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Research Article



## From Proscenium to Public: Explorations of Body and Space in Sircar's Third Theatre

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### Abstract

The name of Badal Sircar, the Bengali playwright, actor and theatre activist, holds a very prestigious position in the history of modern Indian theatre. Both in the field of the Indian mainstream proscenium theatre and in that of the Alternative/Street theatre, he has made significant contribution to the Indian drama. In the post-independence period, when Indian

theatre world was caught in the debate of “modern” and “Indian”, he established a brand-new genre of theatre called “Third Theatre”. Third Theatre provided a potent resolution to the inherent dichotomy in modern Indian drama by skillfully reconciling indigenous theatrical tools and techniques with the Western proscenium tradition of a text-based, plot-driven idea of theatre. Sircar’s style is thus a hybrid of folk theatre and proscenium theatre. This was a creative attempt to create an alternate media to effectively spread the playwright's views among the populace. With all these innovative ideas, philosophies and techniques, Sircar’s primary purpose was to bridge the gap between the drama and the audience, between the rural and the urban, between the form and the content etc., and to attain to the ideals of liveness and direct communication in theatrical experience. This effort aids him in breaking sharply with the modern Bengali theatre, which is fixated on the manner of presentation used in the English Victorian drama, and elevating it to a hitherto unattainable level of artistry. The present paper seeks to explore how Badal Sircar experimented with the body of the actor and with the performance space in order to create a syncretic form of theatre accessible equally to the rural and urban.

**Keywords:** Third Theatre, Spatial Dynamics, Theatrical Transgression, Performance Studies, Intimate Theatre, Space, Body, Anganmancha, Muktamancha, Physical Theatre, Alternate Theatre, Postmodern theatre

Badal Sircar, the Bengali dramatist, actor, director and theatre activist, has made a name for himself as a leading figure in Indian theatre today. With around 60 plays/performances to his credit, Sircar has frequently been identified as a trendsetter dramatist in contemporary Indian theatre. No other theatre figure has had such a profound and all-encompassing impact on theory and practice of theatre in India after independence as Badal Sircar. It is a fact agreed by almost all the historians of Indian theatre that the emergence of modern Indian drama owes much to the Western proscenium tradition of theatre. Its form of drama fundamentally modeled after the European naturalistic theatre. In her book *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947*, Aparna Bhargava has explained the idea of “theatrical modernity” and has located the origin of modern Indian Theatre in the colonial encounter. When Sircar started his dramatic career in 1956, it was a high time of debate between the “modern” and the “Indian”, between the urban and rural, between the proscenium and the indigenous folk. Sircar not only excelled in both the wings of this debate, he also successfully opened a path of the reconciliation and resolution of this debate in his Third Theatre. Sircar began his career in theatre by writing and performing the proscenium plays ranging from the light-hearted situational comedies to the plays which explored the tragic complexities and complications of human life. The period from 1956 to 1963 is a phase of Sircar’s involvement with the proscenium theatre. The most remarkable achievements of this period have been his plays like *Ebong Indrajit*, *Pagla Ghora*, *Baki Itihas* etc. All these plays have been immensely popular among the audience as well as the critics. Specially the production of *Ebong Indrajit* in 1965 made him a national celebrity overnight and secured a place for him alongside three other great

modern playwrights- Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad. *Ebong Indrajit* has been noted as “a hall-mark in Indian dramatic history” (Mitra, 61). The creation and production of *Ebong Indrajit* is crucial in another sense also. It is after writing this play that Badal Sircar’s creative imagination started taking a decisive inclination towards his idea of Third Theatre, leading to his final farewell to the proscenium stage in 1972.

In the theatrical career of Sircar, the 70s are noted for his most remarkable achievements in the field of Third Theatre. During this period, he published and produced the plays like *Spartacus*, *Procession*, *Bhoma* and *Stale News*. These plays have been a mile stone in the history of the Alternative tradition in Indian theatre, and with their innovative production style opened up a whole new trajectory of theatrical practices not only for India but for the whole world. It took almost a decade and a half to him, from his first comedy *Solution X* (1956) to his first play written after his idea of Third Theatre *Spartacus* (1972), to materialize his idea of Third Theatre, a syncretic form of theatre combining the Western with the indigenous, the urban with the folk. This decision to abandon the proscenium space for the Anganmancha and the Muktamancha, however, did not occur to him suddenly. It took a long, painful process of introspection and observation:

The thinking process has been sustained by what I have seen of Jatra, Tamasha, Bhawai, Nautanki and Kathakali, of Chou and Manipuri dances; and also by what I have seen in the theatre-in-the-round productions in London in 1957 and Paris in 1963, in the productions of Joan Littlewood in London, of Yuri Lyubimov in the Taganka Theatre in Moscow, in Cinohenri Klub Theatre and the Pantomime of Jari in Prague, in Grotowski’s productions of *Apocalypsis cum Figuric* in his Theatre Laboratory in Wroclaw, Poland. It has also been sustained by discussions with various theatre personalities Jerzy Grotowski, Julian Beck, Judith Malina, Richard Schechner and others. (“Third Theatre” 17)

Sircar was equally impressed by the Western Experimental theatre as he was by the indigenous folk performance traditions. After years of observation of these foreign as well as native performance traditions and introspection on them, thus, Sircar came to realize the elemental reality of theatre. He concluded that theatre is essentially a human act, and happens when the actors and the spectators meet at a particular place at a particular time. Thus, “liveness” and the “directness in communication” between the actor and the spectator, according to Badal Sircar, are the two most fundamental requirements for creating a meaningful theatre. When analyzed this way, Sircar found the proscenium theatre completely inadequate. The proscenium fourth-wall and in fact all its paraphernalia only serves to limit the scope of liveness in theatrical experience and closeness in actor-spectator relationship. Apart from this, Sircar also noted the monetary concerns in the proscenium theatre and found it only as a hindrance of theatre’s attempt to reach to the public. Finance involved in the proscenium theatre, according to Badal Sircar, limits the access of public to it, and at the same time also turns the theatrical production into a commodity to be sold. Hence, Sircar, a devout theatre activist and practitioner, decided to leave the proscenium permanently.

Sircar’s Third Theatre provides a potent alternative to the above discussed limitations of the proscenium theatre. He took theatre away from the boundaries of proscenium to the

spaces more inclusive and easily accessible, and devised a new idiom of theatrical language deriving its energy mostly from the human element than from any additional paraphernalia. The language of Third Theatre is constituted not only of the verbal language of the text but also equally of the actor's body, actor-spectator relationship established through the peculiar designs of the performance space. With his Third Theatre, Sircar abandoned the proscenium stage and took recourse to the alternative performance spaces, first Anganmancha and later Muktamancha. With this peculiar shifting of the performance space, Sircar in fact aimed at a redefinition of the whole dynamics of the performance environment. As against the divide between the stage and the auditorium in the proscenium theatre, Anganmancha and Muktamancha referred to a performance space that was at once the stage and the auditorium both. The actors were allowed to perform in the space occupied by the spectator, and the spectators were invited, when needed, to participate in the performance. Of course, to ensure the equal and collective participation of the actor and the spectator in the performance space was the guiding motive behind this choice. With this alternative performance space, the theatrical experience of the audience was no longer limited to the performer's act only but was also derived equally from the reactions and responses of the other spectators. Obviously, Sircar exclaims, "it was a new language of communication" ("Third Theatre", 27). "This language of theatre", Sircar pointed out elsewhere, "involves being within and experiencing, not viewing and hearing from a distance" ("Changing Language of Theatre", 85).

Body, along with space, is another fundamental resource of creating an effective theatrical language in Sircar's Third Theatre. Sircar opined that "the basic tool of the art of theatre is the human body" (ibid. 82). Dispensing with all the additional artificialities of the proscenium theatre, Sircar took recourse to the performer's body to ensure an effective theatrical communication. He organized workshops and intensive rehearsals to train the actors in body movements, various formations, mime, rhythm, sounds and physical contortions. In Third Theatre, the actor's body was exploited as the most potent resource to give expression and representation of the various shapes, formations and objects required in the plot of the story. Besides the verbal language of the scripted text, thus, the actor's body was utilized to create a powerful visual image for the spectators. Despite this much reliance on the physical acting, however, Sircar never believed in the idea of the so called "physical theatre". In his Third Theatre, body is never viewed as the language of theatrical experience in its own right but is used only as an auxiliary to "enhance or enrich the language part of the play" ("Voyages in the Theatre" 114). Obviously, to get maximum out of the actor's body, Third Theatre demanded extensive as well as intensive training. Sircar, thus, conducted regular rehearsal-cum-workshops for his performers. He encouraged his actors to practice psycho-physical exercises. These exercises, according to Badal Sircar, helped the actors to get rid of their psychological blocks, of their habituated behavior and body language caused by their hypocrisies of civilized life. He also encouraged and guided his performers to practice the exercises that would help them in attaining to an effective mind-body synthesis by exploring "ways of relating one's feelings about the theme to the expression through the body, through movement, sound, rhythm, energy and totality of linguistic expression" (ibid.104). These methods of incorporating powerful expression through sound, movement and energy, thus, helped Sircar to create an

effective language of theatre without the help of all the long narrative descriptions usually found in the plays written for the proscenium theatre.

Dispensing with all the paraphernalia of the naturalistic proscenium theatre, thus, Sircar's Third Theatre really becomes a 'poor theatre', poor not only in the sense Grotowski used it but also in the very literal sense of the term. Sircar has himself observed very succinctly the poverty of his Third Theatre:

We gradually reduced the use of sets, lights, costume and background music, decided never to use mechanical devices like tape recorders and projectors; but we also adopted the concept of poor theatre in the literal sense—that is, inexpensive theatre. Our group was poor, so are our countrymen, but we wanted to utilize poverty and turn it into an advantage instead of allowing it to be a restriction. ("Third Theatre" 18-9)

In the final analysis, thus, Sircar's Third Theatre exemplifies three distinct features—flexibility, inexpensiveness, and portability.

In the practice of his idea of Third Theatre, Sircar tried to design the performance space of each of his productions in its own characteristic ways. *Spartacus* is Sircar's first play conceived entirely for the Third Theatre, though just before it the performance of *Sagina Mahato* in 1971 followed somewhat the same line of experimental production. In the performance of *Sagina Mahato*, "the chairs were arranged in a manner that the acting area cut across the spectators, inviting them to experience the drama from within" ("Third Theatre" 19-20). In the production of *Spartacus* that consisted of a huge cost, on the other hand, the groups of actors were placed at different places, much like islands, with one group kept in the middle. Sircar has himself explained the logic and rationale behind this peculiar seating arrangement—"island arrangement of seats brought the spectator *within* the performance" and enabled them to have "a theatrical experience, not just a spectacle" (ibid. 37). In *Procession*, a maze-like seating arrangement was accomplished in order to provide a theatrical simulation to the structural form of a procession.

Likewise, the dynamisms and potentialities of actor's body too has been exploited and explored abundantly in the plays produced by Badal Sircar. In the production of *Spartacus*, for example, actor's body is utilized almost up to the level of a physical theatre. Sircar himself has very clearly noted:

In the production, action was emphasized more than words. The play began with five action scenes (taking about 10 minutes altogether) depicting respectively— (1) people being captured to be sold as slaves (2) slaves being sold in the market (3) slaves toiling (gladiator-slaves fighting in the arena and (a slave being crucified for an act of defiance. In these scenes, cries, shouts and noise were used, but not a single sentence. The scenes were expressed entirely by physical acting. ("Third Theatre" 36)

Obviously, the visual representation through the skilful utilization of the actor's body here serves as a perfect replica for the verbal description. This has been well explained by Samik Bandyopadhyay on the basis of his first-hand experience of the play:

[How] after the revolt had been crushed, the actors crawled through the lanes, their faces almost touching our knees as they whispered into our faces, abar phire asbo (we will

return...the closeness of it, the way it hit you sensually, the actors becoming a physical transmission of the concept, was very powerful. (qtd. In Katyal 123)

*Procession* is also an important play to exemplify Sircar's experimentation with and explorations of the potentialities of the actor's body to create an effective and strongly communicative language of theatre. In this play, the use of the actor's body to create strong visual stage realities is discernible on many occasions. The most powerful and effective use of the actor's body in the play occurs in the scene where Khokha is repeatedly murdered. Khokha is beheaded, hanged, shot, gassed to death, and finally bombed. All this has been successfully and effectively communicated solely through actor's body and mime. In the decapitation scene, for instance, the visual representation of the executioner's block is skillfully created through the use of actor's body only: one of the actors bends over and Khokha's neck is placed on his shoulder to be beheaded with an imaginary blade by the executioner. Apart from this, there is a scene in the play where various stage realities are created through the body of chorus in rapid succession— a train, a bus and machines in a factory. Mimicking the trains siren and through the skilful use of body movements, the chorus turns into a train. Immediately after it, the actor named One poses himself as a bus and the other actors cling on to him visualizing an overcrowded bus in the city of Calcutta. Again, creating a cacophonous screaming sound, the chorus turns into a machine.

With his creative experimentations with the actor's body and performance space, thus, Badal Sircar has proved that an alternative tradition of theatre is too possible to run parallel to the mainstream proscenium tradition of theatre. This alternative tradition is in no ways less or more significant to the proscenium tradition. Instead, both the traditions have their own internal rationale and objectives. Whereas proscenium tradition has been found well suited for the exploration of the internal contradictions and complexities of human life, the alternative tradition of theatre exemplified by Sircar's Third Theatre claims to be a more convenient and effective form for the drama committed to socio-political concerns. Being inexpensive, flexible and portable, and relying largely on the human body and the "empty stage", this drama is also a perfect replica of urban theatre to be practiced in the rural areas of India.

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