

Eastern Theatre, Western Theatre

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Abstract

In the East, a play is a narrative performance. For an Eastern performer, it is natural for him to play the role of someone else or demonstrate something other than the self. With the help of the allusion and exaggeration inherent in the art of acting, and by distancing oneself from the role, the actor thereby easily makes the character palpable. Contemporary European theater, by understanding and analyzing these very aspects of acting, on the one hand has helped originate the idea of “role distancing,” and on the other, it has become the foundation of “ritual theater.” However in both Western and Eastern theater, neither “role distancing” nor “ritual” are the sought after goals, but rather the inherent and natural dialect of theater. It therefore follows that although the feelings portrayed are real, the roles are not so, and it is normal for the actors not to become the characters they portray. They do not pronounce, “We are them!” but only give us, the audience, and news concerning the “role” or narrate the role’s character to us. Hence it is also natural for the actor to observe the role he is portraying and, by emphasizing both the good and bad traits of the role’s character, incite the audience’s approval or disapproval. So it is natural for the actor, whose whole craft rests in being able to create different imaginative objects and mental images in the minds of the viewer, in the intervals and intermissions of being in character, to be able to ask for “a glass of water to regain his breath”; redo his make-up, or indeed openly read his entire role from a written script. The actor does not mean to imply that what is actually occurring on stage is reality; he is only relating a reality that has already occurred.

Although “role distancing” achieves the same end in both ta‘zieh (religious passion-plays) and in the works of Bertolt Brecht, they are definitely not of the same cloth. By the use of “role distancing,” Brecht attempts to keep the viewer from becoming totally immersed in or captivated by the magic of the scene in order for him to retain his objectivity. It is fundamentally not possible for the actor and the role to become one and the same in ta‘zieh, because whatever the actor does is, in reality, a form of religious homage and worship. He, the actor, believes himself to be a tiny speck in comparison to the saints, their counterparts, or

the enemies of the saints that he happens to be portraying. So how can he possibly make himself one with them? He does not even consider the thought of becoming one with either the saints or their enemies. In the first instance, it smacks of blasphemy and in the second, there lies the possibility of being welcomed to hell! That which occurs in Brecht's works by device, is a fundamentally natural caveat in ta'zieh.

In these ta'ziehs, it is not necessary to set a scene for the actions of the champions. They express themselves, their actions, and their roles, either upon their entrances onto the stage or at a later point, by direct discourse with the audience. How can an actor who is to portray a god, a good or a bad spirit, do so by the use of common or ordinary acts and actions? How can a god or a spirit act as the ordinary man in the street? How can a god, spirit, or mythological being express its ideas by the use of ordinary words such as those in common usage by the general public? Players of this type of theater must portray their roles with extraordinary, larger-than-life actions such as special dances, and cries and songs uttered in unusual voices, thereby bringing to life the god, spirit, or mythical being with actions and utterances in their own image.

The narrative and descriptive style of theater is utilized in these plays. As in all other narrative works, it accepts and does not deny its own nature.¹ Juxtaposition of prayers at the beginning and end of these plays; the prologues and epilogues; the introductions, and the position of the audience as a counterpoint to the play, emphasize both the spectacle of the performance and its sanctity. At the same time, by the use of mutually familiar idiomatic and spiritual contexts and techniques, audience participation is maintained in the performance and action of the play. Exaggeration and hyperbole, which are employed to refer to the supernatural, remove the allegory from the confines of theater, making it quite natural for actors to sometimes define and narrate the character they are portraying. Hence dimensions can no longer appear natural, nor will distance appear logical. The acting alludes to the dimensions and distances in the role and it is the actor who, by setting the mood and using tricks of stagecraft, fires the audiences' imagination and instinct, thereby making the audience a participant in the performance. In Japanese nô theater, by use of a fictional "séance" in which spirits are summoned and brought forth, a link is established with the past. In Balinese theater the same result is achieved by the use of lengthy reverential dances. The gods and devils are brought to earth to dance before their worshippers, and thereby figuratively remove the distance between god and man.

In China all plays are rooted in the legend of the ancestors. The audience is reminded of their principles, ideals and heritage by the revival of their common bygone past as portrayed in these plays. In India and Iran the audience is so intimately involved in these plays that they actually provide some of the stage props as both a charitable deed and in order to become a party to a spiritual and popular act. In present day India, there are still some theatrical ceremonies the likes of which have become scarce in Iran. One such ceremony portrays “the story of Rama” (Ramayana) and requires and involves a whole geographical locale for its performance. After the completion of harvest feasts and religious rites, the peasantry of the village that is providing the player portraying Rama transport him, in accordance with certain rites and rituals, to another village to “propose marriage” to Sita. In this village similar festivities are carried out in welcoming the “bridegroom.” After several days of celebrations, suddenly peasants from yet another village stage a mock attack and “kidnap” Sita. Rama, along with his followers and armed forces, then goes from village to village searching out Sita. A “battle” then takes place in which Sita is recovered and in the final act, the entire community takes part in a general festival. In Iran the remains of similar ceremonies are still extant in the “Mir-e Noroozi” and “the carpet washers of Ardehal of Mashhad” ceremonies.

Religious plays are directly linked to the spectator’s spirit, while secular plays engage his intellect. Eastern theater thus finds itself between these two poles.

Early religious-occult traditions, in giving majesty to superior and unknown powers, as well as other supernatural phenomena, sought to rouse the spectator from torpor.

By separating the common man from his daily routine and creating a bond, it purified and uplifted him. Eastern theater, as the logical continuation of primitive traditions, unwittingly bridges the gap between humanity and the universe by going beyond the commonplace. Thus when watching a traditional Eastern play, there is a feeling and energy which bonds the audience with the totality of existence and the universe. Through theater, humanity and existence are once again unified. This synergy of Eastern theater, now lost to Western drama, produces an atmosphere in which both the actor and the audience have a mutually creative role to play. It is naturally the players who, as the main characters, take part in the performance on behalf of all those involved.

By reference to the other and the actor’s indirect allusions, in a simple fashion, the actor highlights the main theme of the play. By bringing to mind the rites and ceremonies of the ancient traditions, this type of play harks back to the era when society was not yet divided.

During that era, communal activity was both drama and ritual, the philosophy of existence, group therapy, renewal and reaffirmation of tribal affiliations. It was a way of gaining strength and power from the group in order to intimidate enemies and encourage the gods and the forces of nature to increase the yield of agricultural produce. It was also a way to discourage the wrath of destructive and evil forces. In a theatrical ceremony, a crowd would gather, and, by calling upon superior forces, gain strength and power from those forces. By doing so, they would vanquish and overcome their common fears, thereby enabling each individual to release their stress.

The main objective of art in most parts of the East, especially in Indian culture, is this same invocation and worship of the gods. Dancing, which is one of India's main art forms, is actually the language or means of communicating with nature and becoming one with the gods. Even today, most of the gestures used by Eastern dancers have certain meanings which are derived from the ceremonial dances of ancient times.

It is by means of theater that ceremonies are performed, a theater brimming with allegoric riddles and hints, and the characters being portrayed, rather than being alive, ordinary, and tangible, are abstract ideals. If these characters are not wearing a mask, they usually have on heavy make-up; when the performance requires them to dance, it is as though they are dancing inside a temple. By their mysterious movements, they are in fact engaged in performing an extended, vocal form of prayer, like monks of a divine order, who do not reveal their own stories, but speak sincerely of a reality that they consider much superior to themselves.

Introducing riddles and myths into theater, creating realities above and beyond the conceptual reality of the stage, and using familiar mannerisms and commonly held beliefs in such a way so as to detach the audience from its habits and environment and bring to it virtue and grandeur: are Eastern theatrical concepts which have gradually infiltrated Western theater.

Before the introduction of Western "spoken drama," memorizing and repeating a text to an audience constituted a play in Eastern theater. Having a live person on stage was no longer enough. The audience expected the performance to be life-like and the mood of the play to afford the actors a chance to be creative, spontaneous, and to improvise. This creativity was at the same time both limited and open. The limitation was due to the actor being forced, in principle, to follow the path and traditions laid down by the actors who had preceded him in

playing the role. The openness was in the fact that he was free to use his creative ability along with acting expertise and finesse. He could perform the role in the familiar traditional way and yet go beyond what others had previously done with that role. Although the acting had to be in accordance with tradition and custom, each performance could nonetheless be considered a new creation.

Most players of Eastern theater did not consider themselves as actors. A number of them continued to repeat past traditions by playing the roles in exactly the same structure and pattern, in the belief that they were performing a religious duty. Others copied the exact actions of the past in order to earn the merits of the world beyond. In many areas theater is considered a religious “quest.” Even in the most secular parts of the East, apart from requiring technical experience, no actor can go on stage without some form of spiritual and ethical training. Becoming an actor in most parts of the Eastern world is a form of self-sacrifice, and the actor, by having total control over his spirit and by using all his physical abilities, should be able to produce an environment of unusual conditions. The actors’ entering this environment and returning to the day-to-day routine, which could take place many times in a play, in some obscure way, refers to the bond between heaven and earth. In practice, however the actor shows that he is an ordinary human being who is able to represent a supernatural act. The very essence of the play is not in the words utilized by the players, despite the fact that the words may be most valuable.⁴

Apart from the major differences between the Eastern and Western theatrical schools of thought, the Eastern playwrights were the product of a visual idiom, whilst most Western playwrights were influenced by the literary and philosophical aspects of their society as a whole. Depth and pragmatism, which are fundamental criteria of Western theater, are seldom found in the Eastern context. This is quite natural since the ideal in Western theater is the recognition of man and his standing in society, whereas the ideal of Eastern theater is the human role in the controversy of existence. Therefore Eastern theater, in its highest form, while presenting a very simple story, does not confine itself to a limited space but rather tries to portray man’s role and place in the totality of creation. For this very reason the characters portrayed in Eastern theater are not equal in depth and psychological implications to those of the West, possessing instead a rich and comprehensive allegorical power. Based on Eastern criteria, a good script is one in which there is, on the one hand, the optimum possibility of being performed in the most eloquent manner possible, and on the other hand, provides the ability to create an atmosphere in which the real and wonderful meaning of existence can be

elaborated to the fullest possible degree. Thus the hidden unity amongst all the elements of existence can be portrayed and the apparent disparity eliminated. Everything now becomes unified, and out of this whole, the play emerges. So unlike the West, Eastern scripts are only partly influenced by literature. Eastern plays are not really readable material; rather they are visual phenomena. In many Eastern traditional scripts the literary text is either of secondary importance or even non-existent, but what is the main and important element, is the scripts' capacity for pure performing value.

Yet since Eastern theater is mostly non-literary, how can we judge the value of the performance? Artistic performance cannot be recorded as it is dependent on the momentary and fleeting combinations of actions which occur during a performance. Objectively it is not possible to either register or rightfully record the pure interpretation of the whole performance. It follows that in order to preserve traditional Eastern plays, they continue to be passed on from mouth to mouth and from one generation to the next. The same holds true for ancient traditions and ceremonies that also reach their goals in a similar manner. The main means of performing were by way of dancing, mimicry, asides, narration and movements upon the stage. In addition to these we must include non-verbal sounds such as singing, humming, and also sound effects. The elements of speech in a poetic framework, i.e. poetry, by way of conversation or recitation of the text of the play, were introduced much later. Although they later became an important part of the script, they were however not amongst the main aims of the performance.

During the creation of scripts and plays in both the Eastern and Western theaters, the effects of these different elements were similar but different, in much the same way that the two cultures were different. In ancient Greece scripts were produced by philosophers, but in India plays were founded by the gods. During the course of history, the outcome of theater in these two cultures pursued different paths.

The importance of intellectual stimulation in the West also underscored another element, which was emphasis upon the text. Intellectual stimulation means that the writer/philosophers' thoughts are present in the play. This is the reason that, in order to comprehend Western plays, to a certain extent, one must have a good understanding of the author and must be familiar with his lifestyle. (Even the necessity for a critic or theatrical expert, is for the purpose of bringing about a meeting of the minds between the playwright's thoughts and those of the audience.)

A play is a script in which thought and analysis are molded into words. The duty of the performer is to perform these thoughts and analyses within the context of the play and still maintain the depth of the social or philosophical idea. However, texts of Eastern plays are not complicated. Even when they contain elements of mysticism, they are still dealing with emotions rather than logic. They are depicting that which occurs between the lines, as opposed to the written words themselves. In contrast to this, the Western concept has a unified intellectual understanding. The Eastern script, in so far as technicalities are concerned, is solely written to suit the special tastes of the Eastern mentality. This sort of play is an occasion wherein the audience, even in the most literary performance of the play, already knows the whole thing by heart. The Western world's acquaintance with Eastern theater resulted in a series of endeavors to understand the real meaning of Eastern theater in the West. Efforts were made to create a play that was independent from its text, in other words, a non-literal play. The real essence of the play was unveiled by using action to replace words, and thus necessitating the actor to be creative and extemporize, thereby replacing the reading of the text.

This knowledge of Eastern traditional theater⁵ induced Western actors to find ways and methods of acting in a non-Aristotelian fashion and also to seek its roots in the Western idiom. In the meantime, Eastern experiences were absorbed by the West which, having been scientifically systemized and labeled, later returned to the East.

In the course of the last century, theater throughout the Eastern world has had a similar fate. Sudden contact with Western culture, as a vigorous and powerful reality, created new problems in their traditional social and cultural world. The Eastern pillars of what, till then, had been considered to be ultimate truths, were shattered. In their place Eastern societies were forced to understand their current realities, and these (which for centuries were not thought to be creditworthy) became a most important and vital factor of the times. Traditions and values which up till then were the most important elements for continuing along the path laid down by the ancients, were rejected and this resulted in a conceptual change. The major effort of this century was to emulate the Westerners' pragmatic viewpoint on actual reality. This effort inevitably resulted in the birth of a new generation of theater.

The West, after experiencing a lengthy period of military, economic, and political domination of the East, and after a long study and analysis of certain Eastern values, finally overcame its feeling of awe and intimidation of these values. Having thus become aware of these values, they took them and, after carefully analyzing, measuring, sorting, and thoughtfully choosing, transliterated some of them into their own structures. By reaching into the essence of these Eastern values, the West brought forth something completely Western and sometimes even personal. In contrast to this, the East did not advance in a similar manner, since knowledge of Western culture in the East was at best superficial. The East, in trying to rapidly absorb something which it did not as yet fully comprehend, entered a long period of confusion and hopelessness. Since then two matters have, more or less come to pass. First came the East's denial of its own past values and of its own frames of reference in order to express new concepts and instead replace these with hastily copied, shallow, and weak Western versions. As a result these works were doomed to failure, since, although superficially Western, they lacked the depth and intellect of the Western idiom. Of course this is quite natural. To try to transplant a way of thought that has taken centuries to mature in its own environment, and overnight, attempt to use it in a different context, is impossible. This process requires much time and the right conditions to succeed.

To even comprehend a dominant culture can not be achieved in a single generation. The end result of any such supposedly successful transplantation is, at best, a cheap copy with no real identity.

The second matter, which ran concurrently with the first and was not much different, was a limited self-realization. A group of individuals came to realize that having quickly given up and lost their traditional value system, they had actually not gained anything fundamental or worthwhile with which to replace it. Thus they tried to rediscover and explain their traditions and begin to create their own cultural framework, whilst at the same time also attempting to really comprehend Western culture instead of just imitating it. This is where they find themselves in a most strange and difficult circumstance. Just as they try to revitalize their own Eastern value systems and give these a new life, their general public has already come to imitate Western culture at its lowest possible level. Apart from this mimicry, they, the public, do not want anything else. What is more, just as Western thought was trying to be emulated in the East, in the West, it had already reached a dead end.

Within these concentric circles some struggles have already started in an effort to break out, but for these attempts to become more well-defined, tangible, and finally result in an original concept, it will require both time and major effort. However, can this concept really be independent and not just a colorless copy set in the Western mold? Experiences and efforts of various kinds have started in a number of Eastern countries. From amongst these ruins what will emerge? The tomorrow of Eastern theater and culture shall depend on the potency of these experiences.

1 This method was absorbed by Europe and developed over the course of the last century. It was then returned to the East under the name of “Epic Theater.” The use of the word “Epic” in this context is misleading, for it apparently refers to a “heroic” aspect, whilst in reality it is “narrative.” Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, categorized the “Epic” as opposed to the “Tragedy,” the first of which is storytelling and the second theatrical. Narrative theater is the use of narration to produce a play.

2 These attracted the admiring attention of Antonin Artaud. See *The Theater and Its Double*, New York, Evergreen, 1958.

3 More or less similar to Iranian poetic and musical idiom which have their own special forms and limitations, yet still have room for creativity and innovation. Basically the value of each poet or musician is in his ability, while following the accepted idioms of his art, to create something that goes beyond these molds.

4 Balinese theaters revealed to us the idea of a physical, nonverbal theater in which anything that takes place on the stage—independent of the script—constitutes a play. While what we know of Western Theater is that it derives its unity from the written word, which also is its limiting factor. For the Westerner, the word is the thing. Without it, there is no possibility of any message being conveyed to the audience. Theater is a branch of literature; an auditory form of language. Even if we differentiate between what is spoken on stage as opposed to what we can see written in the text, or even if we limit the theater to what happens during the lapses in dialogue, we still cannot separate the actions from the words. (from Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*)

5 Knowledge of Eastern theater had begun long before Voltaire drew inspiration from Chinese plays. In 1789, Kalidasa's Shakuntala (a 4th century Indian play) was first translated into a European language, and was published in many other languages over the next twenty years. Goethe, while praising Shakuntala, used its prologue on the dialogue between the director and the actress in one of his works, thereby causing an avalanche of Eastern texts to be translated into European languages, starting with Japanese and Chinese masterpieces, and then the great Sanskrit works of India, and finally fifty ta'zieh. At that time no Eastern person had so many texts or books of his native country at his disposal.