



Exploring the Politics of Performance: Ramlila to Beggars Operas - ‘Thendikoothu-Dogs Opera Indhiyan’

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ABSTRACT

The introduction sets the stage for an exploration of the politics of performance, spanning from traditional enactments like Ramlila to contemporary forms such as Forum Theatre and Beggars Opera. It highlights the multifaceted dimensions of performance, including cultural representation, power dynamics, social critique, economic realities, and audience reception.

INTRODUCTION:

Ramlila, a revered form of traditional theatre in India, is characterized by its portrayal of the epic saga of Lord Rama from the Ramayana. With vibrant presentations and deep cultural significance, Ramlila serves as a platform for imparting moral teachings, community involvement, and spiritual experiences for audiences.

John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera" is acclaimed for its satirical critique of 18th-century English society, challenging conventional notions of morality and political power. Through its innovative approach and musical adaptation, the opera offers a scathing commentary on societal norms.

Agusto Boal's Forum Theatre introduces an interactive and transformative approach to theatre, aiming to provoke social change and empower communities. By engaging audiences as "spect-actors," Forum

Theatre encourages active participation and dialogue, addressing pressing social issues and promoting collective action.

Dr. Ramachandran Mokeri adopts Boal's Forum Theatre concept to create interactive performances addressing social issues like caste discrimination and gender inequality. Through realistic portrayals and facilitated dialogue, Mokeri's performances empower audiences to confront systemic injustices and work towards a more equitable society.

Overall, these diverse forms of performance illustrate the power of theatre as a tool for cultural expression, social critique, and community empowerment, reflecting and shaping the complexities of the societies in which they unfold.

Objectives of the study

Richard Schechner, known for his work in performance studies and theatre anthropology, might offer insightful opinions about Ramlila performances. He may view Ramlila through a cultural and anthropological lens, examining its role in Indian society and its evolution over time. Schechner could appreciate Ramlila as a form of ritualistic performance that blurs the boundaries between art, religion, and community participation. He might emphasize the transformative power of Ramlila, both for performers and audience members, in fostering collective identity and social cohesion. Schechner may also analyse the performative aspects of Ramlila, such as the use of music, dance, and storytelling, and how they contribute to its immersive and emotive experience. Overall, Schechner's perspective on Ramlila would likely highlight its significance as a living cultural tradition that continues to shape Indian society and identity.

Prof. Anuradha Kapur, in her observations about Ramlila performances, likely examines various aspects of the traditional theatrical form. She might delve into its cultural significance, the portrayal of characters from the Ramayana, the thematic elements, and the engagement of the audience. Kapur may also discuss how Ramlila serves as a platform for imparting moral teachings, fostering community involvement, and creating spiritual experiences for spectators. Additionally, she might analyse the performance techniques, the use of music and costumes, and the role of Ramlila in contemporary Indian society. Overall, Kapur's observations would likely offer insights into the rich tradition of Ramlila and its enduring relevance in Indian culture.

In some cases, Ramlila performances have been known to be used as a platform for political manipulation, where certain groups leverage religious beliefs to promote Hindu nationalist ideology. Here's an overview of how this phenomenon occurs:

1. **Religious Symbolism and Ideological Messaging:** Certain Ramlila performances may incorporate religious symbols and narratives to subtly promote Hindu nationalist ideology. Characters and events from the Ramayana, such as Lord Rama's battles against demons or his exile, may be interpreted in a way that aligns with political narratives or agendas.
2. **Identity Politics:** Ramlila performances can also be manipulated to reinforce identity politics based on religious affiliations. By emphasizing the Hindu identity and portraying Lord Rama as a symbol of Hindu nationalism, organizers may seek to rally support from the Hindu majority or promote a sense of unity among Hindus.
3. **Political Patronage and Support:** Some Ramlila troupes or organizers may receive support or patronage from political parties or leaders with Hindu nationalist agendas. This backing can influence the content and messaging of the performance, steering it towards promoting specific political ideologies or agendas.

Dr. Ramachandran Mokeri's street theatre performances are characterized by their dynamic and interactive nature, aimed at addressing pressing social issues and empowering communities. Here's a detailed overview of Dr. Mokeri's street theatre performances:

1. **Engagement with Social Issues:** Dr. Mokeri's performances focus on highlighting and addressing various social issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, environmental degradation, political corruption, and poverty. These issues are depicted through realistic scenarios and characters, making them relatable and impactful for the audience.
2. **Interactive Format:** Street theatre inherently involves the audience in the performance. Dr. Mokeri's performances go beyond mere observation, actively engaging spectators as participants in the dialogue. Audience members are encouraged to interact with the actors, share their thoughts, and even join the performance, blurring the lines between performers and spectators.
3. **Location and Accessibility:** Street theatre performances are often staged in public spaces such as parks, streets, marketplaces, or community centers, making them accessible to a wide range of



people. By taking the performance to the streets, Dr. Mokeri ensures that his message reaches diverse audiences, including those who may not have access to traditional theatre venues.

4. **Use of Symbolism and Metaphor:** Dr. Mokeri employs symbolism and metaphor to convey complex social issues in a simplified and engaging manner. Through powerful visual imagery and allegorical storytelling, he effectively communicates the underlying message of his performances, leaving a lasting impact on the audience.
5. **Community Participation:** Similar to Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre concept, Dr. Mokeri's street theatre performances often involve extensive community participation. Local residents are invited to contribute ideas, share their experiences, and even take on roles as actors or volunteers, fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for addressing social issues.
6. **Facilitated Dialogue:** After the performance, Dr. Mokeri facilitates a discussion or forum where audience members can express their thoughts, ask questions, and explore potential solutions to the issues raised in the play. This facilitated dialogue encourages critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration among participants, empowering them to become agents of change in their communities.
7. **Empowerment and Social Change:** Ultimately, Dr. Mokeri's street theatre performances aim to empower individuals and communities to take action towards positive social change. By raising awareness, stimulating dialogue, and fostering collective action, he seeks to inspire audiences to address systemic injustices and work towards building a more equitable and just society.

Dr. Ramachandran Mokeri's street theatre performances “Thendikoothu opera Indthiyan: represent a powerful fusion of art and activism, using the transformative power of theatre to address social issues, empower communities, and catalyse positive change. Through their interactive and participatory format, these performances engage audiences in critical dialogue and collective action, demonstrating the potential of theatre as a tool for social transformation.

Dr. Ramachandran Mokeri's performances wield considerable influence on Marxian ideology through multiple avenues. By portraying social issues like caste discrimination and poverty, his work fosters class consciousness among audiences, illuminating the struggles of marginalized communities and aligning with Marxian principles. Additionally, Mokeri's critique of economic inequalities and exploitation serves as a potent indictment of capitalism, prompting viewers to question its inherent injustices. Through his emphasis on collective action and community empowerment, Mokeri resonates with Marxian ideals of empowering the proletariat, encouraging marginalized groups to challenge

oppressive structures collectively. While not explicitly advocating for socialism, his focus on social justice and equality echoes key principles of socialist ideology, inspiring audiences to envision a more equitable society and advocate for systemic change. In summary, Dr. Ramachandran Mokeri's performances possess the potential to significantly shape Marxian ideology by fostering class consciousness, critiquing capitalism, empowering marginalized communities, and promoting values aligned with socialist principle.

Challenges of street theatre performance

Political street theatre performances in India face numerous challenges in their efforts to raise awareness and advocate for social change. These obstacles include censorship and government regulation, where authorities may impose restrictions or bans on performances critical of the government. Security concerns loom large as performers risk harassment, intimidation, or violence from law enforcement or political groups hostile to their messages. Limited funding and resources hinder the effectiveness of street theatre groups, making it challenging to organize impactful performances. Audience reception varies widely, leading to polarization within communities, while legal restrictions pose additional hurdles, with performers facing legal repercussions for staging performances without proper permits. Social stigma surrounds engagement in political activism through street theatre, particularly in conservative or politically sensitive areas. Infiltration and surveillance by government agencies or political organizations compromise safety and effectiveness, while fragmentation within India's diverse political landscape further complicates maintaining solidarity within street theatre groups amidst ideological differences. Despite these formidable challenges, political street theatre persists as a crucial tool for raising awareness and advocating for social change, demonstrating resilience and determination in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the politics of performance, from traditional enactments like Ramlila to contemporary forms such as Forum Theatre and street theatre, reveals the diverse ways in which performance intersects with culture, power dynamics, social critique, and community empowerment. Ramlila serves as a platform for spiritual devotion, cultural representation, and community cohesion, but it is susceptible to political manipulation, highlighting the need for critical engagement to safeguard its

integrity. Meanwhile, John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera" and Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre demonstrate the power of performance to challenge societal norms, provoke social change, and empower communities through satire, interactive engagement, and transformative dialogue. Dr. Ramachandran Mokeri's street theatre performances exemplify this fusion of art and activism, addressing pressing social issues, empowering communities, and catalysing positive change through dynamic and interactive storytelling. Overall, these diverse forms of performance illustrate the enduring relevance of theatre as a tool for cultural expression, social critique, and community empowerment, reflecting and shaping the complexities of the societies in which they unfold.

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