

# The Theatre and The Crisis

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Theatre has survived through many ages and millennia. Theatre thrived during the great depression and the world wars. Theatre found more meaning in the conflicts that humanity has faced and emerged with new forms, new content and new pedagogies. As the world faces the pandemic, with almost every country in the world is either in Lockdown mode or slowly finding its way out the major question is not how theatre will survive the crisis, for it has and it will, irrespective of what the circumstances are, but the question is what will this crisis yield at the end?

The book titled *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook, has an interesting first line. It states in Chapter 1 - The Deadly Theatre: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." (Brook 2008, 11)

In this line, Brook frees the theatre from the many requirements of space and expectations that arise when one looks at live performances. The freedom is from set, costumes and stage, the freedom is to create with just two basic components: Actor and audience. By doing this, Brook provided that necessary condition for theatre such that it can create in all conditions.

Today's restrictions, because of the pandemic and the requirement of staying

indoors has created a huge plight for the artistic community. The article titled *The Forgotten Art of Assembly* written by Nicholas Berger carefully deconstructed why artists during the time of the pandemic should refrain from creating a lot of content, because eventually this would be disposable online work. (Berger 2020) The creation of this content is a natural reaction to the restrictions of the present condition.

It is agreeable to say that the present is an unprecedented time in the history of humanity. But such times have been experienced during the Bubonic plague, the Spanish flu and other pandemics of human history. They have resulted in millions of deaths in the past along with a growth of understanding on how to tackle them. But one thing is for certain, they have added a dimension to the art of that time.

In the article *Shakespeare In Lockdown: Did He Write King Lear in Plague Quarantine?* Published in the guardian by Andrew Dickson, it comes to light that the bard created some of his most fascinating plays during his time in lockdown. (Dickson 2020) Yes, and it was a long lockdown indeed, when The Globe and the other London theatres were shut for almost 68 months. But it is also right to say that Shakespeare did use this as an opportunity to write extensively and create tragedies during the long period when the state of the greatest theatres in London was a tragedy in itself.

The questions that come to mind are:

- What makes the artist create during a time when people are finding survival difficult?
- Which artists thrive when extreme limitations are put on them?
- What emerges out of those novel limitations?
- Does a constraint help or harm the creative process?

In writing, there is a unique form that emerged popularised by authors such as Ernest Vincent Wright that intended to put constraints on the processes of creativity. These may include various possible forms: in the form of vocabulary, length of sentences, the number of words you could use to create a story. The possibilities of putting constraints are endless. Authors like Wright produced entire novels from these constraints. One of his works titled *Gadsby* is a fifty-thousand

word novel without the letter E. (Sonnad 2014)

After producing the novel, Wright shared his challenges that included problems such as trying to avoid the suffix '-ed'. It restricted the use of quantity words to only the available options. For example, Wright could not use any quantity between six and thirty, so he made do with what he had. Despite these limitations Wright and other writers and poets like him created forms of texts that offered a new reading experience to readers.

Texts with constraints exist in many forms. One can see them in the haiku, which is a Japanese form of poetry, usually written in the five-seven-five syllabic form; or a drabble (a 100 word piece of fiction created solely for the purpose of testing the brevity of the author, and their capability to create a moving premise in the constraint provided); or it could also take the form of flash fiction. Each one of them are unique expressions in themselves, configuring unique forms and creating interesting experiences within the limitations they have.

Constraints are observed in all art, and sometimes are a precondition to produce them. The works of theatre maker Jerzy Grotowski is symbolic of them. In the article *Towards Poor Theatre* he wrote: "The acceptance of poverty in theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form." (Grotowski, n.d.)

The question, then, arises-

When one puts a constraint on one aspect of the creative process, does it free up another?

Indian playwright and theatre maker Badal Sircar took to Grotowski and created a body of work called the Third theatre. In his work, theatre was to be freed from all restrictions of space to be more accessible. All the conventions of the proscenium stages and the limitations that came with them were let go by Sircar. He tried to embody the ideology of Poor theatre by taking it to the masses and converting his form to a theatre that can be performed on the streets and other spaces.

In his message on World theatre day 1982, now published in the book *Badal Sircar – Search for a Language of Theatre* he wrote: “I believe that theatre is ‘Human action’. The event of theatre can take place only when two parties of ‘Human Beings’ – performers and spectators – gather at the same place on the same day at the same time and stay together for a period of time. Theatre is ‘Here’ ‘Now’” (Jain 2016, 169)

While Sircar eventually created a very unique form of theatre and his plays ranged a vast oeuvre of work, his message echoed of Brook’s ideas in the book titled *The Empty Space* for no matter what the condition is and what the constraint is, all the work that theatre creates, does need the bare essentials of actor and audience in the same place at the same time.

The present world during the pandemic is in a unique constraint. The one that is a primary requirement for theatre: The here and the now of it.

With restrictions on the congregation of people, on the opening of the theatres, on actors coming close to each other, all the fundamentals of theatre are challenged. But theatre has been challenged for years and centuries. This has been in the form of economic challenges, socio political challenges and many others. Some constraints were put by the state and some were put by the artists on themselves, and within these constraints theatre found a way out, inhibiting one aspect while liberating the other, creating new languages, pedagogies and experiences for the people who were moved by these novel forms.

A constriction in art is sometimes necessary to create. In the present circumstances, there are some unique challenges facing the people who create:

- How do we reach our audience when no one is watching?
- Even when the world moves on and people leave their houses how do they congregate safely to experience a performance live?
- How does the community economically sustain itself in such times?

All these questions are unique constraints in themselves and will lead to responses in various forms. The mass migration of live performance artists to online forums is one such. Despite being challenged as disposable work and critiqued as

ordinary, it still is a recorded document of stories that artists told during the time of crisis. It is valuable in posterity, and maybe, will lead to a novel yield in form and pedagogy.

## References

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