PERFORMING CHANGE:

A STUDY OF THEATRE
IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
IN THREE ASIAN CULTURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
CHAPTER 1

THEATRE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
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Theatre creates heaven and earth, ghosts and deities. Theatre can exhaust ten thousand possibilities of human characters and present a thousand changes in human history. [...] When a performance reaches the most exquisite point, one can hear the soundless and see the Tao as big as life.

- Tang Xianzu (1550 – 1616) Epitaph for the Theatre God Master Qingyuan

You sit and watch the stage
Your back is turned –
To what?
The firing squad
Shoots in the back of the neck
Whole nations have been caught
Looking the wrong way
I want to remind you
Of what you forgot to see
On the way here.

- Edward Bond, Lear (1971)
1.1. Theatre as a Cultural Text

Theatre has been a living and significant presence in the pre-modern world. The Chinese scholar Li Liweng writes in the seventeenth century, "A dynasty's position in history rests on the plays it produced. Therefore, while different from other genres, the art of playwriting is not a minor skill but ranks high, along with history, biography, poetry and prose" (78–79). Such a position for the theatre in contemporary society has been contested and problematized. Performance theorists today, such as Philip Auslander, question the "traditional, unreflective assumptions" (2) that are made about live performance. Auslander attacks what he refers to as, "attempts to explicate the value of 'liveness' [by] invoking clichés and mystifications like 'the magic of live theatre', the 'energy' that supposedly exists between performers and events in a live event, and the 'community' that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators" (2). Technological developments in virtual reality and communications have sometimes prompted the conclusion that theatre has no genuine place any more: technology has turned the world, and humans themselves, into a 'standing reserve' in which everything and everyone is instrumental, a means to be used up or laid waste, rather than a fully present end in themselves (Heidegger 3–35). Postmodern theory tends to see theatre as a "quaint and marginalized activity in a wired world" and contests whether live theatre really exists any more (Fortier 220).

However, equally vocal have been theorists and theatre practitioners who claim for theatre today a more than merely marginal location. In The Future of Theatre Benedict Nightingale claims: "It has been observed that people watching film or TV tend to lean back, people in theatre to lean forward. That body language tells a truth. However hard it may strive to be trivial, the theatre cannot shed the civic and religious importance it possessed at its dawning" (6). Anthropologist and comparative symbologist Victor Turner believes that "Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances."
A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures” (Introduction 1). Theatre researcher and artist Jane Plastow examines the dynamics in a variety of cultures under stress and remarks that “The theatre not only examines the resultant sense of loss of self-worth but also attempts to take part in the healing process of asserting culture and identity [...]” (2). The debate has not abated; it continues to beckon investigators.

This study investigates the viability and vitality of theatre to participate in the creation and re-creation of meaning and social critique. It claims for theatre, in the context of three cultures in Asia, a significant location as a cultural text, in providing space for political discourse; in problematising contemporary social issues; in provoking critical thought on the nature of art and performance; in interrogating culture itself, and matters of cultural identity; and in playing a quasi-ritual role in creating community.

By virtue of being, fundamentally, one of the most collaborative of the arts, the theatre engages with culture at more than one level. Variously, it functions as an exchange between literary text and performance; playwright, reader, actor, director and audience; art and politics; leisure as well as economics; a space for resistance or a less than liberating instrument of political power. Particularly in times of social crisis and transition, theatre finds distinctive creative possibilities poised in the transitional moment. It can act as a multi-layered agent in the creation and recreation of maps of meaning for the cultural group where it operates. The theatre experience is deeply communitarian in nature. In times of social conflict and crisis, elements of discontinuity and heterogeneity and contradictory impulses may find their way onto the stage. This makes available a space for analysis, novelty, resistance and change.

The problem analysed in the dissertation is the complex relationship between theatre and culture in some Asian societies in the second half of the twentieth century. Twentieth century Asia has been a major theatre of political, social and cultural struggle and redefinition. This fact offers vast scope to investigate the response of theatre, as a form of the literary and performing arts, to reinvent itself. The transformation of theatre in the context of a society in
deep and often violent crisis, challenges the investigator to venture into fact finding, analysis and interpretation.

The focus of the study is to throw light on the experience of theatre at the literary and performance levels in three Asian countries as they negotiated social transformation: China, India, and Sri Lanka. To narrow the point of focus, the study investigates the theatre of urban China, the Bengali theatre in India, and the Sinhalese theatre in Sri Lanka. Selected plays from the work of an array of playwrights are critiqued. They are viewed within the larger historical, political and cultural context within which they arose and to which they responded, so as to identify patterns and trends. The underlying assumption is that such an enquiry yields significant insights into the nature of theatre as a cultural text. This assumption is supported by Johan Fornas' observation: "Symbolic or cultural forms mirror, represent and thematise other parts and aspects of human life, society and the external world. [...] Culture represents or refigures these other 'realities' while simultaneously opening an intersubjectively shared symbolic dimension of its own. Cultural texts mirror society but simultaneously take part in its formation" (134).

1.2. Researching Theatre

The study examines selected plays from China, India and Sri Lanka so as to investigate the complex relationships between theatre and culture in these locations from around 1950 to 2000. Rather than conducting an exhaustive survey of all the plays written and performed in these five decades - a rather daunting task considering the large geographical and chronological area under consideration - eleven plays have been earmarked to serve as case-studies. These plays chosen for analysis are believed to be representative of the segment of theatre under investigation.
1.2.1. The Plays

China:
1. *The White-haired Girl* by He Jingzhi and Ding Yi, (representative of the *geju*, a new theatre form developed to popularize emerging political ideals).
2. *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo (representing the historical genre popular in China).
3. *Teahouse* by Lao She (as an instance of the *huaju*, the modern 'spoken play').

India:
1. *Evam Indrajit* by Badal Sircar (a path-breaking experimental play influenced by Western theatre).
2. *Hunting the Sun* by Utpal Dutt (representing the work of an Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) playwright that highlights social issues).
3. *Mareech, the Legend* by Arun Mukherjee (as an instance of an amalgamation of the *Jatra* folk form with the modern theatre).
4. *Water* by Mahasweta Devi (significant as a play by a woman writer and social activist).

Sri Lanka:
1. *The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain* by Ediriwira Sarachchandra (a play harking back to myth and legend to throw light on contemporary problems).
2. *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* by Ernest MacIntyre (an instance of a play with an experimental form and an intractable contemporary theme).
3. *The Bearer of Woes* by Prasannajit Abeysuriya (to illustrate the use of theatre for socio-political critique).
In the six chapters of the dissertation the attempt is to contextualize the study of theatre as it evolved in the three specific locations; to investigate ways in which theatre re-invented itself in Asia in the context of major social transformation; and also to analyse the significance of theatre as a cultural text within such a turbulent context. In this introductory Chapter 1 the thesis is stated, the contours of theatre theory and practice are drawn, and recent relevant literature is reviewed; the focus is on Asian theatre, but the larger canvas of world theatre is always kept in mind. The next six chapters deal with the following themes:

Chapter 2. The Text in the Context of Society and Theatre. In this chapter the plays are introduced and placed within the context of society and theatre in three cultures.

Chapter 3. The Playwright in Political Costume. Here the focus is on the political nature of theatre, with reference to ideology, and power relations. Note is also taken of the role of the artist as understood within the worldview of each culture, and of the ways in which each of the playwrights negotiates these issues in turbulent times.

Chapter 4. Gendering the Theatre. Gender-based constructions in theatre are posited as an intrinsic part of a larger discourse within societies grappling with thorny issues of modernization and identity.

Chapter 5. The Changing Frames of Performance in Asian Theatre. In this chapter some of the problematics of form and style come in for discussion, situated within the dialectic of modernity and tradition.

Chapter 6. Conclusion. The main threads of the argument are woven together to indicate patterns in the weave of theatre and society.

The scope of the study is defined by the parameters selected: to examine theatre as a literary as well as a performance text as it functioned and evolved over a period of about fifty years (1950 - 2000) in specific geographical locations.

Methodology: As the title indicates (Performing Change: a Study of Theatre in the Context of Social Transformation in Three Asian Cultures in the Twentieth Century) the dissertation is essentially a cultural analysis of texts. It is in the nature of a case-study of specific
texts within their context, with the aim of indicating trends or directions. The changes in the writing and performing of plays are seen to go in tandem with the social, political and economic changes in society. The study analyses the nature of this relationship between transformation in society and theatre. It includes a comparative dimension where the responses of the three cultures under observation are juxtaposed and critically viewed in the process of theorising theatre. Mikko Lehtonen indicates the nature of such a process: "Analysis is returning to the roots of text's symbolic construction, to what it is composed of, and simultaneously withdrawing from text, detaching from 'the text itself' and going to contextual elements" (89).

The analysis borrows from the approaches of various theorists: it finds useful insights in semiotics to understand theatre as a language of signs; it acknowledges that psychoanalysis can be a rich map for analysis; it probes, with the theatre anthropologists, the ritual character of stage performance; it takes a leaf out of the book of the feminists to come to grips with issues of gender; and it draws on postcolonial viewpoints to critique the theatre of three Asian cultures grappling with their immediate past. It takes as a point of departure that texts are, in the words of Edward W. Said, worldly events:

(T)exts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.[...] The realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men, women and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics (The World's 5).

Together with the analysis of the selected plays, the dissertation draws upon other primary sources like biographical and other first-person accounts and discussions, as well as secondary sources such as theatre scholarship, historical and socio-political analyses.

The Asia-centred focus in the latter decades of the twentieth century calls into attention a region that has been the stage of social upheaval of enormous magnitude. Asian theatre re-
inventing itself with unsurpassed vitality within such a cultural context offers interesting insights into the nature of theatre and the diverse players who shape its discourse.

The concept of ‘Asian theatre’ is taken as a meaningful category, despite the extensive differences in the circumstances and works that one encounters in each of the cultures being studied. This is based on the perception that theatre in Asia does seem to prioritize specific motifs in the area of form, and that, differences notwithstanding, Asian societies faced common challenges in the twentieth century: overwhelming political turmoil, problematic engagement with Western powers, modernization, questions of cultural identity and nationhood, and social reconstruction.

1.3. **Theatre and Social Change**

Theatre and social change have manifested interconnections, possibly at all times in one subtle way or another, but graphically and diversely in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theatre discourse has been abundant and fertile in sowing the winds of change within every facet of theatre, from the very concept of its nature, to the various aspects of its craft. Simultaneously, the practice of theatre has certainly not remained unaffected by the enormous transformation in the socio-politico-cultural context. The dialectic between social change and change within theatre has flowed with vigour through the century. This is however, not a new or sudden development. Theatre has manifested a nexus with society through the ages.

1.3.1. **Theatre and Society in Ancient Greece**

The debate about the ‘proper’ nature and function of theatre can be traced back through the centuries to the ancient Greeks: Plato’s mistrust of the poet as a man possessed, unable to grasp the true nature of reality and given to whipping up unhealthy emotions, and Aristotle’s advocacy of poetry as more philosophical than history, and his defence of theatre as cathartic, all
seem to point to the vitality of the theatre of the day. It is to the tradition of comedy of the times, as a genre, that we turn to explore topical issues and earthy themes and to take on the events and personalities of the moment. Aristophanes sounds perfectly contemporary to a twenty-first century audience, with his irreverent tone and political engagement. As early as the fifth century B.C., Aristophanes uses, in The Frogs, the parabasis or direct address to the audience, to interrupt the action and mount a direct political exposé. Not surprisingly, one discovers that Aristophanes wrote during the years of the long Peloponnesian War which ended in 404 B.C.: social turbulence had its impact on the playwrights of the day. In Asia too, theatre of social engagement has not been uncommon in days gone by.

1.3.2. Ancient Asian Theatre

In some Asian cultures we encounter a similar engagement not primarily in the classical mode but powerfully in the robust folk traditions. However, the classical playwright Bhasa (circa 400 AD) (Richmond et al 54) is known to have have reinterpreted mythological or historical characters to comment on contemporary matters. The folk performances widespread in India, have usually related in diverse ways to the contemporary socio-political reality. The Jatra of Bengal, Terukuttu of Tamilnadu, Veethinatakam of Andhra Pradesh, Tamasha of Maharashtra, and Yakshagana of Karnataka, are some examples of this process. Originally with strong religious affiliations, as the political life became stable they took to presenting also historical, social and political themes and mythological episodes without emphasis on the religious (Jain 41). As Girish Karnad points out, "the energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head" (14). Karnad’s comment that folk theatre has been a very socially committed space is vindicated by the socio-political themes in mythological dress which are popular to this day.
1.3.3. European Theatre from the Seventeenth Century

Early European drama also reveals its deep-seated involvement with social realities. In Elizabethan England, Ben Jonson insists on the moral purpose of comedy to act as a social monitor and condemn vice by ridicule. Shakespeare’s plays cannot escape questions of power and politics. In seventeenth century France, Molière insists that the only rule in comedy is to please the audience, that the end of comedy is social instruction and that comedy should depict universal types, not individuals. In 1751 playwright and philosopher Denis Diderot in his Encyclopaedia, advocates civil rights and helps pave the way for the French Revolution. Turmoil in the arts often reflects social confusion. Like conceptions of society, conceptions of theatre were being redefined in France: the values came from what were earlier the social margins – not the aristocracy, but the rising middle class which wanted a theatre and a society based on their values. In his conception of production and in urging a prose play that reflected these values, Diderot tried to change and extend the scope of theatre.

The twentieth century, fraught with war and violence, brought forth an enormous body of theatre work. Martin Esslin writes about the new-found seriousness that viewed drama and theatre as a space for reflection as the century dawned:

For the nineteenth century middle-classes, the theatre had been a source of entertainment, a provider of laughs, glitter and maudlin sentimentality; it had lost some of the more lofty functions it had served in some earlier epochs: poetic, religious, political. But voices began to make themselves heard that the time had come to put the theatre – and drama – back to its formerly hallowed position in the culture as a place of serious reflection on the state of society, and, indeed, a source of sublime emotion and almost religious uplift (341).

When one considers the theatre of Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, to name just a few playwrights, Esslin’s comments are entirely apt. The century that produced the mass media is also responsible for an unprecedented interest not only in live
performance but equally in theorizing experiment and a passionate search into the fundamentals of theatre.

In the following sections note is taken of the significant voices of theatre practitioners and critics who have made seminal contributions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; these have influenced world theatre, including, to a large extent, Asian theatre.

1.3.4. Twentieth Century World Theatre and Asian Theatre

A few of the influential voices that have emerged, and will be briefly highlighted, are those of Henrik Ibsen, George B. Shaw, Constantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grotowsky and Peter Brook. Without exception, these were theatre persons themselves, to whom performance was a central issue of life. In this century that experienced profound political, economic and social upheaval, theatre aficionados responded with a discourse where change, however understood, is never peripheral, but uncompromisingly central.

Theatre at the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed major literary and theatrical reform following in the wake of political and social upheaval which swept Europe. Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) from Norway heard the insistent call for naturalism and realism that infused the novel (Zola, Balzac, Flaubert and Stendhal) and painting (Turner and Courbet). During a period of self-imposed exile from Norway to Italy he lived through years of creative turmoil, liberating himself and his art from prevailing superficial and bourgeois mores of contemporary Scandinavian society. In path-breaking plays of realistic prose, Ibsen explored themes like the inequality of the sexes; the endangerment of political systems; the conflict of reality and illusion; the destructive price of material success; the tyranny of ideals. Plays like Ghosts (1881), naturalistic in thematic treatment and deeply symbolic imagery catapulted an international audience into prolonged controversy and debate on the nature of theatre. Ibsen saw the stage as an experimental space where he criticized prevailing moral dogmas and advocated radical solutions. Ibsen remained a
beacon and a point of departure for the new drama of the new century. In China, for instance, the impact of Western drama made a *début* with the acquaintance of Chinese writers with Ibsen and realism in the 1920s and 1930s (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 119). In India and Sri Lanka, too, Ibsen's plays were widely performed in the English theatre as well as in translation to the local languages (Raha 170 and Obeyesekere 123).

Realism found a devoted advocate in England. **Bernard Shaw** (1856–1950) brought to English theatre a passion and energy not seen since Elizabethan times, and a combativeness all his own. Incisive and irreverent, his major plays like *John Bull's Other Island, Man and Superman, Major Barbara* and *Pygmalion* displayed his genius for dramatizing debate on contemporary social and political issues. Though his unabashed use of the stage as pulpit does not gain him a large following today, Shaw remains an influential pioneer. In 1992 the veteran dramatist, actor and director Utpal Dutt, whose play *Hunting the Sun* is selected for study here, staged his *Janathat Aphein* (Opium of the People), a Shavian play debate about Hindu and Muslim claims to the same temple site, a hugely controversial issue at the time in India (Brown 525).

Newer impulses were now being felt and they derived from the borders of Europe. In Russia **Constantin Stanislavsky**, a great patriarchal figure of theatre, (1863-1938) helped usher front-stage the figure of the actor and explore his/her inner creativeness. Roose-Evans asserts: "Of all the pioneers he casts the longest shadow. [...] Through all the vicissitudes of fashion, however, he retained his belief in the essential creative power of the actor as the only source of vitality for the theatre" (6). Stanislavsky's insights into the nature of acting are set out in his two books *My Life in Art* (1926) and *An Actor Prepares* (1937). With Constantin Stanislavsky, then, was firmly established the actor's theatre. Stanislavsky's influence on modern acting has been enormous for the better part of the twentieth century, though it came to be challenged by later theatre practitioners like Meyerhold and Artaud. Stanislavsky's influence was received by Asian playwrights like Lao She, in his play *Teahouse* and others in the 1950s; but it was summarily dismissed by writers like MacIntyre, from Sri Lanka, in his *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* and Badal Sircar in India, in his *Evam Indrajit* in the later decades under the
influence of Absurdist Theatre; also by playwrights like the Chinese Gao Xingjian who rejected realism in favour of the Theatre of Cruelty later propounded by Antonin Artaud.

To his compatriot, Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), the most fascinating aspect of theatre was the primacy of movement. In 1912 Meyerhold wrote in his essay "The Fairground Booth" that pantomime and cabotinage or bodily theatre, were the only antidote to an excessive misuse of words in theatre. By reviving the primordial elements of the theatre -- such as the mask, gesture, movement and plot -- theatre was at last able to free itself from the shackles of literature. The grotesque, on the other hand, sharpened the senses. During the Stalinist regime in Russia, (1928-53) experiment in art was banned and Meyerhold was denounced as an enemy of the State. After a courageous speech defending the right of the creative artist to experiment, Meyerhold was deported to a concentration camp where he died, some believe, having committed suicide. His wife was found assassinated (Roose-Evans 23). It is to Meyerhold's credit that he dared challenge the appropriation of the stage for realistic literature, and point to older and more primordial elements of theatre. Though it would be difficult to trace a direct thread of influence from Meyerhold to Asian drama, one discovers in Meyerhold an emphasis on bodily theatre, which was never alien to theatre in Asia.

By this time the call for a non-naturalistic aesthetic became more and more insistent. The British theorist, director and stage designer Gordon Craig (1872-1966) argued for an abstract and ritualistic theatre that would have an equivalent spiritual significance to the tragedy of classical Greece or the Noh play, a traditional and highly stylized Japanese form. Other theatre practitioners giving serious thought to the visual and symbolic elements of performance were Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) in Switzerland, a theorist and designer who renovated theatrical and operatic scenography and in France, actor, director, critic, essayist and playwright Jacques Copeau (1879–1949) who rejected naturalism as well as spectacular decorativism and advocated a concentration on the actor and a bare stage.

The name of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is deeply linked with the concept of Alienation. In the first three decades of the century, three names were connected with revolutionary
developments in the theatre in Germany. Max Reinhardt directed productions on an epic scale (theatrical invention in squares, streets, by lakes, cathedrals and in private houses). Erwin Piscator invented the phrase 'Epic Theatre' (and pioneered what came to be known as documentary theatre) and Bertolt Brecht used the concept in the writing of his scripts. The influence of Brecht particularly, has deeply marked the world of theatre. Brecht saw drama as a means to transform society by subjecting ideologies to close scrutiny. Roose-Evans accurately indicates the core of Brecht's aesthetic: "Brecht wanted to stimulate a reaction rather than encourage the kind of passive acquiescence found in the old bourgeois theatre. [...] The play thus became an 'encounter' and an 'experiment', with the audience functioning both as interpreter and critic" (68).

Brecht was passionate about creating a form of theatre where the audience is 'alienated', or distanced so that they are not emotionally involved, but ever aware that they are in an auditorium watching a play. They are thus able to ponder the dramatic action, and draw independent conclusions about social problems. The figure of Brecht continues to loom large over the world of theatre. Brecht was deeply influenced by Asian theatre, and the performance of Chinese actor Mei Lan-Fang in which he found confirmation of his insight that theatrical form can use symbolism to great advantage.

In France, Antonin Artaud (1896-1949) launched a rebellion against the rhetorical acting of the Comedie Francaise. He questioned the traditional dominance of the stage by words and by the author. He advocated a poetry of space that utilized music, dance, mime, chanting and lighting. Artaud was rebelling against the kind of culture that is subservient to the printed word and takes no cognizance of primitive sources of inspiration. In his volume of essays The Theatre and its Double (1938) he demanded that theatre should no longer be mere entertainment but genuine action, with real effects on the real world. Artaud suggested a model for theatre: a police raid on a red-light district, rounding up prostitutes on the streets and flushing them out of the brothels. The features of what he later called the Theatre of Cruelty are at work here: violence and sexuality, and the catapulting of dramatic action out of the safe
confines of the stage. Artaud's theories continue to provoke and his influence can be read into the experiments of more recent playwrights in Africa and Argentina who stage violence in criminal States. Among the playwrights studied here, Gao Xingjian's work reveals Artaud's influence, in the depiction of nightmarish violence.

The traumatic impact of the World Wars resonated within theatre in many ways. In his essay on "Theatre After Two World Wars" Christopher Innes discovers an unusually close integration of theatre with its social context after 1919: it can be seen in the different kinds of drama on the stages of defeated countries, and on those of the victors.

There seems to be an equation between the degree of war damage a country had suffered, and theatrical experiment. In Germany, where the theatre had long held the reputation of a 'moral tribunal', Expressionism had already burst on the scene in 1916. [...] Russia had been even more soundly defeated, although initially on the victorious Allied side, and already by 1920 Meyerhold was raising the banner: 'Put the October Revolution into the Theatre!' (Innes 383)

England and France, however, victors in war, lost out on theatre: experiments lacked the ideological content of the Russian and German innovations. Though one seems to encounter here one kind of theatre-society connection, the reality is entirely different when a couple of decades later, World War II ravages the world. Innes opines:

In a sense drama became a continuation of war by other means during the inter-war years, with the slogan 'Theatre is a Weapon' being coined in 1920. And this essential continuity, right up to the declaration of peace in 1945, perhaps helps to explain why there was no artistic ferment and radical innovation in the theatre — such as characterizes the 1920s — in response to the Second World War (382).

Theatre in Europe had been co-opted by the political and educational Establishment and lost its space for subversion and experimentation.

The impulse for experimentation, when it arrived, came from the philosophy of existentialism. In the atmosphere of despair and despondency after World War II, existentialism
became the support of many intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). Among the many plays he wrote, Sartre's *The Flies* (1943), *Dirty Hands* (1948) and *The Devil and the Good Lord* (1951) won great acclaim. Camus was very active in theatre work, and plays like *Caligula* (1938) and *Cross Purpose* (1944), were in the nature of extended debates. Each of these two Frenchmen wrote plays, but it is their essays that were seminal in establishing Existentialism.

But where Sartre felt a sense of commitment to his existentialism, the Theatre of the Absurd discovered no values worthy of commitment. Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and other Absurdist playwrights expressed the disorder they experienced through the very form of their writing. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) the 'story' or the 'un-story' of two tramps, is the masterpiece of the Theatre of the Absurd. It has been said that "through whittling away the traditional elements of plot, setting and character, he has created a dynamic image for the static experience of waiting, remembering, struggling with the characteristically modern sense of futility. [...] Beckett creates compressed images of the whole human situation" (Bradby 81). Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) writing from France, can be seen as the towering figure of challenge to twentieth century theatre. It is to his credit that the angst of the age, the sense of alienation, the breakdown of communication, are given form through grotesque symbols of the emptiness and terror of being human. Beckett's long arm has penetrated Asian theatre and playwright Ernest MacIntyre depicts genocide in Absurdist terms, and Badal Sircar dramatises the rootless consciousness of urban Bengali society.

Other significant voices came to be heard in theatre: in America, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller strove to articulate a genuine American consciousness and idiom. Cliff Odets created a theatre of political consciousness. In England, the fight against censorship of the theatre which Shaw had espoused at the beginning of the twentieth century, came to a head when the Royal Court was prosecuted for staging Edward Bond's play *Saved* (1966). A furore was unleashed and the result was the repeal of the Theatres Act of 1843 and
the censorship of the English stage was abolished in 1968; the greater freedom would be conducive to greater experimentation (Innes 430).

But the most energetic questioning of the nature of theatre originated from Poland. Jerzy Grotowsky (1933 - 1999) had one question to grapple with: what is theatre? Working in small rooms, with audiences kept deliberately small, Grotowsky discovered that theatre can exist without make-up, costumes, a stage or sound and light. But what theatre cannot do without is the relationship of actor and spectator. This one act is essential, this encounter between two groups of people: this, Grotowsky called Poor Theatre. Grotowsky seeks to disturb the spectator on a deep level: he takes a myth or situation sanctified by tradition and the actors confront it to relate it to their own experience of life which is determined by the collective experience of one’s time. The spectator responds with empathy, and at certain moments of heightened awareness, can be changed for life. Grotowsky is considered one of the most powerful influences on world theatre in the twentieth century.

The sophisticated technological control of stage images and sound available to the theatre director prompted questions about the essential nature of performance. Theatre research drove Peter Brook (1925 - ) to attempt to uncover the roots of theatre: he undertook a long series of experiments and what he has termed ‘cultural experience’. How to make theatre absolutely necessary to people, as necessary as eating and sex? Moving from England and Paris to Africa and Afghanistan, Peter Brook searches for an answer, for a quality in theatre lost to Western industrial societies. With a group of actors of different nationalities, Brook turns to a twelfth century masterpiece, The Conference of Birds by the Sufi poet Attar to create a work of theatre that would be meaningful wherever it was played. With his international company he stages the Mahabharata. Brook is not aiming at an exchange of theatrical skills, but to create the conditions for an exchange of cultural experience. Brook’s The Empty Space (1968) and The Shifting Point (1987) have influenced directors and actors as perceptive analyses of the problems facing contemporary theatre. Brook is among those who see that deep change is necessary, but he no longer believes that conventional theatre can provide such change. His quest for theatre as
cultural experience has been challenged by Rustom Barucha from India. In *Theatre and the World*, both Grotowsky and Brook come in for severe indictment. Barucha problematises the so-called 'intercultural theatre' as disrespectful to theatre and an attempt that decontextualises and falsifies the native cultural tradition in response to international market demands. He decries "this lack of concern for the contextual realities permeating the Indian theatre, and its dynamic relationships with numerous communities" (6). Barucha's views give voice to the concerns of some theatre persons world-wide who are deeply suspicious of what they construe as a form of spurious 'interculturalism'.

The attempts by political powers to oppress, exploit and tyrannize have met with resistance in theatre in various forms. Playwrights have seen the stage as the forum for surreptitious insurrection. At extreme personal cost, some have staged the violence tearing the social fabric in countries like Argentina, Nigeria and Brazil. The concept of theatre in Brazil and indeed in the world has been deeply transformed by the work and writings of Augusto Boal (1931 - ). Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed sees itself not as a mere theatrical method but as atonement. His concept of the 'spect-actor' derives from the fundamental importance assigned to the 'user' of theatre, and the users include those who watch as well as those that act. Boal's vision of theatre as a means of empowerment caught the imagination of theatre people. It has found practitioners in more than 70 countries. Not only in the poverty-ridden favelas (shanty-towns) of Brazil but all over the world, Boal's Forum theatre continues to be popular with individuals and communities who see in it the possibility of giving voice, body and gesture to the marginalized and oppressed. Boal's philosophy of theatre has shaped the work of a popular theatre movement in Bengal today that goes by the name of Jana Sanskriti. As the Brazilian's vision is transposed to India, it takes on a more local colouring, but the philosophy remains unchanged: empowering the oppressed.

In the last fifty years theatre appears rejuvenated. Subverting oppression, forging identities, at times supporting the establishment, it has persisted, if not always center-stage, then in interstices and margins. This age of revolutions has prompted practitioners of theatre in
innumerable guises to enter, participate, confront, articulate or subvert the multiple, often conflicting, narratives around them. Contemporary theatre practice has generated plentiful theatre scholarship. Vigorous critical discourse has surfaced in the last few decades attempting to contribute conceptually to theatre scholarship in the contemporary scenario. These include discussions on aspects of performance and culture and on cultural representations of suffering.

1.4. Theorizing Theatre

Ironically, the century that has made the loudest din about theatre as an upstaged cultural practice, is also the century that has voiced the greatest interest in theatre theory. This theory has gained from a broad range of disciplines: philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, political economics, history, anthropology and so forth. Much of the theory stresses the importance of language as the basis of human activity: this is often resented by theatre practitioners as a distorted co-opting by ‘literary theory’, to the exclusion of the physical and sensual elements of theatre. The term ‘drama’ is generally used to refer to the dramatic text in its written form; whereas ‘theatre’ is preferred as a term to refer to the play in performance. Even as the distinction between ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ is made, one needs to accept that “recovering the literary does not marginalize the theatrical – and vice-versa – and both together account for the resonance of the plays in performance” (Dharwadkar 17). Theatre and theory are also complementary, since “both are contemplative pursuits, although theatre has a practical and sensuous side which contemplation should not be allowed to overwhelm” (Fortier 5). Reflection on theatre practice has proceeded from diverse disciplines, some of which we now note.

Semiotics: The rise of semiotics brought to a study of theatre Saussure’s definition of the sign and the signifier and the signified. Theatre semiotics was undertaken by various theorists. In The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (1980) Keir Elam attempts to provide a coherent system capable of accounting for all significant activity of theatre and drama: smiles, gestures, tones of voice, blocking, music, lights, character development (4). Similarly theatre
theorist Erika Fischter-Lichte writes: "Everything which humans produce is 'significant' for themselves and each other, because humans in principle live 'in a signifying world' " (Semiotics of Theatre 1). This standpoint privileges form, but fails to take adequate note of extrinsic contextual factors that vitally affect theatre.

**Anthropology:** The value and significance of 'cultural performance' was highlighted by the anthropologist Milton Singer when he drew attention to the fact that culture is produced and manifested not only in artifacts but also in performance. Singer established the performative as a constitutive function of culture (xii). The cultural performance was later recognized in literary theory by Roland Barthes and in philosophy by John L. Austin who defined 'the speech act'. The critical discourse in the twentieth century has been imbued with the awareness that language not only serves a referential function but also a performative one. In “Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance”, Erika Fischer-Lichte observes that since the 1980s performers increasingly use the body in violent ways and the audience is forced to endure the artist's plight empathetically. "The performer, in this sense, suffers in place of the spectators. [...] Their imagination 'saves' them from the anxieties of violence and pain directed towards their own body by imagining the performer's pain and by attempting to sympathise with it and to sense it themselves" (35).

In an article entitled " 'Where Does it Hurt?': Genocide, the Theatre and the Human Body", Robert Skloot remarks that the twentieth century which has produced genocide of a horrendous magnitude, has equally produced theories of dramatic representation that reject the efficacy of empathy, or warn against its inherent dangers (51). The author examines Elaine Scarry's question 'What do we know of pain?' in her important book The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. Scarry firmly believes that pain is unshareable because its existence destroys the language necessary for it to be conveyed. Moreover, the staging of the violated body evokes hostility. However, it is Robert Skloot's contention that we need to accept shared emotions and our own complicity, as an aspect of the 'Theatre of Atrocity'. These critics offer important insights into the nature of violence in theatre in a violent world.
Theatre anthropologists Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba delve into the ritual origins of theatre and make a case for its continued affiliation with the sacred and the sensuous. They have focussed on a number of Indian theatre traditions and performance genres, viewing them as liberating contrasts with text-based theatre. Their emphasis is on the exacting physical discipline, ritual repetition and 'defamiliarizing' aesthetics of dance forms like Kathakali and Odissi. A hazard of anthropological standpoints is that they tend to indulge in a transculturalism that denies the particularity of cultures.

**Feminism:** Feminist theories have been vigorously applied to the study of theatre and drama. These are deeply concerned with the cultural representations of women, sometimes as appropriation of women to masculine perspectives, at times as masculine fantasy far removed from real women. Sue-Ellen Case presents a critical reading of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* as "a text central to the formalisation of misogyny" (12). These are interesting readings, but the inward-looking focus tends to be 'universalist' and may downplay specificities of context.

**Materialist Theories:** Another approach to theatre is to recognize that theatre happens in a larger context and is intimately linked with the world. Changes in the world cannot but produce changes in theatre. Marxist and materialist theorists have analysed how theatre relates to the forces at work in the context where it is produced. Raymond Williams emphasizes the relations between socio-economics and literature and introduces the idea of the 'dominant', the 'residual' and the 'emergent' (*Marxism and Literature* 121–7). Most Marxist theory stresses the determinant forces of economics. In *Radical Tragedy* Jonathan Dollimore discusses the political force of theatre. Materialist theories have put back into scholarship the demand for a holistic understanding of theatre, interdependent on the material conditions of life and culture.

**Postcolonialism:** Postcolonialism seeks to describe the contemporary situation and its culture by focussing on the effects of Western imperialism and its centuries of domination until its crumbling in the latter half of the twentieth century. Though political independence has been won by the countries earlier subjugated by the West, new forms of domination have emerged, mainly military and economic. Postcolonial theory has taken various routes to map the complex
postcolonial situation world-wide. Palestinian-American Edward W. Said launches a critique of ‘orientalism’ and the asymmetrical divisions between ‘orient’ and ‘occident’ to the advantage of the West. Said discovers that patterns of oppressive orientalism are to be found not only in jingoistic and racist literature, but often in the ‘masterpieces’ of the West. "Most professional humanists [...] are unable to make the connection between the prolonged and sordid cruelty of practices such as slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial subjection on the one hand, and the poetry, fiction, and philosophy that engages in these practices on the other" (Culture and Imperialism xiii-xiv). Said challenges the canon of Western art; his later work moves in the direction of acknowledging and accepting the fact that hybridity exists and grows as cultural identities interconnect in a migratory and diasporic world.

Other powerful critiques in the postcolonial mode have come from Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. The postcolonial writers’ project is to give voice to oppressed groups by understanding and critiquing the structures of oppression; equally, by articulating and strengthening liberation and revolution. These critiques remove theatre from the periphery of critical notice and raise the curtain on questions that are more and more insistent on being framed and possibly answered.

1.5. Decolonizing Theatre in Asia

Art — including the written play and performance — has been a sensitive area in the confrontation of Western societies with Asian cultures in the twentieth century, particularly since the 1950s. This is also a cultural policy issue, since the consciousness of artistic identity extends not only to artists but also to political authorities (Dufrenne 535). In Asia, the practice of art, and of the performance arts in particular, has been deeply influenced by contact with Western imperialism. The theatre of countries in Asia colonized by the West has been imploded by Western theatre, with complex results and reactions. Asian theatre has been rich and distinguished in its performance traditions in countries like India, China, Japan, Burma,
Philippines and Korea, to mention a few. In Sri Lanka (or Ceylon), though there are no records of a classical dramatic tradition, the folk tradition has been rich. In the wake of colonization, a new 'modern', urban and somewhat elitist theatre came into its own as a result of Western education, the growth of cities and the presence of the white 'ruling classes' who made provisions for their own entertainment. A small privileged class of 'natives' was exposed to the Western classics and many young Asians travelled to the West to acquire a Western education. In Calcutta (or Kolkata), Bombay (or Mumbai), Peking (or Beijing) or Shanghai, in Tokyo or Colombo, it was European theatre that established itself in the esteem of the new westernized 'native' elite.

The first plays to be staged in newly constructed theatre buildings in the cities were performed by travelling European companies or by amateur local resident Europeans. By the early twentieth century, local language translations and adaptations of Western plays grew in popularity. In Calcutta the Hindu Theatre, founded in 1831, staged Bengali translations of *Julius Caesar* and soon after, of the Sanskrit classic *Uttar Ramcharita* (The Latter History of Rama). In Tokyo, an adaptation of *Camille* by Alexandre Dumas fils made an appearance in 1907. In Shanghai, The Spring Sun Society staged an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the following decades experimentation by local playwrights in the local language but in the European models gained great currency among the urban educated public. The 'spoken play' had come to stay and it threatened to effectively upstage the older performance traditions now viewed as outmoded. But the political confrontation of the local powers with the imperialist forces inevitably led to a confrontation of cultures. The confrontation was often bitter and included passionately contested questions of national identity.

A greater awareness of the specificity of art was experienced; local artists and intellectuals become more deeply conscious of the reality and distinctiveness of cultures, and the value of their own. Mikel Dufrenne points out how the confrontation creates new realizations for the Asian people:

The national culture, first of all, is no longer experienced, as it might have been, in a kind of happy innocence. Because it has been threatened, disqualified, often half destroyed, it
is henceforth *thought out* and *desired* as the instrument of an intransigent and impassioned self-assertion. If we consider this culture as a value, the West may, all unwittingly, have contributed to it, not simply because it has illustrated the value of its own culture, but because — after the devaluing of the indigenous culture by its conquerors, missionaries and teachers — it has, through its artists and scholars, succeeded in revaluing it (536).

As Dufrenne points out the awareness of art is linked, in twentieth century Asia, to a search for national identity. This assertion of a distinctive spiritual identity has found resonance with theatre persons, playwrights like Girish Karnad in India, directors like Ediriwira Sarachchandra in Sri Lanka and actors like Mei Lan-Fang in China.

**1.5.1. Trends in Asian theatre**

A glance at the theatre in Asia, including theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka, reveals certain commonalities:

a. The powerful influence of Western theatre during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

b. An initial neglect of folk forms in favour of written, text-based plays.

c. A cultural gap and sometimes an atmosphere of distrust between practitioners of the older and newer forms.

d. Politico-cultural questions of identity which fuel questioning and research into older traditions.

e. The creation of new forms, experimental in character, which celebrate their hybridity.

f. Diverse forms, traditional and modern, co-existent and subtly influencing one another.

These trends indicate the directions that theatre in Asia has taken, including within the Chinese, the Indian, and the Sri Lankan cultures.
1.6. Critical Writing about Indian, Chinese and Sinhala Theatre

Few scholars seem to have undertaken to comprehensively study Asian theatre – perhaps the sheer scope and diversity of the field are deterrents. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* edited by Martin Banham, (1992) and *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* edited by James R. Brandon (1993) provide a basic overview of theatre in twenty countries in Asia, but the approach is to survey various forms and processes at work, with only a cursory mention of playwrights and no discussion of plays. The emphasis on traditional theatre in Asia fails to do justice to the efflorescence of modern theatre in this area of the world. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, (1997) edited by John Russell Brown undertakes a deeper analysis of trends in theatre, including modern theatre in Asia and some of the perceptions that have emerged, as for instance of 'cultural colonization' and a 'return to the roots' or more 'syncretic' theatre forms.

Sinhala theatre is examined by Ranjini Obeyesekere in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space* (1999). A timely work that fills a void in the field, the book emphasizes the tolerance of social satire in theatre within a literate Buddhist culture, where the stage escapes the wrath of censors because it is accepted as a kind of therapeutic ‘permitted’ space. Though it provides valuable insights into Sinhala attitudes to debate, and the author appends her translation of a recent play by a young writer (The Bearer of Woes, by Prasannajit Abeyesuriya), the major lacuna is the total omission of any discussion of theatre by the Tamil population in Sri Lanka. It can be noted as a revealing omission. In theatre journal articles we find discussions of aspects of Sri Lankan theatre: in “Sri Lanka’s “Ethnic” Conflict in Its Literature in English”, D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke reveals that the “ethnic” conflict in Sri Lanka is rather a trans-ethnic language conflict, reflected in its literature (451-456). Goonetilleke also writes about “Sri Lankan Drama in English: Metamorphosis Through Migration”, indicating the myriad influences that have shaped modern Sri Lankan theatre (493-500). Both articles carry unmistakable Sinhala viewpoints, and the upshot is that non-Sinhala theatre is all but invisible. In “Is it the End of History for Asia’s Modern Theatres?” (1997) A.J. Gunarwardana focuses on a debate current
among cultural analysts: tradition versus modernity, and claims that the only theatre that has a future in Asia, is the modern theatre, as against the traditional forms that do not resonate with modern audiences and their concerns (77). In generalizing about Asia, Gunawardana seems to miss the simultaneous presence, in various Asian cultures today, of 'traditional', 'modern' and hybrid forms that often interconnect.

Theatre in India has been investigated in *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, edited by Richmond P. Farley et al. (1990), an exhaustive survey of classical, ritual, devotional, folk and dance-drama traditions, as well as modern theatre, with an attempt to relate them to their context. The section on contemporary theatre does not provide a systematic coverage of authors or institutions and does not touch upon important aspects of theatre in India today like translation and circulation. It also does not take note of the complexity of postcolonial theatre which is infused with often simultaneous influences from the classical, the religious and the folk. A recent work, *Contemporary Indian Drama astride Two Traditions* (2005), edited by Urmil Talwar and Bandana Chakraborty features an eclectic and interesting collection of essays on various issues related to dramaturgy, interpretative processes and directorial interventions, offering brief analyses of the work of the major contemporary Indian playwrights in various languages. Bengali Theatre in particular has been fairly comprehensively discussed in a handful of volumes: *Bengali Theatre: 200 Years*, (1999) edited by Utpal K. Banerjee, an anthology of essays by playwrights, actors and scholars which sketches the rich scene of theatre in Bengal for two centuries. Kironmoy Raha’s *Bengali Theatre*, a more concise volume, is able to introduce an array of Bengali playwrights and their major plays. The visibility of theatre in Bengal in the 1940s is to be found in *Turbulent Times: India 1940-44*, edited by Biswamoy Pati (1998), a book about the momentous years of the history of the Indian Freedom Struggle. A chapter entitled “Visions of Cultural Transformation” by Aishwarj Kumar highlights the remarkable contributions of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in Bengal to political theatre through a discussion of major plays. The first serious analysis of theatre, politics and culture impinging on modern India comes from Rustom Barucha, in *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of*
Culture (1990): this is a scathing indictment of the interculturalism practiced by directors like Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook. The Seagull Theatre Quarterly (Kolkata) is also an invaluable archive of news and views on theatre theory and practice in India today.

In the very recent past the number and quality of research works on modern Indian theatre testify to the growing interest in this form of cultural communication. Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage (2004) by Minoti Chatterjee painstakingly studies the dislocations and relocations of theatre in Bengal as India defined its identity as a Nation. Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics and Postcolonial India (2004) by Nandi Bhatia cogently argues that theatre was a significant force against colonial and postcolonial structures and addresses important theoretical questions about recovering contentious voices from the margins of colonial societies. In Poetics, Plays and Performance: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre (2006) Vasudha Dalmia undertakes a detailed discussion of Hindi theatre, tracing its genealogies and its appropriation of folk theatre in its project of evolving a national theatre. And Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947 (2006) by Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar is a carefully researched scrutiny of contemporary theatre with brilliant insights on historical and theoretical themes. Interestingly, all four volumes are by women researchers.

Chinese literature is briefly discussed in Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective (1996), edited by Barbara Stoler Miller; the perspective is 'orientalist', with an eye on the exotic, privileging the 'ancient' over the contemporary. Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present, edited and translated by Faye Chunfang Fei (1999) is a veritable treasure-house of theoretical insights about Chinese theatre from ancient texts, modern debates and contemporary practices. A well-researched account of the development of modern Chinese theatre is offered by Colin Mackerras, a reputed scholar, in The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day (1975). More contemporary discussions are to be found in theatre journals: "PRC Politics and Literature in the Nineties" (1991) by John Marney examines the oscillation between hard-line Marxist ideology and more moderate stands that
favour literary discussion, criticism and experimentation in China in the 1990s. In "Audience, Applause and Countertheatre: Border Crossing in ‘Social Problem’ Plays in Post-Mao China" (1998), Xiaomei Chen argues that unlike other literary genres, which are usually confined to the private sphere, theatre operates in a public sphere and so offers space, however limited, for Chinese intellectuals to pit a marginalized discourse against the dominant ideology. This is an insightful account from an ‘insider’s perspective’ on the dynamics of theatre in a highly regulated society.

1.7. Conclusions

Even a cursory glance at theatre during the course of the century reveals its amazing vitality and flexibility across cultures. Shifting political paradigms and the commercialization of the mass media have often relegated theatre to the margins of social discourse. Paradoxically, it has been off-centre-stage that the theatre has performed most eloquently. In subaltern locations, from city slums to village squares to the streets of small towns, practitioners of theatre in innumerable guises have stretched themselves and theatre resources to enter, participate, confront, articulate or subvert the multiple, often conflicting, narratives around them. In the next chapter the focus is to investigate how the context and the text interpenetrated in the Chinese, Indian and Sri Lankan settings – each with its unique history and postcolonial experience, its own cultural make-up, and its own contemporary political realities. The text-in-context model is posited as essential to a discussion of theatre in times of turbulence. The social and literary-cum-performance contexts are presented as intriguing 'co-texts' with diverse interconnections with the selected plays.
Notes


2 The *Oresteia* (458 B.C.) is a trilogy by the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus. It is set against the background of the Trojan War and the campaign by King Menelaus to capture Troy. The expedition against Troy was a reaction to the seduction of Helen by Paris, a son of Priam, King of Troy, and the running off to Troy of Helen and Paris with a great quantity of Spartan treasure. Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, was married to Menelaus, king of Sparta.