

A Rich and Diverse Tradition

University of Hawaii's book on Indian theatre is a welcome event in the somewhat esoteric, scholarly field of books on Indian culture. This is a collaborative effort by Western scholars who have provided an extensive and exhaustive account of several traditions in Indian theatre, based partly on fieldwork and on interpretation of early documents in the area. The impression one comes out with after reading this book is that of humbling respect and awe for traditions so rich and so diverse that in comparison, other faces of theatre around the world appear relatively lackluster and plain.

Theatre as the "other" event in social life, one which is presented for the pleasure of an audience that comes prepared to see it, seems to be a concept particularly prevalent in Western culture. In India, theatre is life, and life itself takes on the form of theatre, in which imagination is integrated with action.

Farley P. Richmond begins this volume with an explanation of the classic Sanskrit text on theatre, *Natyashastra*. Itself a record of evolving thought in Northern India on the art of representation, *Natyashastra* deals with theatre as a form of life, as a game in which the desire of actors (both on stage and in life) is seen traversing through obstacles, turnarounds, bridges while at the same time being propelled to new horizons. The metaphors most prevalent in *Natyashastra* for acting and drama are those of the body and its grammar. The entire stage is a body, with its own rhythms, choices and its own withdrawals.

Indian theatre, in its long and spellbinding history, unlike Greek theatre, did not concern itself with

the formal space for performance. There are no architectural venues from which one can decipher the history of Indian theatre as one can do with Greek theatre. Moreover, the separation of the audience from the stage by proscenium remained a distinguishing feature of Indian theatre as much as the very concept of audience was added later by historians of the art form. There was no formal separation of the participants from the observers. Indian theatre retained a symbiotic relationship with the people, integrating content, form, style and expression in an art form that energized and galvanized the communities. As Girish Karnad has noted in an essay, "In Search of a New Theatre," Indian theatre wasn't meant for entertainment, an idea which came to India with the British and its ancillary arrivals in the late Nineteenth centuries.

In the South, forms of theatre developed around the life of temples. In Kutiyattam, found exclusively in Kerala, history of the families and community merge with rituals and musical traditions. Theatre is not an event-oriented art form. One devotes an entire life to the study of understanding, interpretation and performance.

Following a historical sketch of these classical forms of theatre (the work itself in not appropriate terminologically), the editors chart the history and culture of performance in ritual traditions (Teyyam, Ayappam Tiatta), devotional traditions (Ras Lila, Ram Lila), folk-popular traditions (Nautanki, Tamasha) and Dance-dramas and dramatic dances (Kathakali, Chau).

Theatre has had an existence simultaneously as an organic part of religious life, social dramas, art



Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli, Editors
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and other expressive forms and as a political strategy of struggle. The editors are comprehensive in giving a cultural history of each of these forms, occasionally taking the reader into analytic gear to show what has remained in India of these regional, quasi-religious and intensely diverse forms of theatre. The weaker part of the anthology may come from one of its assets. In their zeal to cover a whole sphere of complexity, the editors shy away from discussing how these forms live today, how they are absorbed into other folk, popular, technological (film) and oral expressions in recent and contemporary India.

One case in point is the use made by the Hindu fanatics in recent years of Ram Lila to whip a hysteria about a narrow, religious identity among the masses by de-

stroying one of the most participatory and innovatively genuine forms of theatre in the world. Except for cursory references to this "tragedy," Darius L. Swann, shies away from taking this issue head on. When he expresses great enthusiasm about a bright "future" for Ram Lila, one wonders if he means it innocently, either by remaining oblivious to the implicit dangers of its current use or by being overwhelmed by the romance and exoticism that Ram Lila presents to an outsider.

The transitions of these forms of theatre are rather uneasily presented in chapters on Nautanki and Tamasha, both of which have survived in Maharashtra in films and in a marginal form in rural fairs. The richness of Tamasha lies not only in inventing a popular-musical style by synthesizing local traditions, but also by developing a range of strategies which served as

scathing and incisive political and social commentaries in a corrupt and oppressive world. The contributions of women artists, dancers and singers to these two forms of theatre in Maharashtra would require separate chapters.

The concluding part of the book on modern theatre remains sketchy. The editors should perhaps have left this task to another book with ample space to cover the transitions in colonial India, the influence of theater managers in British India (for example, Parsis in Bombay) and the compelling pressures of the market felt in theatre. Girish Karnad's remark that "Even to arrive at the heart of one's own mythology, the writer has to follow signposts planted by the West," strikes home as particularly relevant for a theater that has been forced to define itself in a culture-landscape policed by the West, and the so-called modern theatre has re-

mained somewhat of an enigma since theatre in India had reached its own "modernity" ages ago, in a different place and a different time.

Still, the chronicle of the modern theatre in India serves as a good reference guide. As Farley P. Richmond reserves some space for the Indian National Theatre, regional theatre movements and even for Badal Sircar's "third theatre," his silence on some landmark movements like the Indian Progressive Theatre Association (IPTA) becomes conspicuous.

A book that will serve as a necessary reference to the subject it addresses, *Indian Theatre* is a pleasant arrival on the scene.

— Shekhar Deshpande

