

Not the Drama Seminar – a concept note

A seminar on who we are, how we came to be who we are, and where do we go from where we are.

The word “seminar” comes with too many clichés attached to it. So it may be useful to first of all define this seminar in terms of what it is not, and in the process, articulate what the seminar will be or seek to do.

This will not be an academic seminar, attended mostly by academics. It will be a seminar for practitioners. By this, we mean that the seminar will seek to address itself, first and foremost, to practitioners of theatre in different parts of the country. In order to do so, the organizers of the seminar will invite representatives from some of the most active theatre groups in the country, as well as individuals not connected to theatre groups, but active in the theatre. This means that whereas the usual seminar has an audience of some 30-odd people, this seminar will have an audience of, say, 150 people. Far from compromising the quality of the seminar, we believe that this is the surest guarantee for making sure that the seminar retains touch with the reality of theatrical practice in the country.

While the seminar will not be academic, we do expect speakers to make presentations based on written papers which are submitted in advance. These papers will be circulated to the participants well in advance, so that they can also be translated into various languages if need be. This is critical if the audience of practitioners is to be effectively involved in the seminar.

The seminar will not be academic in another sense of the term as well. Too many seminars tend to adopt a mode that is largely theoretical, interpretative, literary – what Susan Sontag called “hermeneutics” in her classic essay “Against Interpretation.” What we wish to do is connect our enquiries to the materiality of theatrical practice in India today – “erotics” in Susan Sontag’s essay. In other words, this seminar is fundamentally not about the past, but about the present; not about the present as it is, but about the present as it has come to be; not about what was, but about what might be. In other words, the seminar is about historicizing our current theatrical practices.

The act of historicizing implies two other critical processes: the act of contextualizing, and the act of problematizing. It is a truism that we have not one “Indian theatre,” but many; the field of “Indian theatre” cannot be understood except in its multiplicity and diversity. Yet, in practice, the many worlds of “Indian theatre” stay aloof – even indifferent – of each other. This seminar hopes to bring not only many of these different worlds face to face, but also to see the different worlds in context of each other, and indeed in context of the world outside the theatrical. The seminar will therefore also include presentations from people who are not themselves theatrepersons. This involvement of non-theatrepersons will also hopefully help participants to problematize issues.

In sum, then, we need to think of the seminar not as a series of presentations, but provocations. Provocations that will help us reflect on our theatrical practices; on conditions that enable or disable them; and on the prospects and possibilities for the future.