

Envisioning Ethics Anew

Rustom Bharucha talks with *Performance Paradigm*

Performance Paradigm: *At the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance (ADSA) conference in 2006 you talked about the need for practitioners (and theorists?) to ‘stop fetishising the metaphysics of impermanence’ and to locate discussion in a ‘more political realm’. You also stated that you felt we needed to ‘seek answers from elsewhere’ rather than from theatre, and you proceeded to talk about your recent work in South Africa with HIV/AIDS sufferers. We would like to ask you to talk about your choice to work in South Africa and your decision to work with this particular group.*

Rustom Bharucha: I did not go to South Africa to work specifically on HIV/AIDS. I was invited to participate in a public art project called *Tangencya*, which has attempted to intervene in public spaces in the city of Durban and its environs, interacting with marginalised communities through different artistic and social practices (installations, architecture, sculpture, gardening, performance, documentary cinema, education). Since one in four persons in the state of KwaZulu Natal is afflicted with the HIV virus, how could one not engage with this reality? The condition of HIV/AIDS is an integral part of public life in South Africa today.

What needs to be kept in mind is that when one is dealing with HIV/AIDS, one cannot separate this condition from other interrelated realities like poverty, xenophobia, racism, and patriarchy. In my practice-based cultural research, I am increasingly interested in investigating the interrelationships of different contexts, or what could be described as ‘intercontextuality’. I am also concerned with the visceral and corporeal reflexes animating the cultures of everyday life. In this regard, HIV/AIDS is a disturbing catalyst because it compels one to probe the stigmas and taboos relating to *touch* in different states of contamination. In essence, the word *tangencya* means ‘touch’ in Portuguese. We were interested in exploring the possibilities of touch in a post-apartheid public space. When does touch become a blow or assault? To what extent is untouchability an even more virulent form of violence?

I need hardly add that when one is in direct contact with persons *living* with the HIV virus—and I would stress ‘living’, not ‘suffering’—that one has to radically rethink the tendency we have in theatre to make a metaphor out of death, or else, to seek a metaphysics out of the eternal death-in-life of theatre practice. We need to trouble our metaphors because they can be falsely reassuring. Death is not a metaphor; it is an imminence faced by millions of persons fighting the HIV virus on a daily basis. Likewise, poverty is a reality, afflicting even larger sections of the world’s population in increasingly dehumanised ways, despite the hype surrounding global flows of capital, technology and services. I find it hard to even think about ‘poor theatre’ today without engaging with poverty in at least some its economic density and

contradictions. Basically, I want to re-insert the 'real' within the symbolic and metaphoric domain of theatre practice and disturb its civic protocols.

PP: *You talk about the 'ethical necessity of betraying the civic limits of theatre' and while it is obvious that theatre in the current climate must move into the 'political realm' what is it that you hope might be achieved in this transition?*

RB: I should acknowledge here my debt to Jean Genet in making me understand the 'ethics of betrayal'. This is a difficult concept to grasp even for great admirers of Genet like Edmund White, who despair about the fact that Genet could relish the possibilities of betraying his closest friends. I think betrayal can seem perverse, but if one sees in it the possibilities of a certain rigor in not succumbing to bourgeois morality and feel-good liberal, even 'radical' sentiments, it can serve as a robust corrective to political correctness and the illusions of good citizenship.

It's obvious that in wanting to 'betray' the civic limits of theatre that I am dissatisfied with some of its closures, at ideological, social and sensory levels. However, in crossing these limits, I am fully aware that I continue to carry my theatrical baggage with me; some of it can be left behind, but there are other insights gained from theatre that continue to nourish my search for new alliances in the political domain. For instance, I continue to believe in the potentially transformative role of the imagination in the larger process of social change, but I am also beginning to realize that most political activists have killed the imagination of their so-called 'target groups' in their zeal to 'develop' or to 'conscientise' them. 'Culture', for these activists, is at best an instrumentalist tool or collection of strategic skills to counter the inequities of development.

So, having 'betrayed' the civic limits of theatre, I should acknowledge that one may be positioned in a thoroughly disagreeable, fractious, and volatile *intermediary* space, what I would describe as the interstitial space between the civil and the political. That's the space I have been inhabiting in the last few years, in my interactions on site-specific re-enactment of massacres in Bohol, the Philippines; the Tangencya project in South Africa; the collaborative processes between music/dance and engaged citizenship in Brazil. Most of all, in India, some of my deepest insights have been gained not through productions but through workshops and interactions with working children and the Siddi community (persons of African origin) on issues relating to land and memory.

What do I hope to gain from theatrical interactions with marginal groups of people in spaces that defy the grammar and norms of established theatre practice? To answer the question cryptically: less complacency about what can be changed even in the process of catalysing change; a deeper search for new theoretical models and languages concerning performance and everyday life; a more volatile sense of the 'political' as an ever-emergent process of multiple intersections cutting across social and economic contexts. To be honest, I find the established theatre—the theatre performed in civic spaces—boring and exclusionary. Outside the theatre, or even witnessing

extremely marginal practices such as 'prison theatre' in the confines of a prison, I feel freer to think and to renew my connection to the theatre.

PP: *As you know this issue is entitled 'the end of ethics: performance, politics, war' in response to an emergent global socio-political dynamic initiated by a US-led return to 'situation ethics' in which even the use of torture is seriously discussed as a defensible option for intelligence gathering. At the end of ethics what use is radical performance? Can you talk about your own understanding of the relationships between politics, performance and ethics?*

RB: First, I would not endorse the 'end of ethics' quite so easily, just as I would positively refute any such clarion call announcing the 'end of history'. I would rather urge us to see in the notion of 'the end' not just finality or the dissolution of ideals, but a rupture that precipitates 'new beginnings'. This has been the central potentiality underlying my search in—and outside—the theatre in the last few years, which cannot be separated from the larger 'events' of September 11 and the Gulf War: *When the play ends, what begins?*

Let's face it: even as the rhetoric around 'situation ethics' and 'collateral damages' stinks of hypocrisy and covert violence, can it be so irrevocably separated from the earlier secular blasphemies perpetuating the evils of war? Think of the logic of deterrence which legitimised Hiroshima, and which has now been perpetuated into a new, more 'responsible' nuclear global policy. Think of even earlier justifications of genocide. Recently, I heard Giorgio Agamben speak in Calcutta on power and glory, where he made us think through the correlations between the bureaucracy of angels in heaven and contemporary governance. Theology, one of the primary discursive sites of ethics, has been riddled with the doublespeak of 'situation ethics' for a long time. The most hallowed repositories of ethics have also been its most contaminated sites.

Theatre is no exception. What ethics can one so easily claim for classical theatrical traditions, which excluded slaves, women and untouchables of various kinds, hues and colours, from even witnessing the privileged 'sight' of theatre? What enormous violence has been concealed in the benevolent dictatorship of the director, and the continuing homophobia and sexism underlying the pretence of tolerance for gays and queers. In my own country India, the violence of caste has yet to be adequately recognised in contemporary theatre practice, so lost in its secular illusions. We risk a great deal of complacency and false consciousness by imagining that we're somehow more 'ethical' through our links with the ostensibly civil, human, and critically engaged profession of theatre. We need to radically rethink our assumptions of 'human-ness' and civility in the theatre by questioning not just its 'universals' but its exclusionary practices.

If we're seeing the end of ethics in governance and politics—and I'm not sure that this is the case given the massive, if insufficiently coordinated, global rage precipitated by the war in Iraq—I do believe that that we need to work towards a radical performance, or anti-performance, or non-performance,

which could highlight the beginnings of new and more complicated ways of representing and problematising ethics, where there is no clear-cut distinction between 'good' and 'evil'. Rather, we are all implicated in the very crimes that we condemn, either through complicities of silence, indifference or apathy. For performance to be truly radical, it can no longer afford to fall back on the earlier assumptions of an artist's innate, if iconoclastic, goodness. Our subjectivities and privileges can no longer be freed from the internalisation of implicit racism and suppressed violence. In this regard, the exposition of violence in the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, it seems to me, is a shining beacon of the courage involved in subjecting the vision of theatre to the most rigorous test of unsettling its assumed ethics. In this unsettling, we are made to see the possibilities of envisioning ethics anew.

PP: At ADSA you also talked about the 'under-theorised spectator' and his/her 'crucial role in re-imagining theatre'. Can you explain who this spectator is and what this role might entail?

RB: The enigma is that I don't know who this 'spectator' is. I can't mark 'him' or 'her' or 'them'. What I do know is that the spectator, in most assessments of theatre, is subsumed in the omniscient 'I'. At one level, this is inevitable, because theatre cannot be divested from embodied spectatorship, which is, more often than not, inseparable from one's own subjectivity. Indeed, I would have to admit that I find it hard to write about theatre that I have not witnessed myself. But, keeping in mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological difficulties in envisioning a witness tied to one spot, surveying the past merge into the present into the future, I would say that we need to complicate our own spectatorship by embracing the disjunctions of time through specific political and discursive inputs. This is what I tried to illustrate in my ADSA talk where I re-read a decisive moment in my own spectatorship through three historical moments, in 1977, in the last ADSA conference which I had attended in New Zealand, and the present one in Sydney.

However, this kind of spectatorial reflexivity is insufficient if it is not contextualized within larger historical contexts of seeing. This is where we lack adequate theories that can enable us to get beyond the predictable trajectories of 'reception'. I'm not particularly interested in reception theories; I'm more concerned with what can be produced through acts of seeing, which can contradict one's own 'eye' and material conditions. Here I have been extraordinarily privileged in learning from vastly different social constituencies from my own class background in theatre. Watching non-theatre-going spectators in a rural area of Karnataka counter my 'Brechtian' production of Edward Bond's *The Bundle* in Kannada remains one of the most profound learning experiences for me as a 'spectator'. In those scenes where I had thought that the rural spectators would be gripped by the epic action, as in the hyperactive representation of a flood, they laughed out loud; on the other hand, when I expected them to be bored out of their minds, as in a quiet scene highlighting the psychological intimacies between a master and slave, they were totally gripped. I realised that I did not know how to 'see' these spectators, because I had assumed their spectatorship within the insularity of my own urban expectations.

PP: *In 'The Politics of Cultural Practice', you ask if there is 'an ethics of representation in theatre (2). Can you talk about how your more recent work addresses this question of ethics of/and representation and what you think ethics might mean with the context of theatre production and reception.*

RB: I first raised the question of the 'ethics of representation' way back in 1978 on reading about Peter Brook's elision of the contemporary historical reality of the Ik in his much-acclaimed intercultural production. However, it is significant that there was nothing in my theatre education at Yale that enabled me to tackle this question. From the mid-1980s onwards, with the incursions of postcoloniality into the mainstream of theatre studies, the problematic of ethics is, at least, marginally included in the academic agenda. But I still think that it tends to be subsumed in new modes of tokenising minorities, thereby playing into an obligatory political correctness.

For me, in the context of my ongoing work with marginal communities, the question of ethics in theatrical practice is less linked to the problematic of representation and more integrally related to the possibilities of social action. At one level, this shift in priority can be linked to the fact that I am no longer interested in 'productions', but in processes of interaction where the ethical issues are far more fluid, and I should say, instantaneous. The ethics that challenge me cannot be separated from the immediacies of improvisation, which, as a technique of communication, offers an uncanny means of disrupting what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the 'necessary and regulated' improvisations of everyday life. In disrupting the internalised *habitus* of any community, one runs the risk of violating certain norms, and therein lies the possible breach of ethics.

I am only too aware that, in the actual practice of theatrical improvisation, the *habitus* cannot simply unfold, as Bourdieu imagines, through 'conductorless orchestration.' No. As a director observing and intervening in any improvisation, I cannot claim to be 'conductorless'. I have to keep questioning my own role as a Devil's advocate as I keep pushing and problematising the externalisations of particular social codes that are assumed to be 'normal'. When does the right to question these norms through improvisation become coercive and self-aggrandising? To what extent can the presumption underlying the 'right to intervene' be tempered by what Tzvetan Todorov has valorised as the 'duty to assist'? Todorov sees in Susan Sontag's production of *Waiting for Godot* in Kosovo a paradigmatic example of such exemplary 'duty'. I'm not so sure. Can the challenge of doing Beckett in a war zone be separated from a particular 'style of radical will'? Can such 'duty' be separated from the ego of the director and the voyeuristic or masochist desires underlying his or her vision, fed by the global hype of a predominantly liberal press?

PP: *How can you broach the question of ethics in performance without tripping the wire of unethical action? Do you know if/when you've crossed the line? Has this ever been an issue for your work as a director?*

RB: This is a provocative question. Let me try and answer it by alluding to my work with the Siddi community of agricultural laborers with whom I have tried to problematise the technicalities surrounding their political identity and the possession of forest land. In one such workshop, which was interrupted by a perfectly meaningless 'official' visit by the Minister of Social Welfare from Karnataka, I saw to my discomfort how powerfully he succeeded in patronising and infantilising the Siddi as 'lazy natives'. Not only did he succeed in silencing the Siddi, he also succeeded in making me realise how ineffectual theatre can be in countering political power in face-to-face situations.

The next day I did try to make amends by catalysing an improvisation in which one of the Siddi played the Minister while the other Siddi grilled him with their subaltern logic of everyday critical life-practice. At one point, when the Siddi minister hollered at the 'natives' and challenged their lack of evidence to prove their claims on land, a Siddi woman pointed to trees—that's the beauty of theatre, anything can be imagined and created on the spot. She said: 'Look at those trees we planted them with our own hands. Those trees are our documents.'

At one level, this is a fantastic exposition of subaltern evidence, grounded in ecological truths. But, if I had to get beyond the euphoria of the moment, I would have to acknowledge how difficult it is to activate these truths in collaboration with political agencies. Perhaps, the greatest lesson that I've learned from my interactions with oppressed communities has to do with the ethics of illegality. In my work in South Africa, I have been even more exposed to the fact that the downtrodden do not have any respect for the laws of the state. While paying lip service to these laws, they will do everything in their power to break the rules of civil society from which they have been excluded and thereby maximise their minimal opportunities. These are not the 'weapons of the weak', but the conscious strategies of political opportunism which totally reject the pieties of civic law.

To what extent am I prepared to endorse the ethics of illegality in order to activate the process of social and political change beyond the boundaries of theatre practice? This, indeed, is my ethical dilemma. Not so much in 'crossing the line' of unethical action, but in *not* crossing the line with the necessary combination of political rigor, cunning and audacity.