

Theater in Colonial India: Play-House of Power

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This volume of thirteen essays brings together an impressive number of theater scholars, based both in India and abroad, to interrogate the complex interactions between colonialism and theater history. Strangely enough, the colonial aspect of India's theatrical history has received far less attention than questions of regional diversity, indigenous empowerment, and the postpartition period. Although the notion of an "Indian" history retains a certain attraction, most theater scholars would now agree that the colonial and postcolonial political entity "India" finds little correspondence in actual theatrical practice both past and present where regional and linguistic specificity are the main determining factors. The volume is divided into two main sections. The first section is entitled "Theatre: a Contested Site of Modernity and Appropriation" and attempts to reflect regional diversity during the colonial period. The second, entitled "Theatre and Gender: Re-inscribing Patriarchy," engages with the feminist reinvigoration of theater history by foregrounding in particular the introduction of the "actress" into theater as another, more particular site of contested modernization.

Because the sheer diversity of performance forms on the Indian subcontinent defies any kind of easy classification, let alone a comprehensive survey, the editor has wisely chosen to focus on forms and regional manifestations that have perhaps had less attention in the past. Although Calcutta and Bengali theater have, logically, been the subject of much research, western India, in particular Bombay and Marathi theater, has received less attention. Here the present volume provides a valuable corrective with two essays on Marathi popular theater by Urmila Bhiridikar and Sudhanva Deshpande. A second focus is on South India, particularly Tamil theater, which includes a richly documented essay by A. Mangai and V. Arasu, focusing on playbills from the colonial period (called here "drama notices"). This essay also pays tribute to the importance of Parsi theater during the colonial period, whose contribution to popularizing the Western model of theater throughout the Indian subcontinent was crucial and is in fact acknowledged in a number of essays. Tamil theater is also the subject of Susan Seizer's essay on "special drama" (*Speshal Nācakam*), a late-nineteenth-century genre of Tamil theater that also owes its origins to "a syncretic mix" (71) of Parsi, British, and Tamil epic street theater. "Special" means in this genre that performers are hired "specially" for a performance. Because the genre is still active, despite the ubiquitous competition from cinema, Seizer is able to trace continuities from its origins in the plays of T. T. Sankaradas Swamigal (1867–1922) to the present. Parsi theater is the focus of Javed Malick's essay on Shakespeare and the "vernacular public stage," which in fact is a study of Parsi adaptations of Shakespeare into Urdu in the late nineteenth century.

Although Shakespeare in India is familiar territory, the gender-theoretical approach in section two is not. More than half the volume is devoted to gender questions, so it provides a unique, in-depth discussion of the contribution made by

women, mainly actresses, and the intersection of theater and modernity in the colonial and postcolonial period. Although the narrative of *nautch* girls and prostitutes that provides the first actual examples of women performers is familiar, the essays collected here attempt a more nuanced cartography of the gender question. In her introduction Lata Singh discusses the practice of female impersonation by boy-actors, which, as she argues, dies out in Calcutta but in western India metamorphosed into a “cosmopolitan phase” (14) and remained popular into the 1930s. The gender question encompasses both male and female performers and above all complex structures of erotic spectatorial pleasure in conflict with discourses of respectability promulgated by reformists. The individual essays draw an extremely complex picture of women and theater ranging in time from English actresses in the late eighteenth century (Bishnupriya Dutt) to contemporary Tamil Nadu, where Hanne M. de Bruin shows how historically determined gender models inherited from the colonial period continue to impact the treatment of women performers in Kattaikkuttu theater. Although the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) founded in the 1940s is perhaps the best researched chapter in modern Indian theater from the colonial to the postcolonial period, Malini Bhattacharya’s research demonstrates how women activists created a significant new space for women in the theater.

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