
Alternative theatre has emerged as a powerful cultural and communicative medium that challenges dominant theatrical conventions while actively engaging audiences in social discourse

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Abstract

Alternative theatre has emerged as a powerful cultural and communicative medium that challenges dominant theatrical conventions while actively engaging audiences in social discourse. This study examines the development of alternative theatre in Sri Lanka with particular emphasis on its role in communication and its influence on audience perception and consciousness. Drawing upon historical, theoretical, and contextual analyses, the research explores how alternative theatre functions as a dynamic process rather than a fixed artistic form, continuously evolving in response to social, political, and cultural transformations. The study further situates Sri Lankan alternative theatre within global theatrical traditions, highlighting its connections with street theatre, experimental performance practices, and development communication. By analyzing the communicative capacity of alternative theatre to raise awareness, encourage critical thinking, and mobilize public participation, this paper argues that alternative theatre remains an effective and socially responsive medium in contemporary Sri Lankan society. The findings demonstrate that alternative theatre serves not only as an artistic expression but also as a significant tool for social communication, development discourse, and audience engagement.

Keywords: Alternative Theatre, Street Theatre, Development Communication, Audience Perception, Sri Lankan Theatre

Introduction

The concept of “alternative” within artistic and cultural practices refers to modes of expression that exist outside dominant or conventional frameworks. In theatre, alternative forms arise in response to prevailing aesthetic norms, ideological structures, and social expectations, offering new ways of representing reality and engaging audiences. The nature of alternative theatre is not static; rather, it evolves across time and space, shaped by cultural values, social transformations, and historical contexts. As such, alternative theatre can be understood as a continuous process of reinvention grounded in existing traditions while simultaneously challenging them.

Within global theatrical history, alternative theatre has consistently functioned as a reaction to mainstream performance practices. From the transformation of classical Greek dramatic structures to modern experimental movements such as Epic Theatre, Expressionism, and street theatre, alternative forms have expanded the boundaries of theatrical expression. These practices have questioned realism, disrupted conventional narrative structures, and redefined the relationship between performer and audience. Consequently, theatre has evolved from a purely aesthetic experience into a medium capable of social critique, ideological resistance, and public dialogue.

The origins of theatre itself can be traced to ritualistic and ceremonial practices associated with fertility rites, religious observances, and communal celebrations. Anthropologists and historians identify early theatrical expressions in masked performances, myth-based enactments, and sacred rituals, which gradually developed into structured dramatic forms. From classical Greek theatre in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE to the diverse performance traditions across Asia, Europe, and other regions, theatre has remained deeply embedded in social life, reflecting human emotions, conflicts, and collective experiences.

Drama, derived from the Greek word *dran* meaning “to do” or “to act,” signifies a performative act presented before an audience through live enactment. Scholars such as Aristotle defined drama as the imitation of action, while later thinkers, including William Shakespeare, viewed theatre as a mirror of life. Theatre integrates multiple artistic elements—movement, speech, music, costume, space, and visual composition—to create a holistic aesthetic experience that communicates meaning beyond spoken language. Through this synthesis, theatre becomes a powerful medium for expressing both internal human emotions and broader social realities.

In the Sri Lankan context, theatre has evolved through indigenous performance traditions, ritual practices, and later influences from Indian and Western dramatic forms. Over time, Sri Lankan theatre has incorporated alternative modes of performance that question dominant narratives and address contemporary social issues. Street theatre, in particular, has played a significant role in extending theatrical practice beyond conventional performance spaces, directly engaging communities in public spaces and addressing issues such as social injustice, political oppression, development challenges, and cultural identity.

This study focuses on alternative theatre in Sri Lanka as a form of communication that actively shapes audience perception and social awareness. By examining its historical development, aesthetic strategies, and communicative functions, the research highlights the capacity of alternative theatre to function as an effective medium for development communication and social transformation. The paper argues that alternative theatre remains a relevant and impactful form of artistic practice, capable of fostering critical consciousness and participatory dialogue within contemporary society.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Background of Alternative Theatre

Alternative theatre refers to theatrical practices that operate outside dominant or conventional performance traditions. It emerges as a response to established norms, aesthetic expectations, and ideological frameworks that govern mainstream theatre. Rather than existing as a fixed or permanent form, alternative theatre is best understood as a dynamic and evolving process shaped by social change, cultural values, and historical contexts. What is considered “alternative” in one period or society may later become institutionalized, giving rise to new alternative forms in response.

The term *alternative* itself signifies choice, difference, and deviation from accepted standards. In conceptual terms, alternative theatre challenges prevailing modes of representation and seeks to redefine theatrical language, performance space, and audience engagement. It is grounded in the belief that dominant theatrical forms may fail to adequately address emerging social realities or represent marginalized voices. As a result, alternative theatre adopts innovative aesthetic strategies, experimental performance techniques, and unconventional narrative structures to articulate new meanings.

From a theoretical perspective, alternative theatre has often been associated with critical and oppositional discourses. It tends to question power structures, social hierarchies, and ideological assumptions embedded within mainstream cultural production. This oppositional character is evident in global theatrical movements such as Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre, which rejected emotional immersion in favor of critical distance, and in experimental performance traditions that dismantled linear storytelling and realism. Similarly, street theatre and site-specific performances deliberately remove theatre from institutional spaces, bringing performance directly into public and communal environments.

The evolution of alternative theatre can be understood as a process of continuous transformation rather than rupture. New theatrical forms frequently emerge by reinterpreting existing traditions rather than completely abandoning them. In this sense, alternative theatre is simultaneously rooted in tradition and

oriented toward innovation. For example, the emergence of Epic Theatre can be seen as an alternative to Aristotelian dramatic structures, while later experimental practices challenged even Brechtian conventions. This ongoing process demonstrates that alternative theatre remains inherently fluid and responsive to changing social conditions.

In artistic practice, the search for new forms often revitalizes older traditions by recontextualizing them within contemporary frameworks. Classical dramatic techniques may be reimagined to address modern concerns, while indigenous performance practices may be adapted to articulate present-day social realities. Through this process, alternative theatre strengthens theatrical expression by expanding its aesthetic and communicative potential.

A key characteristic of alternative theatre is its emphasis on audience engagement. Unlike conventional theatre, which often positions the audience as passive observers, alternative theatre actively seeks to involve spectators in meaning-making processes. This engagement may take the form of direct interaction, improvisation, participatory performance, or the deliberate disruption of theatrical illusion. Such strategies encourage audiences to reflect critically on the themes presented and to recognize their own social positioning within the performance context.

Theoretical discussions of alternative theatre also highlight its relationship with ideology and resistance. In many societies, alternative theatre has functioned as a platform for dissent, offering space for voices excluded from dominant cultural narratives. It has addressed issues such as social inequality, political oppression, economic exploitation, ethnic conflict, and cultural marginalization. Through symbolic representation, satire, and collective performance, alternative theatre articulates social critique in accessible and emotionally resonant ways.

In this regard, alternative theatre closely aligns with the principles of development communication. Both emphasize participation, dialogue, and community engagement as essential components of social transformation. Alternative theatre operates as a communicative medium that not only disseminates information but also stimulates critical awareness and collective reflection. By combining artistic expression with social messaging, it bridges the gap between aesthetic practice and communicative action. Therefore, within this study, alternative theatre is conceptualized as a socially embedded form of performance that functions simultaneously as an artistic practice and a communicative tool. Its significance lies not merely in aesthetic innovation but in its capacity to influence audience perception, foster critical consciousness, and contribute to broader processes of social change. This theoretical framework provides the foundation for examining the development of alternative theatre in Sri Lanka and its role in shaping audience understanding and engagement.