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Day 3 | 20th December 2019 | Closing Lecture | De-Deciding History | Soumyabrata Choudhury

Let me start by acknowledging how the magnificent closing performance of the symposium by Ayesha Susan Thomas titled *The Flabby-Breasted Virgin and Other Sordid Tales: A reading of the female body in Indian medical textbooks* makes my task a little easier. I can almost flow into the form of intelligence that this performance has generated, and move through that intelligence for five, seven minutes. In an informal conversation with Kai and Anuja, the chief organizers of this symposium, I had mentioned how I appreciate the way the entire symposium began with a comic spirit of things, even before Rustom Bharucha in his keynote *Questioning the Protocols and Possibilities of Documentary Theatre: a dramaturgical perspective* made his fantastic introductory clarification of the terrain. Normally, comic would be considered as something which is not serious. Here, I use the word to the contrary. To me, the comic is the most serious form of theater, or it holds the most significant potential of theater. The comic is a form of collective intelligence. This is the aspect that was executed so vividly and realistically in the last performance to my delight, making my task much easier. Of course, I cannot explore this particular form of intelligence without already moving to another performance. Reflecting upon the performance *Jagar Samtecha* by the Ambedkarite Yalgaar Sanskrutik Manch, I have to bring up “prabuddh” which was the word Ambedkar used for intelligence in his last work *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Usually, “prabuddh” is translated as enlightened. I prefer the word intelligence because that doesn’t only give us a sense of the faculty of light or the metaphor of light, instead, it gives us a sense of doing things with our hands and not just our heads. This establishes that intelligence can be lived and not merely “thought”. So, I would like to translate the word “prabuddh” as intelligence, which was resonating in the music that we saw and heard today in the morning. In my closing notes, I’d like to highlight a few things that especially struck me, among the many exciting ideas I’ve come across during the span of this symposium.

The first thing is a factual point I would like to consider with respect to this nomenclature of documentary theater. Rustom simultaneously provided us with a scholarly, contemporary and lucid understanding of the ground on the first day. He also highlighted that the question of the European origin of the title of documentary theater is actually not merely a label. The term is not merely a slogan: it is indeed a movement. If we are thinking of documentary theater within and beyond this festival, including Kai and Anuja’s long period of work in the field, and the documentary theatre workshop and public talk they organized at JNU during ongoing student strike and protests, then it surely becomes part of some sort of a movement. To begin with let’s agree that documentary theater is neither a slogan nor a genre. It is not even a conceptual or theoretical category; rather, it is a movement. Only under the wide canopy of a movement, can such intelligence, enthusiasm, as well as the extremely sobering and critical attention to detail (that we saw in the closing performance) be salvaged. And this first point, for me, is something that has been building up since the workshop at JNU under the most difficult circumstances.

My second point pertains to a central and dominant, even conventional form of documentary theater and this is the legal or the court form. This relationship of law and documentary theatre was the subject of the first panel titled *Jan Sunawayi / People's Court-Testimonials as Documentary Practice* that I was part of. Curiously, in Germany of 1960s, one of the first steps towards a documentary theater movement involved re-opening the court files of certain moments from history: The Second World War, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and most importantly, the genocide of the European Jews, The Auschwitz and so on. Re-opening the archives was the first step of this movement. In that sense, documentary theater contains some sort of an imperative as it asks us to reopen the files. Why does one reopen the files from the past? One does this because many things remain unresolved while the problem persists. The documentary theater is also the theater of problems. Therefore, the initial question arising from this theatre deals with identifying our contemporary problems. At this juncture, let us not excessively concern ourselves with defining a documentary theater. Whatever be this definition, one has to think more about revisiting the document. Surely, no one will dispute that a whole host of problems that appeared to be resolved in the past have suddenly been exposed as unresolved. Under these circumstances, one re-enters the archive and re-reads the document that has been the long-term political rationale of the documentary theater. That is one essential perspective within our own context. The other aspect of this theatre deals with the questions raised in the last panel: the evidentiary question of the real as well as the spatial and temporal context of it. And here and now is not something we can necessarily locate in an exact historical or geographical manner. This is again a problematic real which cannot even be documented as yet. Should one summarize this entire schema in a pedagogical way and title its trajectory as "From Documentary Theater to Theater of the Real"? Well, maybe this schema is useful but I would like to differ with this schematization a little bit. I would say that the theater of the real is at the very heart of documentary theater. That is the move I would make.

My claim is situated in the emergence of the modern times i.e. in the last 50 years of the documentary theater, on the grounds that the documentary theater takes decisions already made in history as its premise or starting point. Documentary theatre raises and wishes to answer many restless questions: Who was responsible for Auschwitz? Who was responsible for the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings? Who was responsible for the Indian Partition? It attempts to de-decide certain widely accepted decisions of history. That is the first move this theater makes. Does de-deciding great historical chronicles subsequently re-decide history? Of course, it doesn't. Even if theatre nurses the illusion that it has great powers over citizens, the medium isn't an adequate place to re-decide the narratives behind the great problems in history. I remember a scene from István Szabó's film *Mephisto* where the character of the influential actor-hero from Nazi Germany Gustaf Gründgens (played by the Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer) when confronted by the real power of the Nazi officers in an eerie sequence shot in an empty stadium, defends himself by saying "But I am only an actor...". This line has been emblematic of the delusional power of the theater, its heroes and actors. Following from this, documentary theater must also be necessarily a weak medium. In fact, all intelligence is also a kind of weakness. This sobering weakness in the nature of documentary theater, allows it to de-decide but not re-decide anything. But a whole range of knowledge, intelligence, re-evaluation and collective critical work opens up within the space of this de-decision and its aftermath. It's worth noting that this opening up does not necessarily take place only through re-opening the document. A further question must be asked, a question that came up in the panel titled *Archives and Anti-disciplinarity* today,

pertaining to the relationship of the document to theater as creative labour. Therefore, let us re-phrase this question within the context of modern theatre where a similar debate came up in Europe during the 1970s: is the dramatic form adequate to performing the documentary? German philosopher Theodor Adorno thought that the dramatic form or the ordinary literary narrative form was not adequate. He was deeply against the documentary theater. But, he did make a crucial comment. Referring to Auschwitz and the genocide of the Jews, he points out how the real of the Holocaust is prohibited to ordinary literature or ordinary literary representation. In a way, the real stands prohibited. We cannot presume to capture the real, while the document is intrinsically seen as possessing the ambition of capturing reality. But the prohibited real frustrates such an ambition.

From this, we can deduce the following possibilities: the real might become permanently prohibited. If this does happen, then the real gains the problematic aura of a myth. This leads to the paradox of a historically persecuted community identifying with its victimhood in such a way that it becomes a permanent victim and the victimhood itself changes from a real historical experience to a mythical image. In this regard, the documentary theatre refuses to let the archive go to sleep. We disturb the archive, intervene it and use it. One of the greatest keywords of the archive and the theater is use. Is it vulgar to use something? Is it degraded or is this what an active intelligence is? Is it mainly utilitarian to use or could it be creative? Documentary theater makes these questions concrete and vivid. Between the sixties and now, the movement has shifted out of the dramatic mode and into a space which the German writer and dramaturge Hans-Thies Lehmann investigates in relation to the 'media society'. While drama is supposed to be a medium of representing problems in a bound space, today all dramatic theatre is contaminated by the very mediality of a medium and virtual reality. Instead of the limits of a bound space, it is the outlines of a theatre that becomes ill-defined, theatricality becomes infinite and uncontrollable. While drama is always an incomplete closure, it is nevertheless a closure. After all, the performances that we enjoyed so much were ephemeral, limited and bound by the space we occupied together. So the moment this de-spatialization happens in a media society, there is indeed a certain constitutive disruption of the traditional dramatic form. Does that mean we abandon documentary theater? This symposium and its performances themselves establish that there is much to be gained, enjoyed and investigated within the realm of documentary theater.

Lehmann pertinently analyses the media in contemporary society to be more than a space where we perceive an imitated reality and arrive at political judgments about it. Instead, it is a space where the very politics of perception stages itself. Currently, the experience of politics is the very experience of the medium itself. Hence, documentary theater doesn't only document theater through the given media (whether lighting, camera, etc.) but the various media themselves become subjects of an auto-documentation, an automatic expression which always seems to be going out of human control. So this limit experience of media society as the experience of an Anthropocene can be contrasted with the conventional dramatic form of the court play or the legal model of a documentary theatre. So, the controlled and governed model of documentation in more traditional forms of theatre has to be counterpointed by this contemporary proliferation of hyper-perceptual loci that describes new and hybrid objects in a way where the medium of description and description itself cannot be distinguished anymore.

The last point that might be raised concerns the remnants of the traditional heroic figure

within the context I have been exploring. During a public talk at the documentary theatre workshop facilitated by Kai and Anuja at JNU, I attempted to speculate about the existence of the documentary actor. For example, when I watched Geetanjali Kulkarni in the Marathi film *Court*, I reflected to myself how she was a “documentary actor”. To come back to the central question, what is a document? It is a kind of zero degree “object”. The presentation of a document embodied as a gesture and an act of speech is still thought to be a pure objective material meant for our argumentative discussions. In the film *Court*, this is what Geetanjali Kulkarni achieved as an actor. And this has to be explored in an ironic way because Geetanjali was not necessarily enacting the role of a public prosecutor through any Brechtian model of alienation. While she appeared to embody a zero-degree or neutral persona of a generic legal and documentary kind, the character she played was essentially partisan. This public prosecutor was entirely partisan to the State apparatus. The neutrality is deceptive, it's ideological.

While knowledge is apparently enclosed in a document as a neutral entity, it is actually always implicated in a partisan subjective position. In the last performance, we witnessed how a so-called neutral Biology textbook could be deeply implicated in a partisan religio-cultural ideological system. In a way, de-decision to de-neutralisation is the desired trajectory that this symposium on documentary theatre places before us. The actor is constantly implicated in this trajectory while being continuously displaced from objective documentary functions to ideological or political subject-positions. This displacement can also be articulated “feministically” and the last performance was a vivid testimony to this. To return to “Jan Sunawayi”, one of the initial panels, it is here that Sameena Dalwai made a very pertinent intervention. She highlighted how we find women’s voices articulating legal situations in very particular forms of narration, testimonies and stories over and above the general and abstract tenor of a legal argument. To me, this aspect of women’s discourse is a way of speaking against and beyond the patriarchal generality of both law and theatre. While we behave as if the law is general and neutral, the legal experience is always particular, and in this case, a woman's experience. Therefore, all men who experience the particular force of law share a woman’s experience and all women who participate from the side of law as power, essentially have to take on male positions. Again this is a feminist critique of “neutrality” of the legal document and the legal position. Similarly, the question of acting is also a question of transmuting the fundamental position of the actor, which is heroic and male. So, the actress has to be reborn within the logic of the documentary theater in a new way.

This, to me, is a tremendously difficult, exciting and an eminent possibility in the wake of this symposium. To recall the last performance again: I would insist that it was not only a representative performance of the vitality of the festival but also a connective and energetic continuation from the earlier performances. As we arrive at the end of the festival, prepared to leave the city, I will carry a connective spark with a community that participated in an experiment of fun and thought. In different ways all of us will carry this feeling as we leave this place. This feeling or this trigger is not merely related to the question of the document; it is as much a feeling about a possible theatre itself. We don’t merely summarize the proceedings by speaking of a trajectory from documentary theater to theater of the real. We must also attend to the real of theater itself. The real of theatre concerns us as much as a theater of the real or the documentation of the reality outside. This is no less a problem of documentary theater than that of historical reality.

Having said that, we cannot conclude on this note. Today, here and now the document doesn't belong to the archive, it belongs to the power of the State and to very specific figures representing the State. I would not hesitate to say that the document belongs to Amit Shah, the Home Minister of India. Alternatively, the document today does not carry stamps of anonymous bureaucrats; instead, it carries the stamps of well-known faces, figures and names. There are new actors, new heroes, and new men of the state. So, it is something we cannot afford to not say. To that extent, we need to tear the document away from some people--- without tearing it. Our job then today is to make documents illegal, not as documents of the state, but documents of existence. All existence, I think, is constitutively illegal. No state can ever capture existence, because existence is either too much or too little, too grand, or too weak to be captured. So, in a sense, too intelligent for the State to understand. In the light of this, I would rather not talk about post-documentary theater. To talk of a post-documentary theater would be to cop-out. Instead I will say documentary theatre, only documentary theatre... which is a theater-to-come.

Thank you very much.