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The Stories Told: Bolo and its Theatre of Expression

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Introduction

This research considers the aesthetics of, and expression in the performance titled *Voicing Silence* produced by Bolo Theatre in 2007/2008 in Colombo and Galle. The performance engages directly with the device of storytelling, employed by a sexually diverse community as an artistic statement that brings into focus the right of expression, acknowledgement and validation within the contemporary Sri Lankan sociocultural context. The performance analysis takes the following into consideration:

(a.) the context of the physical and symbolic violence against the queer community in Sri

Lanka, given the legal status of same sex relationships as set out in the Penal Code which criminalizes same sex relationships;

(b.) the working process of Bolo Theatre as a discussion group working within the queer community and a theatre workshop group and,

(c.) the theatre group's projection of the right of expression of the continuum of sexual identities and gender expression through a creative aesthetic practice that reflects a queer sensibility.

Background

With regard to legal status in Sri Lanka, Section 365(a) of the Penal Code criminalizes same sex relations as an “act of gross indecency,” and the person held ‘guilty’ can be punished with simple or rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years and/or a fine. The law criminalizing same sex relations provides a rationale for hate crime to the extent that law enforcement authorities are more often than not responsible for the abuse, which ranges from detaining and questioning, extortion, harassment to forced sex, and perpetuates negative and discriminatory beliefs about sexually diverse communities. Efforts to repeal the law have to date not been successful although rights groups continue to work towards this.

The queer rights organisations in Sri Lanka are Companions on a Journey, the Women's Support Group and Equal Ground. Bolo Theatre, the only theatre group working for queer rights in the country is at present a part of the working group comprising the said organisations that are a part of the South Asian Human Rights Commission for Marginalised Sexualities and Genders, and the National Consultation of Section 365(a), an initiative that was strengthened by the decision to decriminalize same sex relations by the Delhi High Court in India in July 2009.

Bolo Theatre in Context

Co-founded by Asoka Mendis de Zoysa, Mathew Tyne and Jake Oorloff in 2005, Bolo Theatre has thus far produced three performances. *Stories From Around The Dinner Table* in Colombo, 2005 and *Voicing Silence* in Colombo 2007 and Galle 2008. Bolo, when

translated from Hindi, means ‘to speak’ or ‘to express,’ and the company’s work, has taken on the idea of expression in terms of the articulation of queer identities and rights through an aesthetic practice.

Bolo Theatre’s first work *Stories from around the Dinner Table* was a closed performance that took place within the safe space of a controlled audience by invitation at the UNIFEM Travelling Seminar on Masculinities held in Colombo at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in October 2005. Bolo Theatre’s first public performance of *Voicing Silence* was a part of the Gay Pride Week line-up of events in May 2007. Although this was a performance open to a theatregoing public, the community event framed the performance. The second public performance of *Voicing Silence* was performed at the Galle Literary Festival in January 2008, and was in some ways more accessible to a public audience than Bolo’s previous work.

Rationale

Through this journey in performance leading up to its entrance into an international literary event, it can be argued that Bolo Theatre has attempted to create a space for the expression of queer arts with a strong Sri Lankan identity and reach an audience beyond the confines of the local queer community.

The term queer, as Narrain and Bhan set out in *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, is both “a deeply personal identity and a defiant political perspective” (2005: 3). Historically a term used to degrade, queer, as a contemporary movement encompasses “a multiplicity of desires and identities,” each and all of which “question the naturalness, the rightness and the inevitability of heterosexuality” (2005: 4). This provides a frame for reading and understanding the artistic expression of Bolo Theatre, which is, it can be argued, not limited to the voicing of ‘minority’ issues, but demands broader understandings of gender and sexuality in a society.

It can be argued that the personal story in performance, which is the central aesthetic device in the work of Bolo Theatre, it can be argued, is an act of agency. The act of speaking one’s story publicly, Jan Cohen-Cruz writes in ‘Redefining the private: From personal storytelling to political act,’ is “a move toward subjecthood, toward agency, with political implications” (2006: 104). The political potential of the personal story is located

not in the particular subject matter in discussion, but rather “in storytelling’s capacity to position even the least powerful individual in the proactive subject position” (2006:103).

This research seeks to examine the autobiographical story in performance in terms of its documentation, the performative expression and its interpretation, and the politics of its expression. It also explores the concept of the agentive act of storytelling in performance, which in its sharing, is an experience of deep personal meaning for the individual as it invokes the notion of the individual in the position of the subject and is thus also a defining political act.

Methodology

In this attempt to study the politics of identity and recognition, and theatre cultures focusing on performer, process and production, the performances of *Voicing Silence* at the Punchi Theatre, Colombo (2007) and *Voicing Silence* at the Rampart Hotel, Galle (2008) will be analysed within its own aesthetic frame, specific process and sociocultural context. The study is thus a sociocultural performance analysis of specific work driven by the expression of a specific identity politic.

All background information on the working process and artistic choices of Bolo Theatre and its work was gathered through a series of interviews with Jake Oorloff, co-founder of the company and director of the work *Voicing Silence* on 28-30 December 2008, and a follow-up interview on 22 July 2009 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The interviews were focused towards locating the aesthetic practice of Bolo Theatre in its sociocultural/political context.

Outcomes

In this performance analysis that considers sociocultural context and the sign processes engendered in performance, what remains of significance is the commitment to the right, and experience of expression.

Thus, the research outcomes focus on the articulation of queer identity in art located in Sri Lanka and the political implications of the personal story, shared and developed within the Bolo Theatre discussion group. Furthermore, the impact of queer expressions in art as received by a heterogeneous (and it can be argued heteronormative) audience will be

considered as this acceptance/dismissal frames the reception of the personal story as a specific culture of expression and its place/potential in the space of the theatre, which is accepted as a culture of dialogue and of shared experience.

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“Burst” of the Northeast Monsoon season in Sri Lanka

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The sudden increase in wind strength and rainfall has led to the term ‘burst’. Low pressure waves gave rise to a monsoon ‘burst’ during the recent Northeast Monsoon in Sri Lanka which occurred from December 2010 to February 2011. Unceasing monsoon rains have exacerbated the crisis causing more than a million people to be affected by Sri Lanka's deadly floods. As rains continued after a brief lull, the government reported that more than 20% of the country's rice crops had been destroyed, which creates problems for Sri Lanka's longer-term food security.