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ECHOES AND IMAGES

Television Theatre

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Some weeks ago I cautioned radio drama against television theatre in this column. I maintain that television has the advantage of combining the intimacy of the radio, the visual appeal of the stage and the flexibility of the film. As a consequence, there is a danger that television theatre might steel a march over radio drama. The trend is already in evidence in metropolitan towns and among audiences of the upper-middle class and higher classes. I am supported in my belief by Mr Thomas Lopez of ZBS who was in India recently. He observed that TV had virtually destroyed radio drama in the USA. It had only recently been resurrected by National Public Radio, a non-commercial enterprise that started Experimental Drama.

Having made my assertion, I was curious to find out the extent of the onslaught that radio in India could fear from television. I have, therefore, been watching TV plays on Delhi Doordarshan on Tuesday evenings regularly. My observations here are based on the following plays: Deputy Collectory, Sandhya Chhaya, Saari Raat, Vaishnav Hotel, Chuhan Ke Gwah, Band Master and Yaksha Prashan.

I came to my conclusion after watching Yaksha Prashan, written and produced by Dr Lakshmi Narain Lal and put across by Delhi Doordarshan on Tuesday last. It is a strange coincidence that Dr Lal started his career in radio, first as a casual script writer and then as a regular drama producer. I have produced on radio plays written by Dr Lal. I have also listened to radio plays produced

by Dr Lal. And here I watched a TV play written and produced by him. In between Dr Lal has had ample experience of the stage, having written and produced a number of plays.

It only shows how these media are close to each other and how frequently talent switches from one to another. The experience in one medium could be of advantage in another but it could also create problems of its own.

Evidently, Dr Lal's rich experience of radio and stage has been brought to bear upon Yaksha Prashan. While the two stories, one from mythology and the other from contemporary life, remind one of radio drama, the crowd scenes that could be most effective on the mike without much effort, seemed to suffer on television for obvious want of adequate resources. Though it must have cost TV a fortune, engaging an army of characters and extras figuring in the play. It was essentially a radio play adapted for TV competently. An excellent idea focussing attention on a vital problem facing our new society. However, where Dr Lal failed his viewers was in not providing the answer. He underlined the question and left it at that. The answer we must find; the alternative is a certain death. On the whole, a creditable performance.

What should be a matter for consolation — though poor consolation—for radio is that TV in India has so far not been able to build its own playwrights and in its present stage of development, it neither has studio facilities nor technical devices to do justice to scripts.

TV theatre seems to succeed when presenting Dalvi's highly successful stage play like Sandhya Chhaya or Badal Sarkar's Saari Raat. But it fails miserably when it happens to be on its own, as for instance in Vaishnav Hotel, Chuhan Ke Gwah and Band Master. All these plays were ordinary in conception and poor in production. It was a sensitive short story of the same title that saved Deputy Collectory.

I suppose, it is time TV functionaries realised that their salvation lies in building up their own script writers. They might use some of the successful radio and stage plays, but ultimately they have to fall back upon scripts written for the medium. And they are sadly mistaken if they are under the impression that their fees or the charm of TV can attract really outstanding talent to the medium; they have to woo them, the way we wooed Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj, Rafi Peer and Vishnu Prabhakar in our time to write for Radio.

What I would advise TV theatre producers to avoid like the plague is the influence of the so-called 'Bombay film'. As it is, they seem to fall a prey to it frequently. The younger brother in Saba Zaidi's production of Vaishnav Hotel seemed to have been bodily lifted from a popular Indian film. The songs in Band Master reminded one of a typical box-office hit.

Incidentally, if they find their own studios inadequate why can't TV producers engage film studios for particular sequences in towns like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta where such facilities are available.

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