

From Page to Stage: National Seminar at Rajdhani College, University of Delhi

A report by Bharti Sharma

The English Literary Association, Rajdhani College organized a National Seminar on “Text to Performance: Drama in Classroom and Beyond” in collaboration with FORTELL on 27 February 2019. Despite notions of superiority of the written word, there has always been a fascination for the audio-visual medium of expression. With literature being treated as elitist and theatre as being treated for the masses, the idea of transforming a text into a performance is to make it more approachable to the people and also to impart a more synaesthetic appeal to the text.

The aim of the seminar was to analyze the pedagogical nuances related to reading, studying and teaching drama in the classroom, and also to take drama beyond the classroom for better understanding of the text. The seminar addressed drama in all its modes and variations, including literary drama, amateur theatre, realist theatre and folk theatre. One of the objectives of the seminar was to decipher the role of drama in social and political contexts, particularly in the current digital era, in which the young generation of playwrights and performers constantly endeavour to make their productions available to a large audience. The discussion also revolved around the relationship between theory and practice, and brought together academics, researchers and practitioners of drama to understand the process of evolution from text to performance.

The seminar began with a “Welcome Address” by Principal Dr. Rajesh Giri, who observed that the topic was of interest to all as we have a natural tendency to learn better from visual experience. Dr. Rachna Sethi, Convenor, English Literary Association, outlined the idea and concept behind the topic of the seminar. She highlighted the performative aspect of theatre that is often neglected or ignored when teaching drama in the classroom. She also talked about sensitizing students

to the vibrant Delhi theatre scene.

Professor G. J. V. Prasad from the Centre of English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University was invited as the Keynote Speaker. He discussed drama as being an inseparable part of human experience; he observed that drama has always been in and beyond the classroom since we all are born performers. The Guest of Honour, Professor Raj Kumar, Head, Department of English, University of Delhi focused on the representation of the Dalits in Indian regional drama. He opined that Indian playwrights have usually been prejudiced in their portrayal of Dalit characters, pushing them into marginalized and minor roles.

The first session, chaired by Dr. Varsha Gupta, had enlightening and stimulating presentations by Dr. Sanjay Kumar (Hans Raj College), Dr. Payal Nagpal (Janki Devi Memorial College) and Mr. Siddharth N. Kanoujia (Hindu College). Dr. Sanjay Kumar emphasized that the history of theatre is the history of defiance and resistance, and in the present time, it is a mark of resistance against the State and the market. He talked of drama as an expression of radicalism in political and social contexts and shared his experiences as a theatre practitioner while talking about the challenges he has to constantly face. Dr. Payal Nagpal discussed the changes and experimentation in theatre that are in tandem with the socio-historical transitions. She traced the trajectory of theatrical forms, starting from the naturalistic and expressionistic theatre to illusionistic theatre to the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Mr. Siddharth N. Kanoujia led an interesting discussion on the pedagogical challenges of teaching Shakespeare to a heterogeneous group of students. He observed that while diversity should be encouraged, it poses its own challenges when it comes to teaching drama in the classroom.

Ms. Divya Bajpai Jha chaired the next session that focused on performance as an art. The resource persons for this session had two theatre actors and practitioners, Mr. Bhaskar Jha (an alumnus of Rajdhani College) and Mr. Piyush Kumar. They highlighted the importance of observation, ambience, costume and voice modulation among actors. They suggested that actors should be open to understanding the director's perspective while retaining their individual expression. They emphasized the need for actors to establish a dialogue with the audience in order to have an impactful performance.

The day ended with an entertaining Indianized adaptation of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, by the students of B. A. Eng. (H) II year under the direction of Ms. Neha Gaur. The play conveyed a powerful message by connecting the theme of the performance to the current #MeToo movement. The professional theatre practitioners present shared feedback and insights with the amateur-student actors.

The day ended with closing observations by Mr. Shafiqul Alam, who discussed the transformation that a text undergoes as it moves from words to a multi-layered performance.

The seminar was successful in realizing its objectives. During the course of the day, the speakers discussed various aspects of text and performance, including different types of dramas; technical aspects and reception of a theatrical performance; the problems that activist theatre faces; and the theatrical challenges that the performers have to deal with while representing a textual character on stage.

Dr. Bharti Sharma teaches English literature and language at Rajdhani College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are romantic poetry, feminist writings, postcolonial literatures and American fiction. She specializes in Canadian fiction.

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