

## Sircar and His Free Theatre

[Badal Sircar is no more. He died in Kolkata on Friday, 13-05-2011. He was a creative genius, a rationalist (born into a family of Christian priests but he remained an atheist throughout his life), a firm believer in social justice. With his death, an era of pro-people political theatre comes to an end. After much persuasion as he was always opposed to publicity, he gave an interview to Shamsul Islam in October 1992. The interview was originally published in the *Sunday Times of India* dated 11-10-1992. We publish below excerpts with due acknowledgement to Tol.]

Q. You propounded the theory of third theatre in early 70s, and kept on changing your notion. How do you visualize free theatre, now?

A. It is true, once I thought of third theatre as a synthesis of urban and rural theatres. But even as I was working on it I corrected my opinion. For third theatre could not be a synthesis of anything if it had to be an alternative theatre. Earlier I had fallen prey to a mechanical approach. I came to the conclusion that third theatre, to be a free theatre, should not be costly, immobile or infested with commercialism. It should attempt a dialogue with the audience.

Once you decide to get rid of the paraphernalia of conventional proscenium theatre you have to depend supremely on the human body. Its potentials should be developed through intense training. Free theatre cannot be treated as pastime. For us, theatrical experience rather than narration of story is more relevant. In any case of physical acting the improvisation are far more effective than an abject dependence on language.

Q. Critics feel your kind of theatre is merely physical theatre, at the cost of language or spoken words. They also say that too much dependence on physical formations reduces your theatre to an acrobatical experience communicable only to a middle class audience. How do you react to these comments?

A. This will be said only by those people who have not seen our performances, or do not want to know anything about our theatre. Even if they were to praise us, it would be for the wrong reason. But that's the way it is in this country: without knowing anything one can go on passing judgments.

In fact we do the reverse of what has been alleged. We start with the theme script and go on to explore the form. For us content is the most important aspect of theatre. There are many who start with a form and tailor a theme or script, to fit it. We never do that.

There's another problem with these critics. They like to believe that common people cannot respond to the finer nuances of a performance, that this is a prerogative of the elite. Our experience is that common people understand the symbols, gestures and the spirit of the play more than the so-called urban intelligentsia.

Q. How do you explain the popularity of your theatre workshops?

A. In my workshops I never work on a script or play. That will be sheer wastage. Frankly, my workshops have no outcome as such. There is no end product. Because I believe a theatre workshop should simply help the participants to be creative, to live theatre and not to copy or simply follow dictats. Theatre should not be the reserve of the director alone.

Q. What has been the feedback in this process?

A. Not much in north India. In Delhi I've conducted workshops for NSD, Sambhav, SRC Repertory. But none of these does free theatre. It's quite the opposite in Andhra Pradesh,

Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. In these states free theatre is taking the shape of a movement. These workshops helped theatre activists in Pakistan too, to initiate free theatre movement.

Q. What are your views on the issue of state patronage for culture?

A. We are dead against it. We never apply for grants or favour from the state or its agencies. If we start asking for patronage free theatre will become meaningless. It is our experience of 20 years that you can do theatre without state grants, through voluntary public contributions.

Q. How correct are those who believe that you want to destroy proscenium theatre?

A. Even if I had tried I'm sure I would not have succeeded. It is a myth propagated. True, I don't believe in proscenium theatre, and I don't practice it. Why should I when I don't find it relevant? But that does not mean that those doing proscenium theatre are my enemies.

Q. Why is it that suicide as a theme recurs in your plays?

A. It occurs in only three—*Pagla Ghoda*, *Evem Indrajeet* and *Baki Itihas*—out of my 50 plays. It is a wrong generalization. And please note, even though they have suicide these are not pessimistic plays. They are full of life. They do not propagate suicide. It occurs simply because it fits into the framework of the play. □□□