

Book Review

Analyzing the role of theatre in democracy

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Winston Churchill said that “*Most people, sometimes in their lives, stumble across the truth. Most jump up, brush themselves off, and hurry on about their business as if nothing has happened.*” He also quoted that, “*Democracy is the least bad of all the system of government produced out of human experiences*”

This book deals with the same experience of democracy with regards to performing arts, more specifically theatre. A collection of 16 essays on democracy has been compiled in this book. These essays emerged from a conference organized by Indian Society for Theater research and its progenitor (2003), International Federation for Theatre research. The majority of the essays deals with Asian examples of performances and is great use for theatre analysts internationally.

The foreword of this book has been contributed by Prof. Brian Singleton, President of International Federation for Theater Research, who has keen interest in Indian Theatre and its polity as well. He is the only person who has attended all the conferences of Indian Society for Theatre Research. He, very beautifully in his foreword, has tied democracy, performance and globalization in a string to give clear understanding of the neo-liberal agenda of global capital. He has drawn examples from Baz Kershew’s book: *The Politics of Performance; Radical Theatre as Cultural Invention*, to explain democratization of culture.

Ravi Chaturvedi has started the preface with a famous and relevant line from Henrik Ibsen’s ‘An Enemy of People’ which says:

“The worst enemy of truth and freedom in our society is the compact majority. Yes, the damned, compact, liberal majority.....The majority is never right. Never, I tell you! That’s one of

these lies in society that no free and intelligent man can help rebelling against. Who are the people that make up the biggest proportion of the population – the intelligent ones or the fools? I think, we can agree it's the fools, no matter where you go in this world, it's the fools that form the overwhelming majority”.

Ravi says, as a bell in temple once rung cannot be unsung, similarly a truth once learned cannot be unlearned and in a similar fashion has blamed democracy which since last 60 years has made India to believe in majority. In a country like India where democracy has been confined into elections, use of muscle and money power, caste power etc, the true essence of democracy is getting converted to democratic chaos and is being sometimes metamorphosed as Demon-crazy or Demon-crazy and this majoritarian democracy has not only affected the Artist's performance but also Audience's benefit from the performance to a large extent. A democratic way to avoid the demon-crazy of majoritarian government is to adopt the concept of 'Safe-Theatre' which is explained by Ramu Ramnathan i.e. to remain the supporter of government and become an active arm of authoritarian propaganda. But the question is how long will the theatre continue to escape from the direct truth and reality of the country?

All the 16 essays discussed in the book are somehow related to politics and democracy and its various aspects and how these aspects have affected performance, troubled it or dismantled the true essence of theatre both at local and global level and both in modern and traditional performances. Hegemonic regime in terms of gender, class and race are highlighted and analyzed in the course of this book for example in a paper named '*The Indian Women: Transformation into Real Self*', Preeti S. Kurup, has shown the differences of approach to address women between West and East as "White Western Feminist" and "Third World Women" respectively. She has referred to G. P. Deshpande, Chikov and Ibsen who has portrayed women as enthusiast, revolutionary and vibrant character. Talking on the lines of cast and race, Ravi Chaturvedi's 'Performing Dalit: Echoing Multi Layered Political Understones in M. Mukundan's *Oru Dalit Yuvtiyute Kadana Katha*' and Svetlana Dimcovic's '*The Politics of Working Class Racism: Sing Her Hearts Out for the Lads*- by Roy Willams, Royal National Theatre, London' has raised the Dalit related issues very effectively showing the political complications and contradictions of dalit v/s non-dalit conflicts which persists even till now. Svetlana Dimcovic in her paper has

brought out the complexity of race relations within British working class communities, together with the relationship of that working class as a conceptual concern of this premiere at the National Theatre in London.

Theatre plays of Japan, Korea and Malaysia have also been discussed in the papers included here. Mitsuya Mori, a famous theatre researcher of Japan has discussed in his paper *'Understanding and Misunderstanding Japanese Theatre'* about the culture, various forms of plays, production system and myths about Japanese theatre and how they have undergone change with time. Korean Theatre has got 2 papers in this collection; Han Ok-geun's *'Characteristics of Korean Traditional Plays'* talks about the history, kinds and contents of traditional Korean plays, Puppet shows and their satires. Lucid elaboration has been given of Pansori, a solo dramatic opera which is a combination of literary, musical and theatrical characters. Jung-Soon-Shim in his paper *'Performing History of Han in Korean Theatre'* has explained the concept of Han which is a complex mix of rather negative emotions such as frustrated desire, resentment, regret and a sense of loss and sorrow. Introduction of western realism plays through Japan is the main reason for modernization of the Korean plays. Talking about Malay plays Solehah Ishak in his paper *'Stage for Humankind: Contestation of Native and Global Knowledge on the Malay Theatre Scene'* has tried to explore the reality of how glaring global trend has dominated the local knowledge and culture. Decade by decade analysis of Malay ethos and local Malay knowledge has been done citing some best examples.

The most important and relevant topic is discussed by D. Schauffer. His paper *'The Irony and Paradox of Democratic Governance on the Development Governance on the development of Indic Theatre in South Africa'* discusses how the Indian theatre and culture reached South Africa. Dividing the whole story into 8 phases he elaborated the immigration of Indian Tamils and Telegus in 1860 to South Africa and how they started Indian theatre there and its situation in present day. Another paper by Christiana Lambrinidis, *'From Staging Gender to "Rehearsing Sex"'* reminds the ultimate truth of life i.e. mortality and no worldly possession is greater in front of death, whether it be the masculinity and patriarchal power or wealth. A very beautiful line from the paper reads as, *"If there is no language, there is no meaning. If there is no meaning, there is no soil. If there is no soil, there is no burial ground. If there is no burial ground, there is no death. And if there is no death, there is no fear or fluxes of desire. If there is no fear, there is*

no theatre. Because theatre is a space where fear is bred and abandoned. And if there is no theatre, then interpretation meets a very dangerous ground; it gets annihilated as not only it has been reversed but it has also finally met its rapture.”

At the end of the book, profiles and details of all the contributors have been given. Overall the book is apt for theatre researchers especially those interested in foreign theatres and their history. The title didn't go in line with some of the papers which deviated from democracy's aspect and talked only about gender and history but rest complied with the title.

About the editor – Ravi Chaturvedi is a professional theatre director besides being the Visiting Professor in the Theatre Department of Chung Ang University, Seoul, Former Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Dramatics, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Theatre Research International. He organized the first conference of IFTR in Asia in 2003 at Jaipur.

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