international thinkers Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, Brecht and likewise. The Theatre thinkers before the era of Stanislavski emphasised on script, however Stanislavski emphasised on acting rather than playwriting, and he formulated scientificism in it and evolved it from the world of imagination to the grassroots of reality. He believed that unless the acting is authentic and convincing, the intended effectuality of presentation or production will not be realised before the audience. Hence, he had innovated proficient technique for the actors to regulate their emotions and body movement basis which the artist could enact their role to utmost authenticity irrespective of given situations or impact of audiences’ presence. While working with the artists on their acting skills, Manjul invents the dimension of humane technique and brings forth the factual characters of the script in form of the actors, so that the core momentum and sensitivity of the script is effectively spelled before the audience and the play reciprocates with the audience to its fullest impact.

Manjul evolves a new dimension to Stanislavski’s theatre philosophy through his phenomenal process, while keeping the magnitude of play writing intact. Like Brecht, he equally values play writing and before the theatre performances he engages the actors in an intensive workshop

where he brings the artist closer to the theme of the play, its gravity and series of contextual incidents, through which the artists process the story holistically, and that emancipates their dramatis personae to real life. They conceptually analyse all the aspects of relevant occurrences. Artists imbibe and then express their learning. This exploration gives way to the evolution of the play. The changes in the script attained through this participative approach reflect the reality of the audience and their life, liberating it from being mere writer's story.

Here, it is imperative to understand that Manjul enables the play writer with the explorative scope of reflection and finesse between the realm of truth and imagination. Manjul is observed forwarding the philosophy of Antonin Artaud herein. Artaud had an unconventional perspective about play writers as compared to existing theatre thinkers. He believed to begin with detachment from the script and then voyaging along its expanse, thought process and expressiveness; which is vested in the playwrights' phenomenal writing style and language. Manjul strives to transform the audience into participants who emerge to experience the performance as the reflection of their own struggle, observations and truth of life. In addition to acting, he brings forth playwright's credibility to its epitome, all of this for the reason that audience is the epicentre of Manjul's theatre performances. Manjul proclaims that audience is first and foremost theatre person. He believes that theatre performance is impossible without its audience and for this reason he handpicks the subject of his play from the issues surrounding his audience. Herein, Manjul's methodology bears close resemblance to Meyerhold, a Russian theatre thinker.

Audience was exceptionally significant to Meyerhold. His stage was totally devoted to his audience and irrespective of the response of the critics; he valued the perspective of his audiences the most. Meyerhold believed that audience is an equal stakeholder of theatre without whom concept of the stage is nullified. However, he did expect time and maturity from his audience. He asserted that the audience in shortage of time commitment for a play performance are sheer disrespect to the stage, performing ground of the artists. But Manjul overtakes Meyerhold's thought by defying the agony of searching for the audience or inviting the audience, rather he comes to be the need of the audience. He chooses theme of his plays relevant to the audience and establish a stage wherever there is an audience rather than wandering far for a stage

with a constant concern of being in audiences' reach. Apart from being an actor, Meyerhold was a writer and director. He believed that absolute devotion is the essence of direction. The director is an amalgamation of a play writer, an actor, a painter, musician and an electrician. Need be, he should be well versed carpenter and a tailor too. Manjul seconds this thought. He seeks diversity and dynamism from a theatre person. Acknowledging Meyerholds' methods, he facilitates theatre training in the exploration of attaining completeness in theatre artists whilst evolving his own pedagogy. Human cognitive processes that were confined to the bounds of human behaviour by western theatre scholars, was disillusioned by revolutionary French theatre thinker Antonin Artaud and he put forth ground-breaking idea to human salvation, which is popularly known as "Theatre of Cruelty". Artaud believed in deconstructing the existing societal system as the first step and thus cleansing its roots, only then his principles would fully support his theatrical vision.

In this course, Artaud resisted the performances of already written plays. He clearly trusted that the scenes should be directly created onstage unlike rehearsed. In that process all the onstage available resources should be utilized. Manjul Bhardwaj, however, does not defy existing plays instead Manjul equips play writers with an avante garde genre. He pulls them closer to the happenings in the society and brings them face to face with the experiences, environment and background of the survivor; thereon he liberates the writer. Like Artaud, Manjul approaches with the process of unmasking the actors rather than masking the actor with the defined character, so that the actors artistically releases themselves from their own form and master the craft of unifying with the characters, both at the imaginary and realistic level, and experientially enact the pain, joy, struggles, inhibitions, and likewise various emotional expressions to its utmost genuity, so that the characterization transcends from fictional to non-fictional.

For Manjul power of theatre is beyond entertainment for audience, and mere medium of contentment for the artist and related theatre fraternity, rather he perceives theatre as the catalyst to life changing process and socio-political revolution. Even Meyerhold and Brecht held on to this notion. Thereon, Manjul not only practices this notion but he modestly integrates with the soul of theatre practitioners and audience. He blends himself in their thought process through the medium of his theatre practices and performances, and not only does he churns their perception,

rather he ignites the need for change, spark for revolution and awakening in them. In this process, he does not extend a definite solution to audience and theatre practitioners; on the contrary he sculpts the acumen to choose the creative and virtuous path. Brecht never practised the existing ideas without rationalising them. He theorized that the experimentation once undertaken with complete awareness reveals the practices in the societal system, however if exercised unwisely then one fails to justify its application. For this reason the learning process must be bred methodically and actors must learn along with other actors. Evidently, smallest social unit is not an individual but a dyad. Our existence is defined by co-developmental approach. Manjul pursue this method beyond the rehearsals, mostly it is vigorously implemented in his workshops. These theatre based interventions varies from children workshop, theatre artists or government officials' workshop. While exercising so, Manjul plants the seed of theatre in participants who are not even closely connected to the theatre practices.

He awakens theatrical awareness in them, which enables the person to transform from audience to theatre practitioner/performer; and builds conviction to perceive theatre beyond the medium of entertainment or expression but a platform for inner change. This experience instils vigour to revolutionize socio-political challenges and prepares to lead through the darkness into the light. Manjul initiates extraordinary experiments with the audience. He does not consider the audience simply as an overwhelmed group of people applauding the performance; rather he regards the participation of the audience in the performances. During one of his performances, his actors hands over ash in the palms of the audience, while extending the ash in their palms, the actors orates that the ash is of that girl's funeral pyre, who was burnt in the greed for dowry by their in-laws yesterday. The audience is caught perplexed. They experience sudden gush of multiple emotions flooding through their senses. Evidently audience is no more an audience now, rather they are transformed into a patron and analyst of the concepts revealed over there. Manjul conducts such experiments in his performances frequently. Manjul does not lean on the availability of a stage for his theatrical performances; on the contrary he creates stage wherever he identifies appropriate need for one, a narrow lane, field, school premises, slum areas and smallest space where few can converse is also converted into a stage by him. Because he asserts that even two people suffice for a theatre performance.

Endnote

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