

STAGECRAFT: AN ANALYSIS OF SCENOGRAPHIC NETWORK IN THE THEMATIC CONCERNS IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

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Abstract

Drama is a powerful medium of communication to exhibit and explore human world in various dimensions. It is not simply constructed with a plot and characters. Intelligent stagecraft and dramatic techniques of a playwright convey many things beyond her/his words and actions. Mahesh Dattani is a brilliant dramatist and excellent stage crafter, who makes his audience to react to the elements on stage and script, and draws his spectators and readers to comprehend matter of life even in some lifeless properties on stage. Unless understanding his stagecraft and techniques, no one could comprehend his plays in a right sense. His stage direction, movement, settings, dramatic techniques are matters to understand his texts, especially his plays *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*.

Keywords: Stagecraft, Scenographic, Dramatic Techniques, Stage Direction.

INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani [2] is India's first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for his contribution to world drama. His plays deal with religious tension, sexuality, and gender issues. What impresses one about the plays is the way he brings in the dynamics of personal and moral choices while focusing on human relationships. Theatre director Alyque Padamsee calls him one of the "most serious of contemporary playwrights".

PLACE OF DATTANI IN INDIAN DRAMA:

Indian English drama has recently shot into prominence. The thirty-eight-year-old Bangalore based Dattani [2] has come up with forceful plays like "**Where There is a Will**", "**Final Solutions**", "**Dance Like a Man**" and so on. Dattani's [2] plays are written for the stage. As poetry is meant to be read in order to be enjoyed, the plays are meant to be staged. It is the visual quality and dramatic effect which are of paramount importance. Dattani [2] accordingly adapts his material to the space, res

haping and fine-tuning his texts constantly.

Dattani's [2] plays speak across linguistic and cultural barriers. His plays have a universal appeal. They can be staged anywhere in the world; they would draw full attention of the audience. It may however be noted that his plays are essentially rooted in the Indian settings. More than he is able to merge the past and the present as well as geographical locations. It is in the fitness of things that we must take an attempt at evaluating the playwright's thematic concerns as well as his exploration of, and experimentation with stage.

STAGECRAFT IN DATTANI'S PLAYS:

I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as apart of the process of a production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium (Nair, 2001).

This is the whole point in the distinction between a playwright and a 'writer' using any other mode. The entire exercise of putting on paper the script of a play is only one of the many necessary ingredients in the genesis of a play, in the birth of drama. It is, perhaps, the beginning, not merely one element in the complete theatrical experience. Two distinct phenomena, though inter-related, can be seen here: the written and the performance, the concepts of the stage and the page.

(* tentative topic, but I would like to work on the lines)

Often compared to luminaries like Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams in his practice of stage craft, Mahesh Dattani [2] has given a fresh lease of life to Indian drama in English. Dattani's [2] works are less grim and forbidding though generally about the unwelcome and unpleasant things of life. What is most notable about Dattani's [2] dramatic art is that the stage for him is no plain expanse of space but a complex multidimensional arena in which vital incidents placed in time may be viewed and reassessed. The arena of performance for him is a space in which the written text of a play assumes the form of an enactment and the use of masks represents a deep ritualistic meaning.

Dattani [2] confidentially challenges the traditional denotations and connotations of the words "India" and "Indians". He places on them, constructs that are far removed from the ones prevalent in modern theatre but are meaningfully related to social, cultural sexual and religious issues that hold centre stage in life in the present times.

Dattani's [2] plays have purely performance-oriented scripts that elicit from the audience an emotional as well as a strongly intellectual response. His plays are a commitment to what Iyengar calls the 'manifestoes of the new realism' and conform closely to the requirements of a play that communicates, for, as M.K. Naik observes, "a play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, needs a real theatre and a live audience". Dattani [2] has created a vibrant, new theatrical form which is a marked development on the hitherto stagnant Indian drama in English.

It's amazing, if we can observe stagecraft in Dattani's plays. The way the play moves back and forth in time, his use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor's talent, and seamlessly all this is done to interest the reader.

The distinctive factor in Dattani's [2] case was that he started out as an actor and dancer, but went on to become a writer because there were no plays in English on contemporary Indian issues. "I'm a reluctant playwright. I would choose to direct first before I write. But I wanted more plays written primarily in the English language for Indian audiences" (Nair, 2001). It is interesting to note that there is hardly any playwright who have actually begun with roots in the theatre or have come into play writing from acting and directing. As Dattani says, "I think that's the tragedy. In my opinion, think that's what they lose out on. They have to have a theatre background... you should begin by getting involved in a production. Because there's nothing like that experience" (Katyal, 2000) [5]. And the notion of group work is vital in theatre for the director who is putting together the show. Then where does the playwright come in? "If you look at my plays, you would find that each character, every character has, you know, his or her space in the play, which an actor can develop" (Katyal, 2000) [5]. He explains that the playwright has to realize that he is not writing to be read and that the actors are going to take away the script and do other things with it. Beginning precisely from basic entries and exits, to the justification of a character's presence on stage, these are things that may be found wanting in the work of playwrights who do not have a background in theatre.

I write to do plays. (emphasis mine) ... that is probably where my strengths lie, because (...) as productions they work. (The content is) ... definitely apart of my world (...) what I see around and within me (...) I think its craft. Craft first and craft next. That's what theatre is about. (Katyal, 2000) [5]

The fact that Dattani [2] is intrinsically a theatre person, rather than a writer, is evident in the way he is able to structure the stage mechanism effectively and how he, at times, allows the texts to speak for themselves, and look at their own workings and methodology. He employs a language that is often pungent, clear and sharp, pushing the spoken word to its limits, and interspersing them with pregnant silences that only someone with an intimate inwardness with theatre can. In a play like **BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN**, for instance, the realities that he deals with are multiple, and while the house and office are incorporated in the stage directions, the play moves from without to within, into a sort of internalized terrain.

Things change, they remain the same; memory and contextual suggestions fly around with the deliberate use of such devices that are also to be noticed in **FINAL SOLUTIONS**, with the same play on the characters of Daksha and Hardika to self-consciously bring in old memories and the sense of history into the mechanism of the play. This play is replete with various stylistic devices such as the 'mob', which doubles up as the chorus and wears/sheds masks to give it the required religious colour. The setting is overpoweringly dominated by a ramp that has the mob running intermittently over it, as the action in the levels that stage the interiors continues, complete only in relation to the outside and the

efuryofthemob.

There are many specific examples of the play text looking inwards, and at the processes of their own making, taking the audiences into confidence. The direct addresses by Hasmukh Mehta in *WHERE THERE'S A WILL*, both alive and a ghost, owe their effectiveness to this employment of the peculiar craft of theatre. This is because a play lives in its performance, and performance can drive its life only in complicity with an audience that shares the entire exercise. The play's almost rollicking comedy comes as a result of such shared confidences: "(puff on the cigarette.) At the rate I'm puffing, I should be dead in forty minutes" (456). And true enough he actually dies in less! In trying to fill the 'empty spaces' in his son's head with some sense, the exasperated Hasmukh cries, "Son, how do I start explaining to you? (To the audience) Yes, How? You tell me. Well, I'll try" (459). He waits for his wife to discover his death as he watches with glee. While Sonal thinks, "Of course, he's asleep. He just has to lie down on the bed and he is dead to the world!" Hasmukh's ghost responds, "She has a way of saying things" (476). This is a clever device of the ghost who acts as a commentator on the action, albeit a very biased one, whose statements evoke laughter from the audience that meanwhile has learnt more. The culturally rooted idea of ghost hanging from a tamarind tree is used to bring in more fun, even directly poking fun at the audience.

Dattani's delightful and quick repartee is an absolutely indispensable part of his style, and the wit is never lost on the audience that is comfortable with the language as well as with the milieu. Words and phrases like "ogler", "combatible", "peas in a pot" and other such gems abound and are a source of much entertainment. From his first play onwards, the wit never sags or loses its charm; and though some of the plays are gag-a-minute structures, they never lose sight of the seriousness regarding the thematic content of the play, ultimately returning to address the issues that have been ranked up.

Mahesh Dattani, from his years of being a "reluctant" playwright to a highly successful (and celebrated) one, has carried on the business, as he says, "of holding a mirror up to society" (Dattani, 2000: xv) through an art that is both entertaining as well as issue-based; self-aware and rooted in its milieu.

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