

Understanding Creativity and Creative Writing
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Lecture - 2
In Conversation with Richard Schechner

This is the second lecture and in fact, it is a session titled in conversation with Richard Schechner. Let me first of all explain, why I have placed this conversation in the second lecture of module one. Before starting the step-by-step discussion of ideas, it seemed right to place it in the beginning, because of the key concerns of the course that have been articulated in this conversation. As perhaps you will slowly discover the central erg in shaping this course is related to the search for the totality of our being. Very often we become consumers of meaning rather than their creators. Through various critical and creative ideas, we would like to make it difference in this regard.

As you listen to this conversation, you will notice that it revolves around reading, writing performance in the context of the globalized world. In my view, this is the fitting start to the first module, because it sets the tone for our own explorations. You may want to come back to this session after our discussion of many related issues in the other modules. The video course allows for this movement back and forth and we have taken advantage of it. My conversation with Richard Schechner has been recorded in New York University campus with help from Professor Sathya Talwar - my husband, and IIT colleague.

Let me introduce you to professor Schechner. Schechner is an eminent theater director based in New York. He has been a noted presences as a professor of performance studies in Tisch school New York university, and his widely seen as the founder of performance studies as an academic discipline. Through his untiring effort, he has supported dialogue on theatre and performance across various countries and cultures. He has argued for thinking of performance as an all encompassing term with theatre as one of its categories. He is also been the editor of the prestigious journal, the drama review which gave a platform for challenging prevailing restrictive ideas about theatre and performance. For a fuller introduction to his outstanding contributions, we would like you check out the website that we have mentioned. You can actually check out many

other website, if you get interested in professor Schechner's ideas and his work. My conversation with professor Schechner actually started way back in the eighties, and it covered many many cultural issues, pertaining to writing and performance processes. Professor Schechner is a great listener forever ready to share his viewpoint, at the outset I would like to thank him.

For sharing his ideas and concerns with us for this video course, it may be pointed out that professor Schechner has spent a lot of time in India, and for those who are familiar with his directorial adventures which of also actually has been a very very important part of the counter culture of the sixties in the United States. His work on Ram Lela of Ramnagar may seem anachronistic, but then globalization has thrown up many unpredictable areas of search and artistic combinations. In my conversation with professor Schechner range of issues have been raised by me, keeping in mind they relevant for this video course. The resonances of these concerns will be palpable as you move on with the course material. Do take notes, undertake required reading and then examine the ideas critically. We would recommend follow up on the resources that have been identified by professor Schechner, to extend your artistic and intellectual horizons. So, now, here is the session with professor Richard Schechner.

Professor: Hi Richard.

Richard: Hello

Professor: I basically want to talk to you in the context of the creative writing course, where I am trying to encourage students to be producers of meaning rather than consumer of meaning.

Richard: Ok

Professor: And they do not seem to see too many plays or read too many scripts of drama. Therefore, keeping that in mind, I think it will be wonderful if they get to have a sense of how you have enlarged the notion of performance from theatre performance onto the other dimensions.

Richard: Ok, so what do you want me to start with...

Professor: The enlarged sense of performance.

Richard: Well, So, I think of performance as a broad spectrum of behavior. And if you think of it as a rainbow with a big arc, we have on one side ritual - that is on one foundation. And on the other side, you have play - that is another foundation between ritual and the play is this large arc which includes things of course, like theatre and dance and music what we call the aesthetic performance genres. It also includes things like classroom teaching or videogames or sports, all different kinds of play, popular entertainments, films, performance in everyday life such as when someone goes to interview for business.

You have to play a role of being somebody that the person who's offered the job wants to have work with them. Or if you go out on a date you are meeting someone of the opposite gender you want to look nice and be good for them, so you are performing a role. You are actually putting on a costume, you look in a mirror you put on a face. If you are a women, you might put on make up, make sure your hair is good etcetera etcetera etcetera.

We all know that those roles are intense and to some degree temporary. As you get to know the person better, you kind of drop those things and maybe sometimes the other person is taken by surprise. Oh that is the way you really are, that is the way you really are etcetera, etcetera. I do not think it is true that that is not the way people really are, people really are different under different circumstances.

So, you have play, games, sports, popular entertainment, performance in everyday life, everyday rituals. Everyday rituals would be what do you do when you get up in the morning? How do you wash your hands? How do you prepare yourself for the day? Then there are secondary rituals like when a president or prime minister gets inaugurated or beings office, there are also kinds of ceremonies where there are military parades. In ballgames there are rituals that surround the beginnings and endings of games. The Olympics are full of rituals the way the athlete stands, the gold medalist stands up the silver medalist stands next to him but below and similarly the bronze, flags are raised, national anthems are played and of course, there is religious rituals.

Hindu puja or the service in a mosque, the five- times-a-day call to prayer, or the prayers in a Jewish synagogue or a Christian church and also of the religions of humanity that are not called the great religions that are practiced in Australia and Native America, in

Africa, you know, different kinds of religions, they are all full of rituals, which are organized behaviors in which we are not exactly ourselves. So, I say performance is when I am not myself and I am not, not myself. I am somewhere between myself and someone who is not me and I play back and forth among these.

Even an actor in a film or a theatre piece when the director says stop they just become another person, when they say go, they become the person that they are. So, we are very well trained from early on to perform these various roles. Some of them we perform professionally and underline, point out now I am playing a role and some of them are quite unconscious.

Professor: That is great I am sure our students will have a lot to take back. Can I turn my attention to your work as a theatre director?

Richard: Sure

Professor: What has been particularly interesting to us and we have talked about it in the course of creativity discussions is the fact that you went back to Greek theatre for your experimental work, and we have also talked about tragic vision that grips you. This plus the fact that you have done Faust and you have also done Shakespearean texts. Could you give a sense of what drove you to those resources?

Richard: Well, of course, I was attracted to the Greek tragedy when I was a very young man. First thing I ever published in a scholarly journal was an essay about Euripides' *The Bacchae*... I later made play into Dionysus in 69, a very famous experimental performance. Ten years before that play I was... I was writing about it. There are two reasons really why I was drawn to the Greeks, one is historical and one is thematic. The historical reason is that it is probably the earliest formal theatre we have in the world. I mean its earlier than Kalidasa and the Sanskrit drama... We do not know, there might be something else to discovered, but this was like 2500 years ago, and they were fully developed plays. So, being in the theatre I want to say what were the first plays that we knew were fully developed? But there is a Greek myth that Venus is born fully grown from the head of Zeus, and in that sense these dramas are like written.

So, they may be very early but they do not seem in and sense primitive or unformed, they seem like they are fabulous; they are finished. And they involve whole community

through the chorus, but they also tell fabulous stories. For example, the story of Antigone who would rather die than see her brother dishonored, who fights against the unjust king who is a sense loses. Creon loses his daughter-in-law, he loses his own son. Or Oedipus who is such a just and good man, but finds out trying to do the job, lets say of a policeman, investigating who murdered the former king and finds out it was he that murdered the former king. I mean it just it still sends chills up and down my spine to realize that i am guilty of the crime I am seeking to find the guilty one for and the Greek tragedies also deal with the people who are not evil.

I mean, in some sense in Shakespeare, I will get there - Shakespeare deals with good people and bad people. In Greek tragedy almost everyone is good and they clash on their goodness and that is what happens in our actual life. It is not that we're so bad most of the time, there are great villains in the world of course, but most ordinary people are not bat. But when they clash, when two good things clash, when you have to decide between am I going to side with my child on this or with my spouse on this and I see both side, but I have to decide and one is going to be very angry with me; what do I do... I love both of them. Greek tragedy raises those questions.

I went to Shakespeare because I am a native born English speakers. So the Greek were the earliest plays in world theatre, the earliest plays in western tradition and Shakespeare's the greatest writer in my language. To be in the theatre and not confront deal with the greatest writer in your language... I mean it just does not make sense and also the great thing about Shakespeare is he's free. You just go online; you do not have to pay any money to read these plays. You have to pay money even to go into a great museum, so you have to pay a little bit of money to see the Mona Lisa, you do not have to pay a rupee to see and to read Shakespeare.

So, why everybody does not read Shakespeare I do not know. He is great storyteller; he has a great character, the most comic, and Tragic. I have been particularly fascinated with Hamlet and I have done three versions of Hamlet, one most recent called imagining O... mostly about Ophelia. So, I get involved in these plays and other plays as well, Faust which is very powerful. I have also been drawn to modern playwrights like Chekhov and Brecht especially. Now I know Brecht is very important in India, at least he was when I was there because he is a playwright first of all who draws on Asian performance traditions, not necessarily Indian, but Chinese.

And certain qualities of performance that are non-European, that are Asian, namely that the character and the player stand next to each other, they do not merge. In realism they merge. In Brechtian theatre, in Chinese opera, perhaps in Jatra and in some other traditional forms in India, the character and the actor stand and comment on each other. Brecht has also a highly developed social sense, a sense of social justice and he writes great dialogue and fine stories as well, both tragic and comic at the same time.

I directed *Mother Courage and Her Children*, which is a tragic story. It has some comic elements in it but it is a tragic story then there are other plays like *The Good Woman of Setzuan* or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* which explore these human dilemmas. So, I am also attracted to dramas as such, to the theatre because it is about behavior. I am not honest I am not a reflective artist I do draw into my notebooks, but I a visual artist. I do not like to draw on paper and make it still, I like behavior. So, being a person who is interested in behavior I have drawn to theatre and films.

Professor: Let us turn to your work in India very briefly. I know it is such a vast area of concern, but since you have interacted with a lot of Indian theatre practitioners, you've studied Ramlila: in retrospect could you assign to intercultural work.

Richard: Right

Professor: Especially in view of this whole burgeoning sense of globalization?

Richard: Right. Well, it is a very complex question. Let me just review briefly my experiences. I came to India first October 1971. I am sure that is before every one of the students probably before their parents were born. And I came there and it was my first time I was outside the sphere of European-American influence. So, I was very shocked and upset. It was just difficult, but I stayed in India at that time for four months.

During those four months, I saw a great deal of folk and classical performances, because I was fortunate enough to meet the very first week I was there. I met Suresh Awasthi who at that point was the secretary of the Sahitya academy. We took to each other. We liked each other very much. And Suresh said, what do you want to do here? And I said, well I am not so interested in the Tajmahal or the Jaipur palaces, I mean I want to see behavior I want to see performances. So, he said, Good, I will introduce you to many people. So, under his tutelage I was introduced to Jatra and Chhau and Bharatnatyam,

Kuchipudi, kathak the classical dances and I saw contemporary theatre and travelled in all regions of India.

So, I travelled as far north and west as Kashmir and as far south as the Kanyakumari, I did all of the great cities I was in Kolkata I was in Chennai when it was it was called Madars, I was in Kerala which of course, I returned to. I was in Bombay, it was called Mumbai. And I saw several performances there, I learnt a lot of things about India when I was there first of all that it is at one level a unified culture and at another level many different cultures India is a model of its own globalization and let us put it that way and it was probably more. So, before the partition between Pakistan and India the final months that I was there in Kolkata and it was the time of the Indo-Pak war and the liberation of Bangladesh. I got very involved in the politics of that war I protested to the president's of the American fifth league, I think it was I was supporting the liberation of Bangladesh.

So, I was involved with Indian culture and society at several levels after that I returned to India many times, I saw and studied the Ramlila particularly the Ramlila of Ramnagar which is a town right across from Benaras Varanasi. I have lived in India for a long as 11 months at a stretch the last time, I was in India was barely a year ago. I was at a conference on Natyashastra in Varanasi, and also I directed Cherry Kabapicha which is the cherry orchard at the professional repertory company of the national school of drama. And then I brought the production of mother courage and her children which we did in New York to India we toured, it to Bhopal Lucknow, Calcutta, Mumbai and Delhi and a small village near Kolkata called Sinjur(?). Awasthi was very helpful in that and so were many Indian people. Actually at the end of this week Nisar and Amal will be my house guests so I am very close to them. Nisar designed the set and Amal Allana the costumes for the Cherry Ka Bagicha.

She is the head of the National School of Drama. Her father was Abraham Alkazi who started the National School of Drama so I am very deeply enmeshed in all of that. In terms of globalization, you know, I probably do not have the politically correct viewpoint. But my view is that ultimately at our root we are all one thing, genetically speaking. Whoever they were and then you look at these trees from one garden and look at that leaf and that leaf over there. So, they are very different, but at the root they are the same. At one level, I feel that globalization is a return to a certain kind of rootedness is a

return to a difficult, but proper condition that was once there... At the same time we do not all want to look like the same leaf. There are two problem with globalization, or let us say challenges.

One is the classic one - to not be exploited. Colonial exploitation exists or has existed and global exploitation exists. National and local exploitation exists. Exploitation unfortunately cannot be localized among one group or one system. It seems that human beings do take advantage of each other and there are generous human being and there are selfish ones. Or let's put it like this; there are times when people act generously and times when they act selfishly. To accomplish the collaboration of globalization without the exploitation is one aspect of it. The other problem is this leveling - we do not want the whole world to look like an airport with always the same brands, the same cloths the same languages and so on.

So, I feel we need to find some way to get over the national phase. I do think that the national phase of human history has caused a lot of bloodshed just like the intensive religious phase caused of lot of bloodshed. What we can do is perhaps keep nations, perhaps keep religious, but not to kill over them. If we look at it straight in the face, more blood has been spilled because people say you believe the wrong thing or you're in the wrong place than for the any other cause. Or may be disease is and equal cause, but diseases we make progress about, we have six billion people on the earth now instead of two billion because we have conquered some diseases.

But we have not conquered our wish for power we haven't conquered war. So, globalization which features trade and cooperation at one level is I think in balance in my point of view a good thing if it can be made to be a good thing. I think of India as a model, you know. I am all for Hinduism, but I am not for Hindutva, I am all for Islam, but I am not for Sharia. It is a question, in other words, of a certain kind of balance. The third thing is that globalization is not going to go away. We are not go to do just like tuddites in the 19th century said get rid of the machines, well that was nice.

Maybe a few people can go without machines, but we are surrounded by machines. We are not going to get rid of genetic engineering, we are not going to get rid of globalization, we are not going to get rid of world trade or the ipad you are holding in your hand which is conceived in California, manufactured in China and sold wherever.

So, even though somebody may be opposed to globalization we are always participating in it. I do not know where this shirt was made, but it was not made where we are sitting. I do not even know where your cloths were made, but possibly in India which is a great country when it comes to clothes but possibly in Cambodia or Thailand or somewhere. So, it is not going to go away. The question then is how to make it serve human justice, human creativity

Professor: Alright. Two more questions, I am getting greedy here. One is about any new experimental forms that you think the students, especially on the interface with science and technology, should see.

Richard: Well, yes, they should go on a website run by an American group called The Builders Association. In TDR we have a big interview with them. I did an interview with Marianne Weems who is their artistic director. They work very closely with the most advanced digital technology and performance. One of their pieces which is well documented, is called Alladeen it is about call centers in India. It features people actually in the theatre making calls to India and talking so it is both live and media at the same time.

They have others about the recreation of jet airlines and those experiences. The very contemporary media revolution that means that people sit in Bangalore and answer the phone pretending to be Americans is a kind of performance because they cannot have a British Indian accent. You are supposed to sound like an American and they say Hi my name is Tom. Well their name maybe Satya or Guruji or whatever. Their name is not tom.

Professor: Yeah

Richard: But since they are dealing with people who would be more comfortable with the people who are like themselves they say that. Now I assume that if an Indian caller calls and they say, Hello, my name is Satya. The idea is to be like the caller. So, this group deals with these kinds of things - not only this, they do whole series of performance technologically speaking. Then there is a group called the Critical Art Ensemble. Again my journal TDR write about them and they deal with genetic engineering and and recombinant DNA from the point of view of performance.

They are both critical of it and they examine it. There is another group called The Yes Men. I do not know. It is a performance group that pushes the great corporations to own up to some of their crimes. So, for example, this one would be interest to people in India. Union carbide owned the plant that give off the poisonous gases in Bhopal about twenty eight years ago which killed thousands of people and they've never never paid the relatives of these victims what they should have. And they have never really acknowledged that they had committed a crime even though it was an accidental, it was not meaning to be crime... but some crimes like Oedipus's are unintentional.

So, the Yes Men pretended to be from Union Carbide and went on television. They dressed up and said Hello we are the CEO or such and such of union carbide and we are saying to the people of Bhopal we are apologizing to you and we are distributing five million dollars. And of course, the next day Union Carbide has to come on television and they are not really us and we are not giving any money and so they are exposed. So, the Yes Men is a group you have to really look at. So, those are three groups: Builders Association, Critical Art Ensemble and the Yes Men that I would think that students who are interested in science, technology and in new kinds of performances might look at.

Professor: Finally Richard can you share your favorite short story writers and novelists?

Richard: For write whether that my favorite I know I will tell you what I am reading at the present movement I have gone back to some old writers. So at present moments I am reading dickens. And I never read dickens since I was in high school, maybe I did not read him then. So, now, I am reading David Copperfield, Great Expectations, Bleak House and the Tale of Two Cities. I like him as a storyteller. He would not be one of the great writers I think, but he is pretty good. And then I also read Virgil's Aeneid which is an ancient story roughly at the same time that the Ramayana was being written and it is about the fall of Troy and the establishment of Rome.

But if you ask me in terms of contemporary writers, a short story writer I like very much is Flannery O'Connor who is very good. She is three generations ago, but she is very good. Then there is Paul Auster who is contemporary. I have worked with Paul in the theatre and his work is good. The great classic of the European novel – Flaubert, Stendhal and Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy I like. I like Gunter Grass, and there is a new writer called Jeremy Latham. There is Pamuk who wrote Snow. I like Salman Rushdie. You

know I am not so different from other people. My real field is not literature, so I read for pleasure.

When I read drama or what I go to the theatre I am doing it for pleasure, but it is also a profession. When I read drama or when I go to the theatre I doing it for pleasure, but it is also a profession. I have also read some non-fiction that I recommend Steven pinker who is a Harvard psychological wrote The Better Angles of Our Nature on violence and the decline of violence. I found that a very significant book one of the few books that changed my way of thinking. So, when I was talking about globalization, I was thinking of his five reasons of why violence has relatively declined. He gives reasons of civilization global trade democratization etcetera. I think it is a very powerful book.

Professor: Thank you so much Richard. It is always lovely talking to you.

Richard: Thank you. Goodbye.