

from
CANVAS
to
STAGE

Edited by

Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami

Dr Sanjib Borah

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AANK_A Creative Line

Guwahati · Assam · India

From Canvas to Stage

Edited by Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami and Dr Sanjib Borah

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*Dedicated to all creative artists
who have devoted everything to their art*

Contents

Editorial Note

viii

SECTION I *Opening the Frame: Conceptual Foundations*

- 1** From Sensation to Reflection: Mapping the Aesthetic Experience **I**

Dr Sanjib Borah, India

SECTION II *Performing Resistance: Theatre as Social Engagement*

- 2** The Indian Potpourri! **9**

Dr Ajay Joshi, India

- 3** Theatre Post-Covid **15**

Dr Ajay Joshi, India

- 4** Performance Art as a Transformational Experience **19**

Anupam Saikia, India

SECTION III *Regional Transitions: Local Theatres in Global Light*

- 5** Dramatic Transformations: Assamese Theatre's Evolution in the Changing Social Landscape **29**

Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami and Dr Junmoni Gogoi, India

- 6** Evolving Horizons: The Impact of Post-Dramatic Theatre on Contemporary Assamese Drama **43**

Bhaskar Jyoti Borah, India

- 7** Sri Lankan Theatre **53**

M. Safeer, Sri Lanka

- 8** Theatre in Contemporary Iran: Challenges and Opportunities **61**

Dr Somayeh Tayebi and Masoud Tayebi, Iran

SECTION IV *Reflections and Critiques: Theoretical Lenses*

- 9** The Evolution of Theatre Criticism in the Subcontinental Perspectives **75**

Professor Shafi Ahmed, Bangladesh

- About the Publisher **90**

Editorial Note

We are honoured to present *From Canvas to Stage*, a curated anthology of essays that delve into the rich and complex intersections of visual and performance arts in the contemporary moment. This book brings together voices from diverse cultural and artistic milieus—spanning abstract visual expression, post-pandemic theatre practices, performance art as resistance, and evolving regional theatres from Assam to Iran and Sri Lanka. Through these works, the volume seeks to explore a fundamental question: How do intangible creative impulses find form and resonance in our tangible world?

This publication is a part of the Publication Section of AANK_A Creative Line, a multidisciplinary cultural collective based in Assam, India. Over the years, AANK_A Creative Line has emerged as a dynamic platform committed to experimental and inclusive art practices, research, and intercultural collaboration. One of its flagship initiatives is the Bhullung-Bhuthur International Theatre Festival (BBITF), which has, since its inception, brought together theatre makers, scholars, and performers from across the globe, fostering new dialogues between local traditions and global narratives.

Our collective has also been privileged to engage in international collaborations that transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries,

working with theatre communities and cultural organizations in Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Through such exchanges—whether via collaborative productions, residencies, theatre forums, or workshops—AANK_A Creative Line continues to affirm its belief in art as a transformative force capable of building bridges and reimagining futures.

From Canvas to Stage reflects this very ethos. The essays in this volume are not simply academic discussions or aesthetic critiques; they are living documents—artistic meditations, critical reflections, and expressions of lived experience—engaging deeply with the socio-political urgencies and cultural shifts of our times.

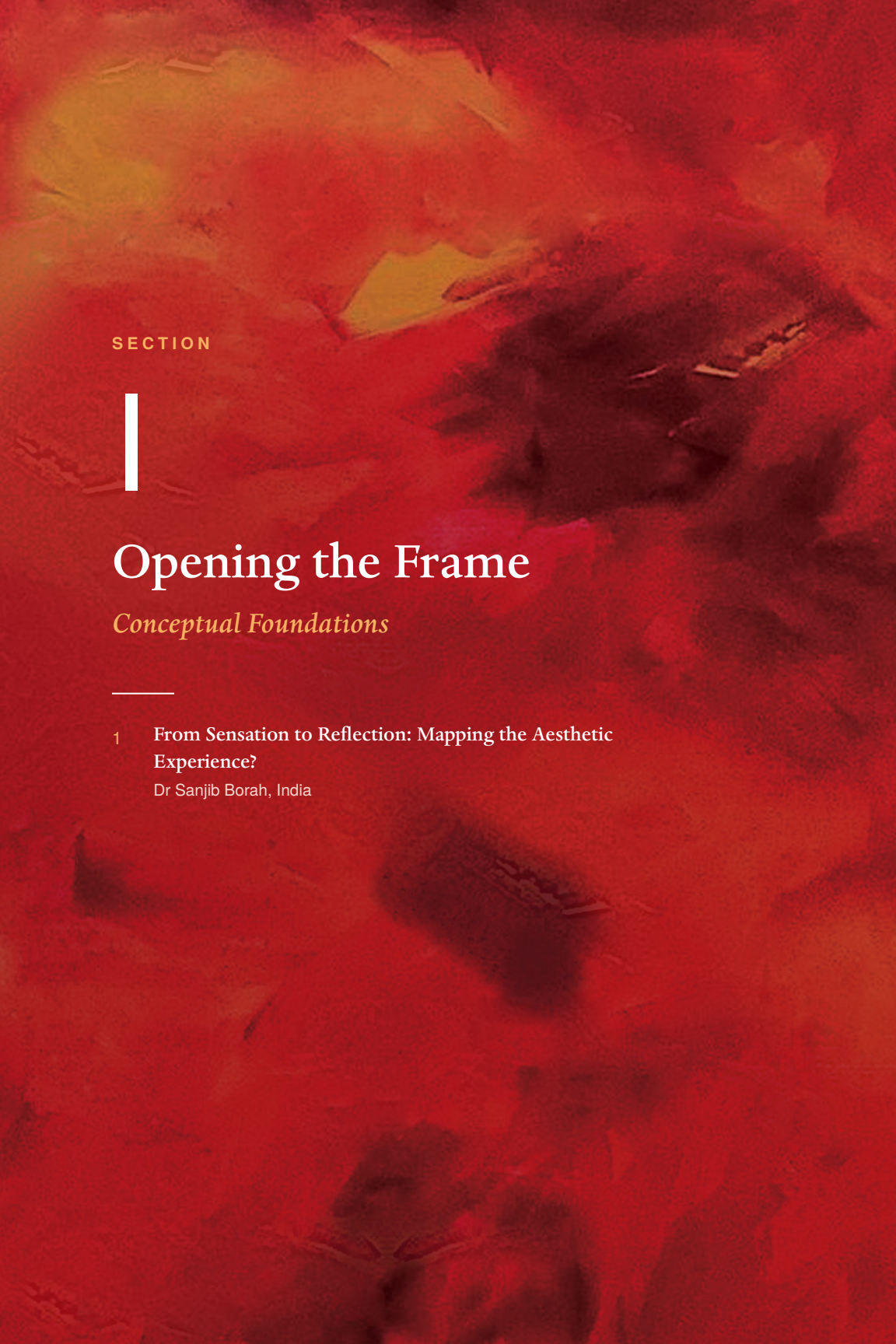
We extend our heartfelt thanks and deepest appreciation to all the writers whose insightful and passionate contributions have made this volume possible. Their diverse voices have enriched the discourse, broadened our horizons, and helped shape this publication into a meaningful testament to the enduring power of art.

We also thank our community of readers, supporters, and collaborators for believing in this vision. May this book serve as a space for inspiration, dialogue, and continued exploration of what it means to create, to question, and to connect through art.

Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami

Dr Sanjib Borah

September 2025



SECTION

I

Opening the Frame

Conceptual Foundations

-
- 1 From Sensation to Reflection: Mapping the Aesthetic Experience?

Dr Sanjib Borah, India

From Sensation to Reflection

Mapping the Aesthetic Experience?

Dr Sanjib Borah India

Every individual lives in a secret world of their own tastes. In this world of random perceptions, one becomes united with their preferences, unknowingly stepping into an aesthetic realm. Here, every experience blends with one's sense of taste, bringing joy and entertainment. At such moments, we don't deeply ponder over the artistic and creative processes; instead, we naturally accept what we see as truth and try to understand it.

However, is a painting, a poem, a story, or a novel merely what we perceive? Are the colors, brushstrokes, shapes, printed letters, and sentences all there is to it? Or is it our own taste that repeatedly gives meaning to these elements? When we discuss philosophy, psychoanalysis, or creativity, it becomes evident that there is more to our initial perceptions—another level of understanding exists. What is the relationship of this unseen understanding with art and literature? What does it do, and how does it manifest? These are questions that our ordinary sense of taste cannot answer. For that, a deeper sense of awareness is needed.

Where does this awareness come from? Is it innate? We cannot deny the possibility. If humans possess this awareness, why do we sometimes find a painting appealing without fully understanding it? Why does a poem touch our hearts while its meaning remains unclear? Why do we

feel good after reading a story, novel, or watching a movie, yet experience a sense of uncertainty?

It might seem surprising, but appreciating a painting or understanding a poem requires as much focus as understanding Buddha, Socrates, Plato, or Freud. This awareness is natural in humans, but it also requires some effort and practice to make the experience fully enjoyable. This effort enhances creative understanding and sets apart an ordinary viewer or reader from a more discerning one.

When we see a painting, our initial perception is shaped by its visible forms, colors, and elements, interpreted through our personal tastes. But is this enough to truly understand art? Certainly not! Beyond its visible form, art involves a complex process that includes the artist's creative efforts and the viewer's interpretation.

To illustrate this, let's imagine an artist (P) creating a painting (V) using a medium (M). A viewer (A) sees the painting and likes it. This seems straightforward. However, as the viewer delves deeper, they uncover the layers of the process. The visible form (I') they perceive is a symbolic representation of the artist's original idea (I). This transformation from concept to visible art involves complex creativity, which we will discuss in detail later. For now, we must understand how much of the artist's original idea (I) the viewer comprehends through the visible representation (I').

The process can be visualized as:

Artist (P) → Idea (I) → Medium (M) → Visible Artwork (V)

When reversed:

Viewer (A) → Visible Artwork (V) → Medium (M) → Idea (I) → Artist's Mind (P)

The viewer's interpretation depends on factors like their experience with art, familiarity with the medium, understanding of the subject, and previous exposure. The artist's original ideas are rarely fully represented in their artwork. Through creative choices, these ideas are

transformed into symbolic forms (I'), which the viewer must decode to reach a new understanding (I'').

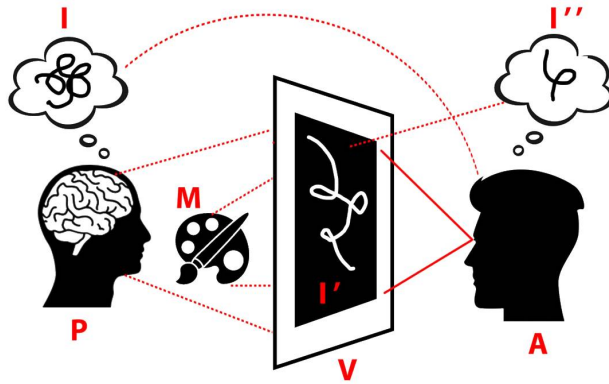


Figure 1. From idea to understanding: the artist (P) turns an idea (I), through a medium (M), into a visible artwork (V) whose symbolic form (I') the viewer (A) decodes into a new understanding (I''). Diagram: Sanjib Borah

This interplay between the artist's intent and the viewer's perception makes art a medium of connection, a bridge between minds. Similar processes apply to poetry and other literary works. A reader must interpret the symbolism embedded in words to connect with the poet's ideas.

For example, Vincent van Gogh's painting "Wheatfield with Crows" conveys a sense of loneliness and confusion through its vast fields and flying crows. The dynamic brushstrokes and striking colors create an immediate visual impact but also evoke a deeper emotional response. The skillful use of colors and strokes attracts viewers but leaves the underlying meaning mysterious, requiring deeper engagement to understand fully.

To uncover the mysteries of art, we need awareness, cultivated through curiosity and analytical effort. Without this, modern poetry may seem like a jumble of words, and abstract paintings might appear as mere patterns of color. Art's true essence lies in understanding these layers of creativity.

The flowing brushstrokes and visually striking presentation of abstract paintings captivate viewers, often creating an immediate emotional impact. This artistic brilliance might overshadow the deeper meaning of the artwork, leaving some wondering: why are abstract paintings so complex? Are they really complex at all?

Abstract art, which emerged as a significant artistic movement in the early 20th century, marked a departure from traditional representational art forms. Unlike conventional art that focuses on depicting physical objects, abstract art emphasizes elements like form, color, lines, and composition to evoke unique emotions and thoughts in viewers. It provides a refreshing new perspective, distinct from traditional tastes.

What Is Abstract Art?

The term “abstract” in art refers to a departure from the concrete and specific, focusing instead on something universal or symbolic. Abstract paintings lack a clear subject or recognizable objects, prioritizing non-representational elements. While these paintings may seem symbolic or surreal, they are not direct representations of tangible objects.

For instance, just as certain elements in literature or poetry—like Abdul Malik’s “Azokha Cholato,” Nilmani Phookan’s “Dhekiyar Anguli,” or Ajit Baruah’s “Gun Gun Dhuwar Kundoli”—evoke specific emotions, abstract art triggers feelings without providing a clear subject. It does not offer familiar symbols or objects to connect with, relying instead on the viewer’s emotions and interpretations.

Why Abstract Art Challenges Viewers

Unlike traditional paintings that guide the viewer with clear subjects or familiar imagery, abstract art demands personal engagement. It often leaves viewers puzzled, as there is no immediate or concrete meaning to grasp. This can create a sense of disconnection or confusion, similar to understanding a formless divine concept in spiritual philosophies.

Abstract paintings challenge viewers to use their emotions, experiences, and imagination to interpret the artwork. This requires time and

effort, as the absence of recognizable forms or subjects forces viewers to connect with the artwork on a more personal level.

The Viewer's Journey

Abstract art invites viewers to look beyond what is visible. It encourages them to explore emotions, colors, textures, and shapes without being constrained by specific narratives or symbols. For example, Vincent van Gogh's painting "Wheatfield with Crows" evokes feelings of isolation and confusion through its vast field, stormy sky, and scattered crows. The dynamic brushstrokes and bold colors immediately capture the eye but require deeper engagement to understand their emotional depth.

Similarly, abstract art allows each viewer to experience something unique. Over time, repeated observation of the same artwork can evoke different feelings, revealing new layers of meaning. This dynamic relationship between the viewer and the artwork is a hallmark of abstract art.

The Artist's Perspective

Abstract artists consciously move away from representational forms, focusing instead on pure shapes, colors, and compositions. This shift allows them to express emotions and ideas that might be difficult to capture through traditional methods. By rejecting the need to depict specific objects, artists explore the limitless possibilities of creative expression, inviting viewers to connect with their work on a deeper level.

For the artist, abstract art is a way to communicate complex emotions and ideas. It challenges traditional notions of art by removing fixed meanings and inviting interpretation. The viewer, in turn, becomes an active participant in the creative process, using their personal experiences to derive meaning.

Understanding Abstract Art

To appreciate abstract art, one must approach it with an open mind. Instead of looking for a specific narrative or symbol, viewers should focus on the emotions and sensations the artwork evokes. Paying attention to the formal elements, like color, texture, and composition, helps create a personal connection with the piece.

Studying the historical and cultural context of abstract art can also provide valuable insights. Learning about the artist's background, influences, and creative process reveals the inspirations behind their work, enriching the viewer's understanding.

Why Abstract Art Matters

Abstract art challenges traditional ideas of representation and encourages freedom in creative expression. It invites viewers to explore their emotions and experiences, fostering a deeper connection with the artwork. This form of art transcends boundaries, allowing both the artist and the viewer to engage in a unique dialogue that celebrates creativity and individual interpretation.

By focusing on form and color, abstract art creates a space for personal exploration, making each interaction with the artwork a unique and enriching experience.

Abstract art redefines the way we perceive and interact with creativity. While it may initially seem confusing or inaccessible, it offers an opportunity to explore emotions and ideas beyond the boundaries of traditional representation. By engaging with abstract art, viewers can discover new perspectives and deepen their appreciation of artistic expression.

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SECTION



Performing Resistance

Theatre as Social Engagement

-
- 2 **The Indian Potpourri!**
Dr Ajay Joshi, India
 - 3 **Theatre Post-Covid**
Dr Ajay Joshi, India
 - 4 **Performance Art as a Transformational Experience**
Anupam Saikia, India

2

The Indian Potpourri!

Dr Ajay Joshi India

Every time I sit down to ‘pen in’; it is invariably after much struggle against the ‘writer’s block’. But when it happens, thoughts and ideas and experiences nudge and jostle to find space in my write-up. Keeping them on track is a herculean task and when the assignment is to write on theatre and that too Indian theatre, it is a cascade. Where does one start, what does one cover, how does one rein in all that is happening, how does one overcome the temptation not to be partial in the coverage. 2000 years of theatre, with the oldest form the ‘Kuddiattam’ still practiced in certain southern pockets, the length and breadth of the country vibrating with activity, some small some big, but there to take your breath away, the dramatic times we live in giving enough inspiration to respond and so much more!

As I mulled over what to write about in this piece and definitely shying from narrating the history of Indian theatre, I wish to raise some concerns that besiege me on my theatric sojourns!

On my visit to the Emerald Island (Sri Lanka), for a symposium on ‘Traditional arts in the context of Globalisation’, as I sat back in the rather uncomfortable chair of the sparsely occupied auditorium, taking in the magnificent oration of the chairperson, Kiran Grewal from Australia, as she chalked out their use of the arts as a means of advocacy and therapy for gang rape victims, two words she used, jarred me out

of my complacency. Two words, though out of context to my previous experiences, jabbed at me and made me sit up. Yes, I had heard them often, maybe a bit too often in my travails and definitely often, back home. I had wondered then, I had tried to understand them, I had tried to reason with them, but like I was too drawn into the 'Comfort Zone', to pursue the matter further – 'Meaningful theatre' and 'Theatre of discomfort'.

Back in India, remnants of the speech had stuck on, the visit to theatre practiced by the ethnic communities in Sri Lanka left a pleasant taste, a week spent with Sanjoy Ganguly, as my roomie, and an important international voice, practicing theatre of the oppressed in Kolkata and many such 'Meaningful' occasions, came rushing to me, pleading for audience and discourse and I decided to pen in.

'As compared to our times', though this statement may sound a tad too clichéd, the present is turbulent at all quarters – social, political, economic and cultural. The world seems to be flung high in relentless wars, idiosyncrasies run unabated, dialogues thinning out, anger flared at the drop of a hat. 'Vote bank' politics ramming deep into the arts, the first victim of any cross-border conflict, hammered, abused, mutilated, coerced. Writers murdered, foreign artistes debarred from practicing in conflict zones, play shows banned and cancelled. Turbulent times indeed!

That theatre is and has been a strong tool of inciting emotions and hitting out at injustice, within its artistic limitations, is no new theory or discovery and proved beyond doubt. At one end are these 'Times', with stories galore at every turn, enough to satiate the creative instincts, and in dire need for representation and the other end an artistic community 'waiting for the right time' to react. Going by the intensity of instability in the world and a need to give vent to smothered voices and shackled intentions, the 'reactions' of the art community seems far apart. Though I don't want to sound pompous by generalising this statement and humbly claim to have not seen all works in the country, I speak for what I have, and that has been dismal.

Now I come back to these two words – ‘Meaningful Theatre’ and ‘Theatre of Discomfort’. Seemingly different, which linguistically could imply different meanings. As I try to engage with them and attempt to unravel the layers, I realise at a point that I am on slippery and highly debatable grounds and the other that they seemed to be interlinked and impacting each other. While understanding what makes theatre ‘meaningful’ it points to the nexus between the performers, the act and the viewers, while not forgetting the publicity and media that take such work to the masses. And here my ignorance of some good work done in other parts of the country could be explained. Ironically as I try to find my answers as to the implication of these words, more questions than answers befall my path. Who and what decides what is meaningful? Art could be meaningful to the creator, but then is it worth that stand, if not understood as expected by the creator, by the viewer? Does that then mean that one has to oversimplify and spoon-feed the audience? Is satisfying the audience, the ultimate and a benchmark to decide the success of a production? What is the preparedness of the artistes to tackle this challenge? How does one raise the bar of aesthetic appreciation of the audience and its training to see varied works of art, in all its complexities?

Can we compartmentalise art as paintings, theatre, dance, installations, multimedia, calligraphy, sculpturing, Graffiti, music, literature and deny their interdependence and collective response in protest to subjugation? Can they be effective ‘Cultures of resistance’? Does creating ‘Discomfort’ lead to ‘meaningful’ theatre or vice versa? If this argument were to hold ground, then does ‘meaningful’ theatre be that which is reactionary, and creates an immediate reaction and response to a situation? The theatre of protest, the theatre of oppression, street theatre! What then happens to definitions of theatre as ‘Entertainment’, ‘Awareness’, ‘Education’ etc., where impact or reach may be immediately seen? For that matter how does one measure the ‘Impact’, it being qualitative in a certain way?

This may sound rather quizzing, but it needs to be pondered upon. Whatever flavour one may give to the approach to the arts, some things

to my opinion are uncompromising. As artistes we cannot be mute 'spectators' to the changing times and have to use this important 'Artistic Tool' that we possess, to express 'meaningfully'. The need to disrobe from our 'Comfort' Apparels, and face the 'naked and exploited' truth of the times we live in, is paramount. Theatre has proved in the past that 'It' has the power to unsettle even the sturdy, which we need to rejoice in, while giving depth and a critical understanding to our work. 'Playing by the gallery' and keeping the 'Already Happy', happy, is 'self-indulgence' and 'orgasmic'; but what holds longer is the warmth and lingering remembrances in the mind of the viewer, of the work you present.

I sympathise that Impact analysis takes time. It raises more queries. If we know that theatre has the power to make a considerable difference in one's life, then at what age is it to be incorporated as a form of art? What do we do with theatres or structures which are already hardened in their philosophies and definitions of theatre and who have nestled deep in their comfort zones, astutely prophesising that theatre is for entertainment alone? I wonder whether in today's changing times, there is now, more than ever before, a need to redefine theatre and its objectives.

Though I might sound morose and depressing and overtly concerned about theatre practices in India, let me assure you that it does not dampen the spirit with which it is happening in India, in all its vigour. Keep aside if anyone is perturbed by my concerns, but the stage is set. And at times, watching some work, I tend to wonder whether I am being too pragmatic and then wanting to prove myself wrong.

The British ruled India for years and left back the Proscenium for us to cherish in. And we did do just that for the many years after them. But that was never our style, as we traditionally performed in open spaces, courtyards and temple premises. Of late I notice this resurgence of the search for alternate performative spaces. And it seems to be doing the trick – at one end overcoming the privation associated with the proscenium in terms of logistics, availability, finance etc., and at the other the accomplishment of reaching out to the audience by perform-

ing where 'they' are available. Garages, Private residences, parking spaces, courtyards, open air theatre, wooded areas and many innovative locales are being explored.

So India is fascinating in terms of the arts and can be viewed and studied from various perspectives. The more you scour the surface the deeper and better it gets, especially where theatre is concerned, spanning the entire range from the primitive and folk to highly sophisticated and chic, catering to a varied palette to cherish and for us viewers to critique!

3

Theatre Post-Covid

Dr Ajay Joshi India

It has been more than two years that we stepped out, or so we think, from the onslaught of the Covid Pandemic, which ruthlessly devoured what befell its path. And with that numerous artistes and artistic endeavours across the board, not sparing for caste, creed, gender, economic status or such. It set the world back a few years as we grappled for survival.

In those days, with desperation and despair confronting at all quarters, I had penned an article, speculating what would happen to the 'Theatric World', during and after the 'VIRAL HOLOCAUST'. And today as I browsed through my jottings, I came across this piece, which then, apart from expressing my angst at the unfolding situation which seemed hopeless, also expressed hope and predictions for the future.

I cannot resist sharing it with you, and adding an epilogue, to confirm or deny my trepidations.

Prologue

These are definitely unprecedented times. The Covid-19 hit us like a storm and overnight turned the world upside down. There was no time to prepare or even gasp, as it spread like wildfire and became the talk of the town, across the world. It was amazing how a single virus consumed the existence of mankind and lay siege on his sanity. With this

the world was confined to the virtual world – the only virus-free space to reach out, to connect, to express, to share. Theatres shut, cinemas pulled down their shutters, shootings packed up and the artistic community was largely straitjacketed. Natural calamities, wars and invasion, diseases, catastrophes are not new on this planet and we the human race have survived them! But this Covid-19 is a different ball game altogether.

The earlier days of lockdown were of scepticism, a ‘this too will pass’ attitude, with jokes and fun and frolic, traversing the corridors of social media. As it became apparent that the end of this ‘Invasion’ was far from near and uncertain, the seriousness set in. The artistic community realised that it would be a while before they get back to work. Not ready to take the hammering they flooded social media with a whole array of artistic renditions. Dance, music, talks, interviews, poetry reading sessions and what have you, were all there to ‘while away the time of quarantine’. Some of these were mundane, while others innovative. They made their presence felt in these times of ‘loneliness’. Even as major theatre festivals were cancelled across Europe and other parts of the world, live and recorded streaming took precedence and some of the world’s best stage productions were up for viewing at the click of the mouse or a gentle touch on screens of the now ‘extra smart phones’. Interestingly this form and medium of entertainment soon had a regular following of viewers, who settled into the new comfort.

But theatre is different and has always been so. It is distinct from the other fine and performing arts, as it needs an audience, even if it is a single person, to complete its engagement with the presentation. It is incomplete without the artiste–audience presence and relation. Theatre has always known to be a community art, serving many purposes beyond mere entertainment. This means that the presence of the audience is inevitable. And that too a live audience!

If this presumption is accepted in ‘normal’ times, I am forced to look at it differently in ‘today’s times’ – the time of the Covid-19. We are all confined to our homes, all theatre activity, at least in the red

zones, is under lock and key. In our own small ways, we stay connected to each other and find ways to give vent to our artistic expressions. And the resultant 'work', is up for viewing in this virtual world. There is definitely a viewership for it. If the lockdown continues and mass gatherings are restricted for a protracted period, will the audience settle in to accept this avenue to watch theatre? In the dwindling response of audiences to attend a play, as felt in major cities, will this affect it further? Will the audience 'risk this discomfort', to stay home and avail to what is available in the virtual world? Will the artiste community find this a viable and relatively cost-effective option to overcome the many hindrances of performing in a theatre – funding, ticket sale, rehearsal time, actor availability, uncertain audience, work-travel ratio, traffic, etc.? Will the virtual world entertainment be the 'New Norm' or then will it chew deep into the ways of theatre?

Having raised this concern, I am not ready to brush away the possibility that, 'Acche Din' for Theatre will never return. Theatre with its unique characteristic, will have to reconnect with its audience – live. The joy of watching a play in a 'live space', in the company of the rest of the audience, can never be replaced. That is the magic of theatre.

But something within has undoubtedly snapped. It is time for new realisations, awareness, new openings and possibilities to explore and definitely creating a new language for expression. It would be amazing if these experiments in the times of the quarantine amalgamate with the traditional theatre that we have been used to doing, and create a new means and genre!

What would happen in the future is unpredictable. However, one thing is certain, that we will be entering a new world, in different capacities and our tryst with theatre will be no exception. What this would mean, is for time to tell. And I am an optimist – waiting and watching!

Epilogue

Reading this article brings back memories and the stark times we all had to go through and endure. The questions I had raised and the trepidations felt, did travel their trajectories. The Covid times seem to be a

distant past, though the moments of angst and waiting and longing, with fear a constant companion, do rear their ugly head, time and again. But we have coursed the worst and undoubtedly theatre swam the tides, to come out stronger and steadfast. Whether this was a knee jerk reaction to breathe free of that tumultuous period, an act to survive, is difficult to fathom, but survive it did.

Today, theatre has bounced back in leaps and bounds, something that I can vouch for in my city of Pune, with its expanse seen across the board – innovativeness in form and content, mushrooming of newer, more interactive spaces, and a devoted audience growing by the numbers. So much so that I, who at one time made it an effort to watch most of the work onstage, have a long backlog of productions to catch up and sadly some have to be bypassed.

These are good times for theatre in particular and the arts in general in Pune and I think in other parts of India as well. Theatre has and always will be a space for the masses to indulge in. And this a golden period that spells its 'Revival'.

People are enjoying the shows and I for one am no longer complaining!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A renowned theatre critic, a doctorate holder in the same and a practicing dentist. He is the recipient of Indian Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Scholar (2018–19). Dr Ajay Joshi is an accomplished personality in multi-dimensional fields. He is a highly passionate individual who has been instrumental in carrying forward the legacy of theatre by educating the majority.

4

Performance Art as a Transformational Experience

Collaborative Theatre-Making: Exploring Ensemble Work and Collective Creativity

Anupam Saikia India

I am a trained painter, visual artist, and performance artist exploring the body as a visual element through multidisciplinary approaches within time and space. In this presentation, I am sharing some of my projects and how I use my body as a site, developing an immersive experience through collaborative exploration.

The notion of collaborative art-making, performances, and theatre has gained significant traditional approaches to production. Whether in theatre, music, dance, or visual arts, ensemble practices are characterized by the collaborative efforts of a group of artists or people who work together to co-create a unified artistic vision. Ensemble practices often encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, bringing together artists from different disciplines to create multi-dimensional works of art. This cross-pollination of ideas and techniques enriches the creative process, leading to innovative and boundary-pushing artistic outcomes. Unlike traditional, product-oriented approaches to art-making (especially in visual art), ensemble practices prioritize the process of creation over the final product. Artists value the journey of collaboration, exploration, and discovery, viewing each step of the process as an opportunity for growth and learning. It has prioritized improvisation and created possibilities for the “concept of unlearning,” i.e., postmodern thinking.

My practice, which is called Performance Art, involves the politics of the body, which is very prominent, i.e., more physical, solid, existential, and contextual in front of the audience, where the audience can feel the attachment, connect, and reconnect with the visual that emerges from the medium. Performance Art is a ritual process that transforms experiences, as described in Alcázar's (2015) theory (Josefina Alcázar, Mexican researcher). The site and environment I create together with my body, action and movement, and interaction with the spectators would enable this transformational experience.

The term "Performance" is used in both categories, i.e., performing arts and performance art. Theatre, drama, music, and dance are all examples of Performing Arts, while Performance Art is associated with Visual Art, which is more body-oriented. Performance Art emerged in the second half of the 20th century by breaking away from the concept of art as the creation of objects. The present, the moment, the experience, and what was undergone during the action became the things that mattered. Art ceased to exist as something material or permanent that could be negotiated or exhibited. It came to a point of abstraction in which behavior and attitude were worth more than the creation of something concrete.



Anupam Saikia in performance. Photo: courtesy of the author

On the Body

(A series of performances by Anupam Saikia happened in Hyderabad and Guwahati in 2014.)

This project started from a personal dialogue with family members. When I was working in the studio in Guwahati, my parents called me every day and told me about violence, murders, negative news, riots, community conflicts, bomb blasts, etc., constantly happening in Guwahati and many other places in Assam. These kinds of news traveled to my home through electronic and paper media, which were badly sensationalized. It is obvious that my parents were worried about their son. Meanwhile, I had to convince my father every time that I was fine and that nothing was happening in my area. These phone calls disturbed me, and this personal talk forced me to think about why they were worried so much. They were affected badly unconsciously, even though I was not near the place where all these things were happening. The sensational news provoked and fabricated fear and violence in the human psyche. I think this hidden disturbance, or unconsciously this conflict, how we see or how we were made to represent it, enhanced a delusion–illusion in our human psyche. With those questions, I wanted to intervene in the context of Assam. Meanwhile, I started to study local newspapers from 2008 to 2014 and tried to find how they manipulated stories. I collected some important news such as violence, riots, community conflicts, bomb blasts, political chaos, identical conflicts, etc. Even though the inspiration for this project came from a personal narrative, through the research, the conflict became universal.

In this performance, I juxtaposed many news headlines, created a new story, and pasted it on the body by two friends who covered their faces with Gamusha (a kind of textile used for prestigious purposes). I tried to create some questions and public rethinking towards those stories. Some of the public, whom I didn't know, came and started pasting newspapers. After one and a half hours of performance, the police came to the performance space and took me into their custody. I was detained by the police for almost 6 hours. I think the act, the interven-

tion, and the spontaneous reaction of the police were also part of the performance. I felt empowered to take creative risks and explore new artistic frontiers. The police took me from the performance space, but my performance did not end there. The mass media was reproducing the narratives, and the images traveled from door to door.

Performance has been understood as ephemeral, fragile, being present, bearing affective excess, having transformative power, identified as disappearance, etc. For me, “Art is a tool to purify myself”: through the ritualistic process, I tried to release negativity and anxiety within me. That process enhances performativity and theatricality. We can’t imagine a whole performance before doing it; interventions (we may call it collaboration) happen, which bring challenges, and the performance takes a new direction. I am always collaborating with the audience (sometimes unknown) and the site. The audience from public spaces creates interventions, and improvisation happens, which leads to new dimensions at the site. Unlike the “On the Body” performance, I tried to collaborate with the audience, even with the police official who created an effect on the content, showing the power of the state.

An approach to creative activity emerges from the collaboration and contribution of many individuals so that new forms of innovative and expressive art forms are produced collectively, developing an immersive experience at the site. Collective creativity occurs when social interactions lead to new interpretations and discoveries that individual thinking could not have generated.

I Have Become Monster

(An art performance by Anupam Saikia in solidarity with Rohith Vemula at North Shop Com, University of Hyderabad. Duration: 80 min.)

On 17th January 2016, a Dalit Research Scholar named Rohith Vemula, a student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide. He was socially boycotted by the administration of the University. I was studying at the same university, and because of this social injustice, a student’s movement was going on across the nation throughout the year. I was reading the letter again and again and tried to understand the

psyche when Comrade Rohith had written those words before killing himself. This note had shaken me a lot, and partially it influenced my performance. In this performance, I wanted to create a monstrous psychology within the human. The title was taken from the suicide note where Rohith had written, "I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body. And I have become a monster." During the process of performance, I slowly transformed into a monster and tried to develop the psychological violence that was created from the power structure, system, caste discrimination, etc. I believe that this violence or the monstrous feeling is always within us, and we should fight against this feeling, which enhances negativity. I pasted a mirror on my chest so that the viewers could feel the monstrousness in their minds through the mirror.

I submitted to the pain and risk of life, and by giving an intense reaction directly, my work reconstructs this relationship in space and time and through the emotion of the painful experience. I walked towards the viewer with a knife. Without asking them, some of the spectators took that knife and slowly cut the things that I had pasted on my body. We can interpret that they released the monster from the body.

The grandmother of performance art, Marina Abramovic, said in her interviews, "To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake ... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real." In my view, in the context of India, theatricality is everywhere in our culture, even in everyday life and mundane activities. Performance art can be theatrical but avoids acting and drama. It has to have a clear intention to transform the experience for the audience.

Lathi Charge

(According to the plan, duration was 20 minutes, an art performance by Anupam Saikia in solidarity with Rohith Vemula at North Shop Com, University of Hyderabad.)

As the mishap at the University of Hyderabad, where students were brutally beaten up by the police on 22nd March 2016 when the students tried to protest against the administration regarding the student's movement about Rohith Vemula. I think I don't need to explain this situation again. I got the inspiration from this suppression, fear, and violence created by the power structure. My body was silent, helpless, and a leather belt tied at my neck performs like a painting, entitled "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" by Francisco Goya. And my body was half bare and half black, metaphorically relating to the identical conflict. My gesture, counter-gaze, was directed to provoke the viewer and to make them think about the issue. I wanted to create the void, fear, suffocation, and suppression, etc., with the help of installed materials and gestures.

The performance was abandoned, and "activation of the public" by the spectators occurred, where the public was becoming co-creators. The audience felt responsible, improvised, and carried the performance further.

The Soul Subsists from There to Here

(A site-specific installation and art performance part of the 6th Episode of Uronta Residential Art Exchange Program. Venue: Gourarong Jamidari Bari, Sunamganj, Sylhet division, Bangladesh, 2017, curated by Sadya Mizan, Bangladesh.)

The history of land and ownership always changes with time, and we may become nostalgic or sometimes rational. My involvement in this art project was shaped by the history of how psychology took shape when geographical contours deviated. The space carries a minimum of 200 years of history, which is slowly being demolished physically, while the narrative should be rebuilt in the context. On the other hand, the context has a historical connection to my homeland that I want to re-

establish through the political map in different time periods, which I drew on a newspaper and pasted on an old wooden door. I took an impression from the wall of the old Jamidari Bari on paper, pasted it on another old door, and in the same way, pasted some manipulative sketches of the recent owner of the houses. My aim was to juxtapose different narratives pasted on the outside of the door, which carries the binary of inside out, the underlying conflict from the past that has to be re-encountered through this project.

In this part, I painted a geographical map of the region on a newspaper where I painted the eastern region of the Indian Subcontinent. There are four parts, and each part is divided into four sections by the door structure itself: one is only land and water, though we can recognize the land but not name it by ownership; the second part is the growth of British Bengal, Assam, and Burma; the third part is in 1947, “the partition”; and the fourth is after the 1971 “liberation war” of Bangladesh. We can see the land and ownership change over time, and the narratives and conflicts are fabricated in locals within the same context.

Being an Assamese, it was very difficult to work in the Bangladesh region because there have been migration issues over the last 30 years. The conflict is politicized everywhere. During conversations with the locals, I found many similarities with my homeland, such as language, dialect, culture, food habits, etc., where somehow the contour doesn’t work in between. From the day I began at the site, I tried to intervene with my body and communicate with the locals. On the last day, sitting in front of my painting installation, I covered myself with transparent plastic and blew up almost 20 balloons inside that. All the way through, I filled up the map with mud, which is one of the best parts of the performance.

Taking a small nap, I thought I should end the performance. I started walking towards the pond and took a bath in the pond beside the Jamidari Bari. Indeed, when I moved back, I saw the locals waiting to look after me. The question arose whether they were expecting something more or were involved in the essence/mood of the performance.

When I came back to the site after changing my clothes, some of the locals were just sitting or standing around me without asking anything. I felt uneasy and moved to another area, and again, they moved with me. I didn't understand what they wanted from me through silence, and even I didn't ask anything. I didn't want to break the silence, or maybe my questions would make them uncomfortable. The next day, on the open studio day of the residency, I went to the site, and the other artists' works were destroyed—the paper, writings, poets, photographs, etc., torn apart by the locals—but the part of my painting installation, the political map, was still there without damage. This was the best feeling in the residency program.

In the context of collaboration with other artists, I wanted to share a project titled “Art as a Difficult Place, Art from a Difficult Position” under the Srinagar Biennale Basel, Switzerland, curated by Janine Schmutz & Parvez Imam. It is designed as a Performance Arts Festival that factors in the Virtual and the Real, engages with an intense Residency as a partial source of production, and builds upon ‘Collaborate and Connect’ as a corollary to ‘overcoming the difficult’. The Biennale showcased performances by eight selected Performance Artists, four from India and four from Switzerland for the Residency, who were free to interpret the central theme as they wished and were expected to work with minimal material and/or the body, besides connecting and collaborating with each other. I was one of the selected Indian artists who tried to collaborate as much as possible, to learn, and engage with others. This project unfolded in two episodes spread over a month with online and live performances, performances in public spaces, a multimedia exhibition, a production-oriented ten-day residency for eight Performance Artists in Basel, and an Education and Outreach program. The online interactions in Episode 1, which happened in Bangalore and Basel, had familiarized the artists with each other's works and helped them come together. Over the next few days, both formal and informal discussions and meetings continued. The artists had to plan their solo performances and collaborative works, as well as a performance in a public space during the Open Stage Open Air event.

In the context of India, over a decade, the Kolkata International Performance Art Festival (KIPAF) developed a kind of collaboration, and they called it “Jamming,” which can start anytime, anywhere. In this festival, almost around 30 artists from all over the world stayed together and worked individually, as well as collaborated, for four days in different locations in Kolkata City.

Another platform, called “In_Process,” develops a process-oriented performance practice in public spaces in different parts of India and South Korea. On this platform, different artists come together in one place and develop collaborative work, and indeed this platform organizes exhibitions, discussions, and online seminars on a collective inquiry on space and time, collaborative approaches to understanding the body, developing durational work, etc. The open session, as part of the “In_Process,” allows anyone to join and express themselves on the collective platform as per the site and sometimes as a decided concept.

Conclusion

Performances in collaborative approaches transcend the conventional hierarchical structure of art-making collectively, even in theatre production, nurturing a democratic environment where everyone contributes to the creative process. It embodies and cultivates a new experience through the amalgamation of diverse perspectives, thoughts, and new dialogues, opening up a new discourse. In conclusion, collaborative theatre-making represents a paradigm shift in the realm of performance, heralding a new era of creativity, inclusivity, and artistic excellence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anupam Saikia is a Painter, Visual Artist, & Art Educator with over 12 years of experience in Performance Art. Based in Guwahati, Assam, he is currently working as a Lecturer at the Govt. College of Art & Crafts. His live actions and work has been exhibited in Basel, Malmo, Korea, Istanbul, Bangladesh, and many Public places & Galleries in India. In 2018, he completed a performance residency at Srinagar Biennale Basel in Switzerland.

SECTION



Regional Transitions

Local Theatres in Global Light

-
- 5 **Dramatic Transformations: Assamese Theatre's Evolution in the Changing Social Landscape**
Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami and Dr Junmoni Gogoi, India
 - 6 **Evolving Horizons: The Impact of Post-Dramatic Theatre on Contemporary Assamese Drama**
Bhaskar Jyoti Borah, India
 - 7 **Sri Lankan Theatre**
M. Safeer, Sri Lanka
 - 8 **Theatre in Contemporary Iran: Challenges and Opportunities**
Dr Somayeh Tayebi and Masoud Tayebi, Iran

5

Dramatic Transformations

Assamese Theatre's Evolution in the Changing Social Landscape

Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami and Dr Junmoni Gogoi India

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the evolution of Assamese Theatre from 1967 to 2016, focusing on its transformative journey amidst the changing socio-political dynamics of Assam. Drawing from sociological perspectives and historical contexts, the paper analyzes key developments in Assamese Theatre, including the integration of folk elements, ethnic narratives, and postmodern influences. Through case studies of selected productions and critical analysis of playwrights' contributions, the paper elucidates the symbiotic relationship between Assamese Theatre and contemporary social life. It highlights the role of playwrights, directors, and theatre groups in ushering in dramatic transformations, shaping Assamese Theatre's narrative landscape and cultural significance.

KEYWORDS Assamese Theatre, socio-political dynamics, folk elements, ethnic narratives, postmodern influences.

Introduction

Literature and performing arts serve as reflections of societal dynamics, embodying the collective ethos and individuality of a community. Sociological perspectives define society as a net-

work of individuals navigating shared customs and goals (MacIver & Page 5). Within this framework, Assamese Theatre stands as a significant cultural expression, evolving alongside the socio-economic and political landscape.

This study focuses on the transformative period of Assamese Theatre from 1967 to 2016. This era witnessed pivotal moments, such as Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya's ground-breaking staging of Arun Sarma's "Srinibaran Bhattacharya" in 1967, shaping the theatrical landscape of Guwahati. Amidst thousands of plays and performances, this research employs a case study approach to analyze selected productions, highlighting trends across epic, absurd, folk, ethnic, physical, and postmodern genres. The goal is to explore the symbiotic relationship between Assamese Theatre and contemporary social life.

Post-Colonial Evolution of Assam: Socio-Political Dynamics (1947–2016)

The post-colonial era in Assam, spanning from 1947 to 2016, marks a period of significant socio-political upheaval and evolution. India's independence in 1947 integrated Assam into the nation, setting the stage for a complex interplay of socio-economic and political dynamics. The post-independence era witnessed a multitude of challenges, including the assimilation of migrants, global events' resonance, and the introduction of new literary theories and scientific advancements that deeply influenced Assamese society (Goswami 65). Understanding this backdrop is crucial to contextualize the evolution of Assamese Theatre during the period from 1967 to 2016.

One significant challenge post-independence was the accommodation of approximately 2.25 lakh migrants in Assam. This influx, coupled with global events such as World War II, brought about profound changes in Assamese society, shaping its socio-political landscape. Additionally, the establishment of educational institutions like Gauhati University in 1948 and the Assam Agricultural College and Assam Veterinary College in subsequent years contributed to the region's intellectual and cultural milieu (Goswami 67).

However, alongside these developments, Assam grappled with socio-political unrest, exemplified by movements like the *Adhiar movement* protesting against land policies and the ban on the Communist Party (Baishya 112). The struggles of the Assamese middle class for governance and power, as highlighted by Hiren Gohain's observations, underscored the complexities of post-independence governance (Gohain, *Sahitya aru Chatana*, 27–28).

Land issues and economic challenges persisted despite attempts by the government to address them through legislation like the Assam Fixation of Ceiling and Landholding Act, 1956 (Kalita 131). Moreover, natural disasters like the severe earthquake in 1950 and armed conflicts, such as the invasion by China in 1962, added to the region's challenges (Rao 315, Rao & Hazarika 29, Kalita 137).

The linguistic and ethnic diversity of Assam further contributed to its socio-political landscape. The language movement in the early 1960s, culminating in the declaration of Assamese as the state language, and the demand for separate states by various ethnic groups underscored the region's complex identity dynamics (Rao & Hazarika 94).

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed intensified movements for self-determination by ethnic groups like the Bodos and Nagas, leading to the establishment of separate states (Rao & Hazarika 318). Simultaneously, Assam experienced armed struggles and political upheavals, including the Naxalite movement and the Assam movement against illegal immigration (Hussain 104).

These socio-political tensions found expression in various forms of artistic and literary endeavours, including Assamese Theatre. Playwrights and artists began addressing socially relevant issues, moving away from traditional themes towards realism and social commentary. The proliferation of education and the establishment of cultural institutions further fuelled this intellectual and artistic renaissance.

Despite the challenges and conflicts, Assam witnessed infrastructural development like the inauguration of the Saraighat Bridge, Kaliabhumura Bridge, Naranarayan Setu etc. which facilitated economic

growth and connectivity. However, these developments were juxtaposed with instances of violence and unrest, such as the Neli massacre in 1983 and the emergence of militant groups like ULFA (Talukdar & Kalita 40).

The late 20th century saw the escalation of militancy, internal strife, and human rights abuses, as evidenced by the 'secret killings' and the proliferation of militant groups like ULFA and NDFB (Talukdar and Kalita 144). These conflicts deeply impacted Assamese society, fostering an environment of fear and instability.

Despite these challenges, Assam witnessed periods of political change and socio-economic development, marked by the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 and the establishment of new State (Talukdar and Kalita 42). However, these developments were tempered by ongoing conflicts and tensions, highlighting the region's complex socio-political landscape.

In conclusion, the post-colonial evolution of Assam from 1947 to 2016 was marked by socio-political upheaval, economic challenges, and cultural renaissance. The region grappled with issues of identity, governance, and development, shaping its artistic and literary expressions, including Assamese Theatre. Understanding this historical context is essential to appreciate the complexities of Assam's socio-political dynamics and its impact on artistic and cultural expressions.

Overall Discussion

In exploring the characteristics and evolution of Assamese Theatre in the post-colonial era, it becomes evident that playwrights have made commendable efforts to depict contemporary social realities within historical contexts. Notably, socio-politically conscious plays have emerged, addressing economic disparities and class dynamics of the time. This period also witnessed a significant shift in the stylistic approach of Assamese Theatre, with the introduction of new forms such as absurd, epic, folkloric, and post-modern plays, which have influenced both writing and staging techniques. However, it is worth noting that while many plays delve into pressing social issues, there is a tend-

ency among Assamese playwrights to overlook issues related to land disputes among the region's diverse ethnic groups and the economic injustices faced by tribal communities.

A prime example of this evolution can be seen through an analysis of select notable plays from this period, particularly those representing the new genres introduced. One such playwright who played a pivotal role in reshaping Assamese Theatre is Arun Sarma. Emerging in the 1960s, Sarma challenged established norms with his ground-breaking works, notably "Urukha Poja" (1952). His radio play "Eya Gadya," later adapted into the stage play "Srinibaran Bhattacharya," introduced a new trend in Assamese theatrical literature, deviating from conventional concepts prevalent at the time. Collaborating with Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya, who brought innovative ideas following theatre training abroad, the duo revolutionized Assamese Theatre with their production of "Srinibaran Bhattacharya" in 1967. Bhattacharya's directorial approach, influenced by Western styles, marked a departure from traditional Assamese staging, incorporating symbolic scenery and meticulous lighting design to convey characters' internal emotions effectively. Despite initial resistance, their production laid the foundation for modernization in Assamese Theatre, setting a new direction in stage structure and production techniques (Goswami 183; Bhattacharyya, *Adhunik Asomiya Natak: Parikhya Nirikhya aru bibhinna Dhara* 17).

A critical examination of "Srinibaran Bhattacharya" reveals its thematic depth, with scholars highlighting its portrayal of a playwright's struggle against societal values. Mahendra Bora emphasizes the play's reflection of prevailing socio-economic and political conditions, illustrating the playwright's isolation in a society driven by false ideals (Bora, *Sahitya aru Sahitya*, 209). The dialogue between characters further elucidates the underlying themes, notably in Nandini's monologue, where she symbolically urges Aniruddha to uncover the truth behind a metaphorical mountain, representing societal illusions and injustices. Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya contextualizes this metaphor within the socio-political landscape of 1960s Assam, shedding light on the tensions between tribal and non-tribal communities, thereby under-

scoring the play's relevance in addressing contemporary issues (Bhat-tacharya, *Patani* 7).

Another significant contribution to Assamese Theatre is Sarma's "Ahar," categorized as an absurd play, which emerged as a response to the disillusionment prevalent in Western society post-World War II. Drawing inspiration from existentialist themes, "Ahar" explores the absurdity of human existence through fragmented narratives and disjointed characters. The play's title, with its layered connotations related to sustenance and nourishment, reflects the multifaceted exploration of human relationships amidst chaos and isolation. Sarma's experimental approach in "Ahar" mirrors the broader wave of change in Assamese Theatre during the 1970s, as playwrights sought to capture the complexities of modern life and societal values.

The staging of "Ahar" under the direction of Dulal Roy further exemplifies the evolution of Assamese Theatre, with its incorporation of symbolic stage settings and innovative use of lighting effects. Critics lauded Roy's adaptation for its authenticity and thematic novelty, positioning the play as a trailblazer in modernizing Assamese theatrical literature (Barman 96). Dilip Sarma highlights the transformative impact of Roy's staging, transcending the audience's reality and elevating the potential of Assamese theatre performances (Sarma, *Dulal Royr Natya Charcha Aru Bhabana* 13).

The integration of folk elements into Indian theatre, which gained momentum in the 1960s and later found resonance in Assamese Theatre during the 1980s, prompted scholars like Sailen Bharali to raise concerns about the potential dilution of Assamese Theatre's uniqueness (Bharali, *Asomiya Natak: Swarajuttar Kaal* 72). Bharali observed that this shift encompassed changes in style, gestures, and mediums, leading to a blending of folk elements within the theatrical landscape.

In their exploration of this integration, playwrights and directors adopted three primary approaches. Firstly, they drew inspiration from the performance style of folk Theatres or theatrical traditions, exemplified by works like "Charandas Chor," based on the Chhattisgarh folk Theatre 'Nach' by Habib Tanvir. Secondly, they incorporated diverse

elements of folk art such as folk songs, dances, and languages into their productions, as evidenced in plays like “Chakrabehu” by Ratan Thiyam of Manipur, utilizing Manipuri folk martial art ‘Thangta,’ or Naren Patgiri’s “Dibakar Atmakatha”, which integrated Goalpara folk songs. Thirdly, they adapted folktales, folklore, or fairy tales, presenting them through various folk arts, as seen in works like Paramanand Rajbanshi’s “Kamala Kunwari” based on the fairy tale of Kamala Kunwari, or Basanta Das’s “Rangpharpi Rangbe”, inspired by Karbi folklore and featuring Karbi songs and dances (Goswami 74–75).

This incorporation of folk elements into modern Indian Theatre served to distinguish it from Western influences, imbuing it with a distinct Indianness. Similarly, in the context of modern Assamese Theatre, the successful integration of folk elements played a pivotal role in establishing its unique identity at both regional and national levels. Prior to this integration, Assamese Modern Theatre had exhibited a reformist character influenced by Western proscenium stages, but lacked a strong connection with indigenous folk roots. However, with the assimilation of folk elements, modern Assamese Theatre found a way to bridge this gap, consolidating its distinctive identity.

From the 1980s onwards, theatre practitioners in Assam embarked on experimental journeys, incorporating folk elements into their works. This led to the creation and staging of numerous modern plays over several decades, spanning the latter part of the 20th century and the initial years of the 21st century. Productions like Jugal Das’s “Bayonar Khol” (1982), Satish Bhattacharya’s “Maharaja” (1983), Akhil Chakraborty’s “Ejon Raja Achil” (1985), and Arun Sarma’s “Buranjipath” (2001) invigorated modern Assamese Theatre, fostering an atmosphere of promise and creativity.

One significant production within this trajectory is Ali Haidar’s “Dhumuha Pakhir Nir”. While the first genre-defining play in Assamese Theatre history was “Bayonar Khol,” published around 1982–83, “Dhumuha Pakhir Nir” marked a pioneering effort in performance, crafted in the style of Ankia Bhaona and initially staged in December 1978. Despite being overshadowed by “Bayonar Khol” in critical discourse, its

significance remains undeniable. The play delves into the economic struggles of a middle-class family, symbolically reflecting broader societal challenges in Assam.

Staged in a folk theatre style, the director drew upon the physicality of bhaona, with the sutradhar's character portrayed through singers' incarnations, employing sutradhar's gestures during songs, dances, and interactions with other characters. The incorporation of backdrops and cues, along with symbolic scenery constructed through multiple ramps, added depth to the performance. While characters were portrayed realistically in costumes and acting, the use of lighting projection and hues enhanced the play's visual impact. Critics have lauded Ali Haidar's adeptness in infusing bhaona elements into his productions, highlighting the director's meticulous approach (Oja 17).

The significance of "Dhumuha Pakhir Nir" extends beyond its narrative framework. It represents a significant milestone in the integration of folk art within the broader context of All-India plays, particularly in the Assamese theatre scene. Never before had folk art been utilized with such precision in Assamese Theatre, underscoring the play's importance in the realm of Assamese theatre.

Examining the thematic depth of the play, it becomes evident that while it revolves around a family, it serves as a mirror reflecting the contemporary state of Assam. Through nuanced storytelling, the playwright intricately weaves societal nuances into the family's narrative, portraying both macro and micro aspects of society, including social transformations and class conflicts. Anjan Oja's commentary further elucidates the play's broader societal relevance, highlighting its portrayal of generational clashes and societal upheavals prevalent during the 1970s (Oja 17).

During the era under discussion, there was a notable endeavour among playwrights of ethnic origin and Assamese directors to interweave ethnic narratives with their folk roots, incorporating indigenous languages and customs to create a distinct theatrical genre. This movement was greatly influenced by the pioneering work of playwright-director Heisnam Kanhailal from Manipur, particularly his "Ritual

Theatre” approach, which emphasized indigenous languages and themes. Prior to this influence, representations of tribal lives in theatre were limited, with few productions exploring such themes and often lacking in quality. However, one standout effort during this period was “Rangharpi Rangbe,” penned by Basanta Das and directed by Rabijita Gogoi in the Karbi language, later translated by Saiching Rangpi.

Premiered at the Karbi Youth Festival in Diphu on February 9th and 10th, 2001, “Rangharpi Rangbe” comprised 13 short scenes centred around the story of a Karbi king who raises a tiger cub captured from the forest. The play vividly depicted various Karbi festivals, songs, and dances while also highlighting the oppression of the common people by the king. The narrative reached its climax when Kareng Rangpharpi defied the king’s order to feed the tiger cub, resulting in a confrontation that ultimately led to her arrest and the threat of the village’s destruction. Kareng’s defiance against injustice serves as the central theme of the play, inspiring others to resist exploitation and oppression.

In terms of staging, the director opted for minimal scenery, relying on essential decorative elements to set the scenes. Background music drawn from Karbi folk tunes enriched the cultural context, while costumes reflected Karbi tradition with imaginative designs. Acting was portrayed realistically, with lighting playing a pivotal role in setting the play’s tone and mood.

I had the opportunity to witness the staging of “Rangharpi Rangbe” at the North East Karbi Festival in Sonapur on February 15th, 2003. The director skilfully portrayed contemporary themes through a Karbi folk tale, employing lighting and background music to convey the play’s central message. In discussing the purpose behind staging the play, the director emphasized the importance of resisting oppression and preserving cultural identity.

This production marked the beginning of a trend where several directors, especially those of ethnic origin, began exploring similar themes, signaling a promising development for Assamese Theatre. Noteworthy practitioners in this regard include Pabitra Rabha, Late Shukracharya Rabha, and others. Additionally, the concept of residen-

tial theatre practice emerged during this period, introduced by Kan-hailal's students, emphasizing body language in theatrical expression.

In more recent years, the concept of "post-modern Theatre" has made its way into Assamese theatre, influenced by similar movements in literature, philosophy, and other arts. This genre, characterized by its experimental nature and departure from traditional norms, utilizes diverse textuality and incorporates elements of installation art, still images projections.

A notable example of postmodern Theatre in Assam is "Gaatha-the 1st text," directed by Rabijita Gogoi and staged by Jirsong Theatre in August 2003. This production diverged significantly from conventional forms of writing and staging, incorporating diverse texts and imagery to create a rich pastiche of contemporary Assamese life. Following its staging, theatre critic Anand Lal praised the play for its original vision and likened its effect to Robert Wilson's Theatre of Image (Goswami 46). "Gaatha-the 1st text" exemplifies this trend, blending diverse artistic genres and media forms to create a new artistic language.

Dr Mrinal Jyoti Goswami has played a significant role in furthering the presence of postmodern Theatre in Assam through productions like "Rajai Hukum Diday," "Imaan Imaan Pani," and "Tuponi ye Tore Kalatalat Ghar." However, it's important to note that there remains a scarcity of practitioners in this genre within Assam, highlighting the need for continued exploration and experimentation in Assamese Theatre.

Conclusion

The journey of Assamese Theatre is a captivating tapestry woven with diverse influences, ranging from its traditional origins to its bold experimentation with postmodernism. Beginning with the infusion of folk elements in the 1980s to its recent ventures into postmodern explorations, Assamese Theatre has embarked on a remarkable voyage of evolution. The incorporation of folk art, the exploration of absurdity, and the embrace of postmodern aesthetics have profoundly shaped its nar-

rative landscape, reflecting the ebb and flow of societal dynamics and cultural nuances over time.

The discussed plays serve as cultural landmarks, each grappling with the complexities of modern existence, reviving ancient folklore, or delving into the intricacies of postmodern thought. They bravely confront issues of societal injustice, challenge conventional norms, and beckon viewers to introspect on the human condition. Through a diverse array of theatrical styles, symbolic staging, and innovative non-verbal storytelling techniques, Assamese Theatre exudes a dynamic vibrancy that captivates audiences.

The vision and dedication of pioneering playwrights, directors, and theatre groups deserve commendation for spearheading these transformative changes. Their relentless pursuit of innovation has heralded a new era in Assamese theatre, introducing fresh modes of storytelling and redefining theatrical presentation.

While this discourse sheds light on the evolution of Assamese Theatre over the past five decades, it also unveils a vast landscape ripe for further exploration and scholarly inquiry. The depth and breadth of this artistic odyssey demand ongoing scrutiny to unearth additional layers of its artistic and cultural significance. In essence, the journey of Assamese Theatre is an ever-unfolding narrative, seamlessly blending tradition with innovation, and serving as a poignant testament to the enduring spirit of artistic expression in the region.

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6

Evolving Horizons

The Impact of Post-Dramatic Theatre on Contemporary Assamese Drama

Bhaskar Jyoti Borah India

The journey of modern Assamese drama began in the 19th century and has continued into the 21st century, marked by numerous obstacles and innovative experiments along the way. Overall, the emergence of Assamese drama in the 19th century was a true reflection of inspired artistic action. In other words, the Assamese drama of that era was shaped by both Eastern and Western influences. Whether addressing social reform or ideological struggles, each play reflected its themes and performances through external contexts. Throughout this inevitable journey, there has been significant innovation and creativity, which has undoubtedly added new dimensions to the field of theatre.

Drama has emerged as a significant art form worldwide, evolving from its primitive origins through a systematic progression. The key to its enduring greatness lies in the various experiments that have taken place across the ages. In the context of globalization, every artistic expression is continually evolving through innovative experiments that respond to the demand for change. Assamese drama continues to evolve on this journey, having been established through various experiments and challenges. Assamese drama, which gained prominence in the 19th century, has since been shaped by a variety of influences and theories from both the East and the West. In essence, contemporary

Assamese theatre draws significantly from Western traditions. While there are several folk art-based Assamese dramas in practice, they remain relatively limited in number. Additionally, various artistic movements, such as absurdist, modernism, and postmodernism, have been reflected partially in Assamese drama since its inception. There have been numerous experiments in Assamese drama informed by these theories. Assamese drama has received widespread acclaim at both national and international levels, with many adaptations of Assamese plays drawn from renowned novels and poems. In this sense, Assamese drama has entered a golden age, significantly influenced by Western doctrines. However, there remains considerable room for growth and improvement on its path to further achievement.

Recently, a new concept and style has emerged in Assamese drama known as Post-Dramatic Theatre. This shift is prominently exemplified in Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's latest play, *Erendira's Metamorphosis*. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami doing some commendable works on experimentations and post modernism in Assamese drama, and understanding this concept is crucial for appreciating its significance within the broader context of Assamese literature and culture. The rise of postmodernism in Assamese drama marks a transformative period, reflecting changing societal values and artistic expressions. Exploring these developments is essential not only for the evolution of Assamese theatre but also for understanding their implications on the cultural and social landscape of the region. As we examine the emergence of post-dramatic elements in this genre, we can gain deeper insights into the artistic innovations that are shaping the future of Assamese drama.

Understanding the significance of postmodernism in the history of Assamese drama is crucial. The influence of postmodernism is clearly reflected in Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's plays such as *Iman Iman Pani* (We Are Drowning), *Topani A Tore Kalatolot Ghar* (Complacency Ruins Us!), and *Irikati-Mirikati* (The Butterfly Effect). Moreover, Mrinal Jyoti Goswami has introduced a new style known as Post-Dramatic Theatre, characterized by innovative experimentation. Some may wonder why it is necessary to discuss these various elements when addressing this

new theatrical style. However, to fully appreciate Post-Dramatic Theatre, it is essential to consider its historical context. Although contemporary concepts have emerged with the passage of time, they often connect with earlier traditions, sometimes indirectly. This suggests that Post-Dramatic Theatre does not replace traditional dramatic forms; rather, it represents an evolution, a new stage in the on-going development of theatrical expression. It is essential to highlight the post-modern plays of Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, as they have significantly contributed to the emergence of a new theatrical style, culminating in the establishment of the Assamese Post-Dramatic Theatre with *Erendira's Metamorphosis*. As engaged audience members and practitioners of drama, our aim is not to critique but to inform about this innovative concept within Assamese theatre and the distinctive performance style showcased in Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's adaptation of *Erendira's Metamorphosis*. Our primary goal is to illuminate these developments and their implications for the future of Assamese drama.

The tradition and concept of Post-Dramatic Theatre emerged in the mid-1970s to 1980s, notably shaped by the Wooster Group. This new style was further articulated by German scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann in his seminal work *Postdramatic Theatre*. Lehmann employed the term "Post-Dramatic Theatre" to describe an approach within Western theatre and performance that moves away from the traditional fictional representations of reality and the written play as the central element of theatrical production. Post-Dramatic Theatre fundamentally differs from conventional dramatic forms in several ways. Characterized by a multi-textual landscape, it contrasts sharply with traditional narratives that often impose rigid structures. In Dramatic Theatre, various elements are typically well-organized within the confines of a storyline, which can lead to limitations in performance style and distance the audience from a fully immersive dramatic experience. In contrast, Post-Dramatic Theatre balances diverse elements such as dialogue, imagery, and action, creating a dynamic and engaging theatrical process that resonates with audiences. This innovative approach not only contributed

to the success of Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's *Erendira's Metamorphosis* but also helped establish a new genre within Assamese dramatic literature.

Erendira's Metamorphosis is an Assamese adaptation of the 1972 novel *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother* by Gabriel García Márquez. 12-year-old Erendira was living in a house with her grandmother when a fire broke out in the house. The grandmother decided to blame Erendira for the accident and to seek compensation for the property destroyed in the fire. Accordingly, her grandmother sells her to a brothel and Erendira becomes a prostitute. In other words, Erendira becomes a living document of a Power Game. That is the main story of the play. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami has adeptly transformed the vivid depiction of exploitation found in Márquez's work into *Erendira's Metamorphosis*. A notable feature of this adaptation is the use of the actor as a narrator, who presents Erendira's story directly to the audience through performance. This narrative technique not only enhances audience engagement but also blurs the boundaries between actor and character, contributing to the play's classification as post-dramatic theatre. In this context, the actor's dual role enriches the storytelling, allowing for a deeper exploration of the themes of power and victimization inherent in the narrative.

Post-dramatic theatre cultivates a distinct aesthetic by redefining the relationship between the performance text and the material context of the acting space. In this genre, the focus shifts from fidelity to the original text to creating a meaningful impact on the audience. The role of the narrator becomes crucial, as they bridge the main themes of the story and engage the audience through performance. Post-dramatic theatre also reconceptualises the theatrical experience as a lived event rather than mere represented fiction. As Lehmann (2006) articulates, this form emphasizes "shared energies instead of transmitted signs." Additionally, post-dramatic theatre often incorporates the fragmentation and disorganization characteristic of a novelist's writing, reflecting a deeper complexity within the narrative.



A scene from *Erendira's Metamorphosis*, directed by Mrinal Jyoti Goswami. Photo:

AANK_A Creative Line

Erendira's Metamorphosis, a work that embodies director Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's insightful vision, exemplifies these principles. The adaptation mirrors the original novel's themes while conveying the entire story through the lens of a single narrator, effectively engaging the audience in a unique and reflective experience. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's *Erendira's Metamorphosis* showcases significant innovations in the performative style of contemporary Assamese theatre. Central to this discussion is the crucial role of management in performative rites. We contend that *Erendira's Metamorphosis* exemplifies the director's profound vision and thoughtful approach. A key aspect of the play is its

conceptualization of stage space. It is common for directors to overlook the importance of a cohesive stage concept, despite their careful consideration of the play's elements. While many directors may have a strong overall vision, they often struggle to translate this into effective stage design, resulting in a disconnection between their intentions and the final execution. The design of the stage profoundly influences a play's performance. Ideally, a director should have a clear architectural vision for the stage before the production begins. However, when this vision fails to materialize in practice, it can severely impact the overall staging and effectiveness of the performance. Goswami's work, in contrast, demonstrates a successful integration of stage design and performative elements, enhancing the audience's experience and engagement with the narrative.

In the context of world theatre, it is evident that various staging configurations exist, each influenced by different theatre management practices. However, Assamese theatre faces specific challenges in its performance and staging practices. These challenges stem from a variety of factors, including resource limitations, traditional conventions, and the need for innovative approaches to engage contemporary audiences. Addressing these issues is crucial for the evolution and sustainability of Assamese theatre within the broader theatrical landscape. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami has introduced a fresh perspective on stage design within contemporary Assamese theatre through his play *Erendira's Metamorphosis*. The performance takes place in a small studio space, offering an alternative to traditional proscenium staging. Goswami meticulously arranges a well-decorated stage before the production, effectively grounding the play in a cohesive visual context. With a runtime of approximately one hour and twenty minutes, the play captures the audience's attention through its thoughtful management of stage dynamics. This underscores the importance for directors to consider not only the overall concept of the play but also the specific stage design. While the concepts and planned designs may not be universally applicable across all stages, Goswami remains uncompromising in his vision. He approaches stage design with the same architectural intent

that he applies to the play's narrative, resulting in a well-defined performance space. Goswami's innovative approach has significantly enriched the discourse on stage and space within Assamese theatre. However, this concept is not without its limitations, the focus on a specific stage design may present challenges when attempting to create a broader theatrical canvas. Nevertheless, this approach contributes to an integrated theatre management style that enhances the overall impact of the performance.

Secondly, the use of properties in *Erendira's Metamorphosis* adds significant depth to the play. Director Mrinal Jyoti Goswami has thoughtfully selected props that are intricately connected to the narrative, enhancing the story from beginning to end. Notably, these props facilitate actor coordination and interaction, a crucial aspect often overlooked in theatrical productions. In many instances, props are used merely for decorative purposes, leading to a disconnection from the artistic intent of the play and giving it a circus-like quality. However, Goswami demonstrates a keen awareness of this pitfall by employing props that create harmony between the actors and their environment. It is essential to recognize that props, along with lighting and other elements, function as characters within the play. A lack of balance in their staging can adversely affect the overall management of the production. The concept of style is another critical dimension of the play. Many directors and theatre practitioners often struggle with defining the style and form of their productions, sometimes due to a lack of engagement with the artistic process. This can lead to a focus solely on narrative, neglecting the vital application of style that enhances the theatrical experience. While directors are not obligated to adhere to a specific style, it is crucial for them to stage their plays in a way that reflects their vision and understanding.

Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, however, is committed to this artistic coherence. With *Erendira's Metamorphosis*, he not only introduces a new stylistic approach but also embodies the principles of Lehmann's post-dramatic theatre, enriching the performance with layered meanings and innovative interpretations. This dedication to both style and substance

elevates the overall impact of the play, making it a significant contribution to contemporary Assamese theatre. In concluding this analysis, it is essential to highlight key elements related to acting and the actor's style that are integral to Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's *Erendira's Metamorphosis*. In the realm of post-dramatic theatre, Lehmann makes a crucial observation regarding acting. He asserts that "the actions of the artists are designed not so much to transform a reality for themselves or communicate it through aesthetic treatment, but rather to strive for self-transformation" (2006). This concept of self-transformation carries significant weight; it suggests that an actor's objective extends beyond mere performance to encompass a deeper quest for personal and artistic evolution. Without this transformative intent, the art risks remaining superficial, failing to penetrate the outer layers and uncover deeper truths. In this context, Namrata Sarma, the lead actor in *Erendira's Metamorphosis*, exemplifies this principle under Goswami's direction. She adeptly navigates the complexities of her role, delivering a performance that resonates with authenticity and depth. Through her commitment to self-transformation, Sarma not only engages the audience but also elevates the overall impact of the production, demonstrating the profound potential of acting in post-dramatic theatre. Another critical aspect of theatrical practice is lighting design, and Mrinal Jyoti Goswami is particularly renowned for his expertise in this area within Assamese drama. He has been instrumental in introducing effective lighting techniques in modern Assamese theatre, and *Erendira's Metamorphosis* exemplifies this mastery. From the beginning to the end of the play, Goswami's lighting choices effectively convey the essence of every element involved in the narrative. Unlike many productions that use lighting merely to create striking visuals that detracts from the core story, Goswami opts for a subtler approach. He employs simple, familiar lighting that enhances the intimacy of the performance rather than overshadowing it. This thoughtful application of lighting is intricately linked to the overall concept of stage and space, which helps transform *Erendira's Metamorphosis* into a compelling example of post-dramatic theatre. By integrating lighting design with the play's them-

atic and spatial dimensions, Goswami creates a rich, immersive experience that deepens the audience's engagement with the narrative.

In Assam, theatre can be broadly categorized into two main types: conventional and non-conventional. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami has been a significant force in Assamese drama, consistently presenting unconventional plays. His most recent work, *Erendira's Metamorphosis*, introduces the concept of post-dramatic theatre to Assamese theatrical literature, paving the way for new explorations in the field. However, it is important to note that this unconventional genre has yet to gain widespread attention among general theatre audiences and many practitioners. While *Erendira's Metamorphosis* appeals to a specific audience, it highlights the need for broader engagement with innovative theatrical forms. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the audience plays an integral role in the theatre management process. Therefore, fostering an informed and knowledgeable audience is essential for the growth and appreciation of the art form. Encouraging greater awareness and understanding among theatre-goers will ultimately contribute to the evolution and success of both conventional and non-conventional theatre in Assam.

Sri Lankan Theatre

M. Safeer Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a long cultural history which simultaneously nurtured the Art of Theatre in the country as well through that lasting history. We can identify the Seeds have been planted rurally for the modern theatre practice through the folk dance and folk dramas. The rituals like Invoking blessings (Shanti karma), Chasing diminish evil absorbent (Thovil) and rituals of awakening energies (Yaaga homa) been well established within the rural community and moved till today. The practice of various theatre forms such as Teeter, Naadagam, Noorthi were different genres of various theatre practices moved along with these. After 1950 the path of these practices has taken its turn towards modern theatrical structure and practice. Late Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra one of the very famous theatre director started his journey towards the exploring new dimensions in Sri Lankan Theatre practice through his drama “Maname.” Colonial era of Portuguese, Dutch and British governance before freedom gained, and foreign influence indeed shadowed the development of Sri Lankan theatre too. The languages commonly used to create dramas are Sinhala fairly around the country, Tamil basically in North and East and English once in a while throughout the island. Theatre arts refers to the ethnicity base in the surrounding.

The Dance traditions of Upcountry (Udarata), Low Country (Pahatharata) and Sabaragamuwa district of Sri Lanka (Sabaragamuwa) were developing within the country, very systematic progress started to flow through the theatre Arts. When the special festivals were taken place in Buddhist Temples, Hindu kovils the traditional dance performances been taken place in the vicinity of the mass gathered. In the North and East also experienced the same tradition which gave its progressive support to stepping towards the development of modern theatre practice. Especially when the traditional practice taken place in invoking blessings to the community, it expanded the artistic taste of the common audience. They did happen centralizing rural, urban and village community.

While we look back and analyze the Theatre Practice in Sri Lanka, we can evaluate the nonprofessional practice within the circle. When a stage play has been created, as production has been in progress, they used to travel through city to city and perform their performances. From the amount of ticket collection, wages been distributed among actors and actresses as well as other technicians and creative personalities too. The most actors and technicians are employed in various other jobs as their employment and practice theatre along with it for many reasons such as fame etc. Though it is not their profession but purely their passion. Within such a framework of a background, all these directors, actors and other creative people main objective is for their self-satisfaction. Under these circumstances even large number of theatre productions been created annually, but lesser number of performances been performed on regular basis due to this environment and practical issues.

Theatres in Sri Lanka

When we consider the theatre spaces available, there are only few theatres available in the country with standard technical requirements and facilities. Most of them are based in Colombo. While we analyze the situation, we can simply point out that Colombo is the main center for theatre and theatre practitioners and also main cultural hub. Lionel

Wendt, Elphinstone, Tower, Bishop Auditorium, Young Men's Buddhist Association Hall, British International School Auditorium, Lumbini Theatre, could be enlisted as theatre spaces available with certain facilities which knows about the theatre fraternity and the requirements of theatre practitioners too. Punchi theatre is a small scale theatre space maintained privately by veteran theatre practitioner. Other than this in Galle, Matara, Kandy, Matale, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Jaffna districts there are theatre spaces called Town Halls available. There is no proper lighting system in those theatre spaces. Theatre groups have to carry required lights and other technical requisitions to fulfil their needs. In some other village areas, we find Community Center Halls which contain the minimal resources where it concerned toward performances and its requirements. Though the performances been performed to the audience, most of these halls doesn't have proper green-room facility even. In university bases there are public addressing places are available as auditoriums. Commonly these spaces are once in a while used as theatres to entertain the public theatre fraternity and university students too. These spaces have the similarity in all sort of issues related to all other theatres mentioned above.

Theatre Festivals in Sri Lanka

All the dramas created annually has been based and centralized their concentration only on few theatre festivals been held in the country. Many newcomers and young theatre practitioners focus their attention centralize and their views towards these festivals as they believe that they could become stable when they are recognized in these sort of festivals. When we point out the festivals it refers to state Theatre festival organized by Cultural department of Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Youth Drama festival organized by National Youth Services Council, Children drama Festival organized by Cultural department of Ministry of Cultural Affairs. All these festivals are competitive festivals. Youth theatre festival is basically organized to enhance youth in the country, students in higher education, young theatre practitioners etc. Only the young people will be allowed to apply and participate in the festival.

The participant's age range is 18–35 years and it refers to length and short play categories in Sinhala and English languages. This youth festival contains 100–150 short plays and 25–50 length plays too. Length plays are moreover one hour in duration while short play's duration countable is maximum 30 minutes in duration.

Anyone can apply and compete in the state theatre Festival. This competitive festival contains length and short plays in Sinhala and Tamil Languages. Each year there are vast number of short plays and demanding number of length play applications are received by the organizers. This festival has been organized by the subcommittee of Drama held under the Art Council of Cultural Department of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

Other than this, State Children theatre festival has been organized by the subcommittee of Drama held under the Art Council of Cultural Department of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Cultural Affairs too. This festival is totally dedicated to Children's dramas. This competitive festival is held in Sinhala, Tamil and English languages. There are two categories for this festival called limited and open sections. Limited category only accepts school theatre productions and any theatre practitioner could apply for the open section.

There is one more International theatre festival functioning in Sri Lanka. This is organized by Inter Act Art Institute itself. It has initiated its functions in 2012. Nine editions have been conducted up to this year 2023. It has changed its criteria as a competition since 2023. That of course contain Local and International competitive theatre production categories. Around 8–10 foreign countries been invited annually and around 6–8 local productions also been participated.

Above mentioned State Theatre festival and Children Drama Festival by subcommittee of Drama held under the Art Council of Cultural Department of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Cultural Affairs, grants winners of the competition some financial prizes along with the awards too.



A scene from Love and Lockdown, Inter Act Art, directed by M. Safeer. Photo: courtesy of the author

Theatre Education in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka we are able to point schools to universities as these places where students been taught about Drama and theatre subjects from basic level to diplomas, various graduation programs to study the subject and universities where student could get into the aesthetic arts stream and obtain special honours degrees are available according to the requirement. A student is capable of studying Drama and theatre subjects and obtain a degree at Universities in Colombo, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, Jaffna and Eastern peninsula. Other than this we have a subject related method to study in school education system from the year one to the year thirteenth. 1-5-year student should obtain the primary education and 6-11 it refers as then along with it comes the higher education to year 12-13. The system is trains the child to enhance this secondary education with complete understanding and knowledge refers to Secondary level of education. At the basic level, in

6th year school children are compulsory to choose aesthetic education such as selecting either music, arts, dancing or theatre subject. After selecting this 11th year they have to select the particular subject chosen as their section of referring subject stream. For an example if a student selects drama and theatre in advanced level through that he or she may choose the stream in which will be comprised drama and theatre in university selections.

There are few theatre schools providing various levels of Diplomas available in the country. That contains three months, six months, one year, two years and three year expansions of durations. The students stepping out from universities as scholars to the society are joining in to the teaching accordingly. There are no proper institution or official body to study theatre art subject properly. If they want to gain experience, they should practice and work under veterans for their thirst of knowledge.

There are around 200 cultural centers maintained under the cultural ministry lead them under the supervision of the ministry too. Within these spaces theatre, Dance, Music, Arts subjects are taught by the guidance and major expenses born by the main body such as governing officials, space and buildings as well as maintenance too. But those are only very simple cultural spaces only.

The basic structure of Sri Lankan theatre could be explained briefly in this manner. In the meantime, theatre spectatorship or fraternity is also not that huge as well. They are basically based on urban town areas. The well-known Directors and their productions are having the somewhat lucky market growth and the newcomer's productions are mostly experiencing the loss in income through performances and fraternity in this tiny market. This is how we can evaluate the Sri Lankan Theatre base in a simple form. In this basic structural analysis, we didn't refer to the history of theatre in full. This is just a tiny effort taken to analyse the base of the subject related to this picturesque island.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An award-winning director of theatre, a playwright, the pioneer who introduced concepts of Black Box Theatre and Forum theatre in addition to few other forms of theatre to Sri Lanka, a director of a publishing house which has published numerous books during the past two decades, founder of the Colombo International Theatre Festival, an annual event since 2012, a dramaturge and directed more than 50 productions including 5 International Theatre Productions, monologues, dance and contemporary productions in the last three decades and a film director.

Theatre in Contemporary Iran

Challenges and Opportunities

Dr Somayeh Tayebi and Masoud Tayebi | Iran

Introduction

The history of Theatre in Iran is rich and diverse, dating back several millennia to the pre-Islamic era, with ritual performances such as the mourning of Siyavash and the vengeance of Iraj showcasing the antiquity of this art form. In ancient times, performances were primarily improvised and involved community participation.

Migrants from the Indo-Iranian tribes came to Iran in the first and second millennia BCE, blending their myths and beliefs with local culture. These gatherings led to the expansion of heroic legends and ritual performances, such as dances praising the fire, which helped inspire warriors' spirits.

The roots of Iranian Theatre are linked to Zoroastrian ceremonies in ancient times, which included storytelling, music, and dance. One of the significant literary works from this period is the epic poem *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, completed in the 10th century, which greatly influenced storytelling traditions and theatrical performances in Iran.

With the Arab invasion, performances were severely restricted, and religious authorities prohibited them through religious interpretation. In the 16th century, Ta'ziyeh emerged as a form of Iranian Religious

Theatre that narrated religious events. This genre combines drama, music, and poetry and remains an important cultural practice.

During the Qajar era (1789–1925), the introduction of Western Theatres began, leading to the establishment of Theatres in major cities such as Tehran. At this time, playwrights turned to adapting Western works and creating new plays addressing social and political issues. With the establishment of the Qajar dynasty, Iranians became acquainted with modern Theatre. Naser al-Din Shah, during his travels to Europe, sought to introduce Theatre in Iran, but religious opposition hindered its progress. The establishment of Dar al-Funun and the demand for dramatic texts initiated a translation movement and the emergence of Western-style playwriting. During this period, severe censorship was imposed, including the prohibition of Ta'ziyeh due to its anti-authoritarian nature.

The Constitutional Revolution marked a new chapter in the history of Iranian Theatre. Theatre became accessible to the public, and intellectuals used it as a means to convey their ideas to the masses. Performances addressed social and political themes, becoming tools for promoting political ideals.

With the rise of Reza Shah, modern Theatre entered a new phase, and the establishment of art schools created suitable spaces for performances.

During the Pahlavi era (1925–1979), Theatre reached its peak, with the establishment of artistic centers like the City Theatre and Rudaki Hall. Theatre was recognized as a social and cultural tool, contributing to the promotion of Iranian culture and art. The government promoted Theatre as a means of modernizing culture and established state Theatres, though censorship remained stringent. In the 1960s and 1970s, experimental Theatre flourished.

After the Revolution (1979 to present), Theatre faced strict censorship. Many artists responded to these challenges by creating allegorical works or using traditional forms. Despite these restrictions, a new generation of playwrights and directors emerged, exploring contemporary and social issues.

Theatre in Iran has been influenced by various historical periods, reflecting the social and political conditions, and has always played a significant role in the country's culture and art. Today, Iranian Theatre encompasses a wide range of genres, including traditional forms, modern plays, and experimental performances. Iranian Theatre artists participate in global festivals, portraying the complexities of Iranian society and culture. Overall, the history of Theatre in Iran reflects its ability to adapt and transform, mirroring the country's rich cultural heritage and contemporary realities.

Challenges and Opportunities in Contemporary Iranian Theatre

To examine the opportunities and challenges in today's Iranian Theatre, we must look at the state of Theatre over the past three decades, specifically from 1370 to 1400 in the Iranian calendar (1991–2021). Additionally, it is essential to consider the emergence of private Theatres and the significant role of university Theatre festivals, providing a comprehensive overview of the structure of Theatre in Iran to understand its opportunities and challenges.

Iranian Theatre in the 1370s in Solar Hijri calendar (1991–2001)

The 1370s (1991–2001) marked a transformative and significant period in the social and political structure of Iran. This decade followed the Iran-Iraq War, during which the country sought cultural revival and reconstruction. Theatre emerged as a cultural and social tool for rebuilding national and cultural identity, although effective practical measures for this purpose were lacking. Theatrical works addressed social, political, and cultural issues, with critical and socially themed performances flourishing, particularly in major cities. Young and innovative artists entered the Theatre scene, introducing new styles and approaches.

During this decade, new theatrical spaces were established, and festivals like the Fajr Theatre Festival gained increased cultural significance. Theatre was utilized as a medium to express social and cultural

issues, with many performances critiquing the social and political conditions of the time.

The 1370s represented a period of innovation, diversity, and reconstruction for Iranian Theatre, profoundly influencing its development in subsequent years. Significant changes occurred in the structure and content of Iranian Theatre. The establishment of new venues allowed artists to present their works in more suitable environments. The Fajr Theatre Festival emerged as a vital cultural event, enhancing the credibility and attention given to Iranian Theatre. The government began to recognize Theatre as a cultural and social tool, allocating some programs and budgets to this field.

Theatre engaged with social, political, and cultural issues, leading to the creation of performances with critical and social themes. Young artists embraced new styles and forms, moving away from traditional approaches through the use of innovative techniques in directing and writing. Many works explored Iranian national and cultural identity, striving to showcase the country's cultural and historical values. The diversity of theatrical genres increased, with comedy, tragedy, and experimental performances being staged simultaneously.

Overall, the 1370s represented a period of transformation and innovation for Iranian Theatre, contributing to the formation of a new identity within the field and laying the groundwork for future growth and advancements, even though the government did not provide comprehensive support for the Theatre.

Iranian Theatre in the 1380s in Solar Hijri calendar (2001–2011)

The 1380s (2001–2011) represented a period of diversity and transformation in Iranian Theatre, characterized by distinct features. This decade witnessed a variety of themes and styles, with theatrical works addressing contemporary social, political, and cultural issues, offering critiques of societal conditions. Additionally, some performances explored Iran's culture and history, drawing inspiration from local and national stories. During this period, directors and writers sought new and innovative forms, employing experimental techniques in their productions.

Theatre began to merge with other art forms, such as music, dance, and visual arts.

The emergence of a new generation of artists was another notable feature of this decade. Young actors and directors entered the Theatre scene with fresh ideas and styles, significantly impacting its trajectory. Specialized training in universities and Theatre workshops helped nurture new talents and created opportunities for the emergence of innovative works and artists.

There was also an increased focus on social and cultural issues during this decade. Many works critiqued social and cultural problems, striving to raise social awareness. Productions paid special attention to human and ethical themes, examining human relationships and the challenges of life. Moreover, Theatre gradually began to utilize mass media for promoting and introducing its works, while the incorporation of new technologies in set design and lighting enhanced the appeal and quality of performances.

Social and political transformations, relative freedom of expression, cultural and governmental support, and the emergence of a new generation of artists were significant factors contributing to the diversity and transformation of Iranian Theatre in the 1380s. The political environment gradually became more open, allowing artists to express their opinions and critiques more freely. Changes in the social structure and increased public awareness led Theatre to pay more attention to contemporary societal issues. The government and cultural institutions placed greater importance on Theatre, allocating some programs and budgets to this field.

Iranian Theatre in the 1390s in Solar Hijri calendar (2011–2021)

Iranian Theatre in the 1390s (2011–2021) exhibited significant differences compared to previous decades. This period was marked by a diversity of topics and new themes that paid greater attention to contemporary social and political issues, including human rights, corruption, and economic crises. Unlike previous decades, which focused more on traditional and historical subjects, the Theatre of the 1390s

concentrated on the challenges of national and cultural identity in the modern world, critically examining these themes.

During this decade, artists gravitated toward experimental and innovative forms, employing new and unconventional techniques in their performances. The emergence of a new generation of artists with fresh ideas and styles contributed to the transformation of Theatre, creating a new space for creative expression. The use of modern technologies in set design, lighting, and sound helped shape more engaging and professional performances, contrasting with the more traditional approaches of earlier decades.



Contemporary Iranian theatre: an actor behind a sieve in a sand-covered playing space.

Photo: courtesy of the authors

Access to international resources and cultural exchanges was another prominent feature of this decade. Iranian artists gained greater exposure to global theatrical works and experiences, enriching their own productions. Additionally, the use of social media for promoting and intro-

ducing theatrical works helped attract audiences and increase public awareness.

Significant changes occurred in directing and performance practices during this decade. Directors embraced experimental and innovative methods, paying more attention to visual aspects and performance forms. They also focused more on the works of contemporary writers and new texts, using them to address social and cultural issues. Reinterpreting classic works with modern approaches became a popular method as well.

Actors adopted new and modern techniques in their performances, striving to portray more complex characters. Some directors sought to establish closer connections with audiences and employed interactive techniques in their performances. The integration of Theatre with other art forms, such as music, dance, and visual arts, added to the visual richness and appeal of the productions.

Private Theatres also had a significant impact on Iranian Theatre during the 1390s. These spaces facilitated the production and performance of diverse works, providing opportunities for young writers and directors. Private Theatres tended to focus more on social and political issues, creating a platform for expressing critiques and challenges faced by society.

Increased competition among artists and Theatre groups contributed to the improvement of production quality, as Theatres aimed to attract audiences with more engaging and high-quality works. These spaces often provided greater artistic freedom, allowing artists to implement their ideas without excessive constraints.

By attracting younger generations and offering diverse and high-quality productions, private Theatres contributed to enhancing the cultural and artistic awareness of society. However, these Theatres also faced financial and managerial challenges that could impact the quality and sustainability of their activities. Thus, Iranian Theatre in the 1390s evolved into a dynamic and diverse period, markedly different from previous decades, leading to the creation of innovative and engaging works that addressed contemporary challenges.



Contemporary Iranian theatre: a production played on a spiral stage. Photo: courtesy of the authors

The Entry of the Private Sector into Theatre

Private Theatres have emerged as a significant factor in the transformation and development of Theatre in Iran. They have not only contributed to the diversity and quality of productions but have also provided a space for expressing social and cultural critiques. These changes have helped Iranian Theatre move towards greater innovation and appeal.

However, private Theatres also have some negative impacts on Iranian Theatre that require attention and proper management.

One of the main challenges is financial and economic issues. Many private Theatres face serious financial difficulties, which can lead to a decline in production quality and an inability to attract talented artists. Rising production costs and rental expenses also exert economic pressure on Theatre groups and artists, potentially driving some of them out of the Theatre scene.

The lack of oversight and standards is another existing problem. Insufficient monitoring of private Theatres can result in the production of low-quality works and a failure to adhere to professional standards in performances. Some Theatres may lean toward producing superficial and commercial works to quickly attract audiences, which harms the cultural richness of Theatre.

Unhealthy competition is also among the challenges. Intense pressure among Theatres can lead to stress on artists and Theatre groups to produce lower-quality works aimed at faster audience attraction. Focusing on audience engagement may cause some artists to prioritize commercial and popular productions over quality and content.

The impacts on scheduling and timing are also significant. Some Theatres may create confusion for audiences due to ineffective planning, inappropriate scheduling of performances, and overlapping shows. If Theatres lean towards frequently staging one or more works, it may reduce the diversity of options and choices for audiences.

The emergence of a commercialization culture is one of the concerning outcomes of this trend. An increased focus on financial and commercial aspects can diminish the importance of artistic and cultural values in Theatre, turning it into a purely commercial product. This commercialization may lead to a reduced emphasis on deep and critical themes in theatrical works.

Closure of the University Theatre Festival

Undoubtedly, the most significant blow to the structure of Theatre in Iran has been the dissolution of the University Theatre Festival. The closure of this festival has had considerable impacts on Iranian Theatre, which relate to several aspects.

The first effect is the reduction of performance opportunities for students. The University Theatre Festival served as an important platform for students and young artists, and its closure leads to fewer performance opportunities for these young talents. Additionally, the absence of this festival may decrease students' motivation and enthusiasm for engaging in Theatre activities.

The second aspect is the reduction in the diversity of works. The festival, as a competitive and creative space, contributed to the production of new and innovative works, and its closure may result in a decrease in diversity in theatrical productions. Furthermore, the lack of this festival could lead to a decline in the introduction of new ideas and innovations in Iranian Theatre.

The third impact relates to artistic education and training. The University Theatre Festival provided students with the opportunity to gain practical experiences, and its closure could lead to a decrease in practical and educational learning in this field. Moreover, this festival served as a platform for communication and collaboration between students and professors, and its closure could diminish these connections and networking opportunities.

The fourth aspect is the impact on Theatre culture. As an important cultural event, the festival helped enhance awareness and appreciation of Theatre in society, and its closure may lead to a decrease in this awareness and attention toward Theatre. Without the festival, university Theatre may be pushed to the margins and receive less attention.

Finally, the impact on the future of Theatre is also significant. In the absence of a space to nurture young artists, we may face a shortage of a new generation of artists and directors in the future. Additionally, the lack of a festival could lead to a decline in creativity and innovation in Iranian Theatre, pushing the theatrical landscape towards uniformity.

Iranian Theatre's Encounter with Technology

Despite technological advancements in the production and distribution of performances worldwide, Iranian Theatre utilizes technology in a limited manner to reach audiences. There is only one website that offers online streaming of shows with limited capacity, allowing artists to showcase their work and connect with audiences across the country.

Theatre During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Furthermore, the global COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the Theatre industry worldwide, including in Iran. The clos-

ure of performance venues and restrictions on public gatherings have disrupted traditional methods of producing and presenting Theatre. However, among Theatre practitioners, there has been a perspective and a desire to present their artistic work using new methods of creation and interaction. The lack of familiarity with contemporary communication technologies, as well as the insufficient training of students and artists in this area, are the main reasons for the reluctance to adopt modern methods of presenting theatrical productions.

The absence of necessary facilities for showcasing productions in performance venues is another significant reason that limits the possibility of creating modern theatrical works and presenting them using communication technologies. During the pandemic, due to the closure of venues, there was not only a lack of awareness but also serious resistance among many artists to produce and broadcast performances online. On the other hand, for the few who were willing and prepared to produce online shows, there was a lack of suitable technical capacity for broadcasting these performances. Additionally, the cost of acquiring online broadcasting technology was prohibitively high for such Theatre groups. At the same time, the technical infrastructure and adequate internet speed for live viewing of performances were unavailable and continue to be lacking.

Censorship in Iranian Theatre

One of the significant challenges facing Iranian Theatre is censorship, which can severely restrict artistic expression and creativity. Theatre artists in Iran must navigate complex regulations and societal expectations, making it difficult to address modern intellectual concepts. Additionally, censorship significantly impacts the quality of content and the form of performances.

Economic Challenges

The economic limitations and scarce financial opportunities within the Iranian Theatre scene pose serious challenges for artists striving to produce high-quality work. The absence of dedicated Theatre companies

that invest in supporting artists, training, and producing specialized artistic works is another critical issue. Often, directors rely on their personal finances to fund theatrical productions, and limitations in personal capital can significantly affect the quality of the final product.

Future of Iranian Theatre

Looking ahead, the future of Iranian Theatre requires strategic planning and coordinated efforts to address existing challenges. Embracing technological advancements and digital platforms could broaden the reach of Iranian Theatre, enhancing visibility and accessibility. Furthermore, supporting artistic freedom and nurturing emerging talents is essential for fostering a vibrant and inclusive theatrical community in Iran.

Opportunities for Growth

There are numerous opportunities for Iranian Theatre, particularly in the realm of cultural exchange and international collaboration. With its rich tradition of storytelling and performance, Iranian Theatre has the potential to captivate global audiences and engage with diverse artistic traditions.

International collaboration and cultural exchange can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Iranian Theatre. By strengthening partnerships with international Theatre organizations and artists, Iranian Theatre can enrich its artistic endeavors and expand its global presence. This could create opportunities for intercultural dialogue and mutual learning, contributing to a more diverse theatrical landscape.

While challenges such as censorship and economic constraints persist, the future of Iranian Theatre holds promise through strategic initiatives, technological integration, and international collaboration. By leveraging its unique heritage and fostering artistic freedom, Iranian Theatre can thrive and engage with audiences worldwide.

Conclusion

In recent years, Iranian Theatre has faced numerous challenges that have profoundly impacted its quality and sustainability. Private Theatres, while serving as a significant factor in the evolution of this art form, have also brought about issues such as financial pressures, lack of oversight, unhealthy competition, and commercialization. Notably, the dissolution of the University Theatre Festival, a crucial platform for young artists, has diminished opportunities for showcasing and learning, negatively affecting the diversity and creativity of productions.

These challenges not only harm the quality of Theatre but also threaten the future of this art in Iran. Therefore, it is essential to focus on establishing and revitalizing festivals and providing supportive resources to ensure the preservation and development of Iranian Theatre. There is also a pressing need for oversight and support for private Theatres and young artists, allowing Iranian Theatre to continue its growth and remain a rich cultural foundation within society.

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that one of the key pillars of cultural growth and the advancement of democracy in any society is undoubtedly Theatre. It is hoped that this vital role will be realized in Iranian Theatre, fostering a vibrant artistic landscape for future generations.

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SECTION

IV

Reflections and Critiques

Theoretical Lenses

9 The Evolution of Theatre Criticism in the Subcontinental Perspectives

Professor Shafi Ahmed, Bangladesh

The Evolution of Theatre Criticism in the Subcontinental Perspectives

Professor Shafi Ahmed Bangladesh

Centuries ago, primarily in the West, theatre criticism evolved as a distinctive intellectual exercise, claiming space in the pages dedicated to art-events. Much later, it acquired slow and steady strength in the East. This evolution gained steady momentum with the increasing numbers of theatre shows across the world. The critics started reviewing theatre to serve multiple targets, like rediscovery of the nationalistic pasts, or to express their admiration for the king/hero figuring in the play(s). Present-day critics include comments on experimentations, stagecraft, retelling of narratives of the oral, classical and alien texts and inherent messages to promote 'social consciousness'.

However, this is as old as the origin of theatre practices in the pre-historic or very ancient times. The people, then living in the forests, started imitating or dramatizing or fictionalizing action(s) by the hunters and the resistance by the animals or the emotional reactions of the family members before the expedition and after their homecoming. Those presentations, meant to produce community-entertainment, underwent some changes later, by fellow actors performing at different sites; the transformation took place as per the willful re-telling the narrative(s) by the performer(s). Such acts can be explained as creative re-

presentation(s), containing some soft 'critical' commentary of the earlier ones. That was the beginning.

The immortal Greek dramatists continuously appear on the present-day theatre space across the globe. But most of these productions depart from the original storyline and acquire new dimensions with their contextualization and new interpretations. Such acts of incorporating new elements in are partly prompted by new theories that involve sociology, anthropology, historicism, feminism, clinical psychology and often by the reviewing & counter-reviewing of the social forces highlighted in the colonial/post-colonial discourses. In this (trans)creative process, the directors assume 'primary' positions of 'critics' by artistically challenging the age-old responses and perceptions of the audience. The challenges of modern theatre critics lie with their understanding of and affiliation to these theories. Some 'literary' critics religiously try to locate the aberrations from the original texts; some play the roles of moral guardians; others criticize the (mis/under/over)-interpretations of the traditional/folk art-forms integrated in any production(s).

The evolution of literary criticism bears the long legacy of discomfort between the authors and the critics. There are instances of similar non-agreements among the (living) playwrights/directors and theatre critics. The former often find it difficult or annoying to agreeing or even negotiating with the views of the latter. Debates often develop from 'warmth' to 'heat'. Stories along such lack of mutual conformity are abundant almost everywhere in the world. And not unreasonably.

To step into a different perspective. Charles Lamb (1775–1834), remarked that Shakespeare's *King Lear* is simply unstageable since the depths of its poetic parts are simply incommunicable to the audience through acting. Lamb's comment represents a philosophic response, signifying that Shakespeare's words can only be felt and internalized through soulful reading. The 19th century essayist took the position of a theatre critic conveying his lack of trust on the merits of the prospective actors or directors. *King Lear* had been performed many times

on the stage at different parts of the British Isles though, before Lamb made his remarks.

Tagore's play *Raktokarobi* was similarly left untouched by many venerable theatre directors on the plea that it was unstageable. Even many literary critics and Tagore-lovers found in it overdoses of introspective poetic images, obscurities, punctuated by lyrics. The comments of these persons can be explained as a thoughtful treading into 'theatre criticism' too, beyond simple 'readership'. 56 years after its publication, Sombhu Mitra, the great Bengali stalwart brought it on the stage with commendable success. And those critics opposed to or highly skeptical about *Raktokarobi*'s potential as a theatre felt constrained to withdraw their reservations.

Let's concentrate on the evolution of theatre criticism, which grew as an academic discipline back in the mythical past in the East, about 5000 B.C. In the West, it also took roots in the ancient times. What we expect from a responsible theatre critic of theatre is a kind of all-inclusive knowledge of the history of theatre—local and global, early texts, art of dialogue, its evolution and popular reception, use of space, skills of acting, music, sound, light etc.

Unquestionably, the first 'must read' text is *Natyashastra* authored, as has been timelessly acknowledged, by Bharat, the sage. It is strongly assumed that this astonishingly long text represents a pluralistic authorship. *Natyashastra* is considered as the fifth Veda that concerns with the learning of the comprehensive arts of entertainment, beyond the knowledge of human duties and responsibilities as contained in the four preceding Vedas. Most parts of its 37 chapters are written in poetry, but the sections on *rasa* (pleasure) and *bhab* (mood) and on music are in prose.

At this point, it is absolutely binding to refer to Aristotle and his universally acknowledged work, *Poetics*. Like most communities of the world, drama was largely known as poetry in ancient Greece. According to Aristotle, theatre as a form of arts, makes use of words in a dialogic form, rhythm, music to create situations, which he largely defined within the forms known as tragedy and poetry. *Poetics* again cannot be

dated precisely. Some of its contents sound elliptical and some points seem a little incoherent. Aristotle's ideas show some legacy to Plato; some treat *Poetics* as a response to Plato's views on poetry. Anyway, Aristotle views theatrical presentations as the 'imitation of an action' having objectives of incorporating diverse elements of arts on the stage. His remarks on the variations of the 'narrative' that categorize them as tragedy or comedy left an immortal impact on theatre studies. Theatre has journeyed onward in multiple avenues challenging Aristotle's views. Still, he remains and will always be most relevant in the area of theatre criticism.

The above two masters deserve special mention. From them did initiate the intellectual exercise what we today label as reviewing of theatre texts/productions. Over centuries, evolution took place within communities across the world. The continuity of theatre criticism experienced changes in social & political relations and at the regional and international scenarios. The areas of literature and arts including theatre, painting, sculpture, continue to evolve in multiple ways in subject-matters and modes or representations with changing realities and increasing urge of creativity. This evolving process acquired multi-dimensionality in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere where European colonization became a forceful reality since it was not just limited by taking over of political power, but it left overwhelmingly irresistible impact on the cultural arena. This is particularly true in the case of theatre. This subcontinent with its vastness of geography, amazing plurality of expressions in visual and performing arts as reflected in its enormous folk traditions, had been and still is the home of uncountable theatre forms, performed in temples, at common community spaces, market places.

Some of these forms are extinct now, and many had lost their original modes of performance but many others are surviving wrestling several kinds of infiltration/intrusion of new elements, consequent to the encounter with colonization. Some of the deliberate (trans)-formations/creations took place under the impact of the increasing popularity of proscenium and with the rise of new metropolitan performing

centres. And the new band of theatre critics added fuel to that. *Yatra* and numerous local theatre forms were still in place. But the educated urban elites felt more attraction for the proscenium performances within walled spaces. The increased number of such shows made new approaches to understanding, appreciation and critiquing the performances more popular. This reality largely contributed to the development of theatre criticism in the Indian subcontinent.

For long, theatre performances in India were largely limited to the projection of different plots or episodes as contained in the religious epics to suit the popular demand for entertainment. Audience response was measured by their shedding tears during the emotional parts of the performances. Such reactions are not rare till today particularly in the countryside. Folk forms delivering plots or sub-plots of diverse stories with some direct/indirect references to local events and dialogues in dialects punctuated with some wit and humour also catered to popular taste. The over-all theatrical design as per the canons of proscenium production introduced the audience to a more structured format characterized by three parts known as the beginning, the middle and the end. Again, the growing volume of new theatre criticism contributed to that.

Books authored by various European masters, including dramatic texts, enjoyed a natural entry as the process of colonization started consolidating. The growing metropolitan educated class found in them some extra charm, and also resources worth-tapping to appreciate, evaluate, and review theatre. The first arrival of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) in India in the middle of the eighteenth century emphatically represented a racial face. The Old Playhouse production of Shakespeare in Calcutta was acted by the whites and no ‘native’ was permitted even to enter this theatre space. However, this exclusivity did not inspire the Calcutta theatre-lovers to form a nationalistic identity then. Which today, is very strongly articulated in the cultural circles of different cities as well as in the university departments of studies. Presently, this attitude forms an insistent nature of theatre criticism. In fact, this nationalistic urge to define the uncountable old native theatre

forms and identify the richness of the indigenous performances occupies the centre of modern-day theatre criticism.

From a restrictively practical point, the origin of theatre in Calcutta, the first capital of British India, had initial connection with a Russian, Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff (1749–1817). That too had a key attachment to the European proscenium practices, hitherto unknown to the natives. The proscenium and Shakespeare together went on impacting our city theatre spaces with an irresistible continuity. The lengthening of colonial rule shaped our theatre practices and the trajectory of theatre criticism. The contents of the scripts, (which earlier were based almost exclusively on sources from the written/oral religious texts) experienced visible changes too. The structural unity of the European dramatic texts spread over the 5 Acts was new to us; gradually this became quite convenient for the theatre persons. The new native plays started portraying human figures set in perceptibly realistic situations, (not exactly representing ‘realism’, which, of course, it will later). And the migration of the Western literary texts and theatre aesthetics became a reality in the Indian cultural territories. The story-outlines departed from the magic and fantasy so far associated with the plot-construction of the native texts.

Increase of Shakespearean performances and introduction of this great dramatist in the academic curriculum, added by the translation/adaptation of his plays in various native languages reflected an increasing love for him of the intellectuals and local/metropolitan audience. Simultaneously, the initial rise of theatre criticism could be identified through the advertisements of the shows in the newspapers which often distinguished the genres (tragedy/comedy/farce), contained the names of the popularly known performers (qualities of acting), and mentioned the names of companies and venues (indicative of the opportunities available for light & sound design and stage props) prices of tickets (suggesting the classes of the audience). Brief reviews also followed in the dailies or weeklies or local news bulletins.

Initially, the theatre critics’ focus was on the magnanimity of the hero (king/commander/great warrior) around whom the plot moved

on. It was followed by the comments on the actor's abilities to perform the high-profile hero's role. The theatre critics followed the plots, subplots, and scene-divisions implying the development of action from the openings (through conflicts in the middle) leading to the endings of the plays. Comments were made to justify this structural development. The theatre critics concentrated on the studies of characters, subjective responses to the mighty and poetic Shakespearean dialogues, the philosophic contents, and search for moral messages within the given social systems. They sought help from the views of Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, De Quincey, Bradley and other Shakespeare experts. The major considerations were: whether the heroes/heroines/important characters had been good enough for the qualitative representation of the dramatic action or intricate situations required by the text; whether the performance met the moral standard that the society subscribes; whether the performers could make a positive impact as a team. These canons were applied for the evaluation of other productions too.

Unquestionably, Shakespeare had a comprehensive influence on the evolution of Indian drama. Even Tagore made a complimentary recognition of that in the introduction to his play titled *Malini*. The replacement of the country forms by the proscenium accelerated the presence of Shakespeare and impacted on the development of the new dramatic literature in native languages. As the translation of Shakespeare's plays was treated as a commendable exercise—whether literary, transformative, trans-creative or contextual—or the adaptations of his plays became increasingly popular with the local theatre companies, the art of theatre criticism acquired positive dynamism and in fact, reviewing of plays both as dramatic texts and productions on the stage acquired an academic trend. The concept and application of 'Method Acting', the essential requirement in the productions of the European plays (which was not considered that indispensable in traditional or indigenous theatre) particularly impacted on theatre criticism. The increase in the number of publications of newspapers and periodicals both in English and the native languages offered to theatre criticism a professional nature.

The formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA: 1943) is historically important in developing theatre criticism. IPTA was not primarily rooted in the cross-fertilization of the 'new' or 'modern' forms of theatre away from the 'traditional' nor it bore much relevance to the European proscenium. Through diverse kinds of cultural performances, IPTA's scope of activities spread beyond theatre practices. This Association was established to articulate the intellectual solidarity of the Indian people with the objectives of the International Anti-Fascist Writers' Union, the genesis of which lay in the painful history of human sufferings caused by World War I. IPTA originated from the socio-political commitment of forming a cultural platform to extending help in the struggle of freedom of people from the bourgeoisie structure that had institutionalized social exploitation. Again, IPTA's ideas of people's emancipation came from the West too through books of history, politics, sociology, literature including drama.

Exercises of mockery, simultaneously funny and sharply critical of the social system, dominated by the aristocratic class as reflected in the English Restoration plays or in the plays of Molière, the great French dramatist, became accessible to the increasingly new educated class. Resultantly, theatre scripts were prepared in sundry Indian languages that imitated or trans-located those European comedies not only in contents & characterization but in their formal structure too, with the re-creation of the mood of fun and frivolity as useful means of social criticism. Indian theatre moved away from the superhuman characters of the ancient epics, of the miracles done by the traditional religious figures or of the history-plays that underlined the glorification of royalty supplemented by the suspense of palatial conspiracies.

However, the idea of 'realism' with its new social and political connotations reached a new high on the stage as well as in the open-air productions of IPTA with their conscious rejection of the amusing 'social' contents/criticism as reflected in the European comedies mentioned above. With its mission of preaching Marxist political philosophy or aesthetics, IPTA believed that the exploitation of people was rooted in the age-old social structure of hierarchy of 'class-divisions'.

IPTA commanded a huge number of writers, poets, artistes, actors, musicians, intellectuals, and progressive activists including journalists as its members across India and it created a new wave of cultural regeneration. As a result, a new band of theatre critics was born and they were berthed and groomed by the leading IPTA intellectuals and organizers to analyze the society with the 'politically correct' ideology that demanded the re-evaluation of theatrical texts and performances (Shakespeare & Tagore included) in the context of the theories of class-divisions within their theatre productions. This left a very significant contribution to the art of theatre criticism, which has its visible legacy even today. And *not* quite unreasonably.

While IPTA had been engaged in organizing a Pan-Indian cultural movement upholding the socialist ideology with the use of theatre as an important tool, the ideas of realism and naturalism found their routes in the subcontinental theatre in different ways too. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* in its English and subsequent translations in local languages brought in a new insight about 'realism' that consciously excluded any comic situation deliberately created to please the audience. The play takes place within a lower-middle class home characterized by typical situations of the lack of plenty. *A Doll's House* makes a very strong statement on women's position in the society. Often it has been treated as the Bible of the feminists. It also underlines 'naturalism' as a vehicle for its representation on the theatre space, which is verified in its elaborate stage-directions. Some other Ibsen plays adapted in the local contexts that suited the social realities also became very popular. The Swedish August Strindberg and Irish Bernard Shaw also stole some space in the subcontinental theatre as the audience developed a taste for realism & naturalism. The critics positively responded to this kind of productions.

The theatre groups, directors, script-writers, critics, cultural activists got influenced by the nationalistic ideas as well as by IPTA's slogan for internationalism. The audience also developed a new attitude to appreciate theatre. Under such changes in the understanding of theatre and performing arts, people's cultural responses, Western sociological

and political theories made some visible impact. At the same time, talented directors felt motivated to delve into the contents of local epics, folk tales, stories, legends, and oral history having nationalistic overtones and exploited these as indigenous resources offering new interpretations within the European model. So, the Western influence had its positive aspects too in our theatre and performances. It has a long-lasting effect till today. The theatre critics also facilitated in finding out and applying such resources to locate areas for effective use of native materials in trans-shifting the storyline and in transfixing the stagecraft including sound, light, and props. These experiments integrated multiple factors in theatre productions. The theatre critics identified prospective areas, evaluated the skills of making them effectively communicative, and related them to various socio-cultural theories. By doing so, they also encountered many contrary comments from the directors and designers.

The indenture of the West through colonization was an inevitable reality and it was lengthy. And as elsewhere in the world, be it British, French or Spanish, colonization not only occupied geographical territories, but through its exploitation and imposition of superiority or ego, it left deep-rooted impacts on the intellectual & psychological shaping of the natives even on their social behaviorism. It was regrettable that Bharat's *Natyashastra* was marginalized. Several new waves of art came flushing from the West, e.g. expressionism, impressionism, cubism, and many of their likes. These opened to the theatre directors the opportunities to initiate diversity in their productions but challenges as well in terms of integrating new vehicles of expressions to the politically conscious audience, simultaneously affiliated to nationalism and international brotherhood. The depiction of heroes of the past acquired a popular theatrical cult for long. Now, the life of the pitiful subjects oppressed by the zamindars also found space. However, there were 'conservatives' too, who raised moral issues in matters of questioning the social structure. Their reactions also found some space in the newspapers. These comments can also be treated as constituting an alternative theatre criticism. These may sound humorous and less important

but were reflective of the responses of a section of the then audience. Saying goes that Vidyasagar, the illustrious social reformer of 19th-century Bengal while watching a stage-play, excited by pure rage, threw his sandal at an actor who had been playing the role of a cruel sahib. His contemporary, Shri Ramkrishna, known for his accommodative stance in matters of religion, asked his followers to watch theatre shows since these delivered useful instructional contents for the common populace. In fact, through these responses, the two great social stalwarts of the past in some way played the role of theatre critics.

Putting this on record, it's relevant to refer to areas that shaped our intellectual priorities and affiliations. The new education system introduced learners to European ideas. Not just books of literature, but on French revolution, political theories, the western *Weltanschauung* reflected in philosophical discourses, dialectical materialism, studies of cultural hegemony and historiography, and so on and so forth. Marxist thinking increasingly entered into the space of the new Indian intelligentsia. The mind-blowing writings by Romain Rolland, Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon became available in the bookshops. These regulated our intellectual discipleship and contributed to spread a new worldview for the upcoming generations, including the thespians.

This social context that promoted progressiveness prompted many of the new educated class to shape their minds. That helped them (authors, musicians, journalists, editors, playwrights, directors etc.) to analyse the social and economic systems and structures from socio-historical perspectives. During the nationalist struggle against the British rulers, a social movement spread across India highlighting the social system that discriminated the backward classes. These learnings also came from books coming from the West, which introduced the educated class (including persons connected with theatre/cultural performances) to the ideas of socialism. Theatre persons found critical messages from these concepts and felt initiated to underline the 'social relevance' in their productions. Such ideas incited the critics to decipher the messages of the performances and to scrutinize the creat-

ive processes. Critiquing of the contents, process, and presentational craft of theatre with this lens of ‘relevance’ is strongly alive till today.

In this respect, Bertolt Brecht is a very significant name in the sub-continental theatre, whose presence was very strongly felt during the 60s to 90s of the last century. The directors found in his plays and theories the materials that answer several socio-political questions. He is from the West (Germany: erstwhile GDR) who brilliantly fits in handling multiple issues of integrating public & private lives, the socialist ideas, historiography stretching from the West to the East, struggle & social status of women, war, market economy etc. Brecht largely commanded our theatre space since it was intellectually prepared by the IPTA productions. The left-leaning audience felt in them the throb of Marxist aesthetics. Moreover, Brecht’s theory of alienation or epic theatre produced a comprehensive charm in theatre productions allowing sundry flexibilities to adapt dramatic texts in our chosen contexts. The focus on the class-divisions could be creatively exploited by the directors and such interpretations enjoyed cheerful reception from the audience.

Just one instance. In mid-80s, the Dhaka theatre space saw three different yet simultaneous presentations of *The Threepenny Opera*. The three directors prepared sub-texts as per their individual interpretations and inserted local elements and theatrical art-forms to communicate their messages to the audience. Obviously, this posed a challenging job for the theatre critics. Before reviewing the plays, they had to put on their writing desks materials relating to Brecht’s mechanisms of production and his creative notes. They naturally recollected their experiences of watching Brecht plays produced earlier by some great native or overseas directors. They reflected on the areas of appropriateness, efficiency, or prejudice in the tagging of some past/contemporary events of local, social, and political interests within the productions.

Multiplicity in critiquing many plays can be found in evaluating several adaptations, just not in various languages or at different community contexts, but in an identical geo-historic space. This happened often in the cases of Ibsen plays—*A Doll’s House*, *An Enemy of the People*,

Ghosts; many of the plays by Shakespeare, tragedies, comedies, histories and more importantly, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; plays by Molière, Jean-Paul Sartre, Luigi Pirandello, Dario Fo, August Strindberg, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, John Osborne and many others from Europe, America and beyond. Tagore's plays have seen many trans-creations, often loaded with modern political interpretations; even some important subcontinental plays are being continuously redone as per the interpretations of the directors.

In the post-independent or early phase of modern Indian theatre, performances within the proscenium circled around some popular themes, life of the ordinary people displaced from the rural to urban contexts, tensions of lower middle families, crises of love relationships etc. Earlier, Ibsen pioneered this path. The theatre critics' search for the relevance and often their incisive references to the qualities of presentation played a complementary part. For long, theatre criticism was seen as an exercise of reportage of storyline plus some comments on the quality of acting. One important as well as irritating question remains. The director likes it to see that a review is published in the press/periodicals but shows unhappiness with the unapproving comments. This kind of dissent among the producers and critics is a universal phenomenon. It's true that at times critics may have dearth of knowledge or understanding about theatre-craft or they display some prejudices. Some professional critics uphold the policy of the newspaper, some have passions for certain political views, some are not intellectually equipped enough to understand the novelty or nuances of experiments. The theatre critics need to be updated with new knowledge about what's happening in the country and in terms of creative experiments. The conservative critics still love to look for the spelt-out messages with no regard for the aesthetic intricacies involved. Many bookish critics are still not convinced about the value of the theatre of Augusto Boal or Badal Sircar or similar other enterprises like the widely popular *street theatre* which are qualitatively and deliberately distant from the open-air performances. Such thoughtful endeavours allow

endless flexibilities in theatre practices. These often involve the audience in the process of performances, and by doing so, these in fact, loudly *criticize* and challenge the limitations and objectives of the conventional patterns of the fourth wall theatre. Such initiatives can arguably be treated as *creative* versions of theatre criticism.

Theatre criticism found an appreciative boost in this subcontinent, not many years ago. Despite the glorious existence of Bharat's *Natyashastra*. The introduction of *Theatre Studies* as an academic discipline at the undergraduate level of different universities opened new avenues of knowledge and exercises. Brecht's theory of alienation made its strong entrance earlier. Now, for developing the structured courses, both theoretical and practical, inclusion of great figures such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Erwin Piscator, Jerzy Grotowski, Pina Bausch, Peter Brook and others came up as an imperative academic necessity. It got accelerated with the inclusiveness of multi-dimensionality of new experiments, as *Performance Studies* grew up as a more intensive-cum-extensive approach to theatre. *Natyashastra* regained its place for comparative studies. The academia also inspired the students or upcoming theatre persons, to revive the native forms, to allow more space to imagination, synthesis, use of digital technology etc. In fact, in Bangladesh, more for its emergence as a free nation in 1971, the urge to discover the past, its inclusive cultural history has acquired a passionate degree in the theatre space.

Diverse materials and multi-angularities of unknown/untapped resources of theatre in countries of the North and South, and of the communities so far left in the margins, particularly the countless ethnic groups away from usual human habitations and those living in the archipelago squatted in the oceans gradually started claiming the attention of scholars and theatre practitioners. The syncretic approaches in theatre performances existed in ancient traditions with the use of flutes or drums, sound and rhythm produced by sticks, or ideas of costume etc. New technologies contribute to creativity that helps reap immense possibilities. There's a living debate though about the limits of applying ultramodern digitalization since many believe that theatre is essentially

a 'human' activity. And many techniques continue pouring from the West. The question of under-statement about the native forms remains alive in the theatre forums of the developing countries.

Adaptation of dramatic texts of different overseas origin remains a reality in the subcontinent. The key reason is the dearth of good playwrights. It is applicable to theatre critics too. Critics are often more vocal about the contents, deviation from the original texts, political messages than the evaluation of the quality of redoing, remix of the tools of the old and new, and theatre as a group work accomplished by the cast and crew. The vibrancy of new theatre groups is visible and qualitatively surprising productions are there. But these remain a business of the big metropolitan centres. The voice from the margins is heard in a low key. Theatre criticism at the subcontinent still largely shows limited professionalism while the Press offers nakedly unequal space compared to other forms of entertainment like sports, cinema, the scandalous rumours in the lives of the stars, OTT platforms, band music etc.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Shafi Ahmed is a retired professor of English Literature and Theatre Studies from Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh. With nearly 40 years of teaching experience, he specialized in Shakespeare and Modern European theatre. He has translated three English plays into Bangla, authored four books on theatre, and has been active in international theatre seminars and conferences. Prof. Ahmed is also a life member of Bangla Academy and served on the executive committee of the International University Theatre Association.



ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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From Canvas to Stage brings together nine essays on the meeting points of the visual and performing arts today. Writing from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Iran, its contributors (painters, performance artists, theatre makers, critics and scholars) ask how we look at abstract art, what makes theatre meaningful, how theatre came through the pandemic, how the body becomes a site of protest, and how the theatres of Assam, Sri Lanka and Iran are changing. The collection closes with a history of theatre criticism in the subcontinent, from the *Natyashastra* and Aristotle to IPTA, Brecht and the present day.

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