

The Impact of Brechtian Theory on the Production and Performance of 2006-18 by M Ganesh's Janamanadata Heggodu

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Abstract

This article draws on the impact of Brechtian theory on a contemporary Kannada Theater repertory Janamanadata Heggodu which is led by M Ganesh a well-known Contemporary Kannada Theatre Director. It draws on the point that how Brechtian theory such as alienation effect in Epic Theater has influenced contemporary theater artists like M Ganesh. The model established in this study illustrates the relationship between the blended illusion in Brecht's theater and the spectators' complex cognitive and emotional activities in the mental spaces with special reference to the performances of Janamanadata. It shows that blending facilitated by the alienation effect through insertion of the conscious with the subconscious expands the spectators' mental spaces for imagination and thus enhances illusion and emotion, instead of eliminating them, this study shows that the alienation effect serves indeed as an illusion and emotion intensifier in the productions of Janamanadata Heggodu. Brecht's plays achieve enhanced illusionist and emotional effects by merging the 'theatrical' illusion with the dramatic one in theater, which in turn facilitates the blending in spectators' mental spaces. This complex blending process in Brecht's theater leads to spectators' intensified identification with dramatis personae directly and through 'theatrical' mediation with the latter indirectly.

KEYWORDS: blended illusion, dramatic illusion, theatric illusion, cognitive mediation, emotion.

M Ganesh is a contemporary Kannada theatre director, associated with the Janamanadata Heggodu, known for its 'activism, formalism and cosmopolitanism'. Janamanadata is a typical Kannada word which compounded by three words 'Jana' means people, mana means mind and aata means play so overall Janamanadata means a play created to touch the mind of the people. His theatre, made by the people and for the people, breaks with the traditional perception of theatre as elitist. His revolutionary status in the profession can be explained through his belief in the power of collaborative theatre (création collective) as the most democratic art form, capable of dealing with political questions. The redistribution of the power of decision-making in the process of production and staging can be seen as a metaphor of a political system based on civic participation. M Ganesh's theatre teaches the audience how to react critically to what is being observed, and to translate this reaction into political activism and participation, in shaping their community. One of the central elements of his philosophy is to make the spectators aware of their potential to participate in the process of change. Instead of passively witnessing the unfolding of political and social events, citizens should feel encouraged to act and to note their personal impact on history. Such an approach is almost certainly inspired by the work of an earlier artist whose

creation also falls into the category of political theatre – that of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht was known for having coined the term *Verfremdung*¹, crucial in achieving a critical response, and which can be described as the opposite of the suspension of disbelief, commonly cited as a requirement for most forms of entertainment.¹ In the Brechtian epic theatre, the spectator must be aware of the fictional character of the play. Only then can the characters' actions be judged in an objective way. The motivations behind these actions are explained by the actors, often through another device typical of Brecht's style – *gestus*, defined in his own words as 'convey[ing] particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men' and 'allow[ing] conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances' (Brecht 1978,104-5).

Prasanna M Ganesh's method to 'the Brechtian paradigm'. Though the two directors' works share a number of common features and objectives, such a statement underestimates M Ganesh's contribution to the development of political theatre.

- 1 The term *Verfremdung* is often deliberately mistranslated as 'the alienation effect' or 'the distancing effect' due to the lack of an accurate English equivalent of the German word. This translation will be used here along another term – the V-effect.

In a statement reflecting his attitude to Brechtian theory, he says that 'Brecht is not a form; it's a vision of theatre' (Williams 1999, 56). Rather than using his work as a pattern to be imitated, she reinterprets his ideas and applies them to his own artistic strategies. This is the reason why M Ganesh calls Brecht a vision rather than a form. Bertolt Brecht is an ubiquitous artistic spirit. One could argue that the resemblance of the two is accidental, with both artists' work falling into the category of people's theatre. It is therefore not surprising that they both use similar tools to address their audiences. Given that Brecht preceded M Ganesh, his influence on the Kannada director is a natural consequence of the evolution of theatre.

Presenting a problem is not enough; the Janamandata must engage the audience in a dialogue. Brechtian techniques play an important part in facilitating the task of speaking to the spectator. However, the difference between the two directors lies in the fact that Brecht is more text-based and M Ganesh is better known for his use of improvisation. This is perhaps one reason why the term 'paradigm' becomes problematic. This essay will analyse the different methods, inspired by Brechtian theory, which enabled M Ganesh to advance his own model of people theatre rather than relying on the reproduction of Brecht's techniques. In order to do so, it will focus on the performance and the staging of 2006: Shradhamatthu Hanathe (2006: A play based on a well known Kannada contemporary writer Shreenivasvaideya's short story).

As a starting point of this investigation, it is useful to note that the play constructed by the collective ideas of all actors of the repertory. They have broken the concept of director who used to be considered as the major key factor in constructing the play. This repertory formulated simple techniques in the design to make the audience to be aware about they are watching the play. In this way Brechtian Epic theater affected on the plays of Janamandata Heggodu. They have not only adapted the techniques in improvising the play but as well as they focused on the subject of the

plays to make the audience think about their contemporary issues. Plays like 'UOOru Keri' an autobiography of a well-known contemporary Kannada Dalith writer Siddalinghaiah and 'Uchalya' an autobiography of Marathi Dalit writer LakshmanGayakwad translated in to Kannada by Chandrakanthpokale. The subject of the play is influence of Brecht because as he did in his contemporary plays for reacting to his current issues. Only by demonstrating exceptional force could Brecht and M Ganesh counteract the bourgeois domination. Their approach required, therefore, revolutionizing the concept of theatre; this was achieved by introducing a political dimension into their works. As a committed Marxist, Brecht believed that theatre must be a vehicle for political ideas. Such an attitude appealed to M Ganesh and soon became his artistic driving force. Theatre had to be adapted to social needs arising from political circumstances, with entertainment no longer being its primary focus. Brecht's and M Ganesh's works are therefore often referred to as social experiments rather than plays, with the success of these experiments measured according to the reaction of the audience. Brecht once wrote that the effectiveness of theatre lies in its capacity to lead people into believing that they too can act upon their reflections and actively participate in the process of change as '[t]he present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation' (2001,274).

Brecht's and M Ganesh's socialist ideals are clearly visible in their working methods. Opposed to bourgeois domination, state despotism and the fascist idea of the personality cult, they support an even redistribution of power among the members of the troupe – *la création collective* (the collective creation). The political significance of this concept was particularly critical for Brecht, to whom it was clear that collectivism must be reborn after it was destroyed by fascism. The concept of an omniscient director is therefore eliminated from his works. Performances are a result of members' collaboration, discussions and conflicts. There is no hierarchy; every member of the troupe is encouraged to share his or his ideas and thus becomes a source of knowledge for the others. Therefore, such an approach does not only favor an egalitarian mode of creation but is also beneficial due to its didactic value. M Ganesh describes the method of collective creation this way: 'They know that they must watch. They know that it is valuable for them to watch the others. To watch the others properly'. Collective creation is as beneficial to the performers as it is to the audience. By empowering the actors and by letting them have an impact on their work, spectators are led to believe that they too can have a say in their community and thus influence the process of change.

Developed by Brecht, collective creation as a means of extracting performers' creativity is a perfect tool for experimentation – it is also the approach favored by M Ganesh. Actors are encouraged to make contributions at any stage of the production, even during an actual performance. There is therefore no single formula for a successful performance because it constantly evolves due to improvisation. Since they usually cannot predict the final outcome of their work, the Janamanadata Heggodu performers often refer to their acting as 'a journey into the unknown'. The idea of change is engraved into the three-year long evolution of the play 2006, just as it is inherent in the course of history.

The use of collective creation techniques is only one way of showing the audience their potential to provoke social change. More importantly, both Brecht and the Janamanadata Heggodu attempt to awaken the spectators' critical thinking, which they see as a more direct incentive to action. Brecht, and subsequently M Ganesh, wanted their audiences to produce logically-deduced judgments on presented ideas and to subsequently act upon them. In order to pursue this project, new performative devices became necessary. Brecht and M Ganesh could no longer rely on traditional theatre forms, too often faithful to the Aristotelian concept of the catharsis. Brecht himself was, for instance, opposed to the concept of traditional opera, which makes wide use of the technique. Yet he collaborated with the socialist composer Kurt Weill to produce an opera, its distinction lying in their attempt to challenge the very concept of theatre while simultaneously offering a critique of the capitalist system. Music is therefore not used to provoke a purely emotional response, which is one of the objectives of bourgeois theatre. Instead, it is meant to create emotional detachment. This way it acts as a tool for educating the audience and encouraging them to question the reality they live in. This is also achieved through the use of *gestus*— a way of presenting social interactions between contradictory characters and allowing the audience to critically assess their behavior and choose the right attitude. Such an approach appeals to M Ganesh, who aims to educate more than she seeks to entertain.

Another way in which both directors challenge the notion of traditional theatre is by refusing any kind of expressionist devices which they perceive to be irrelevant to their aims; dramatic theatre does not appeal to them. They are, equally, against the other end of the stylistic spectrum – naturalism. According to M Ganesh, imitating reality 'turns actors into living pieces of furniture'. A naturalistic approach encourages observation rather than critical inquiry on the part of the audience. Reproducing the status quo creates the impression of an inescapable reality and does not leave any room for potential change. Illusion, which leaves the spectator passive, is therefore renounced. In pursuit of the awakening of the audience's critical thinking, Brecht's most influential device—the *Verfremdungseffekt*—comes into play.

Before answering the question of how the V-effect is adapted by the Janamanadata Heggodu it is necessary to focus on its original meaning, as devised by Brecht. Its main principle is the process of creating distance between the characters and the audience, the distance being not physical but emotional. The audience move away from the inner reality of the play; they do not suspend their disbelief. They must be aware of the distinction between their reality and the reality of the play. Martin Esslin calls the V-effect 'non-emphatic distancing' (1990, 140). The consciousness of the spectator renders his or her capable of passing objective, unbiased judgment on presented problems. Brecht was not the first to employ the technique – it was previously used by East Asian, Indian and Elizabethan theatre. However, his application of it within a European context may be seen as revolutionary. Not only did he detach his audience from the events presented, but he also encouraged them to act upon their reflections. The success of the V-effect depends on the synchronization of various theatrical devices.

The process is evident in the techniques employed by the Janamanadata Heggodu. M Ganesh's choice of a historical setting for the play is the first aspect of the V-effect, as one of the most important Brechtian influences on the production of 2006 is the idea of historical distancing. By contradicting the concepts of timelessness and universalism perpetuated in bourgeois theatre, Brecht presented history as a closed chapter to which public access was denied. Revolutionary personages from M Ganesh's play guard their historical reality by making sure that the audience is not immersed in it by identifying with the characters. Watching historical events from an atemporally conscious perspective allows the spectator to adopt a critical approach. The idea of change is inherent to M Ganesh's artistic creation. According to the philosophy embraced by his Janamanadata Heggodu changing the world should start with the challenging of traditional theatrical techniques established over the centuries. The ideal consequence of this would be rendering theatre-going a more popular activity and engraving a political message into theatre performances. By means of the Brechtian revolutionary concept of *gestus* the actor of the Janamanadata Heggodu speaks to the audience and establishes a dialogue, which would have been unacceptable in bourgeois theatre. The purpose of this dialogue is paradoxically not to immerse the audience in the inner reality of the play, but the opposite – to keep them behind an imaginary wall of reason. Eliminating the distance between the stage and the audience serves therefore not to invite the spectator to a fictional world but to encourage them to reflect upon presented events. This makes the audience aware of their potential to participate in the real social and political world. *Gestus* became for M Ganesh a basic pattern which enabled him to develop other concepts such as theatre for the people and collective creation – all this to achieve greater audience participation. All of these strategies, developed by Brecht but later adapted by M Ganesh, are a reflection of the peculiar character of the Janamanadata Heggodu. They are marked by a strong Brechtian influence, but their originality cannot be denied. Brecht is indeed a vision – an ideology to which M Ganesh added his original technical elements. Calling M Ganesh, a Brechtian paradigm seems therefore to be an over simplification.

M Ganesh was not spared criticism even from within his own troupe. His intention to give the masses an interest in theatre undeniably deserves acclaim. In the spirit of May 1968, the transformation of working conditions should be accompanied by the widening of access of the working class to lifestyle choices traditionally associated with upper classes. However, the insignificant working-class participation in the performances of the Janamanadata Heggodu suggests that his impact on the central problem of the exclusive character of theatre has been overestimated. What is more, the very concept of collective creation has also been put into question. In the interview made by me to M Ganesh Janamanadata Heggodu states:

One must not be utopian. If there has been a small collectivist phenomenon at the Janamanadata Heggodu it is due to the authority, to the tyranny even, of Ganesh. [...] If we had wanted to direct collectively, we would still be in the process of thinking about our first production, and we would never have got around to performing ('Uchalya' 2007).

M Ganesh developed some of the most important concepts that have since transformed theatre. His own influence is undeniable. The Brechtian influences, rather than overshadowing his genius, added to it and improved the overall appearance of his work. If we analyze all these factors, we may come to the conclusion that the work of the Kannada director, regardless of its overall social impact, should be seen as a significant step on the way to permanently changing the face of theatre. Since change is continuous, the audience should be full of hope for the future as others see M Ganesh as an inspiration for their work, just as she viewed Brecht when adapting his techniques to his original work.

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