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## Book Review

### ***Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation***

Siddhartha Biswas; 104 Pages; Hardbound; Cambridge Scholars Publishing; 2017; ISBN-13: 978-1-4438-9572-9; ISBN-10: 1-4438-9572-5

The author of *Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation* is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Calcutta, and has almost two decades of teaching experience. His areas of interest are modern drama, translation studies, and popular culture. He was a Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow as the Translator-in-Residence in the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, UK. His publications include translations of *Frankenstein* and *Invisible Man* for children, translations of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, and critical editions of J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He has also edited various issues of the critical journal *Pegasus*.

– Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Review by

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The reviewer is an Assistant Professor of English at Chandernagore College. His doctoral thesis was on the representations of subalternity in the plays of three Indian playwrights, Utpal Dutt, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani. His current research areas include Indian Writing in English, Postcolonialism and Diaspora Studies. He is one of the editors of *Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Studies* ISSN: 2455-6564 < postcolonialinterventions.com> and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* ISSN: 2456-7507 <postscriptum.co.in>

In the preface to this book, Dr Biswas informs the prospective readers that “This book tries to draw a line from Aristotle to the present day – a line that is not linear but contemplative and perhaps a little whimsical” (ix). This important declaration is particularly significant for a holistic appreciation of this insightful and fascinating book which cannot really be bracketed into conventional categories of academic publications. This book is neither a history of theatre, Indian or European, nor does it concern itself only with performance studies, nor does it follow a chronological paradigm, nor is it a collection of separate essays related to drama and theatre and attendant theorization. Instead, the book mostly serves as a critical exploration of various issues associated with drama, theatre and performances from a keen scholar of English literature and a connoisseur of theatre who wants to share with others, students and fellow scholars, certain observations and questions that reading, spectating and pedagogic endeavours are bound to evoke at one point or another. As the author explains, the book originated from a series of lectures for MPhil students of the Department of English, University of Calcutta, where he now teaches. Perhaps because of that, the book still carries an air of intimate dialogue which infuses into the academic assessment a charm and warmth that more conventional texts often lack.

It is in that vein that the book traverses an extensive swathe of time and theatrical enterprise, which has Aristotle and Bharat Muni at one end of the spectrum and post-dramatic theatre on the other. One element that perhaps ties together all these disparate theoretical considerations, scattered across time and space, is the politics of theatre i.e. how different political considerations have informed the theorisation and practices of playwrights, dramaturgs and directors. It is in this vein that he either discusses how the idea of ‘catharsis’ aimed at the kind of emotional equilibrium which would ensure the perpetuation of the status quo or interrogates the elitist nature of *Natyashastra* which examined the intricacies of a theatrical practice that was limited to a miniscule coterie of Sanskrit speaking Brahmanical elites. While there are plenty of commentaries that either explains Aristotelian theories or the intricacies of *Natyashastra*, it is refreshing to come across a treatise that interrogates the foundational assumptions of both texts without the blinkers of either eurocentrism or an equally prejudiced uncritical nativism.

This openness of perception is also evident from the way in which the text refuses to confine itself simply to the study of the written text, which is often what the students of literature end up doing, by recognising the multiple semiotic networks that a theatrical performance brings into play and how a theatrical text is conditioned by its sheer ephemeral nature, how it is subjected to regular transformations of varying degrees and how such

transformations attest to evolving socio-cultural pressures within which performances are staged. Particularly relevant here is the chapter on Performance and Performers which not only takes the readers into the familiar territories of Stanislavsky and Brecht but also goes beyond them to explore how the written text acquires different identities as it enunciated on stage by specific actors, accompanied by bodily gestures of varying degrees. And even more significantly, one has to consider here the role of the audience as well, since their responsiveness to the actors' performances determines how much of the desired communication has become possible. Therefore, Biswas explains how just as the actor needs to negotiate between what Luk Van den Dries proposes as the distinction between "I-identity" and "role-identity", the audience also needs to be able to respond to the collective assemblage of speech, gestures, light, sound and props to derive utmost significances.

In discussing these issues, Biswas moves fluidly from the world of Greek and Elizabethan theatre onto the twentieth century theories of Brecht, Artaud or Pinter and even takes into account the performance strategies used in ancient and modern Indian theatre, involving the Bhava-Rasa theories of *Natyashastra* on the one hand and the post-independence theatrical scenario involving the interventions of Utpal Dutt, Ratan Thiyam, Badal Sircar or K. N. Panikkar, on the other. Since existing undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi in various universities often include translations of Indian plays by such exponents, this kind of exploration can often be of great introductory value to students. Particularly significant is Biswas' stress on the syncretic nature of many of these dramatic and theatrical experiments carried out by Indian authors and directors which not only underscores the postcolonial hybridity which characterises many of these endeavours but also resists the seductions of nativism which often results in a fetishization of 'folk' that may even slide into the slippery slopes of cultural monochromatism. In attempting to achieve this balance, Biswas not only selects and foregrounds important canonical texts and productions such as Karnad's *Hayavadana* or Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal*, or Badal Sircar's *Sagina Mahato* or Kanhaiyalal's *Pebet* or Utpal Dutt's appropriation of *jatra* techniques in various productions but even chooses comparatively recent productions such as *Urubhangam*, directed by Manish Mitra, which contemporary students may find more accessible. But while such examples are indicative of the cultural location of the author, that location does not deter him from any exploration of plurality which is evident from the way in which modern syncretic Indian examples are placed side by side with multilingual and multicultural recent international productions such as Tim Supple's version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. No wonder then, that Biswas also pays homage to the contributions of Rabindranath Tagore,

himself a wonderful embodiment of the confluence of native and foreign cultural traditions, whose theatre not only foregrounded serious socio-political concerns associated with class, caste or gender, but communicated them through a unique mode which blended music, song and dance with prose and verse dialogues. It is however, regrettable that such an eclectic journey through the forms of syncretic theatre in India could not incorporate a paragraph or two on the contributions of Habib Tanveer whose own experiments with Chhattisgarhi folk performance genres not only contributed to semiotically rich theatrical experiences but created a potent platform through which a large number of urban and rural audiences could be addressed, especially about pressing socio-political concerns that often drew the ire of reactionary forces of one kind or another. Similarly missing is an analysis of the rise of various forms of feminist theatre with several female playwrights and directors coming to the foreground in the last three decades. Bengal's own Shaoli Mitra and Usha Ganguli are among several such performers whose play-texts and performance styles could well have been discussed, alongside others like Neelam Mansingh Choudhury, Sushma Deshpande, Anuradha Kapur or Amal Allana. However, given the self-avowed whimsicality of the text, perhaps such absences are not altogether surprising.

But such absences cannot dent the overall appeal of the text which lucidly brings together a whole host of questions, examples and approaches regarding drama and theatre that traverse time and space with elastic ease and offers an enriching blend of information and insights to the readers. Significantly, the text does not attempt to offer either exhaustive assessments or absolute answers. Instead, it leaves enough room open for the readers to form their own opinions, be it about post-dramatic theatre or about the future stages of theatrical evolution. Such openness, however, is not a result of personal uncertainty. Instead it stems from a sincere conviction about the significance of theatre for human civilisation – a conviction that also shapes the powerful concluding sentence of the text: “Theatre must evolve as it still remains the only mode of live-communication which can both aesthetically entertain and involve the viewer/reader in the endangered concept of cerebration” (89).

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