Chapter 6

Performing Change

Call it human contact, risk or fallibility. It is what makes theatre theatre. It is also what makes theatre necessary. [...] Dramatists do, after all, tend to be questioners, dissenters, and there will be plenty to question in the twenty-first century.

- Benedict Nightingale, The Future of Theatre

6.1. Theatre in a Changing World

A society in transformation is inevitably in a state of emergency – and "always a state of emergence" (Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon" xi) The societies of China, India and Sri Lanka in the twentieth century, struggling over colonial rule or political upheaval became sites of contestation. What took front-stage was a hegemonic tussle, revolutionary language, new constructions of gender, ethnic or religious identity and space, in the arena of political manoeuvring. Such a volatile state contains the seeds of many possible directions: it may free individuals and communities from traditional restraint and allow them agency in socio-political movements; it may break open the dams of protest; it may draw new maps of relationships and mobility. On the other hand, states of emergency have shaped new ways of repression and
oppression; they have stoked fundamentalism; they have countenanced violence and injustice. Here art assumes increased significance. Playwright Tom Stoppard concurs: "Briefly, art [...] is important because it provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgements about the world" (13-14). The power of theatre to mirror and midwife what is being born cannot be underestimated. This has been the thrust of the present investigation. This concluding chapter offers a brief general overview of the dissertation and a re-statement of its findings.

6. 2. Revisiting the Hypothesis

This study was motivated by a conviction that the interpenetration of text and context is of fundamental significance, given the performative nature of theatre. The basic hypothesis adopted was that theatre as a cultural text would be involved in complex ways in the questioning and recreation of meaning in times of social turbulence. Such a process would, of necessity, lead to changes in theatre itself as it negotiated social and aesthetic tensions and new paradigms.

The context of Asian theatre and Asian society in the twentieth century has been one of pervasive and irreducible change. It was of immense interest to investigate the complex ways in which text and context interfaced, with a focus on the transformation of theatre. Hopefully, such an analysis would open the curtain just a little wider on the nature of theatre, specifically its nature as a cultural text in turbulent times.

The particular aims of the study have been to contextualize the study of theatre evolution in three specific locations in Asia; to examine ways in which theatre re-invented itself in Asia in the context of major social transformation; and to analyze the significance of theatre as a cultural text within such a turbulent context.

Though the social context in all of Asia was fraught with revolutionary tensions through the century, their social, political and economic manifestations in each of the selected cultures were never a duplication of any other. Inevitably, the amount of space for manoeuvre, and the
perception of agency by each individual playwright were also different. Thus, a detailed survey of each instance was called for. Consequently, a few representative plays from each culture were selected for analysis.

6.3. General Findings

The study of the plays selected, viewed within the biographical context of the playwright and situated in the socio-political scenario, suggests that theatre did indeed play a meaningful role as a cultural text. Three angles are here indicated, in which theatre in the selected cultures may have creatively explored the possibilities offered by the period of turbulence: as an agent that helped shape and transmit social memory; as a ritual performance that re-presented social conflict and sought a passage from chaos to cosmos; and theatre as a trial of ideology and social practice. These are merely viewing standpoints or outposts, indicating sometimes overlapping zones, but hopefully revealing something of the special nature of theatre and its assumed character in a particular location.

All the three cultures selected for study reveal theatres that negotiated major issues of modernity versus tradition. In all three, the theatre undertook experiments in form that are fairly similar. The themes they dramatised, however, took their colour and texture from each local situation. Nonetheless, inferences can be drawn which may apply generally to all three.

6.3.1. Theatre Re-presents and Transmits Social Memory

Social convolutions such as China, India and Sri Lanka experienced in the twentieth century signify in many ways a rejection of specific ideologies, norms, relationships and practices, a break with the immediate past, and a forward movement towards some preferred future. However, it is apparent that a total and completely new beginning is an impossibility, specially when it is a matter of a social movement or even a social revolution.
Indeed, neither the establishment of the People's Republic of China, nor the Partition of Bengal in the wake of Independence, nor the ethnic struggle for a Tamil state in Sri Lanka, can be understood without a grasp of the prior realities of the people within these cultures, and the body of their expectations based on recollection. Collective or social memory goes beyond individual memories to include the shared memory that underlies any social order. A reading of the selected plays indicates attempts by playwrights to sift through the disturbing events and clashing ideologies of their own times and to construct a modified map of meaning. In Teahouse Lao She looks back at the preceding fifty years of Chinese history: the degeneration of the age-old imperial rule, the unnerving encounter with Western powers, the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, the heavy economic depression, and the pervasive corruption of social values. All these are seen within the complex Chinese worldview that highly values historicity, that insists on balance and harmony, and subordinates the individual to the family as a basic social unit. It is as if the playwright were unrolling all the ills of the old society to present the dire need for change. The bankruptcy of the near past is offered as the basis for the onward march of Communist reform, and the hope for China comes from the fact that “the East is Red.”

Teahouse dramatizes the despondency of the Chinese in the 1940s and their yearning for a more stable future. Guo Moruo's Cai Wenji equally harks back to history: the playwright re-interprets the character of the tyrant Cao Cao as a forceful administrator; he confers a higher status to women than traditional Chinese society did; and above all he urgently posits the necessity of subordinating the family to the demands of the State. The authors of The White-haired Girl address the mass of Chinese society with the specific aim of empowering the Chinese peasantry. In all these plays we find questions of choice and emphasis of what social memory will be passed on to the future.

Social memory needs to be transmitted to new generations, and Paul Connerton convincingly argues, through an analysis of the French Revolution and other political upheavals, that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past “are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances” (4). Social memory itself becomes the location of a power
struggle. In *Teahouse*, *Cai Wenji* and *The White-haired Girl* the playwrights follow the Party line. However, the move by Gao Xingjian to divert from this State-monitored paradigm led to reprisals. *Nocturnal Wanderer*, as a rejection of the collectivist mentality could, predictably, not find acceptance in China even in the late twentieth century. As noted in earlier chapters in this study, the State often attempts to determine what should be remembered and what must be forgotten. In this pursuit, the Chinese authorities proscribed writers and artists, and of the playwrights studied here, one was driven to suicide (Lao She), one was reduced to silence (Guo Moruo), others accepted the new norms (He Jingzhi and Ding Yi) and one was pushed to self-imposed exile (Gao Xingjian).

In Sri Lanka, too, the murder of the noted playwright Richard Soyza can be seen as an elimination of at least one ‘trouble-maker’ who does not conform to what must be remembered and what must be forgotten. The Sinhala plays studied here choose to define and emphasize Sinhala identity. *The Golden Swan* does this through recourse to the ancient Buddhist Jataka tales, and critiques recent mercenary values. *The Bearer of Woes* skillfully weaves legend, myth and contemporary social issues to ask questions about the role of theatre in society. And *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* harks back to a Biblical prototype to underscore the loss of traditional values and to expose fratricide.

In Bengal one does not find repressive measures of such virulence. But economic measures like State funding and patronage or the withholding of these, have certainly determined which playwrights have "succeeded" or managed to be performed or published. In the selected plays questions of social memory inevitably surface. Utpal Dutt’s *Hunting the Sun* reviews history in the light of equations of power and superstition; Arun Mukherjee, like the Sri Lankan playwright Prasannajit Abeysuriya, interpolates the past into the present to develop the theme of ever-present coercive forces crushing the individual. And Mahasweta Devi’s *Water* demands that the tribal subaltern communities must not be forgotten or consigned to the margins of our awareness.
It is in such an endeavour of setting themselves up as recorders to future generations that we can situate Mahasweta Devi, Badal Sircar, Ediriwira Sarachchandra, Ernest MacIntyre and Gao Xingjian. Playwrights such as these inscribe and perform through their plays something of their perception of social reality, thus enriching social memory with pages that might otherwise be lost in oblivion.

The selected plays also act as ritual performance in the troubled social context of China, India and Sri Lanka.

6.3.2. Theatre as Ritual Performance

The performative character of theatre has drawn attention to its ritualistic nature. Theatre critics have specifically noted the connections of early Asian theatre with ritual. Leon Rubin notes:

The earliest origins of theatre in every country of this region seem to have parallel roots in religious ritual and ceremony, related to the world of spirits in animistic practices; [...] performance was the bridge between the human world and the spirit world. [...] Court traditions of performance probably grew up from these animistic rituals, carefully nurtured by rulers to remind the people of their own divine link (483-484).

Writing about South Asian Theatres, Farley Richmond refers to Indian theatre and the fact that theatre architecture in ancient India was a branch of temple architecture. He notes, “Rituals accompanied virtually every step of the construction process, including the re-consecration of the acting area before every show in order to protect the space and the performers from malevolent forces” (451). Though not identical with religious ritual, ancient theatre does reveal a quasi-ritualistic dimension.

The ritual origin of theatre is not an uncontested notion (Eli Rozik 107). Nor is such a notion really essential here. What is emphasized in this study is the proposition that theatre contains ritual elements which define its relationship with an audience, even in contemporary
times, especially in periods of intense social upheaval. A definition of ritual offered by S. Lukes suggests that we use the term ritual to refer to "rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance" (289-308). Theatre seems to fall within the range of quasi-ritual commemorative ceremonies, in that it contains elements of formalism and performativity. Though it may not be possible to claim for contemporary theatre that it enters the realm of the sacred, one could suggest that theatre does, in a sense, possess a transformative quality, that it works to present or 're-present', in Connerton's phrase, a "passage from chaos to cosmos" (65). Like other quasi-ritual ceremonies, theatre represents and transmits versions of the past through words and images. These re-enactments are stylistically performed, in large part, by the bodily behaviour of the actor (Schechner, "Magnitudes" 31). These are postures and gestures that are culturally loaded, and carry immense weight in the reinforcement of communal memory.

**Actor-training:** It is through the transmission of performance skills to actors, singers, dancers and acrobats, - usually very laborious and carefully codified - that theatre accepts its quasi-ritual nature. This has been so in China where traditionally actor training was long-drawn and specialized. Acting involved a "highly complex set of formal, symbolic gestures and portable objects. Although a foreigner might find them confusing, the Chinese audiences knew them from childhood and understood the nuances of the symbolism" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 23). The actors' training began when they were merely children and lasted a minimum of seven years. With the arrival of realistic techniques, Constantin Stanislavsky's so-called 'Method training' caught the imagination of Chinese directors, but the actor's body continued to be charged with meaning.

In India the performer received rigorous training, and every eye, hand or foot movement was culturally loaded with shared meaning. In Indian classical theatre, *Abhinaya* or 'acting' is meticulously regulated, as the *Nāṭyasāstra* indicates. "The histrionic representation covers all human activity and is divided into the physical, the verbal and the mental" (Tarlekar 75). In the nineteenth century, the great Bengali actress Binodini Dasi records in her biography the years of
training and practice that shaped her into a consummate actress who played over eighty roles during her twelve year career (Dasi 67).

In Sri Lanka what little traditional drama existed was highly ritualized and related to religious practices. In the twentieth century the acting styles underwent change under the influence of realism and other new 'isms', but the actor’s body, his or her voice and language continued to be given enormous attention by directors. By the time realistic theatre caught on in the nineteenth century, and actresses like Annie Boteju entered the theatre, actor training was honed to a fine skill through arduous practice (de Mel 92).

The actor’s body has always been recognized as a powerful theatrical 'sign', and body training engenders, through habit, “a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body; and in the cultivation of habit, it is our body which ‘understands’ (Connerton 95). This symbolic, stylized and repetitive store of body movement lends the play some of its quasi-ritual character.

**The performance as a scapegoat ritual:** In the plays analysed in this study, the physical person of the actor has not lost its centrality, though the written and spoken word take on a new emphasis not to be found in traditional drama. The physicality of performance retains its ritual character, as we notice for instance, in Utpal Dutt’s *Hunting the Sun*, Gao Xingjian’s *Nocturnal Wanderer* and in MacIntyre’s *A Grotesque and Somewhat Mad Comedy*, where issues like violence surface in the work of playwrights who have lived through violent times. The plays re-present in quasi-ritual form, the tensions of societies stretched to breaking point by social, cultural, political and economic conflict.

Critic Erika Fischer-Lichte’s insights support this view. She declares, “the performance in a way, turns into a scapegoat ritual. [...] The performer in this sense, suffers in place of the spectators” ("Performance Art" 35). The writer goes on to indicate, in the footsteps of anthropologist van Gennep, that “rituals work in a community in order to secure a safe passage from a given status to a new one at moments of life or social crisis in an individual (such as birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, illness, change in professional positions, death)” (35). She makes
the connection between theatre and ritual when she remarks that "the performances, thus, operate as the signature of a time of transition" (Fischer-Lichte, "Performance Art" 36). These remarks ring true in the case of Asian theatre being studied here, situated in cultures grappling with social transformation.

Asian theatre in the twentieth century can be seen to play such a ritual role. Performance scholar Victor Turner throws light on the relation between theatrical performance and ritual. Turner argues that socio-economic formations have their own cultural-aesthetic "mirrors" in which they achieve self-reflectivity. Periods of social turbulence or what he calls 'social drama' often proceed through distinct stages which may end in resolution of some kind, or rejection of the traditional resulting in revolution. Theatre offers a much needed public space for reflection. Borrowing van Gennep's concept of 'liminality' or 'threshold', Turner writes of periods of social conflict as "a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures" (12). In the plays taken up for study we repeatedly encounter themes concerning fundamental issues like social relationships, changing values and norms, questions of gender and national identity and so on; and these go hand in hand with an exploration of new theatrical forms – theatre and society mirroring each other as a "storehouse of possibilities."

**Theatre as Ritual Formulates Values:** In many cases the plays studied here utilize, consciously or otherwise, ritual elements to create social theatre. For one, rituals feed on, and formulate culturally accepted values. Theatre also draws on the substratum of the culture, formulating values and indicating outcomes. Time and again we see this happening. *The White-haired Girl* underscores the issue of social justice and retribution, as when the lecherous landlord is severely punished for his exploitation of the peasants and the White-haired 'ghost' is returned to a normal and happy existence. *Cai Wenji*, too stresses the need to prioritize responsibility and loyalty to the State higher than that to the family. In *A Somewhat Grotesque and Mad Comedy* the brotherhood of human beings is proclaimed in a State torn by fratricide. *The Golden Swan* critiques the emerging commercialization and acquisitiveness of the modern Sri Lankan society.
*Hunting the Sun* makes a strong case for reason and rational thinking and against superstition and blind belief. And *Water* exposes the corruption of the bureaucracy and petty officials who crush the poor tribal peasant, and dares to dream of the growing empowerment of the tribal communities.

When schisms in the community become irreparable, the outcome may turn out to be revolution. In such instances old values are rejected and cast aside and a new social order based on a new belief system is ushered in. The need is felt for rites of passage. Rituals can create models for a new social reality. Such a movement of turning away from, and turning towards, is detected in plays like *Cai Wenji*, *Mareech, the Legend*, *Water* and *Hunting the Sun*. Each of the playwrights consciously departs from a set of beliefs that he or she finds outmoded and destructive and points towards a new horizon.

New culturally created symbols are sometimes offered for particular social struggles. In Gao Xingjian’s play *Nocturnal Wanderer* the cardboard box stands out as an apt, if disconcerting symbol for the shelter that contemporary humanity finds, as it avoids grappling with urgent questions of evil within the self and in the environs; the need, the play seems to suggest, is to live 'out of the box.' In Mahasweta Devi’s play, river water knocking down the walls of the dam and consuming the water-diviner, water as the life-giver and life-taker, wife and whore, grows into a fertile symbol of the relation of humans and nature, and of social relations of unequal power. In the play by Lao She, the teahouse, once the centre of social space in the city, now a decrepit old relic of the past, acquires the sad character of chronicler and narrator of the passing of an age.

**Ritual creates a sense of community:** In other ways, too, the ritual element surfaces. One senses the playwrights’ concern with revitalization, with the building of new identities. Or one feels, in isolated moments, the play’s attempt to establish a mood of celebration and hope, as in *Cai Wenji* and *The White-haired Girl*. And certainly one can imagine the sense of *communitas* that these plays must have engendered in a live performance. In the beginning years of the Maoist regime, *The White-haired Girl* resonated with Chinese audiences.
who were still chafing from feudal exploitation, came to be enormously popular, and was produced as a spoken play, a Peking Opera and a film. An observer remarks about the audience response, "Emotionally they were completely one with the play, and during tense moments, roared their disapproval of the landlord, shouted advice to the heroine and cheered the arrival of the Eighth Route Army" (Bodde 305-06). By the 1980s the mood of the masses seems to have turned into something very different. And the theatre, though always subject to the censor's dictates, could turn out to be a space for covert criticism and ridicule of the Party line. In "Audience, Applause and Counter-theatre: Border Crossing in 'Social Problem' Plays in Post-Mao China" theatre scholar Xiaomei Chen writes:

China's "theatre of liberation" entails a unique form of subtext, which requires an insider's knowledge and experience to detect and extract from sometimes seemingly very official plays. [...] Theatre has given the Chinese people the opportunity to react subversively to the dominant culture in order to position themselves against the official "other", and their laughter, tears and sorrow have made early post-Mao theatre a meaningful cultural and political experience (Chen 102).

Here, then, we have laughter and tears in the theatre space creating a strong sense of shared destiny, a feeling of communitas.

Ritualistic elements are to be found in the plays of all three cultures studied here. The plays, ritually, draw from culturally accepted values (as in The Golden Swan) and formulate modified ones (as in Nocturnal Wanderer). They offer new models for a new social reality (as in The White-haired Girl). They construct symbols for social struggles (as in Water). The actor in performance often takes on a ritual 'scapegoat' role. In the nature of ritual commemoration, the plays seek to create a sense of community, however transient, among the audience. These Chinese, Indian and Sinhala plays abundantly stand witness to the ritual role of theatrical performance.

With reference to Asian theatre in the twentieth century, it would not be difficult to agree with Turner's contention that "Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted
system of pre-industrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and their solemnity, and uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music” (12). Asian societies have struggled across the twentieth century through turbulent ‘social drama’ and aesthetic drama to wade through chaos and create a new cosmos of meaning.

6.3.3. Theatre as Trial

Theatre often dares put existence on trial. Public events during periods of upheaval are duly recorded in history books; however, more personal agonies rarely find voice, except in art, in literature, specifically in theatre, through its performative faculty. Like a trial, essentially urgent and immediate, the theatre is imbued with a powerful sense of the ‘here and now’. Such a sense of urgency and immediacy is clearly apparent in plays like The White-haired Girl and Hunting the Sun. Rather more subtly, it surfaces in other more self-consciously balanced plays like Mareech, the Legend and it does not fail to filter through, even in the more inward-looking and less engaged play by Gao Xingjian, Nocturnal Wanderer. ‘Dramatic’ seems to become synonymous with intimate and urgent.

Theatre as trial of ideology and social practice can dramatize, as no other literary art can, a multiplicity of voices, divergent and opposing points of view and the impact of their collision. In diverse plays we witness narratives being set free and the repressed being given a voice. In The Bearer of Woes the attempt is elaborately made to create an interplay of conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable points of view. The idealistic Writer, anxious to expose the ills of society, clashes with the Woman, whose primary and immediate need is to provide for her children, even at the cost of plying her sex-trade. The theatre artistes debate their responsibility to society, but are quite unsure how they can influence the course of events. In Nocturnal Wanderer it is subterranean voices from the Traveller’s sub-conscious that vie with one another: desire, violence, fear, self-knowledge. These creatures from the recesses of the mind are freed to
surface and reveal themselves and openly engage with one another. In *Hunting the Sun* powerful factions clash: the ruling classes and the oppressed slaves; the scientifically-inclined Buddhist monk Kalhan and the priestly hierarchy that encourages superstition so as to maintain a stronghold; the debauchery of the powerful and the power of innocence. In *Mareech, the Legend*, the oppressed of the ages respond to coercion in divergent ways. In *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* the crime of fratricide is viewed from multiple and absurdly contrasting standpoints: from familiar contempt, to profound mourning, to anxiety and hysteria. The trial may not be resolved on stage, but the theatre has certainly opened the proceedings.

Playwrights witness to this feeling of urgency in the process of writing and producing a play. In an interview with Bernadette Fort, renowned contemporary French novelist, playwright, and feminist critic Hélène Cixous (1937–) divulges her sentiments about writing for the theatre:

Particularly today, in quite an exceptional manner which distinguishes it from all other literary acts or practices, the theatre structurally carries a *responsibility in the instant.* [...] Why do we go to the theatre, what is it we expect from the theatre, and from no other space, and which only this space can provide? A feeling of urgency and responsibility. [...] It is a question of writing today’s pain and making it heard without betraying it, which is very difficult (428).

This is a telling remark by a person intimately involved with theatre work today.

Asian theatre, as witnessed in the selected plays from China, India and Sri Lanka, has seized the opportunity to become a forum for conflicting voices, a trial of contemporary and intensely felt opinions. It has given credence to the view that “the theatre is the ideal, the heavenly tribunal, if I can say so – or the hellish tribunal – Hades – but where everybody has his or her own say and everything can be said. Nothing is forbidden. This is one of the reasons why people go to the theatre” (Cixous 441). Can “everything” be said in the theatre? Given the potential of the subtext, the symbolism and ambivalence that the playwright can wield, the capacity of performance to nuance the written text, one may agree that much can be said. The moot question, of course, is how much will be said. What will be said is a matter of the individual
playwright's and director's choice, based on personal ideology, political correctness, the socio-political climate and the leeway accorded to the artist.

In the case of Communist China, censorship effectively gagged many voices; in Sri Lanka the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic divide seems to have determined what would be performed and published; and in West Bengal the pain of the trauma experienced, or the anxiety to forget, or the sheer lack of courage seem to have entirely curtained off certain issues like Partition and the communal feud.

6.4. Conclusion

The relevance of theatre in the contemporary world has been contested. Johannes Birringer claims that "many of us would argue that theatre no longer has any cultural significance and is too marginal or exhausted to intervene in contemporary cultural-political debates" (x). As we have noted in Chapter 1, Philip Auslander debunks the 'unreflective assumptions' made about the 'liveness' of theatre, "and the 'community' that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators" (2). Auslander examines ways in which live performances incorporate the technology of reproduction such as television and sound recording. He contends that modern technology has invaded theatre and robbed it of any possible 'liveness' and that live performances are now basically no different from the mediatized forms. Auslander's attack does, of course, have some basis, when one considers the mega-musicals that run for years in the world capitals and produce their fantastic effects with the help of revolving stages, giant screens and wired music. Though they may make for fascinating spectacle, one is tempted to think that such theatricality in the mediatized world moves away from the essential 'live' nature of theatre. But this is a moot question. Modern technology has inevitably been borrowed, for instance in terms of sound and light, by most forms of theatre, even folk forms like the Bengali Jatra; under these circumstances, one is never quite certain where to draw the boundaries beyond which the co-opting of technology by theatre turns into corruption.
On the other hand, theatre practitioners like Hélène Cixous believe that theatre is attractive and useful because it goes against the grain of our technological and simulated culture, and because it offers an encounter with real time, lived experience and death (Siach 106-9). This is a valid sentiment, and possibly shared by those who keep frequenting the theatre. Moreover, it probably voices the lure of theatre for theatre practitioners — writers, actors, directors — given the fact that the stage offers only modest monetary benefits.

Another argument used to dismiss theatre as outmoded is, not that theatre has changed, but that societies have changed radically and a mismatch is now inevitable. Birringer elaborates this view: "(I)n facing the future of theatre we are already facing conditions in which the very notion of a dominant or unified culture, a traditional notion traceable to historical idealizations of the theatre of the Athenian polis, will become obsolete by the changing realities of our fundamentally multicultural, multilingual, and socially polarized societies" (xi). A study of societies in Asia, caught in a flux of change, assuages such apprehensions. These societies, deeply multicultural, have not been estranged from theatre, they have found the theatre flexible enough to deal with complex realities. In India, the unprecedented cross-language translation of playscripts is a point in fact. The simultaneity of traditional and modern styles, the interconnections between myth, history and contemporary themes, the parallel existence of both urban commercial theatre and grass-roots activist theatre, the acceptance-cum-rejection of cultural 'colonization', the emergence of experimental hybrid forms — all these speak of the vitality of theatre even in a globalized society.

To Birringer's lament that theatre has been marginalized in the context of "the erasure of specific histories, traditions and cultural differences promoted by the globalizing spectacles of postmodern capitalism" (xii) we could respond with a conviction gained from a study of Asian theatre: that theatre makes space for us to re-consider and re-imagine the world we live in. Hence, it is in times of turbulence that it regains vitality. In the context of a world emptied of a "dominant or unified culture", the theatre is best suited to stage micro-narratives. It is in the margins that theatre discovers its creative potential. Underlying the selected modern plays, one
senses a passionate engagement with contemporary struggles and a constant exploration of new or hybrid forms of the old and the new. Modern theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka can be seen as a cultural text which has consistently sought, for over five decades, to be an expression of, and an inspiration for, the struggles of the people for freedom and for identity, however these may be interpreted.

Theatre is a cultural text deeply interpenetrated with its social context. As one maps the course of Asian theatre in the face of the uncertain moment of turbulence, one recognizes that theatre has played its part creatively and often honourably. It has done so in myriad ways, according to varying circumstances. One comes across plays like Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* or Girish Karnad’s *Nagmandala* that dramatize fascinating ideas and concepts, which one may perhaps call concept theatre; one encounters many playwrights who, based on political ideologies, prefer a theatre of commitment; and one may discover a Gao Xingjian who is resolute about theatre as the voice of the individual.

Theatre always has an eye on the gallery. The context, the audience, these matter in a live performance. Theatre is often the clown, delighting crowds with light buffoonery, telling stories for an evening’s entertainment. Traditional theatre in Asia has performed this pleasant task with vitality and verve and offered much relaxation and some food for the mind and the heart. But then, at times, the storm clouds gather in the sky, and theatre offers some refuge.

Responding to the need of the hour, theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka has often exchanged the hat of the slapstick clown for that of the witty and satirical ‘fool’, or that of the committed writer, dramatizing social problems and suggesting solutions. At times like these, the theatre comes in for a great deal of opprobrium from some literary critics who dismiss it as political theatre and question its aesthetics. But this is often an unjust claim, since theatre is, in a sense, always political, since it “can enter into resonance in an extremely intimate manner with the citizen’s ethico-political situation of today” (Cixous 428). In turbulent days theatre discovers a responsibility to the present times and the ages to come, and enjoys the possibility of embodying these questions on stage.
As social upheaval grows more intense, theatre seems to deepen its self-questioning. It may re-discover the power of play, for play can lend new perspectives. Amartya Sen correctly points out: "(R)esisting injustice is only one of the uses of voice in play. Another is to express a fuller picture of people which can take us beyond the one-dimensional characterization of human beings that bigots – religious or political or whatever – try to peddle" (5). Playful and serious are then no longer seen as opposites.

However, there come also those terrible times when theatre loses its voice altogether. In the wake of Partition in India and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in China, the horror of the experiences has produced only unnerving silence. Theatre is human, after all. And in its occasional silence in the face of trauma, it faces its limitations. The comments made by Sri Lankan critic D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke tellingly support this view:

Conflict and crisis in history do not necessarily produce good or plentiful literature: World War II was the biggest conflict in modern history; but it begat little literature in English and nothing of outstanding quality. On the other hand, conflict and crisis are not always portrayed well in art out of the immediacy of the experience: it was only many years after the Vietnam War had ended that remarkable films about it began to appear in the United States. This may or may not apply to Sri Lankan literature in English about our “ethnic” conflict. To date, generally speaking, Wilfred Owen’s words hold true: “The Poetry is in the pity” ( “Ethnic Conflict” 453).

Despite its failures and limitations, theatre has created for communities in Asia a rich space to perform their complex realities and to perform change. These Asian cultures are important “new centres of consciousness” (King 7) in the twentieth century and have been the location of intense self-reflectivity. Theatre has shared and fostered the climate of self-reflectivity and has actively participated in the creation of a vision and re-vision of ‘the nation’ and a “reactive cultural identity” (Dharwadker 2). It has offered to the public gaze significant dialectics of modernity and tradition, Western and indigenous, urban and rural. It has often turned with eager interest to cultural legacies and has sought to integrate them with contemporary concerns and exigencies.
On the stage, a "living past" (Smith 9) has been recovered, re-imagined and re-integrated in the present in the shape of history, myth, legend and symbol. Theatre space which had been a 'colonized space' in terms of the exclusion of subaltern voices like that of the woman and the tribal, has begun to be contested. Playwrights have preferred the satiric mode, which mocks and ridicules, to the heroic mode, which idealises and celebrates. Plays have focussed on spaces as public as emperors' courts and teahouses, as private as the home and as hidden as the recesses of the mind. In this process, the interpenetration of the public world of social and political action with the private world of the family as a psychological unit, and with the inner world of the mind, have led to experimentation in form. Where some playwrights have valorized the historico-mythical past, others have opted to engage with the historical present and perform it in a realistic style. The predominantly urban contemporary Asian theatre has not been unchallenged and rural folk forms have sometimes been co-opted into the mainstream theatre. The text has been greatly valorized, as has been the role of the playwright and the director.

One must conclude that theatre has offered itself as one of the most accessible media, perhaps the most adaptable to specific contexts. A text-in-context reading of plays from China, India and Sri Lanka convinces us that Asian theatre has indeed been Theatre Agonistes valiantly performing change and assisting the passage of these cultures from chaos to cosmos. It may well be possible that the transforming societies draw strength, inspiration, release or new perspectives from the deep experience of theatre.