

Test-tube theatre

Experimental theatre can sometimes be hard on audiences. But, says **Shanta Gokhale**, that doesn't mean that it isn't rewarding.

A nifty definition of experimentation is: not to do what has been done before. You experiment because life has changed and new possibilities beckon you. In order to see new challenges and possibilities clearly, you deliberately break the moulds of the past.

Once upon a time our theatre told stories. Breaking that mould, theatre stopped telling stories. Once upon a time, theatre was governed by the word. Breaking that mould, theatre decided to do without the word. Once upon a time there used to be writers. Breaking that mould, theatre improvised. Once upon a time, theatre was human bodies on a horizontal performing surface. Breaking that mould, theatre turned into video projections and circus acts. Purity became a bad word and hybridity in all its forms climbed to the top of the charts. This started in the 1960s in the West and intercultural, inter-textual, inter-media, inter-tradition performances filled the experimental stage.

In 1972, American director Robert Wilson "staged" his *Overture to KA Mountain* on seven mountains in Iran. The performance lasted for seven days and seven nights and its cast included a couple of dozen Iranians. In the eighties, Western interculturalism came to Indian shores as Peter Brook's film version of the Mahabharata. Nobody was sure how to respond to it, though most people claimed to have loved it. Rustom Bharucha begged to differ. In a long and detailed analysis of the original nine-hour performance in Avignon, he called the production "a 'cultural salad' of which he [Peter Brook] is the unacknowledged chef. The materials for this salad have come from all over the world but it is Brook's 'house dressing' that gives it its distinct taste." In short he accused Brook of appropriating a deeply venerated epic without showing either respect for or understanding of its significance in its home culture.

Tim Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* did not tick with political time bombs. It was innocuously intercultural. Firstly, Supple was doing a play over which he had full cultural rights. Secondly, he did not impose his language on the multi-lingual cast from all over India. They spoke Shakespeare in their own tongues. If this made the play incomprehensible that was fine because didn't everybody know the play? And anyway, his interpretation of it was embedded not in the text but in spectacle and physicality, both accessible to people with eyes to see. The terrific response the production received both here and abroad bore out what Supple had suspected – that the well-known, much-loved play "would provide a strong architecture to house and nurture the disparate elements of our collaboration".

Last year we saw Norwegian director Monica Emilie Herstad's inter-textual play *Past is Simulation: The Ladies of the Sea vs Nora and Other Stories* in the National School of Drama's Satellite Festival in Mumbai. It was not enough to know the two Ibsen plays it took off from to comprehend how they were being interpreted on the stage. You had to

be familiar with the work of the Nobel Prize winning Austrian feminist-leftist writer-director Elfriede Jelinek and the late Susan Sontag's reading of Ibsen's *Lady of the Sea*. If you weren't so initiated, you had to content yourself with watching the actors' beautifully-costumed, rigorously-trained bodies moving in a way that conveyed more emotional-sensual meaning than words ever could.

In Mumbai, we are really not prepared for such extreme experimentation. Realism and its cousins have been our staple theatrical diet. Even on the experimental periphery, such as it is, writers-directors have only one eye on their test-tubes and crucibles. The other is trained anxiously on prospective mobile-wielding audiences. Nothing has seriously challenged our most cherished notions of what theatre is.

We once had *Medea* at Max Mueller Bhavan, performed by Alaknanda Samarth with painted panels and interactive video footage created by Nalini Malani. We had Anuradha Kapur's highly stylised *Sundari – An Actor Prepares*, in which Neelima Sheikh's visual design included quotations from Raja Ravi Varma's paintings and Parsi Theatre-style curtains. We also had The Industrial Theatre Company's *Agamemnon*, directed by Rehaan Engineer. Performed in the old Sakshi Gallery, it mixed live action with video footage recorded on the spot. There was a time when media supported experiment. Those who didn't see these plays, read about them. Now media supports consumerist aspirations.

Since Mumbai theatre has rarely yanked us out of our comfort zone, we resist any such attempt when it is made. This is not to deny that experimental work does create huge problems for audiences. Take Herstad's Norwegian play for example. How many people anywhere in the world would have known their Jelinek and Sontag as well as their Ibsen? It must have taken ages to evolve this work because Herstad was not staging a readymade script. She and her associates must have spent months developing the "script", groping towards a form, doing, undoing and redoing, before the actors were ready to go on stage. But how much time did the audience have to absorb and respond to this dense distillation of months of work? An hour-and-a-half, or two, with no opportunity to go away, think, read and return for a second look.

Thrown in at the deep end like this, the best the audience can do with experimental work is to skim the surface. Visuals, sounds, movement and music also produce meaning, if you open your senses to it and keep the mind out.