

REVERSE FLOW OF TECHNIQUE FROM FILMS TO THEATRE: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD AND SAM SHEPARD THEATRICALITY

Dr. Solomon Paul Surendra Bondla

Assistant Professor of English, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia,

ORCID: 0009-0003-5665-9613

Abstract:

Theatre is the predecessor of film. Theatre is an enactment on a stage with a live performance whereas the film is a recorded enactment on a screen. Both theatre and films are organically same as essentially they depict 'a slice of life'. Each of them have evolved their own techniques basing on their scope and limitations. Film being the latter evolved form, adopted many techniques from its predecessor. People involved in one genre move to the other one and in the process contribute to the development of both. Usually people use the expertise and technique of theatre in films but sometimes it happens the other way too. Girish Karnad and Sam Shepard are famous theatre personalities and also have proven their hand in films. The present paper studies how Girish Karnad and Sam Shepard brought back into theatre the technique they learnt in films. It explores some of the screenplay techniques of films such as flash back, cut away, cut back, dream sequences, transition of scenes that are employed in their theatricality.

Key words: Theatre, film, techniques, Girish Karnad, Sam Shepard

Introduction:

Film is a successor to theatre. Historically 'first films' are recordings of live theatrical performances. The naming of the first films, such as "photoplays" and "silent stages" convey cinema's essential indebtedness to the theatre" (Keil, 2006, p.77). Typically both plays and films tell a story, they engage in enactment and its representation as they are performing arts. They are narrative and mimetic (Hurt, 1974, p. 8).

Theatre and film are on one side organically similar and on the other side they are independent of their own forms as well. Critics of both forms have expressed their opinion that fall between these two extreme positions. On one side, "point of view of spectator is the only denominator common to the stage and screen" (Bazin & Gray, 1967, p. 93) and representing the other extreme position, both theatre and films are imagistic media and image is their basic unit of representation (Rozik, 2002, p. 19). It is an instrument of representing human thinking and communication. Their roots lie in basic image making faculty of human psyche (Rozik, 2002, p. xi).

Historians of early film had to encounter two pertinent questions that deal with the relationship between theatre and film. Firstly, to what extent was the original theatrical production altered for film recordings? And secondly, to what extent did the limitations of the camera alter or distort theatrical performance (Johnson, 2016, p. v). As Girish Karnad and Sam

Shepard have engaged in creative production of plays and films simultaneously they must have certainly encountered these questions. Johnson in his technical note explains the variation of viewing space on stage and screen. In films space is viewed from the perspective of spectator, the space is divided laterally into left, center and right, axially into front or foreground, mid ground, and rear or background. Where as in theatre space is divided from the perspective of the actor such as stage left, stage right” (p. ix). Furthering the discourse, Balazs (1970) propounds three pillars of traditional theatre such as i) the spectator sees the enactment scene as a whole in space, always seeing the whole of the space; ii) the spectator always sees the stage from a fixed unchanging distance; iii) the spectator’s angle of vision does not change (p. 30). The cinema by involving more technology and technique in its creative process could become autonomous of those three fixations.

Playwrights who have ventured into both forms will invariably superimpose the techniques of one form on the other. They think they have learned something from films for the stage, too, they try to be more theatre like, even more theatric, in directing for the stage. Undoubtedly, cinema enjoyed the privileges of using more technology for its controlled use of images and shots for narrative representation, however, through advanced techniques one can now “dissolve” on the stage too (Sontag, 1966, pp.33-34).

The techniques of silver screen like shifting of scene, transition of shots, cut aways, cut backs, flash back, and split screen where simultaneous action is shown are a few that be can observed in the plays of Girish Karnad and Sam Shepard.

Discussion:

1. Transition of Scenes in a filmic cut fashion or precision:

Girish Karnad in *The Fire and the Rain* shifts the dramatic action from one scene to another so skillfully in filmic precision – a precision of swiftness and smoothness that can be achieved on celluloid. This can be observed in the very beginning of the play when the dramatic action shifts from prologue to Act one. He makes the shift so smooth by employing flash back technique. At end of the prologue, the Actor–Manager starts singing the benedictory verse. The stage darkens, leaving Arvasu in a pool of light.

ARVASU: He’s agreed, Nittilai! He’ll be there to watch the play! But where are you? Why aren’t you here? Nittilai! Nittilai! I am going to act on stage! I hope you are watching. Please, please, watch. The play is about to begin.....and I know that this isn’t the real thing. This is a fiction, borrowed from the myths. The real play began somewhere else. A month ago. A month? Was it really that recent?

It seems ages and ages of darkness ago. You and I were going to get married. Begin a new life. And I had to meet the elders of your tribe.(FR 4)

As he speaks, Nittilai, a girl of fourteen, enters onto the stage and Act One begins with a dramatic action set a month ago.

Shift from one scene to another takes place in a filmic-cut fashion. In one instance (FR 12) on one side of the stage a conversation is going on among Nittilai, Arvasu and Andhaka. At the end of that conversation, the stage darkens and lights come up in another part of the stage, representing the hermitage of Raibhya, Father of Arvasu and initiating another long scene involving Vishakha and Yavakri.

In another instance, shift of scene takes place by an enactment of a simple physical act. Arvasu and Nittilai's brother are engaged in a hot exchange of words over Nittilai's marriage.

BROTHER : It's been a terrible day for her. She is exhausted. Even now she is crying her heart out. You'll only make it worse for her by hanging around here. Go away.

ARVASU: (*Starts to go, turns.*) But listen. It's not my fault.

(*The brother grabs him by the scruff of his neck*)

BROTHER: Go!

(*Arvasu stumbles home. Raibhya is still awake. Arvasu throws himself down in a corner of the veranda....*) (FR 28)

Here one can observe the shrinking of space with a simple stumble, the scene is shifted from one scene to another located quite a distance apart.

2. Simultaneous action in multiple frames

Simultaneous action in triple frames, rolling of action from one scene to another, from one frame to another on the same stage can be observed in this play. This is somewhat similar to split screen in films. After Arvasu is manhandled badly by soldiers, he is being treated by group of Actors. Even Nittilai flees off her home and joins the acting group. They are all camping in the out skirts of the city. Meanwhile, Nittilai's brother and husband are hunting for her with a tribal vengeance.

ACTOR-MANAGER: ...Something about you worries me. She's a good girl. Don't hurt her.

ARVASU: (*Quietly*) I won't hurt her.

(*While the scene is going on, in the background, Nittilai's brother and husband enter, make a fire and sit near it, silent and immobile Nittilai enters, sees them, freezes and flees in panic. They haven't seen her. Long pause. The Actor - Manager hums a song.*) (FR 45)

Here, there are three scenes of action. Scene-1: Arvasu and Actor - Manager in out skirts of city; Scene-2: Nittilai's husband and brother in the forest; and

Scene-3: Nittilai in the forest. In the complex scene, action rolls on from scene-1 to scene-2 to scene-3 and back to scene-1. One can observe synchronization of scenes on the same stage.

3. Cut-away and Cut-back of roles or action:

During the 'play within the play' also, action cuts away and cuts back into the 'play within the play'. When Indra stabs at the back of Vishwarupa with his thunderbolt, Paravasu who has been watching impassively till then, jumps to his feet. The Brahma Rakshasa appears next to him and rest of the people on the stage freeze. There continues a short dialogue between Paravasu and Brahma Rakshasa and at the end of it Brahma Rakshasa disappears. The stage frozen till then, leaps to life. (56)

Cut away and cut back of roles is observed in *Bali: The Sacrifice*. After the Queen was caught red-handed in the act of adultery with Mahout in the inner sanctum of the ruined temple, in a fit of anger, distress and frustration, they cut away into playing the roles of their youth (BS 89 – 93)

4. Filmic techniques in Dream sequences:

To depict Tipu Sultan's dreams in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Girish Karnad employs many filmic techniques like flash back, flash forward, cut away, cut back, transition of scenes profusely. In the very beginning of the play itself the meta-theatrical characters- Ali Kirmani and Colin Mackenzie resort to flash back. The scene from the house of the historian Ali Kirmani (in the year 1803), goes back to Srirangapatnam fort (in the year 1799) after the end of bloody war, where there was a litter of Tipu's soldiers. The British soldiers were in search of Tipu's dead body. In a filmic mode of passing idea the scene comes alive with a flash back. (DTS 9)

5. Types of Transition of Scenes:

The transition of scenes in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* can be broadly classified into three categories.

(i) Direct transition (From one scene to another scene) : (33) and (60)

(ii) Transition through meta-theatrical characters (Ali Kirmani and Colin Mackenzie provide required commentary and introduce either a new dream or a historical incident.): 1(9) ; 2(18) ; 3(55); 4(62)

(iii) (a) Transition from Dream to Action (through audience) 1(20); 2(30); 3(52)

(b) Transition from Action to dream (through audience): 1(28); 2(50)

Altogether, four dreams of Tipu Sultan [1 (18); 2 (28); 3 (50) and 4 (62)] are portrayed in this play.

Transition of scenes is also a common phenomenon in Sam Shepard's dramaturgy. He affects the scene transitions by various ways such as cut, fade, wipe and dissolve through an adept

use of lighting and complex stage set. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake and Frankie who stand on the separate parts of the stage, in separate pools of light surrounded by dark back ground speak to each other over telephones presumably separated by a long distance. Their separation in terms of long distance is skillfully represented.

6. Imaginary scenes with indicators

Shepard depicts an imaginary scene very skillfully Jake and Lorraine are engaged in a conversation after a little while she exits. Then the imaginary scene starts. Sam Shepard exploiting lights and multiple stage-set brings Jake's vision into life. To differentiate between a real scene and a vision, he proceeds through different stages or indicators.

Indicator one: After Lorraine exits, Jake stares into the darkness outside.

Indicator Two: As he stares into the darkness, at the extreme left stage very slowly, a light begins to come up on Beth giving an impression that Jake's unfolding thought or vision is visualized. (LM 34)

Indicator Three: As Jake stares across her, the light very slowly rises on her as she is sitting on her bed and applying oil to her naked body. The light is continuously rising but remains very low giving a strange effect. All the while Jake stares across her but she is unaware of his presence.

Indicator Four: Suddenly Jake makes a move toward her and the light on her blacks out indicating that it was not real but his imagination.

A continuous flow of these gestures coupled with the effects of lighting brings Jake's vision into life.

Sam Shepard enables this free flow of scenes by using a **complex stage set**. Shifts from one scene to another scene located in different places separated at greater distances are represented by multi-leveled stage setting. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Sam Shepard uses different locations like Jake's house, Beth's house, Highway road, pay phones, road side bar and restaurants, forest etc. To accommodate and present such a multi-location story, Sam Shepard employs a complex stage set divided into different parts at different heights, sizes and shapes. In *A Lie of the Mind* the stage is divided as detailed below:

Extreme Upstage,

Upstage Left and Right,

Centre stage,

Stage Left

Stage right,

Extreme down stage Left and Right and a platform (set description p.8)

Conclusion:

Studying two playwrights who stand on a common platform of film experience throws a new light on the analysis of their theatricality. One of the most striking significance with Girish Karnad and Sam Shepard is their attachment with the film industry. Their dramaturgy has been influenced by their knowledge of filmic techniques. Their versatile involvement with films in varied fields such as acting, script writing and directing has molded their theatrical presentation. Their expertise in film techniques is invariably visible in their theatricality.

References:

- Balazs, B. (1970). *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. Dover Publications.
- Bazin, A. & Hugh G. (1967). *What is Cinema?* University of California Press.
- Hurt, J. (1974). Focus on "Film and Theatre. *Film Focus*". Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Johnson, S. (2016). *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and Early Feature Film*. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs.
- Karnad, G. (1998). *The Fire and the Rain*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Karnad, G. (2004). *The Dreams of Tippu Sultan in Two Plays of Girish Karnad*. Oxford University Press.
- Karnad, G. (2004). *Bali: The Sacrifice in Two Plays by Girish Karnad*. Oxford University Press.
- Keil, C. (2006). "All the Frame's Stage: (Anti-) Theatricality and Cinematic Modernism." *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*. (Alan L. A & Martin P Eds). Performance Interventions. Palgrave, Macmillan. 76-91.
- Rozik, E. (2002). *The roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*. University of Iowa Press.
- Shepard, S. (1987). *A Lie of the Mind*. New American Library.
- Sontag, S. (1966). "Film and Theatre Author(s)". *The Tulena Drama Review*, Vol. 11(1), 24-37.