Failure as a Radical Moment of Rupture: Theatre Curriculum and Disobedient Practices

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Abstract

Positing breakdowns in the 'success' of a theatrical production as moments of critical pedagogical rupture, this paper examines my directorial venture for the National School of Drama, under the graduate diploma, a promenade-style street performance, that moved out of the institutional premises to city spaces and then back to the NSD. Drawing on ecodramaturgy and material performance theory, I explore how failure exposed the aesthetic and pedagogical limitations of the curriculum at Indian institutions of theatre training and revealed its discomfort with abject materials. My "disobedient practices" offer pedagogical insights into what theatre can hold—and what it habitually excludes. Using a performance-as-research (PaR) lens, I reflect on how the work confronted cultural associations of excreta with shame and untouchability as well as the material realities that prevented the performance from being or becoming.

Keywords: Failure as method, street performance, theatre pedagogy in India, waste and cultural associations, aesthetics

As I waited for my final year viva at the National School of Drama (NSD), Delhi, in October 2013, I felt the weight of three years of training condensed into this one conversation. My diploma production—an essential requirement for graduating from the programme—was up for review. It had, breaking all conventions, taken me beyond the walls of the institution, onto the streets.

The first question came quickly: *"In the history of NSD, no student has ever gone outside the Drama School premises to explore the streets for their diploma*

production. Are you happy with what you have done?" I answered honestly: *"I don't know. But the fact that the institution supported such an ambitious diploma production is remarkable, and I am grateful for it".*

"Why choose a topic that talks about shit? It could have been any aesthetic text that suited the institution's legacy. In my opinion, you have wasted the taxpayers' money by doing a project that doesn't fit well here".

I kept my silence, not out of deference, but because I was still processing the layered meanings of that statement: the institutional discomfort with my choice of subject; the embedded hierarchies of what counts as 'aesthetic'; the invisible boundary I had crossed or the disobedience I had shown by taking theatre into spaces marked by waste, precarity, and social stigma. In that moment, I understood that my project was not only a performance—it was a provocation, a refusal, and a test of how far the tolerance of the institution for artistic risk would really stretch.

Success in theatre is often defined as something that works for a group or even a niche audience, whereas it is declared to be a failure if it does not work for either. A failed performance, I argue, is one in which the material that constitutes the play fails to be aestheticised—whether in the realm of creative endeavour or in politics. Failure occurs when the process of acceptance remains incomplete. However, in pedagogical terms, recognising and articulating the limitations of one's own knowledge and the learning processes is itself a significant moment of learning.

The question of aestheticising waste or garbage in theatre had not arisen so far because it has never been included at all. Now, however, there is a need to insist that theatre begin to imagine it aesthetically. This raises critical questions: What forms of aestheticisation are possible if one seeks to retain the politics of waste? Conversely, does aestheticising waste inevitably erase its politics?

As a design and direction student at NSD (2010-13), I explored public spaces as performance spaces, therefore I looked at the idea of the public at public spaces very closely and desired to use actual streets as scenography. I also saw them as one way to escape the isolation of the theatre hubs of Delhi, where theatre is showcased for a certain kind of audience, who can buy tickets and has the leisure to experience art. Streets are also the most exciting spaces for a performance for they are the lived space of the spectators, spaces they are familiar with and experience

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every day. Street theatre provides alternative ways of inhabiting public spaces and alters the unwritten rules that govern our activity in them.

Finding a Subject

My family shifted to Dwarka, in south-west Delhi, in the late 90s. Dwarka has always had a huge water crisis. Trying to understand the problem I discovered that the sewerage system that collects the waste water runs through underground branched canals and finally dumps it in the Yamuna, which requires that the water from the Yamuna, before it is supplied as drinking water, be recycled. After much reading and research on the subject, I visited the sites along the Yamuna, the sewerage treatment plant and the sewerage canals emptying into the river. The stink was strong and the river lay still under a pool of garbage and sewerage. The image haunted me for long.

Sewage systems constitute an ecologically mindless technology which empty the sewage into rivers and other large water bodies, polluting them. City planners take sewage management casually, especially in urban areas, even though they know that it will come back to haunt us one day. I decided to work on a project as a travelling performance piece in the public space based on how human excreta travels in the city. My intent was to discover alternate approaches to how the state deals with excreta, the policies of recycling water and the role of those who design the urban city. I wanted the performance to be like an everyday occasion in a public space, in the actual lived spaces of the spectators to create an inter-subjective encounter. There would be minimal instructions and few unintended effects.

Choosing a Site

Choosing a site for my project was an important but difficult task as I wanted to reach out to an audience that was not the regular Mandi House audience. With the performance worked out in my head I roamed the city. The inner circle of Connaught Place (CP), a heritage structure, with one of the oldest engineered sewerage systems in the city, seemed suitable but getting permission to perform there was not easy. However, the Director of NSD, Mr. Waman Kendre, even without knowing much about the project, approached the Ministry of Culture and after much cajoling got permission for a travelling show with special duty police officers posted as security. The presence of the police completely

flipped the concept of there being no invited audience, but I had to choose between a no show and a show with the police as security squad. No show was not an option because this was my only opportunity to perform at such a site. For NSD also this was a first as they had never before organised a show outside the campus, in a public space.

The Process

My narrative was built around the story of Noah's Ark from the *Genesis* (Chapters 6–9) in which God told Noah to build an ark and take his family and two of each species of the world's living creatures in it when he decided to drown the world through incessant rain. Connecting the idea of the flood to the back flow of the sewage, if the river Yamuna flooded, was the main thematic. A symbolic ship made of waste material became the central metaphor. The campus had enough garbage lying around from earlier theatre productions so one of my classmates, Aliyar K. from Kerala, came up with a design that conveyed the idea of a ship. Twelve feet long and six feet wide, it had four wheels, a handle to pull it and a sail made of discarded cloth. The seat of a commode was installed for the captain to sit on. PVC pipes and tyre tubes gave the ship a rusty, black, battered look as if it had survived a flood.

The costumes of the seven actors/collaborators were also made of material that we found lying in the campus: shirts and pants made of plastic sheets, white plastic gunny bags and toilet paper rolls, a skirt made of used thermacol tea cups on cardboard and thick foam. Stitching them was hard as the needle of the sewing machine broke several times. The process of costume making was more like unstitching the culture of costumes for theatre performances. Wearing and moving in them was equally difficult and that too in the busy streets of Delhi. Properties too were improvised by the actors, again from the material found lying around as garbage.

Actor's Process in the Making

The seven actors were collaborators, all of them from my batch. Actors are trained mostly for the proscenium stage, where they stay at a distance from the audience and do not interact directly with it. They do explore spaces other than the proscenium but the space between the performer and its audience is more or less defined. Orienting actors to the subject of the performance was an integral part of the project because subjects

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like 'shit' or the sewerage system are not things you talk about in public or in the streets of Delhi. The need to persuade the actors to perform in a public space, with no formal distance between them and the audience was also important. When we met for rehearsals, long discussions ensued on the need for a such a performance, and that too at a public site. The actors had no problems with the subject but the idea of performing in a public space needed exploring. We decided to visit CP every day as part of our rehearsals and interact with the people on the topic. Some people laughed at our questions, some participated in the conversation, some got offended, and one person actually threatened to hand one of the actors to the police for asking such an inappropriate question. Our experiences, however, opened up different dimensions of the codes of public spaces, which has unwritten rules of what is normal behaviour in such places. Who decides what is 'normal' and what not, was the question that we addressed throughout the process. And in doing so the actors were creating a provocation. I would not call these encounters with the public a rehearsal, for each interaction was a performance that opened up the space and the possibility of inter-subjective junctions (Bourriaud, 1998) for everyone to contribute towards a discourse or art. After each visit, we shared our experiences and eventually a text for the performance emerged, which I consider was a performance in itself. Actors trained in drama school depend upon a text, on which, through improvisation, they create a performance, but we subverted this process. The team wrote a few poems and selected a nursery rhyme as the opening song. Since the ship was heavy, we had to request the carpentry section to help make the ship move. The people from carpentry had never been on stage before and becoming part of the actors' group needed some rehearsals, so four days before the show, all the actors and the people from carpentry practised moving with the ship in the campus. Finally, a show of about 35 minutes was more or less ready.

In street theatre, the 'emancipated spectator' under the protection of participation in an artistic event, engages in small, but nevertheless quite *real*, acts of democratic participation, resistance or social activism in actual public space: what I call *democratic performatives*. These democratic performatives signify practices that are 'doing' and what they do is engage the audience in democratic activity. (Haedicke, 2013, p. 45)

An artistic event in a public space allows its audience to engage and participate, which creates a democratic performative. Through our

performance, we were also trying to create the space of 'doing' by engaging the public in a discourse, in the protection of an artistic event, making it easy for them to participate through the performative, to open up around a topic which is traditionally taboo in public spaces.

Re-discovering the Public

Examination shows are usually meant only for the NSD faculty who suggest changes before it is opened for public viewing. Students are marked on the basis of concept, design and scenography. So, at 6 pm on 30 August 2013, the NSD faculty travelled to the F Block of the Inner Circle of Connaught Place for the 'examination' show. The performance began the moment people started noticing a ship with six people, wearing blue dungarees and construction site yellow helmets, rearranging it. As there was no back stage and no third bell for audience entry, it was difficult for the faculty to pick out the starting point. Soon, the captain of the ship blew a little trumpet to indicate that the show had begun. The actors started singing "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream. . . if you see the sewage backflow do not forget to scream" ('O' Shit', 2013) to the tune of a mandolin. The captain of the ship then asked his companions, in his Haryanvi-accented English, (translated into English-accented Hindi by another actor) to go and buy things needed to survive "if the city drowns in its own shit". The actors proceeded to the nearby shops to buy things like bags, shoes, swimming costumes, with real currency. Many shopkeepers refused to sell to the actors, closed the doors of their shops and forcefully asked them to leave for they were not prepared for the performance to invade in their real (lived) spaces. This prompted us to look at the streets of our country more closely and ask: What happens when the real and fictional world collide? Why are people so unequipped to deal with anything out of the ordinary? The idea of citizenship is based on the sense of having something in common with strangers just as democracy is built on trust in strangers. Remarked one of the actors later, 'People found it difficult initially to relate to the strange entourage. They fear anything unusual and so the first reaction is to shy away from anything odd that we cannot immediately relate to. An unexpected entourage entering unannounced comes as a bit of a shock'.

As the performance continued, an actor spotted an open gutter and

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apologised to the river, then asked a man in the audience if he knew where his shit went. The man looked clueless and hesitated at such a question. Surprisingly, a woman came forward and said confidently that it went to the river Yamuna. The actor then asked if people knew that the water they drank through the taps in their homes came from the same source. This raised laughs. But another voice from far behind the ship said that the government cleans it and everybody laughed again. At this some people thought that the piece was government propaganda for good sanitation habits.

After the show many students who had come to watch it asked numerous questions but the one that stayed with me was asked by a first-year student who wondered if this could be called theatre. The language of theatre, in what we see and learn in drama school, takes centre stage in art discourse. During the training period most of the experimental work is confined to the school as a process and never played out for public viewing. Arguably, all that happens in the classroom cannot be displayed but whatever is displayed becomes the language of the form that people understand as theatre. Being a collaborative art form, it is difficult to categories something as pure theatre. However, this diploma production raised, I think, a pertinent question as to what theatre is and what it is not.

A second show was scheduled for 6 pm on 19 September 2013 as part of the graduate festival that happens every year to showcase all diploma productions. I requested the NSD not to announce my show as it was not designed for an invited audience, but the NSD could not accommodate me on this point, and I was asked to make a poster announcing the show. The first show had been held in a commercial area; this show I wanted to take to a residential area where people are not rushing to shop or to the office. After much searching, we decided on a spacious lane in Pandav Nagar, across the Akshardham Metro Station, which had local shops and not big branded showrooms as in CP. Since it was an announced show for the public, police permission was needed. I was asked for the script, and I submitted the two poems that we were using in the performance as a formality and permission was granted without further ado.

On the day of the show, as a crowd gathered at the spot, the pressure to start built up as many did not realise that assembling the ship was

also part of the performance. People who had come specially to watch the performance, the Mandi House regulars, felt that this should have been done backstage rather than being put on display but for people who lived in the locality this worked the way it was conceptualised. On my part, this was an effort to build bridges between these two different areas and two different classes of people. However, since this was a residential area and we were encroaching into a more private space, the audience was more actively engaged, and their responses were sometimes hostile. One of the actors was stopped in the middle of the performance and asked for a selfie by a young man who wanted to share it on social media. Police had to intervene to rescue the actor. So, the question that came to me was, can democracy be practiced only through the state and the police, particularly in conditions when civil codes are being violated? Is the state the primary saviour of democratic practices? We had not thought of these questions earlier, but the performance pushed us into thinking of how the public constitutes itself and becomes an entity against the performance and starts treating the performers as outsiders. In a space like Delhi, where people handle so much violence on a day-to-day basis, the question of where to draw the line between the public or audience and a mob is difficult. Haedicke (2013) argues:

> As the artists create events that blur the boundaries between actions that the spectators do in the fictional world of the performance and those that they do in the actual world of the public space—actions that challenge the status quo however minutely—the artists and their audiences shift democracy from an idea to a practice. In fact, these alternative ways of inhabiting public spaces are a key source of the performance's potential for efficacy since the spectator learns and creates new ways of thinking about urban space and civil society. (p. 44)

Here I want to argue that in public spaces, when a performance blurs the boundaries between a fictional and actual world, it becomes an ambiguous ground for both the spectator and the performer. Here, civil or ethical codes to deal or negotiate with each other's bodies weaken and the performers body becomes more vulnerable because it is his/her choice to perform in a public space. Spectators can also feel vulnerable depending upon the action being performed. The possibility of violence is inherent in public spaces and this cannot be ignored and rooted into ethnicity, gender, caste and class.

Two cameramen had been asked to document the performance for

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the archives of the drama school. This affected both the viewing and performing. One man kept popping up before the camera, disturbing the public and the actors. Some people, very much aware of the cameras, began to perform for it. The actors also became aware of the camera which affected the performance. Documentation of theatrical performances has always been a point of debate and much in terms of camera, sound, angles and zoom, choosing what to see and what not, and where to focus have been in processual discourse. As theatre is a live medium and not everything can be captured, the cameraman decides what should be seen and from what angle. In a documented performance, the entire experience is mediated by the camera, and this elicits a certain kind of performance. Documenting a travelling performance in bright day light is even more problematic since the audience is not sitting in the dark and the camera cannot be put in an invisible corner. The presence of the cameras affected our performance at the basic conceptual level, as when actors moved inside the shops to buy goods, shopkeepers behaved politely in front of the camera. A camera capturing a live performance, which oscillates between an actual space and a fictional space, ruptured the idea of inhabiting the public space to open it to an alternate experience.

The third show, scheduled for 12 January 2014, was even more problematic. All diploma productions are part of the Bharat Rang Mohatsav, one of the biggest theatre festivals organised by the NSD. The festival is meant to give students a professional platform and it is designed largely to accommodate conventional theatre shows. All shows are ticketed but I did not want to ticket 'O' Shit' as it was not meant for an invited audience. The festival committees asked me to make the required changes or withdraw the performance. It was a tough decision. Since I did not want to become a precedent to filter out unwanted shows and so agreed to make the changes required to fit the festival format.

The problem of site surfaced almost immediately, for all other productions had fixed venues inside the NSD campus, while mine was displaced into uncertainty. This brought home to me how festivals in India are designed for a particular idea of theatre, catering to certain audiences, with spaces carefully curated through cultural production. To depart from this norm had been my original impulse—and the very risk of the project.

After long negotiations, the route for our performance was reluctantly approved: the performance would exit from one gate of the campus, circle outside, and return through the back gate. When the show began the actors ran into the crowd to guide them but the porousness of the street meant that ticketed and non-ticketed spectators mingled freely, creating chaos. Some who had paid demanded refunds, feeling cheated, while others joined spontaneously, unsettled but curious. For the actors too, the performance shifted: it was no longer the same show, for its conceptual foundation rested on encountering 'real lived spaces' and unprepared audiences—conditions the campus periphery could only partially replicate.

Across three different sites, however, the experiment deepened my understanding of performing theatre in a public space. The first, a commercial zone, offered openness and inclusivity, while the second—a residential area—forced us to question the binaries of private/public and rethink what it means for a public to gather outside the logic of a mob. The third, bound to the contradictions of middle class aspirations and the curated ethos of theatre festivals, highlighted the cultural anxieties around what counts as legitimate theatre.

In retrospect, 'O' Shit' was not simply about sanitation, water, or urban crisis. It was about theatre itself—its limits, its exclusions, its potential to destabilise the aesthetic hierarchies upheld by institutions. The production revealed how risk, disruption, and even failure are not signs of weakness but modes of intervention. If failure occurs when acceptance remains incomplete, then perhaps 'O' Shit' succeeded precisely by refusing easy acceptance—by confronting the discomfort of audiences, institutions, and festivals alike, and insisting that theatre enter spaces it was never meant to inhabit.

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