

## Visual Theatre: Scenographic Experiences for Actors and Audience

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### *Abstract*

Theatre from its inception has been developed as an audio-visual medium. It is a kind of poetry that is visible in a given space. Scenography endorses the visuals, and prepares ground for the poetry to be visible to the audience. It creates scope to experience those visuals, being an integral component of performance making. Precisely, scenography brings opportunity to manifest the visuals through the actor-audience-space integrations. The actors in collaboration with the 'stage-space' formulate a set of symbolic images to be transposed to the viewers' mind, expanded and realised through subjective interpretations. The audience is free to conceive, imagine, and comprehend those visual symbols by passing through his/her individual journey of life in accordance with text, physical gestures, spatial compositions, sound and music, and through various stage symbols. The responsibility of scenography is to guide the viewers to evoke those experiences with the help of a group of actors who amalgamate and animate the space into a living entity. Thus scenography orchestrates between actors, space and audience by blurring the distinctive line of 'creative practices' (Actor's physical presence, voice, direction, design, text, and viewership) and the 'technical practices' (sets, costumes, managements, lights, sound, etc.) through a collaborative process.

With actors, it explores these creative and technical practices, and successfully passes the visual experiences to the viewers' imaginations and initiates the journey along with the dramatic actions. To initiate the audience imagination and guiding them through this journey, scenography explores possibilities through its various components, such as- space, props, masks, sets, lights, sound, and costumes, etc. Like a piece of sculpture, the three-dimensional stage space is cut into horizontal, diagonal, and vertical planes and sections through the actors' physical and oral presence to brings out the best possible visuals (real and imaginary), enriched with kinesthetics. Through this process, a narrative is constructed in time and space dimensions- interchangeable, and symbiotic within animate (actors) and inanimate (space and design) elements of the performance, playing with the spectators' imaginations. The Paper will shade lights on the evocation of the visual journey in the audience psyche and guide him to enter into a world of imaginations through visual symbols.

Keywords: Scenography, Visuals, Space, Performance, Journey

Theatre from its inception has been developed as an audio-visual medium. The *Natyashastra* terms it as '*Drishya-Kavya*' - visual-poetry, which means, the performance is a kind of poetry

that is visible in a given space. Scenography endorses *Drishya*- the visuals, prepares ground for the *Kavya*- poetry to be visible for its audience and creates scope to experience those visuals, being an integral component of performance making. Precisely, scenography brings opportunity to manifest the visuals through the actor-audience-space integrations. The actors in collaboration with the 'stage-space' formulate a set of symbolic images to be transposed to the viewers' mind, expanded and realised through subjective interpretations. The audience is free to conceive, imagine, and comprehend those visual symbols by passing through his/her individual journey of life in accordance with text, physical gestures, spatial compositions, sound and music, and through various stage symbols. The responsibility of scenography is to guide the viewers to evoke those experiences with the help of a group of actors who amalgamate and animate the space into a living entity. Thus scenography orchestrates between actors, space and audience by blurring the distinctive line of 'creative practices' (Actor's physical presence, voice, direction, design, text, and viewership) and the 'technical practices' (sets, costumes, managements, lights, sound, etc.) through a collaborative process.

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#### *Visual narratives*

Stage visuals are not mere scenic decors that are perceived along with the actors' performances without any interactions and connotations. Their role is not to elucidate the characters by creating a background, it is to be interacted and integrated with the dramatic actions on the stage-space. Through these interactions there cultivated strong '*visual dialogues*' for the audiences, perceived through their mind and vision to form an experience of life. In developing Visual dialogues between the space-actor and audience, scenography plays a pivotal role. Often it propels the actors to the front stage by standing affirm with them, as supportive and develops meaningful conversations with its viewers, delving through the mutual energy of actors and space, whenever required. Often it creates dramatic irony and psychological atmosphere parallel to the narratives by contradicting the dramatic action, so that the conflict is built. In this context scenography (inanimate force) and live actions

(animate force) counter act each other through opposite behaviours thus generating irony into the situation.

Scenography never argues for any stunning imageries to take the audience in its spell by the grandeurs of the visuals, but certainly pleads for arousing the visual sensory in the audience psyche and to create harmonious bond between the actors and the audience. This experience can be achieved through various means of presentations. It can be realised through sound, silence, and visual compositions of actors' interaction with sets, lights, costumes, masks, and props, etc., with the actors' performativity in the space. It is an environment, created by the actors as an extended part of their personality. It is not merely an object of craftsmanship, but an essential artistic tool, a symbol for visual communications, supported by and expressed through the actors' potential endeavour for its viewers. Often the actors do not require any pageant design with stunning visual imageries to communicate with the audience, rather they need an appropriate space to be assimilated as an integral part of the action. The space is symbolic, suggestive, interactive, and indicative irrespective of the presentations. The visuals that are communicated to the viewers out of all these amalgamations are not to please the eyes with *objective truth*, but to perceive beyond to draw a parallel from the subjective life force. In this case, scenography serves as metaphor pointing towards a larger milieu of life, - social, political, anthropological, and cultural, etc.

Often abstraction and non-representational compositions in design (space and actors) play significant roles to set its narrative. Abstraction in performance design makes the viewers free from the *objective truth* behind the visual compositions and identify the reality from *subjective emancipation* of life. Abstract visual imageries interacted with dramatic actions generate a gamut of feeling and sets a narrative for the audience, irrespective of its literal meaning. This conceptual phenomenon of scenography often undermines the *objective pictorial realism* and allow the audience to experience truth through *subjective life approaches*.

With this, we can set certain principles for scenographic experiences.

- a. Truth often is perceived beyond the physical reality of the visuals.
- b. Often, visual images believe on subjective emancipations and liberate the viewers from the objective perceptions, where the truth is verified through human sensibility.
- c. The visual starts its journey from the *stage-space* to the *audience mind-space* through a creative process and allow the viewers to experience the happenings as a part of life's phenomenon.
- d. Often scenography is imagined through textual narrations and is experienced through human auditory system thus help visualising through ears.
- e. Similarly, it is also created through the interaction of actors with the design elements without any verbatim and develop *visual dialogues* with its viewers.
- f. Scenography believes in space-actor-audience communion in a three-dimensional space.

### *Scenographic Experiences through Sound and Silence: Imaginary Visuals*

While reading a dramatic text, its sound activates our visual sensory and allows the images to play hide and seek in our imaginations. For a scenographer, and actors these imaginary visuals gradually encroach the dramatic situations and formulate the ambience of the play. Finally, all the spatial compositions of the play including actors and design are trapped in the network of this intrinsic visual plan which guides the artist to map a dramatic space through the visual rhythms originated out of the sound, and silences of the text, which form the sources of scenography. A segment of the visual plan is meant to trigger the audience imaginations in which his *mind-space* is activated to be filled in with numerous unseen visuals through sound and silence. Often images may not exist in their physical form but are transmitted to the viewers' mind through the power of sounds and silence and are transformed into visuals in the audience mind. Imagine, the sound of a train that comes closer and slowly fades away. In this context we visualize the train in our subconscious without its physical presence. Similarly, the impact of thunderbolt can be visualised through the sound of thunder only. With the help of bare necessary and symbolic stage elements and creating indications in scenography the visual experience can be enhanced. In *Hayavadana*, playwright Girish Karnad creates opportunity for the audience to imagine a masculine *Kapil*, climbing a tall tree to collect fortune flowers for *Padmini* on the way to a fair at Ujjain. In this situation, the visuals are created through *Padmini's* monologue and her gestures without the presence of *Kapil* on stage. The rhythm of the text dabbed with the texture of the *Padmini's* dramatic renderings create appropriate imaginary visuals in the audience's mind. In Mohan Rakesh's *Ashad Ka Ek Din* also, we can identify imaginary visuals that are created through the sound effects, for example in second act while *Vilom* sees Kalidas descending from the mountains through the window. In this sequence, the audience does not visualise a rider on the horse back, but the sound of the horse-galloping is enough to generate a scenographic experience in the audience psyche. The gradual increasing of the galloping sound, supported by the dialogues between *Vilom* and *Mallika*, creates appropriate visual atmosphere as a part of scenographic experience for the viewers. Indian dramatic texts are laden with imaginary visuals, which are created through the renderings of the texts.

When we hear some sound, we immediately transform those sounds into imaginary visuals and perceive them in our mind's eye. Similarly, when we perceive certain colours, and forms, we listen to its narratives, expressed through these visible elements. In other words, visual artists develop a deeper sense to perceive through ears and listen to the *anhad-naad* through the eyes. This deeper sensibility of mapping the space through sound and experimenting it in the performance space is a major concern of scenography. Finally, it is the actor, whose effective performance creates appropriate visual imageries in the viewers' subconscious while watching the play.

### *Integration of Space and Actors*

In creating an experience for the viewers, a breathing space is necessary to pacify the visuals, - imaginary or real, metaphoric, or literal. Like a pause in a soliloquy or a silence after an argument, the visual movement often needs rest at times in between textual renderings, stage blockings and compositions. The potential of the space must be interacted scrupulously by the actors and allow the visual artist to create a collaboration between the scenic visuals and the performers for a live communion with its viewers. The performance space and scenography make the actors to be appropriately visible and the audience to visualise, thus constituting the most essential component of theatre making. Ironically, the stage floor, design, props, and all that are used by the actors on the stage are lifeless dead objects, until they are evoked and articulated by the actors. Only through their meaningful amalgamations and interactions, appropriate environment is constructed.

My approach to scenography is not to create impressive and spectacular imageries, nor an intricate environment with sophisticated design elements in which the actors feel jolted and struggle for their presence against the magnificent decorations. A space filled with platforms, steps, ramps, arches, pillars, doors and windows, etc., without any breathing space, amalgamation, stimulation, and visual movements, remains non-responsive, a bundle of wood logs laying under our feet, blocking a major segment of the stage space. Often massive and illustrative stage design restricts actors' imaginations, and interactions with that space. As a result, the space fails to reciprocate with the dramatic actions and disintegrate from the performance, segregating the actors out of its ambience. It becomes difficult for the space to be animate and aroused to a living entity, thus remains 'dead' throughout. The spatial compositions in this jolted space lose their dynamism, and fail to trigger the audience imaginations, forbidding them from active participations in the production. This unimaginative exploration of scenography prevents the visual journey from the *stage-space* to the audience's *mind-space*.

The space must provide utmost freedom to the actors- to play, jump, run, glide, and chisel it. It needs to create scope for the actors to explore all its possible dimensions and provide suitable environment to bring out the truth. Scenography, with minimalistic design, and flexibility of the space, provides ample freedom for the actors. Even the magic can happen in an 'empty space' with the actors' physicality and imaginations. In that emptiness the environment is imagined and transformed to the audience psyche where the visuals can take shape. In this condition, the creative pursuits of the actors become instrumental in transposing imaginary visuals to the audience psyche. Often essential stage elements, such as props and symbolic design-units help building imaginations through actors' interactions. Creating appropriate environment in scenography, helps enhancing the conflict, tension, and irony of the play. Also, it generates possibilities for the actors to be engaged in spatial relationships. The concept of scenography is mainly based on *space-actor engagement* in which an environment is created during the process. In this environment, space and design become inseparable entities of the actors' existence.

Indian classical theatre and its manipulation of space sets a major principle for Indian scenography in which all the spatial elements are subjected to performance. They are easily assimilated and integrated with the actions. The space in Indian performance culture is abstract, symbolic, suggestive, interactive, and indicative irrespective of style and genre, - folk, traditional or classical. In Indian classical performance, symbolic gestures- *mudras* and postures- *gaitis* are used contextually to create imageries, adding to the visual aesthetics of the performance, and supplementing to the imaginations of its viewers, thus creating scenographic experiences. Hence, choreography being an integral part of stage visuals can be included in the domain of scenography in a broader context.

### *Visual Makers: The Actors*

Actors always remain pivotal in the performative cultures over the world. Be it ancient Greek or Indian classical theatre; it is the actor who holds the audience back through his skill. With many diverse approaches, one factor remains common, i.e. the actor's tool of expressions; body, voice, and intellect. These three essential components hold responsible in portrayal with differences lay in their manoeuvring. While in west, the actors involve in creating the journey without any nonconformity, in the east, the actors engage in many intrinsic factors such as, text, space, and audience, along with the characterizations. Visual theatre imbibes both these approaches, - conformist and nonconformist, in formulating its principles, in which the actors invite the audience to participate in the creative journey, thus making it a ritual. In the portrayal, the actor needs to isolate his mind into two idiosyncrasies. While one part of the actor is involved in performing the character, the other part is aware of what is being presented. Simultaneous consciousness is essential due to the abstract presence of the form which needs to be justified and communicated to the viewers through symbols and metaphors. These symbols narrate the story out of *actor-object-space* integrations. Since there are chances of alienating the audience from the dramatic content due to its abstract nature, the actor, - the only living entity of the performance, holds accountable to make the visual narratives communicated to the viewers. This risk factor bestowed some extra responsibility upon the actors working in visual theatre.

Visual theatre provides opportunity for the actors to play the role of visual makers, being in character. These actors activate the visuals, creates meaning, and find scope for the visuals to be engaged in making dialogues with the audience. Through double consciousness, they keep a watching eye for the audience and guide them for the experience in this creative journey. Opposing to other art expressions, actors in visual theatre are directly involved in spatial engagements, such as, arranging props and masks, set changing, wardrobe-scheduling, sound, and stage lighting, etc., during the performance; all these elements are majorly steered by the actors. Visual theatre cannot fully depend upon the stagehands because of artistic and aesthetic reasons. Since the narrative is constructed out of the space-actor integration, and realised through performance, it needs the actor's sensibility to be manifested, which cannot be comprehended by the technical crew. If the space needs a change, and the props, sets, etc., are to be replaced, transformed, or projected in between the actions, the actors must handle

the situation with artistic sensibility, being in the character. The actor can evoke the space, integrate with, and make it viable for the performance, which is an inseparable contextual action in visual theatre. This action by no means can be conducted by any stagehands. There are numerous examples of creating visual actions out of assimilation of the stage objects being a part of the performance. In this integration, the object's performativity is solely dependent upon the actors' ability, whose body and mind react to the situation with a sense of reflex action to respond to that condition immediately. Be it on-stage or off-stage, these actors remain watchful to handle the dramatic actions, channelled by their sense of timing, and coordination.

While changing the set or arranging props within a short span of time, the actors manipulate both the roles: *character and visual maker*, at a single time and space dimension. As practiced in Kabuki presentation, the stagehands change the sets, props, and costumes of the characters in between the performance without disturbing the dramatic actions. These *invisibles* with black gowns, keep moving on the stage passively during the performance and involve in their jobs. For scenographic experiences, visual theatre borrowed this technique with some modifications. In this genre, the performers and stage manipulators are the actors who perform both the roles at the single point of time, which is challenging. In this experiment, the actors' responsibility becomes double since they must finish their jobs in a very short span of time and make the performance space ready for the next scene in darkness. This is possible through proper coordination and dividing the group into two. While one section of actors is responsible for removing the existing design elements, the other section is engaged in installing the forthcoming scene, simultaneously. This tricky situation is always handled with much understanding and efficiency.

Often in visual theatre, the actors perform the visuals by lending a part of their physical body as a fragment of the design element. The actor adopts the spatial rhythm of the visual compositions and perform, being an integral part of scenography. Sometimes, they portray the entire visual narratives only through their physical expressions. But in both the cases, - part or whole, they perform the design and stage visuals. Dr. Jabbar Patel's production of "*Ghashiram Kotwal*" sets example of actors performing design elements, being an integral part of it. The director explores the physicality of the actors as a part of stage design to form the *human-curtain* behind which the characters take entry and exit. In evolving the performance, these actors form various locals as per the requirements of the play. By doing so, the actors make the design performed which brings dynamism and movement into the stage visuals. Similar exploration of actors' physicality as visual design is adopted in some of the works of Badal Sircar. The pioneer of 'psycho-physical theatre' in India, Sircar explores the actors' body expressions to evoke psychological environment during the performance. Along with performing the design components through human body expressions, the actors in visual theatre become an extension of the visual design, which can easily be identified in the productions of '*Matte Eklavya (2011)*, *Tumhara Vincent (2015)* *August Ka Khwab (2017)*, *Adding Machine (2018)* *Animal Farm (2005-2019)* *Shakuntala (2018-2020)*<sup>ii</sup>, etc. The

portrayal of the sunflowers at the landscape at Arles in *Tumhara Vincent (Yours Vincent)* was created out of the fusion of actors' body and stage props. The actors performed the landscape by clustering on the stage floor, rapped with a large white tapestry, holding paper mâché sunflowers from underneath the cloth, which were swinging in the gentle air by the movement of their hands, adding to the visual aesthetics of the presentation.

Simultaneous performance of actors and objects to narrate the story is a common practice in traditional theatres. The actors in Indian classical theatre use to take entry and exit behind a half curtain called '*yavanika*', which is operated by two stagehands. These curtain bearers perform appropriate emotions, apt to the dramatic situations, '*yavanika*' being a part of the performance. The actor behind the curtain is gradually revealed as the curtain removed. This ritualistic activity develops a sense of curiosity among the viewers who are eager to see the character, hiding and revealing behind the cloth, boosting up excitement among the audience. In *Puruliachhau* performance and in *Theyyam* dance of Kerala, the performer wears elaborate mask, headgear, and costume, much larger than human proportion. A major concern of the artist is to handle these amenities with operating skills, apart from performing the character with the help of these objects. One must be thrilled by the spirit of the singer-actor of '*Pandavani*' performance, where the story is narrated with the help of a '*tambura*'- a string musical instrument which is also used as hand prop by the performer. In the '*Pala*' performance, the narrative theatre form of Odisha, the principal singer-actor (*Gahana*), tells the story with a *chamara* (fly whisk) and a set of *manjira* (small brass gong) at hand, making these props performed for the audience, creating many metaphoric visuals with varied emotions. In these cases, the performer acts as visual maker and manipulate the visuals created out of the amalgamation of actor and objects.

Visual theatre adopts the essence of these folk and traditional performances to formulate its aesthetics, thus allowing its actors to play with multiple dimensions and diversions in characterizations. Like an Indian classical and folk actor, who performs two parallel aspects of the performance, - character and narrator simultaneously on stage, actors in visual theatre adopt this dichotomy of 'in- and- out' trait by inheriting their quality. Objects, space, and characters pass through multiple transformations during this performance through many layers of transitions. Characters, actions, and dramatic plots undertake multiple layers of nonlinear journey in making this theatre. In the presentation of '*Animal Farm*', the lead actor who was doing the role of *Napoleon* (a Pig), removed his mask in between the performance where he desperately wanted to become a human being. Removing the mask (in-and-out dichotomy) was performed like a ritual with the help of rhythmic and appropriate movement, music, characterization, and aesthetics in front of the audience. But the real metaphor happened when the mask remained clinched to the character portraying his animality, not by wearing but being operated by the actor like a puppet. By doing so, the actor splits his character into two, - the human and pig. Often, he held the mask and talked to it as if confronting to himself. This gesture created dramatic irony in the situation where the



audience comprehended 'in-and-out' dichotomy in the character and interpret the play accordingly.

In this shot of tricky actions, the magnitude of the actor becomes multi-layered. At one hand he plays the character and in other hand, he becomes a puppeteer who operates the mask, props and design whenever required. In another example, the actor playing the role of 'Vincent' in the play *Tumhara Vincent*, handled the props and sets as a visual maker while remaining in the character. In one situation, during an accident inside the coal mines at Borinage, the actor, being in the character, operated the huge black canvas, weaving it to build an atmosphere of rising water inside the mines. This intense visual, heightened the devastating atmosphere of the accident and structured the dramatic tension through wavy and striking lines created out of the movement of the cloth which gradually got furious, trapping all the miners inside it, leading to their unfortunate death. The actor transits in between character and the visual maker by living with both the entities, thus guiding the audience to pass through a scenographic experience.

### *Conclusion*

Keeping deeper understanding of the visual forms, this theatre is a derivative of visual arts, whose language of expression is vision oriented. Visual mediums such as painting, sculpture, graphic design, photography, architecture, multimedia, or any visible object are only perceived through their formation of lines, colours, textures, and forms. Isolated, they are abstract but contextually they reciprocate each other to form defined relationships to convey the meaning. Often the dynamism emerged out of this reciprocation generate a quantum of feelings in which value seems meaningless and often abstract. An actor in visual theatre adopts this fundamental aesthetics of abstraction to reciprocate mutually with the visuals and develop awareness to realise the 'intricate sensibility' of visual elements. The tangible and intangible movement of lines, psychology of colours, textural feelings and the rhythm of objects are the major treatises of the visual theatre, which can only be realized through a performance. In this process while a scenographer creates visual atmosphere with the help of design elements, the actors carry this atmosphere through the performance, and animate them as living entity, thus creating an experience for the audience and for themselves.

### *References*

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<sup>i</sup>"*Ghashiram Kotwal*" is written in Marathi by Vijay Tendulkar in the year 1972 and translated into Hindi by Vasant Dev. Dr. Jabbar Patel's production of this play sets an example of designing with *human-curtains*, in which the actors play the major components of scenography.

<sup>ii</sup>"*Matte Eklavya*" is a Kannada play, originally written in Hindi as "*Eklavya Uvaach*" by Kuldeep Kunal in 2010. It was translated into Kannada by K.D Ramayah and was directed by Satyabrata Rout in 2011.

"*Tumhara Vincent*" is written and directed by Satyabrata Rout. The play bagged the prestigious Mohan Rakesh Samman by Sahitya Kala Parishad, Delhi as the best original Hindi manuscript in the year 2015.

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“*August Ka Khwab*” is an Indian adaptation of August Strindberg’s “*A Dream Play*”, originally written by the Swedish playwright, August Strindberg in 1901. The play is designed and directed by Satyabrata Rout for the National School of Drama, New Delhi in 2017.

“*Adding Machine*” is written by the American playwright Elmer Rice in 1923. The play sets the landmark of American Expressionism. The play was designed and directed by Satyabrata Rout for the Bharatendu Natya Academy, Lucknow in 2018.

“*Animal Farm*” is a dramatic adaptation of a political satire by George Orwell. The play was adapted into Hindi and directed by Satyabrata Rout for Sriram Centre Acting Course students in the year 2005, and for NSD Bengaluru Centre in 2019.

“*Shakuntala*” is the Hindi translation of Kalidas’s “*Abhijnana Shakuntalam*” by Mohan Rakesh. The play was designed and directed by Satyabrata Rout for the Department of Theatre, Central Michigan University, USA in the year 2018 and for the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Hyderabad in 2020.

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