

SETTING THE STAGE: A MATERIALIST SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF
CONTEMPORARY BENGALI GROUP THEATRE FROM KOLKATA, INDIA

by

ARNAB BANERJI

(Under the Direction of Farley Richmond)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies select performance examples from various group theatre companies in Kolkata, India during a fieldwork conducted in Kolkata between August 2012 and July 2013 using the materialist semiotic performance analysis. Research into Bengali group theatre has overlooked the effect of the conditions of production and reception on meaning making in theatre. Extant research focuses on the history of the group theatre, individuals, groups, and the socially conscious and political nature of this theatre. The unique nature of this theatre culture (or any other theatre culture) can only be understood fully if the conditions within which such theatre is produced and received studied along with the *performance event* itself. This dissertation is an attempt to fill this lacuna in Bengali group theatre scholarship. Materialist semiotic performance analysis serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The materialist semiotic performance analysis is a theoretical tool that examines the theatre event by locating it within definite material conditions of production and reception like organization, funding, training, availability of spaces and the public discourse on theatre. The data presented in this dissertation was gathered in Kolkata using: auto-ethnography, participant observation,

sample survey, and archival research. The conditions of production and reception are each examined and presented in isolation followed by case studies. The case studies bring the elements studied in the preceding section together to demonstrate how they function together in a performance event. The studies represent the vast array of theatre in Kolkata and allow the findings from the second part of the dissertation to be tested across a variety of conditions of production and reception. The dissertation inaugurates a dialogue that negates the universals of meaning ascribed to performances in Bengali group theatre and locates it within the specific cultural contexts where it is produced and received.

INDEX WORDS: Bengali theatre; group theatre; materialist semiotic; Kolkata theatre; conditions of production; conditions of reception; theatre training; theatre funding; theatre spaces

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To the tireless individuals who work, thanklessly, behind the scenes

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is four in the afternoon on a pleasant winter day in Kolkata. Like any other day of the week, the Academy of Fine Arts in Central Kolkata will host a Bengali “group theatre” performance at half-past six in the evening. A quick survey of the auditorium shows no sign of the play or players. The bare stage is lit with fluorescent lights. The house caretaker sweeping the stage with a long mop is the only sign of any activity on the stage. Very soon, however, the house will be abuzz with activity signaling the beginning of the evening’s proceedings.

At quarter past four, a small truck covered in tarpaulin pulls into the Academy of Fine Arts complex. From the conversation that ensues between the people waiting outside the theatre and the driver of the truck, it is easy to surmise that the latter is late. The driver and his two passengers are excited and complain loudly about having been stopped by the police in spite of the requisite road permit. The commotion dies down as everyone present pulls the tarpaulin behind to reveal stands, flats, painted plywood and other pieces of furniture. All hands are called on deck, and the pieces are hauled back to the loading dock of the Academy of Fine Arts and onto the stage. People waiting on the stage pull out wrenches and hammers and get busy assembling the pieces together. Meanwhile, a taxi pulls up next to the truck. As one of its passengers argues over the tip that the driver demands, others get busy hauling wires, dimmers, lighting instruments, gel files and a

lighting board on stage. While all this is going on, a small table has been set up at the bottom of the stage with a compact disc player and an amplifier.

Multiple instructions and orders crisscross each other as everyone tries to get their act together. Nails are being hammered into the wood panels, cables are being laid out, and instruments are being lifted to line sets—all at the same time. Around quarter past five, the tension becomes more palpable. By this time, the stage has transformed to look like the interiors of an old house. One can make out the kitchen and the living area. Some people complain that the wooden pieces are in a state of disrepair and chide the set builder, who continues to run around trying to please everybody while finishing the assembly. The light crew grows impatient; they want the stage cleared of actors so that they can set levels and focus lights. The director sits in the front row and supervises everything, shouting brief but definite orders about the position of scenic elements and the level of lights. The person in charge of sound, meanwhile, has started testing levels adding to the cacophony. At quarter to six, a lull settles down on the stage. The actors have all retired to the dressing room after helping with the assembly and standing in position for the brief focus calls. Prop managers do a last round sweep to ensure that all props are in the right place—both on and off stage.

Actors engage in small talk as they apply make up and arrange their wardrobe even as tea and snacks are served. They have half an hour before the doors are opened at quarter past six. Some enquire about the amount of sales while others discuss work, other projects or run lines. The ushers arrive backstage a couple of minutes before opening the gates to check if all is set backstage. The curtain is drawn at the end of this survey, and the gates are opened.

Audiences start congregating around the theatre from five in the afternoon. Some of them are at the theatre straight from work. The snack and tea counters outside the theatre complex offer a variety of snacks. Some of them have already bought a ticket; others make a beeline for the box office. Most people are seen engaging in conversations with friends and acquaintances – very often, other fellow theatregoers. Patrons start heading towards the theatre around six. Elderly patrons are already near the doors of the theatre, and some of them sit in the very limited seating area in the lobby. Friends of the company or invitees head backstage to wish their friends all the best for the show. The theatre group might have put up some photos and reviews of the play showing this evening and other works in the repertoire. Some members of the audience check these out while others look through the merchandise on sale – usually a couple of anthologies of plays by the director and the program for the evening.¹ The ushers ring the first bell as they open the doors to the theatre at quarter past six. Tickets are punched and the audience is reminded to turn off their cellphones. As the audience is settling in, a second bell is rung at twenty-five past six. At half past six, a group member backstage announces the play, reads out the credits and reminds the audience to turn off all electronic devices again.² The announcement is followed by a third bell and the curtain music. It is show time.

¹ The director of groups, as will be discussed in the section on working conditions and training often doubles up as the resident playwright of the group.

² In spite of these repeated reminders cell phones often ring out during performances, often during critical moments.

The scene described above is the typical run-up to a Bengali group theatre performance in Kolkata. For seven years between 2002 and 2009, I witnessed the transformation of the bare stage to a play set in a matter of two hours. I hauled the scenery, moved lights, adjusted audio levels, assembled sets, attended focus calls, arranged props, put on makeup, sang, danced and delivered lines under the arc lights. I marveled at how every little element came together in perfect harmony in such a short time.

The strike following the performance is equally hasty, lasting no more than an hour. Actors assigned to scene dismantling duty hastily take off their costumes, arrange their bags and run on to the stage to take the scenery down. Lighting crew bring out the ladder and start pulling cable and instruments down. More instructions are shouted while some of the audience makes their way backstage to talk to actors, offer criticisms or present accolades. The evening winds down around ten when company members file out of the theatre followed by the scenery bearing truck and a taxi with the lighting instruments.

There are several myths surrounding the theatre performance in Kolkata. Veterans speak at length about the challenges of performing in various venues, of setting up and dismantling a show in a matter of hours. Light designers fondly recall their improvisations with rudimentary and defective equipment to create magic on stage. Group members bicker about how the set looks tired with every passing performance since the suppliers do not take adequate care of it. The suppliers complain regularly about having to bribe the traffic police while shipping scenery. And there is always the conversation about how the theatre is not making enough money, about delayed grants

and other financial woes. Amidst all these problems and challenges, one thing is constant – theatre has to happen and it does happen regularly, spread across a dozen or so venues in Kolkata.

The Object of Study

Bengali group theatre is the dominant form of popular theatre in Kolkata, West Bengal, India as in the rest of the urban centers in the country. It traces its roots to the peoples' theatre movement of the latter half of the 1940s. Theatre scholar and critic Ananda Lal provides a succinct definition of the group theatre phenomenon:

Group theatre: amateur troupes in post-Independence India, which produced the great majority of important urban theatre work, are classified as groups (...), the number of groups increased rapidly after 1947, catering to an educated clientele with mainly serious and socially committed material, and disdaining pure entertainment. Since their themes precluded box-office success, groups could not hope to pay their members, who typically hold full-time day jobs in other professions and rehearse in the evenings.

Making a virtue of their poverty, groups register as non-profit organizations (...). As such, they qualify for public funding, corporate sponsorship and private donations, tax exemptions, and, for theatre, waiver of high entertainment tax on tickets. Some groups have become eligible for regular but limited government grants. A few, able to muster money from diverse sources, find themselves in a position to disburse small stipends to members, but most have a hand-to-mouth existence,

scraping together tiny budgets from one production to the next. In these circumstances, only the most dedicated survive. Of late, membership has grown flexible, many groups relying on a common pool of actors.³

We learn from Lal's definition some of the major tenets of group theatres: organizational strategies, constant financial constraints, the struggle to survive, the political and social commitment of the groups, and the amateur moorings of the theatre culture.

What this succinct definition cannot cover (due to its brevity), however, is the way in which group theatres function amidst the various challenges that Lal hints at, financial and otherwise. Lal, describing a pan-India phenomenon also does not delve into the specifics of each regional variant of the group theatre. Although some of the basic features of the group theatre like financial woes, amateur theatre, and the nomadic nature of the groups can be seen across India, theatre in every city is subtly different. It would be wrong to assume that group theatres function in identical ways across multiple urban centers. Accordingly, Lal's definition needs to be nuanced further by locating it within specific temporal and spatial settings. Some tenets of his definition have also changed between its publication in 2004 and 2012-2013, specifically in the case of Kolkata. For example, a significant number of groups in Kolkata receive central government financial aid, there is a noteworthy increase in the number of actors who claim professional charges for performing, a parallel youth theatre movement has emerged, and a shift from the political and social commitments to entertainment can be seen across the theatre culture. In this dissertation, I look at the current trends in Bengali group theatre in

³ Ananda Lal, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2004), 139.

Kolkata vis-à-vis Lal's 2004 definition of this urban theatre phenomenon by closely studying the material realities of creating theatre in Kolkata.

Objective

Towards this end this dissertation attempts to answer two central questions: how does Bengali group theatre groups function today – organization, finance and *modus operandi*—and why are things the way they are in Kolkata? The study also tries to unravel several related questions: why does such a strong theatre culture have to struggle so much to survive, why is there no corporate sponsorship for Bengali language theatre in Kolkata, why don't companies lease a space instead of moving around constantly from one venue to the other, and how do technicians, designers, playwrights, actors and directors train themselves?

The method that works like clockwork behind staging a play in Kolkata has never been studied. Neither has anyone made any attempt to understand how the conditions of production and reception affect meaning-making in Bengali theatre. One can find several biographies of Bengali theatre greats, histories of theatre in Kolkata and even studies that discussed the interconnection between theatre and socialist politics.⁴ There is, however,

⁴ See the following as representative examples of studies on Bengali theatre that are essentially biographies, histories and a monograph on the connection between group theatre and politics: Utpal Dutt, *Girish Chandra Ghosh* (Calcutta: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatre 1753-1980* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1982), Hemendra Nath Das Gupta, *The Indian Theatre* (Calcutta: Gian Publishing House, 1988 [reprint]) and Kuntal Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics: A Study of Group Theatre Movement of Bengal, 1948-1987* (Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1999).

very little about the processes underlying theatre practices in the city. This is the lacuna being addressed by this dissertation. The material conditions of production and reception reflect on the state of the theatre culture, the attitude of a society towards theatre as well as the value placed on their work by the artists themselves. Growing up as a theatre enthusiast and later a theatre worker, I was interested and disheartened to work under really trying circumstances to produce theatre in Kolkata: the perpetual penury, the problem of space, the lack of comfort associated with this work, etc. There was no reputable theatre-training program. Scores of directors and actors complained about the inadequacy of the only drama department in the city at Rabindra Bharati University.⁵ The National School of Drama (NSD), located hundreds of miles from Kolkata in New Delhi, literally seemed like a distant dream for aspiring actors like me, even as everyone around you warned that training at NSD closes more options than opens them for actors in Kolkata.⁶

The situation was not very different when I sat across from the stage in the audience. Old, cramped and uncomfortable seating, uneven acoustics, lack of transport options at the end of a show and lack of decent food around some performance venues made it difficult to feel welcome at a theatre event. Leading city newspapers occasionally

⁵ Reactions on the Drama Department, Rabindra Bharati University, as well as details regarding its bachelors and master's program are taken up in the Theatre Training chapter.

⁶ Utpal Kumar Banerjee observes that the "NSD alumni ... [are] accepted locally often with some reluctance and not without malice." Utpal K. Banerjee, "The Boiling Cauldron of Bengali Drama," *Theatre India* 9 (May 2004): 185.

published a review, but they were almost always a hackneyed summary peppered with a few words of praise and criticism lacking the finesse and the insight of reviews that one reads from London or New York.⁷ The same newspapers also publish advertisements for plays, but they are so tiny that you can barely make out the details. Amidst these trying conditions Lal's assertion that only the most dedicated survive seemed like a fair assessment of Bengali group theatre and its votaries, on both sides of the stage.

The making and execution of the *performance event* is very rarely discussed not only in Bengali theatre but also in Indian theatre scholarship. Histories and studies of theatre always tend to focus on individuals and/or the script and narrative.⁸ There is,

⁷ See Javed Malick, "Theatre Criticism in India today: Some Personal Reflections" for a discussion on the pitiful state of most theatre reviews in India. Javed Malick, "Theatre Criticism in India today: Some Personal Reflections," *Theatre India* 1 (May 2000): 113-117.

⁸ See Ananda Lal, *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2004), *Theatres of India: a Concise Companion* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2008), Manohar Laxman Varadpande, *History of Indian Theatre* in 3 vols. (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2005), Utpal Kumar Banerjee, *Bengali Theatre: 200 Years* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1999), Ralph Yarrow, *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom* (Richmond: Surrey Press, 2001) and Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatres of independence: drama, theory, and urban performance in India since 1947* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005). These books are only a small portion of the vast selection of books available on contemporary Indian theatre.

however, no critical work that focuses beyond the play text and on the conditions of performance. Ric Knowles observes that most performance analysis, including theatre semiotics, concentrate merely on the performance text. The performance text includes, in Knowles' definition of the term, the script, *mise en scène*, design, actors' bodies and movement and gestures.⁹ This collection of performance necessities can only be part of an analysis of the theatre event because, as Knowles observes, the theatre event is a triangular relation between the performance text and the conditions in which it is produced and received. An exclusive focus on the performance text is akin to thinking of the theatre event as existing in a vacuum where the material conditions of production and reception do not have an effect on the performance text and vice versa. Knowles proposes the materialist semiotic performance analysis as a critical tool to address this problem.

Materialist Semiotic Performance Analysis

The materialist semiotic performance analysis is a theoretical tool that examines the theatre event by locating it within definite material conditions of production and reception like organization, funding, training, availability of spaces and the public discourse on theatre. Studied this way, performances lose the universal meanings and messages generally ascribed to them and are seen as products of the social, political, economic and cultural conditions in which they were conceived, constructed and received.

Knowles uses the materialist semiotic analysis to comment on English-language theatre in North America and the United Kingdom. He offers a general overview of

⁹ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19.

individual elements that constitute the conditions of production and reception. At the end of the overview, Knowles brings these diverse elements together in case studies of select theatre companies from the United States, Canada, England and Ireland. The case studies demonstrate how meaning in the theatre is a result of the triangular relation between theatre training, working conditions, theatre spaces and public discourse.

The materialist semiotic performance analysis “considers performance texts to be the products of a more complex mode of production that is rooted (...) in specific and determinate social and cultural contexts.”¹⁰ This form of performance analysis brings together two established theoretical approaches to productively bear on each other. Cultural materialism provides a model for locating cultural production within its historical, cultural and material contexts, whereas semiotics allows for a systematic study of the signifying categories in theatre. Either approach has drawbacks when used independently for performance analysis. Cultural materialism has not been able to create models of really close reading of particular performances in particular places since Gramsci, and in its quest for a scientific analysis of theatrical signs theatre semiotics has neglected to include cultural specificity within its analytical model.¹¹ Taken together and applied to specific productions the two approaches can, however, “inform a materialist semiotics that can illuminate the cultural work done by particular productions.”¹²

In their succinct outline of the theoretical paradigm known as “cultural materialism” Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield define culture as “the whole system

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), Italian Marxist theoretician and politician.

¹² Ibid., 12.

of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world,” and materialism as an assertion “culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production.”¹³ The approach outlined by Dollimore and Sinfield consider texts (including performance) as inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in history. Dollimore and Sinfield also suggest that the cultural meaning that are made in the process are finally political meanings, and that cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality.

Ian Watson notes that the roots behind considering performance as a text and the implications that there is an act of reading involved in it lie in literary semiotics.¹⁴ Semiotics, heralded by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce at the turn of the twentieth century, was an attempt to develop a “scientific” understanding of meaning production in society. The “scientific” study of meaning production looks for patterns and assumes that meaning making structures are necessarily timeless and context-less. Theatre as a sign system and the application of semiotic theories to theatre was a result of the Prague School in the 1930s and 1940s. Much of the activity of theatre semiotics that followed from the 1960s onward concerned itself with identifying and classifying various signs on stage. Theatre semiotics has been criticized for reducing performance to mere textuality and for failing to consider: the larger socio-cultural contexts in which

¹³ Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), viii.

¹⁴ Ian Watson, “‘Reading’ the Actor: Performance, Presence, and the Synesthetic,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 11, no. 42 (1995): 135.

performances occur, the semiology of audience response, and performance's relationship to the material world that it represents.

This form of analysis, Knowles argues, “establishes a tension between its insistence on the materiality (as opposed to textuality) of theatre, and the act of reading, which is usually understood to constitute what is read as text.”¹⁵ Knowles considers both the physical materiality and the ephemerality of the theatrical production in his form of analysis. According to Knowles, the raw performance event and the material conditions that shape its production and reception need to be translated together into the realms of discourse and understanding, where they are made available to critics and audiences alike as “performance texts, and where ultimately their meaning is produced.”¹⁶ Knowles uses his form of performance analysis to consider all aspects of “theatrical production and reception” in contemporary English-language theatre. The conclusions that he draws from implementing this analysis are that practice and theory are mutually constitutive: that attention needs to be paid while writing about theatre production about the specific politics of location of the production, and that such writing itself is not unlocated and “is always a function of the cultural positioning of the writer.”¹⁷ The materialist-semiotic performance analysis proposed by Knowles will serve as the critical framework for this study of contemporary Bengali group theatre.

Unlike Knowles, whose study of the conditions of production and reception are based on certain general assumptions of the English-language theatre that he studies, this

¹⁵ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

dissertation delves deeper into the mechanics of the processes that underlie Bengali group theatre. Knowles surmises the ideologies underlying organization, training, the politics of location, space, and funding based on extant observable practices and texts available on the English-language theatre. His work is a significant re-arrangement of available information on theatre practices in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States but the information from which he draws his analysis was already available. For this study an archive had to be generated first since conditions of production and reception for Bengali group theatre was undocumented. Using Knowles' materialist semiotic analysis helps in navigating through the data collected during the field trip in India between August 2012 and July 2013.

Knowles' approach with its emphasis on the non-textual, physical materiality of the theatre event, the ephemerality of the raw theatrical event, and the instable relations between the conditions of production and reception with the performance proper is the perfect critical tool to look beyond the stage and into the conditions that create and shape meaning for a specific theatre culture. Knowles' model becomes handy to bring extant material on the ephemerality of the Bengali group theatre in dialogue with its non-textual aspects. In doing so, I aim to arrive at a fuller understanding of this complex urban theatre phenomenon.

Timeline and Methodology

I have confined the observations in this dissertation to the eleven months I spent as a researcher in Kolkata, India between August 2012 and July 2013. My experience, however, of having been an active part of this theatre culture for seven years (2002-2009) complemented findings from this research period.

The methodological choices for such a research are more problematic in practice than in principle. It is difficult to provide evidence for how productions have been read and how conditions of production and reception shaped those readings. As a socially-positioned observer and critic, I analyze Bengali group theatre both within its local context of production and within multiple contexts of reception. I will not be considering my own and the occasional newspaper reviewers' response as evidence of what the production really meant but as "evidence of meanings and responses that specific performances in particular locations made available."¹⁸ These responses, therefore, become evidences of the readings that emerge as negotiated meanings for particular audiences, critics and reviewers under certain conditions—both tangible and intangible. I function as an "outsider" who has the viewpoint of an "insider." My autoethnographic study helps nuance my perspective even better than where I started with my initial assumptions regarding this theatre culture.

Autoethnography combines "*autobiography and ethnography*."¹⁹ Bochner and Ellis observe that when researchers do autoethnography they "retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity."²⁰ It is, however, essential in addition to talking about personal experience to analyze that experience, to illustrate the

¹⁸ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 21.

¹⁹ Carolyn Ellis et al., "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>.

²⁰ Ibid.

facets of cultural experience, and also make aspects of that culture familiar to outsiders and insiders. This study combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. The autobiographic elements that frame the study are meant to bring a reader into a scene while the ethnography provides what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” of a culture.²¹ Harry Wolcott distinguishes between two kinds of ethnography: “Doing fieldwork” and “gathering data in the field.”²² Quetzil E. Castañeda explains the former as “activities and practices that are based in immersion” and the latter as:

Research activities that rely upon rapid, extensive, and comprehensive investigations of the surface of phenomena on relatively large (or larger) scale with methods such as surveys, questionnaires, sampling, that can be applied without the intensive immersion and *in situ* dwelling of doing fieldwork.²³

The fieldwork that I engage in involves immersion into the theatre milieu in Kolkata as well as gathering qualitative data from my interactions with members of the theatre community. Participant observation, both as a theatre worker and as an audience helped me learn first-hand the perspectives held by my study population. To facilitate the participant observer perspective, I worked in three different productions during my fieldwork. My roles in these productions were very different in each instance. I served as

²¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

²² Quetzil E. Castañeda, “The Invisible Theatre of Ethnography: Performative Principles of Fieldwork,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, No. 1 (2006): 76.

²³ Ibid.

the production controller and actor (*Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked*) in a site-generic performance, wrote and designed a street-theatre piece (*Himmatwala*) and was a crewmember for a proscenium-style play (*Man of the Heart*). I worked backstage for a group (Rang Roop) for three of their productions in various Kolkata and suburban venues besides attending script readings, rehearsals and numerous other performances.

Bengali group theatre is a diverse and complicated system of performance, and in order to get a fuller understanding of the dynamics of its working, triangulation or the use of diverse research methods becomes necessary. Towards that end, I employ archival research, textual analysis and in-depth personal interviews in addition to participant observation in my study.

During the fieldwork, I spent several weeks at the Kolkata based Natya Shodh Sansthan theatre archive and the Sangeet Natak Akademi library in New Delhi. The most significant of the archives for my research, however, was a living one. As I am studying something that has not been hitherto systematically reviewed, the bulk of the information remained untapped in the experiences and processes of the people who build the theatre event. I conducted a series of personal interviews with sixty active actor-directors, actors, designers, builders and scholars in Kolkata. This sample represented a wide cross-section of theatre artists in the city. It includes nationally recognized actor-directors, academics, scholars as well as little known alternative theatre practitioners and young theatre directors and actors. The sample was created using purposive and snowball/chain-referral sampling methods.²⁴

²⁴ The questionnaires used for these interviews are included in Annexure B.

According to Oisín Tansey, “Purposive sampling is a selection method where the study’s purpose and the researcher’s knowledge of the population guide the process.”²⁵ Owing to my prior experience as a practitioner in Bengali group theatre, I was able to identify “particular respondents of interest and sample those deemed most appropriate.”²⁶ This method was useful for actor-directors, actors and designers as they are the “visible” sections of the theatre community. The informed discretion that I used while selecting the “most appropriate” samples was dictated in part by convenience. The chosen respondents for the study were available and willing to participate in the study. I also chose to interview respondents whose work I had seen both during the fieldwork and before. Some of my intended respondents were either unavailable for interviews or refused to be a part of the study. I asked my respondents (especially designers) to suggest potential respondents among technicians. Tansey refers to this process as “Snowball or Chain-Referral Sampling.”²⁷ This process of sample generation was particularly useful to obtain information from theatre technicians in Kolkata. The technicians choose to remain behind the scenes thus increasing the difficulty to compile an exhaustive list. Based on the initial set of recommendations, I interviewed the new sample set and sought more recommendations from this group thus increasing the breadth and variety of the sample size.

²⁵ Oisín Tansey, “Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40, No. 4 (2007): 770.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Structure

The dissertation is divided into three parts. The first part presents the reader with an introduction to the urban landscape of Kolkata and a detailed historical overview of the development of the proscenium style theatre in Kolkata – from the earliest British inspired theatres to the development of the politically motivated and socially conscious Bengali group theatre. The second part begins with the chapter on working conditions. I discuss the organization, funding and the processes of building a theatre event in Kolkata. The chapter following this section is on the tenuous issue of theatre training in the city. The discussion in this chapter centers on the general perception towards arts training in Kolkata and available training options. The third and final chapter in this part is a discussion of theatre spaces in Kolkata. Knowles explains that theatre spaces play equally important roles in dictating conditions of production and reception. Based on that assumption, I engage in a discussion about the various kinds of theatre spaces in Kolkata. Storage spaces, rehearsal spaces and performance spaces all enter this discussion along with audience amenities at auditoriums. The second part of the dissertation looks at the various elements of the production process in isolation in order to delve deep into each element. It is understood, however, that none of these elements can exist and function in isolation, and it is only when these come together that a meaningful production is possible. The elements are seen working in unison towards the production of a theatrical event in the third part of the dissertation where I present the various findings from the second part “with a degree of contextualized thickness” and across a variety of conditions of production and reception as case studies.²⁸

²⁸ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 5.

The three case studies represent the wide variety of theatre that characterizes the group theatre in Kolkata. I look at representative performance examples from the repertoires of Theatre Formation Paribartak, Rang Roop and youth theatre groups Hypokrites, M.A.D (Mad About Drama) and 4th Bell Theatres. I look at the processes of each group, the unique and shared problems for each group and the idiosyncrasies of each to establish that the particular rhetoric that the groups create is a combined effect of all of the above. The initial plan was to study select performance examples from Nandikar, Rang Roop and Shatabdi theatre groups. During the course of the fieldwork, I realized that both Nandikar and Shatabdi were resorting to old and tired formulas, and their work held no appeal for me except being representations of an important bygone era of Bengali group theatre. TFP, on the other hand, sought to break the proscenium mold and challenged extant theatrical conventions in Kolkata with their site generic *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* and street theatre performance *Himmatwala*. Rang Roop, while continuing to work in proscenium spaces and within the group theatre framework, has emerged as a powerful voice through their Bengali domestic drama centered on strong female characters. The youth theatre movement, despite being very new, has made its mark as the essential next step and direction for the group theatre movement. Together, the case studies are laid out as samples of extant practices, alternative approaches within the extant milieu and the future of the group theatre movement.

Very few studies have tried to capture the dynamism of modern urban theatre in India. A couple of recent studies on Indian theatre have sought to break that mold and include modern urban performance within their ambit, but these studies largely remain

biographical and/or historical in nature.²⁹ The materialist semiotic concern of this dissertation is absent from this recent scholarship. My study looks at urban Bengali theatre in Kolkata as a thriving cultural product, and instead of merely eulogizing stalwarts and focusing on play scripts, I locate it within the material culture where it is produced and consumed.

²⁹ For an example, see Nandi Bhatia, ed., *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

PART I – INTRODUCING KOLKATA AND THE BENGALI GROUP THEATRE

CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE STAGE: INTRODUCING KOLKATA

How does one begin to introduce a city that is some three hundred years old and where one has spent the greater part of one's life? Where does one begin? The arrival of the British, the East India Company's acquiring of the three villages Gobindapur, Sutanuti, and Kalikata from the Sabarna Roychowdhury family, the fortification of the city under the British, the development of the modern city or the emergence of the city as the cultural capital of independent India, or the changing political scenario – the repressive Congress regime, to thirty four years of leftist governance to the current Trinamool Congress administration. I toyed with all these choices before arriving at the decision to present it in the current form. In doing so, I engage with the material realities of negotiating with the city. In this introduction to Kolkata I assume the position of a virtual tour guide helping a new visitor to the city find their way to the Academy of Fine Arts and beyond.

Imagine, if you will, that you have decided to go watch group theatre performances in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. You arrive at the newly built massive Kolkata airport. The first thing you notice as you step outside the terminal building is the sheer number of people and the massive chaos. There are tens of people near the arrival doors holding name cards while others simply call out the names of their near and dear ones as they see them coming outside the terminal. You clear the maddening maze of

people, avoid the touts who promise to take you to your destination or ask for “foreign money” and head to the pre-paid taxi counter and book a cab for let us say, Behala. You get into the cab and he pulls out of the airport area.

Driving past the huge “Welcome to Kolkata” sign with a smiling portrait of the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, you enter the V.I.P Road. As the heat pinches into your skin and the pollution hurts your eyes a little, you notice the incredible amount of constructions all around you. Bridges, buildings, and roads – everything is under construction. The taxi slows down to a crawl behind a long line of buses, taxis, and private vehicles. It allows you the time to soak in some more of the sights and sounds of the city that you have just alighted in. One of the distinct features you will notice is, in spite of the best attempts to present a homogenized look, Kolkata changes every two kilometers or so. You are in a sprawling tree-lined highway one second, and the next moment you are turning onto the busy Shri Aurobindo Sarani towards Sovabazar in north Kolkata and then again onto the magnificent Central Avenue, lined with huge colonial-era structures on both sides. The drive takes you past the Ram Mandir, Mahajati Sadan, School of Tropical Medicine, the Calcutta Medical College, and the century-old newspaper office The Statesman House before converging into the central business district of Esplanade.³⁰

Esplanade, at the heart of the city, is bustling with thousands of people as they go about their daily business. Central Avenue now joins the J.L. Nehru Road and you drive

³⁰ Ram Mandir is an old temple in north Kolkata dedicated to the Hindu deity Ram. The area adjoining the temple is a busy marketplace, especially known for north Indian style sarees. Mahajati Sadan is a seventy-five year old multi-use auditorium in north Kolkata.

past the bustling New Market area, the Grand Hotel, the chic Park Street before turning onto Cathedral Road past the magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral, the Academy of Fine Arts and the Nandan Cultural Complex and onto Harish Mukherjee road. The highway gives way to narrower roads as you leave the imagined boundaries of central Kolkata and enter into the south. The buildings lining this road are almost as old as the ones you drove past in the north, but they are smaller. You realize that this area must have been more of a residential area. You make a left on Judges Court Road at the Kalighat Fire Station and drive over a bridge.

The famous Hindu Kali Temple of Kalighat is to your left. The Kali Temple is one of the fifty-one most sacred pilgrimage sites for Hindu devotees. The temple is dedicated to Kali, one of the many forms of the mother goddess in the Hindu pantheon. To your right on the same bridge you see the high walls of the Alipur Central Jail, a pre-independence prison where several freedom fighters were incarcerated and executed by the British. You drive past the resplendent Hastings House, erstwhile home of Warren Hastings and past the Judges Civil and Sessions court before turning left on to Alipore Road. The sights are completely distinct from anything that you have seen so far. Posh bungalows and huge apartment buildings, home of the rich, and the largely non-Bengali Kolkata population lines the road. Emerging out of the Alipore Road and past the Kolkata Port Trust officers' quarters you merge onto Diamond Harbor Road. You are about to leave the city proper and enter suburban Kolkata. The roads here are narrower, more chaotic, and cops try to manage the unmanageable traffic that is characteristic of this part of the city. You go past the Taratala crossing and enter Behala, a bustling market area with shops lining both sides of the street and incredibly slow-moving traffic.

As you leave Diamond Harbor Road and turn in to one of the many even narrower streets negotiating pedestrians, cycle rickshaws, two-wheelers and three-wheeled auto-rickshaws, your taxi driver mutters obscenities under his breath and honks more than he has ever done during the last one and a half hours that you have been journeying with him. During the final stretch of the journey, he asks for directions from locals congregated at neighborhood tea stalls and cigarette shops before finally pulling in front of the small guesthouse in a quiet Behala neighborhood away from the hustle and bustle of the megalopolis that you have just driven through. Your ears still hurt from the cacophonic rhythm of car horns, and blaring microphones. Close your eyes and before drifting off to sleep, recall the wide variety of posters that you saw during your two-hour drive advertising everything from Bollywood films to McDonald's burgers. Try to remember if you saw one advertising a play; you're probably tempted to say that you may have seen a couple of those but you are not sure. Don't worry, you probably did not see any simply because they are a rarity. Tired after a long flight and the first bout of synesthetic mayhem this initial encounter with Kolkata has been, you retire for the day, looking forward to the theatrical adventure of tomorrow.

You wake up early. A calm hangs over the neighborhood. Looking out of your window, you can see the city gradually waking up like a lazy cat stretching itself out of the stupor of the previous night. You can see the smoke billowing from a clay oven in the distance and hear the soft tune of a devotional number playing in the radio somewhere and the gentle scrapes of the bristles of a broom on the sidewalk. The guesthouse staff has already served a hot cup of steaming tea with a couple of cookies, known popularly as biscuits in India. You turn on your computer and start looking for performances. A

simple Google search “theatre performances in Kolkata” throws up links to a couple of dailies, *The Times of India* and *The Telegraph* prominent among them. You browse through the listings, noting down items under theatre and drama. After lunch and a brief siesta you head out around four in the afternoon for the Academy of Fine Arts, which you have been told is the holiest of holy shrines for Bengali group theatre.

Having already experienced a cab ride the previous day, you cannot wait to try some other form of transport today. You are directed to the nearest cycle rickshaw stand, where you climb on to a cushioned back seat of a tri-cycle. A middle-aged man who lights a leaf cigarette pedals the rickshaw. He takes you to the Diamond Harbor Road and directs you to the nearest auto-rickshaw stand. You climb into one of several waiting auto-rickshaws, a small three-wheeled motorized cabin cycle painted in uniform light green and bright yellow livery. In Kolkata auto-rickshaws are used as shared ride vehicles and ply on shorter routes. The driver tells you that you can pay for four people or you could wait for three other people to show up, you choose to wait. You look around the little vehicle. You’re sitting at the far end of the back seat. You can sort of imagine that in this over-crowded city two more people can be cramped into the back seat but cannot fathom where the fourth passenger that the driver spoke of is going to sit. Putting your curiosity to rest, the auto fills up fifteen minutes later. The fourth passenger balances herself/himself precariously in the front seat next to the driver. You imagine that it cannot be a comfortable ride and probably make a mental note to avoid it. The auto-rickshaw meanders its way through major roads and narrow side streets and takes you to Rasbehari crossing. Rasbehari is a bustling four-point crossing in the heart of south Kolkata with a vertical road linking Behala in the west to the J.B.S. Holden Avenue to the east crossing

the horizontal road linking the Tollygunje, home of the Bengali language cinema and the gateway to the southern suburbs, in the south to Esplanade in central Kolkata.

You brace yourself for your first subway ride in Kolkata. You climb down the steps to the ticket counter and buy yourself a Rs. 5 (~10¢) ticket. You have to put your bags through a baggage scanner before you punch your ticket and enter through narrow metal gates for another flight of stairs down to the platform. Mounted television sets blare the latest Bollywood hits intermixed with advertisements and movie trailers. Security personnel with semi-automatic weapons walk up and down the station. The train thunders into the platform and the automatic doors fly open. Neither group of passengers wait for the other and after ample pushing and shoving you find yourself in a train compartment dimly lit by fluorescent lights and headed towards Rabindra Sadan, two stations and five minutes away. As you make your way up to street level at the Rabindra Sadan station, the smell of tobacco, an assortment of spices, betel nuts, and ammonia waft into your nostrils. Outside the entrance, the sidewalk is cramped with several cigarette shops, and food counters selling dumplings competing for space. Walking past all this, you cross the A.J.C. Bose Road and enter the Nandan Cultural Complex. The magnificent façade of Nandan, home of the West Bengal Film Academy and a multi-screen movie theatre greets you first. To your right is the actor's entrance for Rabindra Sadan, one of the city's premiere theatre venues. Moving ahead you pass scores of people milling around, chatting, or standing in queue for movie tickets. You leave the Nandan complex and enter a paved open area. To your right lies a large eatery. You can hear the constant clangs of metal, as plate after plate of noodles are sautéed, and dough deep-fried for chicken and egg wraps. To your left is small area with more food counters selling dumplings, wraps,

spiced puffed rice, and the Kolkata specialty *phuchka*.³¹ Immediately in front of you is a raised concrete platform. People sit chatting, sipping tea, and smoking cigarettes on the steps on all four sides of it. You walk past the platform and reach the box-office of the Academy of Fine Arts an hour after setting out from Behala. You buy your ticket for Rs. 60 (\$1) and buy a cup of tea in a clay tumbler known as the *bhnar*, as you watch the sun setting over the beautifully restored Mohor Kunja gardens across the street.

A little later you start heading down the shrubbery-lined path towards the auditorium entrance at the back of the Academy of Fine Arts, which is also Kolkata's premiere art gallery. Near the entrance of the theatre there is another small food counter selling batter covered, deep-fried delicacies like – egg chop, vegetable chop, fish chop, fish fry, and fish roll besides tea and coffee (pre-mixed with milk and sugar). There are some more people waiting in this area in small groups. At a quarter past six, the auditorium doors open followed by a bell and people enter to take their seats. The show starts at half past six, its beginning announced by shrill a third bell.

The show breaks after two hours. On your way out, you recall that you saw a large number of people walking backstage at the end of the performance. You wonder what that is all about before heading out of the auditorium area. You cross the Nandan Cultural Complex and reach Chowringhee Road and repeat the routine you followed to get to this place in reverse order to get back to your guesthouse.

³¹ Deep-fried crispy dough balls filled with a mix of mashed potatoes, chickpeas, ground cumin and coriander seeds, green chili pepper, and cilantro. The snack is served after the ball with the mix is dunked into flavored tamarind water.

In the following days you negotiate the other transport options in the city – buses and trams to get to Girish Mancha nestled next to a local market in north Kolkata. You see that the north is distinctly different from the rest of the city. Narrow lanes, older houses, quaint little shops are characteristic of this area. You visit Madhusudan Mancha adjoining a large shopping complex in south Kolkata and realize that there is hardly anything similar between north, central and south Kolkata and yet they are all a part of the same city. You visit Gyan Manch, located in a school in central Kolkata, to get a flavor of the youth theatre in the city. You probably take the time out to do some shopping at one of the many malls, where you find familiar international brands next to popular domestic retail stores like Pantaloons and Westside. You are probably taken aback just a little bit by the contrast between the poverty you saw in the streets with the opulence inside the malls.

And thus ends your whirlwind trip to Kolkata. In the last few days you became a seasoned haggler, learned the importance of carrying an umbrella, and bottled water with you and possibly even made a few friends. As you head to the airport, your suitcase stuffed with performance brochures, designer tickets, and souvenirs, a few questions come racing to your mind. Why didn't you see any traditional Indian theatre in Kolkata? Why did everything seem so Western? Why were all the performances in proscenium stages? Why was the same company performing the same play in multiple venues? Are there any non-proscenium plays in Kolkata? What about black box theatres, theatres in the round, and arena theatres? Who pays for all the theatre? Are the actors amateurs or professionals? Why did the theatres auditoriums wear such a tired look in comparison to the chic malls and movie theatres? It probably also came as a surprise that outside of the

auditoriums, there was hardly ever any discussion about theatre and that newspapers did not have a regular theatre column. Read on and hopefully this dissertation will be able to answer those questions and many more.

CHAPTER 3

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GROUP THEATRE IN KOLKATA

Western style theatre in the Bengali language is performed in Bangladesh and the present Eastern Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura. Besides these, Bengali expatriates spread all over the world organize theatre events in various countries. The epicenter of Bengali theatre however is Kolkata and its group theatre. More than a hundred theatre groups from across the city and its suburbs produce theatre regularly in and around Kolkata, making it one of the most vibrant theatre centers in the country. Group theatre differs from the traditional Bengali performance forms like Jatra, Alkap, Bahurupi, Chhau, Gambhira, Kabigan, Kathakata, Palagan, and Putul Nach.³² It has a distinct urban style and caters largely to an urban audience. The roots of this theatre can be traced to the colonial periods when the British settlers introduced the proscenium style Western theatre architecture and Western plays in Calcutta, a major center of the British Indian settlement and later the capital of British India. The Bengali urban *nouveau riche* emulated the colonizers to create indigenous theatre companies modeled on European style theatres. They intended to create a modern theatre distinct from the folk/popular entertainment indigenous to the region. My purpose for this chapter is to frame a historical context for Bengali group theatre. In the following pages, I will trace the

³² See Ananda Lal ed, *Theatres of India: A Concise Companion* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009) for detailed descriptions of each of these folk popular genres.

evolution of the European style theatre in the Bengali language in Kolkata. Through this overview, I will make certain idiosyncratic and culturally specific features of this theatre culture clear, which will help the reader have a better socio-historical context for the remainder of this study. Theatre historian Sushil Mukherjee opines that any historical account of Calcutta's theatres should begin with a reference to the English theatre in the city. Bearing that in mind, I will start by recounting the establishment of theatres by the British settlers, the Bengali private and public theatres of the nineteenth century, before summing up the discussion with the evolution of the group theatre in 1948.

The history of European style theatre in Calcutta begins with the early English settlement.³³ The early English theatres of Calcutta rose out of the social gatherings formed among the early settlers for their own recreation. The earliest theatre in Calcutta was the Play House on Lalbazar Street standing at the north-east corner of Mission Row (then called Rope Walk); its position has been indicated in Will's map (1753) as being to the southwest corner of the Tank Square in the fortified area of the city.³⁴ The most

³³ Das Gupta records some sources for disjointed accounts of these theatres like old maps of Calcutta, Lt. Will's plan of Fort William, Major H.L. Thullier's map of 1847-1849, various accounts given by Philip Stanhope in 1774 in his *Genuine Memoirs of Asiaticus*, Mrs. Fay's letters of 1780, Accounts of Miss Sophia Goldborne, authoress of "Hartley House", 1789, Rev. J. Long's "Calcutta Old and New", Mr. Hicky's "Bengal Gazette" of 1780-1782, "The Calcutta Gazette" from 1787, "The Bengal Hurkara" and letters of the pioneers of the modern Bengali stage and famous Bengalis of the time. See Hemendra Nath Das Gupta, *The Indian Theatre* (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1988), 269.

³⁴ H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta Old and New* (Calcutta: W. Newman and Co., 1907), 93.

important European style theatre of this time was the New Play House popularly known as The Calcutta Theatre, established in 1775.³⁵ Miss Sophia Goldborne, authoress of *Hartley House*, mentions, “At the back of the Writer’s Buildings is the Calcutta Theatre, inside of which, I am informed on good authority, equals the most splendid European exhibition. I assure you I have seen characters supported in a manner that would not disgrace any European stage.”³⁶

Other important theatres in Calcutta during this time were The Chowringhee and the Sans Souci. In 1839, the Hurkara reports that a fire destroyed The Chowringhee Theatre. The Sans Souci theatre opened its doors on August 21, 1839 with Sheridan’s *Hunch Back*. Baishnab Charan Auddy, a Bengali amateur actor, performed the role of Othello with aplomb in the Sans Souci in August, 1848, a fact celebrated by Bengali theatre historians today.³⁷ After the Sans Souci closed down, Von Golder’s Lyric Theatre, The Lyceum on the Maidan, The Lewis Theatre and the Royal and Opera House gained prominence. The amateur actors in these theatres performed as a hobby but never a profession. Bengali group theatre carries that legacy to this day. Barring the nineteenth

³⁵ Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres* (Calcutta and New Delhi: K.P. Bagchi & Co. 1982), 2.

³⁶ Sophia Goldborne, *Hartley House* (Calcutta: anonymous, 1789), 58-59. The Oxford University Press reprinted the book in 2007 as *Hartly House*.

³⁷ Ibid., 6. Mukherjee writes of this performance as a moment of crowning glory for a Bengali performer in the 19th century by revering in the fact that Othello was no minor character and former greats of British theatre had essayed the role and now a native performer was stepping into their shoes.

and early twentieth century attempts at establishing a professional theatre, theatre in Kolkata has largely remained an amateur enterprise.

The first modern play to be staged in Bengali was the translation of an English play *The Disguise* in 1795 during the heyday of the English theatre in Calcutta. Bengali group theatre still produces a large number of produced plays that are either translations or adaptations of Western plays. Mukherjee recognizes the 1795 production of *The Disguise* as “certainly an effort to cater to the entertainment of the Bengalis by offering them the same kind of stuff that the Englishmen had been producing for themselves.”³⁸ A Russian adventurer, Herasim Lebedeff, translated the play; he arrived in India as a bandmaster in one of the British units.³⁹ Inspired and instigated by his Bengali teacher, the linguist Babu Golak Nath Dass, who proposed “to supply” actors of both genders should Lebedeff chose “to present this play publicly,” the Russian “set about building a commodius [sic] theatre, on a place of my own, in Dom-Tolah in the centre of Calcutta.”⁴⁰ Having women on stage must have been quite an achievement in 1795. Mukherjee notes that women were not allowed to perform in the English stages in Calcutta even fourteen years prior to this performance.⁴¹ Lebedeff left Calcutta as suddenly as he had arrived and with his departure The Bengally theatre located in Dom-Tolah that he had established also closed down. Sushil Mukherjee speculates that The

³⁸ Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, 1.

³⁹ Balwant Gargi, *Theatre in India* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1962), 108.

⁴⁰ Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, 8. Excerpt from Lebedeff’s introduction to his 1801 work, *Introduction to A Grammar of the Pure and Mixed Indian Dialects*.

⁴¹ Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, 2.

Bengally theatre must have “caught the imagination of the Bengalis.”⁴² It, however, took another thirty-five years for a Bengali to build a theatre.

The first European style theatres, started and controlled by Bengalis were The Hindu Theatre started by Babu Prasanna Kumar Tagore and Nabin Krishna Bose’s Shyambazar Theatre. Even though a Bengali enterprise, The Hindu Theatre began its journey with a Sanskrit classic translated by a European scholar on December 28, 1831, staging Bhavabhuti’s *Uttararamcharita* translated by Professor H.H. Wilson. The Shyambazar Theatre was situated in Babu Nabin Krishna Bose’s house at Shyambazar. It started a few months after The Hindu Theatre and is today considered to be the first completely Bengali theatre. Nabin Bose’s theatre was considered the first “Bengali” theatre since it staged an original Bengali playscript for a Bengali audience: *Vidyasundar*, a bold and erotic romance by Bharat Chandra Roy Gunakar. The play was staged using apparatuses and mechanical contrivances imported from England at a heavy cost. Even in these “Bengali” theatrical enterprises, the emphasis was on emulating the European style. Contemporary Bengali theatre still tends toward this preference for Western styles over indigenous forms.

Around the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Bengali theatre movement witnessed an upsurge in activity as new playhouses and fresh talent were infused into it. There is some controversy over the issue of the first Bengali public playhouse, with critics divided in opinion between the Bengal Theatre (1873-1901) and the National Theatre (1872-1873). Situated at nine Beadon Street, the Bengal Theatre opened with a performance of Madhusudan Dutta’s play *Sarmishtha*. The National Theatre located at

⁴² Ibid., 10.

thirty-three Chitpore Road, Calcutta, was a temporary stage entrusted to the management of Ardhendu Shekhar Mustafi. The playhouse opened with *Nildarpan* by Dinabandhu Mitra. Occasionally, Ardhendu Shekhar Mustafi performed some entertaining pantomimes. Bhuban Mohan Niyogi founded the Great National Theatre in 1873 at Beadon Street and Girish Chandra Ghosh was appointed at the helm. Soon, the National and Great National theatres merged to form the Great National Theatre. The public playhouses relied on profits from sales for sustenance, but not unlike the group theatres today, the theatres often found it difficult to make money. The theatres relied therefore on external funding sources like the patronage of the landed gentry. A similar situation prevails today where groups depend on external funds in the form of central government grants to cover the massive losses that they bear every evening.

Observers of Bengali theatre can sense the palpable undercurrent of political and social awareness that underlies much of the later development in Bengali theatre in the early history of Calcutta theatre. The rise of the Bengali theatre was simultaneous with the rise of nationalism in Bengal. In what may be referred to as the second phase of the development of theatre in Bengal, theatre started embodying the idea of nationalism. For this purpose, the plots of the plays underwent significant changes from their initial social setting to a historical one. The British channeled the Western influence in the country through the notions of society, social concern and reform. The second and perhaps more significant influence that Western thought had on the Bengali intelligentsia resulted in the creation of a collective national consciousness. Some of the plays of this period rubbed the British colonizers the wrong way, and they took to the offensive to control theatre.

The proliferation of anti-British sentiments in the theatre and direct references to the excesses of the colonial bosses invited the ire of the colonizers. The British government passed the notorious Dramatic Performances Act in 1876 with the objective of controlling and censoring anti-state sentiments in theatrical performances.⁴³ The immediate provocation for this act was the production of the play *Gajadananda and Yuvaraj* by the Great National Theatre on February 19, 1876.⁴⁴ The play was banned by

⁴³ “The Dramatic Performance Act of 1876 gave authority to any magistrate to stop a performance and to issue warrants for the arrest of all members of the company if he found that ‘any dramatic performance is scandalous or defamatory or likely to excite feelings of dissatisfaction towards the government, or likely to cause pain to any private party.’” See Gargi, *Theatre in India*, 110.

“On 29 February 1876, Lord Northbrook, Governor-General of India, promulgated an ordinance. Indian Mirror of 1 March 1876 reported as follows: ‘A Gazette of India Extraordinary was issued last evening containing an Ordinance to empower the Government of Bengal to prohibit certain dramatic performances, which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to public interest... The Ordinance shall remain in force till May next by which time a law will be passed by the Viceregal Council on the subject.’ In March 1876 the Dramatic Performance Control Bill was introduced in the Viceroy’s Council. There was a strong public protest against the Bill. But despite all opposition, criticism and appeal the Bill was passed into an Act in December 1876.” See Mukherjee, *Calcutta Theatres*, 45-46.

⁴⁴ Mukherjee observes, “As regards the Dramatic Performances Control Act 1876, it must be recorded that though the immediate provocation was the satirical play *Gajadananda*

police order but was revived under a different name, *Hanuman Charitra*. This production was banned, too. On March 1, a satire titled *The Police of Pig and Sheep*, ridiculing Sir Stuart Hogg, the Commissioner of Police and Mr. Lamb, Superintendent of Police was staged at the Great National. The previous evening the government had issued an ordinance which allowed it to ban and stop performances as and when they deemed necessary. Several theatre artists including Amritalal Basu and Upendranath Das were accused of being seditious or obscene and arrested under this act.⁴⁵ The administration used this instrument to good effect to control dramatic performance and came down upon the public theatre with a heavy hand. This meant bad days for the theatre companies, and the companies gradually disintegrated. The Dramatic Performances Control Act itself survived till the 1950s. Even after it was disbanded repressive state action against the theatre continued as a recurrent theme in Bengali theatre. Theatre artists have time and again voiced their concerns against state atrocities. The government on their part has

and Yuvaraj, the real purpose of the Act was to put a curb on plays which contained patriotic sentiments and roused national feeling against the British Government.” See Mukherjee, *Calcutta Theatres*, 46.

⁴⁵ Mukherjee observes, “The British Government of India, however, was not satisfied merely with the promulgation of the Ordinance, but contemplated some punishment for the sponsors of the play, if not for that play itself at least on some other ground. On 4 March, when *Sati Ki Kalankini* was on the stage of the Great National Theatre, the police raided the theatre and arrested Upendra Nath Das (Director), Amritalal Basu (Manager) and eight others on a charge of obscenity in a play held earlier, namely, *Surendra Binodini*.” See Mukherjee, *Calcutta Theatres*, 46.

severely cracked down on protest performances by resorting to banning plays or by blacklisting certain theatre artists. In 1877, Bhuban Mohan Niyogi, the owner of the Great National theatre transferred the lease of the property to Girish Chandra Ghosh, unable to bear the losses any further.

Girish Ghosh's taking over the Great National heralded the era of the actor-manager in Bengali theatre. The actor-manager-director figure continues to be an important one in most Bengali group theatre groups. With time and under the requirements of government regulations, most groups now have a well-defined executive body, but the actor-director-manager continues to be at the helm of the affairs. Ghosh and Sisir Bhaduri later in the early parts of the twentieth century became pioneer actor-director-manager figures, and their illustrious careers are worth devoting some attention to in order to understand why the actor-director continues to exercise so much influence in theatrical organization.

Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) was the one-man force in Bengali theatre during the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was an actor, director, producer, and playwright.⁴⁶ In 1881, he was offered a paid position at the National Theatre, now owned

⁴⁶ Gargi describes him as follows: "Like Moliere, Girish was an actor, writer and director, and he put the Bengali theatre on a sound footing. He introduced a standard of professional efficiency and workmanship. His style of acting and extreme freedom of movement injected passion and grace into otherwise dull passages." See Gargi, *Theatre in India*, 111

by the Marwari businessman Pratap Chandra Johuri.⁴⁷ Girish quit his day job and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the theatre. Around the same time, he took to playwriting to fill in the need for new and powerful plays, turning to Indian mythology for source. Ghosh was a prolific writer and penned more than three-dozen mythological, historical and social dramas, some of which, like *Prafulla*, are now considered to be Bengali classics.⁴⁸ Ghosh managed several theatre companies, trained numerous actors and regaled the audience with his histrionic skills during his career. The master craftsman of Bengali theatre continued working in the theatre until his death on February 8, 1912.

Sishir Kumar Bhaduri (1889-1959) dominated the latter half of the Bengali professional theatre. Bhaduri was the first professional to appear on the public stage. He quit his job as a professor of English at the Metropolitan College, Calcutta, and joined the Bengali Theatrical Co. in 1921.⁴⁹ Bhaduri got around him a band of devoted followers from respectable families in Calcutta, an unusual phenomenon at the time since theatre continued to be a pariah art form. The actors he trained infused a new style of acting and developed new production techniques. In 1923, Bhaduri produced Dwijendralal Roy's

⁴⁷ Marwari: Hindi speaking business community from North-west India. A large number of Marwaris (from Marwar) continue to live in Calcutta and are the main business community in town.

See Mukherjee, *Calcutta Theatres*, 49.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 73. "Prafulla hit the headlines of contemporary newspapers and captured the heart of the audience both for its thematic and theatrical appeal. This drama of Girish Chandra remained the trump card of the Bengali stage for more than half a century."

⁴⁹ Ibid., 156-157.

Seeta, with Bhaduri himself playing Rama in this mythological play. The overwhelming success of this production prompted him to set up his own company, the Natyamandir. He converted his theatre group to a limited company and moved to a new stage on Cornwallis Street.⁵⁰ Sisir Bhaduri was not only a legendary actor but an innovative director who stressed on the naturalist style in scenery and costumes. He was also one of the first directors to realize the importance of directional lighting over footlights.⁵¹ Rustom Bharucha observes that as early as 1927 Bhaduri was critical of the “picture frame” stage and considered it to be a mere aping of the European style. He considered this mimicry to be a mistake and wanted to go back to the style of the indigenous *jatra*. A series of hasty decisions including that of undertaking an American trip in 1930 prevented Bhaduri from realizing most of his dreams for the theatre.⁵² Sisir Bhaduri

⁵⁰ Ibid., 192. Mukherjee notes, “It was on the Cornwallis stage that Sisir Kumar displayed his best form as actor, director and producer, and reached a peak of histrionic excellence and earned for himself and his theatre a permanent place in the history of the Bengali theatre.

⁵¹ Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 33.

⁵² Mukherjee, *Calcutta Theatres*, 199-203. Mukherjee gives a detailed account of the America trip. It was hastily organized. The trip began with a lot of fanfare but was largely a financially disastrous misadventure. The company led by Bhaduri did perform for seven evenings at the Vanderbilt Theatre in New York but the reception by the American public was lukewarm at best. When Sisir Kumar came back to India in March 1931, he was without a theatre. For first-hand accounts of this trip see Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri,

continued to be a formidable figure in Bengali theatre till the 1950s, but since the early part of the 1940s, his theatre saw a period of decline. A need to move beyond the dated grandiloquence and bourgeois nature of the Bengali public stage was felt by the new generation of theatre enthusiasts.⁵³ Perhaps Sisir Kumar did not feel these changes; as

Americaye Sisir Kumar, 1959 (Sisir Kumar in America) and Amitava Das Gupta (ed.),

Satu Sen: Atmasmriti o Anyanya Prosongo (Calcutta: Asha Prokashoni, 1976).

⁵³ Samik Bandyopadhyay, "Utpal Dutt: An Interview" in *Contemporary Indian Theatre:*

Interviews with Playwrights and Directors (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1989),

9-10. "Dutt: I saw all the plays produced in the professional theatre of those days. I saw

more of them when I was in college. Those were the days of Sisirkumar Bhaduri,

Ahindra Chaudhuri, and Naresh Mitra. All those great actors appearing together gave me

the sense of something rare. At the same time it was painful to see the terrible

indifference to the rest of the production values – except at Star Theatre, of course, which

was way ahead in this respect. But in almost all the other theatres I noticed something

that amounted to criminal neglect, especially in Sisirkumar's. For it was he who was the

sole draw in it. As an actor he was matchless. But all the actors and actresses around him

were mediocre. The scenes were in tatters, at times dangling on one side. The acting went

on against this, and nobody seemed to care.

Bandyopadhyay: When Sisirkumar came into the theatre scene in the '20s, he did so with

the most progressive and radical ideas. But what happened between the '20s and '40s?

Dutt: He must have fallen into the rut of despair that is bound to effect one who has no

political ideology. He was laboring under the compulsion of keeping the proprietors

happy, something that was against the grain of a man with a personality. But there was

Kiranmoy Raha notes, “Perhaps, he realized that the theatre he had enriched and believed in was inadequate to cope with the maelstrom of socio-economic changes. It could neither portray the harsh reality of the lives of the common people nor provide wholly escapist fare.”⁵⁴ The master thespian died in 1959, three years after having retired from the stage in 1956.⁵⁵

The style of theatre that replaced the grandiloquent style of Bhaduri came in the wake of the burgeoning communist movement in India. In the early 1930s when Bhaduri was away in the United States fruitlessly pursuing the hopes of a Broadway production, the Indian communist movement was gaining a foothold. The British saw the movement as suspect and accused the CPI of trying to overthrow the Raj with Soviet help in 1929, and they eventually banned the organization in 1934.⁵⁶ Despite the ban, writers across the country probably had no other way to make the theatre run. He probably lost spirit after the numerous compromises he had to make.

⁵⁴ Kironmoy Raha, *Bengali Theater* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1978), 104.

⁵⁵ Mukherjee gives a very melodramatic account of Sisir Kumar's final performances in his theatre Sri Rangam: “On 23 January...he greeted his patrons with the role that had once made him famous in his college days, namely, Chanakya in D.L. Roy's *Chandragupta*. To all those who were in the know of things it appeared that the wheel had come full circle – from Chanakya at the University Institute in 1911 to Chanakya at Sri Rangam in 1956. Forty-five years had seen many ups and downs in the life of the Natyyacharyya. And now the end was in sight.” See Mukherjee, *Calcutta Theatres*, 285-286.

⁵⁶ Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 34-35.

country inspired by various anti-fascist cultural organizations in Europe decided to come together to organize the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) on April 10, 1936, in Lucknow. Bharucha notes this convention was the first time in the history of Indian culture that there was an “organized attempt to abandon those debased qualities of Indian literature that the Bengali theater exemplified so egregiously.”⁵⁷ In 1942, the members of PWA realizing the “potential of popular theater as an effective weapon in the fight for national liberation from British imperialism and fascism, and in the struggles of peasants, workers, and other oppressed classes formed a group called the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).”⁵⁸

A young journalist from Bangalore, Miss Anil De Silva, “who had the brainwave of starting a people's theatre movement,” proposed the idea for IPTA.⁵⁹ The organizing group represented a large spectrum ranging from “deepest Red to the bluest Blue blood!”⁶⁰ The primary aim of the IPTA as outlined in the “All Indian People's Theatre

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Nandi Bhatia, “Staging Resistance: The Indian People's Theatre Association,” in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 432.

⁵⁹ Zohra Sehgal, “Theatre and Activism in the 1940s,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 2/3, Crossing Boundaries (Monsoon 1997): 31.

⁶⁰ Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, *I Write as I Feel* (Bombay: Hind Kitabs Ltd., 1948), 30.

Michael L. Waltz reports that “the IPTA governing body included the director of the Hoffkine Institute, a philanthropic socialite, the daughter of a Ceylon minister, a university professor, a lawyer, a critic, a musician, a journalist, and representatives of

Conference Draft Resolution,” was to mobilize “a people's theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and the traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organiser [sic] of our people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice.”⁶¹ Notwithstanding the noble goals outlined in the mission statement the inspiration and influence behind IPTA were essentially western.⁶² The group turned towards folk/popular forms in order to connect with the masses and was able to change the very conception and structure of theatre in India.⁶³ It chose to perform for the masses instead of a limited audience and frequently

students' and workers' groups.” See Michael L. Waltz, “The Indian People's Theatre Association: Its Development and Influences,” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 13, No. 1/4, Miscellany (Fall-Winter- Spring-Summer 1977-1978): 32.

⁶¹ *Indian People's Theatre Association Bulletin*, no. I (July 1943) quoted in Shanti Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movements in India: Chronicles and Documents, 1936-1947* (New Delhi: National Book Agency, 1985), 129.

⁶² Darshan Chowdhury, *Gananatya Andolan* (Calcutta: Anustup, 1982), 118-135. The immediate influences behind IPTA were, Peoples' Theatre from Soviet Russia, Chinese Peoples' Theatre, the Student Federation of the Communist Party of India, the Youth Cultural Fedetation and Romain Rolland's The People's Theatre. Chowdhury gives a detailed account of how each of these organizations influenced the foundation of IPTA exactly. Khwaja corroborates these inspirations as well as the Little Theatre groups in England and the WPA theatres in the United States.

⁶³ Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 40; Srampickal writes, “Drawing heavily from the folk theatre forms of each region, IPTA became a powerful tool to spread nationalist and

traveled across the country with its productions. Some accused the IPTA of hastily constructed productions and therefore insisted the company lacked dramatic merit, but it is undeniable that the group was able to effectively communicate “exigencies of the historical moment to their mass audiences.”⁶⁴

socialist ideals.” See Jacob Srampickal, *Voice to the Voiceless: The Power of People's Theatre in India* (London: Hurst and Company, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 47. Bhatia notes “to seek the 'widest possible mass basis for its activities,' the IPTA turned to indigenous popular traditions of different regions.” See Bhatia, “Staging Resistance,” 433. The Bengal branch of the IPTA however, seems to have failed to capitalize on folk forms from the state creating instead a distinct urban version of the peoples' theatre. See Zohra Sehgal, “Theatre and Activism,” 32. Srampickal disagrees noting, “However, in 1944, the IPTA unit staged a *kabi ladai*. ... In 1954, the Badartala unit staged a *jatra* entitled *Sangat* written by Gurudas Paul on the problems of the working class. Later IPTA stalwarts like Mukunda Das and Utpal Dutt took to *jatra* in a more creative way.” See Srampickal, *Voice to the Voiceless*, 79. Bharucha notes, “the Bengal branch of the I.P.T.A. failed to exploit the indigenous theater familiar to the Bengali peasants such as the *jatra*, the *kabijan*, and the *kirtan*.” See Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 44. Utpal Dutt talking to Samik Bandyopadhyay nearly five decades after the formation of IPTA complains that the, “IPTA was absolutely ignorant about any tradition. They didn't know who their ancestors were.” This, I think is reflective of the problem that some of the leading stalwarts of Bengali theatre, including Dutt, had with the IPTA which eventually led to the disintegration of the organization in the state.

⁶⁴ Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 42.

The Bengal branch of the IPTA attracted some of the best filmmakers, theatre artists and musicians of the time, and its membership reads like the who's who of the Bengali cultural fraternity. The Bengal chapter's most significant contribution to the Indian political theatre movement was the 1944 production of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (New Harvest). Set against the background of the terrible man-made famine that ravaged Bengal in 1943, this play is considered to be a milestone in the new Bengali theatre.⁶⁵ The play was jointly directed by Bijan Bhattacharya and Sombhu Mitra and toured across the country as part of a festival called the Voice of Bengal, which was organized to collect relief for the famine victims in Bengal.⁶⁶ *Nabanna* presents the intensity of the famine through the representation of the starving family of a Bengali peasant, Pradhan Samaddar. Samaddar is representative of the millions of people who suffered in this man-made famine.⁶⁷ Unable to bear the pangs of hunger, Samaddar leaves

⁶⁵ Ibid., 45; Raha, "Indian People's Theatre Association," 163.

⁶⁶ Bhatia, "Staging Resistance," 438.

⁶⁷ Both Bhatia, "Staging Resistance," 438-439 and Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 48-49 cite similar sources and offer similar descriptions of the Bengal famine of 1943. I will offer here a paraphrasing borrowing from both. It is now widely regarded that the Bengal famine of 1943 was not a natural calamity but a man-made one, direct fallout of international political developments. Far from there being a shortage of food, the per capita availability of food in 1943 was 9 percent higher than that of 1941, which was not a famine year. The war in Europe had led to inflation and shortage of rice and salt. And even though the war economy in England was being run very efficiently, the colonial administration in India made no effort to check a rampant black market. Inflation and

his village along with others and heads to Calcutta like thousands of others from all parts of Bengal in the hope of securing a job and finding food. Samaddar is reduced to the worst levels of poverty in Calcutta when he decides to head back to his village.⁶⁸ Bijan Bhattacharya ended the play with the “people” surviving and returning to their village

shortage led to profiteering, black-marketing and hoarding of food. Bharucha accuses the British of exporting the food grain to feed its troops in Europe and Japan instead of making it available food in the rural areas. Bhatia, on the contrary said that the arrival of large number of Allied troops to India raised the fear that the country's food supply was being depleted to feed the army. This situation was also aggravated by Burma's fall to the Japanese, which cut off rice supplies to Bengal.

⁶⁸ Bharucha quotes at length from an unpublished lecture of Bijan Bhattacharya which he gave at a seminar on political theatre in 1977 and where he talks about his immediate inspiration behind writing *Nabanna*. I think the passage merits to be quoted here to give an idea of the extent of suffering that Bhattacharya witnessed: “I spotted on a Calcutta street a crawling baby fumbling over the corpses searching for its mother's breast. The mother was already dead. Even while we organized gruel kitchens to feed the starving people, I felt the need to do something meaningful. Only when I wrote my play *Nabanna* and I staged it, did I have the feeling that I had at last become a mother to that hungry child even as I mothered my play to make it grow into a performance for the people. That image of the crawling child has haunted me ever since. Whenever in my creative quest I miss the crawling baby, I shift my position endlessly till the child comes to view again.”

See Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 49.

from the city “with a renewed awareness of their rights as human beings.”⁶⁹ The rags and bare bodies of farmers and beggars on display replaced the glitz and glamor of conventional theatre costumes of the time. *Nabanna* reflected the IPTA's declaration that the people's theatre should star the people. The play was a major success and helped raise lakhs of rupees (lakh=hundred thousand) in the aid of the suffering families.

The “pioneering role” of the Bengal IPTA was short-lived. Soon after the production of *Nabanna*, the schism between the political people and artists of the chapter came to the fore. The production of *Nabanna* led to the question of political commitment of some of the members. The play made a lot of the actors famous, and they started getting film offers. Several early stalwarts of the movement started neglecting the founding principles and ideals behind IPTA in order to further their own careers. Bijon Bhattacharya explains the reason behind the disintegration of the Bengal IPTA very succinctly in an interview: “There were a lot of reasons but the main reason is we had more careerists than people.”⁷⁰ One of the key architects of this disintegration in the organization was Sombhu Mitra. He was the only one among the theatre artists affiliated with the IPTA who had any experience with the Bengali professional theatre. He had failed to make his mark in the professional circuit, which might have been an inspiration behind his switching over to the progressive theatre movement.⁷¹ Once he had made a

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bijon Bhattacharya, interview by Saktipada Bandyopadhyay, *Prasanga: Gananatya* (Calcutta, 1987), 51.

⁷¹ Chowdhury paraphrases from an interview of Sombhu Mitra on his involvement with the professional theatre in Calcutta: “Sombhu Mitra informs that that he started acting on

name for himself after *Nabanna*, Mitra began acting difficult. He did not want to compromise on the artistic merits of the production by staging it in makeshift venues. He and a lot of others also refused to leave the city of Calcutta and perform in the villages. A report from the IPTA secretary notes that the “artists (notably Bijon Bhattacharya and Sombhu Mitra) did not have much confidence in the capacity of the Party to give them any guidance where Art is concerned.”⁷² The emphasis of the artists on technique and “absolute freedom for expressing their talent” were seen as reasons for their “drifting away from the Party.”

the professional stage from 1939-40. First at “Rangmahal” in some old plays (*Maatir Ghare* – Bijan Bhattacharya), besides new plays like Bidhayak Bhattacharya's *Mala Ray*, Prabhat Mukherjee's *Ratnadeep* (stage adaptation – Bidhayak Bhattacharya) and Gour Shee's *Ghurni*. After this he worked at Minerva for a couple of months performing in *Jayanti* by Dharendra Mukherjee, after that he joined Natya Niketan where he performed the character of Ahin in Tarashankar's *Kalindi*. Then at Sri Rangam he performed alongside Sisirkumar Bhaduri in a few revivals of old plays and then in *Jibanranga*, *Urochithi* and *Sita*. Amongst the old plays he worked in *Alamgir* and *Ritimoto Natok*. After that he worked for a touring theatre company for a little bit. It could be said that Sombhu Mitra had acquired a significant amount of experience of working in the professional theatre. However, he had not been able to establish himself, achieve accolades or carve a niche for himself in this circuit.” See Chowdhury, *Gananatya Andolan*, 403. Chowdhury cites an interview for the above information published in the *Bohurupee* no. 34 magazine. My own translation.

⁷² Bharucha, *Rehearsal of Revolution*, 53.

The Communist Party of India was declared illegal by the Congress government on March 26, 1948 and the Central Squad of the IPTA was disbanded.⁷³ The Congress leadership started a brutal campaign to wipe out the Communist movement from India. The attack was carried on both with legal means and with the illegal use of force with police protection. The Congress leadership tried winning over some of the erstwhile Communist artists through financial and social incentives. Finally, there was talk within the Communist Party itself about the efficacy and the need of the cultural front.⁷⁴ The

⁷³ Darshan Chowdhury, *Gananatya Andolan*, 288.

⁷⁴ Bharucha gives a detailed account of the various reasons that amounted to the dissolution of the Bengal unit of the IPTA. Chowdhury notes how the Indian National Congress tried drawing the intellectuals to its fold right after the Indian independence in 1947. He also notes how the IPTA office (which also served as Sombhu Mitra's residence) was attacked in the same year. In 1953, Jawaharlal Nehru set up the central Sangeet Natak Akademi and other central institutes for literature and arts. This was an attempt on the part of the Central government to weaken the Communist cultural organizations by attracting writers, artists and musicians to join the federal institutes. These institutes also started disbursing various awards as an added incentive for the creative people to abandon their Communist affiliations. Ibid., 279-305

Starting in 1952, the Communist Party Central Committee and Politburo (which had never been too overtly concerned about art and culture) decided that the Party had no need for cultural fronts and the process to dismantle these organizations had been initiated. Political leaders from both the Congress and the Left have seldom shown any appreciation or understanding of the arts (of course with exceptions like P.C. Joshi). They

IPTA had ceased to function as a coherent organization in 1945 itself, but the final blow was dealt when Sombhu Mitra resigned his membership on March 26, 1948, the same day that the CPI was declared illegal. A little more than a month after that on May 1, 1948, Mitra floated his own theatre company Bohurupee, thus ushering in the New theatre or group theatre movement.⁷⁵ Factionalism has been a recurrent problem in Bengali group theatre. As is evident from the historical account presented, factionalism led to the start of the group theatre movement. In the six decades since the formation of Bohurupee, several groups have been carved out of existing organizations owing to ideological, political and aesthetic differences between members, not unlike the kind that Mitra and his followers had with the IPTA.

The New Theatre movement emphasized “the cause of the people suffering.”⁷⁶

Sushil Kumar Mukherjee notes:

used it to achieve political mileage and goals and were quick enough to drop it by the wayside once their purpose had been served. In this context, one is reminded of Sumanta Banerjee and his remark, “As for the other political leaders - whether in the Congress or the Left - the less said about their cultural tastes the better.” See Sumanta Banerjee, “Art in the Time of Cholera,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 39 (Sep. 23-29, 2000).

⁷⁵ Darshan Chowdhury, *Gananatya Andolan*, 292; Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 54; Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres*, 366.

⁷⁶ Kuntal Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics: A Study of Group Theatre Movement of Bengal (1948-1987)* (Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1997), 54.

The range of Nabanatya is wider, it draws its sustenance from a bigger area of life and while introducing modern and radical thoughts on social, political, economic, moral and religion questions and pleading for a new order of the society, based on freedom, justice, equality, it is also conscious about the artistic and aesthetic side of the theatre.⁷⁷

The group theatre movement was a significant landmark in the evolution of the Bengali stage, a movement that has continued to sustain itself to this day. The first members of the various groups that emerged in the 1950s and 60s came mostly from the Western educated middle-class in Calcutta.⁷⁸ The performers trained themselves to be actors, directors and technicians in the absence of a theatre training program in the state. The group theatre had to compete with the commercial Calcutta theatre when it made a comeback in the 1950s, but gradually the group theatre assumed the leadership in Bengali theatre.⁷⁹

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the emergence of several of group theatre companies: the Little Theatre Group (1953), Theatre Centre (1954), Rupakar (1955), Gandharva (1957), Sundaram (1957), Souvanik (1957), Theatre Unit (1958), Mass Theatres (1960), Nandikar (1960), The Theatre Workshop (1966), Satabdi (1967), the

⁷⁷ Mukherjee, *The Story of Calcutta Theatres*, 362.

⁷⁸ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 55.

⁷⁹ Kiranmoy Raha, "Bengali Theatre," in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed.

Ananda Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

People's Little Theatre (1969) and Chetana (1972).⁸⁰ These groups were all distinct from each other in style of production and way of story-telling but were all committed to the basic principle underlying the group theatre movement: displaying “social awareness” and “social responsibilities” while having its roots “firmly planted in the country's social soil.”⁸¹ Powerful contemporary original plays were written by Utpal Dutt (Little Theatre Group and then People's Little Theatre), Badal Sircar (Satabdi), Mohit Chatterjee, Arun Mukhopadhyay (Chetana), Manoj Mitra (Sundaram). The European influence was, however, still quite strong. Plays by Western playwrights like Ibsen, Pirandello, Brecht and Chekhov were frequently adapted to the vernacular, and the Indian context and even the original works were often emulating contemporary trends in world theatre.

In contemporary Bengali theatre, the “near-aridity in dramatic writing” coupled with the advent and growing popularity of the Bollywood films over the last two decades combined to create a marked decrease in the number of theatre aficionados. Stage innovations in Bengal have been somewhat stunted owing to lack of finances and the continued lack of theatre training among the new brand of performers. Most groups in operation today churn out television soap-style melodramatic theatre high on the emotional quotient. There is very little experimentation with newer forms, although a lot of money has been injected into the theatre in the last decade due to wider availability of

⁸⁰ Mukherjee gives a detailed account of the various groups and their work until 1980.

See Mukherjee, *The Story of Calcutta Theatres*, 365-423.

⁸¹ Mukherjee quotes from a souvenir published by Bohurupee on the occasion of its Festival of Plays held in 1961 at the A.I.F.A.C.S Hall in New Delhi. See Mukherjee, *The Story of Calcutta Theatres*, 367.

central government grants. Along with the rise in production costs, an increasing number of actors are turning professional in the city. These actors work as freelancers with several groups and also across multiple mediums. In the wake of this professionalization of the actor's work a new movement has emerged in Kolkata: youth theatre. The movement emerged at the turn of the millennium and was promptly dismissed as "youthful adventurism" by the mainstream theatre fraternity. The members of the youth theatre groups are self-trained and are more willing to experiment with form, content and style. The young groups have already made a mark for themselves and have shown it is possible to create commercially viable and entertaining message-driven plays, a formula that the group theatre has been trying to master throughout its existence with very little to no success.

The historical overview of the development of the European style Bengali language theatre in Kolkata helps locate the contemporary theatre practice in Kolkata within a definite socio-historical context. It also helps to understand some of the defining characteristics of contemporary Bengali group theatre, which can be traced back to the very first proscenium stage performance of a Bengali, play Kolkata in 1795.

PART II: CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION IN BENGALI

GROUP THEATRE

CHAPTER 4

WORKING CONDITIONS

There is very little, if any, scholarship devoted to the study of working conditions for contemporary Bengali performance in Kolkata, but as Ric Knowles identifies, working conditions along with money are the most prominent topics of discussion “backstage, [and] in green-rooms.”⁸² Working conditions were a significant topic of discussion in the numerous theatre *addas* (informal chat sessions) that I participated in during my fieldwork in Kolkata, India.⁸³ These “fundamental framing circumstances” are as important in shaping theatrical meaning, as are the “indeterminable intentions” of playwrights, directors and actors that has been traditionally the center of focus of so much journalistic as well academic enquiry in the field.⁸⁴ This chapter of the dissertation

⁸² Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 53. Knowles' comment is in the context of contemporary English-language theatre in Canada, United States and England. But, Bengali theatre practitioners are also equally eloquent and concerned about these issues.

⁸³ The fieldwork for this research was conducted over an eleven month period between August 2012 and July 2013.

⁸⁴ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 53.

considers theatrical organization and funding as well as the way they shape meaning in the theatre.

The first section studies the system of organization of contemporary Bengali group theatre groups. I investigate the various kinds of theatre groups that co-exist in this theatre culture, produce an overview of the organizing principles of the groups, and examine the inter-relation between group theatre and politics and finally elaborate on group theatre and the issue of factionalism. The second section is an overview of the various funding strategies of the groups. I will primarily deal with the funds generated internally by the groups and an overview of the various government grants available to the groups. The third section of the chapter outlines the directorial processes underlying the building of a theatre event in Kolkata. The fourth and final section of the chapter is devoted to the study of theatre design in Kolkata. In this portion, I am primarily concerned with categories of designers and design processes and challenges.

Organization of group theatre groups

Although Bengali group theatre emerged to oppose the personality cult that had pervaded so much of the Bengali professional theatre in the 1940s, it gradually bought into that cult itself. Today, individual actors and directors like Debshankar Haldar and Debesh Chattopadhyay have the potential of carrying a production on their shoulders simply based on the fan-following that they have/command amongst the Bengali theatre going public. Seen this way, Bengali group theatre has come a long way from being simply “amateur troupes” to a semi-professional theatre culture.⁸⁵ However, a vast

⁸⁵ Ananda Lal, “Group Theatre” in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* ed. Ananda Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 138-39.

majority of the actors continue to be amateur performers “who typically hold full-time day jobs in other professions and rehearse in the evenings.”⁸⁶

Bengali group theatre was and is a middle-class phenomenon. The middle-class in the urban areas of Kolkata and district towns grew as a direct result of colonial education and, after independence, due to urbanization and industrialization.⁸⁷ A vast majority of the group theatre membership is drawn from amongst five of the eleven categories that B.B. Misra divided the Indian middle-class into.⁸⁸ These five are the salaried executives, the principal recognized professionals, students engaged in full-time study, the main body of clerks and other non-manual workers and finally the upper range of secondary school teachers, officers of the local bodies and social and political workers.⁸⁹ Collectively, this

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Kuntal Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics: a Study of Group Theatre Movement of Bengal, 1948-1987* (Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1999), 129.

⁸⁸ B.B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Class – Their Growth in Modern Times* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 12-13.

⁸⁹ Mukhopadhyay paraphrases Misra's study to identify these five categories. He writes, “the first is the bulk of the salaried executives such as managers, inspectors, supervisors, and technical staff employed in banking, trading, manufacturing business owned privately or otherwise. Second is the members of the principal recognised professions, salaried or otherwise, such as lawyers and doctors, lecturers and professors, the upper and middle range of writers and journalists, musicians and artists, religious preachers and priests. Third comes the main body of the full time students engaged in higher education at a university or comparable level. Fourth, the main body of clerks, assistants and other

group is often referred to as the “educated middle-class.” The persons belonging to this social class have received a Western education and are “engaged in the various recognized professions that grew in modern times as a result of Western education and capitalist economy.”⁹⁰ As Mukhopadhyay observes in an essentialist vein, “it has always been a tradition in Bengali culture whereby intellectuals have always tried to culturally influence and uplift the masses surrounding them.”⁹¹ This middle-class spearheaded and patronized the group theatre movement under the pretext of raising the social awareness of the masses.

Samik Bandyopadhyay commenting on the way these groups are formed writes, “A group theatre group would normally grow around an actor-director, commanding the allegiance of a band of theatre ‘workers,’ initially at least committed to serving theatre as a cause or a mission.”⁹² Many of Kolkata’s actor-directors belong to the middle class, and most groups operate around them today. Groups are often referred to by the name of this central figure; for example, Rang Roop is popularly known as Sima Di’r Dal, or

nonmanual workers below the managerial and recognised professional levels. Fifth, the upper range of secondary school teachers and the officers of the local bodies, social and political workers.” See Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 130.

⁹⁰ Misra, *The Indian Middle Class*, 147.

⁹¹ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 129.

⁹² Samik Bandyopadhyay, “Contemporary Bengali Theatre: An Introduction,” *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 27/28 (2000).

Rangakarmee is Usha Di'r Dal, or Swapnasandhani is Kaushik Da'r Dal.⁹³ The use of the Bengali word “dal” is interesting in this context. The word “dal” roughly translates to group, but it is also the word used for team. Thus, instead of being a group, the theatre companies are seen as teams belonging to or led by the central actor-director figure. The over-emphasis on the actor-director central figure is in sharp contrast to the founding principles of the group theatre movement, which stressed on a democratic set-up in the day to day functioning of the group. Instead, a top-down hierarchical set-up seems to have crept into the organization of the companies. Bandyopadhyay feels that this contradiction between being a democratic modern theatre movement while retaining traditional values has always been there in the so-called Bengali group theatre.⁹⁴

The system of organization discussed in this section uses a certain amount of generalization based on personal interactions with actor-directors and ordinary members of the groups and from recorded research all of which seem to be quite narrow in their focus and reach.⁹⁵ It also relies on my own experience and observations as a group

⁹³ Di and Da are short for Didi and Dada respectively, the Bengali word for elder sister and brother respectively. Referring to someone as didi or dada is not just indicator of age but also respect and reverence.

⁹⁴ Samik Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, May 15, 2013. Bandyopadhyay does not like the use of the term Group Theatre to denote modern urban Bengali theatre. He is not clear or explicit about why he does not prefer the use of this term. He chooses to refer to it as the so-called Group Theatre instead.

⁹⁵ For example, Kuntal Mukhopadhyay's book *Theatre and Politics: A Study of Group Theatre Movement of Bengal 1948-1987* (Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1999) is based on data

member with three different troupes.⁹⁶ Though most observers could see the organizational characteristics discussed across groups, each group has certain idiosyncratic rules and regulations. For the purposes of this study, I have classified group theatre groups under three broad categories – traditional, non-traditional and youth theatre groups. Under traditional groups there are three subcategories: large institutions, thriving troupes and new beginners. The following discussion will elucidate each category with relevant examples.

Categories of group theatre groups: traditional groups

Traditional groups closely follow the model of organization where the group congregates around a single actor-director who leads the administrative machinery of the group as well as determines its aesthetic outlook. Depending on the extent of their activities, visibility and number of performances, the traditional groups can be divided into three sub-categories of large institutions, thriving troupes and new beginners.

I define large institutions as groups that are either four or more decades old and have a continuous history of performing over this period of time or groups that have successfully carved a niche for themselves in a comparatively shorter span of time.

collected from 60 individuals and excludes women because as he explains, “it is generally believed that their political consciousness is not very high.” See Kuntal Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics: A Study of Group Theatre Movement of Bengal 1948-1987* (Calcutta: Bibhasa, 1999), insert page number.

⁹⁶ I joined Rangroop in 2002 and worked with them till 2009. In between, I was part of a play that was produced by Theatron, which is led by Salil Bandyopadhyay, and in 2012-2013, I worked with Tritiyo Sutra, first as an actor and then as a backstage assistant.

Audiences know these groups for the quality of their productions as well as for being institutions in the literal sense of the term. Most of the groups falling in this category have active training programs and a yearlong schedule of workshops besides regular performances. Others have inaugurated innovative trends in contemporary performance. Although each large institution follows the basic tenet of the single actor-director as the group's center, the name of the institution also commands an equal respect from the theatre-viewing community. Nandikar, Bohurupee, Chetana, Theatre Workshop, Anya Theatre and Rangakarmee fall under this category. Nandikar, Bohurupee and Chetana have been around for forty years. Theatre Workshop was formed in 1977, and Anya Theatre in 1985. Usha Ganguli led Rangakarmee is the youngest of these groups and produces plays in Hindi and Urdu. The group has nonetheless been able to find a very strong and stable audience base for itself amongst the largely Bengali speaking theatre audience of Kolkata. Therein lies the significance and value of this institution. Of these groups Nandikar is certainly the biggest theatre enterprise not only in the city of Kolkata but also in the state of West Bengal.

While large institutions command respect, most Bengali group theatre companies fall under the second category: thriving troupes. Some of these fairly well-known groups are nearly as old as the institutions, but each has carved a niche for themselves in the last fifteen to twenty years. The popularity of the group is often a result of the reputation of the actor-director around whom the group has collected. His/her reputation/fame depends on one of several factors: family lineage, visibility in television and films, controversies or, more recently, political affiliation. Most of their productions, if not all, do decent business and often win critically acclaimed. These groups manage to get some

government funding and are occasionally able to raise, through personal connections, sponsorship money for productions. The groups also organize colloquia and exhibitions on theatre, host workshops intermittently for group members and host theatre festivals featuring other local groups. Stylistically, most of these groups present formulaic plays that border on the melodramatic, though often the company will use one or two elements in the production to experiment, like the use of music or the scenic and lighting design. The narrative and the acting, however, almost always remain over the top. The groups share a common pool of actors, since they lack the institutional structure to recruit and groom performers. Sangstab, Natadha, Pancham Baidik, Rang-Roop, Swapnasandhani, Kasba Arghya, Sansriti, Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra and Purbo-Paschim are some of the groups that belong to this category.

Besides the institutions and thriving troupes, I define new beginner groups as those companies formed from the late 1990s (post 1996) onward. The actor-directors who lead the new beginners are typically established names. Therefore the new beginners find it somewhat easier to assemble or pool in significant amount of financial as well as logistic resources, allowing groups to produce new work consistently. The new beginners are also able to match up to certain thriving groups in terms of quality because of the same reason. Trito Sutro led by Suman Mukhopadhyay, Naye Natua led by Gautam Haldar and Kalindi Bratyajan led by Bratya Basu are examples of new beginners. All three actor-directors were established names in Bengali theatre when they decided to float these new groups. All three have very different reasons for starting their own groups, but the common thread between the three is the need that they felt to create an independent space for their individual artistic expressions. Bratyajan has certainly been the most enterprising

of the beginners, and thanks to the political connections of its leader, this group has inaugurated a new trend in Bengali group theatre organization.

Apart from Kalindi Bratyajon the group has “spawned” four new centers under “the expert guidance of Bratya Basu.”⁹⁷ These groups, based in Ashoknagar, Howrah, Khardah and Ballygunge, claim to have been “inspired by Basu and his genre of plays with narratives emphasizing [sic] on contemporary problems and characters unafraid to speak their minds.”⁹⁸ So far only Howrah Bratyajan has produced a play. According to the Bratyajon website, Basu plans to open a center in each district of the state. These groups, along with scores of others that constantly surface in the city, struggle to find money for performances, are away from the glitz and glamor and do not boast of star billing are the ones that make up the final category of the traditional groups – the strugglers.

Categories of group theatre groups: non-traditional groups

A handful of Kolkata theatre groups operate differently from the majority of the traditional groups in Kolkata. The groups mostly perform in non-traditional spaces and generally avoid the Academy of Fine Arts and the other usual performance venues. Each group has a signature style and a niche audience. Productions are typically physical in nature with often an unabashed political content.

Groups that conceive, create and present alternative theatre include Alternative Living Theatre, Bibhaban, Theatre Formation Paribartak, Shatabdi, Ayena and Pathasena.

⁹⁷ “About Bratyajon,” Kalindi Bratyajon, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.bratyajon.org/aboutus.php>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Out of these groups, Alternative Living Theatre and Shatabdi have a long history of creating non-conformist, non-traditional theatre. Prabir Guha, trained in non-traditional performance techniques under stalwarts like Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, started the former and remains an active part of the group. ALT primarily operates out of its Madhyamgram (North-Eastern suburb of Kolkata) based alternative performance venue known as Akhra.⁹⁹ The small performance venue was built by ALT aided by a modest Ford Foundation grant and few central government grants. Resembling theatres in the round, Akhra is a small circular space with audience seating arrangements on windowsills around the space. The group rehearses and performs in the space regularly, and according to Guha, the group has managed to create an audience base around the suburban township of Madhyamgram. Guha and his team claim that the group strictly adheres to a democratic centrist model of operation where all decisions are taken collectively, although Guha and other senior members lead the way because of their age and experience.

The legendary Badal Sircar started Shatabdi in the 1970s. Originally the group started performing in spaces like the University Institute Auditorium near College Street and a roof-top performance space in the Academy of Fine Arts premises.¹⁰⁰ Sircar was

⁹⁹ Prabir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ College Street is Kolkata's premiere book market and educational hub boasting such premiere educational institutions as the Calcutta University, Presidency University, Calcutta Medical College, Sanskrit College and Hare School. For the evolution of Shatabdi in detail, see Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 127; Himani Bannerji, *Mirrors of Class: Essays on Bengali Theatre* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1998).

increasingly frustrated with the restrictions of the proscenium stage and introduced a new style that he named the “third theatre.”¹⁰¹ As a third theatre group, Shatabdi started performing in Curzon Park (Central Kolkata) twice a week. The group had to shift base in the face of increased police hostility and political interference. From the late 90s, Shatabdi moved into the Loreto Day School, Sealdah quad. They performed some of the classics from the Sircar repertoire like *Basi Khabar*, *Michhil* (Procession) and *Bhoma* besides an occasional new work.¹⁰² At present, the group does not have a permanent performance venue. They hosted the last edition of the Street Theatre Festival at Niranjana Sadan (an auditorium in the Southern fringes of the city) and hold performances at least once a month in various city parks.

Bibhaban has been around since the late 1980s. Supriyo Samajdar was a founding member and has remained with the group ever since.¹⁰³ The group produces what it describes as intimate theatre regularly at the Proscenium Arts Center on Ripon Street.¹⁰⁴ Bibhaban also publishes a monthly intimate theatre newsletter and organize intimate theatre festivals with lectures and performances by Prabir Guha, Shatabdi among others.

¹⁰¹ For a detailed discussion on the third theatre, see Badal Sircar, *On Theatre* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009).

¹⁰² The plays mentioned here are available in English translation. See Samik Bandyopadhyay trans., *3 Plays* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009).

¹⁰³ Supriyo Samajdar, in discussion with the author, May 29, 2013.

¹⁰⁴ See “The Role of an Intimate Theatre,” Bibhaban – The Experimental Theatre Company, accessed on May 12, 2014, <https://sites.google.com/site/journeybibhaban/journey>.

Samajdar draws his primary influence from Grotowski but strives to create work that is reflective of his own milieu.

Joyraj Bhattacharya and Amajit Basu started Theatre Formation Paribartak when both of them were teenagers in Howrah, Kolkata's twin city across the river Hooghly.¹⁰⁵ They started the group as a platform for young art enthusiasts to come together and create art that spoke to the changing times of the early 1990s. Twenty years later, the organization has remained steadfast in its initial commitment but has also branched out to support theatre movements spearheaded by young actors. Amajit acts and directs plays (both self-authored and adaptations) for various district and state-level competitions. Joyraj, who is an established name in the Bengali group theatre circuit mobilized and facilitated a youth theatre project which saw the group producing a site-specific performance and a street theatre performance between December 2012 and June 2013.

Apart from these groups (which receive this longer treatment because I have interacted and come in close contact with group members and have followed their work) there are a number of theatre groups that choose to work in small neighborhood auditoriums for a select group of audience mostly comprising friends and family members. Occasionally these groups take part in one-act play competitions, which are often judged by the "stalwarts" of Bengali theatre.¹⁰⁶ Most of these groups refuse to enter the Bengali group theatre mainstream rat race. Competition prize money gives them enough financial resources to continue their theatre work. Some of these groups boast of

¹⁰⁵ "About TFP...", Theatre Formation Paribartak, accessed on November 20, 2014, <http://cfp.50webs.org/TFP/>.

¹⁰⁶ The "stalwarts" are older members of the traditional Bengali group theatre groups.

a core team of extremely dedicated thespians and they produce work regularly some of which are of really high quality.

Categories of group theatre groups: youth theatre groups

One of the more interesting theatre phenomenon that I observed during my field trip to Kolkata (August 2012 – July 2013) was the emergence of a significant number of youth theatre groups in the city. Young theatre enthusiasts who had either attended theatre workshops in high school or had trained at one of the few theatre training facilities for children and young adults came together to form theatre groups and produce new work. Thanks to their training and the interest of certain corporate sponsors who came out in support of young artists, these young women and men came together to form groups in the last five years. Groups like M.A.D. (Mad about Drama) were created for college level theatre competitions and have continued beyond the event. Others like Hypokrites and 4th Bell Theatres were formed to allow a creative outlet for young members who wanted to showcase their skills in front of a larger public outside of the college auditoriums. Most of the groups produce original work written by group members and deal with subjects that affect the youth of today directly like romantic relationship, the pressure to enter the career rat race, women's rights, role and safety in modern Indian society etc.

Organizing principles of group theatre groups

Bohurupee was the first group theatre company to form after the split in the IPTA in 1948. And the way Bohurupee functioned has largely set the model, which is still being followed by the various group theatre companies in Kolkata. Bandyopadhyay feels that the model that Bohurupee set in place and was so keen to start revolved around a

single person – the director. The director led the organization, directed all of the plays and also served as a mentor or guru in the traditional Indian sense of the term.¹⁰⁷

Bandyopadhyay finds this reverence for a single mentor figure to be contradictory to the modern theatre aesthetic that Bengali group theatre was trying to promote. Adherence to this traditional form of mentorship is often a deterrent to experimentation since the tried and tested formulas of the guru is repeated continually, often creating a *gharana* or school of thought, which the group members subsequently keep adhering to, which in

¹⁰⁷ Samik Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, May 15, 2013. Bandyopadhyay gave an example of this mindset in the same interview. The Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India would give grants to young artists to study under a renowned master of a particular art form. The training method was supposed to follow the traditional guru-shisya-parampara (master-disciple tradition). In fact, the last item on the form was the section earmarked for the signature of the guru. Theatre was left outside of this scheme till the late 1960s. However, when the government finally included theatre in the scholarship scheme, the guru-shisya idea persisted. Thus a young theatre artist from Bohurupee would apply and get the scholarship as a disciple of Sombhu Mitra, the founder-director of Bohurupee. Bandyopadhyay finds this to be contradictory with the claims of a modern aesthetic that this theatre was supposed to propagate. Sombhu Mitra accepted this without questioning the continued use of the word guru. In a way he accepted his position as the mentor-guru figure. This, according to Bandyopadhyay has created a precedence whereby all directors assume that they are not only directors of the groups but also the guru to every member in the company and therefore demand a certain kind of allegiance from group members.

turn leads to a certain kind of stagnation in the working of certain groups. The administrative guidelines laid out by the government for organizations require an elected executive body. A president typically heads the executive body. The hierarchy thus created can also be a reason that the general members of a group rally around the leader of the organization.

Most groups in Kolkata are registered as non-profit organizations, “which fall within the purview of the Registration of Societies Act.”¹⁰⁸ The registration requirements make it imperative that the groups have a hierarchical administrative structure with a president, vice-president, secretary and executive committee members. Although most groups claim that this structure is only on paper and functionally is more democratic in nature, my conversations with members of various groups clarified that the general members of a group are often unaware of the financial health and the rigorous administrative mechanism of the group. While some seemed okay with this state of affairs, others mentioned, on condition of anonymity, that they hoped that there was more transparency in how the group functioned.

Groups seldom need to recruit actors actively, relying more on the fame of their director and the reputation of their work to attract potential members. Senior members of the group will often bring in an enthusiastic or talented colleague or youngster to the rehearsal room of the group. The new potential member is at first expected to sit through rehearsals and make herself/himself familiar with the workings of the group. Initially, senior members give them small responsibilities, like organizing the evening snacks and

¹⁰⁸ Lal. “Group Theatre,” 139.

serving tea and keeping a track of the scripts.¹⁰⁹ Following this rite of initiation, the company asks the new members to attend performances by the groups. Senior members make the younger male members run small errands and help in setting up the set and help with the marking and positioning of properties. The women, on the other hand, often work on and coordinate props. This period of training and observation could last anything between a week to a year, depending on the needs of the group. It is very rare that a group recruits a young member and hands her/him an acting part in a production. Once the confidence of the fellow members and the director has been established in the new recruit, she/he is asked to stand in for absentee performers during rehearsals. Depending on this performance, the director decides whether to cast her/him in subsequent projects.

Traditionally, the group expected new members remain with a single group for the entirety of their career. It was also the norm that only members of a group are cast in plays produced by that group. Bibhas Chakraborty, was the first actor-director to challenge this way of working, insisting that groups should share acting resources and actors should be allowed to move between groups.¹¹⁰ He broke off from Theatre

¹⁰⁹ An interesting division of gender roles is often seen in the way these initial responsibilities are distributed. While the male recruits might be asked to accompany a younger male member to go to the nearest tea and snack stall to procure the snacks, a young female recruit is assigned to a senior female member to organize the cups and plates, to look after the scripts etc.

¹¹⁰ Bibhas Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, April 24, 2013.

Workshop and started Anya Theatre in 1985 to facilitate this style of working.¹¹¹

Following in Anya Theatre's footsteps, group theatre membership has become slightly more flexible than it was before, and groups now sometimes share a common pool of actors. However, if an actor belongs to a group, he/she is still expected to get advance permission from the director of the group before working with another group. Failure to do so might not necessarily result in termination of membership in the home group but could lead to tension among the members. As is typical of most hierarchical set-ups, differential treatment is meted out to the senior, more established members, since other groups often invite them to perform. In these cases, the groups make the effort to schedule rehearsals and performances bearing in mind the schedule of the senior artist. Understudies are still fairly uncommon but some groups are beginning to train multiple actors for the same role.

Most groups charge membership subscriptions from members, decided on the basis of seniority and the economic capacity of members. Students and unemployed members are charged less unless they volunteer to pay the full subscription amount. Senior and executive members have to pay a slightly higher subscription fee. The funds thus generated are not sufficient to cover production costs but they are enough to cover rent for the rehearsal space, snacks and script photocopy charges. Most groups are still unable to pay their members any remuneration (or choose not to pay the members since participation is voluntary). However, of late some groups have started paying a token amount to members to cover travel expenses. As Ananda Lal notes, some of the larger

¹¹¹ Pabitra Sarkar, "Chakraborty, Bibhash (1937 -)" in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. Ananda Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University of Press, 2004), 76.

groups that are able to “muster money from diverse sources [and] find themselves in a position to disburse small stipends to members, but most have a hand-to-mouth existence.”¹¹² In the recent past, actors who have started freelancing command a certain price. The fees are sometimes open for negotiations but more often than not the actors stick to what they feel is a reasonable fee. Some groups also have a fixed rate when hiring artists and they negotiate with the actors accordingly.

Group theatre and politics

A vast majority of group theatre actors are otherwise employed, and their involvement with theatre is either a hobby or a passion. Both public and private sector employers demand a certain extent of political neutrality from their employees.¹¹³ Although the restrictions are restricted to the workplace, the political neutrality has come to increasingly bear upon the theatre that the middle-class Bengali men and women create. Dipendu Chakrabarti found this trend in the earliest history of Bengali theatre, “the dramatic career of Girish Ghosh amply illustrates how the patriotic fervour [sic] of Bengali theatre dissolved into a harmless demonstration of religiosity. British rulers, thus,

¹¹² Lal, “Group theatre,” 139.

¹¹³ The West Bengal Government Servants’ Conduct Rules, 1959 sections 24, 26 and 27 forbids employees from discussing policies and actions of the government (outside of official capacity), forbids membership, association and assistance to serve the interest of any political party and forbids employees from participating in demonstrations and strikes which are “prejudicial to the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India.” (Source: West Bengal Government Servants’ Conduct Rules, 1959)

succeeded in transforming the theatre of protest into the theatre of prostration.”¹¹⁴ The same trend has repeated itself in the contemporary theatre scene where, after a period of active political theatre by the likes of Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar, most of the groups today are “fighting shy of politics.”¹¹⁵ The Bengali political theatre had reached its modern day zenith at a time when anti-Left sentiments ran high amongst the ruling Congress party in the state and widespread repression against the Leftist sympathizers and artists exists. As Chakrabarti observes, “arts in general, always fares better when the leftist practitioners face resistance from the powers that be than when they become collaborators of a left government. This was as much true of the theatre in the erstwhile socialist countries as it is true in West Bengal of today.”¹¹⁶ Kuntal Mukhopadhyay would have us believe that Bengali theatre groups justified the actions of the Left Front government “to the people at large” when they came to power in 1977, thus continuing to play a political role. He also believes that the politically motivated Bengali theatre presents “a true reflection of the political atmosphere of a particular time.”¹¹⁷

Things have changed quite drastically between 1999 when Mukhopadhyay’s study was published and 2012-2013 when the research for this study was conducted in Kolkata. The political landscape has changed in the interim. The Left parties were voted

¹¹⁴ Dipendu Chakrabarti, “Protest and Prostration in Bengali Theatre,” *Theatre India* 1 (May 2000): 8.

¹¹⁵ Panchu Roy, “A Spectator Looks Back at the Theatre of Three Decades,” *Anustup* Special Number, Drama (2000).

¹¹⁶ Chakrabarti, “Protest and Prostration,” 9.

¹¹⁷ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 147.

out of office after 34 years of governance in 2011. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) led by Ms. Mamata Banerjee has been in power since then. The final days of the Left rule were characterized by the same kind of misrule and widespread government repression against the common citizen and artists that the Congress led state government was accused of before 1977. Along with others, theatre artists took to the streets in protest. The showing of several plays was banned or canceled owing to their political content. At the same time, some theatre artists continued to sympathize with the Leftist coalition, leading to a serious rift in the theatre fraternity. An overwhelming majority in the state assembly elections of 2011 voted the TMC to power. A change in the mandate, however, did not change the state of affairs. After a promising first six months in office the TMC began to fail in every aspect of administration.¹¹⁸ Interestingly, however, theatre groups seemed to have turned a complete blind eye to this dismal state of affairs.

¹¹⁸ The law and order situation in the state of West Bengal is dismal, particularly when it comes to violence against women. The National Crime Records Bureau report shows that the state tops the nation in crimes against women. The state government has also allegedly tried to snuff out any voice of dissent. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee got a university professor arrested because he shared a cartoon depicting the minister and his aides in bad light ("Professor arrested for poking fun at Mamata," *Hindustan Times*, April 13, 2012). The Chief Minister stormed out of an interview when asked to answer some difficult questions about the law and order situation in the state and has also alleged major intelligence bureaus across the globe of hatching assassination and coup plans against her along with the opposition Communist Party of India (Marxist) (See "Cartoon row: Mamata loses cool, storms out of live TV session," *DNA India*, May 18, 2012,

The theatre groups were seldom, if at all, presenting anything that was politically relevant. You could find a one-off passing reference to something relevant like the recent rise in prominence of Narendra Modi, but it seemed that the groups were mostly trying to play safe.¹¹⁹ Some of the plays claim to be political but more often than not resort to mudslinging and/or blatant misrepresentation of political facts and histories. Instead of forcing people to think and or analyze their immediate socio-economic situations, these

accessed October 15, 2013, [http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-cartoon-row-mamata-](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-cartoon-row-mamata-loses-cool-storms-out-of-live-tv-session-1690735)

loses-cool-storms-out-of-live-tv-session-1690735 and “Mamata Banerjee’s conspiracy allegations draw ridicule from Indian communist party,” *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2012). The state government also allegedly stopped showings of Suman

Mukhopadhyay’s *Raja Lear* owing to the political affiliation of the lead actor Soumitro Chatterjee (S.V. Raman, “Hindering Performance,” *Performing Arts in India – Dance and Theatre*, Goethe Institut – India, accessed October 15, 2013,

<http://www.goethe.de/ins/in/lp/kul/mag/kus/dat/kol/en8405942.htm>.). There were also allegations of a theatre worker Bimal Chakraborty being roughed up by goons belonging to the ruling party when he went to protest against their malpractices at the local market (“Theatre actors protest against assault on thespian,” *The Times of India Kolkata*, October 6, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Narendra Modi is a prominent Hindu nationalist leader from the state of Gujarat belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He was voted into power recently with his party sweeping the recently concluded national elections winning 283 out of 543 seats in the parliament. His alleged role in withholding administrative action to stop rioters during the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 continues to be a heated issue in Indian national politics.

“political plays” resort to sensationalism and vilifying political adversaries without being constructive in their criticism. And a lot of groups serve old fare in a new, “improved” avatar: presenting established classics from the Bengali theatre repertoire. Others avoided all of this altogether, producing plays in the realist mode devoid of any political content but with a sentimental family-driven message.

Incidentally, Kuntal Mukhopadhyay talks in detail about this ambivalence in the group theatre:

Though they are loud in their protest against political, social and economic injustices, they do not directly speak out against them. Herein lies thus ambivalence, this arises due to typical middle class complacency. The members remain ‘Paper tigers’ who vociferously protest against political, social and economic injustice, but do not want hamper [sic] their social position or existence. They prefer to deal with general or theoretical questions and never try to have a political confrontation with the authority openly. This complacent attitude is usually to be found amongst the leaders of the groups and it causes friction amongst the ordinary members, who are generally more aggressively political in nature.¹²⁰

Evidence from other sources prove that while Mukhopadhyay’s claim of middle-class complacency and escapism from a more direct political rhetoric are well-founded, his earlier claim of Bengali theatre having been somewhat politically conscious do not ring true. Writing in 1999, noted actor-director Meghnad Bhattacharya observes that the “mentality to keep oneself insulated from the masses has engrossed a few people of the

¹²⁰ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 148-49.

group theatre almost like a disease.”¹²¹ He goes on to explain how the message of revolution preached on stage is targeted at a limited, well-meaning but opportunist middle-class audience. The messages therefore become mere ornamentation and lose any significance. In the same vein, Nemichandra Jain observes a dearth of new dramatic ideas and unnecessary dependence on foreign plays and an “unimaginative, often stale, realist track, in which there is frequently a curious mixture of stereotyped scenic design and melodramatic stage-lighting.”¹²² Contemporary theatre scholars also echo these thoughts.

Manujendra Kundu, a young theatre scholar, while identifying characteristics of contemporary Bengali theatre, opines that Bengali theatre, “has been following the tradition set by the predecessors. While structurally it has not changed much, selection of texts doesn’t reflect much social awareness characterizing dissociation from reality.”¹²³

Gautam Sarkar goes one step further and refers to contemporary Bengali theatre as “Deadly” (using Peter Brooks’ terminology).¹²⁴ He feels that there is a “lack of

¹²¹ Meghnad Bhattacharya, “Commercial Stage and Group Theatre: Similarities and Contrasts,” in *Bengali Theatre: 200 years* ed. Utpal K. Banerjee (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1999), 122.

¹²² Nemichandra Jain, “Viewing Bengali Theatre,” in *Bengali Theatre: 200 years* ed. Utpal K. Banerjee (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1999), 211.

¹²³ Manujendra Kundu, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2013.

¹²⁴ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 9. “The Deadly Theatre can at first be taken for granted, because it means bad theatre.”

challenging and experimental work” and that instead of following any particular ideology the groups have become one-man organizations.¹²⁵ Ananda Lal feels that the non-commercial affiliation of Bengali group theatre allows it the potential to be radical while commercial cinema and television are unable to do so.¹²⁶ He also points out the “bottomless appetite of mindless viewers” for formulaic television soaps. Although Lal does not go on to say how this trend is affecting the content of contemporary plays, it is quite apparent that the formula is finding its way into the Bengali stage idiom and more and more groups are taking the melodramatic route to achieve popular and financial success. Amongst the scholars and critics that I spoke to, only Anshuman Bhowmick seemed confident about the political content and role of contemporary theatre, but his assertion was not backed by any examples from the current repertoire of plays.¹²⁷ This lack of evidence leads me to conclude that his claim is more historical rather than contemporary.

Group theatre and factionalism

Another interesting although potentially destructive feature of the organization of group theatres is factionalism, leading older groups breaking up and new groups forming.¹²⁸ Bohurupee, the first group theatre group, was formed due to factionalism. Sombhu Mitra, the founder of this group disagreed with the IPTA over political interference in cultural and artistic activity and chose to secede from this parent

¹²⁵ Gautam Sarkar, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2013.

¹²⁶ Ananda Lal, in discussion with the author, June 20, 2013.

¹²⁷ Anshuman Bhowmick, in discussion with the author. June 22, 2013.

¹²⁸ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 142.

organization and float his own outfit with chosen members from amongst erstwhile IPTA members.¹²⁹ Similarly, Bohurupee broke up to form Rupakar in 1954. Nandikar, another vanguard from the early days of the group theatre, broke off first in 1966 to form Theatre Workshop, which broke in 1985 to form Anya Theatre. Nandikar left again in 1977 to form Nandimukh, and more recently in 2007-08 to form Naye Natua. Theatre Commune disintegrated to form Sudrak, which in turn disintegrated to form Sanstab.¹³⁰ Most group theatre actor-directors acknowledge the significance of these breaks for their individual artistic expression but refuse to comment on the reasons for these fissures in any detail.

Kuntal Mukhopadhyay identifies political differences between group members and personality clashes as the two main reasons behind group splits. He believes *daladali* (groupism) is an inherent feature of the Bengali society and therefore theatre groups have been subjected to the same social tendency.¹³¹ Personality clashes more than political differences seem to be the main reason that most groups disintegrate. Mukhopadhyay tells us that the personality clash could be between the director and other members or among the actors of the group.¹³² Due to lack of hard evidence, it is difficult to ascertain

¹²⁹ Darsan Chaudhuri, *Gananatya Andolan* (Kolkata: Anustup, 2009), 293.

¹³⁰ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 142 and Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres: 1753 – 1980* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1982) both mention these splits apart from the latest Nandikar split which is a more recent event.

¹³¹ Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 143 writes, “thus it would seem that break-up of groups to form new ones is not something new in Bengali society and that this tendency is inherent in Bengali culture.”

¹³² *Ibid.*

the exact reasons behind the frequent splits. It is quite likely that a popular/famous member of the group gathers around him/her a group of sycophants to “carve out a new area of power,” leading to the breakup of the old group and forming a new one. The splits usually follow one of two models. The first exists when ordinary members of the group decide to quit the parent organization to form newer groups, examples of which include the creation of groups like Rupakar, Theatre Workshop and Sudrak. The second happens when the director of a group leaves with a band of loyal associates to form a new group. Nandimukh and Anya Theatre were created in this way when Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay left Nandikar with some associates in 1977, and Bibhas Chakraborty did the same while leaving Theatre Workshop in 1985.¹³³

Suman Mukhopadhyay started his own group, Tritiyo Sutra, after splitting from Chetana in 2003-04. He gives a different reason behind his decision to secede from Chetana, which is incidentally run by his father, the noted actor-director Arun Mukhopadhyay.¹³⁴ Suman feels that the amateur structure of Bengali group theatre did not afford the luxury of allowing two directors to work within the set up of a single group. He refuses to admit that having had any creative or political differences and personality clashes with either his father or other members of Chetana could be a contributing factor leading to the split. Chetana and Tritiyo Sutra often share a common pool of actors, and Suman recently appeared on stage under his father’s direction and under the banner of Chetana, which lends further credibility to his claim. Bibhas Chakraborty was candid while providing the exact reasons that led to the split in Theatre

¹³³ Ibid., 144.

¹³⁴ Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 5, 2013.

Workshop and the creation of Anya Theatre, but Gautam Haldar who heads Naye Natua after splitting from Nandikar was not forthcoming about the reasons behind his decision to leave and gave a vague explanation about achieving the fullest extent of creative freedom while devising a theatre that is relevant to the current socio-political situation.¹³⁵

Funding and finances

One of the biggest challenges faced by all the categories of group theatre groups is securing funds to continue producing plays. The recent years have witnessed an exponential rise in the production costs and several groups are feeling the heat from increased expenses. The companies have been forced to increase ticket prices to offset some of the expenses. But a rise in ticket prices automatically means that a certain section of the population cannot afford to watch the performances. The need to guarantee a certain cash flow also means that most groups do not want to gamble with experimental work since they cannot afford to shoulder huge losses. In this section, I will discuss the various strategies that the groups employ to raise money and the government and non-government funding that is available to them. I will begin by looking at the average cost of hosting a typical evening's performance in Kolkata, assuming that the performance is being held at the Academy of Fine Arts. All figures provided will be in Indian rupees with their dollar equivalents in parentheses.

Most group theatre groups don't have their own performance spaces, meaning they have to rent space for performances. Academy of Fine Arts (popularly referred to simply as the Academy) is the most preferred performance venue in Kolkata with the major

¹³⁵ Bibhas Chakrabarty, in discussion with the author, April 24, 2013 and Gautam Haldar, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

institutional as well as thriving troupes trying to rent the space, meaning that there is usually a significant period before a group is given a date in this premier venue. Only the more well known groups can hope to secure the coveted Sunday matinee and evening performance slots. The rental charges for Academy are currently Rs. 7500 (\$125) for the weekends, national and public holidays. For weekdays the rent is Rs. 6500 (\$110).¹³⁶ Auditoriums like the Rabindra Sadan, Madhusudan Mancha, Girish Mancha and Sisir Mancha are owned and controlled by the Ministry of Information and Cultural Affairs, and their rent is slightly less compared to Academy but is not less than Rs. 4000 (\$67).¹³⁷

Like most auditoriums in the city, Academy does not come with its own light and sound fixtures, and groups have to rent these from suppliers. A light supplier charges anything between Rs. 1500 – Rs. 3000 (\$25 – \$50) for an evening, depending on the number of instruments used and the kind of board (digital or analog). The supplier also provides the group with master electricians, rigging crew and board operators. Groups also often hire the services of a professional sound display artist to play recorded music.

¹³⁶ Based on 1\$ = Rs.60. Some of the figures might seem insignificant to Western readers but it is important to bear in mind that the per capita income in India according to the 2012 World Bank report is \$1503 compared to \$51749 in the United States (“GDP per capita (current US\$),” The World Bank, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>).

¹³⁷ The figures mentioned in this discussion were collected based on discussions with secretaries of various Kolkata theatre groups. Jayanta Mitra, executive member of theatre group Rang-Roop filled in with a lot of the figures during a personal interview on July 12, 2013.

This person will bring in his own amplifier and playback system (whether a computer or a music player) that is then hooked up to the sound system of Academy. The sound display artist charges the groups anything between Rs. 200 – Rs. 1000 (\$3.5 – \$17) for an evening's work. Most groups also do not maintain their own warehouses and storage units for sets. The sets and properties are typically stored at the builder's warehouse. The set builder charges the company Rs. 1500 (\$25) for bringing in the sets and providing technicians who assemble and strike the set before and after every performance. They also bill the company for transportation of the set. The transportation charges for Academy typically range between Rs. 1000 – Rs. 2000 (\$17 – \$35). Some groups also hire a make-up artist who charges between Rs. 500 – Rs. 1000 (\$8.5 – \$17). Other expenses incurred include refreshment charges for the company members. Most groups restrict the expenses to Rs. 500 (\$8.5) for the evening. The refreshments include tea and basic snacks (the top choices are deep fried spicy mashed potato balls and potato wraps). The ushers and box-office managers are also paid a token amount for their work, which comes to a total of Rs. 1000 (17). If the company hires the services of a guest artist he or she would charge the company Rs. 1000 (\$17) for every performance. However, this amount is not fixed and there are some artists who command a significantly higher price. For example, the most popular contemporary Bengali stage actor is believed to charge as much as Rs. 5000 (\$85) for an evening's performance.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ This actor was unavailable for comment hence I have not used the name. The amount quoted is a popular myth among theatre workers in Kolkata and was mentioned several times by light designers, technicians and other actors.

The single largest expense that is borne by a group is advertisement. Most groups advertise in Anandabazar Patrika, arguably the largest circulated Bengali daily in Kolkata and West Bengal.¹³⁹ Advertisement rates for black and white matter in this paper is Rs. 1470/sq. cm (\$24) for weekdays and Rs. 1525/sq. cm. (\$26) for advertisements published between Friday and Sunday. The minimum size for an advertisement is 3cm (height) x 3.8cm (width).¹⁴⁰ Therefore, a single advertisement on a weekday costs Rs. 16758 (\$280) and Rs. 17385 (\$290) between Friday and Sunday. Groups typically take out three advertisements before a show targeting at least one Sunday. Therefore, the total money spent on advertisements alone amounts to Rs. 50901 (\$850). On an average therefore a weekday performance at Academy costs roughly Rs. 67000 (\$1120) and a weekend performance roughly costs Rs. 68000 (\$1130).

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) collects taxes from the groups. For a casual show with less than 1200 air-conditioned seats the charges for the 2013-2014 year is Rs. 2 (3¢) besides the Rs. 50 (85¢) that the groups are expected to pay per show.¹⁴¹ Under the auspices of the Bengal Amusements Tax 1922, theatre companies are also

¹³⁹ The Anandabazar Patrika claims that its readership is in excess of 30 lakhs (3 million) in Kolkata alone. See “History and Status,” ABP, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.abp.in/index.php?show=7002>.

¹⁴⁰ “ABP Rates,” *The Telegraph*, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.telegraphindia.com/others/adrates/20100401>.

¹⁴¹ “Schedule of Fees and Charges for the Financial Year 2013-2014,” Official Website of Kolkata Municipal Corporation, accessed on September 13, 2013, <https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/jsp/AmusementFees1.jsp>.

expected to pay taxes on every ticket that is sold. For tickets priced under and up to Rs. 25 (45¢) no charges are levied. Tickets priced above this price are taxed at twenty percent of the amount above Rs. 25.¹⁴² Academy seats about 735 people, and tickets are variously priced. The cheapest tickets are Rs. 40 (70¢) and the upper limit for prices is Rs. 100 (\$1.7) for most groups performing at the Academy. Very few groups get full houses at Academy (or at any other auditorium for that matter) and can hope to recover no more than Rs. 25000 (\$420) from ticket sales after accounting for taxes on a good day. The group theatre groups, as is evident, run on constant and substantial losses.

Internal funding

In order to continue to produce shows, groups have organized various funding strategies in order to cover these losses and continue to produce theatre. The funding strategies might be classified into two broad headings – internal and external. The classifications are self-explanatory and are done on the basis of the source of the funds that is whether the groups generate them internally or if they are received from an external source (government and non-government).

¹⁴² The Bengal Amusements Tax Act of 1922, Pub. Chap I.3.b. (1922). The *Business Standard* reported on August 27, 2013 that the West Bengal government “slashed the amusement tax imposed on the prices of tickets of various cultural programmes [sic] in the state.” Under the provisions of the Bengal Amusement Tax (Amendment) Bill, 2013 the value of tickets for which no tax is levied has been enhanced to Rs. 100 (\$1.7). Press Trust of India, “WB Assembly okays Bill to slash amusement tax on entertainment,” National News, *Business Standard*, August 27, 2013.

Internal funds generated by a group are usually very small and is used to cover the day-to-day running expenses of the group. Most groups have a fixed subscription for members, the amount of which is based on several factors. Members holding full-time jobs are expected to pay more whereas unemployed and student members pay a lesser amount. Members who are office-bearers for the group and executive committee members also pay the higher amount of subscription. The amount is decided in executive committee and general body meetings, bearing in mind the number of members and the regular recurring expenses of the group. The funds thus generated are sufficient to cover rental charges for the rehearsal room (most groups do not have their own rehearsal spaces), basic refreshments served during evening rehearsals and photocopying charges for scripts.

Members have been known to lend internal funds to the group during times of severe financial crisis. Jayanta Mitra, member of Rangroop recalls, “When I first joined Rangroop, the group did not get a lot of help from the central government in Delhi. Therefore people would pawn their jewelry to raise money for shows. And sometimes we would each chip in with either Rs. 10000 (\$167) or Rs. 20000 (\$334) to create a fund for a new production.”¹⁴³ Members are requested to chip in with whatever they can, and the amount is refunded when the financial health of the group has been restored. Anecdotes of personal sacrifices and contributions towards the sustenance of Bengali theatre are legendary. Noted actor-director Debesh Chattopadhyay shared one such anecdote: “This is only the second year that I have received government aid. Before that, I used the

¹⁴³ Jayanta Mitra, in discussion with the author, July 3, 2013.

money that I made from private tutoring, my provident fund, gratuity etc. for our theatre. In fact, I was also forced to sell my apartment back then.”¹⁴⁴

Youth theatre companies and alternate theatre practitioners in the city of Kolkata continue to rely almost exclusively on internal funds to continue and sustain their theatre. Some companies like the Alternative Living Theatre in Madhyamgram (a suburb of Kolkata) have received some grant money, but most companies have never applied to government aid choosing instead to look at other sources for funding. Theatre worker Ankur Roychowdhury says, “We have tried to generate funds from other sources like manufacturing things from waste material and selling them. For certain productions we put out donation boxes through which we have collected sufficient amounts of money for us to break even. Besides we always try to avoid extravagance in order to keep costs to a minimum.”¹⁴⁵ Joyraj Bhattacharya, who has worked with leading theatre groups in the city and now occasionally produces work with an alternate theatre outfit, is of the opinion that “there is no funding for alternate practices. If people can raise funds internally then this theatre happens, otherwise not.”¹⁴⁶ He believes that the unavailability of the fund is also a positive sign because it signifies that the alternate theatre practice is hurting the cultural status quo in Kolkata.

Probir Guha of Alternative Living Theatre has been practicing his theatre, which operates in a completely different vein from the regular proscenium style fare offered in Kolkata, for nearly three decades now. He initially used a lot of the money that he

¹⁴⁴ Debesh Chattopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 16, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Ankur Roychowdhury, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

¹⁴⁶ Joyraj Bhattacharjee, in discussion with the author, June 13, 2013.

received as retirement benefits to create a space for rehearsal and performance. He and his group members do various odd jobs to raise money for the group. Recently however, and at the insistence of fellow theatre workers and the younger members of his group he applied for and received a government grant, a paltry sum compared to the needs of the group. Guha insists that he tries to support the more needy members of his troupe from within this meager fund and saves the rest for the group. ALT also received a Ford Foundation grant once, but the bureaucracy associated with it was a bitter experience and they chose not to use it. As he puts it, “We are not in a great place but we are not destitute either.”¹⁴⁷

Youth theatre groups do not rely on public funding for their theatre. They either generate internal funds through personal savings and membership subscriptions or turn to corporate sponsors. Soumya Mukherji of Mad About Drama (M.A.D) says that the funding is drawn from “sponsorships for our shows and of course the prize money we get in different competitions.”¹⁴⁸ Aritra Sengupta, one of the founding members of M.A.D and director of the group says, “the initial source of funding was personal funds. We get money from sponsors, corporate sponsors. In case, there is no sponsorship, there is an existing M.A.D fund; we have a subscription process, where every member contributes a minimum amount.”¹⁴⁹ Debleena Tripathi from 4th Bell Theatres says that the group primarily depends on “occasional call shows, rare grants, our pockets, ticket sales, [and]

¹⁴⁷ Prabir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

¹⁴⁸ Soumya Mukherji, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013.

¹⁴⁹ Aritra Sengupta, in discussion with the author, May 16, 2013.

gifts from well wishers in cash and kind.”¹⁵⁰ Leena Bhattacharya, from another city based youth theatre group, Kolkata Romroma, also mentions subscriptions besides “donations by the well-wishers and the money collected from the advertisements.”¹⁵¹ While youth theatre groups are able to regularly attract corporate sponsors, their older counterparts often fail to and have to rely almost exclusively on the unpredictable public funding.

External Funding

Most institution size and thriving city theatre troupes in Kolkata rely on the grant schemes of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, the external funding option. The ministry offers grants under several schemes that groups can apply to, the most popular being the production and salary grants. This scheme titled “Financial Assistance to Professional Groups and Individuals engaged for specified Performing Arts Projects” offers assistance to “dramatic groups, theatre groups, music ensembles, children theatre, solo artists and for all genres of performing arts activities.”¹⁵²

Grants given under this scheme are supposed to be sufficient to cover a variety of expenses:

Amongst the items which may be treated as approved items for purpose of grant will be salary remuneration to artists including casual artists at prevalent rates, cost of productions/performance, rental for halls of

¹⁵⁰ Debleena Tripathi, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

¹⁵¹ Leena Bhattacharya, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

¹⁵² “Performing Arts Grant Scheme,” Ministry of Culture, Government of India, accessed on November 28, 2013, <http://indiaculture.nic.in/indiaculture/performing-arts-grants-scheme.html>.

rehearsals, cost of costumes, transport contingencies, research expenditure etc.¹⁵³

The application packet is supposed to contain detailed cost estimates for the committee, and in turn, the committee assures to give due representation to different “art forms and styles from all parts of the country” with preference given to traditional and rare art forms.¹⁵⁴ Preference is also given to work that are aimed at encouraging innovative and experimental work emerging out of “original writing, original direction, theatre-research, theatre training programme [sic] or training of audience and those who foster cultural activities at the rural level.”¹⁵⁵ The maximum amount that a group can get as production grant is Rs. 5 lacs (\$8300) per year depending upon the project.¹⁵⁶ The ministry does include the provision for making exceptions (after the approval of the Minister) in case of larger productions, which meet specific requirements of the scheme. The grant is released in two installments of seventy-five and twenty-five percent.

The Ministry of Culture has provisions for salary grants that are given to groups that “have a repertoire of adequate number and quality and should have given

¹⁵³ “Preamble,” Ministry of Culture, Government of India, accessed on November 28, 2013, <http://indiaculture.nic.in/indiaculture/performing-arts-grants-scheme.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ “Eligibility and Criteria for Grant,” Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India, accessed November 28, 2013, <http://indiaculture.nic.in/indiaculture/performing-arts-grants-scheme.html>.

¹⁵⁶ One lac = one hundred thousand.

performances on an all India basis.”¹⁵⁷ The ministry also specifies that grantees receiving this grant will be considered for a renewal only if they stage at least two new productions in a year, at least one of which is a new production (the ministry website specifies that this means a production that has not been staged earlier). Effective from April 1, 2009, a group can get salary grants for up to 25 members and one guru or director. Members are entitled to Rs. 6000/month (\$100) and the guru/director Rs. 10000/month (\$167). The total number of grants made to a group depends on the decision of an expert committee, which is constituted for a period of two years. The committee’s decision depends on the amount of funds available any given year and the number of applications received. Unlike the production grant, the salary grant is released annually to the groups.

Most Bengali group theatres groups in Kolkata receive some aid in the form of salary grants. Gautam Haldar of Naye Natua mentioned that the grants received by the group are enough to support four members of the company.¹⁵⁸ Arna Mukhopadhyay of Natadha was candid about the number that his group receives (10+1 director).¹⁵⁹ Suman Mukhopadhyay of Tritiyo Sutra said that his group receives one grant.¹⁶⁰ Suranjana Dasgupta of Nirbak Theatre Academy mentioned that her group receives “some grants” from the Ministry of Culture.¹⁶¹ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay of Sanstab also spoke about

¹⁵⁷ “Repertory Grant,” Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India, accessed on November 28, 2013, <http://indiaculture.nic.in/indiaculture/performing-arts-grants-scheme.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Gautam Haldar, in discussion with the author, July 10, 2013.

¹⁵⁹ Arna Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013.

¹⁶⁰ Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 26, 2013.

¹⁶¹ Suranjana Dasgupta, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

receiving some financial aid from the central government.¹⁶² Probir Guha of Alternative Living Theatre was the only alternative practitioner who spoke about receiving government aid.¹⁶³

Since most group members hold daytime jobs, often paying handsome salaries, the groups use the salary grant money for recurrent shows during the year. Some groups offer support to some members, but neither the amount of support nor the number of members receiving support match the amount of grants received by the group. It is tempting to refer to this as a malpractice and a misappropriation of government resources, and the practice is a defining reason that younger actors are now choosing to freelance instead of being members of groups. As outsiders, they can claim a share of the pie instead of being treated as volunteers without pay.

Other ministry of culture aids that groups can apply to is listed under the “Cultural Functions Grant Scheme.” These grants are not specifically meant for theatre groups but any organization that functions and is listed under the Societies Registration Act (XXI of 1860), Trust Act, Companies Act or any Central and State Act for at least three years.¹⁶⁴ Schools, colleges and religious organizations are not allowed to apply for these monies. Grants issued under this scheme can be used to organize “all types of interactive fora [sic] such as conferences, seminars, workshops, symposia as also festivals and

¹⁶² Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 13, 2013.

¹⁶³ Probir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

¹⁶⁴ “Cultural Function Grant Scheme,” Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India, accessed on November 30, 2013, <http://indiaculture.nic.in/indiaculture/cultural-functions-grant-scheme.html>.

exhibitions on any subject important to the preservation or promotion of cultural heritage, arts, letters and other creative endeavors.”¹⁶⁵

Groups can apply for assistance for upto Rs. 5 lacs (\$8300) under this scheme. The amount requested for should be no more than seventy-five percent of the proposed total expenses for the event with the groups providing the other twenty-five percent of the expenses. In certain exceptional circumstances (a “project of outstanding merit and relevance, subject to appropriate approval”) the ministry might consider increasing the amount of grant money.¹⁶⁶ Like the production grant this grant is also released in two installments of seventy-five and twenty-five percent respectively. Theatre groups in Kolkata that regularly host theatre festivals, workshops, seminars and theatre exhibitions are beneficiaries of this scheme.

The applications for the salary and production grants need to be recommended by the state government or the Zonal Cultural Centers (ZCCs). Information regarding the grants is now popular knowledge and therefore more groups are applying for them and a significant number have been able to secure some form of financial assistance or other. Although some of my sources claimed that there are a lot of political and bureaucratic hoops to jump through before a group can apply for these funds, it is also believed that the bigger and better known city groups try and exercise muscle power to control the nomination and distribution process of the grant money.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ “Quantum of Assistance,” Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India, accessed on November 30, 2013, <http://indiaculture.nic.in/indiaculture/cultural-functions-grant-scheme.html>.

Call shows make up the second major source of external funds for groups. Call shows are invited performances, which start with the autumnal festival of Durga Puja in September/October and continue through the mild winter and early spring months of November through February.¹⁶⁷ The season coincides with the season for fairs, festivals, college socials and other local cultural events and city theatre groups are invited to present their latest or a popular recent production. Organizers invite groups based on several factors. Quite obviously the most famous names (large institutions, thriving troupes with above average reputation) are the first choices. It is not unusual for these groups to be double booked owing to their popularity, an opportunity for smaller or lesser-known groups to get their play staged and earn some quick revenue.

The second deciding factor behind a play getting call shows or not is the star billing for the play. The audience especially loves it if an actor/actress who is a well-known face in television or film is seen on stage. In the recent past, a few stage actors have emerged whose presence on stage draws in the crowds. The last factor is often the most crucial factor – finances. Hiring a big group with a large cast and crew ensemble and a star performer can be very expensive for the organizers. Having a big group and a star actor/actress, however, is also a huge draw for both sponsors and audience members, and therefore the organizers can hope to recover some of the expenses. It is not unusual to find the same well-known actor featuring in multiple shows being staged in a festival.

¹⁶⁷ The term “call shows” is typical to the Bengali group theatre. The call show season is spread across the cooler months of the year. This does not mean however that there are no call shows during the rest of the year only that during the season the number of shows and the number of groups being invited increase exponentially.

Call shows can be held in the cities as well as in remote villages and municipal towns. While some of these performances are day affairs and the troupe can get back to the city after the performance, some call shows require the troupe to other parts of the state, which require overnight stay. The most coveted call shows are invitations to perform in premier venues in New Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore). Groups are also commissioned to perform their plays overseas in Bengali culture festivals, like the North America Bengali Conference and its British and Scottish counterparts. Some groups are also hired to stage their plays at overseas Durga Pujas.¹⁶⁸

Groups have a varied take on call shows as a fund generation process. Abanti Chakraborty of Aarshi thinks they are important.¹⁶⁹ Arpita Ghosh of Pancham Baidik ranks them in the same category as central government funds.¹⁷⁰ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay of Sanstab feels “call shows are definitely important,” but he also warns that “plays of a certain kind attract call shows, which does not motivate” him when deciding on a play.¹⁷¹ Jayanta Mitra of Rangroop is of the opinion that, “call shows generate a fund and that is used for productions but the primary use of the call show fund is to cover the regular

¹⁶⁸ Durga Puja is the annual autumnal festival of Bengalis where the mother goddess Durga is worshipped. Held in the month of Ashwin, according to the Bengali calendar, the festival is celebrated with great aplomb all over West Bengal and by Bengalis in every part of the world.

¹⁶⁹ Abanti Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, May 17, 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Arpita Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 11, 2013.

¹⁷¹ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 13, 2013.

losses incurred by the group when hosting its own shows.”¹⁷² Sima Mukhopadhyay of Rang Roop echoes Jayanta and tells us “call show funds are mostly used in conjunction with central government grants to help the group break even and continue performing.”¹⁷³ Manish Mitra of Kasba Arghya makes it clear that money is a factor in deciding to accept an invitation: “We normally don’t do low-rate shows. We have performed for free on certain occasions for charitable organizations etc., but if we are being approached by an office club or some such organization with a sound financial backing we do not compromise on the money factor.”¹⁷⁴ Nabanita Basu Mazumdar of Swapnasandhani is of the opinion that “call shows are definitely important to raise funds, but they often do not account for much.” Her opinion is based on the fact that most of these shows are held in the rural areas where organizers might not have recourse to a lot of money and she feels that call shows are done “primarily for publicity purposes.”¹⁷⁵ Soumitro Basu says his group gets invited to do a lot of call shows because they are ready to perform for cheap:

We feel that theatre should be cheap and flexible. We are eager to use any space and with minimal set up. Therefore we get a lot of call shows over the winter months from people [organizers] who want to host shows for cheap. These call shows also generate a significant fund.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Jayanta Mitra, in discussion with the author, July 3, 2013.

¹⁷³ Sima Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 6, 2013.

¹⁷⁴ Manish Mitra, in discussion with the author, June 24, 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Nabanita Basu Mazumdar, in discussion with the author, July 1, 2013.

¹⁷⁶ Soumitro Basu, in discussion with the author, June 5, 2013.

Suman Mukhopadhyay of Tiritiyo Sutra agrees on the importance of call shows, but he also reminds us of other factors that influence the organizers to invite some groups while consistently overlooking others: “Call shows depend on a number of reasons. There are political reasons. People who are in power control the call show business.”¹⁷⁷

National level theatre festivals and competitions like the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM) hosted by the National School of Drama, New Delhi and Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards (META) are other avenues that help bring in some funds to the cash-strapped groups. The National School of Drama hosts BRM in January every year in New Delhi for the past ten years. A significant number of large and thriving troupes from Kolkata are invited to perform at the “largest theatre festival in Asia.” Groups have to submit a detailed application including a video recording, scene summaries in Hindi or English and a written consent of the playwright by the end of August of the application year to be considered for the festival. Only one production per theatre can be chosen. Groups chosen to perform at the BRM are given an honorarium of Rs. 40000 (\$670) besides train fare (AC II tier), room and board for the troupe (not exceeding 30 members) and flight fare for the director.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 26, 2013.

¹⁷⁸ “Bharat Rang Mahotsav,” National School of Drama, accessed on December 1, 2013, <http://nsd.gov.in/delhi/index.php/bharat-rang-mahotsav/>. The call for applications for this festival is released on all major national newspapers in June/July with the last date for submission for entries usually in August.

The Mahindra Group started the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards competition in 2006, annually held in New Delhi during the month of March.¹⁷⁹ Entries are invited from all over the country and should be received by the award committee by January 10 of the same year. To be considered for the award the plays must have been produced in the previous year. The award committee also requires that submissions be accompanied by a video recording and offers some financial help to groups that are unable to afford recording charges. Nominations are invited for the following categories: best actor (male and female), best supporting actor (male and female), best director, best lighting design, best scenic design, best costume design, best innovative sound design, best choreography, best play, best original script and best ensemble. Groups that are selected after the initial screening travel to New Delhi to perform their play in front of an expert jury. The award secretariat bears the cost of transferring the sets, AC II tier travel for the troupe, room and board, venue charges, technical requirements and a nominal staging fee. The winner of the best play award is presented with a specially designed trophy and a check of Rs. 1 lac (\$1670), the winner of the best original script is awarded Rs. 75000 (\$1250) and winners in every other category are awarded Rs. 45000 (\$750) each. The META has not been a very happy hunting ground for Bengali theatre groups. Manish Mitra's *Kasba Arghya* and Usha Ganguli's *Rangakarmee* has traveled to Delhi on a couple of occasions with their plays but the effort returned naught.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ "About META," Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards, accessed on December 1, 2013, <http://metawards.com/v1/about-meta/>.

¹⁸⁰ "Archive," Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards, accessed on December 1, 2013, <http://metawards.com/metaarchive/index.php>.

The cellular network company Vodafone also organizes an annual theatre festival in Kolkata called Odeon, but for the last couple of years, their focus has been more on the burgeoning youth theatre scene rather than mainstream Bengali group theatre groups. Vodafone produces one play that premieres at the festival. These sources of external funds along with occasional corporate sponsorships do not account for much and thus may be considered to be minor or even insignificant funding resources, especially since a vast majority of theatre groups cannot access them.

Building the theatre event

Besides the many funding issues that plague Bengali group theatres, many processes go into building a theatre event in Kolkata. Group theatre companies do not have a pre-decided season of plays and usually produce between one and two plays a year. They, however, continue performing plays from previous years if those are still in demand. Therefore, it is not usual for a group to be performing three plays simultaneously. The popular plays from the group's repertory are often invited to festivals and for call shows while the group tends to perform its newest fare for the shows that it hosts, ensuring that the newest production gets enough attention while the popular plays keep bringing in the call-show money. The groups stop performing the older plays when the newer productions start getting call shows.

The process begins with the selection of plays. Most directors and actors that I spoke with mentioned the existence of a democratic system whereby a play script is chosen for performance after it has been read in the presence of all group members and everyone present has unanimously agreed that the group should stage it. Jayanta Mitra from Rangroop explains his group's process:

We look at various playwrights, find their work and read it. Sometimes we ask playwrights to give us a work to read and nowadays playwrights often approach us with new work as well. So this way we listen to three or four scripts and then we have to choose between those three or four because we are contractually bound to the Central Govt. in Delhi to produce at least on new work every year. Therefore, since we are compelled to choose out of a limited pool there is often no basis for the selection. Under ideal circumstances, we wouldn't have produced anything if we didn't like what was on offer, but we don't have that choice. Out of the limited number of works that we read, we try to choose the one that seems best and allows the maximum scope for experimentation etc.¹⁸¹

Sima Mukhopadhyay, who leads Rang Roop, adds, "Plays are read first, and after the reading, the play that inspires and instigates us the most, that which gets us enthused about the work ahead is chosen for production."¹⁸²

Both Mukhopadhyay and Mishka Halim, a freelance actor added that the social relevance of the play does play a definite role behind a script's selection.¹⁸³ Sagnik Mukherjee, a freelance actor gives a detailed account of a very democratic process of play selection in Usha Ganguli led Rangakarmee, however, he does qualify that this process is not adhered to always and this might have been an one-off instance:

¹⁸¹ Jayanta Mitra, in discussion with the author, July 3, 2013.

¹⁸² Sima Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 6, 2013.

¹⁸³ Mishka Halim, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

In 2010, all the groups were doing something by Rabindranath Tagore to mark the 150th birth anniversary of the poet. We decided in Rangakarmee that all of us would write the names of five Tagore plays on pieces of paper and put those in a box. There would be a draw of lots from among these and the top two would be selected. The lottery happened and *Chandalika* and *Shyama* were selected and we started work on a script based on these two texts.¹⁸⁴

Others actors I spoke to, however, felt that the director has the final say when it comes to selecting a play for production.

Pritha Banerjee also from Rang Roop says, “What happens primarily is that the director chooses the play. She decides what we are going to do. If we have some problems with her choice, we let her know but it is mainly the director’s discretion.”¹⁸⁵

Nabanita Basu Mazumdar of Swapnasandhani echoes the same sentiment, “The Director selects it. That’s it. We have no hand or say in this matter. We listen to a script and like it but that’s it.”¹⁸⁶ Abanti Chakraborty of Aarshi certainly seems to be the arbiter when it comes to what her group is going to produce, “I keep reading a lot of plays. And I decide what to produce depending on the availability of the right actors and the requisite budget.”¹⁸⁷ Arpita Ghosh of Pancham Vaidik feels that since she writes/translates/edits most of the plays that are produced by her group she should have the final verdict on the

¹⁸⁴ Sagnik Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

¹⁸⁵ Pritha Banerjee, in discussion with the author, January 7, 2013.

¹⁸⁶ Nabanita Basu Mazumdar, in discussion with the author, July 1, 2013.

¹⁸⁷ Abanti Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, May 17, 2013.

subject of choosing a play. She acknowledges, “Members will often have their own thoughts and responses with regards to the piece that we have chosen.” She admits to addressing those concerns before commencing work on the project.¹⁸⁸ Suman Mukhopadhyay of Tritiyo Sutro feels that the script selection process in most groups is “farcical.” He explains, “A director chooses a play and then people vote on it. This voting is the remnant of an old Communist Party way of working, which calls for some form of a democratic structure. This usually means that everyone has to say yes to something.” Mukhopadhyay feels that this democratization of the play selection process is pointless because “everyone will not have the same reading assessment of a play.”¹⁸⁹ He believes that the director needs to decide on the play on his own and then choose a team from among the group members who are willing to work with him on that particular project.

Joyraj Bhattacharya, a freelance actor who has worked with several city-based theatre groups, including Chetana and Tritiyo Sutro as well as the Royal Shakespeare Company finds the way group theatres work to be feudal. The leader of the group, who is also often the director, is at the top of this hierarchic set up and according to Bhattacharya, is often surrounded by a close coterie of yes men. He is of the opinion that most groups pretend to be democratic while adhering to feudal values and practices. In his experience, “The director comes and reads a play, and his yes men applaud the work and it gets selected for production. There is no space for criticism at all.”¹⁹⁰ Bhattacharya feels that most members do not want to anger the director by standing in opposition to

¹⁸⁸ Arpita Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 11, 2013.

¹⁸⁹ Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 26, 2013.

¹⁹⁰ Joyraj Bhattacharya, in discussion with the author, June 13, 2013.

him/her, ensuring, according to Bhattacharya, that the yes men land up with substantial roles in the play.

Alternative theatre practitioners like the Alternative Living Theatre of Madhyamgram claim to adopt a very democratic process when it comes to selecting a play for production. Prabir Guha, who leads this group explains, “We try to decide on a play together. The youngest member of the group has an equal say in what the group does and does not.”¹⁹¹ Guha claims that unless everyone in the group agrees to perform something, they don’t do it. He does, however, acknowledge the presence of some form of a democratic centrism in the process: “The younger people are not very mature yet and therefore cannot propose specific projects.”¹⁹² Under such circumstances, the onus is either on Guha himself, his son or some other senior member of the group to come forward with an idea, which is then debated and discussed at length before being selected for production. In the example that Guha went on to provide of the group’s method of selecting a play, the power equation was quite apparent. The director told me that earlier in the day he proposed that the group should take up *Macbeth* next for production. Members seemed to have raised various questions in response and Guha answered those besides narrating the story of Macbeth in detail. But the decision to produce *Macbeth* had already been taken.

Ankur Roychowdhury who works with Swabhav Kolkata and other non-profit and non-government organizations to create plays with young adult actors takes a completely different approach while choosing plays. Like Guha, Roychowdhury does not stage

¹⁹¹ Prabir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

¹⁹² Ibid.

scripts by others but unlike Guha he does prepare a written text for his actors. He explains, “I do not find myself too enthused about someone else’s play.”¹⁹³ While acknowledging the influence of several plays and playwrights on his work, notably, Bertolt Brecht, Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar, Roychowdhury confirms that he strongly feels that either a member of his troupe or he himself will write the work that they will produce. He further comments that he does not find anything in the contemporary Bengali theatre that provokes him to think or inspires his work. He does not dismiss the possibility of staging translations but is vehement in his dismissal of the current trends in Bengali group theatre. Roychowdhury explains that his way of writing plays—I am equating this with script selection in this case, since Roychowdhury almost exclusively works with his own writing—are the opposite of the conventional process. He checks to see what kinds of resources are at his disposal before writing. These include the number of available actors, their capacities and capabilities on stage and the budget. He says that he resists being called a theatre worker or a thespian since these carry certain ideas about what a person is theatrically capable of doing. In his own words, “I am like a quack doctor – hurriedly putting something together and throwing it up on stage. I do it because I love doing theatre. That’s all.”¹⁹⁴ Roychowdhury’s plays are simple in structure and draw a lot from popular culture like Tollywood and Bollywood songs, jatra etc. They are also very socially committed and politically oriented. Roychowdhury is very clear that he writes about issues that bother him, and he wishes to address those through theatre since that allows him to work and mingle with other people from various social levels.

¹⁹³ Ankur Roychowdhury, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Aritra Sengupta of M.A.D. (Mad about Drama) says that most of the plays that the group has produced have been originals. He explains that occasionally he thinks of an idea and places that in front of the group. Alternatively, the group members get together to discuss concepts. Sengupta is usually in charge of developing the script based on what emerges from these “brain-storming sessions.”¹⁹⁵ Soumya Mukherji from the same group feels that when it comes to staging a classic, M.A.D. tries to evaluate if the play concerned speaks to the times, for originals (which Sengupta says that the group has produced most) the members choose a script based on whether they can relate to the script.¹⁹⁶ Sagnik Mukherjee, who has also worked with 4th Bell Theatres, explained that after the initial reading of a script, all group members chip in with their feedback that is then incorporated to create a draft.¹⁹⁷ Debleena Tripathi also of 4th Bell Theatres gives a more detailed account of the group’s process, “Someone writes a script, says, ‘I would like to direct this/ XYZ should direct this.’ We sit and read it, dwell on it critically, give suggestions to change if required.”¹⁹⁸ The group, according to Tripathi has a group of core members, who seem to have the final say on matters of script selection. Although she confirms that the playwright (she calls him/her a “script writer”) can choose to accept or reject the changes suggested by the rest of the group. Leena Bhattacharya of Kolkata Romroma tells us that the group chooses plays on the basis of a majority vote. Group members either write the plays themselves or suggest existing plays that are then voted

¹⁹⁵ Aritra Sengupta, in discussion with the author, May 16, 2013.

¹⁹⁶ Soumya Mukherji, in discussion with the author, September 18, 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Sagnik Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013

¹⁹⁸ Debleena Tripathi, in discussion with the author, September 9, 2013.

on.¹⁹⁹ Anuvab Dasgupta of Hypokrites reported that his group followed the same method for script selection as Kolkata Romroma.

Deciding on the cast follows the script selection process. Groups have various processes for casting plays. Most groups cannot afford a casting director for the process. They also typically don't hold auditions in the way we understand them in the West because each group has a roster of members who are all potential actors or at least expect to be cast in the group's shows. Certain youth theatre groups and Bengali group theatre groups have multiple actors read out the same part and then decide on a casting choice depending on who "sounds best" or "looks best" for the part. It is therefore not a very objective process and dissenters would even complain that the process is not always dependent on the skill and talent of the actor. Some groups rely almost exclusively on the group membership for casting. There is, however, an increasing tendency to hire freelancers or actors from other groups for plays. The actors who are hired are usually given the principal characters or a major role. Some groups like Anya Theatre, Tritiyo Sutra and Aarshi do not have a long roster of actors and assemble a team exclusively for a particular production.

Abanti Chakraborty from Arshi says that she does the casting for her plays herself, "I have people in mind for the various roles. And for Arshi we have a small group of actors that I always try to work with."²⁰⁰ These actors do not belong to her group but according to Chakraborty they have always responded positively to her invitations to work together. Sagnik Mukherjee explains this process further in the context of a

¹⁹⁹ Leena Bhattacharya, in discussion with the author, September 9, 2013.

²⁰⁰ Abanti Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, May 17, 2013.

particular production *Ichher Ali Gali*, “The casting decision is based on experience. For *Ichher Ali Gali* we had about ten people in mind and we chose the seven best out of this.”²⁰¹ Arna Mukherjee from Natadha says, “There is no audition mechanism in our group.”²⁰² Talking about the process further, Mukherjee explains that Natadha’s philosophy is, theatre is a process and not a product. Accordingly, the group gives casting precedence to members who devote more time to the group rather than simply privileging talent. Natadha is willing to shoulder the risks that such a process sometimes results in, including casting a not so efficient performer for significant roles. Natadha relies primarily on in-house acting resources although in the past it has undertaken productions that involved prominent members from various Kolkata groups.

Pancham Vaidik, which organizes round-the-year voice and acting workshops for its members, also relies primarily on in-house resources. The director, Arpita Ghosh confirmed, however, that sometimes they are forced to look elsewhere for actors. Ghosh also mentions, that being the director, casting is primarily her choice. Group members do make suggestions sometimes and she says, “Not that I refuse to take those into consideration but the basic blueprint is usually in the director’s mind.”²⁰³ Jayanta Mitra from Rangroop describes a similar process in Rangroop where senior group members discuss over a casting choice before the director takes the final decision.²⁰⁴ Sima Mukhopadhyay, director of Rangroop feels that the director is in a unique position to

²⁰¹ Sagnik Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

²⁰² Arna Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 6, 2013.

²⁰³ Arpita Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 11, 2013.

²⁰⁴ Jayanta Mitra, in discussion with the author, July 3, 2013.

decide on the casting, since she/he has been interacting with group members for a while which allows her an insight into their capabilities and limitations.²⁰⁵ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay also relies on the in-house acting resources of his group Sanstab. He feels that hiring actors from outside does not add to the play much because each of these actors come with a set of idiosyncrasies, or as he calls it, “a limited box of reference” and can seldom step outside of that.²⁰⁶ Bandyopadhyay feels that he can mould the actors of his group better to essay various kinds of roles. Debesh Chattopadhyay, director of Sansriti feels that casting is one of his strengths. Experience has taught him “that some actors are better suited for certain characters over others.”²⁰⁷ He also considers himself lucky that no actor has ever refused to work with him when he has approached him or her for his or her services. But he does complain that due to the lack of actor training in Kolkata, he has had to work with actors of various competence levels in the same production.

Freelance actors Mishka Halim and Ankita Majhi both say that they have never had to go through any audition process for casting. Although Majhi reports that for certain production like *Raja Lear* (Bengali adaptation of *King Lear*) there was a process that could be compared to an audition because several actors were made to read the same parts before the director decided on the final cast.²⁰⁸ Halim reports having seen “people

²⁰⁵ Sima Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 6, 2013.

²⁰⁶ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 13, 2013.

²⁰⁷ Debesh Chattopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 16, 2013.

²⁰⁸ Ankita Majhi, in discussion with the author, July 17, 2013.

appear for auditions.”²⁰⁹ She feels that groups that hold such “auditions” do it as a clever ploy to test out various actors. After all the actors have appeared individually to the rehearsal room and read a part in front of the group, most are written off unceremoniously and never contacted again. Halim feels that she got cast into roles when her looks matched the director’s imagination. She feels, however, that the popularity of an actor and sometimes even their skill set could decide the casting choice.

Joyraj Bhattacharya maintains that there is no audition process in the Bengali group theatre. He puts a different spin to the story and calls the casting process worse than the infamous “casting couch” of tinsel town.²¹⁰ He accuses directors of being exploitative and running the groups in a feudal manner. Bhattacharya says that the youngest or the newest group member is deliberately denied acting opportunities and/or training. He excitedly accuses certain directors of using younger members of their groups as personal assistants. The younger members don’t know any better and follow instructions with the hope that they will soon land a substantial part in a play. He also accuses directors of setting different standards in the group for themselves, members of their families who are in the group and a select group of members. This select group wields a lot of power in the group and is allowed to have their will, take up other assignments which are in conflict with the group’s shows and the group makes adjustments and compromises according to the convenience of this small and select group of people. Bhattacharya feels that a younger member is never allowed any such liberties, he is strongly discouraged from taking on any other assignments and is constantly

²⁰⁹ Mishka Halim, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

²¹⁰ Joyraj Bhattacharya, in discussion with the author, June 13, 2013.

reminded how big a favor the group is doing him by having him on the roster (even though membership is totally voluntary).

Non-conventional theatre practitioners, like Probir Guha of Alternative Living Theatre, Supriyo Samajdar of Bibhaban and Ankur Roychowdhury of Swabhav Kolkata, cast a show differently from the mainstream groups. Both Guha and Samajdar insisted the importance of the process in their respective theatre practices. In the same vein, both these practitioners also opined that their aim is not to create a product that sells. Guha feels that the Alternative Living Theatre has enough money today to hire actors from outside. He, however, insists that he wants the people in his group to perform. The purpose of Guha's theatre is to give a voice to the "ordinary" people that he works with. Guha observes that audience members have often complained to him that everything about his theatre is fine except for the English pronunciation of his actors. The veteran director dismisses such audience reactions by questioning such puritans: "Why criticize my actors if you can understand them?"²¹¹ The group does, however, occasionally work with actors from outside, but they have to go through the same process of training that the other members of the team are subjected to.

Samajdar, who has worked with actors outside his group in past productions, most notably in the 2011-2012 adaptation of Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghoda* says that they find it difficult to communicate their philosophy and methodology to outside actors.²¹² Accordingly, Bibhaban has decided that it is henceforth going to work exclusively with actors from the group. Samajdar insists that there is nothing wrong with the actors from

²¹¹ Probir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

²¹² Supriyo Samajdar, in discussion with the author, May 29, 2013.

outside. In fact, he acknowledges that the actors that he chose for certain productions were all accomplished performers. There was, however, a difference of opinion between the philosophy that Bibhaban follows and the way the “conventional” actors approached the project. For Ankur Roychowdury of Swabhav Kolkata the cast is always pre-decided, and the script is developed around this cast.²¹³ Therefore, there is no question of a separate casting process.

Youth theatre groups mostly cast in-house and only rarely look outside the group. Najrin Islam of M.A.D says that for the latest offering of the group, C.H.U.T.I.Y.A, the group needed a bigger cast and crew and therefore auditions were held and new members recruited for the show.²¹⁴ From her response, it was unclear whether these actors and crewmembers were recruited just for this play or if they would continue as members of the group. Soumya Mukherji from the same group added that casting is decided by a core group comprising of three or four members.²¹⁵ Leena Bhattacharya of Kolkata Romroma and Anubhav Dasgupta of Hypokrites both said that the cast was primarily in-house.²¹⁶ Debleena Tripathi of 4th Bell Theatres was also of the same opinion although she qualified her comment by adding that when the group is in dire straits they do seek outside help.²¹⁷ It seems that memberships of these groups are a little more flexible than

²¹³ Ankur Roychowdhury, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

²¹⁴ Najrin Islam, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013.

²¹⁵ Soumya Mukherji, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013.

²¹⁶ Leena Bhattacharya, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013; Anubhav Dasgupta, e-mail message to author, January 1, 2014.

²¹⁷ Debleena Tripathi, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

conventional group theatre companies and members often work for two groups simultaneously, meaning that the groups' call in-house acting resources are shared resources.

Rehearsal Process

Rehearsals start once the casting has been decided. Some directors choose to change the casting after beginning rehearsals if they feel that their original casting choice is not working out. Directors usually spell this warning out at the very beginning of the process when scripts are being distributed between group members. As Ankita Majhi, a freelance actor, says, "the rehearsal process is a theatre in and of itself."²¹⁸ Not unlike in the West, each director has his or her own individual rehearsal process. Most directors that I spoke to said that the process lasts anything between a fortnight to six months and longer.

Abanti Chakraborty feels that an artistic process is very important for her theatre. Her work begins in an informal manner. She has individual informal sessions with her actors over coffee or lunch. She wants to work with what she calls the "personal truth" of the actor.²¹⁹ Arna Mukhopadhyay, who has only recently donned the director's mantle says, that his process shifts from one play to the next. As an actor he loves to explore the physicality of his own body and while directing he strives to bring this out in each of his actors.²²⁰ For his play *Ebong Socrates*, Mukhopadhyay spent a month on physical theatre workshops. For *Caesar o Cleopatra* (Bengali adaptation of Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and*

²¹⁸ Ankita Majhi, in discussion with the author, July 17, 2013.

²¹⁹ Abanti Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, May 17, 2013.

²²⁰ Arna Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013.

Cleopatra) he decided to use a stylized chorus, which also required a long and arduous rehearsal process. In the same breath he says that his play *Bishkal* had premiered after ten days of rehearsals.

Sagnik Mukherjee, Mishka Halim and Ankita Majhi as freelance actors have all worked with a lot of different directors. They were able to provide significant insights into the directorial processes of various directors. Mukherjee says that while working with Rangakarmee under the direction of Usha Ganguli he went through a rehearsal process that is unlike anything else that he has come across in any other group. Reading rehearsals are a vital part of Rangakarmee's process. The group sets smaller targets while aiming for the ultimate goal of opening on a certain date. Mukherjee explains, "Let's say today is June 7 and we are going to open the show sometime in September. So, between today and June 15, we will meet four times for table readings and nothing else."²²¹ The table readings are also an important determinant to finalize the cast. Once the group starts rehearsing they rehearse a particular scene continuously and rigorously till it nears or reaches perfection and only then would they move to the next scene. He also observes that Rangakarmee rehearsals are long; sometimes lasting for as long as eight hours. The director Usha Ganguli, Mukherjee says, is a perfectionist and would not stop until things matched her expectation and would leave no stone unturned to extract the best from her cast. Mukherjee goes on to describe his experience of working with Abanti Chakraborty in *Arshi*, "she usually makes us run-through the whole play from the get go."²²² He says that this version of the play is nowhere near perfect and could be described as

²²¹ Sagnik Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

²²² Ibid.

“haphazard” at best but she does not pick individual scenes to work on until later. In Mukherjee’s experience rehearsals run for a minimum of three months and a maximum of six.

Ankita Majhi says that a professional director is usually more methodical but can be difficult to understand at times. She complains that in some cases there are hardly any rehearsals and the professional/freelance actors who have been hired for the job are supposed to figure things out on their own.²²³ She feels that without some sort of a direction, theatre is not possible. Majhi gives the example of a play that she was a part of which rehearsed for only eight days before opening. She was not particularly fond of what the piece looked like but being a professional she was not in a position to question the director or the group. She does mention that while some productions are under-rehearsed there are those that are sometimes over-rehearsed. Mishka Halim says, “Each director, be it Suman Mukhopadhyay, Sima Mukhopadhyay, Bibhas Chakraborty, Chandan Sen, Arun Mukhopadhyay or Usha Ganguli have all trained differently, are differently read and use different approaches.”²²⁴ She explains that Arun Mukhopadhyay and Bibhas Chakraborty both consider the reading rehearsals to be an important part of the process and use this phase of the rehearsal to communicate a lot of their thoughts and ideas to the actors. She feels that a hardworking, intelligent and talented actor would take the hints some directors offer during the process, do the requisite homework and deliver what was expected of her/him. According to Halim, Chandan Sen does not believe in reading rehearsals. He feels that since blocking/composition changes everything anyway,

²²³ Ankita Majhi, in discussion with the author, July 17, 2013.

²²⁴ Mishka Halim, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

one should not waste time on table reads and start getting a feel of the space from the very beginning. Actors are not required to be off-book but they are expected to deliver their lines while figuring out their own movements in the space. He then steps in to orchestrate and design the final blocking. Halim is of the opinion that most groups rehearse between four and seven months before opening a show but as an actor who is hired from outside the group, freelancers usually get about a month of rigorous practice and are only called for rehearsals when most other aspects of the production have already been taken care of.

Suman Mukhopadhyay (Tritiyo Sutra) and Debesh Chattopadhyay (Sansriti) are two of Kolkata's most well-known and critically acclaimed directors and they both seem to take an extramural approach to directing. Mukhopadhyay says, "I have abandoned the traditional approach to direction – sit downs, read through, figuring out the voice modulations and orchestration, then blocking/composition – a long time ago since I did not really believe in it."²²⁵ He believes that each project demands a unique rehearsal approach. For Mukhopadhyay this involves a thorough negotiation with the material that he is working with as well as allowing his collaborators to take a multi-disciplinary approach. For the adaptation of *Teesta Parer Brittanto* (a series of scenes and images which he had adapted from the 1988 novel by Debesh Roy of the same name) he depended on his actors and collaborators to weave the scenes together in the rehearsal room. During the rehearsal process, Mukhopadhyay felt that the urban lifestyle of his

²²⁵ Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 26, 2013. Mukhopadhyay described his rehearsal process with particular emphasis on his first major success *Teesta Paarer Brittanto* (2000).

team is restricting their physical expression. In order to break that, the team traveled to Purulia and took Chhau lessons. Not because he was trying to incorporate this dance form into the play but because it challenged the actors to think beyond the urban confines of their physicality. His approach changed completely while directing Tagore's *Bisarjan*, where he was dealing with a classic Bengali text. Mukhopadhyay asks his actors and collaborators to think of other forms of artistic expressions to the play that they are preparing for. The idea is to inspire them to think "outside the box." The director acknowledges that this is not always successful but taking an alternate approach and allowing his actors to do the same forms the crux of his process.

Debesh Chattopadhyay takes a similar multi-disciplinary approach to prepare for directing a play.²²⁶ For him, the process starts with identifying a basic concept that he would like to work with. He follows this with looking for and reading any material that he can find around this concept: a short story, a novel, a poem, articles or newspaper reports. Based on this source, he creates a text. Sometimes the text Chattopadhyay uses is an actual play, or in certain instances it is something that he himself dramatizes or adapts for the stage. Sometimes he abandons the idea of creating a text in the beginning altogether and the text is gradually developed through the rehearsal process. For example, when he directed an adaptation of Tagore's *Shey* the whole team got together and read the Tagore short story repeatedly to capture the finer nuances of it. The the team then got to its feet, started improvising based on the story and finally a text was created. Chattopadhyay believes that his process is continuous and changing continually through the rehearsal period. What this generates, Chattopadhyay says, is a metatext.

²²⁶ Debesh Chattopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 16, 2013.

Chattopadhyay feels that he allows actors a certain space within the process of directing/designing a play to develop and create their own understanding of the piece. He says, “I refuse to spell out everything. I am not a composition master.”²²⁷ He gives the actors a space and he wants them to react in it. They have a set of dialogues, and he wants the actors to build on those words, to listen to the people reacting to their lines and add to what they already have. Chattopadhyay expects his actors to react to the space that they have been given, even as he keeps changing it. He wants to see how the actors respond to these changes. He feels only a very intelligent actor can negotiate with this process. Chattopadhyay complains that this is not always possible because he has to work with actors of multiple levels of competence (a result, he feels, of the lack of actor training opportunities in the city), meaning that while some do not need to be told everything, there are others who need things to be spelt out and yet others who require a demonstration of what is expected of them.

An interesting feature of Chattopadhyay’s work is the choreographed scene changes. These are highly dramatic in nature and are woven into the structure of the play to serve as transition points as well as to introduce the following scene. Chattopadhyay claims that like most things in his plays, these are not pre-designed either. He gave me an example from the play *Debi Sarpamasta*, a production replete with several such sequences. The play was produced by the Minerva Repertory Company and after rehearsing the play for a while the troupe realized that they had run out of money for scene design. Chattopadhyay and his actors found that there were some set pieces leftover from the Company’s earlier production of *Raja Lear* and some benches and a tree that

²²⁷ Ibid.

were used by Kanhailal (eminent director from Manipur) for a project. The actors brought these props on stage and then started moving them around to suggest various locations. Chattopadhyay balanced these improvised looks and choreographed the transitions to “smooth out the rough edges.” The result was a series of smooth transitional moments that suggested a change in location without ever looking cumbersome. Chattopadhyay feels that letting the actors build the space that they are going to interact with allows them to identify with the space better. The director is of the opinion that longer the period of rehearsal the better. He would ideally like to work for a year before opening a new play but acknowledges that it is logistically impossible to get such an extended rehearsal period.

The plays by both these directors often include elaborate scenic, lighting and costume designs. However, neither of them mentioned anything about the design process and how and when that factors into the rehearsal process. Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, director of Sanstab, offered an insight into this aspect of the process while discussing his approach to directing. Bandyopadhyay does not always start with a ready blue print for the play. Instead he lets the play develop during and through the rehearsal process. The actors get together and read the play to unearth its meaning. While this process is underway, Bandyopadhyay keeps certain images of what the play is going to look like in his mind. He discusses these ideas with the rest of the group, and depending on the reaction of his team, he re-works some of these thoughts and ideas. Bandyopadhyay also involves the group’s scenic (set) designers in this stage of the process.²²⁸ The designer duo Soumik and Piyali present their concept in the form of a drawing, and together the

²²⁸ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 13, 2013.

director and designer go over these preliminary designs, re-working it till they arrive at a final design. If Bandyopadhyay feels that the play is demanding a musical score, he consults a music director. The choice of a music director depends on what Bandyopadhyay feels is appropriate for the play. If the design that he has in mind is something very basic, he talks/consults with a person who can give him a basic score (usually someone who can play the synthesizer). If he feels that the play demands a more elaborate music design, he hires a professional musician.

These design elements are gradually integrated into the body of the play before the rehearsals are shifted to a bigger space and the group's light designer, Badal Das, is called in to sit through the blocking/composition process. Once all of this preliminary design decisions have been made the group moves into the stage rehearsal phase. The first part of the stage rehearsal (technical rehearsal) process is used to try out various design ideas and the director and the designers frequently interrupt the run to adjust scenic and lighting elements. The second part of the stage rehearsal process is a series of complete runs. After this, the group returns to its regular rehearsal room, which is smaller than the auditoriums that they have been holding technical rehearsals at for a few more dry runs before the opening night's performance. On the opening night of a show, Sanstab hires the venue for the whole day. A final dress is held in the morning after which the group retires for the afternoon before coming back for the premiere in the evening. Bandyopadhyay says that he typically needs between six and seven months before opening a show since he never has a detailed blueprint in mind before starting the process.

Ankur Roychowdhury of Swabhav Kolkata says that his rehearsal process is simultaneous with the writing process.²²⁹ He assembles a team before starting work on the script. The script and the play develop together during the ten/twelve days that the team spends together rehearsing the play. Rehearsals start around ten in the morning after breakfast and goes on till one in the afternoon, when the group breaks for lunch and siesta. They re-convene at four in the evening and rehearse until six before taking another short break. The final leg of the day's rehearsals takes place between half past six and nine. The team then retires for dinner and Roychowdhury ensures that the entire team has turned in for the night by eleven. This rigorous process culminates in the final show, usually a low-key affair. Roychowdhury is keener on getting his message across and tries to travel with his plays to various slums across the country, meaning that the shows do not have elaborate designs and are typically performed under flat lights with minimal props. Actors mostly source their own costumes with the organization providing anything specific that the team requires for a play. For the play *Madhubabu'r Bajar*, for example, Roychowdhury used a police uniform, which was bought from a second-hand market in Kolkata.

Probir Guha of Alternative Living Theatre suggested that their process is time consuming and different from the conventional group theatre companies. The primary point of departure that he noted for his practice is that the process for his group is continuous and does not start or stop with a particular performance. The group merely alters the way it practices to suit the particular needs of a production. Guha offered the example of *Macbeth*, the play that the group has decided to stage next under his

²²⁹ Ankur Roychowdhury, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

stewardship. Although he wishes to retain the basic outline of the Shakespeare original, Guha said that they were not going to use the script. The process starts with a lot of discussions surrounding the original text. On the day of this interview the group had finished listening to the story of *Macbeth*. Sharing smaller segments from the narrative and presenting these in different performance styles will follow the discussion session. Some of the questions that Guha asks his team at this stage are, “What are your favorite episodes? Which ones strike you as most familiar with your surroundings? How do you want to express it? What are the various ways of doing it?”²³⁰ He says that this process continues for a long time – three or four months. After taking the various viewpoints of the team into consideration, Guha brings the various elements together to form the final collage, which is more of an interpretation of *Macbeth* rather than being the play itself, as we know it.

Youth theatre group members from the city did not present a very clear and concrete idea of what constitutes their “rehearsal processes.” Some of them like Debleena Tripathi of 4th Bell Theatres simply commented that the rehearsal process depended on the individual director.²³¹ Some of the others had more insights to offer. Leena Bhattacharya of Kolkata Romroma said that after the casting the cast is asked to list their availability and based on that a rehearsal schedule is worked out.²³² She did not explain however what actually happens in the rehearsal room. Soumya Mukherji of M.A.D. (Mad about Drama) offered a cricketing analogy to explain the rehearsal process. He compared

²³⁰ Probir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

²³¹ Debleena Tripathi, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

²³² Leena Bhattacharya, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

the performance to the delivery of a bowler and the rehearsal as the run-up to that delivery.²³³ He said that the process involves three stages, becoming the character, figuring out the blocking for individual scenes and finally a series of uninterrupted run-through rehearsals. The run-through rehearsal Mukherji opined help an actor build “chemistry” with the other characters in the play. Najrin Islam of the same group reflected that rehearsals commence immediately after a script has been read, approved and cast. She says that once individual scenes have been blocked the group has a series of run-through rehearsals. On the eve of the opening, the group has what she calls a “tech-check” at the venue. The “tech check” allows the person in charge of lights to figure out the console besides allowing the actors to rehearse the blocking for every scene.²³⁴

The designers and their processes

In the preceding section, I have discussed at length the directorial processes that lead to a theatre event, based on conversations that I had with actor-directors and actors. Very rarely have I discussed the designers and technicians who design, build and execute the theatre event along with the director and actors. Barring a couple of directors, almost no one mentioned working with designers while discussing their processes. There is very little doubt that without the immense contribution of these people the theatre event will not be possible. Somehow, however, they remain unheard of just as they remain unseen behind the wings of the stages. This final section of the chapter is devoted to the designers and technicians and their take on the working conditions of Bengali theatre.

²³³ Soumya Mukherji, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013. In cricket a bowler runs a few paces before he throws or delivers the ball towards the batter or batsman.

²³⁴ Najrin Islam, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013.

The discussion is based on my conversations with both designers and technical crew working in the group theatre. While some of the designers mentioned the collaborative work with an actor-director while describing their processes others chose to concentrate merely on their own work. I will demonstrate, along these lines, that there is a disjunction between the designer's work and the development of the play. The discussion will demonstrate that although the two processes are simultaneous they develop almost independently of each other. I will first lay out the various design components in Bengali group theatre, and second, I investigate the processes of particular designers from each of the components discussed in the first part and the various challenges that faced by the designers in Kolkata.

Categories of designers

The people working behind the scene in Bengali theatre can be broadly divided into two categories – designers and technical crew. For much of the process however, these roles overlap. It is only after the opening of the show that the different roles get concretized. The designers typically belong to the educated urban middle-class milieu although there are some exceptions to this trend. The technical crew is almost always drawn from people belonging to the weaker economic sections of the Bengali society. Unlike a lot of the actor-directors and actors who also hold parallel day jobs and spare the evenings for the theatre, most of the technical crew are full-time theatre workers. A significant number of the technicians entered the profession not because they loved theatre but because this was the only means of livelihood for them. Although not very common, but some technicians are known to have left the profession when better employment opportunities came calling.

Scenic designers usually work on their own or as creative duos like Soumik-Piyali. They typically have a particular carpenter that they entrust their designs to or go with the preferred carpenter of the theatre group that they are designing for. Once the design has been executed and the show has opened the set is stored at the group's expense and at their preferred warehouse. Maintenance and subsequent set-up and strike are the group's responsibility. Light designers usually maintain a complete set up of their own, complete with an instrument inventory and technicians. Light designers have their own warehouses and maintain at least four or five teams of technicians to run parallel shows of various plays.

Music direction is the third technical design category in Bengali group theatre. The choice of the music/sound designer depends on how intricate the director wishes the score of the play to be. If she/he is going for minimal designs then either a group member with some musical talent and a working knowledge of the synthesizer or a freelance musician with the same acumen is hired for the job. The group member is obviously not paid whereas the freelancer receives a token honorarium seldom amounting to more than a few thousand rupees. If, however, the director decides to go for a more detailed score then the group hires a music director. In the past, noted Indian classical musicians and Rabindra Sangeet singers have served as music directors for plays.²³⁵ These musicians

²³⁵ Rabindra Sangeet or Tagore songs are songs written and composed by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tagore composed a vast array of songs collected in *Gitabitan* (Garden of Songs). The book is divided into six major parts: Puja (worship), Prem (love), Prakriti (nature), Bichitra (diverse), Swadesh (patriotic) and Anushthanik (celebratory). This distinctive category of Bengali music, popular among Bengali

hire an orchestra depending on the budget of the group. The group also hires a recording studio to record the music, arrange and mix it. Some groups like Nandikar and Kasba Arghya seldom use recorded music and rely almost exclusively on a live orchestra. While the former has a strong in-house team of musicians, the latter either trains members to play certain instruments or hires accomplished musicians for its shows. The groups that use recorded music need to hire the services of a music display artist. These artists or technicians have a basic amplification set up comprising of a CD/DVD player and/or a computer, a mixer, a small speaker and cables. They plug their system into the audio output of the auditorium and run sound cues.

The role of the costume designer is not a very well defined category in Bengali theatre. Most groups have a member or two who are deemed capable of designing the wardrobe for a show and are entrusted with the responsibility. Usually actors source their own costumes from their personal wardrobes. In such cases, they are mostly entrusted with maintaining it themselves and are responsible for it. Changes can be and are often incorporated once shows get underway, but the actors have to seek the prior approval of the director. Some shows like Swapnasandhani's *Macbeth* had an elaborate costume design (by Reshmi Sen), and in these cases, the groups maintain the wardrobe. There is

speaking people all over the world borrows elements from Hindustani classical music, European romantic music and the folk music of Bengal. Generations of musicians and singers in Bengal have trained and specialized in this style of music. Some of its notable exponents are: Kanika Bandyopadhyay, Shantidev Ghosh, Debabrata Biswas and Suchitra Mitra. Swagatalakshmi Dasgupta is an eminent Rabindra Sangeet singer who has also worked on the music for several group theatre plays.

usually no person designated as wardrobe managers and instead the group members in charge of properties take care of the costumes as an extension of their responsibilities.

Groups have stipulated budgets for design elements for a play. And if one of the design areas commands the lion's share for a production, most groups will try to compensate that by going easy on another design area. And in some instances when the group can barely afford to put a show together the overall design aesthetic for a show is significantly compromised. For example, for the Rangroop production *Byaram Biram*, the director Sima Mukhopadhyay asked group member Jayanta Mitra to design the sets and keep the cost to a minimum. Mitra designed a Rs. 2000 (\$35) set, which is barebones even by Bengali theatre standards. Scenic designers and music directors charge a one-time fee for designing the sets and score respectively. The fee depends on how famous the designer is and his demand among the groups. It is not unusual for a scenic designer to be working on multiple projects simultaneously. Some of the more noted scene designers in the city are also trained artists. Designing for the stage is one of their artistic mediums of expression. Music directors who work in Bengali theatre are seldom solely theatre artists. Their reputation is the sole determinant of the price that they command.

Music directors like Debojyoti Mishra also work on films and are established musicians and will now occasionally design for the stage if approached by a friend or if he is hired in exchange of a full compensation package. Working in the Bengali group theatre is therefore not the primary source of bread and butter for these artists. The same holds true for most of the scenic designers in Kolkata. Designing for the stage is one of the many ways that they find a creative outlet. These two categories of designers can apply to and get various government grants, scholarships and fellowships because they

are considered to be “artists.” The same does not hold true for most light designers and the technical crew, including music display artists, lighting personnel and scene shop workers. The general perception is that they are laborers who aid the artistic process of the director and actor. This perception dismisses their status as artists. The technicians depend solely on the payment that they receive from the groups to pay themselves and maintain and update their inventory. Groups often complain that technicians complain too much and haggle over payments or over staff shows so that they can extort more money.

Light designers Badal Das and Chandan Das both commented that there are no external sources of funding and that the designers make do with whatever the groups offer them as remuneration.²³⁶ Babloo Sarkar, another city based light designer comments that apart from the fact that there is no external funding resources for technical work, the designers take a minimal payment for their work in group theatre.²³⁷ Music display artists complain that they are treated as the least important accessory to the production process. According to Jayanta Pal and Swapan Bandyopadhyay, groups now insist on having a digital sound set up for their music display but are not willing to pay the extra amount that is required to purchase and maintain the necessary equipment.²³⁸

²³⁶ Badal Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013; Chandan Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

²³⁷ Babloo Sarkar, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013.

²³⁸ Swapan Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 11, 2013 and Jayanta Pal, in discussion with the author, July 11, 2013.

The design process and challenges

Scenic designer Sanchayan Ghosh is more selective than both Badal and Chandan Das. He wants to understand how much time the group and the director are willing to invest on a particular play and the underlying processes. The content and the context of the play are also important selection criteria for him. He has often found himself in uncharted waters after selecting a play but more often than not he likes working with play texts that can have multiple layers of interpretation. Kolkata directors who have hired him in the past also seems to have realized that Ghosh is not interested in working on a play which has a simple and straightforward narrative structure. In his own words, “I don’t want to simply make backdrops, as a designer I want to participate in work that has multiple layers of interpretation and meaning.”²³⁹ Ghosh agrees to work on a project provided the director allows him this space for dialogue.

Ghosh does not want to read the script himself; he prefers it being read to him. And he comments, “It often happens that while listening to the play eighty percent of my design plan is ready.”²⁴⁰ This preliminary design is certainly not set in stone and Ghosh changes things during subsequent rehearsals. Ghosh’s design choices are based on points of emphasis that he notices in the script; spatial, situational or certain recurrent motifs. His primary thoughts revolve around the kind of space that he is going to design for the play. Is it a singular space or one that changes or is the action of the play spread over multiple locations; after these preliminary enquiries Ghosh does what he calls “a material

²³⁹ Sanchayan Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 9, 2013.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

interpretation of the whole play.”²⁴¹ And based on this material interpretation, he decides on a method of construction for the sets. He offers an example to elucidate this process:

In *Mukhomukhi Boshibar*, the whole action is happening in Darjeeling and it is about two people who have their own life crises. They are both in Darjeeling and they meet by chance. A sense of coldness is seen in their relationship. I interpreted it as a situation, which was both transparent and opaque. And all of this is taking place amidst the hills of Darjeeling. This required me to create a feeling for the audience that everything about this play – the location and the relationship is pervaded with a sense of coldness. The material I chose to depict this was transparent acrylic sheet. The material is transparent and at the same time you can create the icy feeling with the clever use of lights.²⁴²

Having decided on the material, Ghosh chooses a method of construction. He looks at “metaphors of making” for a “constructional similarity that matches the material.”²⁴³

Ghosh offers the example of another production to explain the process of selecting a method of construction, “In *Shanu Roychowdhury* the setting was a kitchen, the private space of a woman. I used stitching, hanging and stretching both as

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid. The play’s title *Mukhomukhi Boshibar* can be roughly translated to “having someone to sit face to face with.” The title is borrowed from Bengali poet Jibananda Das’ celebrated poem “Banalata Sen.” Darjeeling is a popular hill-station in North Bengal.

²⁴³ Ibid.

construction methods and as metaphors.”²⁴⁴ Ghosh explains that he tries to look beyond the ordinary even when the script calls for something as simple as a wall and tries to unearth its significance in the narrative. For example in *Jalchhobi* (Watermark), the wall separated the outside world from the interiors of the house, which in itself was reminiscent of the glorious heritage of the owners, now long gone. Hence various pieces of furniture, some of them resplendent in design but unusable were brought together to form the wall. Ghosh explains that this continuous transformation between material and metaphor takes place in his designs. Once the design has been finalized, Ghosh contacts his carpenter who builds the set.

Sahidul Mistry popularly known as Bablu da in the Bengali theatre circuit is one of the many carpenters who have worked with Ghosh on his sets. Mistry runs a company called Raj Drama Set Suppliers and works with multiple designers from various city based theatre groups. He also maintains a large warehouse that is used for storing the scenery for various groups. Mistry says that only very few designers visit his workshop to supervise the construction of the sets.²⁴⁵ Ghosh is among the people who visited the workshop and supervised the construction. Others simply hand over the drawing and leave it up to Mistry and his team to realize it. Once the pieces are ready and the production has entered the stage rehearsal phase the set pieces are transported to the auditorium and the designer sees the final product. Mistry reports that while some directors and designers approve of the work without any further changes, sometimes the

²⁴⁴ Ibid. The play's title is the name of the protagonist.

²⁴⁵ Sahidul Mistry, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

team needs to add or subtract elements from the finished product.²⁴⁶ He usually sends an extra supply of wood, ply boards, paint and various other accessories with his team to make these changes on site.

Madhav Pal, a scene set-up artist with Raj Drama Set Suppliers says that groups sometimes don't like what they get and want adjustments to be made.²⁴⁷ He feels that with experience he and his team are competent enough that they can attend to these on-site demands without much trouble. Theatre groups technically own the set pieces, and Mistry and his crew are only entrusted with storage, maintenance and transportation on the day of the performance.²⁴⁸ They make advance payments to his company enabling him to buy all the raw material that he needs. He also factors in some labor charge, transportation charge and a little profit in to this amount. Once the show has opened, he enters into a contract with the individual group under the agreements of which he stores the set in his warehouse and provides transport and manpower for performances. In return, he charges the groups for the number of men that he is sending to a show and a transportation charge.

Light designer Babloo Sarkar informs that the groups get in touch with him after the script has been selected. He reports that on several occasions he has been asked to collect the script two or three months before the opening date for a show. Once he has a script in hand, Sarkar reads it over and over till he feels that he has a very fair idea of the narrative, giving him an idea, Sarkar claims, on what the play is going to look like, which

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Madhav Pal, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

²⁴⁸ Sahidul Mistry, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

scenes need some special lighting and which characters demand extra attention. Then he gets together with the director to discuss the color palette that she/he has in mind for the scenic as well as the costume elements in the show. Accordingly he plans the lighting palette as well as the angles that he wants to use. After deciding on this, Sarkar attends a complete run-through. Sarkar says, “Watching rehearsals serves two purposes.”²⁴⁹ It gives him an idea regarding the composition and the blocking and it also allows him to get acquainted with the musical score for the play, which sets the mood for the play and therefore has a decisive role on the lighting scheme. Once he has seen, what he calls, a “dry rehearsal,” Sarkar has a whole scheme in his mind and the play enters the stage rehearsal phase. He and his team hang the lights and the rehearsals proceed “scene-wise” as in the lighting crew set the levels, note the cues and make any necessary changes for a particular scene before the next scene is rehearsed and the same process is repeated. Sarkar and his team take two or three days to compose the lights and then proceed to the run-through rehearsal phase. The number of stage rehearsals that he gets before opening a show depends on the financial strength of the group.

Acclaimed light designer Badal Das has been working on the Bengali group theatre stage since the late 70s. He says, “Whoever calls me to come and work with them and if my time and schedule permits, I don’t say no.”²⁵⁰ His process, like Sarkar’s, starts after a script has been selected and the director calls him to come and sit through rehearsals. This process seems to be Das’ signature style. Sitting through rehearsals helps him familiarize with the narrative. Following this, Das holds meetings with the director to

²⁴⁹ Babloo Sarkar, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013.

²⁵⁰ Badal Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

know more about what her/his thoughts are on the finer aspects of the project. After these initial meetings, Das watches some more rehearsals to see how much of the directorial thought is getting translated into action. Once the group decides on a schedule of light rehearsals, Das starts planning the light scheme for the play including the palette, angles and possible cues. Das and his crew try to add to the directorial vision with their work. Das insists on getting at least a few stage rehearsals because that allows him to stand back and take a stock of the stage picture. Sometimes during this stage of the process, certain things do not seem to work. Either the color scheme of the sets or the costumes gets in the way of the original palette that he had in mind. Das will sometimes suggest changes to the director or will simply change his own plans to suit the needs of the production.

Several groups send Das a sketch of the set, which helps him decide on a light scheme. Das says, “When we start work, we try to match it with the director’s vision and slowly the finer nuances come to the fore.”²⁵¹ Das offers the example of the play *Manaschakkhu*, to explain his point further. In the play, a psychiatric tries to understand what it feels like to be a murderer. Das chose not to unnecessarily sentimentalize one of the climactic scenes in the play. He used suggestive imagery to demonstrate the moral turpitude that the psychiatric was going through. Similarly, towards the end of the play, the realization dawns on the doctor that love has the power to conquer all. The stage is washed in a soothing blue color as the actor playing the psychiatric raises his arms and waves them gradually. Das feels that any light designer who is imaginative and experienced can grasp these little things and represent them on stage. Das insists on the importance of stage rehearsals and remarks, “The more rehearsals we get, the more

²⁵¹ Ibid.

polished the final design. If we don't get enough practice for a new play, we have to keep playing with things during the first few performances before things look perfect."²⁵²

Upcoming lighting designer and Das's son, Chandan Das follows in his father's footsteps and does not refuse any group when they ask him to design a show.²⁵³ He does, however, make an exception and refuses to work with groups that mushroom across the city to take part in competitions and then shut shop. He feels that these groups do not take theatre seriously and get together to "have fun." His process is very similar to that of his father, who initiated him into this profession. Das would prefer to get a certain number of stage rehearsals for each show. He reports, however, that most groups can only afford two to three stage rehearsals before opening a performance.

Music display artists are hired after the sound design of the play is ready and has been recorded. A short paper tech session precedes a run-through rehearsal where the director sits down with the technician and together they go over the various sound cues and make extensive notes about timing, duration, volume etc. At the end of this session, the display artist practices the music cues with the actors. Experienced display artists need no more than two sessions to figure out the cues. The director and the artist might interrupt the rehearsal to fine tune a cue or to make sure that the music is playing for the right amount of time. After these initial sessions, the artist is only called for stage rehearsals and then for performances. Often display artists work as teams. Typically, the most experienced artist is the team leader and he has a couple of people working with him. The team members all try to keep abreast about the various shows that they are

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Chandan Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

working on so that one of them can cover for the other when the need arises especially when one of them has to go on tour with a show.

Designers and technicians of Bengali group theatre face a major problem because the productions move constantly across several performance venues in the city.²⁵⁴ This means that the show has to be set up and struck every evening. Moreover, the dimensions of each space vary significantly and the team has to adjust accordingly. Most designs, however, are made keeping the dimensions of the Academy of Fine Arts in mind. Designers Sanchayan Ghosh and Soumik-Piyali both spoke about this problem during our conversations. Directors and technicians often modify the design at will and choose to add or subtract properties and stage elements based on the amount of space available. For example, the scenic design for Rangroop's production *Jalchhobi* has several drapes hanging from the ceiling. The original design was conceived with Academy of Fine Arts in mind. For smaller spaces, however, especially when the group tours with the show to municipal towns outside Kolkata, several of these drapes are not used based on the discretion of the director. Designer duo Soumik-Piyali complains that they find this unacceptable but are unable to find a way around this.²⁵⁵ Technician Madhav Pal confirmed this directorial intervention in the design.²⁵⁶

Light designers are faced with a similar and sometimes a slightly more complicated problem. Groups are not often able to reserve the actual auditoriums where

²⁵⁴ The issue of having to move across several venues and the problems associated with this nomadic nature of theatre activity is taken up more fully in "Theatre Spaces" chapter.

²⁵⁵ Soumik and Piyali, in discussion with the author, July 11, 2013.

²⁵⁶ Madhav Pal, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

their show will be performed during the stage rehearsal phase of the rehearsal process because the main city auditoriums are extremely busy throughout the year, making it difficult to find an opening for a rehearsal. Groups are also often reluctant to pay the premium price that is required to hire these spaces for a rehearsal since they result in no box office returns. Therefore, the light design teams have to judge their light scheme in a venue different from where they are actually going to execute it. When the performance moves to the actual venue the light designers merely have an idea of what the design looks like rather than a blueprint. Instruments are hung based on the experience of the designer and his crew to replicate the stage rehearsal look. Directors often complain that the light design varies considerably from one performance to the other and the reason that they offer for this shift is a continuous change in the personnel that the designer appoints for a show. I would suggest that a continuous shift across venues, the directorial intervention in scenic design elements between performances and lack of concentrated practice in the performance venues all contribute significantly to the problem.

Designers and their work also suffer from the neglect that they are subjected to in the overall scheme of things in the production process in Bengali group theatre. Light designers in Kolkata use some of the most archaic stage technology in the world. Only one light designer in the city uses a computer-controlled lighting console. Only a decade ago, light designers were still using analog dimmer controls for lights. Most auditoriums were also not equipped with adequate electrical circuits and frequent blow outs during rehearsals and performances were rampant. These conditions have now improved marginally but still a lot needs to be done. Most light designers cannot afford to purchase top of the line equipment from the meager payments they receive. Inventories are thus

not updated for long periods of time. The wear and tear that the instruments suffer are easily seen during the show when, due to dents in the instrument or faulty wiring, light beams leak or are not focused properly.

Most groups do not have their own scene shops and therefore scenic designers do not get access to proper workshops. Set builders have workshops which double up as warehouses but designers complain that it is difficult to do paint jobs in the cramped conditions of these work sheds. Costumes are folded and stored in trunks which are then shelved at any available space attached either to a group's rehearsal room or the director's house, resulting in significant wear and tear of the costume pieces which the groups find difficult to replace. The shows therefore start looking worn out and old by the time a performance is twenty-five to thirty performances old. Directors and actors acknowledge that these are significant problems but there is little, if any, effort made to change things. In fact, a lot of the directors and theatre workers celebrate the fact that they are working and producing new work against such odds.

CHAPTER 5

THEATRE TRAINING

People involved in Bengali group theatre have mixed feelings about theatre training. While some consider formal training to be important and are strong advocates for it, others largely decry it. Informal and apprenticeship training choices abound in the city, while Kolkata lacks formal theatre training facilities except for the drama program at a single suburban university. Ric Knowles observes, “Among the material conditions of production that shape meaning in the theatre, training and tradition function as perhaps the determinants least immediately apparent to audiences.”²⁵⁷ They play a significant role in the “production of theatrical signs.”²⁵⁸ Both training and tradition provide what Knowles refers to as (borrowing from Frederick Jameson) a kind of “political unconscious.” The political unconscious works subliminally to effect the themes, content and aesthetic bent or intent of the theatre.

In this section, I will examine the various training methods and processes for technicians, designers, playwrights, actors and directors in the Bengali group theatre. I will attempt this by referring extensively to my interviews of theatre personnel from Kolkata, an informal survey of the lone university theatre curriculum in Kolkata and other extended theatre training workshop modules for children, young adults and adults.

²⁵⁷ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

Before that however, it is important to examine the role of professionalism in Bengali theatre. The value attached to professionalism, I argue, has a direct bearing on the way theatrical training is perceived by thespians in the city.

Amateurs and professionals work shoulder to shoulder in the Kolkata group theatre and this feature has been a characteristic of this theatre culture throughout the sixty-six years of its history. Designers (except for costume designers), technicians and builders are full-time professionals who earn their livelihood from working in the theatre. Most directors, actors and playwrights, however, are amateurs who are otherwise employed and voluntarily participate in theatre activities without any financial gains. The difference in status between the technicians and the “artists” creates a hierarchy within the theatre fraternity where the position of the amateur is valued more than that of the professional.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an amateur as follows: “One who cultivates anything as a pastime, as distinguished from one who prosecutes it professionally; hence, sometimes used disparagingly, as = dabbler, or superficial student or worker.”²⁵⁹ An amateur is often equated to an “incompetent hobbyist” with lack of “formal” training being the reason for their ineptitude.²⁶⁰ The term has also been historically used as an antonym to “professional.” Nick Salvato quotes Majorie Garber to demonstrate that the terms amateur and professional are not mutually exclusive and in

²⁵⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “amateur, n.,” accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6041?redirectedFrom=amateur>.

²⁶⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “amateur, n.,” accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6041?redirectedFrom=professional>.

fact “‘produce [...] and define each other by mutual affinities and exclusions’ at the same time that they disavow—and acquire power as categories by disavowing—‘the close affinity between them.’”²⁶¹ Salvato is quick to remind us that since the twentieth century the tendency has been to accord a more privileged status to the professional over amateurs. The difference between an amateur and professional can also be seen as a determinant of social capital.²⁶² As Ruth Finnigan observes, “being either “amateur” or “professional” can become a political statement rather than an indicator of economic status.”²⁶³

In the case of Bengali theatre, the amateur “artist” holds the sway over the “professional” technician. The amateur directors and actors claim artistic legitimacy while enjoying relative economic affluence whereas the professionals associated with this theatre remain economically disenfranchised and socially marginal. The amateur “volunteers” take pride in the fact that they are involved with the theatre out of a deep

²⁶¹ Nick Salvato, “Out of Hand: You Tube Amateurs and Professionals,” *The Drama Review* 53 No.3 (2009): 69.

²⁶² Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 249.

²⁶³ Ruth Finnigan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 16.

sense of social and political commitment whereas the technicians are “laborers” who don’t necessarily understand or appreciate “art.” Technicians tend to get defensive when questioned about their role in Bengali theatre. A master electrician who initially refused to talk to me about his job, mentioned, on condition of anonymity, “We are in it for the money; we will do their bidding, collect our daily wage and return home. The groups think we are their servants, and they can order us around. Why should I care then about their ‘art?’”²⁶⁴

The amateur-professional set-up translates into ways in which new people enter the Bengali group theatre. Because of the largely amateur set-up of the groups and the emphasis placed on the voluntary participation of members, theatre enthusiasts find it easier to obtain memberships of groups. Few groups emphasize the need or importance of theatrical training while a member is accepted into the group. A similar model is followed by their professional counterparts; the difference however, being that the new entrant in this case is an apprentice that a master craftsman decides to take on with the understanding that he will learn on-the-job. The pace at which a trainee technician acquires the skills required for a job decides the pay that he can command and his career trajectory.

Things have started shifting in Kolkata, and there is now an increasing demand for “professional” or “freelance” actors. These actors are not attached to a group and are hired for plays in exchange for a fee. Some of these professional actors have a “home

²⁶⁴ This master electrician is one of the most experienced in the city and has at least two decades of experience in working with a lot of different directors and groups. Other technicians that I interviewed were however more forthcoming with their responses.

base;” like stage veterans Debshankar Halder or Senjuti Mukherjee who are both executive members of Nandikar and Aarshi respectively. They are, however, two of the busiest actors in Kolkata and perform regularly for groups other than their own. Young actors just starting their careers begin in some theatre group but moved outside of that structure.

I investigated what sort of preparation Bengali group theatre aficionados and workers underwent before entering into this theatre and the nature of their participation. I spoke to twelve technicians (carpenters, electricians, set movers, board operators), five designers, two playwrights, twenty-four actors and sixteen directors to ascertain what kind of training they had in theatre, what tradition (if any) did this training adhere to, and for how long did the training last. I also asked the same group of people if they held a job outside the theatre, and how and if the job interfered with their theatre work. Lastly, I wanted to know what they thought of the theatre as a possible career opportunity.

The questionnaire that forms the basis of this section not only enquires into theatre training and theatre as work but probes deeper to find the traditional value attached to being a performer and whether that is seen as a worthy profession. I argue that the attitude towards training is decided by the way theatre has been perceived traditionally and the resultant attitude towards performing as a profession.

Technicians

Most Kolkata-based technicians do not have any formal training in their line of work. They mostly belong to the economically marginal/weaker section of the society and started working as a technician primarily because there were no pre-requisites to joining this profession. All the technicians (some of whom also work as designers) that I

spoke with came to the profession via some friend or neighbor who was already involved in the work. Dipak Kumar De, for example, who has been working as a lighting crew for nearly four decades now recounts, “Amal Ray brought me to Nandikar.”²⁶⁵ Gopal Ghosh, a colleague of De’s has an identical story: “Amal Ray took me to Lakkhikantapur one day and I was asked to work in a play as a prompter.”²⁶⁶ Technicians and designers (some of them erstwhile technicians) mentioned how they found the work that they were doing to be “interesting,” “fun” and the environment “nice.”²⁶⁷ This reaction seems to have paved the way for many of them to choose a life in the theatre.

As technicians, however, they had to acquire/learn some technical skills. All of my respondents confirmed that they had never had any formal/institutional training in the theatre. Their training was exclusively practical. Gopal Sarkar, technical staff (light,

²⁶⁵ Dipak Kumar De, in discussion with the author, July 17, 2013.

²⁶⁶ Gopal Ghosh, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013. Amal Ray is mentioned by several stage lighting technicians and designers as their *guru* (mentor). When quizzed about this common influence the technicians and designers mentioned that he worked in Nandikar and was a theatre aficionado. The Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media mentions an Amal Roy who staged a street play in 1967 called *Bharoter Vietnam* (India’s Vietnam) and was one of the co-founders of the first Naxalite theatre journal *Natyaprasanga*. It is, however, difficult to establish if these two people are the same. See John D.H. Downing ed., *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media* (New York: Sage Publications, 2011), 360.

²⁶⁷ Gopal Ghosh, Dipak Kumar De, Pabitra Sarkar, Chandan Das and Badal Das all echoed these thoughts.

sounds, and costume) at Padatik Buildwell Theatre recounts how various people at different stages during his professional career have taught him all that he knows about the theatre, “I learned light design from Swarup Mukherjee. Then there was Chitta Sarkar, Biswakalyan da, Tapas Babu, Sunil Barua, directors like Alok Chowdhury, Tarit Chowdhury and others who have all taught me.”²⁶⁸ Gopal Ghosh picked up the basics of his trade from Monoranjan Ghosh, a prominent light designer. Jayanta Das looked up to his father, the noted designer Badal Das for initial training. Set builder and arranger Madhav Pal, hospitality caretaker Manik Das, and light board operator Sumit Chakraborty all had similar stories.²⁶⁹ Their training was based on practical work-experience but there was a mentor figure that guided them through the steps.

Carpenter Mohammed Rabiul Gaji, had training as a furniture builder and used those skills to make a successful switch to building sets for supplier Sahidul Mistry.²⁷⁰ He mentioned, however, that training as a carpenter does not entail going to school but an apprenticeship with a senior carpenter. Set-supplier Sahidul Mistry now owns his own warehouse and set supply business. He started as an apprentice to Monu Dutt, the founder of the well-known set making, storage and supply facility Indian Institute of Supply. Mistry fondly recalls the years of his training when he was scolded, verbally abused and physically assaulted but learned a lot as well.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Gopal Sarkar, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2013.

²⁶⁹ All the responses mentioned above were recorded in personal interviews with the technicians.

²⁷⁰ Mohammed Rabiul Gaji, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

²⁷¹ Sahidul Mistry, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

Working in the theatre was reported as the sole source of income for all the technicians barring Gopal Ghosh who occasionally works as a local supplier for a cleaning products company. He confirmed, however, that while this second job helps supplement his income he does not let that get in the way of his theatre work and commitment.²⁷² Others like hospitality manager Manik Das of Padatik Buildwell theatre had switched over to working for a theatre after starting out in a different line of work.²⁷³ Gopal Sarkar of Padatik joined the Central Kolkata theatre facility as a security guard before he was appointed as the costume in-charge at Padatik. Mohammed Rabiul Gaji continues to work as a furniture builder but devotes his primary attention to working in the theatre. From the responses of all twelve technicians, almost all of them (ten out of twelve) depended solely on theatre for their livelihood and had no formal training in their chosen line of work.

Designers

Designers belonging to the various design departments all go through very distinct initiation processes. Light designers usually start as an apprentice in a senior light designer's crew. Most scenic designers in Kolkata today have a background in formal art training.²⁷⁴ Music directors often have a similar training although a musical training in

²⁷² Gopal Ghosh, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

²⁷³ Manik Das, in discussion with the author, May 9, 2013.

²⁷⁴ All three scenic designers that I interviewed (Sanchayan Ghosh, Soumik and Piyali) were art college graduates.

India often follows the classical Indian apprentice system.²⁷⁵ Most groups appoint one of the members to serve as the costume designer. From my conversations with directors and group members who have worked as costume designers, they could not identify a basis for a certain member being chosen to perform this duty. Only one costume designer had any formal training in the subject.²⁷⁶ Most groups also have one or several people in charge of props.

These designer positions are all gendered with very few exceptions. There aren't any female light designers in Kolkata. There is one female scenic designer but she works with her male partner as a creative duo. Men dominate the music department but there are some very strong female presences. The costume and prop departments are almost universally managed by the women of the group. Observers should juxtapose the nature and kind of work required for each of these positions with the traditional gender roles in Bengali society. Tradition dictates the boundaries of duties and responsibilities within the group theatre setup.

Light designers like Babloo Sarkar, Badal Das and Chandan Das all started working in the theatre at a young age. While Babloo Sarkar and Chandan Das would accompany their light designer fathers to the auditorium and help and assist with the set up and execution, Badal Das was the first person in his family to take up this

²⁷⁵ The classical apprentice system, or the *guru-shisya parampara* (mentor-disciple tradition), is explained in detail later in the chapter.

²⁷⁶ Dr. Debasish Roy Chowdhury is an Assistant Professor of stage make-up and costume at the Rabindra Bharati University and works for Rang-Roop. He was unavailable for a full-length interview.

profession.²⁷⁷ Badal Das has been working in the theatre for more than four decades. He calls Amal Roy his guru and mentor. Das says, however, that he has learned from every single director that he has worked with over the years (he claims to have worked with more than 150 of them). His initial training happened when Roy sent him to Nandikar, where Rudraprasad Sengupta and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay were his main teachers. Amal Roy was always present as the mentor figure walking the young Das through the practical aspects of light design. He claims to have picked up the theoretical side during the thirteen years he spent at Nandikar, but he is quick to point out that this theoretical knowledge did not come from reading books or spending time in the classroom. He learned from listening to the discussions of the seniors, from seeing the work done by the other designers. Das also credits his inquisitive spirit as a young man and his incessant questions about the use of particular instruments, colors, positions as a vital component of his learning process.

Das's philosophy is simple: every director has a unique insight into theatre that he tries to imbibe into his work and philosophy. Das was initiated into theatre by Amal Roy. They met on the street one afternoon in the early 70s and Roy asked the young Das to accompany him. Later that evening Das found himself in a field in Diamond Harbour operating a follow spot light for a *jatra* performance. Above everything else, Das remembered that he had a lot of fun during this show, and this got him thinking, "This work is worth doing."²⁷⁸ Das joined Nandikar as an assistant to the various designers

²⁷⁷ Babloo Sarkar, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013; Badal Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013; Chandan Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

²⁷⁸ Badal Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

there. In his words, “I realized however, that I was doing a lot. And then I decided that I was going to be a light designer.”²⁷⁹ He started building a lighting inventory with his savings and got his break as an independent designer when Rangkarmee (led by Usha Ganguli) asked him to design a show.

Light designer Babloo Sarkar fell in love with plays when he started going to the theatre with his light designer father Chitto Sarkar. He says, “This love and passion for plays and light design influenced me to pick up the tricks of the trade from my father and eventually I started working on my own.”²⁸⁰ Sarkar says initially he did not think about design as a profession but later it became a part of his life. Sarkar confirms that he has never had any formal training. He is, in fact, dismissive of formal training and feels that classroom based or institutional theatre training is not particularly useful. Instead, he feels it depends on the individual’s capacity to “imbibe all the information, his involvement with the process and the passion for the work.”²⁸¹ He also feels that simply repeating the process over and over again teaches a lot.

He gives examples from early in his career when one of his directors (Jayati Basu) taught him the significance of the “light design following the pace of the play.”²⁸² In other words, the lighting should complement the action on stage but not supersede it. Sarkar considers this an important lesson early in his career. According to Sarkar small tips and tricks like the above example has taught him a lot (and he considers this on the

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Babloo Sarkar, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

job training superior to conventional training) along with the opportunity that he got to work with many important designers.

Chandan Das has been working in some capacity or the other in his father Badal Das's unit since his early childhood.²⁸³ As a young boy, Das was entrusted with cutting and designing gobos. Badal Das supervised the work but he was largely left to his own. He got interested to design plays after watching Sanstab's *Mushtijog* (1988) which was designed by his father Badal Das. To date, Das has independently designed about a dozen plays, including such big banner projects as Kasba Arghya's *Urubhangam* (2013). He continues to assist his father. Das has not had any formal training in light design. He knew he wanted to join the profession "right from the moment I can remember and especially because I thought this job was an honorable one."²⁸⁴ Das dropped out of high school, realizing "education was not my forte."²⁸⁵ He claims to have learned most of his craft from his father. Senior designers like Dipak Mukhopadhyay also seem to have had a significant influence on the young Das and most importantly instilled the confidence to work independently as a designer.

Most light designers in Kolkata maintain instrument inventories and use their own equipment at shows. Kolkata auditoriums have very poor and minimal inventories and hanging additional instruments becomes a necessity. The lighting designer is often referred to as the "light man" in Kolkata, which merely means one who has or supplies lights. His aesthetic contribution, therefore, seems to be often overlooked behind his role

²⁸³ Chandan Das, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

as a tradesman/provider. All of the above designers are full-time theatre professionals and have never held any other jobs in their lives.

Scenic designer Sanchayan Ghosh is an associate professor of art at Visva-Bharati University, Bolpur-Shantiniketan, West Bengal, besides being one of the most sought after scenic designers in Kolkata. Unlike his lighting design counterparts, Ghosh has a formal training in art from Visva-Bharati University. Ghosh attended a series of workshops in 1995-96 with Badal Sircar, the leading figure of the avant-garde theatre movement in Kolkata at Shantiniketan.²⁸⁶ As a result of participating in these workshops, he started feeling the need and relevance for an interactive space for his art. For his master's dissertation, Ghosh began researching the use of visual language in various performative spaces. One of the proscenium plays that he watched as a part of this research was the Gautam Haldar solo performance of *Mehgnadbadh Kabya*. The parallels between the various sculptural postures used in the choreography of the play served as a food for thought, and he interviewed Gautam Haldar about this aspect of the play. During the interview, Haldar suggested that Ghosh should explore the process for himself and invited him to get involved with *Nagar Kirtan*, the next production in the works. Ghosh says, "I got involved with the proscenium stage simply for my research. There was however, a shift in my artistic aesthetic since then and I kept getting drawn into theatre and the reason that I am still involved with it."²⁸⁷

Ghosh charges a professional fee for his work from the groups that hire him, but he identifies as a university professor first and a scenic designer afterwards. He

²⁸⁶ Sanchayan Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 9, 2013.

²⁸⁷ Sanchayan Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 9, 2013.

remembers that when he started designing for Bengali theatre the fee that was offered to him as a scenic designer was too little and insignificant, but things have changed now and the idea of professionalism is beginning to take root.²⁸⁸ He points out that several young city-based designers are sustaining themselves on the basis of their design work alone. Ghosh made a conscious decision to accept the teaching position at Visva-Bharati even though he was at the height of his creative success in Kolkata.²⁸⁹ Ghosh felt that his scene design work for Bengali theatre was not enhancing his creative practice: “I didn’t want to see myself only as a theatre designer. Theatre is an extension of my practice and I am not just a theatre designer.”²⁹⁰ On asked whether this interferes with this theatre work, Ghosh comments that he felt that academics would be the perfect work environment for him since he can choose who to work with and what to work on while at the same time working on his own creative practice. The decision to focus on his own creative practice prompted him to shift back to Bolpur-Shantiniketan and join Visva-Bharati as a teacher. There is, therefore, no question of his job getting in the way of his theatre.

Designer duo Soumik and Piyali trained as artists before taking up scenic design for theatre as an extension of their creative practice much in the same way that Ghosh

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ The Bengali poet and Asia’s first Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) established Visva-Bharati University in 1921. An Act of Parliament in 1951 recognized visva-Bharati as a central university and an institution of national importance. See “About Visva-Bharati,” Visva-Bharati, accessed on May 7, 2013, http://www.visvabharati.ac.in/Visva_Bharati.html.

²⁹⁰ Sanchayan Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 9, 2013.

did. The duo said that they charge professional fees for their work but often have to make artistic and aesthetic compromises when groups are not forthcoming about finances or cut the scenic design budget without prior notice. Soumik and Piyali are both practicing artists, with art galleries around the world holding exhibitions of their paintings. They also professionally design artwork for various government and private organizations.

Playwrights

Directors of Bengali group theatre companies often serve as the translator/adaptor or writer of the plays that the groups produce. Bibhas Chakraborty, Soumitro Basu, Sima Mukhopadhyay, Suman Mukhopadhyay, Debesh Chattopadhyay, Chandan Sen, Abanti Chakraborty and Arpita Ghosh whose interviews largely inform the section of this chapter on the training of directors have all written original plays, adapted for the stage or translated Western plays. The director doubling up as the resident playwright of the group has been a tradition since the early days of Bengali group theatre. All major landmarks of Bengali group theatre were either adaptations by the director or an original work by him/her with a few notable exceptions. I spoke to two individuals who serve exclusively as playwrights: Ujjwal Chattopadhyay and Sumitro Bandyopadhyay.

Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, a professor of Economics at Maulana Azad College, Kolkata, has been writing for the stage for more than two and a half decades. He started dabbling in theatre during his university days in 1982.²⁹¹ As is common in many colleges and universities across the country (and especially in Bengal), a group of students got together and put up a play. He acted in these plays, and if the group needed a new work, he would volunteer to write it. Initially, Chattopadhyay directed most of his effort into

²⁹¹ Ujjwal Chattopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

writing poetry but felt that since he had the flair he could experiment in a different medium, especially for a small college-level performance.

He gave up writing poetry altogether and started concentrating on plays exclusively around 1988/89. Chattopadhyay recalls that this shift was not a planned move; he did not expect these plays to be read or staged. He felt the urge to write something, and whenever he sat down, he could only think in terms of plays. Dialogues and dramatic episodes came naturally to him. Chattopadhyay remembers, “I always had a soft corner for plays, and then my friends started praising what I was writing – together it kind of compelled me to hone my playwriting skills further.”²⁹² Chattopadhyay says, “I have had training. It was not a formal or a conventional training, but I was definitely trained.”²⁹³

Armed with one of the scripts that he had written in his early dramatic writing frenzy, Chattopadhyay approached veteran director Shyamal Ghosh whose group Nakkhatra is credited with producing some of the early absurdist work by Mohit Chattopadhyay. Ghosh asked Ujjwal Chattopadhyay to read his play *Munna* out to him and decided to produce it. He also pointed out that while Chattopadhyay certainly had a great narrative, his style was completely flawed. The senior director sat down with him and meticulously supervised the revision of the play, what Chattopadhyay considers his first significant learning moment in playwriting. Director Asit Mukhopadhyay’s group Chupkatha produced Chattopadhyay’s next major work, *Akorik*. He also introduced the

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

young writer to Mohit Chattopadhyay, who was one of the first Bengali playwrights to break the naturalist/realist mode of writing and move to a more absurdist style.

Meeting Mohit Chattopadhyay was one of the highlights of Chattopadhyay's career. Both Chattopadhyays took an immediate liking to each other and developed an affectionate relationship over the years. Ujjwal Chattopadhyay became a devout student of Mohit's, and in his own words, "I would write half a play and take it to him. We would read it, and then he would start talking about it and giving me ideas that took the play to a completely different and brilliant direction."²⁹⁴ Chattopadhyay believes that Mohit's house, where he spent hours discussing plays, was his school, not a conventional institution but nothing less than that. Mohit Chattopadhyay also promoted the young playwright in various places and recommended him to write plays for various city-based groups. Chattopadhyay feels that his mentor has given him the entirety of the technical skills that he possessed. Chattopadhyay reminisces, "Whenever I got stuck at some point with a play, I would ask Mohit da for help, and he prescribed what I like to call the Mohit-style medicine and that worked every time like magic."²⁹⁵

Along with Shyamal Ghosh, who gave him his first lessons in playwriting, and Mohit Chattopadhyay, who influenced the entirety of his art, Chattopadhyay also credits three other playwrights whose works had a tremendous influence on him. These are the Bengali playwright-actor-directors Manoj Mitra and Utpal Dutt and the Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov. Chattopadhyay feels reading the works of these playwrights and then

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

discussing them with Mohit Chattopadhyay were some of the best lessons that he has received.

I enquired whether he considered playwriting to be his profession or if he would want it to be his profession. Chattopadhyay candidly remarked: “Groups are reluctant to pay for the script.”²⁹⁶ During the early phase of his career, Asit Mukhopadhyay paid him a royalty of Rs. 25 (40¢) for each performance and Bohurupee, which also produced one of his plays, continues to pay him Rs. 40 (60¢) for each performance. In his own words, “No one pays you for writing plays. And I knew this when I started getting involved with the theatre.”²⁹⁷ He reminds, however, that things have changed now and most groups receive some government grant or the other. And this has prompted him to ask for money from the groups when he writes something for them but as he says, “The groups won’t give you anything if they can avoid it.”²⁹⁸ Chattopadhyay feels that he is temperamentally not suited for a life completely devoted to the theatre. His job as a teacher of economics is as important to him as his theatre. He also feels that since his job is done after writing the play he can afford to have a parallel career and yet successfully balance both.

Sumitro Bandyopadhyay has been a member of the Ashok Mukhopadhyay led Theatre Workshop since 1998.²⁹⁹ More recently, he along with some friends founded a group called Sanjog Sutra. Theatre Workshop has produced plays written by this young playwright and Sanjog Sutra produced two of his plays in October 2012 and March 2013.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Sumitro Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 14, 2013.

Apart from these two regular platforms for his work several city-based groups have also produced Bandyopadhyay's plays.

Bandyopadhyay feels that training oneself is the best form of education. Taking that approach Bandyopadhyay stresses that watching the work of his seniors in Bengali group theatre, learning and watching plays from around the world (visiting shows as well as via the internet) and reading extensively has been the most important part of his training. But apart from these, he has also undergone a formal training. He is an alumnus of the lone drama program in the city of Kolkata – at Rabindra Bharati University from where he got his bachelor's degree. His academic knowledge of theatre was further honed during his master's degree program in mass communications. Bandyopadhyay participated in a ten-day play writing workshop organized by the Paschim Banga Natya Akademi in 2004 under the stewardship of noted Bengali actor-director-playwright Manoj Mitra.³⁰⁰ This workshop was held in a location away from the city and allowed budding playwrights the chance to rub shoulders with Mitra and other reputed playwrights of Kolkata. This workshop influenced Bandyopadhyay immensely. He opines, "The writing would have happened anyway but this camp steered me towards the right course."³⁰¹ Bandyopadhyay signed off by reiterating that he taught himself the most and that his training has never stopped. He continues to read and learn from various sources besides drawing inspiration from various moments in his life. Bandyopadhyay works full-time in the theatre but supplements the meager income from the theatre by doing freelance journalist work.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

Actors

Bengali group theatre actors can be classified into two broad categories: actors who belong to a particular group and work exclusively with that group and freelancers, actors who perform across various mediums and for different groups. The former category was and still is the predominant one. These actors are mostly amateurs and are typically not paid for their work. The latter category is a more recent phenomenon. Most freelance actors started their careers with some group or the other before they left the groups and started working with multiple directors across various groups. These actors are “professionals” and are paid for their work. Interestingly enough, the difference in status between the actors seems to have no correlation to the kind of training that they might have received prior to joining the theatre. Formally trained actors are found in each category outlined above as well as actors who were trained by the directors of the groups where they started their careers.

I interviewed seventeen actors. Of the seventeen, eleven identified as freelancers. Ten out of the eleven freelancers confirmed that they were full-time performers. Five actors belonged to a particular group and gave first priority to the work of that group. Only six actors claimed to have had any formal education/training in theatre, while the training process for the rest can be described as “organic.”

I borrow the term organic from one of my correspondents.³⁰² The organic training structure includes both formal training processes like workshops, seminars, regular practice sessions to perfect an actor’s craft as well as such informal training components like observing seniors, learning from watching, copying and repeating. Most importantly,

³⁰² Sagnik Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

the organic training happens parallel to or in lieu of the formal education offered at degree-granting institutions. The organic training does not lead to an obvious result (like a degree or a certificate) but the purpose of it is to make one “capable with the wherewithal of the business of acting.”³⁰³ For example, I never went to school for theatre in Kolkata, but I have been working in a group (Rang-Roop) since high school. We would have regular physical theatre sessions ahead of rehearsals. Between two productions, we had vocal training sessions, theatre history lessons, dance workshops and make-up sessions.

Jayanta Mitra is an actor who works for the group Rang-Roop. Mitra says that he received no formal training in theatre, although he started performing informally towards the end of his high school.³⁰⁴ In the early 90s, he joined the National Institute of Film and Fine Arts, Kolkata (NIFFA), which had some of the finest actors of stage and film on the faculty at the time. Mitra completed the first half of the two-year course which focused on acting on stage, and this time was his only brush with formal training. Mitra feels that although training is important, an actor evolves through her/his own experience. According to him, watching, discussing and performing plays are all a part of a training process. Mitra opines, “I made mistakes, the seniors in the group pointed these out and then I sat down and discussed and dissected these.”³⁰⁵ He also credits his current director Sima Mukhopadhyay for helping him with integrating and interpreting characters better.

³⁰³ Sudipto Chatterjee, in discussion with the author, June 20, 2013.

³⁰⁴ Jayanta Mitra, in discussion with the author, July 3, 2013.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

Nabanita Basu Mazumdar (Swapnasandhani) and Pritha Banerjee (Rang-Roop) are two actors who have not had any formal/institutional theatre training and work exclusively with one group. Basu Mazumdar has been performing since 2008. She considers Kaushik Sen (director, Swapnasandhani) to be a very good teacher and claims to have learned a lot from seeing him perform on stage.³⁰⁶ The group organizes various workshops by eminent theatre practitioners in Kolkata. The workshops, Basu Mazumdar feels have also contributed towards her training. Pritha Banerjee joined Rang-Roop in 2009. She does not have any formal training in theatre but believes that life is her greatest teacher and that theatre training cannot and should not be a finite time-bound process.³⁰⁷

Freelancers Gopa Nandi, Sagnik Mukherjee, Satish Prakash Shaw, Senjuti Mukherjee and Joyraj Bhattacharjee, have one other thing in common besides the fact that none of these actors received any formal training either: they all worked for a particular group before turning freelancers. Apart from Joyraj Bhattacharjee all the other actors credited their original mentors as having a significant impact on the development of their craft.

Gopa Nandi joined Nakkhatra after finishing high school. After the initial grooming here under Shyamal Ghosh, she joined Rang-Roop in the late nineties and spent more than a decade working under Sima Mukhopadhyay's supervision.³⁰⁸ Nandi has no formal training in theatre and has developed her craft while performing with

³⁰⁶ Nabanita Basu Mazumdar, in discussion with the author, July 1, 2013.

³⁰⁷ Pritha Banerjee, in discussion with the author, March 7, 2013.

³⁰⁸ Gopa Nandi, in discussion with the author, May 10, 2013.

various directors. She credits Sima Mukhopadhyay with training her to project her voice, control her delivery etc.

Sagnik Mukherjee started his career at Rangakarmee under Usha Ganguli's mentorship. Ganguli who knew Mukherjee from earlier offered him a role that she had written while keeping him in mind.³⁰⁹ After Mukherjee accepted the offer, Ganguli offered to train him, since he had no experience of being on stage. He remembers, "Usha Di took me into her house and mentored me. She would wake me up in the middle of the night to practice lines, speech patterns and body language."³¹⁰ Mukherjee says that he considers this initial grooming under Ganguli as his only theatre training apart from a couple of workshops that he attended as a member of Rangakarmee. Mukherjee did not give particulars of either workshop but acknowledged the fact that both of them had a significant impact on his craft and helped him grow as an actor. The first of these was a fifteen-day mime workshop under Partha Roychowdhury, while the second was with the Bangladeshi director Jamil Ahmed.³¹¹

Satish Prakash Shaw started acting with the local branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association in his neighborhood. He considers himself lucky that from this small suburban setup he was able to make the transition to work at a reputable group like

³⁰⁹ Sagnik Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Partha Roychowdhury is a well-known mime performer and teacher based in Kolkata, while Syed Jamil Ahmed is an eminent Bangladeshi director, designer and scholar. Ahmed is also the founding chair of the Department of Theatre and Music, Dhaka University.

Chetana and under the stewardship of Suman Mukhopadhyay.³¹² He considers Mukhopadhyay to be a great director and extremely knowledgeable about theatre in general. *Teesta Paarer Brittanto* (Story of the banks of river Teesta premiered in June 2000), the play he was cast in is considered one of the classics of the contemporary Bengali stage. Shaw describes, “*Teesta Paar* was not merely a drama; it was a process. The year-long process included several workshops, including Sudipto Kundu’s on dance, Anjan Deb’s on mime etc.”³¹³ He also found Mukhopadhyay’s style of directing to be very helpful, “Mukhopadhyay is a director in the true sense of the term – he does not demonstrate the acting, but he observes what I am doing, corrects and helps me navigate through things.”³¹⁴ Shaw signed off by saying that while he did not have a lot of training prior to joining the group theatre, working with Mukhopadhyay and attending a vast range of workshops while at Chetana has served him well.

Joyraj Bhattacharjee and Sudipto Chatterjee, both actors started under mentors at city-based groups but were exposed to a whole range of training methodologies and teachers during their careers, explain the organic nature behind actor training in Kolkata group theatre. Joyraj Bhattacharjee does not believe in institutions because of his political beliefs and convictions. He wants to call himself an “integrated art practitioner.”³¹⁵ A

³¹² Satish Prakash Shaw, in discussion with the author, July 9, 2013.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Bhattacharjee wants to emphasize that his theatrical training draws as much from formal training routines as it does from life experiences, hence the allusion to reading

practitioner of this kind, according to Bhattacharjee “will not be a part of such a “formal” training methodology.”³¹⁶ He feels his training moves beyond the formal boundaries of any institution and academy and is influenced by a diverse range of experiences including “religiously reading Bengali comic books, learning Bharat Natyam and Kathak at dance school as well as the experience of masturbation.”³¹⁷ At the same time, he has taken part in hundreds of workshops. Bhattacharjee explains he took a conscious decision of not attending any institution or academy, but at the same time, he wanted to compete with and be better than the actors who were in these institutions. Consequently, “I grabbed whatever was at hand. Be it classical dance, mime, contemporary dance, jazz dancing, playing percussion etc. and not under any supervision. I taught myself all this and from whatever source was available most easily.”³¹⁸ Bhattacharjee is one of the few actors in Kolkata with a sound understanding of stage lighting and scenic design, and he claims that his zeal to get better than his contemporaries prompted him to learn all of these things. Bhattacharjee feels that this process has been going on constantly for nearly two decades now ever since he decided to devote his full energy to theatre.

Sudipto Chatterjee is a Senior Lecturer of Drama at Loughborough University, UK. Chatterjee had a wide variety of performance experience in Kolkata before heading

comic books and masturbation. Joyraj Bhattacharjee, in discussion with the author, June 13, 2013.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

to New York University from where he received his doctorate in performance studies.³¹⁹

Chatterjee started performing at the early age of three under his mother's direction for a children's theatre troupe that she ran in Kolkata. Chatterjee started performing as a child artiste on All India Radio before he was ten. Here he got the chance to rub shoulders with the stalwarts of the contemporary Bengali stage. Although he didn't realize it back then, he now considers this exposure and experience to have been theatre school for him. Preparing for these radio plays helped Chatterjee learn "how to speak Bangla, how to modulate and under the late Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay's direction, how to pronounce Bangla words correctly."³²⁰

Chatterjee started working for Doordarshan (the state-run television network) when he was slightly older. The exposure marked another period of training for Chatterjee as he got to work with people like actor Chinmoy Roy and theatre director Bibhas Chakraborty. At Doordarshan, Chatterjee had his initial exposure to script writing, which later translated into an interest in writing plays and translation.³²¹ Supplementing these hands-on trainings was the important experience of watching plays and seniors like the late Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay perform from very close quarters, often from the wings. Bandyopadhyay also offered the young Chatterjee an opportunity to work in the *jatra* when one of the actors was taken ill during a tour. This experience proved to be an important one as well. Chatterjee recounts:

³¹⁹ Sudipto Chatterjee, in discussion with the author, June 20, 2013.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

Occasionally there would be no amplification available at the venue but twenty thousand people in the audience. Under these circumstances you had to learn diaphragm breathing in order to project your voice. It was like someone holding a gun to your head and demanding that you learn the craft. It was under such circumstances that I had my training.³²²

Chatterjee also worked with Rama Prasad Banik and his group Chenamukh after the untimely demise of Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay in 1983. Banik's approach was very much in the Bohurupee style that Shombhu Mitra had inaugurated: a mixture of Stanislavskian realism and Brechtian alienation. Chatterjee says, "These names hardly mean anything, but if you need a moniker, then they define a broad base at least."³²³

City-based groups like Nandikar and Pancham Vaidic, which I classified earlier as large institutions, hold more formal annual training camps. Nandikar has year-round training camps for children below the age of eighteen. These workshops have flexible participation policies, and participants are charged a flat monthly fee. Young adults and adults between the ages eighteen and thirty are admitted to a more formal one-year training program, which meets twice a week and offers a comprehensive theatre training. The trainees are charged a Rs. 6000 (\$100) fee for this course. Rudraprasad Sengupta, the Director-President of Nandikar explains the reasons behind starting the adult training program:

Way back in early 80's, Nandikar started its training programmes [sic] for adult theatre aspirants. One major reason for this was to induct young

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

people into theatre fold (...). These intensive training programmes [sic], on one hand, created good many young theatre enthusiasts all around; on the other, the theatre community started to feel need for theatre training per se. Government programmes (sic) for theatre training started, some groups and individual followed suit. (...)

Of late, the situation has changed. Not all, intent on training, are interested in theatre per se. Many of them want training to qualify for TV series or film debuts or modelling (sic) or working as MCs or DJs and so on.³²⁴

Participation in the yearlong workshop is the only way that new aspirants can hope to join Nandikar. Sengupta explains, “Our stated position is that Nandikar can not admit anyone directly; one shall be inducted only when through this training programme [sic] we come to understand each other and agree to do theatre consciously and little knowledgably.”³²⁵

Pancham Vaidic’s training program is called Panchamveda Charyashram. The workshop, the group’s website explains functions like an institute, set up in 1984:

[It is] a centre to impart training in all aspects of theatre (...). Students here learn the language of the body, attempt at experiments with voice and speech, and try to imbibe the idioms of theatre. There are classes on the origin and history of drama as well as elementary science also (sic). We are regularly receiving interested students and there are regular training

³²⁴ “Nandikar and Training (Part 2 of 2),” last modified August 31, 2012, <http://nandikar.net/2012/08/nandikar-and-training---part-2-of-2/>.

³²⁵ Ibid.

program conducted round the year to train aspiring future theatre artistes.

This training is without any cost to the students. The workshops are lead by eminent personalities from theatre world, spearheaded by Smt Saoli Mitra.³²⁶

Nandipat organizes a similar annual theatre-training workshop for new acting aspirants.³²⁷ Rabindra Bharati University (henceforth RBU) in Kolkata is the only university in the city with a department of Drama, and it offers academic programs from the undergraduate level to a doctoral degree.³²⁸

Five of the actors that I interviewed did at least an undergraduate degree from RBU, and four of them are freelance actors. Debesh Roychowdhury who has been with the theatre group Bohurupee since 1984, is an alumnus of the RBU program, and she recollects that the program had a large theoretical component covering every aspect of theatre including sets, lights, costumes and make-up.³²⁹ The program also required the students to read a large number of plays. Roychowdhury recalls, “I was in the acting department and therefore had a significant practical component in my coursework, but

³²⁶ “Our Heritage – A Legacy,” Pancham Vaidic, accessed January 20, 2013, <http://www.panchamvaidic.org/history.html>.

³²⁷ Detailed information regarding this training program is not available online. Senior member Bimal Chakraborty commented during an informal discussion that the training covers all aspects of theatre with concentration on acting.

³²⁸ A detailed description of the undergraduate and master’s programs offered by this university is provided in the appendix to this chapter.

³²⁹ Debesh Roychowdhury, in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.

the theory part was vast.”³³⁰ He believes that having to prepare for this theory paper made sure that he read a lot of material on theatre, something which he says he probably wouldn’t have done otherwise. Roychowdhury also remembers training in a wide variety of performance styles including Bengali folk theatre, *jatra* and Puranic tales. Freelancer Ankita Majhi mentioned in passing that she was a student of the RBU drama department. She does not delve too deep into the specifics of the training at RBU but considered it to be a different kind of schooling besides the training received from working with various directors.³³¹

Mishka Halim, another popular freelance actor in Kolkata is a graduate of the RBU drama department. She was working on her M.Phil. thesis from RBU at the time of this interview. Halim comments that the students were taught quite a few things at RBU.³³² These included basic training in make-up, mime and stagecraft besides acting and its various schools and technicalities. She refers to the training at RBU as her training in theatre fundamentals, supplemented by attending workshops with local directors at the Paschim Banga Natya Akademi and with foreign directors under the aegis of the Kolkata branches of the British Council and the USEFI.

Actor Turna Das started her stage career when she was in the fourth grade under the tutelage of Niranjana Goswami in a month-long summer theatre workshop. Das didn’t consider theatre seriously until after graduating high school, however.³³³ She joined the

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ankita Majhi, in discussion with the author, July 17, 2013.

³³² Mishka Halim, in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

³³³ Turna Das, in discussion with the author, July 5, 2013.

RBU drama department while working with noted city-based acting coach and director, Sohag Sen. Das went on to get a Master's degree from RBU and is currently working on a doctorate at the Asiatic Society, where her focus is on Bengali theatre. Like Majhi and Halim before her, Das does not go into any depth to describe the program at RBU. As a freelancer, Das has worked with several important directors of Kolkata. She feels that each of these directors represents a different style and prepare their actors accordingly. In her own words, "On the one hand, I have Sohag di and her style of intense acting and method acting training, and on the other, there's Usha Ganguli and her preference for a more physical performance style."³³⁴ According to Das, these multiple styles have all informed her practice. She also feels that "the integration of all these styles in my practice creates a different style, perhaps even a new style."³³⁵ Das does not claim her style to be a distinct or a unique style because she feels that she is too young to make such a claim.

Directors

Directors, like actors, rarely train formally in Kolkata. Of the thirteen directors I spoke to, four had undergone some form of formal training prior to working in the theatre. Of these, two attended RBU and completed master's degrees from there. The other two were trained in the United States. The majority of the directors, however, were not formally trained in the theatre but spoke at length about the various influences and experiences, including working with other directors that shaped them as artists. The directors, barring a few exceptions, started their careers as actors. All of them also had experience with writing plays and adapting from other literary genres for the stage. Seven

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

of these directors reported that they were full-time theatre workers and held no other job, while six of the directors did not depend on the theatre for their livelihood.

Abanti Chakraborty, Arna Mukherjee, Sima Mukhopadhyay and Suman Mukhopadhyay are the four directors who have had any formal training in theatre. All four of these directors are full-time theatre workers. While Sima Mukhopadhyay and Arna Mukherjee are paid honorariums from their respective groups, Rang-Roop and Natadha, Abanti Chakraborty and Suman Mukhopadhyay are often hired outside their own group to direct professionally for a fee. Sima Mukhopadhyay and Arna Mukherjee are RBU alumni. The former was a student of the department in the 80s, whereas the latter is a recent graduate.

Sima Mukhopadhyay recalls that there are two parts to her training.³³⁶ The first of these happened at RBU, which she refers to as a “golden period.” The program had the who’s who of Bengali group theatre as faculty: Kumar Roy (Bohurupee), Tarun Roy, Rudraprasad Sengupta (Nandikar), Manoj Mitra (Sundaram), Jogesh Dutta (Jogesh Mime Academy) among others.³³⁷ Mukhopadhyay also feels that her cohort at RBU was a strong one, and together they did a lot of good work during their student days. She especially remembers the week-long residential workshop between Christmas and New Year. The students got the chance for intensive training with faculty members as well as guest instructors like Badal Sircar and Bob Das. She claims the second part of her training happened because she worked with a lot of different directors as an actor. Mukhopadhyay says, “While working with these different directors, I observed their way

³³⁶ Sima Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 6, 2013.

³³⁷ Ibid.

of working and I learned a lot from doing that. In that respect I am sort of a self-made director.”³³⁸ She explains that she does not believe that acting and directing can be taught, but they are possible to learn. She credits directors like Utpal Dutt, Bibhas Chakraborty, Kumar Roy and Arun Mukherjee for being her mentors as far as directing is concerned.

Arna Mukherjee begins narrating his experience at RBU with the disclaimer that he is aware of the “extant controversy” about the program in the Bengali group theatre fraternity: “Apparently nothing is taught there, or no real training happens in the department and the teachers are irresponsible etc.”³³⁹ He continues that he has had his share of disappointments in the department. At the same time, he feels that the university affords a student the opportunity to remain immersed in the theatre throughout the day, which is important. Mukherjee says that, during his time at the department, he took dance and martial arts lessons and sat in on dance and music classes.³⁴⁰ He feels that these external resources perhaps taught him more than classes at the drama department, but the overall opportunity was available to him because he went to RBU. Besides these practical knowledge, Mukherjee also credits his five years at RBU for inaugurating the whole expanse of what constitutes theatre: its history, philosophy and its special place among the creative arts.

Directors Abanti Chakraborty and Suman Mukherjee were trained in the United States. Chakraborti had her basic training with Ellen Stewart at the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York in 2006. She feels that the La Mama stint was

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Arna Mukherjee, in discussion with the author, July 6, 2013.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

not really training but more of a residency. Chakraborty attended the Yale School of Drama as a theatre direction fellow in 2010 and trained with director Liz Diamond and designer Ming Cho Lee. According to Chakraborty, the training at Yale “focused on the mainstream,” since most students of the school eventually work for the mainstream entertainment industry.³⁴¹

Director Suman Mukhopadhyay feels that his training was a combination of both formal and informal elements. He was never a full-time theatre student. Mukherjee’s father, Arun Mukhopadhyay, was one of the most celebrated directors from Kolkata in the 70s when he produced works like *Jagannath* and *Marich Samvad* with his group Chetana. The young Mukherjee’s “training” started during his early childhood when he “scoured every inch of the theatre space.”³⁴² Mukherjee started acting under his father’s direction at Chetana when he was a teenager. Acting in Chetana provided him with a wide range of experiences – traveling to interior locations for performances, the shift in audience between these venues and their expectations and reactions. Mukherjee feels that he lived through a very important moment in the history of post-independent India.³⁴³ The years between 1986 and 1992 were very significant and witnessed a series of rapid changes – the change in audience demographic, the economic reforms in India, and the failure of the left government in West Bengal. Mukherjee witnessed these events closely, and they influenced the young thespian. It was during this time that Mukherjee left the

³⁴¹ Abanti Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, May 17, 2013.

³⁴² Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 26, 2013.

³⁴³ Ibid.

country in 1991 to join the La Mama Trinity Performing Arts Program. Mukherjee hails the program as being very good:

I had some fantastic teachers, and I saw some fantastic performances, including Pina Bausch and Anne Bogart among others. Our program was crafted very well. We watched both Broadway and off-Broadway performances, visits to the MoMA, The Met, performances at the Central Park and a tour to see all the graffiti near downtown.³⁴⁴

Mukherjee also attended workshops and short-term courses in Germany, Italy and other places where he met some “good people and had some productive exchanges.”³⁴⁵ He feels that the formal institutional training and his hands-on informal training together created his aesthetic sense.

Four full-time theatre directors said that they hadn’t had any formal theatre education: Gautam Haldar, Manish Mitra, Chandan Sen and Debesh Chattopadhyay. Chandan Sen has been working with Natya Anan since 1997. Sen trained as an actor before taking the reins of this theatre group. Sen said that there are two traditional schools of thought when it comes to actor training in Kolkata – the “Mittir school” (inspired and based on the training methods of Sombhu Mitra) and the “Utpal Dutt school” (inspired and based on the training methods of Utpal Dutt).³⁴⁶ Rama Prasad Banik, who trained under Mitra for twenty-one years, coached Sen. He also has had the opportunity to be

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Chandan Sen, in discussion with the author, June 11, 2013.

taught by Utpal Dutt himself at his People's Little Theatre.³⁴⁷ Apart from these informal trainings, Sen considers himself fortunate to have had some important lessons during his trips abroad. Sen came to the United States to direct a production with the New Jersey based Epic Actor's Workshop. During his visit Sen would go sit in on classes at the New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.³⁴⁸ He sat in on classes devoted to various actor training methods, including biomechanics. He also got the opportunity to work with Augusto Boal for a week during this stint. Sen has also worked with various directors and claims, "I have learnt a lot from all of them."³⁴⁹ The majority of his learning however, Sen says happens on stage while he is performing and getting the feedback from the audience. As far as stagecraft is concerned, Sen works every year as a technical advisor to the Biswa Banga Sammelan (World Congress for Bengali Expatriates) and visits various cities in the US for the mega eventm, during which he gets to rub shoulders with experienced and trained stage crew which helps him to keep abreast about the latest developments in stage technology.

Debesh Chattopadhyay has been leading the group Sansriti since its start in the year 2000. Chattopadhyay was a student of chemistry and as a consequence did not get a chance to pursue a formal degree in theatre.³⁵⁰ He was performing since his late teenage years and prepared himself in his own way for a life in the arts. Chattopadhyay based his learning on workshops with directors like Heisnam Kanhailal of Kalakshetra Manipur

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Debesh Chattopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 16, 2013.

and working in plays with Salil Bandyopadhyay of Theatron, Kolkata and observing the work of Bibhas Chakraborty of Anya Theatre, Kolkata. He supplemented the practical knowledge gained from these interactions with a careful and astute study of world theatre and interactions with fellow contemporary directors like Suman Mukherjee, who Chattopadhyay acknowledges as having “the most international exposure.”³⁵¹

Manish Mitra, director of Kasba Arghya states explicitly that he has had no training in theatre. He picked up the tips and tricks of the trade while practicing his craft.³⁵² Mitra had joined Rangakarmee to understand and learn the *modus operandi* of running a theatre group and to learn the basic ropes of directing shows.³⁵³ Apart from this, Mitra claims he has relied almost exclusively on research-based learning for the specific context of a production. While doing so, he developed an interest in the folk theatre traditions of India. Mitra felt that he wanted to develop a theatrical idiom that was “Indian” – one in which “pan-Indian elements are easily discernable.”³⁵⁴ Mitra and his team of actors have trained extensively with experts of traditional performance forms like *chhau*, *kutiyattam* and *pandavani*. His objective behind these trainings, Mitra explains, is not to master the art form but to “understand the mechanics of story-telling and the rhythm of the art form.”³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Manish Mitra, in discussion with the author, June 24, 2013.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

Directors Bibhas Chakraborty, Dwijen Bandopadhyay, Soumitro Basu, Suranjana Dasgupta and Arpita Ghosh also reported as having no formal training in theatre. These directors were not full-time theatre professionals and had other professional obligations besides their theatre work. Bibhas Chakraborty worked for the Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata, before he opted for voluntary retirement.³⁵⁶ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay and Soumitro Basu are both theatre teachers and work as an Assistant Professor and Professor of theatre at RBU respectively. Suranjana Dasgupta is a librarian at a government school; Arpita Ghosh owns a printing press. Bibhas Chakraborty said that making a living from theatre was an impossible dream and hence having a second job was a necessity.³⁵⁷ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay and Soumitro Basu look at their work at RBU as an extension of their theatre work and hence see no conflict between their professional and creative selves.³⁵⁸ Suranjana Dasgupta feels that her job does get in the way of her theatre sometimes but she tries to strike a balance between the two.³⁵⁹ Arpita Ghosh says that she has chosen not to expand her business beyond its current status in order to avoid any conflicts with her theatre. She does not regret this choice and does not blame her business or the theatre of getting into the way of either.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁶ The Doordarshan is the state-owned television network in India. Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata is the Eastern regional headquarters of the network.

³⁵⁷ Bibhas Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.

³⁵⁸ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 13, 2013; Soumitro Basu, in discussion with the author, June 5, 2013.

³⁵⁹ Suranjana Dasgupta, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

³⁶⁰ Arpita Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 11, 2013.

Bibhas Chakraborty has been involved with the Bengali group theatre movement since 1963. Chakraborty worked as an actor with Bohurupee and Nandikar before joining Theatre Workshop. He left Theatre Workshop in 1985 to start his own group Anya Theatre. Chakraborty remembers that back in the 1960s theatre training depended exclusively on the individual performer. An actor/actress chose the ways in which to develop him/herself.³⁶¹ For Chakraborty, this process entailed studying plays and watching theatre and film. Chakraborty remembers, “Several shows from abroad passed through the city during those days. These plays were staged at New Empire, Kolkata. Watching these shows was an important part of our training.”³⁶² Theatre enthusiasts would all make it a point to catch these touring shows. Directors would also offer comments, tips and tricks about the work that they were doing in rehearsals.³⁶³ Chakraborty regards these feedbacks as a vital and important part of the training process. He reiterated that in the absence of a formal training program the training depended exclusively on the individual artist and how much she/he could absorb from any number of available resources.

Dwijen Bandyopadhyay has been associated with the theatre since 1973, first as an actor and later as an actor-director for the group Samstab since 1978. Bandyopadhyay says that although now there are quite a few actor training institutes and regular acting workshops in the city, he doesn't feel that any of these are very effective.³⁶⁴ He recalls,

³⁶¹ Bibhas Chakraborty, in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Dwijen Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, July 13, 2013.

“When I started theatre in 1973, all the training that we received was during the rehearsal phase of a play. It depended on how involved we were with the process and the director’s thought process behind a play.”³⁶⁵ He also remembers directors from other groups coming in and sitting through rehearsals and offering feedback, which helped the young actors. Bandyopadhyay was roped in early in his career to play the lead role in several important plays, which, on the one hand, allowed him the opportunity to work with the best directors in the city, but he was made to work doubly hard to develop himself as an actor.³⁶⁶

Soumitro Basu has been working with the theatre group Sandarbha since 1998. Basu was involved with Bohurupee for eighteen years prior to joining this group. He feels that although it will not be right to refer to this phase of his theatre career as a period of training but “being associated with an institution like Bohurupee was similar to getting training in theatre.”³⁶⁷ Basu worked with directors like Bibhas Chakraborty and Kaushik Sen as an actor, and he feels that these assignments served as learning experiences if not as training per se.

Suranjana Dasgupta is a founder member of the theatre group Nirbak Abhinay Academy which was started in the early 1980s. She has however been directing plays for this group since 2005-06. Dasgupta started as an actor under the tutelage of Bibhas Chakraborty with the group Theatre Workshop and also worked with director Ashok

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Soumitro Basu, in discussion with the author, June 5, 2013.

Mukhopadhyay in this group.³⁶⁸ Then later when Chakraborty left Theatre Workshop to start Anya Theatre, Dasgupta joined him. It was at Anya Theatre that Dasgupta gave her most memorable performance as the female protagonist in Chakraborty's *Madhab Malanchi Kainya*. Dasgupta considers this play and the process that went behind its creation as a crucial period in her career. Apart from playing the female lead, Dasgupta was involved with the whole production process for a period of eight months: "I contributed in some way or the other to every aspect of the production."³⁶⁹ At the same time she felt that she learned a lot from working with Bibhas Chakraborty, Dinendra Chowdhury and Debasish Dasgupta.

Dasgupta says that she has learned the most while performing or working towards a performance. Recalling the various plays that she got invited to be a part of Dasgupta opines, "I think they (meaning the directors) saw something in me and hence called me to work with them. I have never sat down to think how much I have learnt, but I am certain that I was able to stand out from the other actors which is why I have had so many opportunities to work with so many different directors."³⁷⁰ Dasgupta feels the various traditions of acting and actor training does not have any bearing on her craft. She is of the opinion that acting comes from within and can be refined by doing it repeatedly.

Arpita Ghosh has been working with theatre group Pancham Vaidic since 2001. She attended the Panchamveda Charyashram in 2000-01, the only training that she had.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Suranjana Dasgupta, in discussion with the author, June 25, 2013.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Arpita Ghosh, in discussion with the author, June 11, 2013.

She assisted Saoli Mitra for the production of *Putul Khela* before making her directing debut in 2003 with two productions: a dramatized adaptation of Sukumar Ray's *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* and the one-act *Antargata Agun*.³⁷² During the same time, she started translating and adapting Western classics. She translated Sartre's *Crime Passionel* as *Rajnoitik Hatya* in 2003-04. She assisted Saoli Mitra for this production besides playing the lead female role. Ghosh believes that assisting Mitra and then donning the director's cap has taught her everything that she knows about directing. Ghosh also acknowledges the help that she received from her friends who were more experienced thespians when she started doing theatre. Being a newcomer (relatively speaking) Ghosh feels that her training is still ongoing.³⁷³

Non-traditional and youth theatre groups

The non-traditional theatre groups and youth theatre groups in Kolkata follow the organic model of training that I described above. The non-traditional theatre groups, however, seek to find a performance vocabulary different from the mainstream theatre culture in the city. I spoke with three directors, Prabir Guha, Supriyo Samajdar and Ankur Roychowdhury, who have all made a conscious effort to stay away from the mainstream Bengali group theatre and create their own performance spaces, literally and figuratively.

Prabir Guha is associated with the Alternative Living Theatre (henceforth ALT) which operates in its own space – the Akhra in Madhaymgram, a suburb in the northwest of Kolkata. Guha was inspired after watching Bibhas Chakraborty's production of

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

Rajrakta and approached the veteran director to join his group. Chakraborty welcomed Guha into the fold and thus began the first phase of Guha's training. Guha says, "I started understanding things with a scientific approach: what is theatre, how to do it, what is light design, set design, what is a script etc.?"³⁷⁴ Working with Chakraborty also allowed Guha to rub shoulders with some of the leading names in Bengali theatre. He also watched a lot of plays and toured a lot with Chakraborty. Before long, however, the question "Why am I doing this theatre?" began to haunt Guha.³⁷⁵ He found that the social class that ostracized a section of the population was the ones that was promoting and performing the theatre that he had come to be associated with.

Guha felt impatient since he was not able to take his theatre to the marginal people of the society.³⁷⁶ He had read Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* and was inspired by it, but he did not know how to translate the vision contained in the text into performance. The answer came in the form of Badal Sircar and his third theatre. Sircar and his plays convinced Guha that there was a space after all to create a different theatre. He joined Shatabdi informally; spending time with the group, attending workshops and trying to understand the philosophy underlying their work. After three months of being with Shatabdi, Guha found himself at yet another crossroad: "Either I didn't understand Badal da's work completely or the work that they were doing was too urban for it to be

³⁷⁴ Probir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Guha is referring to the economically, socially, politically and culturally disenfranchised people of the city when he talks about the marginal people.

comprehensible to a larger section of the population.”³⁷⁷ He also feared that if he spent any more time with Sircar he would become a clone and lose his own way of thinking and doing things.

Guha realized in order to create the kind of plays that he wanted to he had to build his own theatre. The first hurdle in this process was he wasn’t a playwright. He decided that he would create a collaborative process to create plays involving all the actors in his young troupe. The group sat together, discussed scenes and the actors would improvise. He found that his actors found it hard to work with even the minimal dialogue that he was writing for them. He abandoned dialogues and allowed his actors to come up with their own lines. While doing so he learned that his actors were more comfortable conveying thoughts and ideas with their bodies as opposed to words.³⁷⁸ Guha felt the need for a definite training regime at this point and adapted *chhau* dance, though he realized he could not possibly learn the technicalities of a dance form that was so closely linked to the lived realities and experiences of the rural dancers from Purulia. He began studying the underlying techniques of the training process and trained along with his group. The group followed this training up by improvising on *chhau* techniques rather than adhering to the original art form.

ALT led by Guha decided to learn *kalarippayattu* techniques after the initial exploration with *chhau* for their performance work. Guha says, “Kalari (popular abbreviation for the martial art form) has remained unchanged throughout its thousand year old history. I thought I would find originality in this. We treated *kalari* as a complete

³⁷⁷ Probir Guha, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2013.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

exercise. We deconstructed the exercises to create our own stuff.”³⁷⁹ Guha explains why he felt that ALT needed to come up with their own training routine in spite of their being several models that could have been followed. Guha was exposed to Boal techniques under Badal Sircar. He had also worked with several world-renowned directors like Grotowski, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and John Martin. He really appreciates the training routines that these directors have developed, but he felt that these had to be rejected:

[Their exercises were] perfect or right for their context. And theatre is very much culture specific, food habit specific, region specific and environment specific. I strongly believe in this. And so, in our tropical country – I don’t need such heavy [sic] exercises for warm-up. So my exercise has to be distinct.³⁸⁰

This quest led to a creation of series of exercises that Guha claims ALT can claim to be their own. Guha and his actors continue to follow this routine in their training while imbibing newer traditions both from the East as well as the West.

Supriyo Samajdar has been working with Bibhaban since 1997. Samajdar is an alumnus of RBU, the primary source of his training, but during our conversation, he placed much more emphasis on the informal training that he went through after his stint at RBU.³⁸¹ Samajdar claims that there are several people who have influenced his work and the decision to pursue non-proscenium theatre seriously. He has worked with some of

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Supriyo Samajdar, in discussion with the author, May 29, 2013.

these people directly while he has had the opportunity to see the work of some of the others. Samajdar reveres Badal Sircar and claims that without seeing his work he would have never realized that, “theatre outside the proscenium could be so rich and varied.”³⁸² Samajdar also trained with Prabir Guha, although he claims that their theatres are very different but connected philosophically. Abani Biswas, who was associated with Grotowski’s Theatre of Sources for over three years, was another important influence on Samajdar. He attended workshops at Biswas’ theatre retreat Theatre House in Bolpur-Shantiniketan. Rena Mirecka, who was one of the key figures in Grotowski’s experimental and paratheatrical experiments between 1959 and 1982, visited Kolkata in 2009 on the invitation of Bibhaban.³⁸³ Workshops with Mirecka were a vital learning experience for Samajdar and Bibhaban. Samajdar also had an opportunity to travel to Poland where he worked with Raúl Iuiza, theatre director and actor associated with the Grotowski Institute.³⁸⁴

Ankur Roychowdhury has been working with a not-for-profit organization Swabhav Kolkata for the last few years. The group produces plays with children and young adults from various socio-economic backgrounds. Roychowdhury refuses to be called a theatre director, but he uses the medium as a means of furthering social messages. Roychowdhury started performing early in his childhood with one of his cousins, Robin Chowdhury, who was a member of Utpal Dutt’s group People’s Little

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Timeout, *The Telegraph*, February 14, 2009.

³⁸⁴ Supriyo Samajdar, in discussion with the author, May 29, 2013.

Theatre.³⁸⁵ Roychowdhury regards this exposure as a preliminary training in theatre. He joined a small suburban theatre group in Bijoygarh, Kolkata called Bijoygarh Meghdoot performing in and touring with a play called *Subarna Paduka*. At the same time, he was also involved with a group called Theatre Club during his high-school days.

Roychowdhury does not consider any of these as training per se but an exposure and experience that taught him to love and appreciate theatre. In 2002, he joined the yearlong Panchamved Charyashram hosted by Pancham Vaidic but left the course after six months.³⁸⁶ Around the same time he also practiced *thang-ta* (a Manipuri martial art form).

Roychowdhury feels that the majority of his training happened without a mentor and by watching and seeing plays. According to him, there was no particular tradition involved in his training; it was organic. He claims, “I have watched theatre extensively.”³⁸⁷ Roychowdhury lacked the confidence of donning the hats of a playwright and a director till the 2003 edition of the British Council organized inter-college drama competition/festival Drama Ties, where he lead the Jadavpur University Department of Comparative Literature team. He wrote an original script based on the tenth scene of Bertolt Brecht’s *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, Lalit Vachani’s documentaries *The Boy in the Branch* (1993) and *The Men in the Tree* (2002) and a piece by Jonathan Swift.³⁸⁸ The play was a success and instilled in Roychowdhury the confidence that he

³⁸⁵ Ankur Roychowdhury, in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

could effectively use the medium of plays for his social messages. He also watches popular Bengali films and *jatra* shows to inform his craft further.

The youth theatre group members in Kolkata are all in their early to mid twenties and have diverse backgrounds. Some of the members have had previous exposure to theatre in the form of workshops at high school, while others have studied under mentors at various children's theatre workshops. None of the members that I spoke with are students of drama and are following various academic pursuits in colleges and universities. Aritra Sengupta, director of M.A.D (Mad About Drama), summarizes the situation, "The training varies from member to member. There are people who have not done theatre seriously before and there are people who have done workshops with groups like Nandikar."³⁸⁹ Speaking of his own training Sengupta comments that throughout his schooling days he attended various workshops. He does not consider any of these to be formal trainings since they were very short. He also feels that these workshops haven't helped him much in the long run and does not believe that they can for anybody unless they get down to working in an actual production.³⁹⁰

Soumya Mukherji, member of M.A.D, claims to have no training in theatre, formal or otherwise.³⁹¹ Najrin Islam, also from M.A.D says that although she does not have any formal training in theatre, she did attend a lot of workshops in high school and thinks of those as a learning experience.³⁹² Leena Bhattacharya of Kolkata Romroma was

³⁸⁹ Aritra Sengupta, in discussion with the author, May 16, 2013.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Soumya Mukherji, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013.

³⁹² Najrin Islam, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2013.

a student of the theatre workshop at Nehru Children's Museum for four years. The late Rama Prasad Banik was her mentor at this institution, and she claims to have learned the theoretical and practical aspects of theatre during her time there.³⁹³ Debleena Tripathi of 4th Bell Theatres joined the Nandikar Children's Ensemble as a child.³⁹⁴ Tripathi graduated from this program and then joined the senior group of trainees as a trainee theatre trainer for a period of six/seven years. The training here took the form of "sustained workshops on various aspects of theatre and brief workshops conducted from other groups on different forms of theatre and theatre for special people."³⁹⁵ Tripathi was trained in clown theatre, theatre for visually and hearing impaired people and theatre for children in these workshops.

Conclusions

Theatre training in Kolkata, as the above discussion demonstrates, is not a well-defined process. It is, however, possible to group the wide variety of training, theatre personnel acknowledge undergoing, under the umbrella of organic training. One significant feature of the organic training method is the presence of a mentor and a mentee. This relationship, seen across all the categories of theatre workers in the city, follows the system of training seen in classical and traditional performance forms in India – the *guru-shisya parampara* (the mentor-student tradition). Theatre scholar Samik Bandyopadhyay finds the presence and exaltation of this traditional approach in a modern

³⁹³ Leena Bhattacharya, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

³⁹⁴ Debleena Tripathi, e-mail message to author, September 9, 2013.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

theatre phenomenon to be an anomaly.³⁹⁶ Based on the experiences of the Bengali group theatre artists, however, it is quite evident that the tradition continues to be revered. Even when someone like Sumitro Bandyopadhyay or Joyraj Bhattacharjee claims that they taught themselves their respective crafts, the strong presence of mentor/s is undeniable. It would be important to understand some of the basic tenets of the traditional model of performance training in India to understand the model of training that has been discussed in the preceding sections.

According to Ananya Chatterjea the *guru-shisya parampara* style of training was “predicated on the student’s unconditional surrender to the guru’s training process.”³⁹⁷ The student came to study with the guru at an early age and lived with him as a member of his household. Chatterjea explains, “Implied in this tradition, therefore, is the concept of the *gurukul*, the home or family of the guru, which extends to include the disciples training under the guru.”³⁹⁸ In the traditional sense, the guru who “imparts knowledge and dispels ignorance” is in a position of authority while the student/receiver of knowledge is in a position of total obedience to him. There are also ordained rules of behavior in the presence of the guru as explained by Chaubey:

While entering the home of the guru, one should be in calm mind, devoted in the extreme, leave one’s vehicle, sandals, umbrella, fan, collyrium, and makeup outside and enter slowly. In the presence of the guru, one should

³⁹⁶ Samik Bandyopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 27, 2013.

³⁹⁷ Ananya Chatterjea, “Training in Indian Classical Dance: A Case Study,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 13, no. 1 (1996), 68.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

stand in prescribed form. In the service of the guru, one should be wholehearted. One should honor fully what he says and do it without question.³⁹⁹

Chatterjea opines training in performing arts has retained “this necessary component of reverence for the guru and unwavering devotion of the disciple” even as contemporary education in other disciplines has gradually evolved to a more informal relationship between the teacher and the student.⁴⁰⁰ In this context Chatterjea observes, “One still leaves footwear outside the room where the guru is or where the training happens (because one is entering sacred ground); one begins and ends the training by touching the guru’s feet as a mark of respect; one appropriately lowers one’s eyes when the guru scolds vigorously.”⁴⁰¹ The culturally coded behavior of reverence towards the teacher helps establish the guru as the bearer of knowledge (which includes a sociocultural, philosophical and kinesthetic dimension) and gives the guru the right to exercise complete control over not only the education of the disciple but his person as well.

While the *gurukul* tradition is not extant in Bengali theatre, the training system is dependent on the unconditional surrender to the group leader’s training process. Members are expected to follow a certain unwritten code of conduct before the leader. The reverence for the traditional model of training is the reason, I argue, that members are inducted into a group even if they do not have any prior experience in theatre. It is

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 70

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 70-71.

thought that under the care of the *guru* (the resident director of a group) the actress/actor will learn the craft. Younger members of a group are expected to demonstrate their *lagan* (call to vocation) much in the same way Reginald and Jamila Massey observe the initial phases of the training of a student in the classical dance tradition of *Kathak*: the student is initially tasked with menial jobs in the master's household, and only when his/her devotion is confirmed does the actual training begins.⁴⁰² Younger members are asked to brew and serve tea to other members, run errands, assist in the lifting and assembly of scenery and observe rehearsals and shows before they can start performing. The key difference between the dance training and Bengali group theatre being that while in the former instance the student serves a single guru in the latter he is serving the group. The idea is that the trainee is placed constantly but subtly in a continuous learning environment. In this way she/he learns much more than the technicalities of performance alone. The learning itself, as Chatterjea observes, "is not necessarily learned from the guru's conscious instruction, however, but rather is realized by the student through the hours of practice, repetition and personal deliberation."⁴⁰³ I argue it is the student's realization that is termed "organic," since the source material is varied.

Director Suman Mukhopadhyay objects to the way most groups are centered on the dominant presence of the director (guru) and his sermonizing on the next course of action for the group. He started his own group Tritiyo Sutra to move away from this approach. He is in charge in this new setup, but neither he nor the collaborators in Tritiyo

⁴⁰² Reginald Massey and Jamila Massey, *The Dances of India: A General Survey and Dancers' Guide* (London: Tricolour Books, 1989), 31.

⁴⁰³ Chatterjea, "Training in Indian Classical Dance," 72.

Sutra are tethered to the group and are free to work wherever they want. Mukherjee decides on a project and then assembles a team of collaborators who he wants to work with or feel are competent enough to work on the play he has in mind in return for a payment for their work.⁴⁰⁴ Abanti Chakraborty follows a similar model when she is directing in her own group. Debesh Chattopadhyay follows the same model when directing outside his own group.

Light designers and technicians learn the craft within a similar training environment but with a significant difference. Actor, actor-director and playwright training rest on the guru's superior position as the carrier of knowledge and the student's complete devotion to the teacher even after acquiring the required skills for the craft. The training of the technicians depends on a more informal training environment for the trainee, and there is a change in his status within a company once he is allowed to adopt the "cloak of competence."⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Suman Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 26, 2013.

⁴⁰⁵ Jack Haas, "The Process of Apprenticeship," in *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again*, ed. Michael Coy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 87-105. In the synopsis to their book *Becoming Doctors: The Adoption of a Cloak of Competence* (Greenwich: J.A.I. Press, 1987), Haas and Shaffir note: "Professionalization requires the successful adoption of a 'cloak of competence' communicating to legitimating audiences the idea that special changes have taken place. This symbolic cloak identifies both professions and professionals as doing special kinds of work with trustworthy competence."

The resident light and sound technician at Padatik Buildwell Theatre (henceforth Padatik) under conditions of anonymity explained that he learned whatever he knows by working under his mentor at Padatik. He also credits learning by simply repeating the process multiple times. The sound technician at Academy of Fine Arts (on conditions of anonymity) had a similar account to offer about his training. Both these technicians are originally from out of the city and came to Kolkata looking for work.⁴⁰⁶ Their mentors are either from their town/village or someone in their town/village knew the mentors and the work that that they did and suggested that working with these mentors could help them earn a livelihood. Learning by observation and repetition is often the method by which owners of technical support companies and auditoriums make new hires.

As opposed to the actors and directors, the technicians are usually affiliated with a single light designer/supplier or a set supplier. The owners of these companies maintain staff and delegate responsibilities to them based on their experience and competence. People are often hired if the company needs a new hand irrespective of the new hire having any previous technical experience. He is placed under the care of a senior member of the crew and given smaller responsibilities: carrying cables and instruments and pulling up lights during focus. His slightest oversights are met with severe verbal reprimands. He is frequently ridiculed and almost all members of the company refer to him as “baccha” (child) often not using his real name at all during the course of an evening.

⁴⁰⁶ Both these technicians said that while they had no problem discussing their initiation into theatre work, the initial days of struggle, their training and their eventual success, they would prefer not to be named.

The trivial work assigned to the new apprentice (new hire) is similar to the experience of apprentices in a wide variety of fields. Jack Haas describes the initiation of a new assistant “punk” ironworker.⁴⁰⁷ The superintendent takes him to a job site and asks him to stand below and work as a firewatch. After a limited orientation about fire safety equipment and the ways to use it, he is left to do his job. The new apprentice for a light supply or a scene supply company is initiated into the trade in much the same way. The job is a boring one but observing the work from a distance allows the apprentice to get the feel of the job.⁴⁰⁸

The verbal reprimand and the demeaning address to the newcomer resemble what Haas describes as binging, sounding or ranking of an apprentice. He explains, “From the perspective of the work group, they must find out about the new apprentice because his actions affect the group. By observing and interacting with the newcomer members of the group begin to add information for making a judgment.”⁴⁰⁹ Binging is described as a mode of social interaction involving verbal aggression. Haas says that a work group (or street corner gangs, Black ghetto youth and industrial workers) can never be sure of either old or new members and thus continues to take readings on old and new alike. Initially, the newcomer does not reciprocate binging, but as he moves towards group acceptance, the “definition of the repartee changes.”⁴¹⁰ Initially the group uses binging to test the newcomer while later forms of this behavior indicate group acceptance.

⁴⁰⁷ Haas, “The Process of Apprenticeship,” 98-100.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

Technicians and laborers acquire a special skill set through their training, considered to be secrets of their trade. Apprenticeship under a master craftsman becomes in this case, as Michael Coy observes, “an education in the ‘secrets’ of a craft.”⁴¹¹ Coy observes that the secrets of the craft might be profound, trivial or relatively meaningless. The contents of the secrets, however, are not as important as the fact that there are secrets. Those within the realm of this knowledge control the specialized knowledge of the craft, essential to acquire if one wishes to practice the craft successfully.⁴¹² The secrecy surrounding the craft creates the necessity for apprenticeship training.

Ric Knowles observes that extant training in the English language theatre claims to provide an “all purpose preparation” for any form of theatre that an individual’s interest or inclination leads them to.⁴¹³ According to Knowles, this over-arching claim masks “naturalized assumptions about theatrical representation.”⁴¹⁴ Theatre training claims are mystified in theatrical productions whose meanings are shaped or subverted by these assumptions. The training in Bengali theatre follows a pattern that is similar to the above assertion. Knowles claims that the generalizing principles underlying training in English-language theatre governs the behavior of theatre personnel in a way that allows certain meanings to emerge at the cost of others. In the case of the Bengali group theatre

⁴¹¹ Michael Coy, “From Theory,” in *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again*, ed. Michael Coy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 3.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

in Kolkata, we observe a similar phenomenon, except that the absence of a general training procedure leads to actors, directors and playwrights to resort to formulas that have met with success instead of daring to experiment. Actors and directors find a safe spot and regurgitate it knowing that audiences accept these formulas. Audience members too are used to seeing formulas for different groups and decide what to watch on the basis of previous experience. The reliance on formulas and the absence of training create, I argue, a stalemate that hinders experimentation in the theatre. The need for producing theatre continuously to ensure government sponsorship allows very little time to be devoted to development of an individual's craft.⁴¹⁵ Directors in Bengali group theatre work with actors on a performance-by-performance basis rather than equipping them with the technical wherewithal of the craft. They find it convenient to cast an actor in a role similar to the ones that they have seen a performer essay before. In a similar vein, playwrights are instructed to reproduce formulas that seemed to have worked with audiences, and designers are instructed to follow a set style. The absence of formal training, therefore, emerges to be as problematic as the over-emphasis on training as seen in the case of the English-language theatre.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ The conditions of continued central government support have been dealt with in the Funding section of the chapter on Working Conditions.

⁴¹⁶ See Knowles, "Practice: Conditions of Production and Reception" for a detailed discussion on how dominant training inscribes the prevalent cultural context on theatrical work and the meaning it create. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 35-36.

CHAPTER 6

THEATRE SPACES

The question of theatre spaces assumes special significance in the context of Bengali group theatre in Kolkata. As I have already discussed in the chapter on working conditions in Bengali theatre, no group in Kolkata owns or controls its own performance space. Groups rent performance spaces for stage rehearsals and performances, though they do not rent a performance space for the entirety of the run of a particular production since most plays are retained in the repertory for a period of at least a year. Normally performance spaces are rented for a single performance. The production is loaded in and struck on the same day for every performance. Plays move across different venues across the city during a run with several days between two performances. The constant change of performance spaces means that practitioners have to constantly adapt and negotiate with different staging conditions, often very quickly. The number of performance spaces in the city is also limited, and groups and productions fiercely compete for the same performance spaces. The production process in Kolkata is equally fraught with a crisis of space owing to limited availability of storage and rehearsal spaces.

Most groups don't own rehearsal spaces but rent rooms where rehearsals are held. These rooms bear little or no resemblance to the size and shape of the performance space where the show is to be presented and are very often a shared facility with other organizations whose programs can and sometimes do affect the group's rehearsal schedule. There are only a couple of spaces in the city that are designed for theatre

rehearsals. Consequently, there are long waiting lists for these spaces. Most groups prefer improvising on rehearsal locations rather than waiting on these spaces to open up. Some groups even use a variety of rehearsal spaces during the run up to a production being unable to afford a single rehearsal space or because a space of choice is unavailable. As mentioned earlier, groups in Kolkata seldom have their own storage facilities. Sets are stored in warehouses of the supplier/builder and are hauled to the performance venue for every performance.

There is hardly any scholarship studying and analyzing the role of theatre spaces in Bengali group theatre in spite of it being such a pressing concern. In this chapter, I will discuss the theatre spaces in Kolkata under two broad headings – spaces of production and spaces of reception. The former category will include rehearsal spaces and storage spaces. The latter category will largely be a discussion of the various performance spaces available in the city of Kolkata. For this description and analysis, I will be using Gay McAuley's categorization of the various parts constituting a theatre: the theatre building, audience space, practitioner space and presentational space.⁴¹⁷

Theatre spaces, Ric Knowles observes, impinge directly on both theatrical production and reception.⁴¹⁸ Marvin Carlson, Gay McAuley and Susan Bennett demonstrate and discuss the relation between theatre space and its role in meaning making in the theatre. For the discussion in this section, I will rely on their findings and

⁴¹⁷ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 36-89.

⁴¹⁸ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 62.

supplement it with discussions on theatre spaces that I had with theatre practitioners, scholars and audiences in Kolkata.

Spaces of production: storage spaces and rehearsal spaces

Storage Spaces

Since groups do not own and control their own performance spaces, they rely on set builders/suppliers to provide storage for sets and on lighting designers/suppliers for the lighting inventory. Actors more often than not carry and maintain their own wardrobes. Groups buy and maintain a basic props inventory, which are carried to performance venues. These are mostly personal props for actors and seldom include furniture pieces, which are also stored with the set builder/supplier. The condition described above is true of any small and financially unsound theatre company in the world. Reliance on set and lighting suppliers and sourcing personal belongings for use on stage seems to be the general *modus operandi* for Bengali group theatre irrespective of its size and financial strength.

The warehouses of set builders and suppliers are cramped, housing scenery for various productions.⁴¹⁹ Set builders and suppliers claim that they provide adequate care for sets, though my own observations contradict this assertion. During a visit to the warehouse of Raj Drama Set Suppliers, I observed that multiple stage flats were kept stacked on top of each other. Although covered with a concrete roof, the storage facility had enough openings that would allow pieces of wood and plywood to be exposed to the elements during a heavy downpour especially during the monsoons between June and

⁴¹⁹ The observation is based on visits to Raj Drama Set Supply and Indian Institute of Supply warehouses during the course of the fieldwork (August 2012 – July 2013).

September.⁴²⁰ The constant assembly and strike of the set pieces also meant that they are subject to considerable wear and tear, which the groups either cannot afford to get repaired or do not bother to get repaired. The demand to produce sets for new productions also means that newer pieces of scenery get added to the cramped storage space, and the company has little or no time to attend to repairs of existing scenery.

Lighting equipment is also stored in equally cramped storage spaces. The concept of instrument cages and racks seems alien and distant to designers who also double up as suppliers. The frequency with which instruments need to be stowed and hauled for a performance allows very little time for maintenance and is perhaps also the reason why suppliers and their crew do not invest time or money in building proper storage units like instrument racks. The incentive to innovate, update or maintain is also absent since the groups do not seem to bother too much with or about sophistication in design. During my visit to two lighting warehouses in Kolkata, I observed that instruments of various kinds were simply stacked on top of each other.⁴²¹ A pile of cables of various lengths lay in one heap on one side. Auditoriums in Kolkata are seldom electrically equipped to handle the large amount of wattage required to run heavy light hangs. Suppliers carry their own backup power packs for additional power. These lay stacked on one side of the storage room

⁴²⁰ The Gangetic West Bengal where Kolkata is located gets an average monsoonal rainfall of 1167 mm every year (“Hydromet Division: Updated/Real-time Maps,” India Meteorological Division, accessed on May 8, 2014, <http://www.imd.gov.in/section/hydro/dynamic/rfmaps/updated.html>).

⁴²¹ I visited the warehouses of light designers/suppliers Badal Das and Babloo Sarkar.

as well along with patching boards and light boards. Cardboard boxes containing gels, gobos and gobo holders completed the inventory.

Rehearsal Spaces

The rehearsal hall, Ric Knowles points out, is where almost eighty percent of the creative process that goes behind mounting a production takes place.⁴²² It is, however, the space over which a theatre group usually has the least amount of control, and it is seldom considered as a creative space in the design of a show.⁴²³ Most theatre groups in Kolkata rehearse in spaces that they do not own. Only older and established groups like Nandikar, Anya Theatre and Rangakarmee have in recent years secured control over spaces where they rehearse. These spaces, however, vary significantly in dimension from the stages where the productions are eventually mounted. Some groups like Tritiyo Sutra and Theatre Formation Paribartak do not have fixed rehearsal spaces and move from one space to another depending on availability and affordability. The nomadic quality of preparing for a production leads to an exhaustion resulting not only from the physical strain of having to adjust continually with a new rehearsal space but also from the fact that the stage picture that is being attempted is hardly ever fully visualized before the production moves into the stage rehearsal phase much later in the production process.

McAuley opines that the level of comfort or discomfort, the ease of access, cleanliness and warmth of a rehearsal space are a “further dimension of the physical framing of the practitioners’ experience.”⁴²⁴ The location of the rehearsal space, the ease

⁴²² Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 67.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 71.

of access by public transport and security all has important bearings on the people involved in the theatre. McAuley reminds us that actors often have to put up with work conditions that would “provoke strike action in other workplaces.”⁴²⁵ McAuley’s reminder gains even more currency in the context of Bengali group theatre where work conditions are seldom conducive to productive work. The voluntary nature of participation in theatre however negates the possibility of an adverse reaction substantially.

Lack of affordable and suitable rehearsal spaces effect not only the quality but also the quantity of theatre produced in a city. It also determines to a large extent what kind of theatre is produced – young, inexperienced, experimental and avant-garde groups often find it difficult to afford the space and the time for rehearsals. This restriction leads to a situation where, according to McAuley, the laws of the market function as state censorship “in determining whose voice may be heard in the theatre.”⁴²⁶ Groups like Nandikar and Anya Theatre, which control their own rehearsal spaces, are the top brasses among mainstream theatre-makers. The ease of work that having their own space allows these groups is the result of many years of struggle. It is however noteworthy that the neither group has experimented with form, content or style in recent years.

Actors, both McAuley and Knowles observe, are fraught with tension when a production is transferred from a rehearsal space to the theatre. McAuley attributes this to the “actors’ extreme sensitivity to spatial factors, to their own bodily experience of place,

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

and of the complexity of the process by which a performance takes shape.”⁴²⁷ Knowles ascribes part of the shock to the “natural” transition from the safe, homey environment of a rehearsal space where “delicate instincts are nurtured in private to a larger, public space, where performances, of necessity, increase in scale, and private explorations insert themselves into the larger public world.”⁴²⁸

The transition from a rehearsal space to a theatrical space becomes more complicated in the context of the Bengali group theatre. The shock of the transition becomes multi-dimensional because technicians, designers, actors and directors all need to negotiate with a new space for every performance without anywhere near adequate rehearsals in any of the actual performance spaces. Lack of practice in the space not only plagues actors but also the technical crew in Bengali group theatre. All major theatre auditoriums in and around Kolkata have a technical staff, but their work in the performances that the venue is hosting ends with powering the dimmer board and the sound system on. The technical crew accompanying the performance team is tasked with figuring out the best angles, hanging and patching lights and running the show.

Most theatre groups in the city cannot afford long and continuous stage rehearsal sessions. The auditoriums are seldom free during the evenings when other performances are scheduled. Groups often resort, therefore, to nightlong rehearsal sessions. These strenuous sessions no doubt take a significant toll on the actors’ bodies and voices. These rehearsals are also earmarked as technical rehearsals with only minimal attention devoted to the performance of actors who are also struggling to adjust to a new space. Several

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁴²⁸ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 62.

theatre groups in Kolkata use the Niranjana Sadan auditorium in South East Kolkata for stage rehearsals. Like every other theatre building in the city, it has certain idiosyncratic spatial features that get incorporated into the performance inadvertently. These features complicate the transition from the rehearsal phase to the performance phase even further. Most groups in Kolkata will not have rehearsed in all the auditoriums that the production will be mounted on during the course of its run and there are productions that will not have had a single rehearsal in any of the eventual production spaces.⁴²⁹

Knowles observes that rehearsals often happen in a more intimate setting, and he believes most actors are familiar with the ways in which the performance will have to be enlarged and adjusted to when the production moves from a rehearsal space to a production space.⁴³⁰ While the same holds true for a Bengali group theatre actor, she/he is faced with a bigger challenge than their Western counterparts because this transition from a more intimate rehearsal space to a performance space has to be done for every performance. And it is here that McAuley's observation of the rehearsal space not being a "neutral container" and the possibility of it imprinting "aspects of its own reality on both the fictional world that is being created and even on the physical reality of the stage" particularly on the actors' movements within it becomes important.⁴³¹ Actors complain of having difficulties in timing entrances, exits and of not being able to cover a certain

⁴²⁹ Theatron's 2007 production *Mitrapuran*, in which I performed, is an example of one such production. The only showing of this production was at Gyan Manch, but the group never rehearsed in this theatre.

⁴³⁰ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 68.

⁴³¹ McAuley, *Spaces in Performance*, 74.

distance when the production moves from one auditorium to another and especially to one where the group has not rehearsed before.

Spaces of reception: the theatre building and its various parts

Location of the Theatre Building

Kolkata, unlike New York or London, does not have a theatre district at present. At the turn of the twentieth century, during the heyday of the commercial theatre in the city, North Kolkata boasted of a series of performance venues with companies competing for patronage and clientele.⁴³² At present, however, most of these theatre buildings in North Kolkata have fallen into disrepair. With the expansion and growth of the city, theatre buildings, too, have left their North Kolkata moorings and are now spread across the city. The theatre halls in Kolkata can be divided into several sub-categories based on location and ownership. Theatres are roughly located in three broad geographic areas of the city—North, Central and South—and they are either privately owned or administered by the State government.

North Kolkata is the oldest part of the city and boasts large colonial buildings and winding alleyways. Central Kolkata is the business and the commercial heart of the city comparable to what is termed as the downtown in the United States. South Kolkata is almost as old as the North but developed much later compared to the North. Old colonial buildings exist in this part of the city along with more recent art-deco buildings, sprawling avenues and roads. Apart from these three principal parts of the city, Kolkata

⁴³² For a detailed discussion on the public/commercial theatre in Kolkata, see Sushil Kumar Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres, 1753-1980* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1982).

has continued growing in all four directions with the metropolitan area now extending far beyond the erstwhile city limits.

Theatre halls in Kolkata are either public facilities or privately owned. Academy of Fine Arts, G.D. Birla Sabhaghar, Gyan Manch and Kala Mandir are some of the private theatre halls in Kolkata. Girish Mancha, Minerva Theatre, Rabindra Sadan, Sisir Mancha, Madhusudan Mancha and Behala Sarat Sadan are administered by the Information and Cultural Affairs Department and maintained by the Public Works Department of the Government of West Bengal. The Star Theatre in the Hatibagan area of North Kolkata is owned by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation but is leased to Priya Entertainments, a private enterprise.

The Star Theatre and the Minerva theatre on Beadon Street are two nineteenth century theatres that are still in use. Both theatres have undergone significant renovations in recent years. The Star was reopened in 2004 after it was completely destroyed by a fire in 1991.⁴³³ The theatre in its current incarnation is used both for screening films and live performances with film screenings taking precedence. The Minerva Theatre re-opened in 2008 after being destroyed by a fire in 1922.⁴³⁴ Minerva Repertory Company housed in the theatre started its journey in 2010 with *Raja Lear* directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay.⁴³⁵ The company was dissolved in 2013.⁴³⁶ The theatre has not been in

⁴³³ “Kolkata corporation resurrects the legendary Star Theatre,” *Financial Express*, October 17, 2004.

⁴³⁴ Staff Reporter, “Minerva is reborn,” *The Telegraph*, February 29, 2008.

⁴³⁵ “King Lear for Calcutta,” *Caleidoscope*, *The Telegraph*, August 8, 2010.

use since. These two theatres along with Girish Mancha (opened in 1986) in the Bagbazar area of North Kolkata are three of the more prominent theatre venues in the North of the city.

The major hub of the city's theatre activity is now concentrated in and around the Nandan complex in Central Kolkata. The Academy of Fine Arts auditorium, arguably the most important theatre auditorium in the city, is located in this area flanked by the huge Rabindra Sadan and the tiny Sarat Sadan. The Paschim Banga Natya Akademi (West Bengal Academy of Theatre) is also in this area.⁴³⁷ Gyan Manch, Padatik Little Theatre and Kala Mandir are in close proximity. Madhusudan Mancha is the largest South Kolkata theatre facility. Mukhtangan Rangalaya, run by theatre group Shouvanik, is located in the prominent Kalighat area of South Kolkata but is not used frequently by prominent theatre groups in the city. Ahindra Mancha, a prominent theatre facility in 80s, opened after extensive renovations in 2013 in the Chetla Bazaar area of South Kolkata. The theatre however has not been able to gain as much momentum so far. G.D. Birla Sabhaghar occupies the basement of the gigantic Birla Temple in the Ballygunge Phari

⁴³⁶ Prithvijit Mitra, "Minerva Repertory dissolved, actors kept in the dark," *The Times of India*, March 12, 2013.

⁴³⁷ Ananda Lal, "A City of Theatre," *Performing Arts in India – Dance and Theatre*, Goethe Institut – India, 2010, <http://www.goethe.de/ins/in/lp/kul/mag/kus/dat/kol/en6387307.htm>. Lal refers to the Academy of Fine Arts as the "hallowed temple of group theatre" in this article and groups the prominent Kolkata theatre venues under the moniker "theatre district."

area of South Kolkata. Behala Sarat Sadan is located in the Behala area of South West Kolkata. This theatre facility has been under renovation for nearly three years.

As the above description surmises, theatre buildings are spread all over the city of Kolkata with performances happening in almost all of them every evening of the year. This wealth of performance certainly makes Kolkata one of the most vibrant theatre centers in India if not in the world. Several problems plague this theatre culture, however, and these problems are a complicated fall out of where the theatres are located, the location of audiences, inherent mechanisms of the theatre culture in Kolkata and the fact that these theatre facilities are beyond the control of the groups that perform in them.

The location of theatre buildings within the urban environment of the city is a major take off point for Knowles, Carlson, McAuley and Bennett. Marvin Carlson has demonstrated that theatre architecture and the location of the theatre within an urban landscape has the potential of strongly affecting the meaning that audiences make of the happenings on stage.⁴³⁸ Gay McAuley observes that the place where a theatre building is located “necessarily makes some statement about the way the theatre is perceived by society more generally and by its practitioners.”⁴³⁹ The location of a theatre building, McAuley reminds us “exercises a power of exclusion” on the audience. Susan Bennett writes, “Geographic location is always important. A play must be produced in a location

⁴³⁸ Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 33-34.

⁴³⁹ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 46.

that attracts an audience.”⁴⁴⁰ The location of theatre buildings within the complex urban environment of contemporary Kolkata represents the varied and complicated attitude of the city towards group theatre.

Since plays travel across venues, most theatregoers wait for performances to come to a preferred venue rather than making the extra effort of going to the theatre where the show is playing on a particular evening. There is an exception to this rule if the show is very popular or is nearing the end of its run or is the revival of an old favorite. Most auditoriums in the city are stand-alone theatre facilities. They are not located in or near a culture complex, which means that patrons who go to theatres to watch a performance visit the theatre simply because they are drawn to the play. The absence of any other incentive to visit the area where a theatre is located alienates the uninitiated from making the effort to catch a theatre performance. As McAuley observes, “The surrounding buildings and the activities associated with them add a further dimension to the framing function performed by the [theatre] building.”⁴⁴¹ The isolated theatre building exposes the ambivalent attitude towards theatre in Kolkata.

Theatre is not grouped together with other entertainment options in the city, and neither is it treated as a commercial commodity requiring marketing. Barring the Nandan Cultural Complex in Central Kolkata, most auditoriums are located in areas that are not conveniently reached by public transport, and patrons would need to walk considerable distance to get to the venue. Hence each auditorium ends up catering to patrons who are

⁴⁴⁰ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 120.

⁴⁴¹ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 45.

residents of the area where the auditorium is and can therefore reach the venue conveniently and more importantly reach home easily after the performance. Theatre buildings do not have convenient and dedicated parking facilities, either, which alienates certain section of the audience from venturing to the theatre. The inconvenient locations of the auditorium coupled with there being very little to do while at the theatre is a major drawback for the Bengali group theatre. It serves, I argue, to convey the message that theatre is a domain belonging “exclusively to initiates” who need to be devout to the art form in order to pursue it.⁴⁴²

The Nandan Cultural Complex in Central Kolkata is a notable exception to the trend described above. The area is home to three theatres (two government, one private): Rabindra Sadan, Sisir Mancha and Academy of Fine Arts, a movie theatre (Nandan), the West Bengal State Film Academy, the Bengali Language Academy, the West Bengal State Academy of Theatre, two art galleries and the Kolkata Information Center. It is very close to a subway stop, and several bus routes connect the area to almost every corner of the city. Every evening, the area is abuzz with cinephiles, art enthusiasts, artists, academics, writers, journalists and students. There are several entertainment options to choose from. One could catch a film show, choose between three plays, sit in on a lecture or a seminar or a book launch, watch an art or a photography exhibition or simply while away their time by chatting with friends and acquaintances. In recent times, the complex has also hosted several cultural festivals and book fairs. While the large crowd does not always translate into full houses at the theatres in the area, the popularity does hint at what McAuley describes as, “the divided nature of the urban population and theatre’s

⁴⁴² McAuley, *Spaces in Performance*, 47.

typically uncomfortable stance, desiring communion and finding that its appeal is to a very limited social group.”⁴⁴³

Audience Space

Inside the theatre building, there are spaces that are meant for the audience to gather in before a performance, during the intermission and occasionally after a performance. The box office, entrance, foyer, lobby, refreshment stands and even washrooms constitute what McAuley has referred to as the “Audience Space” in a theatre building. The audience space as a transitional space between the outside world and the theatrical event, Ric Knowles reminds us, has been studied in considerable detail, but the role of the audience space in shaping the audiences’ “horizon of expectation or containing their post-production response” has not been the subject of significant critical enquiry.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁴⁴ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 70. Horizon of expectation is an important component of Hans Rober Jauss’ Reception Theory. Jauss posits that each reader approaches and interprets a text based on her/his “horizon of experience,” or the sum total of reactions based on what they may have already read. Based on the horizon of experience, a reader has a horizon of expectation while approaching a text. In the context of performance, the horizon of expectation can be the result of previous experience of watching a particular actor or director’s work. Knowles appends to this idea and says that the audience’s experience in the audience space of a theatre is an equally important component of the horizon of expectation from the performance.

Most theatre auditoriums in Kolkata, India, are multi-purpose venues. Theatre events are one of the many events that these buildings host. Therefore, the halls do not cater to the idiosyncratic needs of theatre. This lack of distinct theatrical purpose affects both practitioners as well as members of the audience. McAuley writes, “The theatres that work ‘best’ for actors and spectators are ones that are sensitive to the physical dimensions of the body.”⁴⁴⁵ An examination of the arrangement of the auditorium helps to understand the experiences that they constrain and the ones that are allowed. Audience seating in most Kolkata auditoriums are arranged in vertical tiers. McAuley points out that the advantage of this sort of arrangement is that it brings more spectators closer to the stage, but the disadvantage of such an arrangement is that the sightlines are very bad.⁴⁴⁶ In the case of the bigger halls in Kolkata (Rabindra Sadan, Kala Mandir, Madhusudan Mancha and Girish Mancha), the advantage of the vertical tiered arrangement is minimized to a great extent because the enormity of the performance space means that a sizable number of audience members are a long way back from the stage. The upper tier in all three halls is also heavily raked, which gives spectators at the end rows of the auditorium the feeling of being in a stadium nosebleed section.

Gyan Manch and G.D. Birla Sabhaghar are two theatres that have the single-tiered seating arrangement. This seating plan allows most seats in the auditoriums to have an uninterrupted view of the stage. Gyan Manch is a more compact auditorium, and thus audiences seated at the very end of the auditorium are afforded a good view of the stage. This advantage is slightly lost in the case of the larger G.D. Birla Sabhaghar. The

⁴⁴⁵ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 53.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

Academy of Fine Arts auditorium has the tiered-seating arrangement. The lower level has a flat arrangement of seats with a negligible rake while the upper level has a gradual rake. I feel that the best viewing angle at the Academy of Fine Arts is the front row of the balcony.⁴⁴⁷ It affords a completely uninterrupted view of the stage, and the seats are at a level where the audience does not feel dwarfed by the proscenium like it does in some of the seats in the ground level. Padatik Buildwell Theatre is one of the only intimate theatre spaces in Kolkata.⁴⁴⁸ There is fixed audience seating in this space, which offers spectators a frontal view of the performance space. The auditorium seats fifty people, and chairs are arranged across platforms arranged like a staircase. Theatre group Rangakarmee converted its rehearsal space on Prince Anwar Shah Road to a black-box style theatre in 2013. The Binodini-Keya Mancha has been hosting intimate theatre performances over the last year.⁴⁴⁹ The practitioners, however, seem constrained by the conventional proscenium style prevalent in Kolkata, and I did not observe any experimentation with the spatial possibilities of this space.

The arrangement of seats in an auditorium is an architectural determinant of how much spatial mobility is allowed to the audience in an auditorium.⁴⁵⁰ The auditoriums in Kolkata, barring the exception of the Padatik and BKM, are arranged in the proscenium-

⁴⁴⁷ The balcony front-row seats are sold as premiere seats at the Academy of Fine Arts and for the same price as the second and third row seats in the lower level of the auditorium.

⁴⁴⁸ Henceforth Padatik.

⁴⁴⁹ Henceforth BKM.

⁴⁵⁰ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 57.

style arrangement with the action contained in the stage and audience seated in a frontal arrangement. There are two major styles of seating arrangement conventions that are followed in theatres across the world: continental and American.⁴⁵¹ In the continental style, there is no central aisle in the auditorium and seats are arranged in long rows with entrances on either side. In the American style, there are aisles in between groups of seats. The continental style seating allows more seats to be accommodated into a space but makes it difficult for patrons to enter and exit the rows especially if they are seated in the middle of the row. This problem is avoided in the American style where patrons have more ease of access. Most theatre halls in Kolkata use the American style with one or two aisles in between groups of seats depending on the size of the theatre.⁴⁵² The Gyan Manch is one of the few theatres in the city with a continental seating arrangement. Halls with American style seating, however, have the bulk of their seats in the central block with fewer seats on either side. Therefore, the advantages of the American arrangement are lost and patrons have to negotiate with fellow members of the audience to enter and exit a row.

Where one sits in the auditorium is also a measure of the individual's cultural, social and economic standing in the society. Invitees to a group's performance are typically seated in the two front rows of the auditorium. While these seats are often not the best seats in the auditorium, convention dictates that people seated in those seats

⁴⁵¹ VPA Wiki, last modified September 1, 2013,
[https://wiki.vpa.mtu.edu/wiki/index.php?title=](https://wiki.vpa.mtu.edu/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page)
Main_Page.

⁴⁵² The seating in all Kolkata theatres is also raked.

command a special respect. It is not uncommon to see audience members passing the front rows paying their regards to a familiar face. Being able to sit next to a dignitary in the front row indicates to the other spectators in the house that a person is either equally important to the group, is an accomplished artist or has the economic wherewithal to buy the expensive seats in the house. The stratification based on ticket prices thus joins hands with the architectural design of the building to hierarchize the audience in an auditorium.

The arrangement of audience space and presentational space (the stage) determines the flow of energy between the two spaces. It is this arrangement that decides whether a certain space will work or if it will impede a performance. McAuley reminds us that it is important that “the energy must flow both ways and not simply from actor to audience.”⁴⁵³ John Gielgud, McAuley quotes, had perceptively observed the role of the space in transforming “a collection of human beings into that curious, vibrant instrument for an actor – an audience.”⁴⁵⁴ There are certain spaces that enhance the theatre experience and others that stifle the response of an audience. Most auditorium spaces exert certain demands on an audience (no exit during the performance, fixed firmly forward looking seating, darkened space to focus attention on a single lit space, a similar reduction in sound levels to focus attention on the sound emanating from the single lit space) to “eliminate or at least maintain at a low level, undesired individual emotion.”⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵³ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 58-59.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. McAuley quotes the line from James Arnott, Heinrich Huesmann, and the International Federation for Theatre Research, Eighth World Congress, *Theatre Space: An*

McAuley draws on psychological studies of space to point out that psychologists make a connection between what is termed as the “information rate” of a building or environment and the psychological arousal levels of the inhabitants and users of the space. If the information rate for a building is low, the space is perceived as either bland or boring and users tend to be understimulated. This same information rate was the reason why, McAuley says, “hospitals began in the 1960s to introduce a little color into their stark white rooms, and schools began to hang pictures along their utilitarian corridors.”⁴⁵⁶ Modern theatres, however, McAuley points out, have not followed this trend so as not to draw attention away from the stage. Theatre halls in Kolkata follow a similar trend. The G.D. Birla Sabhaghar is a notable exception with murals of Hindu saints adorning panels along the walls of the auditorium. The information rate generated by this imagery strongly emphasizes the fact that the venue is attached to a Hindu temple and undermines, I would argue, the secular nature of the theatre entertainment presented on stage.

The presentation of other parts of the audience space constituting the foyer, lobby, refreshment stands, the stairways and corridors that lead to the auditorium and the box office all contribute to the information rate of the theatre building. McAuley gives examples from theatres in Europe, where foyers and lobbies are elaborately decorated, or from Australia, where the access to the theatre is very direct and the proximity of the world outside never allows the audience or the practitioners to forget the “vulnerability of

Examination of the Interaction between Space, Technology, Performance and Society (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1977), 149-57.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 59.

the human body in the face of modern technology.”⁴⁵⁷ This discussion assumes special relevance in the case of theatres in Kolkata where there is seldom any attention placed on the social places adjoining the theatre.

Theatre groups will sometimes set up small displays in the theatre lobby that highlight past achievements, include press reviews and a few photographs from the group’s most recent productions. There is also a stall that sells the program for the evening’s performance (referred to as the brochure in Kolkata) and publications by group members, often the director/leader of the group. Nonetheless, this ephemera does not generate enough information rate about the space for the audience. Groups are reluctant, I found out, to invest any more than what they already do to dress the lobby/foyer. Having to dismantle everything at the end of every performance and then having to painstakingly set it up again for the subsequent performance is certainly a major deterrent. Administrators of theatre buildings seem equally reluctant in decorating the audience space because the number of people coming to the theatre does not affect their business.⁴⁵⁸

In certain theatres like the Academy of Fine Arts, Gyan Manch and G.D. Birla Sabhaghar, the lobby space is kept open and the audience is allowed to mill about and browse the exhibits and the merchandise on sale. Hall authorities are however careful that groups are not effacing the wall or that they clean out everything at the end of the performance so that the space can be ready for use the next afternoon/evening. The

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁵⁸ As I discussed in the chapter on Working Conditions, groups have to pay a flat rental fee to use an auditorium. The auditoriums do not get a percentage of the ticket sales.

garden path leading up to the Padatik theatre is lined with boards bearing photos of Padatik's greatest theatrical achievements. Groups using the space are allowed to set up a small table with merchandise. All these theatre halls also have some seating available in their lobby. Theatre groups and hall authorities in some theatres like Madhusudan Mancha and Rabindra Sadan are often reluctant to allow the audience to enter into the lobby space. The audience can be seen making a long queue to enter the theatre. The main entrance is often open in conjunction to the doors to the auditorium and the audience is hardly allowed any time to congregate in the lobby. Most patrons make a beeline for the restrooms after entering the lobby and then head to the auditorium.

McAuley writes, "The connection between going to the theatre and the consumption of food and drink is long-standing, and there are fascinating differences in the customs and conventions that prevail in different places in this respect."⁴⁵⁹ Food and drinks are not allowed inside auditoriums in Kolkata. Some theatres, like G.D. Birla Sabhaghar, enforce it strictly, while some others are a bit relaxed about it. Interestingly enough, none of the theatres have restaurants, concession stands, bars or cafes attached to them. One can buy over-priced vegetarian snacks and hot beverages at Gyan Manch, Kala Mandir and G.D. Birla Sabhaghar before a show and during the intermission. In other theatres, patrons have to depend on hawkers around the theatre. The Nandan Cultural Complex has a plethora of food options, but none exclusively attached to any of the three theatres in the area. Part of the reason for disregarding the connection between food and theatre in Kolkata might be that Bengalis tend to eat dinner late and thus it is expected that most people would only snack while at the theatre rather than enjoying a

⁴⁵⁹ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 61.

meal. There is, however, no plausible reason for ignoring the possible revenue that having a snack counter attached to the theatre would generate. The negligence, I argue, stems from the fact that theatre is not considered a part of the leisure industry in Kolkata but is rather seen as an intellectual exercise. What the audience then pays for is not necessarily “a good night out” but rather a “stimulating or cathartic evening” with entertainment taking a secondary role.

McAuley observes that a discussion about the audience space in a theatre building would be “incomplete without some reference to the box office, or the site of financial transaction.”⁴⁶⁰ The box office is often the first place that a member of the audience has to negotiate with in a theatre building. Without the ticket, the audience is not allowed access to the otherwise forbidden inner space of a theatre building. The box office is either located right next to the entrance, separated from the foyer by doors that offer glimpses of the space within or in a separate room some distance from the theatre. Its location in the “interstitial space between outside and inside,” McAuley observes, makes the box office in most Western theatres a clear part of the audience space.⁴⁶¹

The location, decoration and pattern of transactions in Kolkata theatres are a clear indicator about the attitude of theatre practitioners and audience towards theatre as a commercial activity. Box offices in Kolkata theatres are not computerized. The attendant sits with a seating chart in front of him and a ticket booklet. The tickets are not the generic computer generated slips that are so common in the West now, but each group invests some energy in designing custom tickets for each production. The ends of tickets

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

are torn off at the door of the auditorium in lieu of the counterpart that is retained in theatres in the West. Patrons cannot pay digitally at the window, and the attendant often creates a fuss about having to tender change. The ticket windows at certain theatres like the Academy of Fine Arts are at a height where patrons have to bend low to talk to the attendant. The transaction is therefore quick with little or no room for pleasantries. Like in most movie theatres, there are usually two windows open at theatres, with one reserved for current bookings and the other reserved for advance purchases. There are no boards displaying the calendar of events with a simple cardboard signage over the window lit by a single electric lamp announcing the production playing that evening and another over the advance window displaying the forthcoming production. The areas around some theatres like Academy are crowded with mounted signage for upcoming productions. None of the posters usually mention the ticket prices since prices can vary between different theatres.

McAuley reminds us that theatre practitioners have always tried to “accentuate the distance between the financial transaction and experience of the performance.”⁴⁶² This pattern is especially true in Kolkata where being a theatre practitioner is still largely a voluntary activity. The money made from ticket sales enters the group’s coffers and is used to fund its activity. The audience, however, has always remained very aware of this financial reality of theatre. It is only recently that virtual bookings are being made possible in Kolkata, and some groups like Nandikar and Kasba Arghya have teamed up

⁴⁶² Ibid., 63.

with a private company to allow patrons to buy tickets online.⁴⁶³ While this is being seen and touted as a positive step in “modernization” of the theatre experience in the city, McAuley reminds us that virtual transactions help to distance the audience from the financial transactions associated with the performance further. According to McAuley the presence of the box office at the front of the theatre serves as a continuous reminder of the financial realities of the theatre even as practitioners and audience keep making efforts to, “separate itself from the contaminating effect of the financial transaction, as though we need to get that over with elsewhere.”⁴⁶⁴

Practitioner Space

Every theatre has an area that practitioners consider to be private – the domain of their work, the area where their craft is practiced – the “practitioner space.” McAuley observes that writing about this area of the theatre is difficult since it has not been documented systematically in the past and the area continues to be considered private by practitioners. The practitioner space, as McAuley defines it, includes “the actors’ point of entry to the theatre building, ... the dressing rooms, green room, or other social space provided for the artists, and the areas around, under, and above the stage that the spectators never see.”⁴⁶⁵ The major feature of this space is that it is inaccessible to the

⁴⁶³ Since the conclusion of my fieldwork in July 2013, several Kolkata groups have teamed up with the private company bookmyshow.in to allow online reservations of their shows. The exact terms and conditions of this association/collaboration are not mentioned in this research since it started after I left Kolkata.

⁴⁶⁴ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 63.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

public. The stage is, of course, the heart of the practitioner space. Although it is always under intense public gaze, Simon Callow observes there is considerable separation of public and private:

The functional stage, with its ropes and wires, its steep black brick walls, its little purple lights and tables full of props, wheels and weights, staircases leading down into the bowels of the building, and ladders leading up to the giddy flies, remains a potent phenomenon; the romance of work, the juju of craft—and all secret. Our kingdom.⁴⁶⁶

The backstage is the “world of work,” accessible to only those who have the requisite skill to make it work.⁴⁶⁷ In the case of Kolkata theatres, the audience often invades parts of the practitioner space in the process breaking the unseen boundaries between the world outside and the world of theatre.

In contemporary theatres, McAuley notes, lighting instruments and equipment are often visibly situated in the auditorium. Revealing the source of light was a part of Brecht’s technique to demystify the theatre, to show that the theatre event was the result of work and not magic.⁴⁶⁸ This convention has now gained so much currency that modern audiences do not often notice the presence of the lighting instruments, the light board operator and his equipment. In most Kolkata theatres, there is a separate operating booth for light board operators. These are often located at the back of the theatre over the last

⁴⁶⁶ Simon Callow, *Being an Actor* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 181-82.

⁴⁶⁷ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 64.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

row of seats so that the operator is afforded a clear view of the stage. No doubt this arrangement was done to hide the technical crew from the view of the audience.

The need to maintain the privacy and seclusion of the practitioner space can be the result of, McAuley notes, concealing the sordid nature of the work environment provided for actors and production staff. McAuley quotes Anthony Hopkins's observation on the subject: "Sometimes there is too great a contrast between the glamour and luxury of the front of house and the cramped squalor backstage."⁴⁶⁹ McAuley is quick to point out, however, that neither Hopkins nor Bergan (Hopkins' quote is from the foreword for the latter's book *The Great Theatres of London*) provide us with any corresponding images of the backstage in support of his complaint. She feels that there seems to be a tacit agreement between everyone concerned about not complaining about the dismal working conditions for actors and technicians.

The contrast between the front of house and backstage is not as stark in Kolkata. The negligence of the theatre hall administrators affects every part of the space, and thus often both audience space and practitioner space bear a forlorn look. There are some notable exceptions to this trend. The state-owned Rabindra Sadan and Madhusudan Mancha have expansive spaces on either side of the stage that allows practitioners to move freely and props to be arranged easily. Girish Mancha, although not as vast as the two theatres mentioned earlier, has ample space on either side too. Sisir Mancha is one of the smaller government facilities and lacks backstage space and larger productions tend to avoid the theatre because of the cramped backstage. Among the private theatres, G.D. Birla Sabhaghar and Kala Mandir are the most well fitted ones, whereas Gyan Manch has

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.

adequate space on stage left but absolutely no room on stage right. In each of these theatres, however, one can guess the condition backstage from the state of what I have discussed earlier (following McAuley's lead) as the audience space. Rabindra Sadan, Madhusudan Mancha and Sisir Mancha have clean lobbies, show less wear and tear and have clean restrooms for the audience. The backstage of these theatres (though varying in size) bear a similar look and feel. Girish Mancha on the other hand wears a more tattered and tired look, and the backstage matches this exterior demeanor. The private theatres, Kala Mandir and G.D. Birla Sabhaghar host various high-profile events throughout the year and are the preferred destination for touring shows (both national and international) when they pass through the city. These two halls are arguably two of the grandest theatre venues in the city, boasting resplendent lobbies and clean, modern restrooms. The backstage areas bear the stamp of the same kind of care that is accorded to the front of house. In a similar way, Gyan Manch, which is attached to a private school and also serves as the school auditorium, has an utilitarian front of house space: clean and efficient but lacking any decadence. The backstage space in Gyan Manch is very similar: organized, utilitarian, and a little cramped. The Academy of Fine Arts which I have celebrated earlier as the most respected and important theatre venue in the city comes closest to fitting the "cramped squalor" description of the backstage given by Hopkins. The theatre has very little backstage space on either side of the stage. It is really difficult for actors to switch sides during a performance because of the lack of space on the sides, and props have to be arranged inside the dressing rooms. The lobby of the theatre wears a tired and weary look with fluorescent lamps lighting the area. Old rickety benches are the only seating available for people waiting to enter the auditorium. True to the trend seen in

other theatres, the pitiful condition of the front of house amenities reflect on the cramped squalor that greets the practitioners in their “kingdom.”

The dressing room is an important part of the practitioner space in a theatre. McAuley and Knowles acknowledge the importance of this space.⁴⁷⁰ They suggest that allocation of private dressing rooms is an important marker of a particular actor’s position in the theatre company. The absence of private dressing rooms in Kolkata theatres leads to a communal atmosphere backstage and helps actors bond with each other; the positive energy emanating from such association often reflects on the work on stage.

Most theatres in Kolkata have two dressing rooms: female and male. In some theatres the dressing rooms are completely separate, whereas in others, like the Academy of Fine Arts, one enters through one of the dressing rooms and has to cross the stage to get to the other. Madhusudan Mancha and Rabindra Sadan each have two large dressing rooms behind the stage. There is ample seating in both rooms and attached restrooms for actors. The dressing rooms at Girish Mancha are arranged in two different levels above stage level. Women generally use the rooms at the lower level with men taking the one above that. Once inside the dressing rooms, one is greeted with a make-up area with a corridor to the side connecting to the second room. Both rooms have attached restrooms with showering facilities, but the restrooms are not well maintained. The dressing rooms at both levels are dimly lit and have an oppressive feel to them. Actors are required to negotiate with several flights of stairs to get to the stage but the stairwell is well lit even during a performance. Sisir Mancha has some of the cleanest and most well maintained

⁴⁷⁰ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 65; Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 69-70.

dressing rooms in the city. Their location immediately behind the stage and the precarious steps leading to the stage, however, make these spaces difficult to negotiate, especially for quick changes.

There are three dressing rooms at the Academy of Fine Arts. The room on stage right is slightly bigger than the two rooms on stage left. Both the dressing rooms have small changing areas separated from the dressing room proper by plywood partitions with no separate roofing. The dressing rooms on stage left are generally used as the female dressing room, since they are further away from the actor's entrance on stage right. The room, it seems, was the same size as the dressing room on stage right but has been partitioned to carve out a second room. Both dressing rooms have attached restrooms, but there is no showering facility. No more than twelve people can sit down for make-up together at any given time. The dressing rooms at Gyan Manch are located in the basement of the theatre. There are two large rooms and a couple of smaller individual rooms. The stage can be accessed from this space by a steep flight of stairs. G.D. Birla Sabhaghar has four dressing rooms of different sizes spread across the mezzanine and the ground level above the stage. Actors need to climb down a single flight or two flights of stairs to get to the stage. The assignment of green rooms in both these theatres, in my experience, is arbitrary.

Experience has taught the actors to negotiate with the backstage spaces in most theatres. The condition and situation, however, varies very widely when the group has to travel outside Kolkata. Nothing is under the group's control for call shows. If the show is being held in a theatre, the group has access to dressing rooms. These dressing rooms often leave a lot to be desired. The Rabindra Bhavan at Chinsurah, for example, did not

have enough chairs for all the actors to sit on. The Najrul Mancha at Ranaghat has shabby dressing rooms with very few and broken chairs. The dressing room has no place to store belongings and restrooms with fixtures falling apart. In yet other places where the groups have to perform in makeshift stages, there is often no proper dressing room. For one such performance in Bansheria, Hooghly members of Rang-Roop were given two tarpaulin enclosures as dressing rooms.

The stage door assumes a special place of importance in McAuley's discussion of the practitioner space. McAuley calls the stage door "a door of hesitation," borrowing from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, neither open nor bolted, and she characterizes it as a "particularly potent force" since the separation that it marks between the world of theatre inside it and the outside world is so absolute.⁴⁷¹ In most Western theatres, McAuley observes, the door is resolutely closed and may even be guarded by an official doorkeeper opening only for very brief moments. The stage door does not hold such a revered place in Kolkata theatres, especially for group theatre performances. As a theatre movement that grew out of the need to remove the star system that pervaded the commercial Bengali theatre in the middle of the twentieth century, the Bengali group theatre movement has always prided itself on being close to and accessible to the general populace. Even though the contemporary theatre practice has now reverted back to the star system, the backstage remains open and accessible to the common audience to walk into and meet the cast of the performance that they have just watched. Popular faces on television and screen and thespian-turned-politician-turned-minister all appear to let their guard down when interacting with a theatre audience at the end of a performance.

⁴⁷¹ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 67.

McAuley seeks to find the answer to the vital question regarding the value placed on the work of the actor and on the theatre in a society at the end of her insightful discussion on the practitioner space. While my attempt here has been to provide a description of the practitioner space in Kolkata, I cannot help but comment on the cultural and social value that the work of the theatre practitioner commands in Kolkata. The meager, unadorned utilitarian practitioner space in Kolkata theatres that I have described in the discussion above in conjunction to the similar attributes of the audience space leads to the conclusion that theatre occupies a marginal position in the cultural map of the city. The difference in attitude becomes stark when compared to the development that movie theatres have witnessed since 1991 (post economic liberalization) but a discussion on that is beyond the scope of the present study.⁴⁷²

Presentational Space

The final spatial category that McAuley creates is the presentational space. The presentational space in her terminology represents a notion that includes both the scenographic arrangement of the stage for a performance as well as its occupation by the

⁴⁷² For the situations leading up to the economic reforms in 1991, see Bernard Weinraub, “Economic Crisis Forcing Once Self-Reliant India to Seek Aid,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1991. The reforms led to the ease of foreign investment, cut down on subsidies and diminish license requirements for businesses. The changes that the economic reforms brought about were drastic even if economic growth was not achieved overnight. Movie theatres in India today resemble any movie theatre in the West with multiple screens, plush seating and dedicated concession stands.

actors.⁴⁷³ The stage is the center of focus in a theatre building both to the audience and the practitioners. A stage, McAuley writes, is an instrument and can be very complex in what it needs and what it can offer.⁴⁷⁴ The presentational space includes not only the architectural idiosyncrasies of a stage in a performance venue but also its organization for a particular production. The stage also exercises a psychological and philosophical control on the meaning and the aesthetic of a theatre event. Thus the proscenium tends to enclose the actors in their separate space from the audience, an orchestra pit creates a strongly marked separation and a simple platform offers the actors more to the spectators' gaze. The nature of the space decides what kind of performance "will 'work' in the space, the nature of the acting required, and the degree of physical stress on the practitioners."⁴⁷⁵

Theatre halls in Kolkata, barring a couple of exceptions like Padatik and BKM, are all proscenium stages. This design automatically dictates the kind of performance that is seen in the city. Borrowing from McAuley's argument that proscenium stages tend to isolate the actors in their own separate space on stage, I argue that adapting to the proscenium stage has resulted in plays that are all narrative and realist in style. The directors, designers and actors are all invested in creating a story for the audience, a fictional world that the audience is allowed into for the duration of the performance. The curtained stage before a performance, to borrow from Bachelard, then is a closed casket, something that needs to be experienced from the outside, but holds the promise of an interior, of something that is going to be revealed. What is revealed is always a separate

⁴⁷³ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 74.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

world, one that forces the spectator to forget the world outside. The performance, as McAuley points out, remains a performance and its fragility is heightened by any “untoward occurrence:” either a technical hitch or a disturbance from among the audience like the ringing of a cellular phone.⁴⁷⁶

A recent trend noticeable in certain performances in Kolkata is the abandoning of the use of the front curtain at the start of the performance. This move was seen in the West in the 1960s and 1970s as observed by McAuley when theatre moved out of traditional theatres and into found spaces. The dialectic of the hidden and the revealed, which McAuley observes as being fundamental to theatre, continues to re-assert itself on the performance especially on the proscenium stage. Even in productions where aesthetic choices emphasized a full revelation, the audience is never allowed to forget that they are peeking into a fictional world that has been engineered for the performance. When the open stage style is followed modern lighting design becomes a close ally to accentuate the hiding/revealing dialectic. The stage can be presented as fully dark, or it could be completely illuminated or partially lit all of which allows the audience to engage differently with the stage and its décor. As McAuley observes, “Until the set is occupied by the performers, however, it exists in a kind of lambent state, an incitement to dream rather than an active element in a complex total artwork.”⁴⁷⁷

Conclusions

Peter Brook after years of experience came to the conclusion that the décor of a play is space specific and hence cannot be taken on tour, whereas the play itself can

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 76.

travel and adapt to various spaces and places, sometimes even without décor.⁴⁷⁸ In Kolkata, groups travel across theatres with the same décor and the design, often disregarding or being forced to disregard the physical idiosyncrasies of each new space. Theatre, Knowles reminds us, is the most social and place-specific among the arts.⁴⁷⁹ The continuous displacement results in a loss of that specificity. Practitioners of Bengali theatre, having to negotiate with the continuous displacement, create performances that cater to universal themes and ideas. This compromise negates any significant engagement with any particular performance venue; companies resorting to adjustments instead. While the performances all take place in the same city and are attended by audiences that belong to a similar (if not an identical) milieu, moving a performance across venues requires subtle to definite tweaks (both performance and design). These changes in turn affect audience reception. The audience seeks to find the message of the play above and beyond the particulars of the aesthetic choices made by the designer or the director.

André Antoine and David Williamson take a completely different approach to stage décor. They believe in creating the fictional world of the play in as much detail as possible. It was only when the *locus dramatis* was fully realized that the question of the position of the audience was considered.⁴⁸⁰ Yet another perspective to the role of décor and its negotiation with space can be seen in the creative collaborations between Brecht and his scenic designer, Caspar Neher. Brecht and Neher believe that the “set needs to

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 80. McAuley is referring to Peter Brook, “Introduction,” *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, special issue on “Les lieux du spectacle,” n.p.

⁴⁷⁹ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 89.

⁴⁸⁰ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 80-81.

spring from the rehearsal of groupings, so in effect it must be a fellow-actor.”⁴⁸¹ Neher always began with the action and observed the negotiations that the actors were doing with the space before beginning a sketch. The presentational space thus not only remained as a container for the action but also became an integral part of the whole process. These approaches, however, can only be realized if the groups in Kolkata had access to a single venue for a single production and did not have to move the play for every performance. Youth theatre groups in the city and some alternative theatre groups like Bibhaban and Alternative Living Theatre have been able to follow these models of negotiating with the presentational space.

Youth theatre groups have shorter runs and tend to perform their plays in a single theatre. Gyan Manch in Central Kolkata has become synonymous with youth theatre in the city. Groups like Hypokrites, Kolkata Romroma and M.A.D. (Mad about Drama) are therefore able to plan the compositions and setting accordingly. Limited financial resources often do not allow these groups to build and play with the *locus dramatis* for any longer than what conventional groups can. The advantage, however, lies in the fact that they are familiar with the dimensions and the particular physical attributes of this space very well. This familiarity results in the directors and actors engaging with the space more intimately. The composition often goes out of the stage space and uses the passage in front of the stage, the raked aisles on either side of the seats and the balcony perches overlooking the audience. Bibhaban and Alternative Living Theatre have been performing at the Proscenium Arts Center in North Kolkata and Akhra in Madhyamgram respectively for several years. The long experience of working in these spaces has taught

⁴⁸¹ John Willett, *Caspar Neher: Brecht's Designer* (London: Methuen, 1986), 98.

the directors and actors of these two groups how to use their respective spaces so much so that, to echo Gay McAuley, the theatres have become “really necessary to them in artistic terms.”⁴⁸²

Bengali group theatres, which do not have a permanent home space, resemble theatre companies that Knowles refers to as “nomadic and touring theatres.”⁴⁸³ He comments that the work of these companies represent a “healthy dislocation” guaranteeing an engagement with space on some level.⁴⁸⁴ He also points out that the continued displacement and state of homelessness leads to a certain exhaustion. The exhaustion is the result of a continuous and difficult search for rental spaces and the reality that when such spaces are found it is often difficult to control them. This search in turn pulls the company’s work around in unanticipated ways. Bengali group theatre companies suffer from the same exhaustion.

The major difference between the companies whose work Knowles studies and the Bengali group theatre companies is while Cheek by Jowl, Ex Machina and Theatre Complicite stage a particular production in a single space before the search for a new space begins, most groups in Kolkata stage the same production across several venues. The limited availability of performance spaces often means that there can be a hiatus of several days between a production’s premiere and the next performance besides having to engage with each space anew for every performance.

⁴⁸² McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 78.

⁴⁸³ Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 88.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 89.

The homelessness of Bengali theatre companies effects the way elements of production are prioritized in the theatre. Not unlike its Western counterpart, the director assumes the position of the chief arbiter in Bengali theatre. She/he often wields an upper hand over the aesthetic choices made by the designer during performances. Shows are set up and struck for every performance in Kolkata. The scenic designer usually presides over the set-up and assembly of a set for the premiere production. She/he is not present for subsequent performances although the director is. The director often switches positions of set pieces or adds and subtracts parts of scenic design elements without consulting the designer.

Veteran scenic designer Khaled Choudhuri remembers one such instance when the director Shyamanand Jalan of Padatik decided to saw off a portion of the set for *Evam Indrajit*, which Choudhuri had designed.⁴⁸⁵ This decision significantly changed the look of the play, but Jalan defended his choice, saying that it did not effect the meaning of the play. I have seen similar arbitrary changes being made during my stint with the theatre group Rang-Roop when director Sima Mukhopadhyay dictated the way the set was to be arranged hours before a performance without prior consultation with the designer. In a similar fashion, the light designer is often simply ordered to change the look of a particular scene because the director feels that a certain light scheme is not working.

The exhaustion that Knowles hints at, therefore, plagues the Bengali group theatre in multiple ways. Some of it is on the surface, like the exhaustion of having to continually

⁴⁸⁵ Samik Bandyopadhyay and Pratibha Agarwal ed., *Hindi Theatre in Kolkata: Shyamanand Jalan and His Times* (Calcutta: Natya Shodh Sansthan and Thema, 2011), 52.

look for a space and not being able to control the space when it is found. Others are subliminal (while being more literal) and affect the look and feel of the theatre culture. The continuous displacement takes a toll on the physical set and after a few performances the set pieces show substantial wear and tear. The actors, directors and technicians are exhausted from having to negotiate with a new space for every performance. This exhaustion results in everyone making compromises to make things work. The compromises lead to revisiting and reusing formulas, which have worked in the past— narrative, design and performance. The overuse of formulas contributes in turn to the whole theatre culture wearing a dated, exhausted feel.

PART III: CASE STUDIES

I will use the model of performance analysis I developed in part two of this dissertation to study select productions from two group theatre groups and the burgeoning youth theatre movement from Kolkata in this section of the dissertation. In doing so, I will be bringing aspects of material conditions of theatre production and reception out of the “artificial isolation of the semiotic laboratory” and into a more productive dialogue with each other.⁴⁸⁶ The various aspects discussed in isolation in the previous section apply together in different performative circumstances. The attempt is to create a model of critical analysis of meaning production in the theatre that includes a wider range of shaping mechanisms than is done in current critical discourse.

The groups Rang-Roop and Theatre Formation Paribartak (TFP) and the nascent youth theatre movement in Kolkata are representative examples from among the theatre landscape in Kolkata. Rang Roop is a suburban theatre group that strives to produce “good” social drama, and while their productions receive critical appreciation, that does not often translate into box office returns. TFP works on the periphery of the group theatre culture, seldom surfacing in the group theatre mainstream. Youth theatre is a relatively new phenomenon in Kolkata. The most active of the current groups was only founded in 2008. Some of these groups have already managed to turn heads and forced the theatre mainstream to sit up and take notice of their work. I will be looking at three of

⁴⁸⁶ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

these groups: Hypokrites, M.A.D (Mad About Drama) and 4th Bell Theatres in this section besides giving an overview of the youth theatre landscape in general.

The analysis of the work of these groups seldom move beyond the text of the play, or what Ric Knowles refers to as the tendency to “treat all theatrical production as taking place in a material vacuum.”⁴⁸⁷ Knowles suggests that critics and reviewers should instead “learn not simply to interpret and analyse [sic] production texts *as* texts, but also analytically to read the material theatre itself, and the conditions that shape theatrical production.”⁴⁸⁸ He also calls upon the directors, actor, designers and technicians to not only acknowledge but confront the material conditions within which they function, especially if they want to achieve some intervention in the circulation of cultural values and if they wish their work to be culturally productive rather than being re-productive. The work of these groups variously fits this framework. While TFP can certainly be seen as acknowledging and confronting the material conditions of production, Rang Roop’s theatre does not achieve any intervention and assumes a more re-productive stance. The youth theatre groups challenge some of the existing conventions, but by choosing to largely remain within the proscenium framework rather than attempting to break away from it, the groups, it can be said, slow down their intervening role.

The analyses in this part of the dissertation take both an emic (from the perspective of a former Bengali group theatre worker) and an etic (as a researcher probing into Bengali theatre with a nuanced critical understanding) approach. Morris et al. reminds us that an emic research requires “sustained, wide-ranging observation of a

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

single cultural group” whereas etic research involves “brief, structured observations.”⁴⁸⁹

The researchers hint, however, citing Goodenough, that emic “descriptions also can be pursued in more structured programs of interview and observation.”⁴⁹⁰ The emic approach in my research is a sum-total of my sustained engagement with the theatre culture as a “native” practitioner as well as the structured research conducted through participant observation and interviews during the fieldwork period. The etic approach uses materialist semiotic performance analysis as a means of the information generated from an emic viewpoint. In other words, understanding the material conditions from within allows me to comment on the shows that I observe from without better.

I will be relying on newspaper reviews of plays, informal discussions with spectators and my own experience of watching and working for plays (both on and off stage) for the purposes of this analysis. The case studies are arranged to reflect the changing landscape of Bengali group theatre. The section opens with the study of Rang-Roop. The group formed in 1974 can be seen in many ways to represent some of the old group theatre values in both process and the eventual product. The study on Theatre Formation Paribartak exposes the reader to the subterranean alternative theatre circuit in Kolkata. The third and final case study focuses on the youth theatre movement as vanguards of the future direction that this theatre culture is taking. Together the three studies are representative of the contemporary group theatre scene in Kolkata.

⁴⁸⁹ Michael W. Morris et al., “Views from Inside and Outside: Integrating Emic and Etic Insights About Culture and Justice Judgment,” *Academy of Management Review* 24, No. 4 (1999): 782.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 7
CASE STUDY 1
RANG-ROOP

During the 2012-2013 season, theatre group Rang-Roop had three plays in its repertory: *Jachhabi* (Watermark, premiere 2008), *Mayer Moto* (Like a Mother, premiere 2011) and *Patro o Patri* (Groom and Bride, premiere 2012). Rang-Roop produced *Adhara Madhuri* (Elusive Beauty) in early 2013, replacing *Patro o Patri* in the repertoire. During my fieldwork, I attended the rehearsals of all these plays and also attended multiple shows of *Jalchhabhi*, *Mayer Moto* and *Adhara Madhuri*. The plays were performed not only in all the major auditoriums in Kolkata but also across small towns where the group was invited for “call shows.” In this section, I will offer a critique of Rang-Roop’s *Jalchhabhi*, *Mayer Moto* and *Adhara Madhuri* using the materialist semiotic performance analysis that I have developed in the preceding section of this study. The processes underlying the production of these plays assume more significance in this analysis over the narratives of the plays. Therefore, the discussion of what the play entails is left till the very end whereas the circumstances leading up to the production are dealt with at the beginning. The same style will be followed in both the case studies that follow.

Rang-Roop describes itself as “one of the prime theater teams of Kolkata, West Bengal” on its website.⁴⁹¹ Theatre scholar and columnist Ananda Lal notes that the group is the “Bengali theatre’s vanguard of indigenous feminism, spotlighting ordinary women who become role models of personal strength.”⁴⁹² Sima Mukhopadhyay, who directs most of the group’s shows besides acting in them, leads Rang-Roop. She has also written plays and adapted Bengali short stories for the stage. Ananda Lal writes that Sima Mukhopadhyay’s plays consistently deal “with subjects that male writers tend to bypass.”⁴⁹³

Mukhopadhyay directed all three plays that I will be discussing in this section. She played the lead in *Jalchhabhi* and *Mayer Moto* while playing a major supporting role in *Adhara Madhuri*. All three plays emphasize the signature Rang-Roop theme of Bengali domestic life, with the action revolving around women protagonists. Mukhopadhyay did not don the playwright’s hat for any of these plays. Dr. Tirthankar Chanda adapted *Jalchhabhi* from British playwright Martin McDonagh’s 1996 play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Noted Bengali playwright Mohit Chattopadhyay adapted *Mayer Moto*, originally a short story by Kabita Singha, while Dr. Chanda wrote *Adhara Madhuri*.

⁴⁹¹ “About Us,” Rang-Roop, accessed on April 9, 2014, <http://www.calcuttayellowpages.com/adver/108186.html>.

⁴⁹² Ananda Lal, “A Foreigner Comes Calling,” *The Telegraph*, January 15, 2011.

⁴⁹³ Ananda Lal, *Theatres of India: A Concise Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

Rang-Roop is based in Behala, southwest Kolkata, where it was founded in 1974. The group's forte lies in producing plays that deal with quintessential Bengali domestic themes. The plays adhere to the realist-naturalist tradition. In the productions discussed here, Rang-Roop under Sima Mukhopadhyay's stewardship has tried to experiment with choreography and scenic design. The acting in all three plays continues to adhere to the realist tradition with actors striving to "become" the characters.

Members of Rang-Roop are volunteers and most of them hold daytime jobs. Sima Mukhopadhyay and her husband and secretary of the group Suvasish Mukhopadhyay are the only two full-time theatre workers who draw a salary/honorarium from the group. In the recent past, members were paid a token travel allowance for shows. That practice was stopped towards the middle of 2013 owing to an abrupt paucity in federal government funding.⁴⁹⁴

Rang-Roop receives federal aid from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. They received the ministry's salary and production grants in both 2012 and 2013. The production grant award requires recipients to produce a new play every year.⁴⁹⁵ According to Rang-Roop executive committee member Jayanta Mitra the compulsion to

⁴⁹⁴ This discussion on membership, organization and funding is based on my conversations with group members Jayanta Mitra, Pritha Banerjee and Sime Mukhopadhyay. Some of the later discussions on process are also based on my own observations during rehearsals as well from the experience of having been a member of this group between 2002 and 2009.

⁴⁹⁵ Please see the section on Funding in the Working Conditions chapter for a detailed discussion on the terms and conditions for the award of this grant.

produce a new play in order to ensure the grant often leads the group to choose works that they would not have otherwise produced. Mitra observes that the group tries to choose plays with room for experimentation but opines that compromises need to be and have been made while selecting scripts. Rang-Roop has also been the recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi grants and the Ministry of Culture's conference and workshop grants.

The volunteer members of Rang-Roop represent various walks of life. The membership includes educators, bankers, homemakers, students, medical professionals, insurance agents and retirees. Some of these theatre enthusiasts join Rang-Roop with prior stage experience. For the overwhelming majority of the membership, this group is their first foray into serious theatre. As a result, the levels of performance acumen vary widely between individuals. Training is provided in-house to members, but the process is not methodical with a workshop schedule. Sima Mukhopadhyay leads various workshops during the run-up to a production for group members. Member Pritha Banerjee observes that most of the in-house workshops stress vocal training for the actors.⁴⁹⁶ The group occasionally organizes physical theatre workshops by senior theatre practitioners from other groups. Rang-Roop has also organized make-up workshops and theatre history classes for its members.⁴⁹⁷ The majority of the learning happens by watching other actors in rehearsal or while participating in one. Mukhopadhyay uses a variety of methods to communicate what she wants from her actors. She gives notes to more senior and

⁴⁹⁶ Pritha Banerjee, in discussion with the author, March 7, 2013.

⁴⁹⁷ "About Us," Rang-Roop, accessed April 9, 2014, <http://www.calcuttayellowpages.com/adver/108186.html>.

seasoned actors, and for some of the more inexperienced members of her troupe, she demonstrates exactly what it is she is looking for.

Rang-Roop rehearses for four days a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays between six and nine in the evening. The rehearsals take place at a state government owned and operated adult education center in the Sahapur area adjoining Behala. The group rents this space and has to pay a fixed monthly rent for it. In exchange, they are allowed to use the main classroom space in the first floor of the building, an adjoining room as storage and the restrooms. Rang-Roop shares this space with several other organizations from the area. Although scheduling conflicts are kept to a minimum occasionally the group has to adjust rehearsal times or cancel rehearsals for an evening owing to another event happening in the space. The rehearsal space is fifty feet by twenty feet. There are benches and a blackboard in the room besides a few tables, chairs and a large high wooden platform. The space is not air-conditioned, and mosquito repellents need to be used to ward off mosquitoes. During the final weeks leading up to a production, the group uses the houses of members for additional rehearsal before shifting to an auditorium for technical and dress rehearsals.

Rehearsals for Rang-Roop productions follow a standard reading-off the book-blocking-stage rehearsal routine. The group tries to rehearse for a minimum of two months before opening a new play. Rehearsal sessions are typically three hours long, but the hours are extended closer to the opening. Night rehearsals (between ten in the evening and six in the morning) and daylong sessions during public holidays and weekends replace the normal schedule. Jayanta Mitra observes that the group does not hold

auditions and the casting decision is not a democratic process.⁴⁹⁸ The director takes the decision and then discusses her choice with some of the senior members. Mukhopadhyay confirms this process and opines that since she has been interacting with her actors over a long period of time, she has developed a basic understanding of who is capable of what. She distributes acting responsibilities accordingly but with the disclaimer that initial choices are not final and she may want to try someone else for a character based on further rehearsals.⁴⁹⁹

Rang-Roop relies primarily on its membership to cast its shows, but in the productions discussed here, the director chose to look outside the group and hire the services of more seasoned actors. Veteran actors Bimal Chakraborty (Nandipat) and Chitra Sen (Swapnasandhani) essay the roles of the male lead and female supporting role in *Jalchhabhi*. Chitra Sen returns in *Mayer Moto* for a short but important cameo, while veteran comedian Kamal Chattopadhyay (Anyra Theatre) stars in *Adhara Madhuri*. All of these actors receive a token honorarium from the group for attending rehearsals as well for show days.

The need to hire more seasoned actors for lead roles in Rang-Roop plays is a result of economic and practical needs. Bimal Chakraborty, Chitra Sen and Kamal Chattopadhyay are all well known names in Bengali theatre. Having them on board translates to additional revenues from shows in Kolkata as well as in the suburbs. Chakraborty and Sen are also seen in very popular television soaps, and the audience is always excited to see their screen idols in the flesh. Chattopadhyay is one of the busiest

⁴⁹⁸ Jayanta Mitra, in discussion with the author, July 3, 2013.

⁴⁹⁹ Sima Mukhopadhyay, in discussion with the author, June 6, 2013.

actors in Bengali group theatre, and the Bengali theatre audience is familiar with his prowess as a comedian and is attracted by his histrionic skills. The practical aspect of having these actors on board is to compensate for the lack of strong actors in Rang-Roop besides a handful of members, a problem that plagues most groups, especially smaller groups. Besides Sima Mukhopadhyay, Jayanta Mitra and former member Gopa Nandi, the group lacks able actors who can carry a lead character on their shoulders. Hiring seasoned actors therefore becomes a necessity for the group.

The rehearsal spaces that Rang-Roop uses have very little to no resemblance to the eventual performance sites. The blocking and movement is based, therefore, on approximations, with the experience of having performed in most of the spaces in Kolkata serving as a mental guideline. Set pieces are improvised out of the available furniture in the rehearsal spaces. The group does not have any resident scenic or lighting designers. After the script selection, the director enquires into the available budget. Depending on the budget and the plan that the director has in mind for the show, designers are chosen. Scenic designer Sanchayan Ghosh designed both *Jalchhabhi* and *Mayer Moto*, while Hiran Mitra designed *Adhara Madhuri*. Badal Das has been working as Rang-Roop's lighting designer for well over a decade now and designed the lights for all three shows. Costume designing/planning for Rang-Roop shows are done either by Debasish Roy Chowdhury or Pritha Banerjee, both members of the group. Miska Halim, who was a member of the group at the time but has turned to freelance work since then, designed the costumes for *Jalchhabhi*. Tarit Bhattacharya, a freelance music designer, has been in charge of designing the score for all three plays in discussion here.

Like all Bengali theatre groups Rang-Roop travels across several venues to perform its shows: in Kolkata, suburban towns and district towns. The production team is well aware of the idiosyncrasies of most performance venues in Kolkata. The scenery is designed according to the measurements of the Academy of Fine Arts stage with some room factored into it to allow for adjustments to be made in a bigger or smaller venue. The scenery is stored at the warehouse of the set builders Raj Drama Set Suppliers. The builders provide an assembly crew of one or two for shows and also transport the sets to any venue in Kolkata and its immediate suburbs in return for a flat fee. For outstation call shows, Rang-Roop does not travel with the entirety of the scenery, carrying only the bare essentials and easily transportable pieces: folded tarpaulin sheets, small paper cutouts and small painted plywood pieces. The rest of the scenery is improvised based on the resources of the organizers. The set builder usually sends a member of the assembly crew with the group to help in building, painting and assembling the pieces that are being put together. The improvisations are often very different from the original scenic design of the piece. The group has to resort to this compromise in order to ensure that they can minimize costs while traveling for “call shows” and maximize profits from these out of town performances.

For example, for the performance of *Adhara Madhuri* at Balurghat, North Dinajpur, the group carried only the cardboard cut outs that show two men in bizarre yoga postures.⁵⁰⁰ All the furniture pieces were sourced from a local decorator and painted on site. The furniture was far more ornate than the ones that are used for shows in

⁵⁰⁰ I traveled with the performance team to Balurghat, North Dinajpur, for this performance in February 2013.

Kolkata and were uniformly designed, which did not leave room to distinguish between the three different locations that the play's action moves through. The director presides over these design choices in the absence of the scenic designer, who typically does not travel with the group for performances. Even in Kolkata, once the show has opened, the director assumes control of the production, and it is solely based on her decision that scenic elements are retained or discarded for every show. For a performance of *Jalchhabhi* at the cramped Nazrul Mancha auditorium in Ranaghat, Nadia (February 2013), for example, Sima Mukhopadhyay decided that the stage did not have enough depth to allow all the plastic sheets that Sanchayan Ghosh had designed for the show to be hung. Accordingly, the set assembly crew was instructed to do away with a couple of pairs of the sheets. The same routine was repeated at the Academy of Fine Arts theatre in Kolkata when the crew was having a hard time trying to figure out the exact line set from which the sheets hang.

Design, especially scenic design, is used to give the audience an idea of the kind of space that the action is located in rather than being an inseparable part of the aesthetic. The ease with which elements are appended and/or discarded are suggestive of the tendency to regard scenic elements as mere decorations which do not affect the overall meaning making of the play. The narrative takes precedence in this regard, and the director's primary concern lies in being able to communicate the message of the play. The hierarchy thus created assumes that the story and the people who tell the story are the most important parts of the production process, and everything else, including design, is extraneous but essential as embellishments.

Rang-Roop performs in a wide variety of spaces including makeshift stages in fairgrounds. These spaces pose considerable challenge for actors as well as designers. In multiple instances, the group only has between two to three hours to load in a show and get ready for a performance.⁵⁰¹ These venues often lack in basic practitioner space amenities like restrooms, adequately lit dressing rooms and a secure storage area for belongings. Auditoriums in municipal towns like Chinsurah, Ranaghat and Balurghat are seldom maintained properly, and the dressing rooms and restrooms show considerable wear and tear. The men's dressing room in Nazrul Mancha, Ranaghat, for example, had broken restroom fixtures and no running water. In makeshift venues the dressing area is a tarpaulin enclosure with a couple of mirrors.

The stage or presentational space in makeshift venues stands on bamboo stilts or on rows of wooden platforms covered by jute carpets to cover the vast volumes of electric cable that needs to be laid down. Stage weights are never available to hold set pieces in place and are substituted by bricks or chunks of concrete. An open performance venue also requires amplification, which interferes with the visual aesthetic of the piece since microphones are hung in rows over the stage. Actors need to ensure that they find the nearest microphone while delivering dialogues and improvising on the blocking does this. Entrances and exits are also improvised upon to accommodate to the specific needs of the space. Some venues in Kolkata, like the Behala Sarat Sadan and suburban venues

⁵⁰¹ While the amount of load-in time is almost the same in Kolkata auditoriums, the performance spaces outside the city pose an extra challenge for the performers and the designers. Often, neither group has any idea about the space and its technical specifications.

like the Ram Gopal Mancha in Howrah, lack proper acoustics, and actors have to adjust their movement and delivery depending on the position of the microphones. While Mukhopadhyay does not always block shows based on the possibilities of having to make adjustments to the needs of various venues, her preference for linear compositions and the drawing room setting of Rang-Roop plays makes it easier for her actors to make the adjustments for frontal delivery into a microphone.

The audience space is beyond the group's control in invited performances. The organizers manage ticket sales and Rang-Roop seldom puts up a display or a merchandise booth. In performances hosted and organized by the group and depending on the venue the group sets up a counter to sell programs and anthologies of plays written by Sima Mukhopadhyay. A display with photographs of current shows and newspaper reviews is also put up. The group celebrates October 2 as its foundation day. The celebration typically takes place at the Academy of Fine Arts auditorium. The day coincides with a public holiday on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. The premiere venue is rented for the entire day, and there is typically a double billing featuring two of the most recent Rang-Roop productions. A simple floral decoration adorns the lobby of the auditorium surrounded by bouquets received from other theatre groups to mark the occasion.

Rang-Roop's plays have what Dean Wilcox would describe as "a fixed, external narrative structure."⁵⁰² The plays seldom, if at all, veer from a fixed trajectory of beginning, middle and end. The narratives often have a strong melodramatic component

⁵⁰² Dean Wilcox, "What does Chaos Theory have to do with Art?" *Modern Drama* 39, No. 4 (Winter 1996): 701.

echoed by the acting. Most of the action is set in indoor locations—mostly living rooms of people’s houses where the characters get together to discuss a problem and find an eventual solution or resolution. Mukhopadhyay does not stray from the domestic theme but presents it either as tragedies, comedies or melodrama in her shows.

The audience in Rang-Roop plays relate very easily to the slice of domestic life that is presented on stage. Mukhopadhyay weaves a story that is familiar to most of her audience members, who lead lives similar to the characters on stage. She talks about the problems that plagues ordinary middle class lives and offers a solution, a resolution or a message that transcends the ordinariness of their lives. A look at the narratives of the plays in discussion here will clarify this position further.

Adhara Madhuri is the story of three couples – Rameshwar and Madhuri Adhikari, Salil and Bithi Ghosh and Binoy and Arunima Roychowdhury.⁵⁰³ Madhuri develops an obsession for “Yoga” and other televised wellness regimes. She subjects Rameshwar to a strict routine of pranayams, yoga and strict medicinal diet. Rameshwar is fed up and desperately looks for an escape from this fitness torture. Bithi Ghosh is a forty something housewife whose sole mission in life is to acquire everything that comes for free on purchase of another product. Be it a small steel bowl or a pair of toilet brushes, Bithi will chase every freebie down. Her husband Salil is tasked with acquiring these free items. His routine outside of work revolves around shuttling between neighborhood grocery stores and supermarkets hunting out “free gifts.” He, too, seeks a respite from chasing freebies. The two tired husbands meet for the first time at Rest-a-While, a small

⁵⁰³ *Adhara Madhuri*, Performance brochure (Kolkata: Rang-Roop, 2013).

innocuous bar-restaurant run by the elderly Roychowdhurys – Binoy and Arunima. It is here that they hatch a plan to teach each other's wives a lesson.

Rameshwar and Salil decide to go into hiding from their respective families. They, however, secretly introduce themselves at the other's home with the intent of teaching the wives a lesson. The play ends with the male protagonists realizing that they have forgotten to pay attention to the little things about their respective partners, which make them special. The female leads, for their part, understand that they were pushing their partners too much and need to show restraint in order to lead healthier lives and more fulfilling relationships. The Roychowdhurys orchestrate the finale where all the couples come together and celebrate each other after an emotional climax.

Mayer Moto is the story of a freedom fighter's wife.⁵⁰⁴ After the death of her husband, Nalini Mitra is left behind with three children – two sons and a daughter. The financially unstable family struggles to make ends meet. When her eldest son Debabrata gets an admission to study at a prestigious educational institution abroad, Nalini sells her last possessions to put together the money needed. Debabrata disregards his mother's sufferings and chooses to settle abroad, not even bothering to communicate with her. Debabrata returns home after twenty-five years to settle a marriage for his daughter Shila. The family drama intensifies when the groom's grandaunt refuses to take the alliance any further without meeting Shila's grandmother. Debabrata has no option but to visit his mother in her humble abode on the outskirts of the city. Nalini's daughter Subrata, basking in the glory of his NRI brother and his riches, accompanies him. Nalini appears very calm and welcomes her children to her house. She assures Debabrata about visiting

⁵⁰⁴ *Mayer Moto*, Performance brochure (Kolkata: Rang-Roop, 2011).

his house to meet Shila's grandmother-in-law. At Debabrata's posh city apartment, Nalini meets her granddaughter for the first time and takes a liking to her. She helps her dress up to meet the groom's elderly relative. When the two elderly ladies come face to face eventually, it is revealed that they had fought shoulder-to-shoulder against the British colonizers. With the meeting over Nalini refuses Debabrata's request to move in with him and even refuses to let his chauffeur drop her off at her house. At the end of the play, the audience is reminded how the jet setting urban children treat their aging parents. The aged but self-reliant mother of three, Nalini leaves the posh apartment of her well-off elder son with the message that she is no longer his mother but something resembling his mother. The audience is left in the grip of the emotions that engulf the elder son as his mother leaves the house nonchalantly.

Jalchhabhi, is significantly different from the hackneyed cathartic endings of both *Mayer Moto* and *Adhara Madhuri*. The adaptation of Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is set in a small Bengal village Naranpur.⁵⁰⁵ Mrinmoyee, the protagonist who is nearing forty now, was once celebrated as "Naranpur's Nafisa Ali" after the Indian beauty queen. She hailed from one of the richest families in the village residing in the lone permanent structure of the area. All the young boys from her village coveted her and were thrilled to even exchange a few words with her. Things took a turn for the worse, however, when her father died. The responsibility of her family comes down upon her young shoulders. She manages to marry off two of her sisters, but the dual pressure of managing the household and making ends meet takes its toll on her mental stability. Mrinmoyee is institutionalized at a local lunatic asylum. After her discharge,

⁵⁰⁵ *Jalchhabhi*, Performance brochure (Kolkata: Rang-Roop, 2008).

Mrinmoyee returns to Naranpur to take care of her seventy-year-old mother who is completely dependent on her. The overbearing nature of this dependence wrecks their relationship. Mrinmoyee's old friend and admirer Poto comes back to the village. He is now a seaman but has not lost his old admiration for Mrinmoyee and wants to propose to her. Mrinmoyee feels Poto's attraction and is drawn to it herself as a possible escape from the treacherous life that she has been leading. Poto writes a letter to Mrinmoyee which falls in the hands of her deranged mother. The mother, unable to bear the thought of a possible separation from her daughter, destroys the letter. Mrinmoyee finds out and in a fit of rage kills her mother. The play ends with Mrinmoyee finally giving up on her dream of starting a family or escaping the clutches of her dilapidated home. She assumes the role of her mother and slumps back into the chair that her mother sat in—ghosted by the crumbling mansion. Interestingly enough, although all of these plays achieved significant critical and popular acclaim, *Jalchhabhi* is regarded as one of Rang-Roop's best works in the last decade.

In his review of *Jalchhabhi*, critic Ananda Lal celebrates the introduction of Martin McDonagh on the Kolkata stage, praising Tirthankar Chanda for keeping up with the latest in Western theatre and for transplanting McDonagh's "Irish ethos rather well into provincial Bengal."⁵⁰⁶ Lal spends a substantial portion of the brief review to discuss McDonagh's "highly eclectic style, beginning with superficial comedy, moving to a mainstream melodramatic plot featuring sharp twists and turns and concluding in horrifying violence."⁵⁰⁷ He also praises Sima Mukhopadhyay's deft direction but

⁵⁰⁶ Ananda Lal, "Stories about women," *The Telegraph*, March 28, 2009.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

reflects that it lacks the ironic treatment of melodrama, which would be “inevitable in contemporary Western theatre.”⁵⁰⁸ Scenic designer Sanchayan Ghosh’s set is praised for the rundown somber look that it created, but Lal observes that Ghosh’s design “lacks the claustrophobic feel in the original.”⁵⁰⁹

Commenting on Rang-Roop’s *Mayer Moto*, Lal observes that playwright Mohit Chattopadhyay does not take the beaten track of depicting senior citizens wallowed in misery and fond reminiscences of yester years.⁵¹⁰ Chattopadhyay depicts a woman who is content with her simple life in the outskirts of the city and keeps herself busy with her social work. Lal praises Sima Mukhopadhyay’s restrained and controlled performance as the mother besides praising her for directing the *dramatis personae* “in plausible portrayals, especially her resentful younger son (Jayanta Mitra) egged on by his wife (Gopa Nandi).”⁵¹¹ Sanchayan Ghosh, who returns as the scenic designer for this show, is criticized for designing “an extremely poor set for the NRI’s supposedly posh apartment, contrasted with the natural ambience of Mukhopadhyay’s residence.”⁵¹²

Jalchhabhi and *Mayer Moto* were invited to be staged at the Sri Ram Center for the Arts, New Delhi, in June, 2012, under the auspices of the Impresario India. Diwan Singh Bajeli reviewing the plays for the national daily *The Hindu* celebrated the plays for presenting two sides of the mother – from “high thinking, simple living to deceptive and

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Ananda Lal, “A Foreigner Comes Calling,” *The Telegraph*, January 15, 2011.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Ibid.

manipulative.”⁵¹³ Bajeli praises Sima Mukhopadhyay for directing the plays with “remarkable sensibility and deftness.”⁵¹⁴ Bajeli picks up on the eclectic nature of *Jalchhabhi*, remarks on the multiple styles that blend together in this play and comments that “the play leaves the audience in a state of shock, terror and utter despair with a disturbing look at the dark recess of [the] human psyche.”⁵¹⁵ He comments on the scenic design of the play, which complements the dark and depressive feeling of the play.

In his review of Rang-Roop’s *Adhara Madhuri* for Bengali theatre weekly, *Natya Mukhopatro* reviewer Panchu Ray writes that the teamwork of playwright Tirthankar Chanda and director Sima Mukhopadhyay has successfully captured the overbearing presence of consumerist culture in our everyday life.⁵¹⁶ Ray comments that Rang-Roop has been producing work that speaks of the problems that has rendered us into soulless robots in our daily lives under Mukhopadhyay’s stewardship. Ray praises Kamal Chattopadhyay for his “remarkable” histrionic skills besides heaping praises on Jayanta Mitra, Pritha Banerjee and Madhumita Sengupta, characterizing them as Rang-Roop’s assets. Ray hails Sima Mukhopadhyay as “the most active female director in Bengali theatre.”⁵¹⁷ He comments on the variety of themes that she works with besides praising

⁵¹³ Diwan Singh Bajeli, “Many Ways of Maa,” *The Hindu*, June 29, 2012.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Panchu Ray, “Rang-Roop-er Sima Mukhopadhyay-er ‘Adhara Madhuri,’” *Natya Mukhopatro* 892, June 20, 2013. The title of the review in English translation is “‘Adhara Madhuri’ by Sima Mukhopadhyay of Rang-Roop.”

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

her as an excellent actress. Ray congratulates Adhara Madhuri for taking a stance albeit comically against the onslaught of “multinational imperialist aggression.”⁵¹⁸ Ananda Lal, writing for *The Telegraph*, is, however, not as kind to the production as Ray. He acknowledges that the play has its “funny moments and succeeds in entertaining with actors like seasoned comedian Kamal Chattopadhyay.”⁵¹⁹ He opines that the Chanda’s script fails to rise to “any great heights that could make it memorable.”⁵²⁰

Rang-Roop’s plays border on melodrama and are not very experimental in content, style or form, a result of multiple factors, principal among them the group’s dependence on federal government funding. The pressure to produce a new play every year forces the director to take recourse to formulas that she has worked with and that seemed to have worked on audiences. The structure of group theatre is such that groups consider anything short of a one-year run to be a failure. The funds received, however, are not adequate to support the recurrent expenses. The groups, therefore, try producing work that will have a “market” and will be able to generate some funds from the performances. Seeking refuge in formulas becomes an easy way out in such instances. A formulaic presentation in turn restricts the scope for experimentation. Rang-Roop has wriggled to create some room for experiments in terms of scenic design in *Jalchhabhi* and choreography in *Adhara Madhuri*, but the group remains firmly committed to its signature style of women-centered domestic drama.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ananda Lal, “Serious and Light,” *The Telegraph*, December 7, 2013.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 8

CASE STUDY 2

THEATRE FORMATION PARIBARTAK

In December 2012, the group Theatre Formation Paribartak (henceforth TFP) presented a modern-day adaptation of the 1912 Sukumar Ray play, *Lakkhaner Shaktishel* (A Fatal Weapon for Lakkhan). The play was given the expanded title of “*Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked*” to lay stress on the contemporary elements that were being freely added to the interpretation of the play even while keeping the original text intact. The production was one of the few attempts made in Kolkata to take a production outside the confines of the proscenium stage. The play was set and performed in an eighteenth century *zamindar* house: the colonial mansions owned by the city’s *nouveau riche* that once dotted the north Kolkata landscape. In March-April, 2013, TFP produced an original street play, *Himmatwala*. The group toured parts of Kolkata and its suburbs extensively with this production. These productions proved TFP’s commitment to non-proscenium, non-traditional and socially committed theatre.

TFP operates out of the Shibpur area of Howrah, a town across the river Hooghli from Kolkata. TFP produces mainly Bengali plays, both original and adaptations based on English and Bengali classics. The group does not name the playwrights, directors or actors for their shows, and claims that, unlike many other theatre groups, it is not

“associated exclusively with any famous theatre personality or any one person.”⁵²¹ This distance from the Bengali theatre star system helps keep the core group together and prevents partisan feelings from entering into its operations. The members of TFP are volunteers, with a large number of them having full-time day jobs. The group does have full-time theatre workers, but they are not tethered to the group and work professionally with other groups and across mediums. The team that performed both *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* and *Himmatwala* was assembled bearing this philosophy of the group in mind.

The group members for these two productions were a motley crew of people. The production was announced between friends, and anyone interested to be a part of the group were welcome to join in. Journalists, musicians, poets, screenplay writers, academics, students and theatre professionals assembled as a team for these productions. Some of the actors had prior training in theatre, whereas for others this would be their first time on stage. The trained, experienced and mostly middle-class members of the group were often seen taking the lead in decision making processes whereas the younger members of the group settled in the role of followers. The roles of the plays were accordingly distributed (barring a couple of exceptions) although that was not a pre-determined condition. In *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked*, actors belonging to the middle-class and trained in some capacity or the other played all the roles of Ram, Sugrib, Jambuban, Bibhisan, Lakkhan, Rabon, Doot, Hanuman, and Jom, whereas the younger members formed the chorus. The casting for *Himmatwala* (primarily due to the

⁵²¹ “About TFP...,” Theatre Formation Paribartak, accessed on March 15, 2013, <http://cfp.50webs.org/TFP/index.html>.

format of the play) did not comply with this line of thought although the senior members of the group essayed the bigger speaking and singing parts.

The casting choices reflect the value placed on actor training by the group. Joyraj Bhattacharjee, who led the team and assumed the role of the facilitator (a word used by the group instead of the director) for *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked*, is himself extensively trained albeit through unconventional means.⁵²² Prakriti Dutta Mukherjee, a recent alumna of the National School of Drama took the lead in physical workshops, since she had the requisite training to do so, besides designing the costumes (her other area of interest). Similarly, Satakshi Nandy, a trained classical dancer, and Arka Das, a trained and experienced drummer, led the dance and music departments respectively. Arnab Banerji and Sagnik Mukherjee, with their experience of theatre administration, were in charge of finances, publicity, and logistics.⁵²³ Sumeet Chakraborty (better known as Babun da in theatre circles) was the light designer for the production. Although not formally trained as a light designer, Chakraborty brought his extensive experience in both designing and running lights to the production. Sukanta

⁵²² Bhattacharjee was trained in multiple traditions including classical Indian dance, folk dance forms, and jazz. He trained under some of the best directors in Kolkata like Shyamanand Jalan, Arun Mukhopadhyay, and Suman Mukhopadhyay before being recruited by the Royal Shakespeare Company for a three-year stint with the company's 2006 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A detailed discussion of his training can be found in the chapter on Theatre Training.

⁵²³ I was a member of the production team from the very start of the process. I will refer to myself in the third person for the rest of the ensuing discussion.

Majumdar, arguably one of the best sound engineers in Kolkata, volunteered his services for the production, while veteran sound display artist Swapan Bandyopadhyay supplied audio special effects. Ankur Roy Chowdhury served the dual roles of stage manager and assistant stage manager.

The difference that training (conventional or unconventional) makes to a production was very evident. The overall design, music, choreography, costumes, and lights all bore the mark of the highest professional standards. The presence and admixture of seasoned and fresh actors resulted in a stew with a discontinuous flavor. There were major and palpable differences between energy levels and ability to study characters. The production called for a considerable list of songs sung live by actors. While Sagnik Mukherjee and Prakriti Dutta Mukherjee were able to employ their trained voices to render stable performances, Arnab Banerji's lack of musical training showed in all four performances when he missed beats or abruptly increased or decreased the tempo of a song.

Lack of training again reared its ugly head during the preparatory phase for the group's next production—*Himmatwala*. Members attempted to create an original script revolving around current socio-political issues and the rise of Hindu nationalism. The effort resulted in a failed first attempt during early March, 2013, when the cast created short improvised scenes with no narrative through line connecting one episode to the next. Amajit Basu, the director and writer for TFP, stepped in a week before the show was to open to create a rough first draft, which was translated and modified during rehearsals by co-designers Joyraj Bhattacharjee and Arnab Banerji. The lack of experience and exposure of the cast to street plays and improvisation proved to be a

major challenge during this process. Bhattacharjee created a song for the play drawing on his extensive knowledge of folk/popular traditions of Bengal while Biswajit's skills with percussion instruments came in handy during the performance. The lack of discipline that a formal training enforces on practitioners proved to be handy in the case of *Himmatwala*, since the spontaneity of performers allowed the production to achieve immediacy, which would have been lost in the quest for perfection.

TFP does not have any recourse to public funding. It runs on voluntary contributions of members and with the prize money won at various regional and state theatre competitions.⁵²⁴ While this relieves the group from kowtowing to federal funding regulations, it also creates financial uncertainty for the organization. The team for the productions being discussed herein had taken the decision to refrain from using any of TFP's financial resources. The group made an unsuccessful application to the Bengaluru (erstwhile Bangalore) based India Foundation for the Arts for support under its New Performance Grant scheme for the production of *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked*.⁵²⁵ Following the rejection of their application, Bhattacharjee decided to fund the production with his personal savings with major inputs from team members Sumeet Chakraborty, Prakriti Dutta Mukherjee, Dipangshu Acharya and Koyel Ghosh.

⁵²⁴ See "Awards," Theatre Formation Paribartak, *Wikipedia*, last modified on March 13, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_Formation_Paribartak. TFP maintains this page themselves, the award list is not maintained on the group's website.

⁵²⁵ "New Performance," India Foundation for the Arts, accessed on March 17, 2014, <http://www.indiaifa.org/programmes/new-performance.html>. The grant program is currently closed and not receiving any new applications.

Barring Bhattacharjee, all the other contributors were not able to put together the amounts that they had promised to the production.

The unavailability of funding in this case should not be blamed squarely on the funding agencies. The group failed to strategize an effective funding drive. Sponsors were not approached correctly or well ahead of time, especially since it were well known that securing financial support would be particularly difficult for a group which preferred staying out of the limelight and did not boast of any star performer (deliberately) in its ranks. The lackluster attitude of the group towards promoting the show exemplifies what Arun Mukhopadhyay, director of Chetana, talks of when he says, “We in the Group Theatre have failed to understand the economics of theatre. Of course, there have been successful productions which had given us enough money, the wherewithal to experiment with new plays, new productions but not sufficient enough to sustain a professional theatre group.”⁵²⁶ The group learned an important lesson after the financial hardships endured during the staging of *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked. Himmatwala* was designed (the format chosen helping in the cause too) as a barebones production requiring only minimal financial investment.

In my opinion, the group more than made up for its unprofessional handling of marketing its shows with an interesting and unusual rehearsal process. The process emphasized play over work. The idea was to engage in playful community building through the performance process eventually leading to a production. Bhattacharjee’s political belief and ideological stance guided this process. As he himself might have put

⁵²⁶ Kajal Das, “Arun Mukhopadhyay: Three decades in Bengali Theatre,” *Theatre India* 9 (2004): 92.

it, he served as the ordering mechanism in the creative anarchy that he was trying to initiate.

Having observed and been a part of the process, I am tempted to see it in conjunction with the workings of chaos theory. Dean Wilcox explains:

Chaos theory looked at from a philosophical position, stresses process over product, the interaction of all elements of a dynamic system, the sensitive dependence on initial conditions, iteration, the revelation of previously hidden patterns, and the evolution of a system driven by its own internal logic.⁵²⁷

Wilcox explains juxtaposing the dramatic works of Henrik Ibsen and Robert Wilson that while the former's work constitutes what Bert O. States calls "a closed field of force" whereas the latter's work "is not governed by a predetermined narrative structure [and] does not follow the same type of dramatic logic."⁵²⁸ Wilson's work, Wilcox observes, can appear erratic from the vantage point of an external observer although it constitutes a dynamic system following an internal logic generated by the interaction of all stage elements. Even from within the rehearsal processes for both TFP productions, it wasn't always clear the direction the process was taking and what the eventual result would be. Bhattacharjee kept reminding the group that the product was not as important as the

⁵²⁷ Dean Wilcox, "What does Chaos Theory have to do with Art?" *Modern Drama* 39, No. 4 (1996): 701.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 701-702. Wilcox is referring to Bert States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 146.

process, remaining confident at the same time that if the process were executed faithfully, the product would not fail us.

The internal logic in operation here seems to be the conviction of the group that the various independently developing components of the production held a strong potential together, evident in both rehearsal processes where considerable attention was devoted to music, dance, and choreography. Acting and scenic design remained two neglected aspects of the first production. While the need for scenic design was largely minimized by the space where the performance was situated, the flaws in acting were masked by the overpowering smartness of the other stage elements. The street play format demands close proximity to the audience and a melodramatic (loud, over the top) style to heighten key moments in the performance. Shorn of all other adornments, the team devoted more attention to acting in this production, evident from the relative ease with which complicated scenes and emotional roller coasters were tackled. The conviction of group members to collectively excel is difficult to explain in words but that seems to have been the underlying internal logic that created the dynamic systems that these productions turned out to be.

Space assumed a special place of importance for these TFP productions.

Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked was billed as a site-specific performance.

Christopher Balme offers a broad definition of site-specific performance as

“performances that take place outside pre-existing and pre-defined theatrical spaces.”⁵²⁹

⁵²⁹ Christopher B. Balme, “Audio theatre: the mediatization of theatrical space,” in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (Amsterdam: International Federation for Theatre Research, 2006), 122.

He continues that these performances “utilize natural features or historical spaces and buildings to provide a spatially determined semantic frame for the actual performance.”⁵³⁰ Balme observes that the defining aspect of site-specificity is the rootedness of these performances to a particular space and the consequent impossibility of locating the performance outside of that space. Seen in this light, *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* does not fit the description of a site-specific performance.

The author Sukumar Ray does not specify any particular kind of performance space for the play and the scores of productions of this work that happen across schools and colleges in Bengal everywhere locate the play anywhere from a conference room to a school auditorium. Bhattacharjee wanted to tease out the idea of degenerating nobility used to getting their way: a central theme of the play. A crumbling *zamindar* house bearing the nostalgic weight of a glorious past seemed like an obvious choice as a performance venue. The colonial mansions of the Bengali *babus* symbolize a decadent era in Bengali culture, and the myths of their extravagant lifestyles form the staple of Kolkata urban folklore. The lackadaisical Ram of the play and his equally incompetent merry men could not have asked for a better playing field than the *Ghoshbari* (house of the Ghosh’s) located on 46, Pathuriaghata Street, near Girish Park, North Kolkata.

Ghoshbari was not the first choice for the group. The group looked at several other colonial mansions in North Kolkata. The other houses that the group looked were either embroiled in legal hassles, were unavailable, or were well beyond the group’s budget. The permission to use the *Ghoshbari* premises (free of cost) was acquired thanks

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

to group member Sahana Bhose who was related to the Ghosh family. Balme observes that the category of site-specific performance has become too broad to accommodate the various experimental forms that emerge under its “conceptual umbrella.”⁵³¹ This ambiguity has led to the emergence of a new subcategory, Balme writes, that of *site-generic* performance. Site-generic performances “require a specific category of space but are not tied to one place.”⁵³² The supposed transportability of the performance (not realized in actual re-productions) and the possibility of locating it in any structure similar to the *Ghoshbari* makes *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* a site-generic performance.

Himmatwala, TFP’s next production was conceived and created as a street play. The street play went a step ahead of the site-generic performance of *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* in rejecting an enclosed space as a container for the theatre event. Jacob Srampickal defines a street play as “a short sketch performed on the roadside or street corner in order to give a quick, encapsulated statement about a socio-political problem, or to motivate spectators to take swift action on a particular issue, through the use of highly imaginative allegory.”⁵³³ Safdar Hashmi, founder-member of India’s premier street theatre group Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), writes, “Since our mainstream theatre is by and large out of tune and touch with the majority of our people, the need remains for a fully developed people’s theatre, a theatre which is available to the

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Jacob Srampickal, *Voice to the Voiceless: The Power of People’s Theatre in India* (London: Hurst and Company, 1994), 99.

masses.”⁵³⁴ Hashmi also stresses the importance of the circular acting area, the proximity of the actors and spectators and the unique relationship that the two share in shaping and developing an idiosyncratic theatre structure that “can be enjoyed at the community level, in large gatherings.”⁵³⁵

Srampickal draws upon Richard Schechner’s study on the environment in theatre when he writes “that space, movement and the architecture of performative environments are as communicative as the spoken text itself.”⁵³⁶ Seen in this light, the proscenium theatre creates an environment where the audience and the actors are separated and the text being played out on the stage assumes “an absolute, mythical authority.”⁵³⁷ The audience related to the performance individually and, more importantly, passively to the distant actors. In popular theatre performances (of which street theatre is a subcategory), Srampickal observes the performance is moved in the midst of the audience where they can become aware of each other.⁵³⁸ A performance in a street encourages the audience to enter into a dialogue with it rather than remaining mute spectators. The low cost of production, political immediacy, and the possibility of reaching masses were the major draws for TFP to produce the street play *Himmatwala*.

⁵³⁴ Safdar Hashmi, “The First Ten Years of Street Theatre,” in *Theatre of the Streets: The Jana Natya Manch Experience*, ed. Sudhanva Deshpande (New Delhi: Jana Natya Manch, 2007), 14.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁵³⁶ Srampickal, *Voice to the Voiceless*, 43.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

Even before the considerations for a performance space emerged for either of these productions the question of finding a rehearsal space haunted the group. Gay McAuley's concern that the lack of affordable rehearsal spaces poses as a major impediment to experimental theatre work by younger theatre groups proved to be true.⁵³⁹ The group in the run up to *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* did not have a permanent rehearsal space. The reading rehearsals were held in a cramped room with inadequate seating in a ceremonial house, followed by the use of a theatre basement and lobby and a university auditorium in the municipal town of Bolpur-Shantiniketan, one hundred miles north of Kolkata. Thanks to the generosity of group member Sahana Bhose, the group was finally able to use the roof of Bhose's Central Kolkata residence as a rehearsal space. This space lacked adequate lighting and had only one bathroom for actors. There was also no space to store the props and costumes that were being bought for the show. The group used a spare room in Bhose's roof for storage.

The rehearsals shifted to *Ghoshbari*, ten days prior to the premiere performance on December 29, 2012. There was one restroom that both actors and audience would have to use, and the group was allowed access to two small rooms to be used as dressing rooms. The acute shortage and the destitute condition of the rehearsal and the practitioner space were serious challenges for the group. Several actors had to be cramped into a single room to change. There was no space to store personal belongings securely, and thus the makeshift dressing rooms often became extremely messy and disorganized. Costume pieces were frequently misplaced, too. The unavailability of adequate dressing

⁵³⁹ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 71.

rooms also made quick changes difficult. The lack of mirrors and proper lighting meant that actors had to guess about possible looks while applying makeup. It also did not help that winter 2012 was especially harsh in India, and therefore actors were frequently seen huddling together in the cramped dressing rooms to protect themselves from the cold.

Ghoshbari also lacked audience space. To start with, there was very little parking available close to the venue. Traffic restrictions also made it challenging for spectators to find the venue. Under Ankur Roy Chowdhury's stewardship, the group posted signs along the route from the nearest subway stations besides stationing ushers along the way. As already mentioned, there was only one restroom available for use, and this, too, was designed in the Indian style, which often proves difficult for modern urban audiences accustomed to the more common Western toilets. Tickets were mostly sold beforehand, thus distancing the financial transaction from the theatre event itself and eliminating the need for a box office. There was a table set up in the front of house for the few tickets that were left over. Once inside the space, the audience was greeted by the soothing warm blue glow of the pre-show look. Seating was arranged in the wide pits on either side of the elevated courtyard that served as the stage. Actresses dressed as Playboy bunnies served freshly made saffron and pistachio flavored drinks in earthen tumblers while a haunting jazz-blues style original song played in the background. The performance ran without an intermission, and the audience was free to come on stage and chat with the actors at the end of a performance.

In spite of TFP's declared objective of doing away with hierarchies with any aspect of the performance, certain social conventions created create a pyramidal structure and effect, especially in audience segregation. The second floor balcony of the

Ghoshbari arguably offered the best view of the courtyard. Invited guests (some of them had paid premium price for the tickets) were seated in this balcony, whereas general members of the audience sat below stage level. The segregation, however, reminded one of seating in Elizabethan theatres and Parisian opera houses as late as the nineteenth century where the nobility came to the theatre not just to watch a play but also to be watched. TFP perhaps wanted to reinforce the fact that the cultural glitterati of the city (mostly from the theatre community) had lost the connection with the common masses that once formed the foundational backbone of the group theatre. Interestingly, Srijit Mukherji, touted by many to be one of the most prominent film directors in the country, sat with the rest of the audience at the ground level in spite of being offered the premiere seats.

Sahana Bhose's rooftop continued to serve as TFP's rehearsal space during the initial rehearsals for *Himmatwala*. The mounting summer heat in the beginning of March meant that rehearsals in the open-air rooftop could not start before sun down at 6:30pm, posing problems for many of the members who traveled from the suburbs to Kolkata for rehearsals. It was decided to move the rehearsals to another rooftop—this time to team member Satakshi Nandy's apartment in the New Alipore area in South West Kolkata. This location, with its proximity to a suburban railway station and other transport options, proved to be more convenient for a majority of the group members.

The question of practitioner space becomes redundant in the case of a street performance where the performance travels to the audience and the practitioners are aware of the unpredictable nature of each performance site. *Himmatwala* premiered at a cycle rickshaw stand adjoining the suburban railway station at Akra, South 24 Parganas.

It was an open space, and the presence of a large group of young people in relatively uniform clothing and more urban than the milieu signaled to the people that something was about to happen. The opening call to attention with which the performance began and the first hits on the *djembe* brought together an audience who laughed, cheered, leered, whistled, photographed and cat called during the twenty-minute performance. Loud cheers emanated from the crowd at the end of the show as it began to dissipate immediately. The next performance was held thirty minutes later in a *durgamandap* (permanent structure for the autumnal festival of Durga Puja) adjoining the Santoshpur suburban railway station, and the evening drew to a close after a third performance near a municipal school in the Metiabruz area. This routine was repeated over the next month, during the course of which the play was staged twelve times in both urban and suburban locations.

Practitioner, audience, and presentational space coalesce into a singular entity in the case of the street theatre. Each presentational space presents a challenge to the actors, but the street theatre form demands a certain flexibility of style that allows adjustments to be made according to the idiosyncratic demands of the presentational space. The various places where *Himmatwala* was performed during its run posed these challenges for the actors. At Santoshpur and College Square, audiences occupied three sides with a backdrop (a *durgamandap* in Santoshpur and the statue of Indian educationist and social reformer Iswarchandra Vidyasagar in College Square) framing the action. At Metiabruz, the Academy of Fine Arts Complex and Shibpur, audience sat and stood in a circle surrounding the action of the play. The play was also performed at the IPTA premises in Shibpur where the audience sat in chairs in a proscenium-style frontal arrangement.

The presentational space in *Ghoshbari* also posed multiple challenges for the performers. Most of the actors in the group had the conventional idea that a performance was meant to be staged with the audience in the front. The initial challenge was adjusting the performance to address and include the audience on all sides of the stage. There were multiple points for entries and exits spread out all over the presentational space, including scaffoldings that led from the stage level to the balconies that were also used for performances. There was no way to block the audience from having a full view of the practitioner areas along the presentational space. This space was, however, left in complete darkness to allow the audience's attention to remain focused on the action in the presentational space not unlike a conventional theatre space.

Peter Brook famously wrote, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."⁵⁴⁰ Bhattacharjee claimed to have been influenced by this thought while conceiving *Lakhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* as a site-specific/site-generic performance. Bhattacharjee thus made a "theatre out of a space that previously was thought of as something else."⁵⁴¹

Marvin Carlson has challenged Brook's assertion by claiming that "the 'something else' that this space was before, like the body of the actor that exists before it interpellated into a character, has the potential, often realized, of 'bleeding through' the

⁵⁴⁰ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book about the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), 9.

⁵⁴¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 133.

process of reception.”⁵⁴² Carlson refers to this process as “ghosting.” Ghosting arises out of the previous experiences and associations that the audience and even those who produce theatre have with elements used in a performance—be it an actor, a text, elements of design, and even a space. Carlson suggests that empty spaces are not neutral containers simply designed to contain whatever is put into it. He draws upon the seminal work of Henri Lefebvre, who has dismissed the notion of empty spaces by arguing that “the empty spaces that have been utilized for centuries for theatrical events are particularly susceptible to semiotization, since they are almost invariably public, social spaces already layered with associations before they are used for theatrical performances.”⁵⁴³ He draws parallels between Michael Quinn’s “useful discussion[s]” on the effect of celebrity on public perception of an actor and observes, “The same is true of these appropriated spaces, to which audiences also bring an extratheatrical acquaintance.”⁵⁴⁴ The ghosting happening as a result of the role the space played when it was not being used as a performance space. Carlson suggests that theatre makers have often recognized that “public performance spaces often brought with them certain nontheatrical resonances.”⁵⁴⁵ He observes that such a notion is especially true in case of site-specific performances where previously written texts are located “outside

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

conventional theatres that are expected to provide appropriate ghostings in the minds of the audience.”⁵⁴⁶

The *Ghoshbari*, with its long and checkered history as the cradle of classical music and culture in Kolkata, provided the appropriate ghosting that Bhattacharjee was looking for *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked*. There was yet another form of ghosting waiting for the audience once the performance commenced. Marvin Carlson writes,

Any theatrical production weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience, playing in various degrees and combinations with that audience's collective and individual memories of previous experience with this play, this director, these actors, this story, this theatrical space, even, on occasion, with this scenery, these costumes, these properties.⁵⁴⁷

The audience in Kolkata is very familiar with the text of Sukumar Ray's *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* as a children's play. *Lakkhaner Shaktishel* is Sukumar Ray's 1912 satirical take on the Indian epic Ramayana.⁵⁴⁸ The action of the play takes place on the eve of the fateful day during the battle between Ram and Rabon when Lakkhan (Ram's younger brother) gets hit by the Shaktishel (a fatal weapon given to Rabon by the gods). The play starts with Ram describing a dream that he is just waking

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁴⁸ None of the editions that we consulted confirmed a date for this very popular play. There is no reference to the date either in the memoirs of Satyajit Ray, Sukumar Ray's son who mentions the play while recounting his childhood days.

up from where Rabon slips while climbing a tree, falls down and dies. The army of monkeys and Ram's close aides are all very excited. As Jambuban, his prime minister, chimes in, "Royal dreams are never lies. Rabon must be dead."⁵⁴⁹ Amidst the celebration that ensues, one of the royal watches sees Rabon's chariot in the distance with the fierce Lanka king astride.

Ram's general Sugrib and Lakkhan set out to fight Rabon and defend the honor of their prince. Sugrib is a timid character who tries to put on a brave appearance in the face of adversity. Rabon is far too strong for him, and he is brutally roughed up and sent packing. Lakkhan enters the arena next. He thinks he is very strong and can take on anyone, but Rabon takes him out without breaking a sweat. The news of Lakkhan's death casts a spell of grief on Ram's camp. Everyone (including Ram) tries to play up the grief. Finally at Ram's behest, Jambuban prescribes an antidote and sends Hanuman to get the medicinal herb from Gandhomadon Mountain. The retinue retires for the night leaving Bibhisan (Rabon's brother who defects from the Lanka king's army and joins Ram) to guard Lakkhan's corpse.

Meanwhile, the god of death, Jom, has learnt about Lakkhan's death and sends two of his emissaries to fetch the young prince's body. The two messengers run into Bibhisan as the night-watch and try to convince him to let them pass. Bibhisan stands his ground firmly, even though he is very scared. Jom joins the party and threatens Bibhisan with dire consequences if he does not let them take Lakkhan away. As tension rises,

⁵⁴⁹ Sukumar Ray, *Lakkhaner Shaktishel* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1987), 22. My own translation.

Hanuman enters the scene carrying the whole Gandhomadon on his shoulder since he could not find the right herb. Not noticing Jom, he covers him with the mountain.

Ram and the rest of the company are called in, and Jambuban finds the right herb and administers it to Lakkhan, who immediately springs back to life. Jom is released from under the mountain. He is surprised to find Lakkhan alive and takes his leave, promising to fire his deputy Chitrugupto for giving him incorrect information. Ram and his entourage, meanwhile, get very busy to take credit for all that has transpired. Lakkhan claims the prize when he announces, “The ultimate credit is therefore mine. If I hadn’t been shot by the Shaktishel none of this would have happened, and none of you would have had the chance to show off your special skills!”⁵⁵⁰ The company is about to retire for the evening when sheer pandemonium breaks out, and everyone jumps in to the chaos.

Apart from being familiar with the narrative, some of the audience were also familiar with the length and breadth of facilitator Joyraj Bhattacharjee’s theatre work and his penchant for experimental theatre. The TFP production served as a myth-buster of sorts for the popular perception surrounding Ray as a children’s writer by teasing out the very adult social, cultural and political themes in the play while firmly establishing Bhattacharjee as an important voice in the nascent experimental theatre scene in Kolkata.

Bhattacharjee embellished his version of the Sukumar Ray classic with elements drawn from a wide variety of popular culture sources, resonating Marvin Carlson’s observation, “postmodernism opened the theatre, at least in the hands of more experimental companies and directors, to a new interest in the artistic and reception

⁵⁵⁰ Sukumar Ray, *Lakhaner Shaktishel*, 36.

possibilities of recycling.”⁵⁵¹ Carlson identifies recycling as an old tendency in the theatre among actors, directors, and designers but observes that those with a postmodern sensibility employ a freer use of material from a wider variety of sources in complete opposition to “the concept of organic unity.”⁵⁵² The success of the recycling relies on the audience’s previous acquaintance with the recycled material.

Audiences for TFP’s *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* were greeted with a wide array of recycled and superimposed material. Laxman was dressed as Superman, Ram as the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Bibhisan as a rebel leader (comme Che Guevara), Jambuban as the popular Bollywood villain Gabbar Singh, Rabon as a professional wrestler and the monkey brigade as volunteers of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS).⁵⁵³ Scantly clad cheerleaders, messengers of Jom (god of death), appeared as sales girls dancing an item number, and Jom as a *femme fatale* complete with a husky voice and a seductive number, were also appended to the production.⁵⁵⁴ All of these elements carry a lot of symbolic weight for an Indian audience

⁵⁵¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 167-168.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha or RSS is the ideological mentor for the Hindu right-wing national political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). See “Know RSS,” RSS, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://rss.org/knowus/>.

⁵⁵⁴ Item numbers are a special category of music videos pretty common in commercial films from the Indian subcontinent. They are typically extraneous to the film’s main plot and bear no connection to the storyline. They are used to showcase beautiful women in skimpy clothes and lend support to the marketability of the film. The item number is now

bombarded continually with a largely Bollywood induced glamour ridden aesthetic. As Bhattacharjee noted in an interview, “The only way to counter the incursion of Bollywood in our daily lives was to over-project it, so much so that audience finally awakes from the stupor that this mind-numbing aesthetic induces.”⁵⁵⁵

The ghosted space and the recycled symbols in the play formed the major subject of the public discourse that emerged around the performance. Debarshi Bandyopadhyay of Kolkata daily *Ei Samay* noted, “*Lakkhaner Shaktishel* by Theatre Formation Paribartak took theatre out of the familiar surroundings of Academy-Rabindra Sadan-Madhusudan Mancha and under the open sky after a long time.”⁵⁵⁶ A little later in the review he writes, “Every time the mind traveled to some nineteenth century anecdote while seated in the Pathuriaghata *Ghoshbari* courtyard, some unexpected sabotage brought one back to the shores of contemporary times.”⁵⁵⁷ This reviewer also celebrated the fact that an “archaic piece like *Lakkhaner Shaktishel* was excavated to reveal the explosives that it contained

quite a popular feature not only in Hindi films but also in Tamil, Telegu, Kannada, and Bengali films. They often serve as the financial backbone of a film and producers often depend on the success of the item number to recover their investment from even a not so popular film.

⁵⁵⁵ Debarshi Bandyopadhyay, “Ke Bollo Sref Lakkhaner Shaktishel,” *Ei Samay*, January 5, 2013. My own translation. The title can be translated as, “Who said only Lakkhaner Shaktishel?”

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid. My own translation.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. My own translation.

and for giving it a contemporaneous dimension.”⁵⁵⁸ Reviewer Suman Majumdar, writing for *Ekdin* noted:

Those used to watching conventional theatre would be caught unawares at first. The proscenium is replaced here by a courtyard, and not just that, the veranda around the courtyard, the Hanuman seated on the edge of the veranda, the residents of the house next to him and above all the open sky—in total, it is highly unlikely that Kolkata has witnessed anything like this a lot.⁵⁵⁹

Majumdar observes that the style of performance was reminiscent of the theatre practice that had originated in the houses of the landed gentry of Kolkata. He feels that the play is veiled in cheek humor, which helps it stand apart from the scores of productions of this play. Majumdar celebrates like Bandyopadhyay that this adaptation reiterates Sukumar Ray’s maturity as an author.⁵⁶⁰

Reviewers from the Facebook group of theatre enthusiasts, Theatrics, who thronged *Ghoshbari* on both days of the performance, had a mixed reaction to the play.⁵⁶¹ Almost all of them unequivocally celebrated the fact that the play took place in a non-

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid. My own translation.

⁵⁵⁹ Suman Majumdar, “Fajil Lakkhaner Psychedelic Shaktishel,” *Ekdin*, January 5, 2013. My own translation. The title can be translated as, “The psychedelic Shaktishel of a flippant Lakkhan.”

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Theatrics Facebook page, accessed April 30, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Theatrics>.

conventional space and freely recycled popular culture elements in this freewheeling adaptation. Some of them felt that the production did not use the space effectively and that it lacked “organicity.” A couple of reviewers complained that the production was too loud and was akin to a synesthetic carpet bombing, with a lot happening together often leading to an information or semiotic overload.

The production of *Himmatwala* was not reviewed in the local press. The production, however, received wide word-of-mouth publicity. The repeated requests for performance by activist groups, student political bodies, and the IPTA bear testimony of the fact. *Himmatwala* was created by members of TFP in the wake of the Kolkata visit by Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat. The Hindu nationalist leader is widely touted to be the most successful administrator in India and is the frontrunner in the 2014 general elections for the prime minister’s office. He is, however, also widely accused as a silent bystander during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom in which over one thousand people died, the majority of them Muslims. TFP responded to the meteoric rise of this leader and his visit to Kolkata by weaving together a street performance that showed him as an unscrupulous, riot-provoking politician.

The play starts with a simple domestic quarrel between a Muslim man and his wife. The wife alleges that her husband is having an affair.⁵⁶² The fight intensifies and the couple decides to take the help of local goons to sort out the differences. The goons from opposing camps take up the cause of the couple but soon the fight comes down to their own agenda of claiming territory. The political leader who both the gangs report to intervenes and summons the leaders to his office, where he lays out his plan to start a

⁵⁶² *Himmatwala* is an original script by members of Theatre Formation Paribartak (TFP).

communal fight. At the end of the fight, deep scars are left behind in both communities. The leader emerges victorious and proclaims that he is the “face of development.” The development that the leader stands for is, however, exclusionary and does not cater to the disenfranchised sections of the population. Industrialists and socialites are depicted fawning over the leader as he continues to hog the media limelight. A group of ordinary citizens resists the rise of this corrupt leader, and the play ends with the company breaking into song about ushering in a new dawn. The play was subsequently modified after this initial showing. Instead of targeting Modi alone, the play in its new avatar turned its attack against the corrupt political leadership of the state of West Bengal. The satirical take lampooned the gimmicks and outlandish behaviors of the leaders. The new version was embellished further with songs set to the tune of folk popular music.

The crowning moment of the production came during a performance at the College Square complex.⁵⁶³ At the end of a performance on a particularly hot and humid day, a poor tea vendor, approached the team, and while serving tea to everyone, he remarked that in all the years that he has been visiting the park he had never seen a play as dynamic, as powerful and as close to his heart. It is important to note here that the College Square complex is a favorite destination of young theatre groups from across the city to stage street plays. This compliment was a special moment for the young team who

⁵⁶³ College Square is located in Central Kolkata adjacent to College Street. College Street is the main book market in Kolkata, home to numerous prestigious educational institutions including the Calcutta Medical College, Calcutta University, and Presidency University.

collectively celebrated the fact that they had been able to connect and communicate with the common masses with their production.

Political differences and a conflict of ideology led to the disintegration of the team that worked so hard together to produce *Lakkhaner Shaktishel/Laxman Shellshocked* and *Himmatwala* in May-June 2013. Disintegration of groups has been a common problem plaguing Bengali group theatre since its early days. The team got together in December 2013 to perform a revised version of *Himmatwala*, but it has not convened since then. The Shibpur unit of TFP, however, continues to function and produce “straight plays” on both sides of the Hooghli.

CHAPTER 9
CASE STUDY 3
YOUTH THEATRE IN KOLKATA

Theatre group Tin Can emerged out of a creative collaboration between various college campuses in Kolkata. It sought to change the way theatre was thought of and done in the city during its brief stint under the arc lights between 2005-2009.⁵⁶⁴ Tin Can founders Soumyak Kanti De Biswas and Tanaji Dasgupta wanted to create a theatre of, for and by the youth of the city (to use the hackneyed phrase). Tin Can's plays *Onko* (2005 and 2007-08), *Intro* (2006 and 2009) and *Video* (2007-08) captured the imagination of the college going population in Kolkata. These plays also marked one of the very few instances when corporate houses in the city came forward to help the young theatre group with financial support.

Tin Can helped launch the careers of several young actors, while other members of the group have switched over to working behind the scene in films.⁵⁶⁵ Tin Can disintegrated as suddenly as it had burst on the scene, leaving behind a legacy that a career in the performing arts was a possibility. One of the most important youth creative

⁵⁶⁴ See "The World's A Stage," *The Telegraph*, June 20, 2009 for a discussion on the evolution and the highlights of Tin Can's achievements.

⁵⁶⁵ Tin Can members Anubrata Basu, Sumeet Thakur, and Shadab Kamal have all starred in mainstream films while Anusuya Sengupta and Tanaji Dasgupta work behind the scene as an art director and as a line producer.

collaborations to emerge in Kolkata after Tin Can was LOK under the stewardship of Soumyajit Majumdar.⁵⁶⁶ The group has, however, diversified over the years and is currently a film production house and a media coordinator service. Soumyajit is busy with his own film career, and the group only occasionally produces plays. Recent high school graduates and college-goers have, however, not stopped building theatre. If anything, the “youth theatre movement” is a thriving parallel branch of the Bengali group theatre. 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 group theatre.

In this case study, I will review six productions by three of the youth theatre groups in the city: *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 Arohra* (The Trusted Ship and Remarkable Passengers) and *Nobel Chor* (Nobel Prize thief) by 4th Bell Theatres. The reason behind choosing these three groups over other youth theatre groups in the city is the fact that these groups produce new work regularly. I will also be offering a general critique of the Bengali language youth theatre effort in Kolkata.

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

⁵⁶⁶ Ranjabati Das, “By the People,” *The Telegraph*, January 16, 2010.

experimental theatre.”⁵⁶⁷ 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.”⁵⁶⁸ Aritra Sengupta, founder and director of M.A.D (Mad about Drama), 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 (Mad About Drama) was born.”⁵⁶⁹

It would perhaps 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 some 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 exposure to theatre. As a report on the Kolkata youth theatre groups in *Natya Mukhopotro* notes, “Youth theatre in Kolkata is not a new phenomenon. The

⁵⁶⁷ P. Bhattacharya, “Language of the Heart,” n.p., n.d., accessed via The Hypokrites Facebook page, posted photo, March 7, 2013.

⁵⁶⁸ 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.”

⁵⁶⁹ Aritra Sengupta, in conversation with the author, May 16, 2013.

appellate youth theatre however was not ascribed to it heretofore.”⁵⁷⁰ 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.⁵⁷¹

It is, however, interesting that instead of aligning themselves with established groups young theatre enthusiasts are forming their own groups. Members blame the stagnation in style and paucity of experimentation behind launching their own platforms for theatre. Soumendranath Mukherjee of M.A.D (Mad about Drama) says, “I feel that the current trends in Bengali theatre is not offering anything new to the youth of the city. It is perhaps why when we are saying what we want to in our way that it is being labeled as youth theatre—a youthful razzle-dazzle, devoid of any seriousness.”⁵⁷² Mukherjee complains that the Bengali group theatre today goes in circles between fixed narrative structures. 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

⁵⁷⁰ “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.”

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

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."⁵⁷³

The youth theatre groups are organized and function differently than the Bengali group theatre groups. Unlike the mainstream theatre groups the 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 not unusual to see members sharing responsibilities equally. Most of the groups are not registered as a society in contrast to the Bengali theatre groups and, therefore, do not have the need to form or have executive committees with defined hierarchical posts. Some of the groups like M.A.D (Mad About Drama) and LOK have recently registered themselves as societies. Members unanimously agree that this was just a formality as is the executive committee that had to be formed as a result. 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. I must note here that the same person wrote no two plays produced by a group that I will be reviewing here, although Anubhav Dasgupta of

⁵⁷³ Ibid. *Anandabazar Patrika* is arguably the largest circulating Bengali daily in Kolkata.

Hypokrites and Aritra Sengupta of M.A.D (Mad About Drama) are known to be quite prolific as playwrights.

The youth theatre groups do not often share a common actor pool. Each group draws actors from within its membership and occasionally “call for audition” notes are posted on social networks for larger projects like the M.A.D (Mad About Drama) production of *C.H.U.T.I.Y.A.* Barring M.A.D (Mad About Drama), no other group mentioned holding auditions to recruit actors for a show confirming; instead, they cast shows from within the group. My conversation with members of Hypokrites, M.A.D (Mad About Drama) and 4th Bell Theatres revealed that the membership ranges from no training to a sustained half a decade long workshop-based training. None of the members I spoke to were enrolled in any of the programs offered at the Rabindra Bharati University. 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.”⁵⁷⁴ 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.”⁵⁷⁵

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

⁵⁷⁴ “Kolkataye Anyorokom Jubora,” November 11, 2012.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

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. Costumes are designed in-house, not unlike most mainstream theatre groups. Hypokrites, M.A.D (Mad About Drama) 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.

As non-registered and very new organizations, youth theatre groups have no recourse to government funding. Raising the requisite money to finance theatre is a major challenge. The youth theatre groups have been able to attract corporate sponsors to partially fund their theatre. Anubhav Dasgupta comments, “Most of our funds come from sponsorships and push sales.”⁵⁷⁶ Soumendranath Mukherjee also stresses the importance of “push sales” in colleges and neighborhoods. He says, “That is the only way we can ensure having an audience, because unless we have an audience a sponsor will not be interested in investing money.”⁵⁷⁷ Groups like M.A.D (Mad About Drama) have a monthly subscription for members which allows the group to build up an emergency

⁵⁷⁶ 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.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

fund.⁵⁷⁸ Hypokrites and M.A.D (Mad about Drama) 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 mediums that attract youth. Facebook event pages and group pages have emerged as important and vital mediums of advertisement for these groups. It also proves 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 has a very active Facebook page with over five thousand followers.⁵⁷⁹ Administrators of this page post regular updates here, including newspaper reviews, publicity material and photographs from shows. The M.A.D (Mad about Drama) and 4th Bell Theatres pages also have significant followings, although they are not as efficiently organized as the Hypokrites page.⁵⁸⁰ Mainstream Bengali theatre groups have also tried

⁵⁷⁸ Aritra Sengupta, in conversation with the author, May 16, 2013.

⁵⁷⁹ The Hypokrites Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2014,
<https://www.facebook.com/HypokritesKolkata>.

⁵⁸⁰ M.A.D. (Mad About Drama) Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2014,
<https://www.facebook.com/madaboutdrama>; 4th Bell Theatres Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/4th.Bell>.

embracing this new technology but continue to rely heavily on expensive print advertisements which almost never translate into significant box office returns.

Hypokrites and M.A.D (Mad about Drama) maintain an active repertoire of two to three plays at any given time. The cast changes occasionally, and the script is treated as a work in progress with contemporary references often finding their way into subsequent showings. Both Anubhav Dasgupta and Aritra Sengupta observe the lack of funds often throws a spanner into plans of regularly staging a play. The groups, however, keep working on new projects while keeping existing plays ready for performance should an opportunity come calling. Not being dependent on central government funding also absolves the youth theatre groups from the compulsion of producing a new play annually and allows them enough wriggle room to play around with the active repertoire. The demand for a particular performance dictates how often it is performed. *Conditions Apply* by Hypokrites, for example, has been re-mounted several times in the past three years owing to popular demand. *A Good Play* by M.A.D (Mad About Drama) has enjoyed a similar run, although most of its later showings have been outside Kolkata. 4th Bell Theatres works slightly differently. They use their paltry resources every time to stage a new work rather than revisiting older productions. Even though the group's *Fifteen Minutes to Fame* and *Happy-D* achieved popular and critical acclaim, for example, the group has chosen not to re-mount these shows regularly. 4th Bell Theatres produced three new plays—*Biswasto Jalojan o Aloukik Arohira*, *Nobel Chor* and *Natok*. It must also be observed here that 4th Bell Theatres has not attracted the attention of sponsors as have the two other groups being discussed here. Whether that is a conscious choice or simply a turn of fate is difficult to establish.

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 (Mad About Drama) and 4th Bell Theatres rent their rehearsal spaces, Hypokrites rehearses in director Anubhav Dasgupta's house. As Najrin Islam, actor, M.A.D (Mad about Drama) says the rehearsal space is a safe refuge for group members, and they consider themselves lucky to have it.⁵⁸¹

In the shows that I attended, not much attention was paid to the audience space. Gyan Manch, arguably the most popular youth theatre venue in Kolkata, has a well-lit lobby with comfortable seating, a concession stand and adjoining restrooms. Both Hypokrites and M.A.D (Mad About Drama) set up a small counter but the purpose of it seemed more to introduce people to the activity of the group and to get them to sign into a mailing list rather than the sale of merchandise. Both the 4th Bell Theatres performances that I attended were at the Mukhtangan theatre in South Kolkata. The auditorium, once a breeding ground for group theatre is in a state of disrepair with broken seats, a creaky stage, terrible acoustics and torn and tattered legs and borders. 4th Bell Theatres does not have the financial wherewithal to embellish the space for it to look attractive to an audience, and neither was there any stall/booth set up for the audience to interact with group members. None of the groups had printed programs for either distribution or sale at the performances.

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

⁵⁸¹ Najrin Islam, in conversation with the author, September 18, 2013.

School complex. Hypokrites and M.A.D (Mad about Drama) typically perform most of their shows in this venue. The groups have, however, tried experimenting with non-conventional theatre spaces. Hypokrites produced an intimate theatre piece in their rehearsal room in Behala and M.A.D (Mad about Drama) used Rangakarmee's Binodini-Keya Mancha for their show *The Bikini, the Burqa and other Veils*. Both these groups have also attempted to produce street plays. 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 fund raising 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. Hypokrites under Anubhav Dasgupta's stewardship have tried to circumvent the problem by resorting to elaborately painted backdrops and minimal furniture by way of scenic design. Dasgupta rues the fact that he has to move across different venues to perform but comments that he does not see this itinerant style changing anytime soon and therefore simply plans accordingly.⁵⁸² M.A.D (Mad about

⁵⁸² "Kolkata's Anyorokom Jubora," November 11, 2012.

Drama). it seems, has multiple scenic designs for its shows. When performing in Kolkata, the group uses the more elaborate design replete with set pieces. The design shrinks to include the bare essentials when on tour. Aritra Sengupta, the director blocks the show accordingly to retain this flexibility within its structure. 4th Bell Theatres does not travel often outside Kolkata with their performances.

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 that the youth theatre groups claim to be the voice of, 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. Some of the people expressing their disdain at the state of affairs were seasoned theatregoers and their comments could not be dismissed as petty and malicious. These comments as well as the circumstances that lead 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 (Mad About Drama) at the G.D. Birla Sabhaghar.

I reached the venue an hour before the doors opened. A small crowd had already begun gathering outside the South Kolkata 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 PM. M.A.D (Mad About Drama) explained that the group was having some technical issues which resulted in the delay. A friend who had accompanied me and who had been to other

M.A.D (Mad About Drama) shows added that this was common practice in the group's performances.

There was a mad rush to occupy the best seats in the theatre once the gates opened, and I ended up in a corner seat towards the middle of the auditorium and near an exit. 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 focused on the technicians who work tirelessly behind the scenes for any play but seldom emerge from behind the shadows. 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 director, played by Aritra Sengupta, offers insights into the elements that create a good play today – reference to social networks, thinly veiled pornography and a message to raise social awareness. The play, however, belongs to 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 slangs. The largely young crowd in the audience reacted with raucous laughter every time one of the characters on stage mouthed an obscenity. As Sreemita Bhattacharya writing for the *Times of India* notes, the director

perhaps took a lesson from the message of his fictitious counterpart and created “a good play,” one that excites the audience.⁵⁸³

Kolkata daily *The Telegraph* carried three very 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.”⁵⁸⁴ The anonymous reviewer seemed to have enjoyed the metatheatrical style of this play: “The successful playing out of the play-within-a-play format highlighted the conflict between who we are and who we want to be, between conscience and inner demons, between creativity and commercial diktats.”⁵⁸⁵ The reviewer also noted that the future of “theatre in Bengal” depended on how far the medium “can be of, for and by the young.”⁵⁸⁶ Abhinanda Datta’s review of the play was published on November 3, 2012 in the Campus section of *The Telegraph*, which targets a college readership. Datta commented on the use of “lights and shadows and smoke on stage to heighten the dark undertones of the script.”⁵⁸⁷ He felt based on the reactions of audience members that ninety minutes was a little too long. The play would have done better if it were cut short by fifteen minutes. Ananda Lal, reviewed the same

⁵⁸³ Sreemita Bhattacharya, “Stage warms up to the power of youth,” *Times of India*, March 2, 2013.

⁵⁸⁴ Sibendu Das, “Stage: A Good Play Indeed! Mad About Drama Poses Questions that Scare Us,” *The Telegraph*, March 4, 2013.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Abhinanda Datta, “Youth Theatre, An Online Shop Stop & A Click Camp,” *The Telegraph*, November 3, 2012.

play in *The Telegraph* on August 17, 2013 along with M.A.D (Mad about Drama)'s latest offering *C.H.U.T.I.Y.A.* Lal felt that this latest effort was an improvement from "MAD's [sic] previous *A Good Play*, (...) an original by Sengupta, contained certain simplistic binaries of virtue *versus* vice that exposed a relatively immature hand."⁵⁸⁸ Lal found the play within a play structure 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.⁵⁸⁹

M.A.D (Mad About Drama) 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.

It was heartening to see the young theatre group moving out of the confines of a proscenium space. 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

⁵⁸⁸ Ananda Lal, "Venomous and Lyrical," *The Telegraph*, August 17, 2013.

⁵⁸⁹ Sreemita Bhattacharya, "Stage warms up to the power of youth," *The Times of India*, March 2, 2013.

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. Najrin Islam, who wrote the script and acted in the show, commented that for later showings both the script and the staging were changed which led to more positive audience response.⁵⁹⁰

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. I was, however, able to get a ticket. I also met one of my former middle-school teachers, Jyotirmoy Sinha, who was playing a pivotal character in *Amra Bangali Jati*. Sinha proceeded to take me on a backstage tour and introduced me to Anubhav Dasgupta. There was a flurry of activity going on stage with instructions being shouted from one end to the other. The doors opened as I headed out of the backstage area. The group followed an open seating policy with the first few rows blocked off for guests. I took an aisle seat towards the middle of the house. The audience comprised mostly young people in early to mid-twenties.

⁵⁹⁰ Najrin Islam, in conversation with the author, September 18, 2013.

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.⁵⁹¹ 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 Dali 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."⁵⁹² 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."⁵⁹³ 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. The

⁵⁹¹ Sreemita Bhattacharya, "When chairs rocked mankind," *The Times of India*, September 22, 2012.

⁵⁹² Asijit Dutta, *God's Toilet*, unpublished play script. My own translation.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

conversation during the intermission revolved around the boldness of the style and how such a hard-hitting play was the need of the hour.

Reviewers seemed to have very 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.”⁵⁹⁴ 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.”⁵⁹⁵

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 starts looming in the not too distant future. Parents actively discourage participation in the arts and insist that the adolescents focus on studies exclusively with the goal of entering an elite city college or university. 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

⁵⁹⁴ Sreemita Bhattacharya, “Finding God and Godot,” *The Times of India*, April 20, 2013.

⁵⁹⁵ Ananda Lal, “Unexpected Scenes,” *The Telegraph*, February 11, 2012.

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, “Once the pen was thought to be mightier than the sword, but today’s generation feels that mass communication is mightier than bombs.”⁵⁹⁶ Three of the characters stage a 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.”⁵⁹⁷

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. The idea of mass communication being stronger than bombs was not clear, and I did not find that weaved into the narrative effectively.

⁵⁹⁶ Anubhav Dasgupta, *Amra Bangali Jaati*, unpublished play script. My own translation.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

The lone review of the play in Bengali daily *Ei Samay* (April 20, 2013) lauded the production for raising important questions regarding the “passion of today’s youth about theatre and the responsibility of their parents towards them.”⁵⁹⁸ Members of the Theatrics Facebook group praised the production for being honest with their portrayal of the hypocrisy of Bengali parents when it comes to taking a stance about the career choice of their children.

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. I was introduced to 4th Bell Theatres by a friend who had worked with the group for two productions before parting ways owing to ideological differences. He held the group in high regard and praised their work unequivocally.

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.”⁵⁹⁹ 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

⁵⁹⁸ “Namey tara ‘Hypokrites.’ Ar Kajey?” *Ei Samay*, April 20, 2013. My translation. The title of the article can be translated as “Hypokrites by name. But how about their work?”

⁵⁹⁹ 4th Bell Theatres Facebook page, accessed May 12, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/4th.Bell>.

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 Muktangam theatre has appalling acoustics, making it difficult to understand all of Avignan's words, especially at the end of the performance when his character had an heightened slur in his voice. 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 (Mad About Drama) 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 one of the last plays that I attended as part of my fieldwork in Kolkata on June 8, 2013. This performance was the premiere of 4th Bell Theatres' latest offering at the time. The performance held at the Mukhtangan Theatre had a decent-sized audience compared to the group's previous show. The audience was a good mix between younger college-goers and middle-aged people.

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 1913.⁶⁰⁰ The medal could not be recovered even after the Central Bureau of Investigation was pressed into action, and the case was dropped in 2009.⁶⁰¹ 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. He is celebrated in school textbooks and films. The current state government has also chosen to use Tagore songs at stoplights and crematoriums, thus literally making him omnipresent in our lives.⁶⁰² Rabindranath is a

⁶⁰⁰ Nilanjana Bhowmick, "Tagore's Nobel Prize Stolen," *The Times of India*, March 25, 2004.

⁶⁰¹ Press Trust of India, "Tagore's Nobel theft case can be reopened if we get more information: CBI," *The Times of India*, April 24, 2010.

⁶⁰² Indo-Asian News Service, "Tagore songs at Kolkata traffic signals soon," *NDTV*, updated July 7, 2011.

brand name that sells easily and is cashed regularly by the cultural glitterati of Bengal. 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 especially 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. Sensitive issues are dealt with in the play deftly. The issues do not become overbearing at any point, even as Chakraborty takes them head on. Mazumdar weaves an excellent score for the play. The association of a specialist musical team with a production is bound to have telling effects on the performance. The music of this production and its execution helps drive that point home. Sumit Kumar Roy's simple choreography creates nice stage pictures. Kudos are due to the team for functioning as a very well-oiled machine during the various dance sequences. Some performers excel more than the others. Sumit Kumar Roy excels as Meher Ali. His physical style of acting helps him stand out from the rest of the actors.

In spite of thoroughly enjoying the production there were certain things that I felt needed more work. Several actors lacked voice projection skills including Avignan Bhattacharya, arguably one of the finest young actors in Kolkata. Even though the terrible acoustics at Muktangan were not aiding the vocal efforts of the actors, it must be

noted that Sumit Kumar Roy was clearly audible while some others were not. The actors certainly need to work on their voice projection as well as frequent tail drops. Aniruddha Dasgupta's production and scenic design never rise to exceptional heights. Dasgupta uses *gamcha* 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 can 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 the Theatrics Facebook group, the play does not seem to have drawn the interest of any newspaper reviewers. The commentators were full of praise not only for *Nobel Chor* but also reminded everyone that the group has a penchant for producing high quality theatre regularly. 4th Bell Theatres did not seem to be overtly interested in hogging the limelight during my brief interaction with group members. They seemed content with doing their work within their limited means.

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. It is, however, too early to predict the

efficacy of these groups in fostering a youth cultural revival in the city. The three groups discussed at length here along with a few others 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.⁶⁰³ 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.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰³ “Kolkataye Anyorokom Jubora,” November 11, 2012.

⁶⁰⁴ “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.”

CHAPTER 10

THE MATERIAL REALITIES OF BENGALI GROUP THEATRE

AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Contemporary western-style theatre in Kolkata as in most of India is largely a non-commercial amateur activity. Very few thespians treat the theatre as their profession. Most actors and actors-directors think of it as a hobby or as a socially responsible commitment. Neither the city of Kolkata nor other urban centers in the country has ever witnessed, therefore, a theatre movement or a rigorous and successful popular interest in theatre. Individuals, based solely on their personal merits, have occasionally created exceptional works of theatre, but these works have not had a sustained impact in heralding or forging a theatre culture. At the same time, a section of theatre workers depend solely on the theatre for their livelihood. For light designers and suppliers, set builders, and other technicians, the theatre is not solely about art or aesthetic merit but about survival.

The parallel existence of professionals and amateurs in this theatre is a unique feature of group theatre. The artists and professionals associated with Bengali group theatre look at their work as dissociated and independent of the conditions of production and reception. I have tried to demonstrate in this dissertation that it is otherwise by trying to answer the two central questions: how is theatre created and seen in Kolkata and why things are done the way they are done.

A majority of my respondents among the actors and directors drew a complete blank when I asked them to comment on the conditions of production and reception for group theatre in Kolkata and ways to improve it. After a moment's thought—and some explanation about what I exactly meant by conditions of production and reception—most of them replied that the city needed a stronger intellectual climate that would foster better theatre. Directors expressed their desire to work with actors who were trained better, a theatre of their own and more money for their work. Actors wanted a living wage, the recognition of working in the theatre as a regular profession and social security benefits that would allow them to eventually retire.

Designers and technicians, on the other hand, seemed to be waiting for this question. Set builders and suppliers wanted police harassment while transporting scenery to stop. Light designers/suppliers wanted some recognition as artists and better pay to improve, update, and maintain their aging inventories. Scenic designers wanted respectability for their work and of their work. All of my respondents unanimously expressed their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and wanted me to understand that theatre happens under challenging circumstances in the city, but it still is “world-class.” This dissertation was an enquiry into the challenging circumstances for theatrical production and reception as reported by Bengali theatre practitioners.

In order to understand the socio-cultural circumstances that frame it I have studied the conditions of production and reception for Bengali group theatre in Kolkata in isolation and in considerable detail in the second part of the dissertation. The chapter titled “Working Conditions,” is an overview of the conditions of work for group theatre groups. I have outlined the various categories of group theatre groups in the city—

traditional, non-traditional and youth—as well as the basic organizational structure of category of groups, the overlap of politics and theatre, factionalism, funding, and the process of building a theatre event in Kolkata. The chapter is an exposition of the fact that Bengali group theatre from its inception has always maintained a subtle but obvious distance from politics and has yet been a socially conscious theatre culture. The financial struggles that plague this theatre and the serious in fighting between groups that lead to frequent fissures are discussed at length in this chapter.

The contentious issue of training of theatre personnel in Kolkata is taken up in the next chapter. Since theatre is not considered to be a feasible career option in Kolkata, there is very little availability of formal theatre training. It becomes evident from the opinions, observations, thoughts and remarks of my respondents that the unavailability of institutional training resources is not seen as an impediment in this theatre culture. A self-devised “organic” training routine and apprenticing for established seniors emerge as the preferred training methods for theatre personnel in Kolkata. Lack of training however translates into the recruitment of thespians based solely on their enthusiasm and interest in the craft. Whether someone improves depends on how efficiently they can pick up tricks of the trade while working in the theatre. The exhaustion of being itinerant theatre groups continually on the lookout for a new performance venue and the unavailability of adequate rehearsal and storage spaces frames the discussion on theatre spaces that follows the chapter on theatre training.

The case studies in Part III of this dissertation are an attempt to demonstrate the workings of the individual framing mechanisms together in production. The case studies of Rang-Roop, Theatre Formation Paribartak and the youth theatre groups Hypokrites,

M.A.D (Mad About Drama) and 4th Bell Theatres are representative of the diverse kinds of performance that jostle for space simultaneously in Kolkata. Rang-Roop represents old school group theatre values and produces realist theatre in the proscenium style. Theatre Formation Paribartak is a non-traditional group and lending credence to their name creates theatre that stands apart from if not against mainstream trends. The three youth groups, along with a few others, are heralding a new era in Bengali group theatre replete with youthful vigor, corporate sponsorship and smart packaging.

The urban theatre phenomenon in India, especially post-Independence, is heavily influenced by western theatre practices, plays, and styles. Bengali group theatre is no exception and is in many ways a hybrid theatre culture. The group theatre, however, has certain features and qualities which sets it apart and distinguishes it from being a blatant copy of the west. In the particular case of Bengali group theatre, as we have seen in this study, the theatre is linked integrally with Bengali social and cultural life even if it does not have the popular appeal that it had during its heydays in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of its devout practitioners still juggle multiple professional commitments and congregate in the evenings with religious regularity to practice their craft or to regale audiences with their histrionic skills. Groups continue to strive to take their theatre to the masses and travel with their productions to far away locations, even places that lack basic amenities. Even within city limits, it is the play that reaches the audience instead of the other way around because of the itinerant style of performance. All of the above, along with acute financial shortage, regular financial losses, and the unavailability of enough rehearsal and performance spaces are major hurdles for the Indian group theatre in general and for Kolkata groups in particular. It is these same features, however, that sets this theatre

phenomenon apart and in spite of its hybrid nature distinguishes it from contemporary western theatre.

This study has made available a new form of performance analysis for the complex urban theatre phenomenon not just in Kolkata but also for other regional theatre centers in India. The “careful consideration of the site-specific particularities of production and reception” will be useful to arrive at a fully contextualized performance analysis for productions at their moments of reception.⁶⁰⁵ The form of analysis also has the potential to complicate, intervene, and enrich historical studies of a performance culture by allowing researchers to identify markers of uniqueness in theatre cultures that would otherwise seem like mere copies of western models. Identifying and knowing about the material conditions of production and reception would help nuance further research and understanding of the urban theatre phenomenon in India by contextualizing the meaning that the productions suggest within definite cultural frameworks.

This dissertation represents what Christopher Baugh has referred to as the “game of arranging and re-arranging [his] mother’s button box.”⁶⁰⁶ The research into the conditions of production and reception for Bengali group theatre is an attempt to re-focus the attention to the performance event in Kolkata. The material collected and discussed in this study creates a new archive besides re-arranging existing archives. Each re-arrangement of an existing archive creates a new archive with a new story. In the specific

⁶⁰⁵ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 204.

⁶⁰⁶ Christopher Baugh, *Theatre Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), xiii.

instance of Bengali theatre, an astute study of the theatre event might have been ignored, “overlooked or subsumed by competing claims for the dramaturgical, the directorial and the cultural dimensions,” but this study, with its significant re-organization and focus on the materialist semiotics of the performance event in Kolkata, can be used to create a new dimension to the existing scholarship on Bengali theatre.⁶⁰⁷

It is fitting that I should end with a personal anecdote since I started this dissertation with one. Earlier, I described an interaction with a tea-vendor in the College Square complex as a crowning moment for the young Theatre Formation Paribartak team while performing the street play *Himmatwala* in various places across the city. This poor tea vendor approached the team all three times that we performed at College Square. And besides showering accolades on us, he also tried shoving a ten-rupee note into our hands. Ten rupees translate to less than twenty cents and sounds like a meager amount. Even in a city as cheap as Kolkata, it is barely enough to buy a decent snack or a cheap bus ticket. For a tea-vendor, however, the sum represents a sacrifice, close to ten percent of his daily saving if not the earning. Even as I overcame tears and refused to accept the money, I wondered, why was this poor man insisting that he pay us for a play that we were happy to perform for free?

Kaku (as he is popularly referred to) gave the answer himself, “You’ll are working so hard for us in this heat. Nothing is and should be free. Keep this money and keep performing, people like me need voices like yours.”⁶⁰⁸ This poor man understood that theatre was labor intensive. As he saw us sweating as we sang, danced and screamed

⁶⁰⁷ McKinney and Iball, “Researching Scenography,” 116.

⁶⁰⁸ Kaku is the Bengali word for a paternal uncle who is younger than the father.

in the public park, he perhaps also recognized the effort that had gone in to the whole process. He understood that we had traveled from another part of the city to come to College Square and perform, and he knew that at the end of the performance we would be thirsty and hungry. And based on all of that and his financial situation, he fixed a price for his entertainment and offered us the money. At that moment, the material reality of theatre work became very real to me, as did the material conditions of production and reception that framed Kaku's response to our work. And, 10 rupees aside, Kaku did give us what we hungered for that night, and there will always be a Kaku waiting in the audience to hear the stories that we, in turn, must tell.

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APPENDIX A

OVERVIEW OF THE UNDERGRADUATE AND MASTER'S PROGRAM IN DRAMA OFFERED BY THE RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY, KOLKATA

Rabindra Bharati University (henceforth RBU) has an elective and an honors (the former is the equivalent of a minor while the latter is the equivalent of a major) course in Drama. The elective course has three papers of one hundred marks each. Each paper is divided into two equal halves of fifty marks each. The first paper is entirely devoted to the nineteenth and twentieth century histories of Bengali drama. The first half of this paper calls for “special reference” to important playwrights from this period while actor-managers and actor-directors are studied in the second half. The first half of the second paper is a “theory” paper and introduces students to theories of drama (the syllabus says, “with special reference to Bharata, Aristotle, Stanislavski, Brecht”), as well as an overview of various kinds of theatre spaces and dramatic genres. The second half of this paper is a “practical” paper. Students are introduced to the “Fundamentals of Acting in the proscenium and non-proscenium modes” and are acquainted with “theatre space and set, light, costume, sound and music etc.” The third and final paper is a “practical” paper. The first half concentrates on “Acting before Camera” while the second half involves “Project Presentation.” Students are required to make two presentations “requiring use of their specialization in their Majors, and allowing for use of space by choice.”

The honors (major) course in Drama is a three-year program with an annual exam at the end of each year. The first year students take a single class (equivalent to a course

except that it is spread over a year with mid-year assessments which often do not factor into the final tally at the end of the year), referred to as Paper I worth hundred marks for the B.A. Part-I exam. The paper is divided into two equal halves. Each of these halves is further sub-divided into two equal parts. For the two parts of the first half, students study Western theatre and Asian theatre. The second half concentrates on theatre from Bengal, with the first part of this half devoted to pre-IPTA Bengali theatre (1798-1945) and the second part on folk and non-proscenium theatre forms from the region.

For the second year B.A. Part-II exam, students take two papers Paper II and Paper III each worth a hundred marks. Paper II is on the history of drama. The first half of this paper is the history of Ancient Drama with a special reference to Sanskrit, Greek and Renaissance Drama. The second half is divided into two equal parts with the first part devoted to the study of Modern Indian drama and the second part devoted entirely to the study of plays by Rabindranath Tagore. Paper III is theoretical and delves into the mechanics of play texts and “theory of drama.” In the first half of this paper students do a comparative play analysis of representative plays from the classical Western and Bengali dramatic canon. The second half offers students with a “Definition of drama, Elements of Drama, Structure of Drama,” vis-à-vis other literary genres like “Fiction and Poetry.” This half also exposes students to various classifications of drama based on forms, themes and styles.

The third and final year of the program is entirely practice-based. Students are required to appear for four papers (Papers IV-VIII). The first half of Paper IV is divided into two parts: voice production and use of music. The second half is also divided similarly and concentrates on make-up (“Colour [sic] work, Wig Setting, Crepe Work,

Hair styling”) and costume. Students learn mime for the first half of paper V and work on improvisation and expression for the second half. The first half of paper VI introduces students to concepts of stage lighting while the latter half is devoted to “Set Designing.” For this last component, the students are required to design a “Production for a given play.”

Paper VII focuses on acting and direction in each half. For the acting component, the syllabus calls for “Stage Acting with prescribed pieces.” It is not very clear from the syllabus what this entails; past and present students described this component as a character building exercise. For the direction component, students are supposed to prepare a director’s script for prescribed pieces and subsequently direct the play (the department produces these plays but they are not presented to the public as a festival or a showcase). Paper VIII focuses on script writing and videography. For the script-writing half of the paper the students are trained to write short plays, TV scripts as well as radio plays. For the second half on videography the students are given an introduction to different kinds of video cameras, edit consoles and the relevant software and hardware required for video production. The students are also supposed to plan “prescribed pieces” and produce the work.

The master’s in drama at RBU is a two-year, four-semester program. There are five groups that a student can choose from to specialize in: acting, play writing, direction, mass media practices and production design. It is not clear, based on the syllabus alone, if the students can take courses from outside of their area of specialization. Every semester all students have to take compulsory theoretical paper/s. These are: Ancient Indian theatre and theory of drama (semester I), Modern Indian theatre and Interpreting myths

and legends (semester II), Aesthetics Western and Eastern (Semester III) and History of Western Theatre (semester IV). Each of these papers is worth fifty marks and between two and four hours of credit. The program is practical heavy and emphasizes doing over classroom learning. Students are required to take twenty hours of credit every semester. Except for the first semester when the hours are equally divided between theory and practice all other semesters are practical heavy with sometimes as much as sixteen hours (eighty percent) devoted to practice. In the last semester of course work students take a four credit hour dissertation course.

The acting concentration covers theories and traditions of acting, acquaints the student actor with a practical understanding of set, light, sound, costume and make-up besides offering instruction on mime, yoga, folk theatre forms, characterization and acting across different mediums. The playwriting group covers theories of playwriting, developing a plot, various kinds of scripts (stage, radio, television and film), exploring folk theatre forms and writing based on mythology and folk traditions for the contemporary stage. Students of direction learn about the various theories of direction, are given the working knowledge of sets, lights, costumes, make-up and music, learn about folk and traditional forms of theatre, preparing a director's script and direction for non-traditional performance spaces. The mass-media group are given an introduction to media culture and cultural studies, communication theories, learn making advertisement films, the hardware and software associated with filming and editing, acting for camera, producing radio plays, video production, documentary making and dubbing technologies. The production design students cover the entirety of the design process that goes behind theatre. They are taught elements of production design, carpentry, making set models,

lighting, costume, make-up (these three are covered in a single semester), history of stagecraft, exhibition pavilion designing, mask, puppetry, prop making and management, designing publicity material and art direction for video and film work.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW AND FIELD DOCUMENTS

The UGA IRB board approved the following documents for my field research in Kolkata. I am including the consent document and the approved forms for my study.

IRB Interview Participant Recruitment Guidelines

I will be meeting theatre artists, scholars, reviewers and critics in person or contact them over telephone to solicit individual interviews. I will endeavor to communicate several key pieces of information during this process of solicitation:

1. The researcher will identify his name, institutional affiliation, contact information, and research interests early in the conversation.
2. The researcher will stress on the fact that no personal and private information will be asked for during the interview.
3. The researcher will explain the amount of time the interview will take.
4. The researcher will explain that there are no benefits to the interviewee, but he will further elaborate on the importance of the study and the significance of the new form of performance analysis that he is proposing.

The researcher will also remind the interviewee that participation is completely voluntary and the interview may be stopped any time at the interviewee's discretion without any penalty.

IRB Interview Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study that attempts a materialist semiotics analysis of contemporary Bengali theatre. The materialist semiotic performance analysis is a theoretical tool that examines the theatre event by locating it within definite material conditions of production and reception. Studied this way performances lose the universals of meaning that are generally ascribed to them and are seen as products of the social, political, economic and cultural conditions in which they were conceived, constructed and received.

Your participation is solicited because you have been involved with Bengali theatre as either an artist (director, actor, technician, designer) or as a scholar, reviewer or critic. This interview will focus exclusively on Bengali theatre and at no point will any attempt be made to delve into your personal life outside of your theatre commitments or scholarship.

Should you consent, your name will be used in the study and you might be quoted at length if you have no objection to that either. In case you do not wish to be identified by name, the researcher will change it before using it as part of the published study. IN WHICH CASE, ANY IDENTIFIERS WILL BE REMOVED FROM THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE INTERVIEW NO LATER THAN ONE DAY AFTER THE INTERVIEW. If you want it, a copy of the transcript would be made available to verify the statements that you made and avoid misrepresentation. However, you do agree that I will be doing a textual analysis of our interview for the purposes of the study. The findings of this analysis would also be made available to you upon request.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty. There are no direct benefits to you. However, the proposed form of materialist semiotics performance analysis may be useful in studying the theatre event in a different way than established scholarship has done so far. There are no foreseeable risks associated with your participation in this interview or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you agree to participate, you will sit down with the researcher for a 1:1 interview at a mutually agreed upon location. The researcher will let you choose a location first and honor the choice unless circumstances prove to be in-conducive. The interview will take between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. THE INTERVIEW MAY BE AUDIO RECORDED, BUT ONLY IF YOU CONSENT TO THE RECORDING. Depending on your availability the researcher might solicit a second and a third interview. However, your initial participation is by no way a compulsion for further involvement with the study.

The researchers, ARNAB BANERJI AND DR. FARLEY RICHMOND (PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR), will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 678-447-5588 (ARNAB BANERJI) or 706-254-5374 (FARLEY RICHMOND). Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address

IRB@uga.edu

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

1. Instrument – Interview Guide – Theatre artists

Theatre Artists Interview Guide

1. How long have you been part of this group?
 - a. What is your role in the group?
 - b. What motivated you to join the group?
 - c. Is there any financial remuneration that you receive for being involved in the group?
2. What kind of training did you have in theatre?
 - a. Did you go through a sustained period of training?
 - b. Do you think there is a particular tradition that your training adheres/d to?
3. Do you have a job outside of your theatre activity?
 - a. Do you think your professional life interferes with your theatre work?
 - b. Do you think you would have been more actively involved in theatre if you did not have a job?
4. How long does a particular production run?
 - a. What is the script selection process?
 - b. What factors determine the length of the run?
5. How and who casts the shows?
 - a. Is the cast mostly in-house or do you all frequently hire the services of actors from outside the group?
 - b. What is the rehearsal process?
 - c. How long is the rehearsal process?
6. How does your group fund its theatre activity?

7. Do you watch theatre regularly?
 - a. How do you choose a production that you would like to watch?
 - b. What motivates your choice of selecting a venue to watch the particular production?
 - c. How important do you think external factors like the lobby display and sale of merchandise have on your eventual reaction to the production?
8. What is the value of audience response and reaction to a production?
 - a. Do you think there is a regular theatre audience in Kolkata?
 - b. What factors do you think motivate audience response, is it simply the content of the play or are there any external factors as well?
 - c. Do you think moving across various venues has an effect on the quality of the performance and the way the audience reacts/responds to it?
9. What are your thoughts on the conditions of production and reception for theatre in Kolkata?
 - a. What would be an ideal set up?

2. Instrument – Interview Guide – Scholars, reviewers and critics

Scholars, reviewers and critics interview guide

1. What is your area of interest in Bengali theatre?
2. What are some specific characteristics of Bengali group theatre according to you?
3. What are the major determinants of audience reaction in Bengali theatre according to you?
4. When watching performances do you find yourself often visiting the same venue?
 - a. If yes, what factors influence that choice?
 - b. Do you think a change in the venue affects your and the audience's reaction?
 - c. Do you have a favorite theatre auditorium? Why is it your favorite?
5. Do you think factors like location of the auditorium, lobby displays and sale of merchandise have any effects on the reaction of the audience to a production?
6. What effect do you think reviews published in popular newspapers and periodicals have in effecting public opinion regarding a performance?
7. Are these reviews representative of popular public opinion regarding a performance?
8. What would you consider are the conditions of production for Bengali theatre?
 - a. What effect do you think these conditions have on the theatre product?

3a. Instrument – Participant Observation (performance)

Participant Observation Tracking Form

Performance venue location:

Date:

Time Start:

Time Finish:

Quantitative data:

No. of audience members present during the performance:

Qualitative data:

Lobby decoration during the performance:

Time spent by the audience in the lobby:

Merchandise sold before and after a performance:

Audience reaction during and after the performance:

General observations:

Immediate log of researcher reactions (to be recorded directly after participant observation research):

Narratives observed:

3b. Instrument – Participant Observation (rehearsal)

Participant observation tracking form

Group name:

Rehearsal venue:

Date:

Name of production:

Start time:

End time:

Immediate log of researcher reactions (to be recorded directly after participant observation research):