

Understanding the Ecoscenographic Practice: From Beer and Rabha

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ABSTRACT

With the slow paced evolution of the Eco- theatre of the West, the role of theatre in the times of eco-crisis came under discussion and sustainability in theatrical production became an area of much debate. In this context Tanja Beer's concept of ecoscenography gained popularity. Theatre which shows thematic affinity to ecological concepts, cannot turn its face from practicing what it preaches and here is the relevance of ecoscenography. Beer's works show how to practice sustainability in theatre productions, without compromising on their aesthetic value. Her innovative and creative scenography not only promotes reuse and recycling of material resources in theatre, but also goes beyond being another eco-efficient project by creating positive legacies for the society which sends forth many deep ecological messages. Through her research Beer has developed an eco-trajectory and five guiding principles of ecoscenography. In an attempt to understand the ecoscenographic practice, the study has analyzed her performance instillation named *Strung* and the research initiative *The Living Stage*, tracing a scenographer's movement along this trajectory. The study also has discussed the famous *Under the Sal Tree Theatre Festival* organized by Sukracharya Rabha in Assam in order to find out the importance of the principles of ecoscenography prescribed by Beer. Hence the study has tried to bring out the significance of ecoscenography and the message it sends forth as a sustainable theatrical production practice when ecological issues and resource management have become a burning concern for the entire humanity.

Key words: Eco-theatre, Sustainability, Ecoscenography, Eco-trajectory, Tanja Beer, Under Sal Tree Theatre Festival

Eco-theatre or the green theatre has gained popularity in the last twenty years, especially in the Western theatre scene. With the development of the green theory of drama, many directors, scenographers, scriptwriters and other theatre practitioners are increasingly attempting to explore its practicality, refusing to continue in oblivion. Performing arts and theatre space, owing to their communal base, become ideal sites for experimenting and practising environment-friendly approaches to art. Evidently, scenography is one area where theatre could become the torch bearer and demonstrate to all enterprise in arts and science how one can practice what one preaches in terms of environmental issues.

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance defines scenography as, "The accumulation of spatial signs that creates a stage setting. Scenography ... is a category of signs that includes stage architecture, scenery, machines and lighting..." (Kennedy, 2003, p. 1196). But the definition of scenography is one which is evolving continuously. Owing to the current holistic and trans-disciplinary approach in the area of scenography, it is no longer restricted to mere designing of the backdrop and placing of the appropriate props within the performance space. Tracing its etymological roots further reveals its significance, "The word 'scenography,' derived from the Greek 'skeno-graphika', suggests an act of writing for stage space,

a kind of ‘visual dramaturgy’ (Howard 2009, 89) or ‘drawing in or with the scene’ (Palmer 2011, 52) (as cited in Beer, 2016, p. 14). This reveals the importance of a scenographer’s creative purpose within a performance, for he creates the spectacle, sketches a sensory marvel (at times catering to more than the visual), which becomes crucial in the performance experience. With the evolution in the concept of stage space and the transformation of the spatial relationship between audience and performers, scenography too has moved beyond traditional as well as conventional paradigms to become an integral part of performance itself. Previously, scenographic designers gave little to no consideration to the probable impact their works could have on the environment. As a result of the progressive development of the eco-theatrical praxis, now, ecological ethics and sustainable design strategies are becoming more and more relevant within scenographic practice in both conventional and avant-garde theatre. This has led to the development of “ecoscenography.”

Tanja Beer (2016), a much sought after Australian ecoscenographer whose works made this concept widely acceptable throughout Western theatre, defines this neologism as “a more helpful paradigm for sustainability, where ecological thinking, regenerative development, community engagement and positive legacies are considered within the scenographic practice” (p. iii). Evidently ecoscenography is beyond nature scenery on stage or the practice of naturalism in theatre. In ecoscenography we find a common ground for the guiding philosophies and ideas of ecology and scenography to merge and evolve, bringing out a scenographic practice that is modeled on an ecological, eco-materialistic worldview, identifying man as a part of the living system which includes all forms of matter, refuting all hierarchical divisions and dichotomies of binaries (in the name of superior subject positions) within the system. Beer (2016) also stresses on the “role of the scenographer as an activist and facilitator of change, with the potential to cultivate stronger relationships with communities and ecosystems and to invest directly in their future” (p. iii). This is far beyond the role played by the traditional theatre scenographer, whose creativity was restricted neither by environmental nor economic concerns; who remained a hand in the backstage, congratulated for his creativity, imagination and innovation, but never for his ecological sensibilities. The scenographer tries to bring the best as far as spectacle and scenery are concerned, for every theatrical experience aims to be a thrilling sensory experience too. With this aim the traditional scenographer most often hides his/her face behind cans of spray paint, timber, metal, polymer clay, plaster of paris, thermocol, plastics, cardboard and paper, forgetting the ephemerality of his/her works which are permanently discarded after they serve their purpose during the performances. They are ultimately destined for the dustbins in spite of being creative marvels that not only contribute to the aesthetics of the spectacle but might also possess thematic relevance within the performance. These materials used in the scenographic design find their way to dump yards and landfills, becoming theatre’s contribution to the pollution and degradation of environment. The theatre extravaganza also uses up non-renewable energy resources like electricity (for light, sound, air conditioning, etc.), without showing any level of mitigation. Theatre has thus now become a non-point source as well as a point source of pollution, draining resources and creating non-biodegradable waste of myriad forms. In this scenario ecoscenography becomes an opportunity for theatre to shed its complacency towards the environment in the name of artistic, aesthetic autonomy and entertainment value.

In the ecoscenographic design process, “the choices that ecoscenographers make can just as easily achieve positive social, political and environmental outcomes, and... this can inspire new modes of artistic practice and engagement...” (“What is ecoscenography,” n.d., para. 2). Designers like Beer remind us that a scenographer’s ecological preoccupation needn’t end up as a restraint in harvesting his creative potential, for ecoscenography is a creative challenge which inspires the designer to succeed in prioritising the environmental ethos without compromising on the cultural and aesthetic significance of the performance. Taking up this challenge the scenographer is expected to incorporate within the scenographic design, “principles of ecology to create recyclable, biodegradable, restorative and/or

regenerative performance space” (“What is ecoscenography,” n.d., para. 1). The scenographer often uses the knowledge base and resources of the communities in his approach, giving them an opportunity to share the creative impetus. The result is often non-conventional, avant-garde forms of theatre space and scenography, which can be called hybrids born out of creative interactions that are trans-disciplinary in nature.

Beer (2016) asserts that ecoscenography differentiates itself from “eco-efficiency” (p. 47) in production practices, which according to her is the attempt to minimise the negative impact of the theatre’s activities on nature. Eco-efficiency might prevent further destabilisation of our environment, but the purpose of regeneration, which goes beyond prevention of degradation, is not within the scope of eco-efficiency. Whereas ecoscenography is not just about minimal resource consumption, repurposing, recycling and reuse in theatre; it teaches us that promoting sustainability in scenographic practice is more than control of waste and reduction in resource consumption happening behind the stage. It involves creatively spreading the message of sustainability as well as the spirit of community and social justice through the scenographic set designed in terms of the principles of sustainability. As mentioned in the definition, beyond ensuring eco-efficiency, it also focuses on ideas of development and regeneration, community engagement and on creating positive environmental legacies through theatre. The scope of scenography gets extended here, becoming a form of activism or stewardship aiming for an environmental change in the right direction. Beer introduces the eco-trajectory and the principles of ecoscenography, to act as a framework for the ecoscenographic practice.

A Trajectory for Ecoscenography

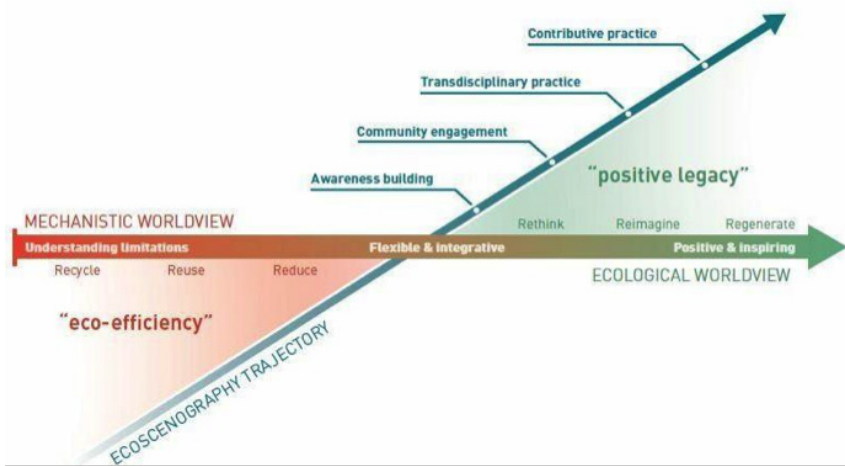


Figure 1. Ecoscenography Trajectory (Beer, 2016, p. 171)

Figure 1 demonstrates how Beer aims to achieve the theatre’s movement away from the anthropocentric and mechanistic world view to an integrated bio-centric or ecological world view. This according to Beer is the base of ecoscenography. Ecoscenographic practice not only involves recycling, reusing and reduction in the usage of resources within theatre, but also a more holistic methodology which encompasses the promotion of positive ecological rethinking, reimagining and regeneration through theatre. Taking into consideration the inadequacy of the scenographic practices of the present times in addressing ecological concerns, Beer (2016) seeks through ecoscenography, “regenerative notions of investigating new strategies to restore and regenerate social-ecological systems while incorporating reflection and action feedback loops to revivify current practices” (p. 60). Therefore in ecoscenography, spreading environmental awareness, engaging the community in the processes of theatre, trans-disciplinary practice for an eco-friendly design and making lasting contributions to the society and

environment become important. Moreover the concept of ecoscenography takes theatre forward in a trajectory which moves beyond the peripherality of other eco-efficiency projects, without compromising on its aesthetic value. Beer (2016) stresses how ecoscenography hopes to leave behind a legacy, focusing on the generation of a “positive ecological footprint that contributes to environment and community...” (p. 60). Hence theatre, through the contributory practice of ecoscenography, begins to concern itself with the impact and change it can bring about ecologically in the functioning of all living systems (both human and non-human) in the world outside its four walls, through a positive engagement. Such a contributory practice through the scenographic design, considering and addressing the issues of the local community, helps them use theatre as a means to find resolutions that have a long-lasting positive impact ecologically, socially, culturally and even economically. As the scenographer travels down the ecoscenographic trajectory it becomes possible for him to use scenographic techniques that can re-awaken the slumbering green impulses in the audience, re-establishing in them an intrinsic connection with nature, and thereby curbing exploitive practices which endanger various living systems. Such a reconnection with nature is made possible by a multisensory immersive scenographic design that makes the audience more sensitive to their surroundings and the living systems around them.

This undertaking of a sensitive approach to ecological concerns, through ecoscenography, makes theatre a communal celebration which possesses rejuvenating powers.

Further, Beer (2016) lists five guiding principles which are meant to be the central ideals of ecoscenography:

1. Ecothinking as foundation
2. Place as actant and provocateur
3. Ecocomplexity challenges assumptions
4. Ecoscenographers as collaborative change-agents
5. Enduring contributions beyond the event (p. 171)

The first principle “ecothinking as foundation” calls for valuing ecological ethics as part of the scenographic aesthetics, overcoming creatively the challenges it poses the scenographer in holding a free reign in the designing process. The core guiding vision of the scenographic endeavor in ecoscenography is an ecologically sensitive one, which prompts use of materials with due respect to the vitality they possess, acknowledging the meaningful contribution each human and non-human actant makes in the web of life. The second principle, “place as an actant” is equally relevant in ecoscenography for trans-disciplinary initiatives and community involvement in ecoscenography is related to this principle. Moreover, “Place-based responses allow the scenographer to let go of preconceived ideas to better imagine ways of making work that integrates place, partnership and the wider community into its processes” (Beer, 2016, p. 176). For example, locally sourced materials and resources help avoiding waste, ensuring better management of resource utilisation, cost efficient scenographic design possibilities, out-of-box thinking to develop sustainable alternatives in design practices, etc. The proper understanding of the various physical, social and other material aspects of the performance space in relation to the locality helps the scenographer make informed decisions, again ensuring sustainability. The third principle, “eco complexity challenges assumptions,” works along the same line. Once an eco-centric world view becomes ingrained in the philosophy of the scenographer, he gets motivated to go beyond all set notions and beliefs considered acceptable in scenography. Unsustainable practices and certain preconceived assumptions are discarded to make way to innovative and creative scenography which have roots in an eco-sensitive approach. The fourth principle brings the duty of an ecoscenographer to the forefront, for he is a “collaborative change-agent,” a leader, a facilitator or a catalyst who has the power to introduce concepts and practices which are path-breaking. He coordinates with trans-disciplinary personnel and members of the local community to make relevant ecologically sensible scenographic decisions. In Beer’s (2016) words “The role of the scenographer was expanded to consider ecological design’s permeability

as a ‘communal resource’ thereby dissolving perceived binaries between artists, materials, audiences and the broader ecosystem” (p. 187). The fifth principle speaks of the importance of contributory practice associated with ecoscenography, which seeks positive ecological, social, cultural legacies that continue to benefit the human community and other non-human systems even after the performance comes to an end.

The ecoscenographic trajectory can be further explained with the help of Beer’s performance installation *Strung* (Cycle 3 at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London) created as part of the research project *This is not Rubbish*, and also her research initiative The Living Stage. The five principles of eco scenography can be elucidated with an analysis of *Under the Sal Tree Theatre Festival* organised by Sukracharya Rabha in Assam.

Strung is Beer’s first initiative under the research project *This is not Rubbish* based on Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory, which says “the value of an object is dynamic...value emerges through our ways of finding, placing, transforming and re-using objects ...” (“This is not rubbish,” n.d., para. 1). Beer believes that understanding this dynamic nature of the value and potential of matter creates a positive ecological sensibility as far as scenographers are concerned. Using their ingenuity and inventive power they can reclaim discarded elements for and from their scenographic design and put them to new use, preventing wastage of resources and environmental degradation. Upcycling becomes an important scenographic strategy as an ecoscenographer tries to re-enliven and re-appropriate the material once considered useless or unworthy.

In *Strung*, salami netting is used by the actor (with the help of active scenographers who take part in the performance) to develop a network of strings tied to different pillars and a rig in the ceiling. The performance begins with the actor entering the performance space which has strings of netting material hanging from the ceiling rig. The actor then starts dressing herself in a string costume. It is a specially designed six-piece costume with long strings of netting material attached to each piece. She feels the netting strings in her hands and slowly starts pulling the costume over her body (midriff), her arms, legs and over her head, making a stylised movement in tune with the live music. Then the scenographers emerge in the performance space. They touch and feel the texture of the strings and start attaching the strings of the actor’s costume to the pillars around the performance space and to the strings hanging from the ceiling, bringing the actor to a standing position. The audience too are invited to help the scenographers in this process. Soon a web of enmeshment is created with the actor literally strung in the middle. Now the actor systematically frees herself from the string costume one piece at a time, leaving behind an intricate pattern of netting strings.

Beer (2016) explains how, “Part ecoscenographic demonstration and part immersive meditation, *Strung* was performed with one bag of reclaimed salami netting off-cuts, one performer, one musician and three active scenographers who worked together to build an installation directly in front of the audience” (p. 84). At first the salami netting she used for *Strung* looked utterly useless to her, but when perceived with “open mindedness, a ‘widening of identity and willingness to engage more responsively with the essence and integrity of the material’” (Beer, 2016, p. 92), she saw its true potential. This ability to perceive the so far unperceived, beyond all preconceptions, is a necessity in ecologically sensitive practice and this leads to awareness of self in the complex system of material reality.

Strung also demonstrates “material entanglement—between bodies, substances and environments...” (Beer, 2016, p. 8). Thus the project brings to focus eco-materialist ontologies and concepts of vital materialism which believes in the agency possessed by matter and material, in deconstructing human and nonhuman relationships.

Jane Bennet (2010) explains how vitality or the “thing power” is an ability possessed by matter “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (p. viii). This vitality has much significance from

the ecological point of view, explaining even the origins of many natural calamities which to an extent result from human intervention and a consequent retaliation from the non-human world. In this light, the sea washing ashore plastic and other non-biodegradable waste dumped in it over a period of many years, gets a new significance and meaning, no longer remaining a random act or coincident event. An acknowledgement of the vitality of matter otherwise discarded as lifeless is also a politically powerful step in a world where humanity exercises unrestrained freedom to manipulate the matter left at their disposal. *Strung* aims to counter the hubris possessed by humanity which, blinded by principles of indiscriminate consumption and exploitation, fails to understand how power and vitality throb in all forms of matter. When we give due consideration to the innate spontaneity and potential of matter (which also includes the matter with which the human bodies are made of), we forgo our egotistic anthropocentric attitude to everything categorised as non-human. Vital materialism hence offers a counterculture of materiality, and challenges the narcissistic preoccupation of humans and their belief that their political agency and ability grants them power to manipulate the instrumentality of nonhuman matter. Beer's *Strung* is a demonstration of how matter appearing inert and lifeless from outside is not truly powerless, but is an actant whose vitality emerges during formations of creative "assemblages" (Bennet, 2010, p. 23) which might include bodies both human and nonhuman. Such alliances between bodies create a field of force that emits a "distributive agency" (Bennet, 2010, p. 31) possessed by the constituent matter. Beer (2016) shares how during the performance of *Strung*, for the actor, "it was about embracing the complexity of the material and physically surrendering to it, moving...[the] body according to the lines in the space and 'following where it lead'" (p. 105). The actor, accepting that she doesn't have any imperious power or absolute control over the material she is interacting with, becomes receptive to the vitality of the netting and the resultant distributive agency of the assemblage (involving matter both human and nonhuman, in this case the netting strings, the actor, the active scenographers, the audience, along with the supporting pillars). The installation is the creative output of the agency of this assemblage. Such co-creative interaction between actants of both human and non-human categories disengages all kinds of assumed hierarchical arrangement of political agency of humans above the non-humans. The actor, the scenographers, the netting and even the audience interact and integrate in an interface, weaving a new pattern of relationship, giving birth to an artistic monument whose intricate pattern of netting ingrains a powerful ecological message that, "all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter..." (Bennet, 2010, p. 13). The enmeshed strings of the installation depict life as an integration of matter, with their vitality cruising through the various strings of the web, making new meanings and possibilities at each point of interaction.

As *Strung* moves along the proposed trajectory of ecoscenography, Beer goes beyond the concepts of reuse, recycle and reduce in scenographic practice, to reach concepts of rethinking, reimagining and regenerating. Once the netting lost its elasticity and flexibility it was used for making trendy fashion accessories which were auctioned for charity. Beer (2016) was influenced by the concept of "eco-effectiveness" popularised by McDonough and Braungart, which focuses on bringing environmental and societal benefits from the scenographic design by ensuring that, through methods of upcycling, the life of the material used makes a cyclic movement from "cradle to cradle" instead of "cradle to grave" (p. 52). In *Strung* we see the demonstration of eco-effectiveness, as the netting's life doesn't end after the performance, but receives a transformative regeneration, a totally new reality and meaning. The ecoscenographer succeeds in identifying a novel use for the netting which has now reached a new stage in its cycle of life.

Beer's attempt to use the salami netting in new and creative ways, making it useful beyond its traditional representations and purpose, is also in terms of Theodor Adorno's concept of "non-identity" of things and "negative dielectrics" (as cited in Bennet, 2010, p. 14). Adorno points out how representation and conceptualisation of matter can never be complete with regard to its reality. Beer becomes a negative

dialectician whose attempts to reuse the netting is a call for “self-criticism of conceptualisation, sensory attentiveness to qualitative singularities of the object, exercise of an unrealistic imagination...” (Bennet, 2010, p. 15). The whole process demonstrates how we need to understand the intrinsic value and worth of the minutest of matter and material in the web of life, beyond conceptualisations and subject positions granted by humans to different forms of matter, in an attempt to mount the “hierarchical apex” (Bennet, 2010, p. 11). Such a re-conceptualisation is made possible by being truly aware of the vitality possessed by all matter, irrespective of being human or non-human.

Beer (2016) shows how ecoscenography calls for an “expansive listening,” an “ecomaterialist idea of perception which aims to ‘consult non-humans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies and propositions’” (p. 107). Thus ecoscenography itself is an ecological practice which tells humans to “‘re-think’ their current engagement with materials to adopt new strategies, that incorporate a more holistic and integrated worldview” (Beer, 2016, p. 115). Such a perspective which leads to the thought of regeneration, understanding the value possessed by each material at all stages of its life, is undoubtedly relevant in the present times of environmental exploitation and crisis.

Beer’s next project *The Living Stage* further demonstrates the role of awareness-building through community involvement, trans-disciplinary practice and most importantly contributory practice in the trajectory of ecoscenography. With principles of sustainability at its core Beer is guided by an artistic vision which embodies a unique union of nature, community, culture and design. Beer (2016) says, “*Under the title of Living Stage*, the project combined stage design, permaculture and community engagement to create a recyclable, bio-degradable and edible performance space” (p. 120).

The performance site was Victoria Park in Castlemaine and the grounds of the Old Castlemaine Goal became the site where the plants used in the scenographic design were grown. The creation of such a performance space called for an active participation of the local Castlemaine agricultural community, as plants bearing fruits, vegetables and flowers were integral to the design and Beer was a novice in the field of farming. Setting up of this unique performance space involved planting seeds, rearing the seedlings, giving water, fertilizers and ensuring optimum level of sunlight. Castlemaine being a country known for its apple orchards, there were plenty of discarded apple carts available and Beer used these wooden crates as planters. Natural fertilizers were used in an attempt to make the endeavor completely eco- friendly and organic. Beer’s (2016) *The Living Stage* sought inspiration from the concept of “ecological-design” (as cited in p. 53) defined by Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowen as a design which stands for minimal impact on the environment by connecting closely with living processes, respecting ecological values, and ensuring community participation and collaboration. The setting up of *The Living Stage* which took days of hardwork and patience, made Beer understand how a scenographer can use the local knowledge base and material resources available locally in their scenographic design. On the other hand the efforts also made the community more egalitarian and eco-sensitive, strengthening their bonds and deepening their connections with nature. It became a learning process for everyone involved, especially for the children from the local community who actively participated.

Beer (2016) also observed how nature (weather), became a co-creator of the performance space, making the result a splendid display of the, “symbiotic relationship between nature, culture and design” (p. 149). Beer (2016) admits of becoming more ecologically aware as a scenographer,

I became acutely aware of the need to work in synchronicity with nature’s processes. Integral to this understanding was the (sometimes harsh) realisation that nature could not be negotiated with, hurried or slowed down. Instead, I had to find ways to adapt my design to local conditions and unreliable sources, such as extreme or temperamental climatic conditions or nutrient-poor soil. (p. 141)

Beer (2016) applying the principle of regenerative development, sought the help of the local

community and established permaculturalists, in practicing the trans-disciplinary concept of permaculture which “entails working with or replicating patterns of the natural world to build ecologically sensitive practices—a waste and chemical-free discipline that employs local composting, recycling, seasonal and companion planting, natural sunlight and rain or tank water to grow food” (p. 135). Such a collaborative approach of design-making has its own advantages, for the local permaculturalists, whose help was used, turned out to be authentic sources of local knowledge. They had valuable contributions to make in the pre-production efforts which included planting the seeds and rearing the plants, production efforts which included the performance when the plants were truly harvested, and also post-production efforts where the plants in the apple carts were distributed to local community to become positive legacies born from the performance. They helped the scenographer in choosing the plants which can be used in the design, gave information and guidance regarding the climatic conditions and fertilizers appropriate for growing them. Thus the whole event exemplifies a collaborative development or co-evolution of nature’s system, including both biotic and abiotic components and the human community along with their cultural events. Such regenerative practices within the scenography promise a design aesthetics that has mutually beneficial outcomes, which cater to the needs of the community as well as other systems of nature. The project succeeds in questioning the nature-culture binaries, for in *The Living Stage* nature is inextricably intertwined with the cultural event.

Various theatre performances were organised on *The Living Stage* where the actors actively interacted with the plants, fruits, and other elements of the stage design. For example, in the performance,

Produce, a powerful movement piece accentuated by the environment of *The Living Stage* exploring human relationships with the natural world through themes of growth and change. The performers utilised the space in a number of ways: a ‘marketplace’ of characters nibbled at herbs, climbed up apple-crate walls, cut wheatgrass, and juggled vegetables from the garden (Beer, 2016, p. 149).

The apple carts with the various flowering, fruit-bearing plants and herbs, the trees, the soil, water, grass, leaves all became part of the scenographic design. As these aspects of nature became co-performers, the agency possessed by non-human elements of nature was once again demonstrated to the audience. Though the performances didn’t deal with major ecological issues, many deep ecological messages of a bio-centric world view were communicated explicitly by the stage, which became a site for enacting out human-nature relationship. After the performance the stage remained a multisensory instillation celebrating the themes of growth and regeneration.

The audience was permitted to climb on stage and to touch, smell, pick, and even taste the fresh vegetables and plants growing in the apple carts. Such a multisensory approach also serves to illuminate glimpses of a very innate connection which humans have with the various systems of nature.

Beer’s ultimate aim was to bring a positive legacy out of the theatrical design, making it a contributory practice, i.e., going beyond the transient and ephemeral nature of performances, to leave behind a socio-ecological contribution. This is the regenerative role ecoscenographic design is envisioned to cater to. Thus when the performances were over, the different elements of *The Living Stage* were disengaged and given back to the local community, “physical structures became garden beds or community spaces, plants became food or were replanted into larger containers and waste became compost” (Beer, 2016, p. 121). The performance space, sticking to the ecoscenographic trajectory, from the beginning to the end and beyond, left behind no non-biodegradable waste or land fill items, but things of utility for the community which will keep on reminding them for many years to come, the ecological message it once depicted within the performance space. Beer’s works proved that such ambitious projects of ecoscenography based on regenerative practices were no longer a presence in fringe theatre but have paved their way into the mainstream theatre seeking international attention.

Meanwhile, many miles away in a small Assamese village in India called Ramapura, Sukracharya

Rabha developed a strikingly similar eco-centered approach to theatre and scenographic design. A theatre festival of the name *Under the Sal Tree Theatre Festival* is organised for four days every year in the month of December, setting a new eco-aesthetics for Indian theatre. The festival celebrates nature and explores how nature can participate in theatre. This unique theatre festival which is arranged in a grove of Sal trees, in the rustic environment of a village far from the hustle and bustle of the cities, reflects the five principles of ecoscenography introduced and practiced by Beer.

Principle 1: Ecothinking as foundation

The festival has its genesis in the eco-thinking of two visionaries of Indian theatre, Kanhailal and Sukracharya Rabha:

Kanhailal first conceptualised the idea under a collaborative project titled 'Nature-Lore' of Kalakshetra Manipur and Sukracharya Rabha's Badungduppa founded in 1998. Subsequently, the latter transformed it into a research-oriented theatre festival to explore new possibilities of survival and sustenance of theatre in a pristine rural ambience, and by taking performance into nature itself (Talukdar, 2015, para. 5).

Rabha says that through the festival, "We are committed to decipher the strings which once bound man and nature in an organic unity and which in the face of the intrusion of materialistic tendencies now, remains relegated to a forgotten sphere," (as cited in Girotra, 2018), taking eco-scenography to the next level by literally using nature as a space for performance.

Rabha here attempts to combine ecological awareness with creativity and the result is a theatre festival which can be called one of its own kind, a festival that has become an inspiration internationally.

Principle 2: Place as actant and provocateur

Rabha says, "The space is given to us by nature" (as cited in Girotra, 2018). His theatre displays a synergetic relationship with its surrounding living systems, particularly the Sal tree grove. Identifying an empty patch of land within the Sal grove, Rabha set up his make shift theatre without cutting a single tree. To reach this natural amphitheatre under the green canopy of Sal trees, one has to take a walk through the woods. Everything from the backdrop to the gallery is made from locally sourced, eco-friendly material. The multitiered benches in the gallery are made from planks of Bamboo and Beetal nut trees tied to the Sal trees (which become natural pillars supporting the gallery). The stage is handmade using mud. The backdrop is a frame made by weaving together dry grass and straw. Even the tents built for the visiting troupes are thatches of straw from a local plant variety called Hamprang. The props and other elements of set design for the various plays are minimal and mostly eco-friendly, created from material taken from the same locale. Khan (2017) gives two examples of the same from the festival,

[The actors] in the Odia play *Nian* (The Fire) took out guns, binoculars and camera, all made of bamboo, to tell the true story of a woman Maoist commander in Kandhamal... Payanihal (Passengers), a Tamil play from Sri Lanka, which is heavily dependent on lighting effects to show its two characters mostly perched on top of each other, relied instead on a 10-foot long bamboo pole and a couple of cloth bags (para. 7-8).

No artificial lights are used as the performances happen during early hours of the morning and before the setting of the sun. Sunlight filters through the foliage of the Sal trees, which is dense and made of different shades of green. At times the light falls on the stage acting as natural spot lights. The bodies of the actors glisten in the sunlight, creating a beautiful display of light and shadow as they move about the stage. Mikes and sound systems are not allowed in the festival. But the Sal grove has natural acoustic property which makes it possible for the actors to be audible without straining themselves. The clear and crisp air of the forest takes their voices far, with the help of the trees which trap the sounds and make it echo. The actors modulate their voices and the audience maintains pin drop silence. It is remarked that 'An almost meditative silence punctuates the battle cries and exertions of live drama that reverberate into the sky, and the numbers in attendance could rival any large proscenium in an urban centre' (Phukhan,

2017, para. 1). The music is played live, using various acoustic instruments particular to the place. “Most of the musical instruments are the traditional Rabha instruments made of bamboo, earth, etc. Often, natural sounds like whistles of wild avian species or that generated in bamboo bushes when winds hit them, form a large part of the music in his drama” (Talukdar, 2015, para. 11). Thus place not only acts as the space for performance, but influences every theatrical aspect from props to the light and sound. In Rabha’s decision to set the theatre in the Sal tree forest we see an ecoscenographer’s “localized response to the social, cultural and environmental potential of a place...” (Beer, 2016, p. 124). For him nature is a co-creator, consulting and collaborating with which his Festival is organised. His camaraderie with nature is well reflected in the concern the late flowering of the Sal trees caused in him and his decision to wait for their flowering, willing to even postpone the festival if necessary. In this festival the place undoubtedly is the most powerful actant on which every single scenographic decision is based and the festival is an attempt by Rabha to re-establish the lost relationship to the land and thereby to nature.

Principle 3: Eco-complexity challenges assumptions Rabha’s theatre space lacks all modern amenities, even the bare minimum facilities a normal proscenium theatre offers. Yet many international troupes wait patiently for December to take part in the festival. The lack of the traditional stage setting is not a disadvantage, but a creative challenge for the performers. Shredding all pseudo-technological paraphernalia and trappings of the proscenium theatre, the Under the Sal Tree theatre experience takes the actors in a journey which tells them it is important to connect with oneself from within and outside, to be apart of one whole. For on stage “It was just us, our bodies, our feelings and nature, ’...” as Rabha says (as cited in “Theatre troupe,” 2011, para. 4) and “In the end, drama becomes synonymous with the submission to Creation in a wider perspective” (Talukdar, 2015, para. 3). The actors are inspired by Kanhailal’s technique of acting where an organic relationship is established between human body, breath, and nature. The actor’s body participates in the rhythms and movements of nature. The actors engage in a communion with nature, even when they are not on the stage. They take long walks early morning, as the clouds and the fog play with the tall trees. When they come on stage the actors succeed in communicating this enriching experience to the audience, who remain enthralled at the same time reconnected to nature.

The theatre festival gives the actors an eco-aesthetic experience revealing to them the eco-complexity which becomes the basis of life and performance. “This kind of theatre, Sukracharya says, is linked to identity and personal space. As it intends to forge back the link between man and his natural environment, it cannot resort to the alienating threshold of an artificial stage” (Kishan, 2017, para. 6). Rabha proves that his theatre built in the lap of nature, is a return to one’s roots. He succeeds in dispelling all doubts and set assumptions in relation to one’s ecological identity and its relation to the theatre and performance, to reveal how theatre can give an ecologically significant message in a better way.

Principle 4: Ecoscenographer a collaborative change-agent

Here Rabha as an ecoscenographer also becomes a collaborative change agent. He attempts to bring together culture, community, and ecology to initiate a healing process which will work from inside and at the same time outside (healing the place as well as healing the people, who become more conscious of their ecological identity). Rabha as a facilitator encourages active community participation in using the full potential of his land and its geographical peculiarities. The feeling of community ownership has its own positive impact. The maintenance of the performance space becomes a responsibility that is shared with the community for it requires continuous attention since the theatre festival happens only once every year. He builds relationships beyond hierarchical divisions, making connections which are mutually beneficial. For example, he links the tribal Rabha community to the creative world outside through the theatre festival. He stresses on how he wants the members of the Rabha community to gain exposure and how he also aims his theatre to be a motivation to the world outside his small village.

By building his theatre amidst this green grove of Sal trees, Rabha also tries to protect the trees from

being cut, for “Acres and acres of Sal forests have been done away in the last few years to make way for frantic rubber production, the dividends of which is significantly higher” (Saikia, 2017, para. 16). By protecting the Sal trees Rabha aims to restore the ecological stability of the bioregion. Understanding the cultural and ecological significance of preserving the Sal tree groves which were sacred to the Rabha community, he becomes a steward or an activist who uses theatre and ecoscenographic practice to initiate an important socio-environmental change.

The festival is an attempt to develop a “a place-based consciousness that is linked to both cultural and ecological perspectives [which] aid the process of ‘rehabitation’ which is about creating or finding new ways to live in places that have been ecologically damaged, silenced or threatened” (Rangarajan, 2018, p. 68).

At the same time Rabha’s festival is a very positive approach to place consciousness and bioregionalism, for through his festival, the village and the Rabha community leave their gates wide open to the global world to peek into their local culture and ecological systems, without any fear of invasion of trans-local forces and their influences, but with a strong belief in respect for the other and ecological interconnectedness at the global level.

Principle 5: Enduring contribution beyond the event

The festival becomes a venue for various scholarly discussions on theatre and sustainable theatre practices. The theatre festival which happens every year attracts more and more national and international attention, promoting ecoscenography. As the community joins hands in the performance event, much dialogue, discussions, reflections, and decisions are initiated. Evidently in Rabha’s endeavor we see “the scenographer’s ability to activate ecological potential by instigating, sharing, engaging and collaborating with others in the pursuit of a more integrated and ecologically rewarding creative practice” (Beer, 2016, p. 179).

The festival succeeds in making an enduring contribution beyond the event, leaving a positive legacy to the concept of ecoscenography, for Rabha “is now moving towards creating a residential academy for sustainable theatre to broaden the sensitization of society” where “...participants will do farming, and local art and craft...” (Khan, 2018, para. 10).

Thus Rabha’s Under the Sal Tree Theatre Festival takes a parallel trajectory to that of Beer’s ecoscenographic projects, demonstrating a framework of similar principles and practices.

To conclude, from the three works discussed it is evident that ecoscenography is one of the most refined, creative, challenging, and moreover one of the most effective forms of eco- theatre. It is a practice which speaks louder than the words in the dialogue. The scenographic works of Beer and Rabha themselves become an ecological message. There is no better way of sensitising the audience about the environmental concerns through theatre, for each element of an ecoscenographic performance space has its own story of conservation and regeneration. Beer and Rabha are pioneers of a concept and practice which every environmentally conscious theatre practitioner should adopt, accepting it as a challenge to his/her ingenuity and creativity; for the positive ecological legacy such a practice leaves behind will not fail to have a reverberating impact on the eco-consciousness of the entire society.

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