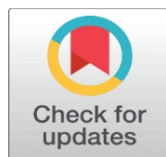
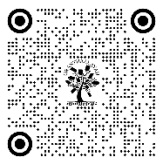


THERUKUTHU AS A TRAINING METHOD FOR CONTEMPORARY THEATRE ACTOR

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary acting in theatre has resembling in many features of the Tamil traditional theatre form Therukuthu. So, this discussion intended to establish the possibilities of the Therukuthu as a method of actor training for contemporary theatre actors. The primary concern of the discussion includes the actor and acting of contemporary theatre; the way how actor presents the character and communicates with the audience as co-actors, which are the two significant features of contemporary theatre. So, the discussion considers at those factors of Therukuthu form and acting or performance those applicable to the contemporary theatre actor, to consider Therukuthu as a potential Contemporary actor training method.

Keywords: Therukuthu, Actor Training, Contemporary Theatre Acting, and Therukuthu and Contemporary Acting

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary actor training in Indian contexts includes the elements from; Yoga, Martial Arts like 'Kalari', 'Silambam' and the Traditional performing art forms; the use of these elements depends on the practitioners' experience and the design or need of the production. Therukuthu is one of the traditional theatre forms of Tamil Nādu, trained in academic institutions as a traditional theatre form. But beyond a traditional theatre form, the scope of the Therukuthu might be extended as a training method for contemporary actors because while considering the features of both Therukuthu and Contemporary theatre and acting, unignorable parallel features could identify. So here discuss the features of the contemporary theatre, the characteristics of the Therukuthu, the similar notions of both forms, and

the scope of the Therukuthu as a training method for contemporary theatre. The intuition behind the discussion is that an actor of Therukuthu could be well performed in contemporary theatre spaces. So, the objectives of the discussion are two; (1) to establish the parallel of identical features of Therukuthu in performance beyond the form; the skills of the performer exhibit during the performance both as physical and psychic levels of performance with the skills of an actor in contemporary theatre productions, or the skills demanded from an actor by contemporary theatre. (2) to evaluate the possibility to propose the therukuthu training as a potential method for contemporary actor rather than a traditional performing form. This discussion will provide clarity the practitioners to recognize the importance of the traditional forms in the contemporary theatre practices particularly in training and performance. And also contributed to the discussions and studies about how various theories and movements of modern theatre inspired from the indigenous theatre forms.

2. ACTING IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

For contemporary theatre, acting means not 'representation' of the character alone, as the theatre is developed beyond to art of mimesis. Contemporary theatre includes realistic theatre practice, and the theatrical movements arise against the realism or picture frame theatre, which challenges age-old concepts of the performance space between actor and audience. The contemporary theatre has formed from the two aspects. One is against the conventions of theatre and dramatic forms. Another aspect is the rebel the society and politics with theatre; two aspects are independent but inter-related. The foremost theatrical movements that influence contemporary theatre acting and design include Epic theatre, Theatre of Cruelty, Poor Theatre, and Forum Theatre. These movements challenged identifying the character, bringing the audience to the illusion of the fictional world, and changing the spatial demarcation between the actor and audience. The technique of 'alienation' in Epic theatre may be the first challenge to the actor to come out from the character while in a performance other than the traditional performance. Then the spatial conventions also break with the 'aesthetical space' Boal (1995) and 'empty space' Brook (1996). The space for the actor and audience merged into the performing space, and Augusto Boal recognized actor to Spect-Actor in his observation theatre was a commune in the beginning. So, contemporary theatre in this context is the theatre practices under the influence of the theatre movements and concepts of the Twentieth century.

Epner (2014) observes three strategies of acting in contemporary theatre; first, 'being someone else' (Actor and Role) for portraying the fictional character, and second, 'being oneself' The modern actor is not alone means to present the character but also to communicate to the audience as the actor than the character. And 'performing actions. For Grotowski, "productions are detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship" Grotowski (2002a) 14. So, the modern actor is both communicating with the co-actors and the spectators. Habib Tanveer welcomed the ordinary people into his stage while staging his theatre production 'Agra Bazar' Khan (2020); the play was performed in an unconventional theatre space at the time. He may find the stages for his theatre in ordinary social spaces like a street, a marketplace, or any space in the village. In his practice, theatre is not a 'close-up' art. Ebrahim Alkazi also found success in his productions ability to communicate with the audience, and the aspect of success is related to the response of the public; he states that.

“The idea was, in addition, to communicate with Indian audiences coming from a peasant background. I was thrilled to find persons responding to that play and to feel the reactions which a Maharashtrian audience would feel, which a peasant audience would feel, in seeing that play, in seeing the earth, the dust-quality almost, the heat-quality of the play” Alkazi (1975).

The contemporary theatre proposed communication to the audience and tender a co-creation phase with the spectators, which is necessary to compete theatre with the contemporary popular entertainment and leisure options. Modern theatre practitioners like Grotowski, to adapt theatre in the era of the film, reinitiated co-creating aspects of the theatre. In other words, established the collective and collaborative phase of the performance by actors and audience alike. [Grotowski \(2002b\)](#). The conventional role of an actor in theatre; is to enact the story or depict the character also changes. The contemporary actor is a co-creator of the theatre production and creates the theatre’s content from improvisation. Habib Tanveer made the stage play ‘Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad’ [Katyal \(2012\)](#) from the improvisations of the ‘Nacha’ workshop he conducted at Raipur in 1972. So, the contemporary actor needs the skills to represent the character, and other skills demanded from the modern actor include presenting the character, creating theatre by acting his character and collaborating with co-actors, and collaborating with the audience.

3. THE FORM AND PERFORMANCE OF THERUKUTHU

In contemporary spaces Therukuthu performed in a customized way according to the convenience of the organized space and time while traditionally it is a night long performance. If the performance duration of the Therukuthu is short, for instance, less than three hours, the actor give more importance to character illustration in the performance. So as the performance is not too short but a medium i.e., three hours to five hours, then the actor give importance to presenting the character and to interact to the audience as a Person than an actor. And likewise, if the duration performance is long, i.e., whole night seven hours to eight hours, the audience could experience the actor as the character as well as a person among them in interaction with the audience with no walls or barriers. Then the proportion of Person-Actor-Character may be could scale as 20-30-50 percentages correspondingly.

Figure 1

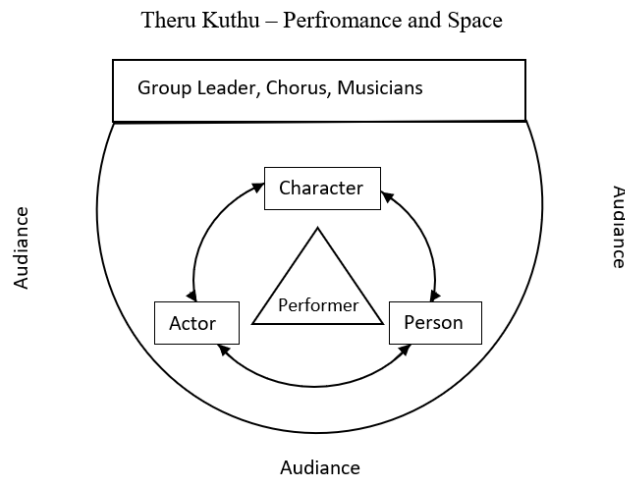


Figure 1 Image by K.R. Rajaravivarma

In total, a Therukuthu performance could be illustrated as follows [Figure 1](#) to provide an overview of the form in special aspects and in performance aspects.

3.1. THE ACTOR AND ACTING IN THERUKUTHU

Therukuthu actor is called 'performer', and his life duty is acting the role of an Archetype character alone; he also demonstrates and establishes the character's attitude with gestures, postures, and movement patterns. In addition to this, the actor shows his nature of being a performer of his own to the co-actors, kattyakkaran, and the audience. The actor himself is a middleman between character and person. In the actor's self, one has to know the history of the character, narrate the episode from the point of view of the character, be interesting in Kattiyakaran (comic story narrator and live stage manager), and sustain the character in the actor's part when dealing (interacting) with kattyakaran getting into the character's seriousness at any time. It depends upon the humor-based argument skill of a performer with kattyakaran.

Traditionally kuthu stage preferred to the opposite of the 'Throupathi Amman' (Goddess of Throupathi) is supposed to watch the performance as the performance is a dedication for the Goddess Throupathi [Swaminathan \(1991\)](#). So here as a part of the ritual extension, the Therukuthu is played every year to worship the Goddess who protects the villagers and their farming work and health. It is a strong belief that the Goddess is watching all the day-to-day activities of the people of that village. And also, the Characters of Mahabharata are often referred to by villagers for identifying behaviour among themselves. In total Mahabharata is an ever-living epic among the Therukuthu villages in Tamilnadu. [Figure 2](#)

Figure 2

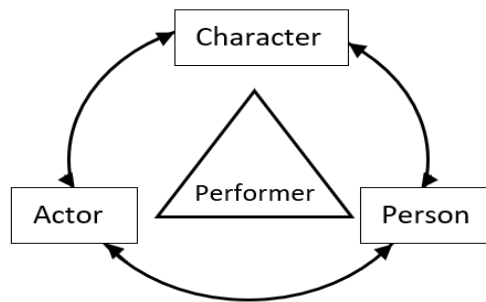


Figure 2 Image by K.R. Rajaravivarma

In Therukuthu, performance depends typically upon the entertaining capacity of the Therukuthu performer rather than the representation or presentation of a character. It demands argument, fun making, teasing ability, proverbs, knowledge of Tamil literature, Puranas, mocking, imitating skills, current affairs, local performance place news, colloquial language, pun words, (double meaning and aside, etc..). Moreover, ferocious attitudes like Bhima, Druriyotdhana -, Narrashinha, and Iranyskashibu show the full extent of their physical power in movements and expressions firmly. Here actor has physical skills like Kiriki, acrobatics, Mannerism, own style of attitude in the pattern of activities, gesture, and posture, and also doing activities -like biting the teeth, projecting tongue, shaking the head, handling property in a creative manner, etc...

3.2. ACTOR TO AUDIENCE IN THERUKUTHU

When a performer deals with the main character, it has a goal of becoming the character and attaining the Trans and women roles in characters like Panchali, Viruthasarini... are in the costume of Saris to feel the tenderness of a Feminine. The main characters in women's roles have the task of becoming feminine and sharing the deep sorrows of the character and nearly fainted. Especially the actor inside watches the audience and creates the character of feminine become is to the pathos of that character and also elegance of presenting the beauty of it, male is making the female character. All main characters have the task of encountering Kattiyakaran who is also a representative of the audience and communicate with the audience and resounds for the audience according to the reaction or feedback of the audience. Here the performer (Person-Actor-Character) has to have the ability and skill to defend himself. It is a must in Therukuthu because of its nature of being a village community Theatre. At the same time, the character's freedom when necessary does not fall into the criticism of Kattiyakaran. It is a kind of neutrality between character, Actor, and person.

4. THERUKUTHU AS A TRAINING METHOD

A Therukuthu performer could perform in modern theatre with less effort, more reflexive and creative way, where the acting style is highly flux and physical. [Grotowski \(2002a\)](#) does not intend to teach something to his actors with training because he prefers 'transillumination' to the actor than the 'transformation'. As well as to him, training is "to eliminate his organism's resistance to this psychic process. The result is freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses." [Grotowski \(2002b\)](#)16. The contemporary theatre actor could prefer Therukuthu as a training tool mainly based on the five following features of Therukuthu, which have parallel traces in contemporary theatre.

- The physicality of Acting
- Presentation and representation of the character
- Connecting to the Audience
- Performance is theatric rather than dramatic
- Rich in Theatre

4.1. THE PHYSICALITY OF ACTING

A kind of the physical theatre [Murray and Keefe \(2016\)](#); performance of the acrobatic skills in jumping, vigor movements, and delivery of the dialogue in a loud voice in verse and prose could trace to the first observation of the Therukuthu. The 'external expressiveness' [Tian \(1999\)](#) of the Meyerhold and 'physical potentiality' [Schechner \(2005\)](#) of Richard Schechner could be recognized in the acting of the Therukuthu. So, the traditional form applies to the develops the physical skills of a contemporary actor. Particularly, theatre productions influenced the theatre of cruelty, with acrobatics and highly physical elements, giving more importance to the actions than dialogues. For Peter Brook action is more important one than dialogues which could speak more louder and deeper, in his words "no explanations were needed, the audience had seen itself in action, it had seen how many layers silence

can contain" Brook (1996) 28. As a method, like the bio-mechanism of the Meyerhold, he proposes developing the 'external expressiveness' of the actor by practicing poses, gestures, and movements. So, he developed many exercises known as 'Etude' to enable the performers to perform required emotions to enforce the expression of thoughts and ideas. The actor for the theatre of Richard Schechner, demands high physical potentiality and intellectual rigour from the theatre practitioners, because theatre is alive, experiential, and organic, instead of a thing that involved a mere replication or reconstruction of reality.

4.2. PRESENTATION AND REPRESENTATION OF THE CHARACTER

The actor in Therukuthu moves the space and the present and represents the character to the audience, in another words the body is devised to reflect the fiction and the reality Fischer-Lichte (2008). As the presentational actor, he is introducing himself while appearing before the audience as the character. And the same time as representational acting, the actor identifies with the character and trans also. All these types of acting could be recognized in the Therukuthu performance; the performer not only identifies with the character but may beyond enter into trans while performing characters like 'Narasimha' (the incarnation of the Vishnu with a physique of the man and lion).

4.3. CONNECTING TO THE AUDIENCE

Therukuthu actors connect the audience in three ways; the first two ways are through the actors, and the third one is through the space of the performance. The first one is direct talk to the audience through the 'kattiyakaran'; which is a role in Therukuthu. They narrate the story and occasionally take minor characters like the attenders of the king's court. The second one is the actor's self-introduction to the audience while entering before the audience. These two ways are almost the same as the 'Coming out of the character' proposed by the epic theatre; it is the technique in epic theatre, employed by the direct talk with the audience as the actor, not as the character, about the play and the performance. But in Therukuthu, the direct talk is beyond the play and character extended to the social satire. So, the Alienation of the Brecht and spect-actor of the Boal could trace to the performance of the Therukuthu Kumar (2019). The characters are entered before the audience with a self-introduction, so before Boal itself, in Therukuthu, the actors are the spect-actors. The actors converse with the audience sharing the character's plight, which is later influenced and reflected in the productions of the Habib Tanveer and others. The third way of the connectedness of the audience is relating to the space. Traditionally the Therukuthu performance is not on a stage with a closed auditorium, but space similar to the experimental theatre of the Ebrahim Alkazi and Habib Tanveer. Where the 'creative solitude' Stanislavsky and Hapgood (2017) is a challenge for an actor as the performance is the with the audience. So, a Therukuthu artist is really trained to act simultaneously with co-actors and audience also irrespective of any spatial preference.

4.4. PERFORMANCE IS THEATRIC RATHER THAN DRAMATIC

The Therukuthu even narrates a story from epic or myths or history, but the story does not take the people to watch the performance, as the story is age-old and everyone knows, so no suspense. But the suspense is in the performance, which

draws the people to the Therukuthu. Schechner describes; “The drama is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman; the script is the domain of the teacher, guru, master; the theater is the domain of the performers; the performance is the domain of the audience” [Schechner \(2005\) 70](#). The contemporary theatre is preferring a theatre not based on the script alone the performance they developed from improvisations also. The Therukuthu actor converses and reacts spontaneously to both actor and co-actor beyond the script, that creative instinctiveness is also applicable to the contemporary actor. The theatre is based on improvisations than the texts are successfully practiced by many contemporary theatre directors.

4.5. RICH IN THEATRE

When considering the Epic theatre technique, ‘Minimal set, costumes, props, and lighting and the poor theatre concept ‘magical transformation of objects’, obviously Therukuthu has both the nature of epic theatre and poor theatre. And in the concept of the Grotowski, in theatre actor should amaze the spectator with his presentation of the character with no other staging elements or devices. The ‘spectacle’ should render from the actor and his performance, so the actor supposed to “transform from type to type, character to character, silhouette to silhouette - while the audience watched - in a poor manner, using only his own body and craft” [Grotowski \(2002a\) 21](#). So, Grotowski demanded that actors draw the images from the collective process of physic and psychic existence and express through the body and voice of the actor. All these aspects of acting are more or less the very nature of the Therukuthu, so for a Therukuthu performer epic theatre or poor theatre is not a challenge.

So as a contemporary theatre actor wanted the skills to perform theatre productions range from the physical performance, acting- to present and represent a character, connect with the audience, actor improvised performance, theatre is with minimum props with the maximum potentiality of the actor as discussed. Therukuthu could consider an integrated training method for the contemporary theatre actor. The great post-independence theatre directors like Ebrahim Alkazi in his practice consider the potentiality of the traditional forms in actor training. Alkazi followed a ‘self-indulgent approach to the theater’, which include epic theatre traditions of Indian theater, in his words.

“Folk forms -- the use of music, dance, speech, song, the use of the simplest type of conventions, the use of a type of montage which you have in the epic theater, the breaking up of the flow of the action, the discontinuity of the action, the distancing, or the alienation of the spectator from the action on the stage as well as of the actor from his role. All this, I think, is part of the Indian tradition” [Alkazi \(1975\)](#).

5. CONCLUSION

For a traditional theatre artist or actor, the performance and acting are defined and have a conventional frame according to the form; moreover, the actor may perform the same role in the performance till the end. But in the case of contemporary theatre, the actor has to perform various roles with various styles of acting according to the theatre production design. So, the contemporary actor faces more challenges than a traditional theatre actor. The skills required for a traditional theatre actor include the skills to present or represent the character, the skills to act enact and react with co-actors and audience, the skills to present any space with no conventions or convenience to perform, moreover he as to collaborate with the team

to make the theatre without a script and to collaborate with the audience during the performance. While analysing the nature of the Therukuthu and the acting dimensions, certainly one could recognize the possible application of the Therukuthu as a training method for the contemporary actor. Therukuthu could train an actor for his physical skills, instinctiveness or spontaneity, and creative collaboration to both with the team and audience in theatre-making and performance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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