

The Quest for a Universal Language of the Theatre

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe

Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies
University of Wales Aberystwyth

Introduction

Fischer-Lichte differentiates three categories of intercultural productions. The first category comprises productions in which reference to the foreign (theatre, culture) dominates, which regard the foreign components as ideal or model for their own theatre, placing the foreign next to the existing forms of theatre. In the second category, reference to the production's own theatre, culture, dominates. Foreign elements enlarge the range of possibilities for expression, aiming at further development or relativation of one's own forms of theatre (Fischer-Lichte, 1989: 115). The aim of the third category is a universal language of theatre. In this essay I want to address the implications of such a concept for the theatre theory and practice with reference to Antonin Artaud and Peter Brook and Indian philosophy (Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 1996).

Artaud

In response to the need for a magic culture, Artaud wished to create a form of theatre that could do justice to the demands of a genuine culture: theatre should be 'magical and violently egoistical, that is, self-interested' (Artaud, 1974: 4). He developed the *Theatre of Cruelty*, a frequently misinterpreted concept (Innes, 1981: 110). Artaud took great pains to point out that 'cruelty' was not synonymous with bloodshed. He understood the term from a 'mental viewpoint', implying 'strictness, diligence, unrelenting decisiveness, irreversible and absolute determination' (Artaud, 1974: 77). Artaud regarded any variety of physical violence as merely one minor aspect of cruelty, and emphasized that cruelty is 'very lucid, a kind of strict control and submission to necessity' (78). Cruelty, finally, is for Artaud a

hungering after life, cosmic strictness, relentless necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living vortex engulfing darkness, in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue. (78)

According to Artaud, this *cruelty* needed specific modes of theatre different from traditional performance practices. In particular, theatre has to look for different languages than the traditional one of dialogue to convey *cruelty*. Artaud conceptualized language that is physical, 'aimed at the senses and independent of speech' (25). This physical language, also referred to as 'poetry for the senses' (25), affects primarily the senses, although Artaud pointed out that it might, at later stages, amplify its full mental effect 'on all possible levels and along all lines' (25).

The effectiveness of physical language on the stage depends primarily on the actor, on the effectiveness of his acting. In his emphasis on a physical language of the theatre, Artaud compares the actor to a physical athlete, with a major difference: in the case of the actor, not actual physiological muscles are trained, but affective musculature 'matching the bodily localization of our feelings' (100). For Stanislavsky, the solar plexus was the physiological seat of the emotions; Artaud regards the rhythm of breathing as the crucial aspect of the actor's physiological counterpart of affective musculature, maintaining that 'we can be sure that every mental movement, every feeling, every leap in human affectivity has an appropriate breath' (101). Artaud's emphasis on physical language has its origin in his admiration of Balinese theatre:

In fact the strange thing about all these gestures (...) is the feeling of a new bodily language no longer based on words but on signs which emerges through the maze of gestures, postures (...) leaving not even the smallest area of the stage space unused. (38-39)

Artaud reformulated the principle of a physical language which he discovered in Balinese theatre in the context of his own views on culture. This language 'develops its physical and poetic effects on all conscious levels and in all senses', and Artaud proposes that it 'must lead to thought adopting deep attitudes which might be called *active metaphysics* (31). It is the language of nature, its grammar undiscovered as yet (84). 'It poetically retraces the steps which culminated in the creation of speech' (84) Artaud associates this 'new' dimension of language with an 'ancient magic effectiveness (...) whose mysterious potential is now forgotten' (85).

Brook

In *Orghast*, Brook had the poet Ted Hughes develop a new language, also called Orghast. The language was based on the concept of total identity between sound and meaning (Pronko, 1988: 110). The intention, according to Innes, was

not only (...) to reflect the sensation of a half- barbaric world, but to affect 'magically' the mental state of the listener on an instinctive level in the same way as a sound can affect the growth of plants or the patterning of iron filings. (Innes, 1981: 139)

Innes points out, however, that *Orghast* worked only with intellectually sophisticated spectators, whereas a 'supposedly more primitive (and therefore in theory more receptive, even more susceptible) audience on Brook's African tour, apparently they found those dark primordial cries hilariously funny' (Ibid., 142).

Brook's production of *The Mahabharata*, both for the theatre and for film/television, has been called the apotheosis of Brook's research into theatre (Shevtsova, 1991: 210). The title of the Indian epic implies 'the great history of mankind', and the 'great poem of the world' (Pronko, 1988: 220-1). Whereas Brook attempted to arrive at universality through language in *Orghast*, he strove for the same aim in the *Mahabharata* project through the concept of *dharma* (duty) which he located at the centre of the philosophy expounded in the Epic. In his view, the *Mahabharata* does not 'explain the secret of *dharma*, but lets it become a living reality. It does this through dramatic situations, situations which force *dharma* into the open' (Brook, 1987: 164).

Indian Linguistics

Reference to Indian language theory helps to understand both Artaud's intuition and Brook's quest for a universal language of the theatre. According to Coward, linguistics and the philosophy of language, relatively recent developments in the West, were begun by the Hindus before the advent of recorded history. Beginning with the Vedic hymns, which are at least 3000 years old, the Indian study of language has continued in an unbroken tradition right up to the present day. (Coward, 1980: 3)

The main focus of Indian linguistics is on the relationship of language and consciousness--'not even restricted to human consciousness'(Ibid). There

are many theorists of language in the Indian tradition. The grammarian Bhartrihari is of special importance. He distinguishes three levels of language: *vaikhari*, *madhyama* and *pashyanti*. *Vaikhari* 'is the most external and differentiated level', on which speech is uttered by the speaker and heard by the hearer (128). Its temporal sequence is fully developed. *Madhyama* represents, in broad terms, the thinking level of the mind.

It is the idea or series of words as conceived by the mind after hearing or before speaking out. It may be thought of as inward speech. All parts of speech that are linguistically relevant to the sentence are present here in a latent form.' (129)

The innermost level is that of *pashyanti*. At this level 'there is no distinction between the word and the meaning and there is no temporal sequence' (129). Bhartrihari associates this level of language with the concept of *sphota*. It represents meaning as a whole, existing in the mind of the speaker as a unity. 'When he utters it, he produces a sequence of different sounds so that it appears to have differentiation' (73). The process of differentiation into sounds proceeds from the *sphota* on the *pashyanti* level of language via *madhyama* or inward thought to expressed speech on the *vaikhari* level. For the listener, the process is reversed. Although he first hears a series of sounds, he ultimately perceives the utterance as a unity--'the same *sphota* with which the speaker began' (73). The *sphota* or meaning-whole thus has two sides to it: the word-sound (*dhvani*) and the word-meaning (*artha*) (12). Sound and meaning are two aspects residing within the unitary *sphota*, which, according to Bhartrihari, is eternal and inherent in consciousness (12). Meaning is thus not conveyed 'from the speaker to the hearer, rather, the spoken words serve only as a stimulus to reveal or uncover the meaning which was already present in the mind of the hearer' (12). Haney points out that the unity of name and form, of sound and meaning on the level of the *sphota* in *pashyanti* applies mainly to the Sanskrit language. He argues, however, that

because Sanskrit is considered by orthodox Indians to be the oldest documented language and probably the source of all languages, the same unity of name and form found in it must exist to some extent in other languages when experienced on sufficiently refined levels of consciousness. (Haney, 1991: 316)

Artaud calls the language beyond speech, which he intuits, the language of nature. *Pashyanti* represents the subtlest manifest level of nature, and must thus be assumed to be closest to nature itself. The grammar of this language, Artaud argues, has not yet been discovered. Experience of sufficiently refined states of consciousness, i.e. direct experience of

the *pashyanti* level of language, should reveal that grammar. Artaud assigns an 'ancient magic effectiveness to the language beyond speech. In parallel, Abhinavagupta, the main classic commentator on Bharata's *Natyasastra*, states that it is the poetic experience of *dhvani*, the sound aspect of speech, that brings about the experience of *rasa*.

as a transcendental function of suggestion removes the primordial veil of ignorance from our minds and thereby allows the bliss associated with the discovery of true meaning to be experienced. (Coward, 1980: 76)

Artaud may well have sensed levels of language beyond speech actively expressed in Balinese and other Oriental forms of dance, and he associated the levels of the mind gained by the spectator through watching such performances with the intellect rather than with the emotions, let alone the even subtler level of *pashyanti*: 'Thus we are led *along intellectual paths* [my emphasis] towards reconquering the signs of existence' (Artaud, 1974: 46). Artaud here shows influence by contemporary science which places the intellect above the emotions and has no place for a level of the mind beyond speech, The lack in Western psychology of a model of the mind which takes levels of language beyond speech, as the *pashyanti*-level described by Bhartrihari, into account, leads to the vagueness and confusion of terminology in Artaud's argumentation.

Vedic Psychology

Vedic Psychology can assist Vedic linguistics by providing such a model of consciousness: During the last 40 years, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has subjected the knowledge provided by the classical texts of Vedic literature to a thorough re-assessment, resulting in what he calls Vedic Science. Among its various disciplines, Vedic Psychology will be of particular interest to this study. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi is a disciple of the late Swami Brahmananda Saraswati (1869-1953), who held the position of Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math for the last 13 years of his life. He was the head of one of four monasteries in India founded by the sage and philosopher Shankara to safeguard the tradition of his Advaita Vedanta philosophy. As Brahmananda Saraswati's disciple, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi is in the direct line of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

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Vedic Psychology posits '(...) an architecture of increasingly abstract, functionally integrated faculties or levels of mind.' This hierarchy ranges from gross to subtle, from highly active to settled, from concrete to abstract, and from diversified to unified. The senses constitute the grossest, most highly active, most concrete and most diversified level of the mind, followed by desire, the thinking mind, the discriminating intellect, feeling and intuition, and the individual ego. Vedic Psychology uses the term 'mind' in two ways: 'It refers to the overall multilevel functioning of consciousness as well as to the specific level of thinking (apprehending and comparing) within that overall structure.' Underlying the subtlest level, that of the individual ego, and transcendental to it, is the Self, 'an abstract, silent, completely unified field of consciousness.' Each subtler level is able to 'observe and monitor the more expressed levels.' Empirical evidence suggests that transcendental is a field that links all individuals, parallel to Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. Pure consciousness, in contrast to the collective unconscious, can be experienced directly (Alexander 1990: 290).

Within this hierarchy of the mind, pashyanti represents the finest manifestation of pure consciousness, and para is located in pure consciousness itself. Pure consciousness is beyond socio-cultural boundaries, contents, it is universal. Thus also the level of para is universal. Socio-cultural specification sets in once that universal level is left, once individual language begins on the level of pashyanti.

Language is universal only on the level of pure consciousness. Traditionally, that level of consciousness, because it is beyond activity, is regarded of little use to an active life, especially because pure consciousness, being 'pure', contentless, can only be described in very subjectiv, individual terms of expressed language. Vedic Psychology tackles this problem by not only describing the hierarchy of the mind, but also proposes, in agreement with Vedanta philosophy, higher stages of human development, characterized by the simultaneous experience of pure consciousness together with waking or dreaming or sleeping. Such a state of functioning is called cosmic consciousness.

If theatre, therefore, is able to reach beyond the performer's and the spectator's intellect, even beyond their emotions, if theatre is able stimulate the co-existence of pure consciousness with the waking state of consciousness, i.e. cosmic consciousness, then theatre will have reached the level of language which is universal.

Once it has been established that theatre can allow actors and spectators to access the universal level of pure consciousness, it has to be asked whether in addition to universality as the goal of theatre, the relative, expressed languages of the theatre, verbal, gestural, costume, make-up etc., and their combination, can also be universal, i.e. independent of culture and history. Vedic theory of music, Gandharvaveda, proposes that the primordial sound, nada, is at the basis of all creation, including consciousness, and that the dancer's/actor's body starts moving in the rhythms and movements of nature when all cells of his/her body begin to resonate with that primordial sound (Hartmann, 1992). Thus sound is directly transformed into movement of the body. It could well be argued--as a working hypothesis for further studies--that if the composer composes, (or the choreographer choreographs, or the dancer dances, the actor acts) in a state of cosmic consciousness, the result (the composition, choreography, dancing or acting activity) will be fuelled by impulses emanating directly from the universal level of pure consciousness, unmediated by culture or history. Such impulses will then reach the spectator and enable his mind to reach the same underlying, universal level of consciousness from which the aesthetic impulses originated. Creative activity will be culturally and historically mediated when such activity does not originate from cosmic consciousness characterized by a simultaneity of pure consciousness and activity, but if it originates from ordinary waking state of consciousness which has no systematic, only ephemeral, 'coincidental' experience of pure, or cosmic consciousness (e.g., Grotowski's translumination, or Brook's total theatre).

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