

Shumang Leela and the Third Theatre: Plays for the Masses

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ABSTRACT

Shumang Leela which means 'Courtyard performance' is a mobile theatre in Manipur that is not confined to the elites. It puts forth the core socio-political issues and makes the masses in Manipur aware of history and the prevailing social issues both locally and globally. Performed in the open space with a few paraphernalia required on stage it is a form of folk media which inform, educate, persuade and entertain. Another theatre that has transcended the boundaries of the proscenium theatre and meet the audience in the open field is Badal Sircar's Third theatre. The Third theatre also engages in invoking the intellect of the audience and it makes them think and question the prevailing social issues. The paper discusses how Shumang Leela and the Third theatre fuse rural and urban theatre, how they make use of the open space with the limited paraphernalia of stage craft and also how the actors bear the core responsibility of carrying the whole performance with no prompters and implore the audience to use their imagination. With the similarities comes the scope of difference between the two which are also analysed in the paper. The paper begins with a brief introduction to Shumang Leela and the Third theatre followed by a comparative study and discussion on how these are plays for the masses.

Key Words: Communication, Folk theatre, Shumang Leela,
The Third theatre, Stage Craft

INTRODUCTION

Theatre is a dramatic art of communication which is informative and educative. For Sircar (2009), what is essential in every art form is

communication which may be through literature, music, painting and acting. However, the method of communication in theatre is different from the rest as unlike the writer and painter who do not need to be present while the communication is taking place, theatre is a live show where the communication is direct. The performers encode the message through verbal as well as non verbal forms and direct it to the audience to decode. Theatre can be used as a tool for creating social awareness as it has the potential to reach the masses. The paper attempts to critically analyse two forms of theatre i.e. Shumang Leela of Manipur and the Third theatre (which originated in Bengal) as plays for the masses which raise pertinent prevailing socio-political issues and how their mobility, minimal use of stage craft and costumes make it inexpensive as well as accessible to the masses.

SHUMANG LEELA

Shumang Leela, which is a form of mobile theatre, is an integral part of almost every Manipuri's life. The term means 'Courtyard performance' as 'Shumang' in Meiteilon means courtyard and 'Leela' means 'play or performance' and this Manipuri theatrical art form had its development in the 19th and 20th century. It is a form of art which is accessible to the masses irrespective of caste and creed. It is a medium through which social awareness is spread and the performances deal with global as well as local themes. For instance, the noted play *Naitom Satpi* deals with people's ill treatment to those with leprosy and this play creates the awareness that leprosy is a curable disease. *Keisamthong Thoibi* is about creating the sense of integrity where human love transcends difference of caste and creed. The ruthless regime of Idi Amin and how people of Uganda suffered under him is artistically portrayed in *Ugandagi Maraibak*. Thus, Shumang Leela is a form of art that not only focuses on the entertainment aspects but also carries a strong message of morality, integrity, humanity and envisions an egalitarian society.

Machungwangliu (2015) argues that Shumang Leela bears resemblance with Wand and Dissanyake's (1984) definition of folk media which is a form of communication system that had been embedded in every culture and existed much earlier before the mass media. Such folk media still continues as an important mode of communication despite changes and modifications. Shumang Leela is one such media which still continues and adapts well

with the changing world. It serves as a vehicle of information, education, persuasion and entertainment. It touches diverse themes starting from education, health, nutrition, housing, government schemes, international historical events. There are two groups of Shumang Leela: Nupi Shumang Leela where the artists are all females and Nupa Shumang Leela where the artists are all males. Most of the Nupi Shumang Leelas are on historical accounts while Nupa Shumang Leelas touches both traditional and modern themes and are more popular. These art forms are performed in the open level space mostly constructed by wood and bamboo for temporal usage. Unlike the proscenium theatre, the stage is surrounded by the audience from all four directions. There is no background scene. The paraphernalia comprises table, chairs, poles for holding the microphones and tube lights.

There are multiple opinions regarding the origin of Shumang Leela in Manipur. It is believed that Shumang Leela originated from the *Tangkhul Nurabi* episode which is performed on the last day of *Kanglei Haraoba* (festival of appeasement of the sylvan deities). It later developed from *Phagee Leela* (farce plays) performed during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti. Sonia (2022) divides Shumang Leela into three phases which are: Pre Maharaja Chandrakirti era (1074-1849 AD); the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti (1850-1949 AD) and Shumang Leela with written scripts (1950 AD- till date).

THIRD THEATRE

Badal Sircar formed 'Third Theatre', a new form of theatre to come closer with the folk community with his revolutionary ideas and ideologies. He is a dramatist, director and actor. He is the pioneer of absurd drama in Indian literature. He is renowned for his play, *Evam Indrajit*. He has to his credit sixty (60) plays. He established Shatabdi, a theatre group which also plays a crucial role in moving the theatre from the proscenium to the public. He has composed a number of plays for the Third theatre: *Circus* (1969), *Spartacus* (1972), *Lakshmisarar Panchali* (1974), *Michhil* (1974), *Bhoma* (1976), *Hattamar Opary* (1977), *Siri* (1984) and *Bhool Rasta* (1992).

Badal Sircar withdrew from entertaining the city's theatre hall and took theatre to the peripheries: the villages and the small localities for people's meaningful involvement in the theatre. He firmly believed that art must promote social change and the purpose of theatre is to make people

conscious of their situations and their potential to bring social change. His Third theatre unfolds such issues in the open space beyond the confines of the proscenium theatre. In the same way, Shumang Leela aims at creating awareness among the masses of Manipur. Sircar's Third play depends on two things: the performer's body and the spectator's imagination. According to Dharwadker (2005), his art is committed to communication between the performers and the spectator and also among the members of the performance.

SHUMANG LEELA AND THE THIRD THEATRE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Shumang Leela had two forms which are the Dialogue Leela and the Eshei Leela. Dialogue Leela was composed of stylised dialogues and music where simple instruments like dholaks (drums) and kartals (cymbals) are used. On the other hand, Eshei Leela had songs and choreographed dance sequences. Dialogue Leela is now no longer performed while Eshei Leela continues as the current Shumang Leela. Third theatre has two forms which are Anganmancha and Muktamancha. In Anganmancha, there is no specific stage and no separation between the actors and the spectators. There is not much distinction between the actors and the spectators. It is a simplified form of proscenium. However, here the drama team has to wait for the audience. In case of Muktamancha, which is completely open, the team of drama goes to the audience and perform before them in contrast to the proscenium where they wait for the audience. There is no need to dress up and to put on make-up. Here, background music is not given much importance. The actors have to develop the skill of singing, dancing, acting and genuine expression of gestures. Similarly, the Shumang Leela troupes go to the localities and perform in an open space. Instead of the drama team waiting for the audience, a large audience waits for the Shumang Leela, encircling the elevated open stage from all directions. A separate space is provided for the artists to get ready and they start performing from the very moment they leave their makeup room and paves their way towards the stage. There is no use of screen on the stage. Audience sit in close proximity with the performers and as such the performers have to understand and make use of the space they get for their performance. Even with the close proximity, there is not much spectators' participation

in such Leelas as the plays are well scripted. However, occasionally in some dialogues, when a place is mentioned or any person is mentioned during the play, the artist will not stick to the script but rather mention the name of the place where they are performing or any name of a person from that place which shifts the play closer to the audience. Unlike the Third Theatre, in Shuamng Leela, the artists put on make up and wear the latest trendy dress. The Nupisabis (the male actors acting as female characters) would set trends on fashion. Another thing is the use of background music, songs and dance. Since Shumang Leela is normally performed at night and Manipur, being a conservative society, not only the male actors act as female characters, male singers also sing in female voice.

Both Shumang Leela and the Third theatre do not depend on excessive paraphernalia. They rather play with the imagination of the spectators. There is no raised or a particular sitting arrangement in both art forms. However, unlike Shumang Leela where the stage is elevated from the rest, in the Third theatre, the actors and the audience share the same space. No tickets are bought for these performances.

Third theatre is a result of the fusion of two theatre: rural and the urban theatre. Sircar considered the folk theatre and rural theatre as the first theatre and the urban proscenium theatre as the second theatre. He took the inherent features of folk theatre i.e. live performer and direct communication technique and the emphasis on the performers' body from the proscenium theatre. The cardinal feature of the Third theatre is direct communication with the audience. In the case of Shumang Leela, such fusion can be noticed as the plays incorporate the elements of dance, drama and music of folk theatre with the themes of prevailing socio-political situations. In addition Shumang Leela is performed in both the urban as well as rural spaces in Manipur.

Both Shumang Leela and the Third theatre depend on the performer's body and the spectators' imagination. Such forms of performances are flexible, portable and inexpensive. They can be easily performed anywhere and there is no need for expensive stage craft like heavy set up, spotlight, furniture. An interesting aspect is the number of audience does not depend on the limited seats available in theatre houses. It depends on how wide the ground is where the play is performed. One difference would be in regard

to costumes as the Third theatre does not need costumes while Shumang Leela uses costumes according to the themes of the play.

Shumang Leela and the Third theatre's approach to acting is quite similar as both give much emphasis on the human body. Workshops and training sessions are conducted before the performers where the actors are trained to deliver a true expression of the self. The performers depend on movements, rhythm, mime, formations and contortions to express themselves physically. For instance, in the Shumang Leela *Lidice gi Gulap* based on the story of Lidice memorial at Czech Republic, the actor who is playing the role of Hitler comes on the stage and stands on one of the chairs acting as if he is standing on an elevated stage and addressing his army. He has no other props to support him. However, his body posture, his facial movement and his strong voice convince the audience that he is indeed Hitler who is addressing his army. It is noted that even though the approach to acting is similar, there are also differences between the two. In the Third theatre, there is scope for improvisation from the side of the actors and the aim of such theatre is to arouse the thinking i.e. the intellect of the audience to question the existing social conditions. On the other hand, in the case of Shumang Leela, there is limited scope for improvisation and the acting is accompanied by excessive expression of emotion. This leela plays with the audience's emotions and makes them see and feel the raw emotions.

There is another tendency to equate Shumang Leela and the Third theatre as Street theatre. However, neither Shumang Leela nor the Third theatre can be termed as Street theatre as Street theatre is a quickly created short performances. While a Street theatre may fall under Third theatre but every Third theatre performance needs not be a Street theatre.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Shumang Leela resembles the Third theatre in terms of minimal stage craft, the actors' pulling the whole performance depending only on their intricate use of voice, their body and mime and its aim to enlighten, instruct, educate and sensitise the audience. Both forms are flexible, portable and inexpensive. Both art forms show features of rural and urban theatre and depend on the imagination of the spectators. Despite the similarities, Shumang Leela and the Third theatre are also quite diverse as the Third theatre logically attempts to make the

audience use their intellect and questions the issues along with the actors while Shumang Leela endears its audience to feel the strong emotion along with the issues. Unlike the Third theatre, there are beautiful costumes, music and choreographed dance sequences in Shumang Leela. It can also be highlighted here that Shumang Leela has traces of folk theatre even today as it follows the rituals of mandali puja, paying homage to gods and it concludes the performance by conveying reverence to the audience. What is unique in both forms are its accessibility and its presentation of theatre that no longer speak the language of the elites but that of the masses.

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