

Ravi Chaturvedi and Tapati Gupta, ed. *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Theatricality and Artistic Crossovers*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2017. 217 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0856-2.

This anthology of essays, which confessedly derives from 2014 Conference of Indian Society for Theatre Research and circuitously from the continued existence of ISTR, is an interesting contribution to understanding drama as literature, theatre as performance and the performance arts. The book is an exploration of performance in theatre, dance, music and activism. At the very onset in the “Preface” Ravi Chaturvedi affirms that crossing over of various disciplines is an inherent phenomenon of Indian theatre and performing arts (xiii). Tapati Gupta puts forward a significant question in her “Introduction” – whether theatre can ignore or do without the other arts, science and cultural forces that make up the fabric of the civilised world, for performance has always been interdisciplinary (2). Thus a simplistic approach to the fundamental discourse of this volume titled *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Theatricality and Artistic Crossovers* is rather problematic. The essays in this volume attempt to formulate a new template of critical approaches to theatre, dealing with, in the main, structure of Indian theatre, ancient and postcolonial Indian theatre, the emergence of drama from narratives, practise of theatre, dance in theatre and dance as performance, music as performance, personal experiences of performance, women’s contributions, women’s body and bold experimentations in performance, history, culture, activism and film that make us reflect on the “artistic crossovers.” These diverse areas have been bought under assiduous enquiry and discussion. The thread that unites the assorted essays is performing arts and draws our attention to the title of the book where the word “Contemporary” is inclusive of an extensive period of more than two thousand years. In an avowal, the “Introduction” says that the readers could feel that a bit more analytical theory would be welcome.

The well-built Plot and Narratology are concepts that existed in ancient India. In “Plot and Narration in Indian Theatre: Negotiating Boundaries of Semiotic Relationship” Ravi Chaturvedi acquaints the readers with the plot structure of Indian theatre as prescribed in *Natyashastra* of sage Bharat (200 BCE -200 CE). For English literature students acquainted with Aristotle and Freytag, *Natyashastra* prescribes a more detailed graph with five successive states in the Plot. The essay also discusses the distinctive features of Indian Narratology. The dateline of these concepts is acknowledged to exist since the Vedic and Epic period when story telling was imperative for transmission of information, entertainment and for preaching of social and moral codes. In a country with such a rich heritage of theatre, history acquires an extremely significant and problematic identity within the corpus of postcolonial theatre as the playwright

must not only reinterpret available facts in new light but also shed light on blank spaces left inside colonial and nationalist paradigms.

History of a nation is often narrated in terms of selective amnesia in order to validate the self-congratulatory claims of nationalist myth making (131), as Hayden White puts it in *The Burden of History*: “We choose our past in the same way we choose our future” (132). Playwrights are often seen to participate in an innovative refashioning of history which seeks to fill in those blanks that hierarchies of power leave within the narratives of official history. The essay “Theatre and History in the Postcolony: Examining Inter-Disciplinarity in Two Indian Plays” apprises us of these stances, and studies Girish Karnard’s *The Fire and the Rain* and Utpal Dutt’s *Hunting the Sun* as two plays that purportedly rewrite history on stage, interrogate the hierarchies and power relations, and subvert the fundamental prejudices and biases that have gone into the making of the imaginary community of the nation by foregrounding marginalised or erased voices of women and outcasts, and review the Brahmanical male paradigm through which the nation has more often than not been conceptualised.

In a book dealing with artistic crossovers, it is not surprising that Rabindranath Tagore occupies much space. The western brand of opera conceptualised in an entirety of a music performance was conceived in the Tagore family in Bengal with the efforts of Swarnakumari Devi, Jyotirindranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore. Tapati Gupta’s “Tagore’s Holistic Expression” tells us how Rabindranath Tagore gave it a new life in his four music dramas *Balmiki Prativa* (1881), *Kal Mrigaya* (1882), *Mayar Khela* (1888) and *Sapmochan* (1931). They were experimentations with western and eastern musical forms that were “more than intuitive” (14). The lyric in Tagore diversified into songs to suit various emotional and ritualistic ceremonies. Tagore was the first to validate the importance of both male and female dancers in his music dramas. His recognition of the language of the body was singular in colonial Indian modernity. Tagore was not only imagining a nation, he was also creating a cultural space for it.

Abhijit Sen in his “Rabindranath Tagore and His Notion of ‘Theatre as Dance’” comments that this conceptualisation of an alternative theatre was intrinsically intertwined in Tagore with his urge for finding a new space (48). Tagore’s shift to Shantiniketan enabled him to put into practice his alternative model of theatre which began with *Sarodoutsav* (1908), followed by *Sapmochan* (1931), *Chandalika* (1933), *Chitangada* (1935) and *Shyama* (1939). *Rituranga* (1927) celebrated the cycle of seasons. Sen sees this as Tagore’s liberation of cultural space for an emergent nation. The themes for his early plays, namely, *Balmiki Prativa* (1881), *Kal Mrigaya* (1882), *Mayar Khela* (1888), *Raja O Rani* (1889) and *Visarjan* (1890) were drawn from repertoire of the Hindu past that represented the imaginative and the utopian projected with a particular political project of revival and reformation. Though his subject matter reflected the Hindu past, the style and structure were influenced by European model. It was not, however,

theatre but the indigenous form of *Jatra* which was first introduced into the Jorasanko household for performance in the first half of the 19th century. *Jatra*, also called *pala gaan*, was the most popular entertainment form with the nouveau riche absentee landlord families in Kolkata till the beginning of 19th century (167). However, with the second generation of the elites, educated and emulating the English, *jatra* came to be labelled as obscene and was substituted by the newly imported proscenium theatre (167). As *Jatra* travelled away from religious roots of rural Bengal and arrived in the city, it underwent a considerable change, as Sudipto Chatterjee explains in his book *The Colonial Staged* (2007), which resulted in diverse kinds of hybrid formulations germinating from admixture of *Jatra* and theatre.

The essay “Investigating the Inception of a New Language of Theatre in Rabindranath Tagore’s Play *Sarodoutsav*” by Rajdeep Konar sees *Sarodoutsav* (1908) as crucial to the understanding of Tagore’s oeuvre of plays. Tagore’s shifting base from Kolkata to Shantiniketan, away from the centre of nationalistic political debates to a new place not given to historicity, made his task easier. It is in his *Sarodoutsav* that Tagore could give shape to his desires; ethical binary of good and evil were toned down in intensity and rendered unstable. Konar sees Tagore as using a technique similar to the Brechtian *Verfremdung*, by which he could situate his plays in Bengali culture that enabled him to connect with his audience and at the same time maintain a distance with the contemporary world enabling him to critically comment on his own times. Both Sen and Konar refer at length to Jyotirindranth’s enthusiastic construction of artifice as close to reality as was possible.

Women theatre lovers will find out to their delight that women have had a significant history in theatre and performance, have interrogated, investigated, daringly experimented and substantially contributed to its various forms. Many of the essays in the volume speak of such women whose performance and contributions have embellished performance in India. Indian theatre was essentially a male domain. Women characters were played by male performers. Women performed concedably in dance forms considered pure, namely, Bharatnatyam, Mohiniattam and Kudtyattam or in folk forms (26). In her essay “Women Directors: Interculturalism and Repositioning of Gender in the Indian Theatre” Asha Pande gives us specifics of the women who had created their space in this male domain. Women started performing on stage only after 1900 and the majority of these women performers were courtesans. Figures of Zohra Sehgal and Uzra Butt stand out prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century. The sisters joined Uday Shankar ballet group, IPTA and became leading actors of the famous Prithvi Theatre of Bombay. Both the sisters won awards and accolades including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. They became role models for women theatre lovers in India. Zohra Sehgal also received the Padma Bivhusan award. Anuradha Kapoor, author of *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The*

Ramlila of Ramnagar, is another stalwart who had worked at NSD. The essay turns from women to women impersonators Jaishankar Sundari and Bal Gandhrava. A play based on Jaishankar's life, *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1999), investigated the man-woman figure in the theatre that evoked tremendous cross-gender fascination during the period. We hear of Amal Allana, who apart from directing plays also sought to disturb gender stereotypes by casting Manohar Singh (male) in a play called *Himmat Mai* (female).

The essay on *mujra* performer's toil and tales is an in-depth analysis that studies the fashioned performance stance and its impact on the personal lives of the performers. The *mujra* artists displayed an aura of unhappiness as a part of their performance and that performance of sorrow eventually became too innate to be separated from their existence leading them to deny their natural expressions in the real life beyond performing spaces. Sharma asserts that the leading *mujra* performers like Begam Samru, Khanum Jan, Unrao Jan and others establish that the *mujra* performers were well-cultured, talented, polished, affluent, influential, independent and far more confident than the conventional mainstream women in the given times (58). In "Response and Responsibilities: Creative Interventions and the Dancer as a Social Being," readers are acquainted with three varieties of performances explored by Chandralekha, Maya Krishna Rao and Alokanda Roy. Urmimala Sarkar Munshi speaks of Chandralekha's three minimalist experimentations in choreography comprising of 1. *Sloka* (1999), explained as "Self and Renewal," 2. *Raga* (1998), explained as "In Search of Femininity" and 3. *Sharira* (2001), a bold attempt to fuse male and female energies. Munshi next studies Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk* in response to the Delhi Gang Rape as a performance derived from Activism that alternates between the empathiser and the aggressive resister daring the audience to feel and acknowledge their feelings. It shifts its monologues and incorporates the necessary alternations keeping up with the everyday occurrences of sexual violence in India with its core theme remaining the construction of personal and sexual freedom and the idea of resistance (95).

Alokanda Roy's performances is seen as an attempt to connect with the inmates as human beings in a kind of communication they had forgotten within the confines. Playback theatre, with its dependence upon unscripted stories and improvised enactments may lack finesse, or the aesthetic impact of device theatre, or seem unsuitable for large crowds, but since the actors who narrate/dramatise the stories are from the community in focus, they empathise with the pain of the original story tellers and may share similar experiences. "The Spoken Word to Performance: A Disciplined Interdisciplinary Praxis" is a focus on this under-discussed praxis by Ajay Joshi. Ben Rivers who specialises in the use of applied theatre for community mobilisation, cultural activism and trauma response, worked with Palestinian refugees. Alecky Blythe's in *Do We Look Like Refugees*, Eva Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* and Saggherr Loadhii's *Hijra* are based on similar

juexhaustive interviews that were edited and improvised for performance. Eldhose A.Y. and Manju V.V., in “Women’s Body as a Site of Dissent: Performing Resistance in the plays of Kathryn Blume,” analyse the performances of *Lysistrata*, *The Accidental Activist* and *The Boycott* and make us rethink them as conscious acts of transmitting victimhood and trauma into theatrical activism. The female characters in the three performances illustrate how war is brought into homes through the brutal behaviour of men who carry them back from the battlefield and how women use their bodies as rhetorical sites of action by embracing their feminine sexuality. Kalonike, an Athenian women character appears trapped seeking definition of womanhood: “But what can we do? All we’ve ever done is sit around looking ornamental” (186). *Lysistrata* responds “That’s our strategy. Our instruments will be transparent dresses and dainty shoes, rouge and mask” (186). In the essay titled “Drama/Theatre and Film: The Dynamics of Exchange” Somdatta Mandal begins by pointing out that there is a propensity to regard the film as essentially a form of theatre/drama and thus it is theatre/drama that suffers most when compared to films. She distinguishes between the essentials of theatre and those of film, enumerates the problems of filming a play, which, according to Mandal, are 1) realising the verbal text in a succession of sights and sounds, 2) converting theatrical decor into cinematic decor and 3) converting a dramatic work into an “epic” (narrated) work. She delves into and concedes to Gerald Mast’s arguments. In the last part of her essay, “The Case of Adaptations,” she is of the opinion that filmic adaptations of literary texts are bound to differ from the originals, that adaptations are even called translations, and that no film can attain to the maximum power and artistic development if it adheres to the form of a play. While history of cinema is quite old, the dynamics of exchange between drama and theatre remains all-pervasive (205).

“Forbidden Dance” by A.P. Rajam deals with the Devdasi cult as music and dance performance culture. Two personal narratives reflecting on personal performance are not out of place in the volume. Devendra Sharma who sees *Nautanki* as a powerful communication tool recounts his childhood experience of his father’s performance and how it shaped his own choice of becoming a performance artist. While reflecting on music as performance we also hear of *tokari geet* and *jhumur* songs of Assam in the volume that acknowledges Coke Studio @MTV as a significant platform for performers of fusion music.

To conclude, I would like to say that this exhaustive volume of essays on performance arts is a distinctive addition to recent theatre studies.

Works Cited

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