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Recommended Citation

Banerji, Arnab. "Taking the Stage by Storm: Theatre of, by, and for the Youth in Kolkata, India." Cerebration, 2016, www.cerebration.org/arnabbanerji.html.

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Taking the Stage by Storm: Theatre of, by, and for the youth in Kolkata, India

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Recent high school graduates and college-goers are spearheading a "youth theatre movement" in Kolkata, creating a thriving parallel to the mainstream Bengali group theatre in the city. [1] Although dismissed by the theatre fraternity as a mere youthful adventure, the youth theatre is very much present and is, in many ways, paving the way for the future of Bengali language theatre. In this paper, I will study the work of three youth theatre groups focusing on organization, funding, and working process. At the end of the essay I will be reviewing six productions by these youth theatre groups from Kolkata: God's Toilet and Amra Bangali Jati (We the Bengalis) by Hypokrites, A Good Play and The Burqa, The Bikini and Other Veils by M.A.D. (Mad About Drama) and Biswasta Jalojan o Aloukik Arohira (The Trusted Ship and Remarkable Passengers) and Nobel Chor (Nobel Prize thief) by 4th Bell Theatres. I selected these three groups for their consistency in producing new work and because of the leading role that they have taken in giving this theatre movement its shape and form.

GENESIS

Some students of Asutosh College, South Kolkata, formed 'Hypokrites' in September 2008. Anubhav Dasgupta, one of the founding members and director of the group, says, "Hypokrites was formed with a new vision, an attempt to specialize in experimental theatre [2]." Aniruddha Dasgupta, founder member and director of 4th Bell Theatres, recalls, "The idea that finally led to the play Happy-D came to me while I was a student at St. Xavier's College. I shared it with my classmate Debleena who in turn shared it with her friends Avignan and Sumit. And it was then that it was decided that we would produce the play ourselves [3]." Aritra Sengupta, founder and director of M.A.D., recalled, "A bunch of us from various colleges were trying to participate in a theatre competition, and we needed a name for the group that is how this platform called M.A.D. was born [4]."

It would not be wrong to characterize the stories behind the genesis of the youth theatre groups as a result of youthful vigor. All the young people mentioned above, and the members of their groups are in their early twenties. Some of the group members had exposure to theatre in high school, where they attended a variety of workshops or trained in some children's theatre camp. For a large number of members, joining the group was their first foray into theatre. As a report on the Kolkata youth theatre groups in Natya Mukhopotro notes, "Youth theatre in Kolkata is not a new phenomenon. The appellate youth theatre however was not ascribed to it heretofore[5]" Why use the term now? Anubhav Dasgupta of Hypokrites feels that the theatre that they are creating is created by the youth and targeted to the youth – hence the name. Another fellow young thespian explains that the term is perhaps used to identify the youth groups as a separate entity performing outside the Bengali group theatre circle and for a younger

audience [6].

Members blame the stagnation in style and paucity of experimentation behind launching their own platforms for theatre. Soumendranath Mukherjee of M.A.D. says, "I feel that the current trends in Bengali theatre [are] not offering anything new to the youth of the city [7]." Others like Rajeshwari Nandi observe, "Bengali theatre is refusing to cater outside a small group. It is getting increasingly difficult for newcomers like us to enter that circle and honestly, we don't want to enter it either." Subhadeep Majumdar goes a step forward to point out, "The policy of distributing performance dates in auditoriums is not transparent. The same names keep appearing in Anandabazar Patrika. Which is why we are going to Gyan Mancha--at least there's transparency there [8]."

ORGANIZATION AND PRACTICE

The youth theatre groups are organized and function differently from the Bengali group theatre groups. Unlike the mainstream theatre groups, youth theatre groups are organized more democratically. While it is undeniable that certain members of each group have taken leadership positions and roles more often than others, it is also not unusual to see members sharing responsibilities equally. Not only in terms of organization, the youth theatre groups differ from their mainstream counterparts in the way that shows are produced, advertised, and subsequently performed. Scripts are selected based on a democratic decision-making process in the group. The dramatist-director reads a script, or someone who has written a script (a member or a friend/acquaintance of a member) wishes to read a script to the group and then opinion is sought from the membership. If the majority gives the green light to a script, then it is picked up for production.

My conversation with members of Hypokrites, M.A.D. and 4th Bell Theatres revealed that the membership ranges from no training to a sustained half a decade long workshop-based training. As theatre critic and long time supporter of youth theatre Ananda Lal observes, "I cannot say that there is nothing amateurish about this theatre, but I must acknowledge that their passion is very genuine. [They are] very eager to learn [9]." Rajeshwari Dutta echoes Lal's conviction and comments, "We know that without practice and training we will not be able to do anything. We get together in our own way, exercise and read together. We understand that unless we keep ourselves updated we will lose ground [10]."

The training that the groups try to give themselves goes beyond playwriting, direction, and acting and encompasses the technicalities of the performance process as well. Each group assigns the responsibilities of scenic design, lighting design, costume design, and publicity design to members. The credits are not shared individually and instead seen as a group effort. The designers come up with basic ideas, which are taken to a builder who executes the design. The same goes for lighting design. The groups are unable to maintain their own inventory but do not hire the services of a designer. The inventory and the services of an electric crew are hired. Hypokrites, M.A.D. and 4th Bell Theatres all have a strong musical team. The team is comprised of competent songwriters, singers, and instrumentalists. Although recorded audio is not uncommon, most groups use live music, which is a refreshing break from most Bengali group theatre shows where the music is pre-recorded.

FUNDING AND MARKETING

As non-registered and new organizations, youth theatre groups have no recourse to government funding. Raising the requisite money to finance theatre is a major challenge. Anubhav Dasgupta explains, "Most of our funds come from sponsorships and push sales [11]." Soumendranath Mukherjee also stresses the importance of "push sales" in colleges and neighborhoods. Hypokrites and M.A.D. also travel around the country performing their plays in theatre competitions at major college festivals. Both groups have won several crowns at these competitions which almost always carry cash prizes. The money raised thus is funneled to organize more shows and maintain daily expenses.

Youth theatre groups cater to the youth of the city and market their plays accordingly. The posters for the plays bear testimony to the technical competence of the younger generation. Posters are symbolic in nature and have a distinct aesthetic. The groups target their young audience via media that attract youth. Facebook event pages and group pages have emerged as vital advertisement media for these groups. They also prove to be much more cost effective for the cash strapped young brigade since they can reach almost the entirety of their audience using these social network platforms without having to spend thousands of rupees on newspaper advertisements. Hypokrites, M.A.D., and 4th Bell Theatres all have very active Facebook pages with over thousand followers [12]. Administrators of these pages post regular updates here, including newspaper reviews, publicity material, and photographs from shows.

WORKING PROCESS

Most youth theatre groups have their own rehearsal spaces where they meet regularly to brainstorm ideas, work on their craft, and rehearse. While M.A.D. and 4th Bell Theatres rent their rehearsal spaces, Hypokrites rehearses in

director Anubhav Dasgupta's house.

The groups consciously avoid mainstream Bengali group theatre venues like the Academy of Fine Arts, Rabindra Sadan, and others. Most groups prefer Gyan Manch on Pretoria Street in Central Kolkata. This auditorium is located in the Abhinav Bharati High School complex. 4th Bell Theatres perform regularly at the Mukhtangan auditorium near the Rasbehari crossing in South Kolkata. They have also occasionally used the Jogesh Mime Academy complex not far from the Rasbehari crossing. All of these venues are located in or near major thoroughfares and are easily accessible by public transport, an important consideration for the college-goers who form the majority of the audience for shows by the young groups.

Although it might appear from the above account that the youth theatre groups have set venues in Kolkata, they continue to operate as itinerant companies. The groups seldom get the chance to load in a show more than a day in advance and have to strike a show immediately after the performance. The tours that the groups go on for fundraising and to showcase their work at various college festivals around the country and the lack of a permanent venue require that the design for youth theatre plays be kept simple and/or easily adaptable.

WORK IN ACTION: REVIEW OF YOUTH THEATRE PLAYS

M.A.D. (Mad About Drama)

The euphoria surrounding the emergence and the work of the young theatre groups is not unanimous. The work of the groups came up several times during informal theatre chat sessions during my fieldwork. College students, the milieu for whom the youth theatre groups claim to speak, expressed their disappointment with the naïve style and content of plays. M.A.D (Mad About Drama) and Hypokrites came under the heaviest attacks. They were accused of being pretentious and under-educated about the finer nuances of theatre. These comments as well as the circumstances that led to the production of the particular aesthetic created by the youth theatre groups served as the framing device when I went to watch *A Good Play* by M.A.D. at the G.D. Birla Sabhagar.

I reached the venue an hour before the doors opened. A small crowd had already begun gathering outside the venue. We milled around before entering the theatre. The audience comprised mainly of college students with some middle-aged people in tow. The doors opened a little after the scheduled time of 6:15 p.m. M.A.D. explained that the group was having some technical issues which resulted in the delay.

The opening of the show utilized the aisles in between the three blocks of seats in the auditorium. Aritra Sengupta managed to successfully stage a confusion ensuing from the flurry of activities that precedes a performance in any Bengali theatre event. The play, an original by Sengupta, revolves around a theatre group's journey from conceptualizing a play to realizing it in production. The characters are a mélange of people you find in a theatre group – an overzealous director, an aspiring actor, a lighting designer/supplier and a set supplier. The play belongs to the characters of the light designer Bablu Bose, played by Soumya, Set Shankar, played by Soham and the struggling actor Junior, played by Soumendranath. The trio captures the struggles, trials and tribulations of being in the shadows with powerful and honest portrayals. Playwright and director Sengupta peppered the play with generous helpings of Bengali street slang. The largely young crowd in the audience reacted with raucous laughter every time one of the characters on stage mouthed an obscenity.

Kolkata daily *The Telegraph* carried three remarkably different and contradictory reviews of this play. The first published on March 4, 2013, celebrated the play as "soul-stirring, well-coordinated, bold and entertaining [13]." Abhinanda Datta's review of the play was published on November 3, 2012 in the Campus section of *The Telegraph*. Datta commented on the use of "lights and shadows and smoke on stage to heighten the dark undertones of the script [14]." Ananda Lal, reviewed the same play in *The Telegraph* on August 17, 2013 Lal felt that "*A Good Play*, [. . .] an original by Sengupta, contained certain simplistic binaries of virtue versus vice that exposed a relatively immature hand [15]." Lal found the metatheatrical style to be "hackneyed." Sreemita Bhattacharya, writing for the *Times of India*, gives the play a four-star rating (out of a maximum five) but offers little insight into the play other than giving a rough summary of the action and hailing the young actors for faithfully essaying their characters [16].

M.A.D. ventured outside the proscenium stage for their next play, *The Burqa, The Bikini and Other Veils*. The play, written by Najrin Islam, was a response to the abysmal rise in violence against women in West Bengal and the rest of India. It was performed at the Binodini-Keya Mancha studio theatre space, managed by Rangakarmee. The play had an all-female cast and a live band featuring two guitarists and a vocalist. The characters were representative of women at various stages of their lives. They spoke about the challenges of being a woman and the restrictions imposed upon them by the society. One of the actors, draped in a flowing saree, floated through the space, representative perhaps of the freedom that women aspire to in their lives.

A play like *The Burqa, The Bikini and Other Veils* involving several strong emotional moments was perfect for an intimate space and allowed the audience and the actors, I felt, to engage with the play better. The staging, however,

exposed the young director's inexperience of directing outside a proscenium space. The audience sat on three sides of the playing area, but the direction failed to take that into account. The actors played to one side of the audience while ignoring the other two. Lights were focused on the central area and were hung from a height that blinded the audience sitting on either side of the space.

Hypokrites

Hypokrites staged *God's Toilet* and *Amra Bangali Jati* (We the Bengalis) as a double bill on April 14, 2013 at Gyan Manch. *God's Toilet* was written and directed by Asijit Datta, while Anubhav Dasgupta was at the helm of the second offering of the evening. By the time I reached the venue at 5:30 in the evening on a hot April day in Kolkata, a large crowd had gathered, so much so that I feared that the shows might have been sold out. The group followed an open seating policy with the first few rows blocked off for guests. The audience was comprised mostly young people in early to mid-twenties.

Asijit Datta, director of *God's Toilet*, is a self-confessed votary of absurd theatre and has been experimenting with the form for some time now. Datta has previously translated and directed *Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco for the Hypokrites. The play met with moderate critical and popular success and toured the college competition circuit around the country, winning a few laurels along the way [17]. Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* inspired the bilingual *God's Toilet*. It is a ninety-minute tirade in defense of the absurd theatre.

The play features two characters, *Music Man* (Somak Ghosh) and *Mad Man* (Aditya Prakash Ghosh). The staging is simple with a single chair, a couple of Salvador Dalí paintings and a single picture frame. The characters warn at the very beginning of the show that the play is "plotless [sic], characterless, sceneless [sic] and sometimes shameless [18]." It also warns that no situation in the play is supposed to cause laughter and if at any time the audience feels compelled to laugh "it is completely unintentional and unfortunate [19]." What followed were several sets of profanities aimed at everything from middle-class sensibilities to Rabindranath Tagore, from Samuel Beckett to God. The audience did not heed the warning to avoid laughing and greeted each profanity with loud cheers, to the point where the cycle of profanity and loud laughter became annoying and tiring. The audience, however, found the style to be powerful and effective.

Reviewers had radically different takes on the use of language in the play. Sreemita Bhattacharya of *The Times of India* writes in her review published on April 20, 2013: "Hard-hitting dialogues by Datta are the hero [sic] of the play – while mocking audience's intellect on the surface, they try to communicate a strong message through the narrative [20]." Bhattacharya gives the play four and a half stars out of a possible five. Ananda Lal also picks up on the issue of language and the way it evokes "toilet humor" in his review for *The Telegraph* (February 11, 2012). He notes, "Datta does not realize that beyond a point this stance of verbal antagonism wears out and boomerangs on them, the viewer's patience wearing thin [21]." Contrary to Lal's assertion, however, the audience seemed to have enjoyed the verbal antagonism of the characters.

Amra Bangali Jati (We the Bengalis) revolved around a crisis faced by most Bengali youth in their families. Bengali parents encourage their children to take up the arts as children and adolescents. This attitude sees a complete reversal when the children enter high school and the question of careers start looming in the not too distant future. Members of the youth theatre group must have had fresh memories of this shifting stance in their respective families and drew upon their experience to craft this play. The play exposes the hypocrisy of Bengali parents and the frustration of the Bengali youth at not being able to pursue their dream. Unable to bear the pressure of choosing between their passion for the arts and the insistence of families to choose a more meaningful career, the young theatre enthusiasts resort to extreme measures. They declare, "Today's generation feels that mass communication is mightier than bombs [22]." Three of the characters stage a fake suicide and force their families to reconsider their decisions of not allowing them to pursue a career in the arts, specifically theatre. Playwright Anubhav Dasgupta echoes the thoughts of several young theatre enthusiasts when he writes, "There will come a day when we will be able to survive simply by doing theatre, put food on our tables...we will continue to be hungry but that will be a hunger to satisfy the soul. Tell me? Won't we be able to? We shall overcome [23]." The audience appeared to be in the grip of strong emotions throughout the play. They laughed and cried with the actors on stage and erupted into loud cheers and sang along when the company burst into a song at the end of the performance.

I thought that the narrative was too simplistic and the message about the power of mass communication frivolous. I found the play and its simplistic solution of blackmailing parents into acquiescing to the demands of the youth to be trivializing the struggles of young people in Kolkata who strive to make a career in the arts in spite of all odds.

4th Bell Theatres

4th Bell Theatres presented *Biswasta Jalojan o Aloukik Arohira* (The Trusted Ship and Remarkable Passengers) on

April 6, 2013, at the Mukhtangan Theatre near the Rasbehari crossing in South Kolkata. The solo act is based on a story of the same name by Jyotsnamoy Ghosh and was performed and directed by Avignan Bhattacharya. The play revolves around a single character, the poet Arnab Dasgupta, who is seen in a bar celebrating his thirty-ninth birthday with friends. The blurb of the play describes it as "an intense monologue [in which] Arnab ridicules, accuses, challenges, and condemns his so called friends [24]." The poet questions the beliefs and convictions of his friends and accuses them of being turncoats. The friends have conveniently switched sides and abandoned their ideals to achieve fame and money even as Arnab strives to live up to the ideals that they all once stood for.

The audience's attention is drawn immediately to the simple staging as the curtain opens. A single table and chair sat on the stage while several cut outs of chairs were suspended from the ceiling. A bottle of alcohol and a glass completed the picture. The character of Arnab is seen seated on the chair, glass in hand, raising a toast to himself before proceeding with the rest of the monologue.

Avignan delivers a tour de force performance as Arnab Dasgupta. His husky voice and his commanding presence on stage ensured that the audience followed in rapt attention. It was no mean feat given that the performance ran for more than an hour, during which the character of Arnab Dasgupta got progressively drunk. His accusations gained in force and momentum as he swayed from one side of the stage to the other. The recorded music score provided a good haunting background to the action while evoking the sensation of being in a crowded bar. The image of Arnab Dasgupta lying in a heap in his chair – defeated, drunk and yet steadfast in his belief was a very strong one.

Unfortunately, the play was not reviewed as widely as it should have been in the local press. It was equally disheartening to see that the theatre was largely empty, barring some 4th Bell Theatre loyalists. Unlike a M.A.D. or Hypokrites production, college-goers had not thronged to this space to witness this commendable performance by a young actor. I felt, however, that the script needed some editing. Notwithstanding the fact that Avignan is a powerful enough actor to carry the whole play through with élan, there were a few moments where Arnab Dasgupta repeats himself. A more careful editing could have easily cut these portions out and made the narrative tighter.

Nobel Chor (Nobel Prize Thief) was performed on June 8, 2013 at the Mukhtangan theatre. The play is a humorous take on the Rabindranath Tagore mania of Bengalis. The play borrows its title from the 2004 theft of the Nobel Prize for Literature medal awarded to Rabindranath Tagore in 1913 [25]. The medal could not be recovered even after the Central Bureau of Investigation was pressed into action, and the case was dropped in 2009 [26]. The obsession of Bengalis with everything Rabindranath did not cease at any point. If anything, this episode intensified it. 4th Bell Theatres' play looks at the vacuous nature of hero-worshipping India's national poet. The play identifies Tagore as yet another deity of the Hindu pantheon. In the play, we find Rabindranath Tagore returning to earth from his heavenly abode to search for his medal and is shocked to find that everyone reveres his name but are unable to recognize him.

Akash Chakraborty wrote the play based on a skit by Rohan Tripathi. Indranil Mazumdar designed the original score, much of which was performed live by a musical ensemble. Sumit Kumar Roy choreographed the show while Aniruddha Dasgupta designed the sets and directed. Chakraborty deserves to be complimented for the script, which is a series of rhyming couplets. He does not compromise on alluding to topical issues and includes subtle but definite hints to excesses surrounding Rabindranath fanaticism. Mazumdar weaves an excellent score for the play. Kudos are due to the entire team for functioning as a very well-oiled machine during the various dance sequences.

In spite of thoroughly enjoying the production there were certain things that I felt needed more work. Several actors lacked voice projection skills. Aniruddha Dasgupta's production and scenic design never rise to exceptional heights. Dasgupta uses gamcha (an indigenous towel made with brightly dyed meshed cotton) to embellish the set, which, although not aesthetically displeasing, does not add anything to the design either. The scenic design lacked any insight. Certain set pieces like a platform placed in the center of the stage, and several small stools strewn around the stage seemed redundant. The use of lights also left much to be desired. The designer overused floor lights and follow spots leading to a lot of shadows and grey areas instead of an even design. A show that is so strong narrative-wise definitely deserved a far superior execution.

Overall, the production was a success. It ran to a perfect length of little under an hour during which the audience could hardly lose focus from the stage. 4th Bell Theatres entertained and regaled the audience with Nobel Chor. The young group proved socially conscious theatre could be equally entertaining. Barring a few remarks on a Facebook group run by Bengali language theatre aficionados, the play did not interest newspaper reviewers who were not present at the performance. The Facebook commentators were full of praise not only for Nobel Chor but for the group in general and their penchant for producing high quality theatre.

CONCLUSION

The work of the youth theatre groups is certainly praiseworthy, injecting fresh blood into the Bengali theatre

bloodstream and turning a section of the youth of Kolkata towards the arts and away from the career rat race. The three groups discussed at length here have shown promise, but there are still quite a few roadblocks to overcome. Aniruddha Dasgupta, Anubhav Dasgupta and Soumendranath Mukherjee all have dreams to create training facilities, theatres, and socially conscious theatre [27]. The question remains: do these young theatre enthusiasts have the necessary training and expertise to realize their dreams? One can only hope that the perseverance of the youth theatre groups in fostering a theatre culture amongst the youth will eventually lead to more theatre schools and a formal training in the craft of the theatre. Till then the "untrained expertise" of the young thespians and their passion for the stage will hopefully keep the spirit of youth theatre alive [28].

End Notes

Bengali group theatre is the dominant form of popular theatre in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. It traces its roots to the peoples' theatre movement of the latter half of the 1940s.

P. Bhattacharya, "Language of the Heart," n.p., n.d., accessed via The Hypokrites Facebook page, posted photo, March 7, 2013.

Rudrarup Mukhopadhyay, "Fourthbell-er Natok 'Happy-D' ebong Aniruddha," Natya Mukhopotro 862, November 22, 2012. My own translation. The title of the article can be translated as "Happy-D by fourth bell and Aniruddha."

Aritra Sengupta, in conversation with the author, May 16, 2013.

"Kolkataye Anyorokom Jubora," Natya Mukhopotro 862, November 11, 2012. My own translation. The title of the article can be translated as "Youths with a difference in Kolkata."

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid. Anandabazar Patrika is arguably the largest circulating Bengali daily in Kolkata.

"Kolkataye Anyorokom Jubora," November 11, 2012.

Ibid.

Ibid. The term "push sales" referred to bullish marketing strategies. Friends and families of group members are urged to buy tickets and attend performances and bring their friends and families along to fill auditorium seats.

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"Chhotoder Chokhe Theatre," Natya Mukhopotro 888, May 23, 2013. My own translation. The title of the article can be translated as "Theatre from the perspective of the younger generation."