

THE LOCUS OF AN INDOMITABLE AURA: THE POLITICS OF THE EDIRIWEERA SARACHCHANDRA OPEN-AIR THEATRE

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Introduction

Ediriweera Sarachchandra Open-air theatre of the University of Peradeniya being, perhaps, one of the most renowned and “celebrated” performance spaces in Sri Lanka is conceptualized in terms of its own politics. This study captures the way Ediriweera Sarachchandra Open-air theatre becomes a site of physical, social and psychic forces in society where “enactments of power” take place. Furthermore, this study was also my attempt at teasing apart the ideological aura weighing down on a space which can otherwise be the provenance for works of art capable of superseding the limiting confinements of hegemonic constructions.

Ediriweera Sarachchandra Open-air theatre can be termed “a magnetic field of tensions and conflicts” for it is ineludible where politics of performance spaces in Sri Lanka is concerned. (Thiong’o 1997) Built in 1958, the Ediriweera Sarachchandra Open-air theatre, or the “Wala” as is commonly known, is a unique construction not just in the University of Peradeniya but also supposedly in Sri Lanka itself and has come to mean many things over time. Some believe that the Wala sets the standard to judge dramas by, and since the success of a play can only be measured by the reception and the response of the audience there, it is seen as a space that is dauntingly “critical”. Hence, a *successful* performance at the “Wala” is conceivably one of the pre-eminent feats due to the “challenging” audience and the “intimidating” history of the space. Most importantly, unlike any other performance space in Sri Lanka, the Open-Air Theater signifies, for many, a place of sacredness.

Due to these “myths” which have acquired a resolute legitimacy overtime and due to the general discourse of Wala’s significance, the perception of it as a site of sanctity and as a legacy of an awe-inspiring personality, the Ediriweera Sarachchandra Open-air theatre has acquired an ineluctable ideological aura. This paper, then, identifies the politics of this performance space in order to lay bare the hegemonic discourses

surrounding it through tracing the internal and external relations to the space and the space's relation to time which are identified by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space*. The Wala's relation to time initiates my discussion, as the internal and external relations of the space subsume vestiges of the Wala's cumbersome history.

Results and Discussion

“The Unsurmountable Weight of a Legacy”: The Ideological Location of the “Wala” Within Time

The deification of Ediriweera Sarachchandra and the sentiment towards his plays remains intact and is kept alive by many and mainly by the literati and this is evident through the textual reinforcement of the ideological aura of the “Wala” through time. The “Wala” is and continues to be an exclusively “Sinhala Buddhist” space, where only Sinhala theatre is brought in and a Sinhala audience is catered to, thus rendering it a space which hierarchizes the Sinhala Buddhists, their art, specifically their theatre, as the dominant form. This exclusivity of the “Wala”, has clear bearings on the crystallization of the space as the cultural capital of a specific group of people which, according to Liyanage Amrakeerthi is the Sinhalese middle class: a class of people who, in the late 1950's, was in search of cultural symbols which will render them as elitists, intellectuals and superior to others. (Amarakeerthi 2010)

“An Engulfing Performance Space”: Self-Contained Field of Internal Relations of the “Wala”

The self-contained internal relations of the performance space is the interplay between the performance, performers and the “Wala culture” of the audience of the Open-air theatre. The ideological location of Wala in time, appeared to have stimulated most of the sentiments of the performers, directors and stage managers of the plays which were performed in the said “Wala Sathiya 2015”, towards the performance space that they felt the opportunity to perform in it a “blessing”. The difficulties the performers, directors, claim to have faced in the performance space, where its material and immaterial boundaries are concerned, lead to a common understanding that the acquisition of “real power” is an arduous task in this specific space. This understanding, in turn, contributes to the production of the Wala as a challenging and an

intimidating performance space, and thereby construes it as containing internal relations unparalleled to any other performance space.

The “Wala” within the University Sub-culture: The External Relations of the Performance Space

The field of Wala’s external relations is explored through the meanings that the “Wala” acquires within the so-called “University sub-culture”: the “Wala” is introduced as one of the seven wonders of the University of Peradeniya and moreover as a place of sacredness, which connects with a set of “rules” regarding the use of the space. These rules along with the explicit involvement of the Student Unions of the University of Peradeniya within the “Wala Sathiya” establishes the way in which the “sub-culture” defines, delimits and regulates the performance space as one that is exclusive to those that identify with the sub-culture’s principles.

“Enactments of Power”: Towards a Counter-hegemonic discourse on the “Wala”

The performance space is a site of struggle. There is a constant struggle within it “[...]between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state”, which Ngugi identifies as “The enactments of power.” (Thiong’o 1997) The implicit and explicit acts of resistance and subversive performances counter the hegemonic discourse of the “Wala” and these are studied in an attempt to appropriate the space for a more counter hegemonic practice. Certain “contradictions” embedded in the ideological sign of the Wala, could be traced in a handful of conversations within which the interviewed individuals claimed to possess no feelings of piety towards the performance space, countered the discourse on the Wala’s audience being “unique”. The conceptualization of the open-air theatre as is dictated by the university sub-culture has been challenged and flouted by certain performances where the performers and drama crew members did not identify with the sub-culture’s rules and principles. (“Deyyo”, “Pettiyak Oneda”, etc.) Certain counter-hegemonic performances which have challenged the politics of the structure of the Wala (Pujitha De Mel’s “Socrates”) and contested the conceptualization of the performance space and those which distanced themselves from the social order inscribed in the Open-air theatre by the gatekeepers of its boundaries merit a comprehensive study.

References

- Amarakeerthi, Liyanage. (2010) “*Nirprabhu natya kalaava ha prabhu kalaa rasgnathaawa: hathaagei natya wale penneema ha wale dameema.*” *Hatha Gena Katha: Hathhotuwegama Upahaara Lipi/ Tales about Hatha*. Ed. Sudesh Manthilake and Athula Samarakoon. Panideniya: Arts Council of the University of Peradeniya. P. 9-18
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