

# Architecture and Theatre

## Introduction

The architectural and spatial needs of Theatre must be determined by a philosophy and aesthetic of live performance, which make it a valid form of expression today. For cinema is clearly the art of our times and it seems to invalidate theatre, by doing much better, what theatre does. Besides it has the reach, the technological resources and commercial validity which theatre does not. And in a political climate, which demands mass accessibility, its reach provides it with an advantage and a greater relevance. Theatre therefore has to redefine itself in this context. It has to seek out its strength and create its validity from that strength.

I believe that theatre must not try to replicate cinema even if cinema has the apparent possibilities of a politically correct art form for our times, in that it can have mass viewership. I believe that theatre must do what cinema cannot. And if it is true to its *raison d'être* it will be of little consequence that it does not have the reach of cinema.

What is it then that distinguishes theatre from cinema? And what is that different something, which gives it its validity and strength as an art form? Once this is clear we will see that decisions about spaces for theatre performance will emerge spontaneously from this first premise.

Although both forms are perceptual, the theatre has an edge over cinema in that the perceptions that it offers to the ear and eye are inscribed in a **true space**. The theatre involves real persons on the same scene as the public. **Presence** is the only reality in theatre. The cinema on the other hand accommodates every reality except the presence of the actor.

## Theatre Space and Cinema Space

What are the implications of this for a space for the theatre?

The true space in theatre demands an interactive engagement at an individual level. In the cinema, technology creates a measure of realism, which allows the audience to sit back and receive passively what is on show. And the spectators then are hypnotized into one mass to induce a mass response.

In 1937 Rosenkrantz wrote about the attitude of the spectator while viewing the two forms, in *Esprit*: “ The characters on the screen are quite naturally objects of identification, while those on stage are, rather, objects of mental opposition because their real presence gives them an objective reality and to transpose them into beings in an imagery world the will of the spectator has to intervene actively, that is to say, to will to

transform their physical reality into an abstraction. This abstraction being the result of a process of the intelligence that we can only ask of a person *who is fully conscious.*”  
{Italics my own.}

The theatre space therefore demands the spectator’s individuality and her active individual response. Such a response will not be possible if the audience is a large mass of persons. For a large crowd creates a mass mentality. It crowds out the individual mind, which is occupied by the collective suggestion. **Therefore the true space fulfills its functions best when it is small.**

Cinema itself has impacted theatre in such a way that it needs to be in a space, which is intimate. Certain principles of cinema such as the *spatialization of time*, which are expressed in the cinema through the facial close up, when applied in live performance lead to the creating of images through the body of the performer----the body space expresses emotions and feeling states in time, now this, now that etc. Spatializing time has made the device of the soliloquy redundant both in cinema and theatre. And if earlier this device could reach large masses through the voice and its verbal rendition, today the visual image, which has replaced it, needs, in the theatre, a closer and more intimate viewer-ship. The contemporary trend world wide of using the performer’s body in theatre in this imagistic manner comes possibly as a response to the concept of spaztializing time. And its implications in determining the size of the performance space are obvious.

There is also a pragmatic need for the spectator retaining the essential individuality of her response to the performance experience in the theatre. A shared authorship passes on to her once the creative work becomes a performance piece. Her articulated and even her unarticulated responses aid in the “unpacking” of the performance further. The performer and the performance consequently grow as a response to the varied interactions with a variety of different spectators.

Therefore the larger the number of performances and the more varied the spectators, the more creatively productive the experience, as also the greater the reach. One must not exhaust on the very first night the audiences one can have. Ideally therefore one is looking at a theatre space which is intimate and small and which therefore gives the performer the possibility of repeating her performance many times for different audiences. And therein lies growth.

The repetition of performance in theatre is not like the repetition of shows in cinema. For cinema captures the show once and for all, which remains unvaried and cannot change. In the theatre the performance changes as the performer grows and struggles to reach, understand and touch different audiences whom she is in dialogue with over time. We believe that theatre is not only about performance. It is about developing the ability to sense and access the sensibility of different/alien audiences and thereafter to evolve means by which to *communicate* with them through the performance. Herein too lies growth.

## Live Performance and Space

The nature of the space required in theatre emerges essentially from an understanding of the philosophy and aesthetic of live performance.

Theatre's forte, its inimitable strength, is the live, sensorial, presence of the performer. And unlike the actor in cinema, the audience can almost touch, smell, feel, and taste the actor in the theatre. It is this sensorial presence that a contemporary aesthetic of performance must aim to enhance by creating a performance language, which will impact the audience deliberately and powerfully.

Thus the actor will exude an enhanced non-functional energy, very different from that which she uses in everyday life. She will break down her automatic behavior and find an alternative way of walking and standing, a different balance axis, a different gestural mode, and a different way of speaking from that which she uses in everyday life. The actor's performance energy will then result from her being constantly present in and aware of her every action.

And through a contagion of this enhanced physical energy the audience will be seduced into the performance.

But the sensorial impact of the performer is only a vehicle for a deeper interaction between performer and spectator in the shared space. This interaction is based on a spiritual element: that of the **contagion of consciousness**.

In the world of art and aesthetics both contagion and consciousness are fundamental to experience. Indeed the value of all art lies in its ability to create a heightened or elevated state of consciousness. This uplifting power of art is inherent in its nature, for art is itself the expression of a heightened/elevated consciousness. If the creations of the artiste/performer come from her highest states of consciousness they will impact the spectator and elevate her to the corresponding state of consciousness.

Enhanced states of consciousness are those in which the boundaries of everyday consciousness are rolled back. The assumption is that these states of consciousness which one perceives to be beyond oneself are actually regions of oneself, which one is as yet unaware of. The attempt at enhancing the consciousness or of extending its boundaries involves therefore the colonizing' of our potential or possibility, as in the thrust for inspiration.

When we talk of inspiration, we talk of it as though it is something, which comes to us from outside ourselves, from a space, which is other than what we are in everyday life. In the intense need to find solutions to creative problems, one sometimes makes great leaps of consciousness into spaces of ourselves, which exist beyond those of daily existence. These are vertical leaps into a potential of ourselves, which at that moment seems beyond us.

The solutions that come to us from there are instances of inspiration. These spaces can become part of our everyday consciousness if one tries to access them often enough. And if that were to happen, inspiration would still tantalize us from even higher reaches, inveigling us to go further beyond, **enlarging the boundaries of our consciousness even more.**

This work has an enormous relevance to performance practice. For the struggle to go beyond the everyday in a process of continuous becoming creates a vibrating, energized persona, which reaches out to the spectator and touches her through a contagion of consciousness.

A word about contagion. In the physiological context contagion implies a physical impact at an unperceived level. Psychologically it relates to osmosis and at an impact at a spiritual level. Is such a thing within the realm of possibility? I quote from the Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who says that anytime the consciousness of one individual is raised in the world the general quality of and quantity of mind in the world is enhanced because reality is connected by a fundamental oneness and therefore communication is possible at levels beyond those of every day perceptual reality.

Chardin's is not a lonely voice. He echoes Indian philosophy and most particularly his contemporary from our part of the world: Sri Aurobindo—and he is echoed by the new physics when he talks of the fundamental oneness of all reality and the possibility of communication at all levels.

**Such an aesthetic and philosophy of the theatre implies that it has a sacred function. Its validity lies in its spiritual function of elevating the consciousness of all participating in the events occurring in the shared space.**

### **Sacred Space**

Indeed according to the evidence we have of the traditional performing space, {both in the Natyashastra and of the Koothambalam,} we find a similarity in the organization of the temple space, which is sacred, and that of the traditional performance space. It seems therefore that the tradition also envisaged a sacred role for theatre, although the traditional notion of the sacred possibly varied from ours. While theirs was largely religious, ours can be religiously, morally, politically and socially subversive and yet retain its sacredness, as that sacredness is not dependent on already recognized tangibles and established formulas but on the truth of a lived experience.

But going back to the similarities of the temple and the performance space. Certain important features of the temple are replicated in the Koothambalam. For instance the temple has an inner sanctuary {*garbha griha*} in which the deity is kept, it has a pillared hall {*mandapa*} in front of the sanctuary for the assembly of devotees and it has a run around verandah {*maha-mandapa*} on each side of the assembly hall. In the Koothambalam the performance area replaces the inner sanctuary,{thus signifying the sacred nature of this space}and the pillared assembly area of the temple is replaced by the

space for the spectator. And these two spaces are frequently marked out by a small difference in levels and by pillars. The run around corridor is also accommodated in the structure of the Koothambalam.

An aside at this point: there is much the same conventional system and disposition of parts in the Christian Church and the Greek Temple as in the Indian Temple. Thus the chancel in the Christian Church and the *cella* in the Greek Temple correspond to the *garba griha*, the nave of the Church and the columned *naos* of the Greek Temple to the *mandapa*.

The architectural principles fundamental to the sacred in the traditional performance space manifest themselves through: (a) the subtle division between the performer's space and the spectator's space and (b) secondly in the awareness that the center of the entire constructed space of the theatre is the point of highest energy and that is where the performer ought to situate herself so as to have the highest impact.

The traditional space recognized the need for a division between the performer's space and the spectator's space. For the aesthetic while allowing for intimacy and sensorial participation encouraged a psychical distance between the performer and spectator. Thus while the performer could portray lust/*kama* for instance the spectator was encouraged to be detached from the feeling of lust while experiencing an aesthetic appreciation for its portrayal.

This was an attempt at consciousness elevation. It got reflected in the space by a subtle division through an arrangement of pillars, which marked out the two areas or by a slight elevation of the performance space. One can create this separation today by other devices such as a difference in the materials used in the two spaces, or by a modification in the arrangement of the two spaces—a flat space giving way to a rising space, or by a small gap between the two spaces.

This subtle division is extremely necessary in an intimate space where the sensorial presence of the performer is the fundamental experience. For without it the performance could become merely a sensorial experience without being elevating.

In so far as the second principle is concerned very few performance spaces honor it today. Most place the performance space at the extreme end of the entire structure. The Koothambalam however, divides the entire constructed space into two, one half of which is the performance space and the green room beyond---and this places the performance area at the center of the structure. In performing at the center of the structure the performer avails of the high energy that is available at that point.

### **Intimate Space and Architecture**

**The sacred intent of theatre, which is grounded on Presence in a true space, dictates that the space is such that neither the presence nor its contagion is diffused. It begs**

**for a space, which is intimate. It begs for a space, which encourages an interactive engagement between the performer and the spectator.**

What is meant by intimate space in architectural terms?

Today theatre practitioners define the intimate space in terms of the audience capacity of the space. Such a capacity could vary from being able to accommodate sixty or seventy people to about two hundred. But although this could be one yardstick for defining an intimate space, there are as well other criteria, such as the **arrangement** of the space for instance. For example a proscenium with a two hundred seating capacity space is not intimate, because it allows for a distance between performer and audience. Anything, which distracts from an exclusive mutual concentration between performer and spectator, prevents the space from being intimate.

One of the best examples of an intimate space in contemporary times is the Prithvi Theatre. A space, which by its arrangement: a thrust stage, a black box effect and excellent acoustics: holds the performer-spectator in an embrace and allows for the magic of an intimate performer-spectator relationship. In the Indian tradition there is recognition of the need for this embrace-like effect of the theatre space. The Natyashastra describes such a space as a **cave**, where nothing extraneous intrudes to disturb the communication between spectator and performer.

Although the sensorial impact of the performer's Presence on the spectator and through this vehicle the contagion of her consciousness would depend largely on the performer's own psychological, bodily and vocal behavior in the performance space, **an ideal space which transmits the power of this behavior to the spectator at the optimum would be one which provided perfect and exact visibility of minutest detail and perfect resonating audibility.**

The Natyashastra arrives at a similar conclusion through awareness of three kinds of spaces, which the actor operates with. There is a sense of the inner psychological space of the performer, the external 'real' space, which she shares with the audience and a larger cosmic space.

Traditionally the most intimate inner space was expressed through facial expressions/ *mukha abhinaya*, and this was a privileged sharing by the spectator of the performer's inner private emotions and reflections. There was however a more objective communication of these private emotions to the objective/real space shared with the spectator, through hand gestures as reportage. Finally the performer's voice combining both subjective emotion and objective reportage united both performer and spectator at a metaphysical level by communicating through sound, which filled the cosmic space.

If the inner spaces of the performer are to be reflected on her face then each twitch on it ought to be visible to each one of the spectators. **And thus the eye dictates the size of the intimate performance space. For if the minutest details on the face of the performer are visible from any point in the space, the size of that space is right.**

**When a space carries the sound of the performer, unaided by technology, beyond mere audibility to resonate within the body of the spectator, then it is truly an intimate space.**

Veenapani Chawla  
Pondicherry  
26.10.2003