

An Analysis of the Interplay between Dramatic Text and Performance Text

Dr Navjot Kaur

Associate Professor, PG Deptt of English, Sri Guru Gobind Singh College, Sec 26, Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

The duality of dramatic text manifests itself in a number of formal and stylistic features, which signify the performance possibilities inherent in it. Therefore, a performance cannot escape carrying traces of its indebtedness to the dramatic text that lies at its basis. This intrinsic feature of theatre leads to the creation of two types of textual material, the dramatic text and the performance text. The former is usually a blueprint for the latter. It is the initial step in a process, which reaches its fulfillment only in a performance. Despite the inherent differences, dramatic text only finds meaning in its enunciation on stage, which is an appropriation of the text as it is replaced and reconstituted. Thus, it has its status change into the performance text, in the course of its staging through adaptation. In fact, it passes from a written to a staged text and in this passage, the whole identity of the original is modified.

The dramatic text is a literary text conceived to be performed, it has a style that is deciphered during reading and all its facets can be visualised in the performance. Its mode of existence is literary, which reaches its fulfillment in a performance. It has a dual existence because it precedes and accompanies a performance. The duality of dramatic text manifests itself in a number of formal and stylistic features, which signify the performance possibilities inherent in it. Therefore, a performance cannot escape carrying traces of its indebtedness to the dramatic text that lies at its basis. This intrinsic feature of theatre leads to the creation of two types of textual material, the dramatic text and the performance text. The former is usually a blueprint for the latter. It is the initial step in a process, which reaches its fulfillment only in a performance. At the same time, performance is also dependent on the written script and cannot free itself from its traces. It not only gives a body and voice to its words but also makes its pauses come alive on stage. Thus, the dramatic text is composed for theatre while the performance text is produced in theatre. Although both the categories have their own distinctive features and modes of existence, they are also connected to each other through a complex web of intertextual relationships. This research paper "An Analysis of the Interplay between Dramatic Text and Performance Text" is an attempt to decipher the underlying linkages between the two entities in question.

The dramatic text is motivated by performability and carries within it the seeds of all possible performances. As it has a double nature, it must be understood textually as a fiction dialogue and scenically when the text comes to life. This ability gives it a multiplicity of voices and diverse existential perspectives. Therefore, a dramatic text is not just about establishing the story, reconstituting the actions and following verbal exchanges. It also highlights the structural elements, their combinations, relation and codification to present how meaning is created via the underlying systems of rules and conventions. Thus, it is a fabric of words, a weave of sentences, lines and sounds. A fabric that is not always the same as it carries traces of a voice, a language, a situation and a mental representation where language merges with non-verbal elements. Although plays exist which were mainly written for a reading audience, dramatic texts are generally meant to be transformed into another mode of presentation or

medium, which is performance. While affirming this Kier Elam the renowned theatre semiotician in his seminal work *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* written in 1980 states that the dramatic text is, "determined by its very need for stage contextualization, and indicates throughout its allegiance to the physical conditions of performance" (*The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* 209).

The dramatic text comprises of the dramatic shape, character, dialogue and stage directions. The organisation of the content into blocks in a dramatic text lays the foundation of its dramatic shape. These blocks are acts and/or scenes which signal the beginning and end of a unit of action in relation to the whole. A block of text presented as an act is both a self-contained unit and a link in the structural chain. An end of an act provides us with closure along with a wider view of the dramatic frame. Traditionally, act and scene division work in tandem with the construction of the dramatic plot. They contribute to the shaping and signposting of the unified beginning, middle and end of the drama. These conventions of play construction are not experienced in performance, where the playing of the action is continuous. Over the centuries the conventions of division have received critical and theoretical attention with the consequence that particular age or period of drama has established a notion of an ideal form. The Renaissance drama written in a five-act structure was neither arbitrary nor coincidental but rather a reflection of the Greek and Roman drama. Aristotle's description of tragedy has provided a set of rules and conventions, still traceable in the nineteenth century.

Characters of a dramatic text represent one of the most important analytical categories as their interactions trigger and forward the action. They are important not only in terms of who they are, but what they do. It is through the concentrated form of their actions that events are retold and shaped in a plot. The characters can generally be divided into major and minor characters, depending on their importance in the plot. A good indicator of this is the amount of time and speech as well as presence on stage he/she is allocated.

Characters can also be classified according to their allegiance to certain groups both across the entire play as well as in individual scenes. If one considers the overall structure of the play and groups of characters therein, one deals with the

constellation of the dramatic personnel. Constellations can be based on sympathies and antipathies among characters, on how they act and react to one another. Usually, one can make the distinction between protagonists and antagonists, and find characters who collaborate or plot against each other. This distinction provides coherence to the overall structure of the play.

The dramatic text is a form of verbal interaction between two participants of a conversation. It is a dialogue that is a specific case of spoken language that has a functional relation to the listener. The role of dialogue in a dramatic text is to establish character, space and action. Here, a dialogue is structured as a turn-taking system where one character addresses another who listens and then replies, in turn becoming the speaker. This interactive duality of the speaker-listener role not only points to the fictional world but also unseen characters, events and space. This interaction in drama can be presented either as monologues, dialogues and asides. Thus, essentially the function of dialogue is to create the 'reality' of the dramatic universe with the protagonists within it as constant and consistent elements.

The stage directions primarily consist of title, names of characters, indications of places along with elements responsible for enactment of the fictional world like stage decoration, props, lighting and music. In the dramatic text they either precede, succeed or intersperse with dialogues. They are generally italicised and subject to a range of parenthetical conventions to set them apart on the printed page. These stage directions answer the questions of 'who' and 'where' and provide us with a context within which theatrical communication takes place. The textuality of these directions is then projected in their application in performance.

The fundamental distinction between dialogue and stage direction answers the question of who is speaking. In dialogue, we have a character created by the author on paper but distinct from him. In stage direction, it is the author who names the characters and indicates who is to speak at any given moment. He also assigns to each character a place from which to speak and a share in the discourse. Furthermore, through stage direction, he gives directions as to the gestures and actions of the characters. This key distinction, which is a unique feature of the dramatic text allows us to see that the author does not speak directly in theatre. Dialogue is always the voice of the other. The author here writes so that another can speak in his place through a series of verbal exchanges. Therefore, a dramatic text can never be deciphered as an expression of the personality, feelings or problems of the author. If there is a textual component of which the author is the subject, it is stage direction. The relationship between these two distinct yet dissociable parts varies according to different periods in the history of time. Sometimes the stage directions are non-existent and sometimes they can occupy an enormous place. Even where they appear to be non-existent, the textual locus for these directions is always present. Thus, a dramatic text basically exists in the form of a printed manuscript or book, which displays several characteristics. The substance of its expression is verbal and it follows a linear reading as opposed to the multiple deployed signs of a performance text.

The relationship between dramatic text and performance text is marked by both absence and presence. The staging elements alter and transform the verbal metaphors of the

former into the latter. The performance text is thus made up of a set of verbal and non-verbal signs, which are flexible, mutable and culture-dependent. The verbal message is contained within the system of performance and to this is added all the non-verbal signs like the visual, musical and spatial. Any theatrical message within a performance requires multitudes of signs which presupposes a relationship of equality and reciprocity between them. Therefore, the theatrical sign is a complex concept, which brings into play not only the co-existence of these signs also their superimposition. This is the reason, which makes it possible for the theatre to say several things at the same time and construct numerous interlinked stories. Commenting on the performance text Keir Elam concludes that, "It is, at the same time, a highly ambiguous text, being at every point semantically 'over-determined' and relatively non-redundant. By the same token, the text is intensely self-focusing, being not a mere sum of 'information about' or 'intelligence given' but an event aesthetically ostended as a formal and material structure" (The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama 28).

Each signifying system of the performance text is valid in its own right, but it also has implications for the rest of the performance. The performance text represents the visual image of the textual signs. The major sign-systems which embody a performance are actor, stage setting, lighting, music and costume.

The sign-system of the actor is repository of the majority of signs on the stage. A performance is a form of communication between actors and spectators present together in the same space. A space where the actor is responsible for and in control of all the major sign-systems operating in the theatre. By drawing on the elements of theatrical language to establish a meaningful and hierarchised system of signification the figure of the actor appears to be the most prominent. Tadeusz Kowzan, the eminent Polish theatre semiotician built a typology of theatrical signs and sign-systems in his groundbreaking publication "The Sign in the Theater" in 1968 (Diogenes 52-80). In this classification he upholds the centrality of the actor. The eight groups with which Kowzan heads his taxonomy directly relate to the actor as opposed to the other five, which exist outside the actor. This sign-system is the focal point which brings together the other elements of a production as Czech semiotician, Jiri Veltrusky aptly sums up, "The most common case of the subject in the drama is the figure of the actor. The figure of the actor is the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs, the carrier of which may be the actor's body, voice, movements, but also various objects, from parts of the costume to the set" ("Man and Object in the Theater" 84).

Various prominent schools of theory also attribute special responsibility to the actor, as in the instance of Bertolt Brecht's notion of the social function of the actor where the performer's dominant occupation is that of speaking the text. While elaborating on his version regarding the status of the actor, Y. Gourville the French theorist states that, "...consists in the fluctuations between the two loci of the writing; of synthesising the director's scripting of the stage and the writer's scripting of the text" ("The Actor in Project" 121). The performer is thus a locus of multiple interconnecting sign-systems.

Stage-setting another important component of a performance, helps to define and contextualise a play. It is an integral part of the realisation of the text, counterpointing

theme, ideology and symbolism in pictorial terms. This may be through realistic means in reproducing the utmost details of locales or through stylisation. While pointing out the function of stage-setting NissarAllana the eminent theatre scenographer and recipient of SangeetNatakAkademi Award (1980) for stagecraft in Indian theatre states that, "The use of space in contemporary theatre has become more elemental and has a direct relationship with the actor. Scenography is no longer just a visual language of theatre. It is integral to the dynamics of the performer: it provokes action, responds to it and encompasses it, becoming a co-performer with the actor" ("Redefining the Actor" 40). This interactive relationship between the performer and stage-setting helps to enhance the dramatic action.

Another constituent of performance text is lighting which brings into existence all the visual elements like space, scenography, costumes, actors and makeup thereby creating an atmosphere. It facilitates in drawing attention to the focal points of the action and producing dramatic illusion. It is thus instrumental in building the emotional construction of the performance. Elucidating on this aspect Patrick Pavis says, "In short, lighting allows the dramaturgy of a performance to be guided and inscribed in time, particularly in terms of the temporal and the narrative articulation of the action" (*Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film* 195).

Within performance, music has a unique status as Richard Wagner the famous theatre director and composer has eloquently put, "Whereas other art forms say it means, music says it is" (qtd. in Patrice Pavis 140). The sign-system of music is not tangible. Its value is measured above all in terms of the effect it produces. To comprehend this, an endeavour has to be made regarding its origin, how it is produced and how it is dispersed in space. This mode of signification performs various functions like the creation, illustration and characterisation of an atmosphere. It helps to make a situation recognisable, forming punctuation during pauses in acting and scene changes. Thus music in general and particularly on stage performs the function that is at times integrative and sometimes disintegrative.

The sign-system of costume is the most observable and permanent trait of the actor's physical presence. It not only serves to identify the individual in relation to his/her gender, age, social rank, occupation, nationality, religion but also personal attributes such as state of mind and attitude towards social values. Symbolically, it also creates nuances in terms of colours, contrast, exaggeration, size, inconsistency, etc. Consequently, it is a conglomerate of signs which sharpens the spectator's holistic perception of the actor's dramatic persona.

Although, dramatic text and performance text have their own distinctive features and modes of existence, they are also connected to each other through a complex web. A theatrical performance offers an entirely different experience as compared to reading a play. The most important aspect being, the immediacy and ephemerality of the performance as Keir Elam says, "The reader is able to imagine the dramatic content in a leisurely and pseudo narrative fashion while the spectator is bound to process simultaneous and successive acoustic and visual signals within strictly defined time limits" (*The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* 123). The dramatic text has permanence and fixity which performance text lacks. Each performance is a new text because the mental and physical state of the performers, the quality, size and composition of the audience

as well as the physical conditions during the performance cannot be produced again. Moreover, the possibilities of staging are not unlimited, since the text imposes certain constraints on the director and vice versa.

Despite the inherent differences, dramatic text only finds meaning in its enunciation on stage, which is an appropriation of the text as it is replaced and reconstituted. Thus, it has its status change into the performance text, in the course of its staging through adaptation. In fact, it passes from a written to a staged text and in this passage, the whole identity of the original is modified. There are no set rules for this transformation except that the adaptation of the text by the director be at once productive and coherent. Consequently, performance text is not just the putting into practice of what is present in the text. On the contrary, it is the speaking of the text in a given staging, the way in which it presuppositions, unspoken elements, and enunciations are brought out.

Theatre comprises of two textual materials the dramatic text which is eternal and the performance text which is momentary. It is a literary production and concrete performance at the same time. In order to understand the relationship between the two entities, I have undertaken an analysis of the same starting from their historical background to their present state of existence. Much of contemporary theatre criticism remains embroiled in this timeless debate of text and performance.

At key moments over centuries, it has been argued that theatrical writing does not belong to literature nor should literary tools define theatrical analysis. At different times author, director, actor, performer and audience have taken their turn as the primary arbiter of stage meaning. The dramatist's authority was dislodged by the advent of the modern theatre director in the late nineteenth century. Subsequently, many processes challenged the primacy of writing like the splintering of authorial dominance due to the director's vision, the actor-performer appropriations of the text, the multiplicity of audience interpretations and responses.

Looking back centuries before the advent of the printed word, the connection between playwriting and performance was particularly a close one. The distinction between the playwright and the director did not exist. All great playwrights like Sophocles, Aristophanes, Moliere and Shakespeare were writers as well as theatre persons. They were themselves performers and wrote in active collaboration with those who performed their plays. The dramatic text did not have any independent existence and was liable to be constantly modified during rehearsals and even during a performance. Both these texts were neither divorced from each other nor hierarchical in importance. However, with the arrival of the printed word it became possible for the playwright to write his plays in isolation from its performability on stage. Consequently, it created a distance or weakened the relationship between the two traditionally linked activities of playwriting and performance. The dramatic text was no longer regarded as a provisional draft for stage performance and instead acquired an independent public existence. Since plays could now be read as well as staged, playwrights began to write for their readers as well as for the performers of their work. To facilitate this transition a new element, stage direction was introduced for the benefit of the readers as well as the stage performers.

Following this hiatus between the function of the playwright and the director, gradually the idea of the primacy or even the sacredness of the dramatic text began to emerge. The playwright's text came to be seen as the dominant force in a performance. All the other constituents of the theatre were deemed to be subservient to the written word. Production came to be regarded mainly as visualisation or at best an interpretation of the dramatic text. The director's job was to transform a text into performance, wherein his primary duty was to remain faithful to the written word. The main danger of this approach was the temptation to freeze or fix the dramatic text thereby granting privileged status to one historical or codified performance of the text. In other words, resulting in the prohibition of any advances in the art of staging the play.

The other approach, one that was much more popular in modern times was the radical rejection of the text. In this approach, theatre was seen entirely as a ceremony that takes place before or amidst the spectators. Here, the text was only

one among several elements of the performance. As early as the 1940s, Antonin Artaud called for the rejection of the supremacy of the verbal text in favour of what he called the "unwritten poetry of the theatre". A major contemporary trend towards more or less unscripted performances became particularly strong in the 1960s wherein an attempt to rid theatre of the dominance of the written word was the objective. While commenting on this dynamic Patrice Pavis summarises, "In the Western tradition, the dramatic text remains one of the essential components of performance. In theatre it has long been assimilated as the primary component, with its performance on stage only accorded a subordinate, optional role. However, things changed radically with the recognition of the director's function, towards the end of the nineteenth century, when it was acknowledged that a director is capable of marking a text produced on stage with a stamp of a personal vision" (*Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film* 198).

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