

Theatre in Pakistan...

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The following article provides a brief portrait of theatrical happenings in Pakistan.

With a turbulent political history, Pakistan is struggling to find its cultural identity, caught between being an Islamic state, a remnant of the British Empire and a broken wing of South Asia. After two hostile wars with neighbouring India, two martial laws and a brief stint of democracy, Pakistan under the present military regime has entered a peaceful dialogue with India, easing relations with its hostile neighbour. With an air of secularism and media liberalization, the performing arts in Pakistan are beginning to make a significant appearance.

The post partition generation, exposed to the new left movement, defied the prevalent state ideologies in the 1960s, which led to huge student uprisings that finally overthrew the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan and brought a vibrant democracy with the charismatic leadership of Zulfikar Bhutto. A concept of new Pakistan emerged, which did not correlate with the dominant English drawing room comedies or other remnants of Parsi theatre. The fresh political conditions triggered popular movements in theatre, art and music: popular folk art was given a forum on state television, theatre groups were founded and The Arts Council was granted new buildings. English language plays became marginalized and foreign play adaptations, increasingly localised, took hold of the main stage. Student theatre activity, in particular, began to flourish, with individuals strongly influenced by the new left anarchists, European absurdists, Afro Asian movements and indigenous traditions. Writers like Sarmad Sehbai and Najam Hussain Syed pioneered the contemporary theatre with a revival of Punjabi idiom. Pakistani Theatre for the first time had on its stage some of the most original and relevant plays.

In 1979, however, Bhutto was ousted by General Zia who seized power in a Military Coup, putting the country again in the darkness of Martial Law for eleven long years. Cultural and theatrical activities, from popular truck art to student theatrical activity were banned. Ironically, theatrical pursuits were still permitted in Pakistan National Council of Arts, which had been put under new governmental bureaucracy, producing plays for commercial gain. Under rehearsed, often unscripted comedic repartees were staged by brilliant actors, fine tuned in the art of improvisation—a local skill cultivated throughout the performing arts, from music and dance, to bhaands and jhugaat.

Other theatre artists took a 'parallel' route, performing plays mostly in clandestine locations; foreign cultural institutions, private homes, occasionally out on the streets, producing work which attacked the prevailing establishment, political and theatrical. Bertolt Brecht, and India's Badal Sircar, became popular mentors having fought similar political oppressions. In Lahore, Ajoka was the most prominent group to emerge, involving many artist activists drawn primarily from Universities. Following their first two plays, the group split; Ajoka continued under the direction of Madeeha Gauher performing adaptations from Brecht along with many new plays, and Lok RaHS was founded on the basis of reviving the Punjabi language, performing street and circle plays influenced by Punjabi folk tradition. In Karachi, Dastak, Grips Theatre and Therik-e-Niswan emerged mainly performing adaptations which attacked the military regime. Because official forums for socially relevant dramas were denied, theatre activity of the 1980s relied solely on

individual commitment, a passion still prevalent on the theatrical scene today.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, international funding began pouring into Pakistan, which saw the rise of the NGO. Still, with no state support of the arts, theatre companies, like Ajoka, Therik-e-Niswan, and later Lok Raahs, became NGOs, vehicles for international donors to promote developmental agendas. Theatre has consequently tended towards important social issues on a microscopic level, rather than exploring broader historical, political and economical contexts. Formally these plays have been diverse although often deploying an awkward mix of theatrical traditions, from circle drama to proscenium arch; most of the plays embody the Raahs tradition incorporating song and occasionally dance. Although these groups began their theatrical campaigns for popularizing theatre, many of their plays when performed in urban localities are for invitees only, often attended by activists from other NGOs. In the early 90s, the government imposed a severe tax for performing artists, this alongside prevalent state censorship makes it more profitable financially and offers the artist more freedom, to perform free of charge to an audience of select invitees.

Various groups have attempted to resist NGO funding, such as Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop and have turned instead to multinational funders. They have provided a significant contribution in providing performance forums for others, free from ideological constraints, staging festivals of music, dance, puppetry and theatre, incorporating folk and urban artists. Multinationals and local businesses are commonly sponsoring English language plays, often adaptations of blockbuster Western films. In both cases, the audiences tend to be comprised of invitees of the upper enclaves of society.

The hugely popular commercial stage, mainly concentrated in Lahore replaces the dying cinema tradition, with many cinema halls being converted into theatres. Performing comedic repartee the commercial stage is generally snubbed by the parallel theatre makers. Dominated by stars such as Umar Sharif, Iman Ullah and Sohail Ahmed, the audience, traditionally men, flock to see such plays on the basis of its actors, and its dancing girls. While the essence of such theatre is cathartic, it is usually deeply satirical, pulling jibes at official morality and social order. Increasingly deemed as vulgar, the government as in General Zia's time, again, indiscriminately banned female dance on the stage. Surprisingly, this seems to have led to artists to clean up their theatrical form whereby dances are no longer crassly inserted into the drama for the audience's pleasure, and their plays are also being frequented by families, although largely from the mercantile class.

One of the most exciting spaces for innovation has appeared to be from within the universities, which are relatively free from social, political and economical constraints. Rafi Peer's recent Youth Festival exposed some promising new talent, especially from Punjab University and The University of Engineering, in the past labelled as Jamaat-e-Islami breeding grounds where theatre activity has struggled to exist. But without theatrical mentorship, it is unclear whether these forums will ever produce outstanding theatrical sensibilities. Several attempts have been made to create theatrical training institutions, which have failed, theatre being low priority on the national agenda. Beaconhouse University was founded last year, and is running a successful theatre department offering courses in- script writing, direction, dramaturgy, acting, scenography. We hope that within the coming years this will lead to socio political consciousness being performed with the understanding of theatre as a medium.

DRAMATURGY IN PAKISTAN

The following provides a brief account of the theatrical process involved in creating Sunay'ha

On first encounter with Pakistani theatre I was informed that in this country dramaturgy didn't exist. But to my knowledge, dramaturgy in South Asia has a rich history from Shakuntala to The

Natyashastra, shunned by the ruling elite. I found fragmentary theatre forms, intuitively held together by passionate individuals willing to play out seemingly important concerns of the day, regardless of social, political or economic constraints – theatre was addressing ‘the immediate’. For me, coming from the empirical West this was a Dionysian dream, without an Appollian order, Shiva without the wisdom of Vishnu.

On second appearance I found both Gods strangulated by the multinationals and NGOs. The stage had turned into a pulpit, feeding ‘slogans’ to select invitees. At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, the commercial stage was offering slapstick repartee, nourishing an audience hungry for entertainment. Both theatres equally playing to the gallery.

In these circumstances I began working with Context Theatre, Lok RaHS and Beaconhouse University on *Vatandara* (Exchange). The concept was ultimately to lead to a collaboration of techniques and ideas between young enthusiasts and professional practitioners, producing new material informed by the dramaturgy of the region. Unfortunately the political divisions in Pakistani theatre were too wide to bridge- the language of art could not replace the language of politics. Lok RaHS dissociated themselves from *Vatandara* on the basis of their own limited agenda, precluding the sharing of a wider vision which explored the theatre medium itself.

As a dramaturg I see all socio-political themes taking birth from within the context of the theatre and not jostling in from outside; theatre is not ‘about’ society but borne ‘of’ society. Context Theatre and Beaconhouse University have therefore continued to work together with professional practitioners to evolve the original concept. In a country with a chequered history, and multi national predominance- it is difficult for a genuine theatre artist to survive. With an insight into the rich tradition of theatre in South Asia theatre can only flourish by transcending the imposed orders of the NGOs and marketing hacks. Sunay’ha aims at this very insight, and is working with artists who have maintained their intellectual independence, reviving work for production nationally and internationally.

The Sunay’ha Festival is planned to travel internationally. A version will travel to the UK in Spring 2005. A selection of artists from Pakistan will collaborate on their work with UK artists for a Pakistani Theatre Festival at Oh!Art, Bethnal Green London- discovering how their work translates culturally, politically and aesthetically.



Photos and literature available on www.contexttheatre.co.uk

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By Claire Pamment

