



Origin of Thornton Wilder's Stage Manager and its Comparison with Sutradhara of Sanskrit Drama

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Abstract: Undoubtedly, the creation of Stage Manager is one of the important contributions of Thornton Wilder (c.1897-1975) to the field of American drama. His idea of the Stage Manager in regards to its role and function in his plays is experimental and multidimensional. An endeavour is made in this paper to trace the origin of or reasons behind Wilder's creation of the Stage Manager in his plays, and in the process, it also points out some similarities and dissimilarities the character has in terms of technicality and functionality with the Sutradhara of Sanskrit Drama.

Keywords: Stage Manager, American drama, Sutradhara, Indian Classical drama,

According to the production team handbook of the Department of Theatre and Dance, the Appalachian State University, "The Stage Manager has a wide number and variety of responsibilities, which can be broken down into three primary categories: handling the majority of the administrative duties related to a production, assisting the director during rehearsals, and being responsible for all backstage activity once the show opens." ¹ To be more specific, a Stage Manager "is like the hub of a wheel—the central, stabilizing core from which the spokes of a production radiate. Stage managers facilitate communication across all creative and technical departments..."². It means the Stage Manager is at the same time very pivotal and instrumental in respect to the successful output of a drama on the stage. The Stage is to be managed well by its manager in every successful production. He can be more akin to the modern-day director, producer, and marketing manager as a whole.



But, the idea of Stage Manager in regards to its role and function in the plays of Thornton Wilder, the great American litterateur, is quite experimental and multifunctional. His different functions in the different plays he figures in, remind western Wilder scholars of Greek Chorus, Pirandello, the Property man of Chinese drama, the Stage Assistant of the Noh Theatre of Japan, Strindberg, Brecht, Alfred Jarry; but further research shows that he is more like Sutradhara and less like what they have suggested because they can be compared to him in one or two respects whereas Sutradhara can be compared to him in many respects, though not in all.

Wilder's Stage Manager would go down in the history of American drama as one of its major landmarks though critics to date have been lost in locating his ancestry and in the process ignoring and undermining things more important. At the end of the twentieth century, one is now well-equipped and in a better position to conclude that "the narrator as Wilder conceived and employed him has no real precedent in European-American theater. The character has roots, of course, in a number of literary works of the past, for example, the author-commentator of Vanity Fair; the Chorus in Shakespeare's Henry V, and the Coryphaeus (Chorus leader) of the Greek classical tragedies"³ but to pin down the whole debate regarding the Stage Manager to the insignificant question whether Wilder has borrowed him from others is to misunderstand, misconstrue and undermine his contributions to American drama.

Western Wilder Scholars have tried to look for his origin elsewhere and in its wake failed to take notice of a very significant fact which is important in tracing the origin of this character. He seems a byproduct of the mental state of Wilder at the time he introduced this character in the play. The fact, that he was passing through a mental stage where he wanted to remain aloof from his surroundings and yet remain very much a part of it, unconsciously induced him to create a character who, like him, is very much a part of the play in which he figures, and yet, once again, like him, completely aloof from the rest of the characters. The fact that the Stage Manager is very much an autobiographical projection of Wilder is a very significant fact which critics except Richard Goldstone overlooked: "Moving into his mid-thirties, Wilder had become more detached from people. Or he thought he had. His determination to rid himself of emotional involvements,



to avoid, under any circumstances, giving his heart away, is clearly reflected in the fascinating trio of plays, two of which are "stage manager" by an objective observer, who understands everything but stands apart from the action, and one of which recounts the endless rituals of birth, marrying, feasting and dying. He is, in effect, a composite of what Wilder himself, by 1937, was becoming - or at least what role he was playing."⁴

Apart from this autobiographical compulsion, there are many other weighty reasons as well for creating this character, one being a demand of his dramaturgy. He needed this character that would facilitate him in continuing the style he had cultivated while writing his uneatable Three Minute Plays. The following passage taken from the play Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job? shows how and why it was difficult to stage these plays. One cannot stage them, this can at best be narrated and the audience be told about it. "Suddenly the thirty pieces of Silver are cast upward from the revolted hand of Judas. They hurtle through the skies, flinging their enormous shadows across the stars and continue falling forever through the vast funnel of space."⁵

The presence of the narrative elements that one finds in the above passage was the inherent problem in his plays that he had to solve before he could think of writingactable plays. He succeeded in solving the problem in his later plays where they are either not present or if and wherever they are present they have been incorporated into the action by the use of a chorus narrator.

The character, who has been variously nicknamed by various critics and who is now considered one of the most important contributions of Wilder to American drama, was hailed by the dramatist himself as a hangover from a novelist-technique and created out of compulsion: "Perhaps in the very greatest dramatic representations, as in Othello – the ultimate point of view that the beholder should take upon the action is nowhere indicated, but is distributed throughout the work by a series of strains and stresses in selection and emphasis. It may be, though, that in an age in which an audience contains such varying approaches to fundamental questions of life a



commentator is useful for delivering signposts.”⁶ Whatever Wilder has to say has not been said in just one go, but in bits and pieces and hence a character like the Stage Manager was needed who would weave together these bits and pieces, present them as an organic whole and help the baffled audience having varying perceptions and deprived of the fixed absolutes of the past, cultivate the required perspective for understanding Wilder’s vision of life.

The reason for Creating the Stage Manager and the advantages derived thereof has been well summed up by Haberman, “Gertrude Stein’s idea of narration is responsible for the presentation in Our Town of a series of small glimpses of life, each without beginning or ending. This technique required the character of the Stage Manager so that some continuity was kept between each event and the next.”⁷

The Stage Manager may remind critics of different characters in the plays of different dramatists but whoever he may remind them of, is not very important, what is important is, first, the difference, if any, between them, and, second, the uniqueness of Stage Manager to move within two worlds, an important aspect of the Stage Manager evaluated in detail by Patricia, R. Schroeder: “The Stage Manager operates within two worlds - that of the production and that of the play - at once. His very first speech demonstrates his ability to function in both contexts, as he introduces the cast of players and the inhabitants of Grover’s Corners almost simultaneously. In his role as a theatrical device, the Stage Manager single-handedly runs the show: he acts as a living playbill, he describes and prepares the imaginary set, he directs the actors, and he often interrupts the play to comment on the future significance of an action just presented. By intruding in this way between the audience and the characters, he permits us to share his double vision of present and future (which Emily achieves only after death in the third act) from the very beginning of the play.”⁸ One must find out his similarities and dissimilarities with his counterparts in other plays because the similarities would suggest two things, first, are they the same, and, second, if yes, then Wilder is simply a rediscovered and nothing else. The difference likewise would suggest two things, one, if they are different then how and to what extent; second, is Wilder simply a remover of obtrusive brick-a-brac or an innovator or both. One must



also find whether his own Stage Managers differ from each other or not because in this case also the similarities and dissimilarities would suggest two things. The similarities among the different Stage Managers of Wilder would suggest that he repeats himself and hence not innovative since he does not care to explore new avenues and untapped resources; the differences would suggest that the different Stage Managers are not dull and unimpressive because Wilder has been continuously evolving in his art of delineating the character of the Stage Manager and hence an innovator.

The Stage Manager is very much like the Indian Sutradhara one finds doing almost the same thing in classical Sanskrit plays that the American Stage Manager does in his plays, if at all there is a difference, it is a difference dictated by different cultural and social milieu in which Indian Sanskrit dramatists and Wilder lived and wrote.

When the Stage Manager arranges the act, he reminds western Wilder scholars of the Property Man in the Chinese theatre but these Wilder scholars have chosen to ignore and overlook the functions of Sutradhara with whom he can be well compared. The Stage Manager moves a few pieces of furniture only but the Sutradhara goes beyond that and "secures the erection of the temporary stage,"⁹ itself which remains one of his many functions.

He introduces the play and plays a major role, these are the two important functions for which he can be well compared to Sutradhara also: "Since the Sutradhara managed the entire show and may even have imparted the necessary instructions to the group members, he had to take any role when an artist was missing or the troupe wanted to economies. In Mrcchakatika, he "is transformed into a Prakrit speaking citizen" in Uttararamcarita, he assumes the role of a citizen from Ayodhya, in Malatimadhava, the two leading roles of Kamandaki and Avalokita are played by him and his associate, and in Ratnavali he plays the role of minister Yaugandharayana."¹⁰ "To him falls not merely the very important function of introducing the play, but also of taking one of the chief parts; thus he plays Vatsa in Ratnavali, and in the Malatimadhava, Kamandaki, the nun, who powerfully affects the current of the drama."¹¹ In



playing different roles both the Sutradhara and the Stage Manager are not circumscribed by sex even, the Sutradhara plays the role of a nun and the Stage Manager plays Mrs. Forrest and the role of many women discussed at length in the Third chapter.

His all-pervasive knowledge about people and everything that happens and exist under the sun reminds one of Sutradhara, whose qualities and functions have been well summed up by both Keith and Indu Shekhar: "For this high position his qualifications were to be numerous; he was supposed to be learned in all the arts and sciences, to be acquainted with the habits and customs of all lands, to combine the completeness of technical knowledge with practical skill, and to be possessed of all the moral qualities which an Indian genius can enumerate."¹² "That the Sutradhara was a person of considerable importance is proved by the technical requirements and other qualifications which he possessed. He was expected to be familiar with light literature such as narrative, plays, and poetry. He was expected to know several dialects, people of different places, and was also expected to be experienced in dramatic details including mechanical art. In short, he was the chief architect of the theatre on one hand, and the accepted leader of the troupe on the other. Hillebrandt's suggestion that a troupe-leader known as 'natagramani', used to look after the band of artistes of all types, receives support from Keith."¹³

His role of dictating the cast is one of his important functions for which he can be compared to Sutradhara because these are the functions of Sutradhara also: "Sutradhara combined the functions of director-manager and producer of the play, which is by no means a small tribute to his functional importance in the drama. The traditional definition of a Sutradhara is "Whatever is to be performed in a play, has a clue for guidance. One who arranges the preliminaries on the stage, benedictions, and prayers, he is known as Sutradhara i.e. holder of the clue."¹⁴ "The Chief actor, whose name Sutradhara doubtless denotes him as primarily the architect of the theatre ... is occasionally styled 'troupe-head of actors' (natagamani), and he is essentially the instructor of the other actors in their art (natyacarya) so that his title Sutradhara can be used topically as equivalent to Professor."¹⁵



One fundamental difference between the Stage Manager and the Sutradhara is that the Sutradhara generally leaves the stage once the preliminaries are over, but the Stage Manager continues to dominate and manipulate the stage.

A comparison with Sutradhara to show the difference in the manner of presenting the character on the stage suggests how and to what extent, Wilder removes the obtrusive bric-a-brac: "He is normally the husband of one of the actresses (nati), who aids him in the opening scene, and who is compelled, poor woman, to combine the arduous life of an actress with the domestic duty of looking after her husband's material wants. She is represented as devoted to him, fasting to secure reunion in another life, preparing his meal and seeking to remove by her good works the dangers which threaten him, and compelled to play her parts, although anxious, as in the Ratnavali, over the difficulty of securing the marriage of her daughter to a fiancé who has gone overseas, or, as in the Janakinarinaya, over the wickedness of another actor in seeking to take her daughter from her."¹⁶

The way Sutradhara introduces the play also suggests that Wilder is a remover. Wilder introduces his play directly and does not beat about the bush as many Sanskrit dramatists do. In Wilder, the play begins with the introducing expository remarks of the Stage Manager itself and since his manner of introducing is different from Sutradhara he is not required simply for the preliminaries or considered essential for the smooth transition of dram only, he is very much a part of the preliminaries as well as drama proper, he is a multifaceted character performing multifarious functions, this difference between the Stage Manager and Sutradhara shows how the Stage Manager is an innovative improvement upon Sutradhara: "the classical drama usually begins with a dialogue between the Sutradhara and the Nati, who is usually represented as his wife; in this we have, it is said, a reflex of the old popular mime. But an examination of the practice and theory ... shows that we have no simple or naïve arrangement, but a very elaborate literary device by which the actors bridge over the transition from the preliminaries of the drama to the drama itself. The preliminaries are essentially popular religion, and the detail was left largely in the hands of the Sutradhara and his assistants, sided by a chorus of dancers and by



musicians; they are doubtless elder than the drama, and it was an ingenious and happy device which was invented to carry on the preliminaries so that the transition to the drama was effective and satisfactory."¹⁷

Wilder does not have to bother for the transition or wait for the preliminaries to end and the drama proper to begin as Sanskrit dramatists do. The following difference in the manner of presenting the play shows that Wilder is a remover of obtrusive bric-a-brac. His Stage Manager begins the play straight-way but in Sanskrit plays, the play begins with the usual dialogue of the Sutradhara and the actress, his wife: "The Sutradhara and his two attendants leave the stage, and the preliminaries are ended. Immediately after, according to the 'NatyaShashtra', another person, similar in appearance and qualities to the Sutradhara, is to enter and introduce the play, a function which gives him the style of introducer, Sthapaka. His costume should indicate the nature of the drama, as dealing with divine or human affairs."¹⁸

Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the omniscient author in the novel tells the reader facts that the other characters do not know but on a stage, everything must be presented between the characters. This function was performed by the Chorus in Greek tragedies, by the Sutradhara in classical Sanskrit plays, and by the Stage Manager in Wilder. Critics frantically tried to prove that he functions as the property man in Chinese plays but once again, for reasons best known to them, they chose to overlook that he functions like Indian Sutradhara also.

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