



## MEGAN TERRY : THE TRANSFORMATIONAL THEATRE

**DR A. SANDHYA REDDY**

Associate Professor in English  
Chaitanya Bharathi Inst of Technology  
Gandipet, Hyderabad,  
(TELANGANA) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*The transformational theatre created waves as it was totally different from the traditional drama. No works of any other literary figure reflect aspects of transformational theatre than those of Megan Terry. Megan Terry disregarded the rules and assumptions of the literary theatre of the past and achieved new techniques in the theatre. Her work was a return to the playwright's original position as instigator of action, not merely creator of the written word.*

*Actors, characters and playwright took a back seat and the audience clearly focused on on the action and the interpretation of that action. It is through this technique that Terry portrays various issues. The stress on 'craft' or technique is quite pronounced and hence the plays become more and more a series of fresh 'formalities' where transformation becomes central and institutionalized. As an artist, she is deeply concerned with her contemporary American ethos. Terry's interest always lay in making the audience participate more through feeling than through thought of what is happening on stage. She developed as an innovative writer of the avante garde and her plays attracted various groups, university drama departments as well as the media. The continual exchange of one reality for another which is proposed by transformation, reflects the modern temper. The paper discusses the transformational theatre and its deep impact on Megan Terry's craft as a playwright.*

**Key words :** Transformational theatre, avante garde, realism, naturalism

### INTRODUCTION

Megan Terry became a playwright with the sole intention of becoming one. She is a sculptor as well as a painter, but her soul is in playwriting. "I'm really a theatre person" (Leavitt 286), she is quite clear in her mind. It is only relevant to go back to her recollection to locate her interests and inclinations.

DR A. SANDHYA REDDY

1P a g e



Megan Terry's father had taught her to survive in the wilderness; life after all, is a sort of wilderness that needs gardening, systematizing. She is quoted by Phyllis Jane Rose in **The Dictionary of Literary Biography** as she remembers,

*I caught my first fish at two, cleaned it, cooked it, and ate it. I still prefer to sleep outside whenever possible. I can build shelters and hunt and know how to use wild herbs and berries. My father also taught me to build houses, and I could lay bricks so accurately I didn't need a plumb line : he didn't know how I did it, and I didn't either. It was by feel. (278)*

So far as her plays are concerned, be it in writing them or directing them, much stress is put on "as one feels". She is very spontaneous in her expression in the text and on stage. More importance is given to 'action' rather than to 'word'.

By the time Megan Terry was in high school in Seattle, she had read Chekhov and the Irish dramatists. It was at this stage that she returned to the theatre she had madly fallen in love with at the age of seven. The Seattle Repertory playhouse was run by the Jameses. Florence James, the director, had studied with Stanislavsky.

At the Seattle Repertory Theatre the resident designer instructed her in set designing. This early interest in design added with the design skills she learnt in her mother's florist shop and the building skills she learnt from her father moulded the art of "structures" in her plays. Her early and ever growing association of theatre with politics is attributable to the political beliefs of the Jameses.

The Seattle Repertory Theatre was closed under pressure from a State Committee investigating un-American activity in 1951. This radicalized Terry at a very early age. She says that "it also impressed me that theatre was pretty powerful if the politicians wanted to close it down." (**T.D.L. Biography 278-9**)

After this Terry went to Canada and enrolled as a sophomore at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, where she learnt timing. By 'timing' we mean accuracy of word as well as action. For timing is one thing that strikes us in her plays. Nothing seems to be in excess and if there is too much slang or repetition, they are used with a purpose. During her stay in Edmonton she read Antonin Artaud - the French director, actor, and aesthete who has evolved ideas about a "Theatre of Cruelty" and believes that theatre should make us aware of the fact that, "we are not free, And the sky can still fall on our heads" (**T.D.L. Biography 279**).

DR A. SANDHYA REDDY

2P a g e



She studied Psychology and Sociology. At the same time she was also designing sets for the university theatre and was technical director for the Edmonton Children's Theatre.

It is evident that Megan Terry had some experiences behind stage ever since she was a child. These experiences contributed much to her transformation into a conscious playwright. So far as societal norms are concerned, Terry is, perhaps, uncaring. Her belief in doing things 'by feel' makes most of her plays look like stream of consciousness pieces. Terry wrote a number of plays of which a few are **Ex Miss Copper Queen on a set of Pill, The Magic Realists, Calm Down Mother, Approaching Simone, Comings and Goings** etc.

It is essential to learn about the transformation techniques which Megan Terry adopted in her plays. Transformations exploded the aesthetic and political conventions of realism or naturalism which were opposed by Chaikin as according to him,

*the mode of behavior which a theatre chooses to emphasize is a political choice, whatever the content. Naturalism corresponds to the programmed responses of our daily life to a lifestyle which is in accord with the political gestalt of time. To accept naturalism is to accept society's limits.*

*(T.D.L. Biography 281)*

Transformation plays broaden the actor's technical skill as she or he has to shift sex, age, class or enact a lifeless object. The Open Theatre wanted to transcend the limits of conceptual prison, which defines a human being as a single "personality" or "role". Their argument was that they were aggregates of multi-faceted contradictions. Hence change was always possible. The rules of transformation require the players to be constantly alive to changes. Each actor must respond to spontaneous changes of action or circumstances (time and, or place), or character. Terry explains that is like

*the simple way children play. You have a broomstick: this broomstick is a horse, is a magic carpet, is a rocket ship, is a gun, is a witch, is a broomstick. In the folktales; I'm enchanted, I'm magic; I kiss you and you will turn into a frog, I kiss you again and you will turn into a prince. It's all play. It's just taking how children play and doing it on an adult level. (T.D.L. Biography 281)*

It was with this technique that she began to build plays as a series of action blocks rather than as sequences of motivationally connected scenes. That is to say, here was a new departure

DR A. SANDHYA REDDY

3P a g e



and a sort of break with the conventional notions of a play. From then she started looking at plays as structures. **Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place** is one of Megan Terry's most acclaimed one-act transformation plays.

Improvisation depended on factors other than words, such as spontaneity, teamwork, intention and gestus-Brecht's word for the point, direction, gesture and tone of a scene, expressed verbally and or physically.

The improvisational-style scenes are acted out in a variety of styles that include naturalism, camp, gangster movies, vaudeville, costume epics, melodrama and abstraction. Terry is not interested in the psychological probing of her characters but she devises a series of images that flow together in an effort to explore confinement, dependency, ritual, friendship, domination - submission, deprivation, and loneliness. The characters are defined by the "roles" they play in transformations. As Bonnie Marranca comments :

*continual exchange of one reality for another proposed by the transformation reflects the modern temper. It is a notion of dramatic character that revels in action, fragmentation, and the divided self-unlike naturalism and its insistence on story and character built through the accumulation of emotional and intellectual details which conspire to make a composite of a total, unified theory of self. (185)*

## Conclusion

In transformational plays, those many aspects of the self are revealed, as there are layers, whereas in a conventional drama aspects of a character are successively peeled away finally to reveal the center of a personality. In the same way, the audience in an innovative transformational play is not to sit passively and watch the drama develop on stage. The audience is invited to participate as it is invited actively and continually to adjust its expectations of "reality" on stage.

By viewing Terry's "transformations." the audience was forced to watch and interpret the action rather than focus on the personalities of the actors, characters, or playwright. It is through this technique that Terry portrayed various social issues and revealed layers of the human psyche.

In America during the sixties, when American actors began to experiment with alternatives to naturalist acting. This meant a highly physicalized, non-psychological treatment of character in the barest of settings for the Open Theatre.

DR A. SANDHYA REDDY

4P a g e



The play is full of 'devices' and experimental stage techniques. Instead of a connecting theme, there are situations, or, perhaps, happenings which are dramatized. It is futile to look for conventional congruity in a transformational play. Transformational technique has outlived the material it was designed to serve.

## WORKS CITED

**The Dictionary of Literary Biography**, Vol 7, Part II, ed. John Nicholas Michigan, Gale Research Co., 1981

Leavitt, Dinah.L. "Interview of Megan Terry" in **Women in American Theatre**, eds. HK Chinoy and LW Jenkins. New York Crown Publishers, 1981

Marranca Bonnie, "David Rabe's Vietnam Trilogy", **Canadian Theatre Review**, 14 Spring, 1977, p86-92