Radical Open Space Performances in the 20th Century

In this chapter, I will survey various political open-space performances across the world. For purposes of clarity regarding the material we are exactly looking at, I need to first explain a few points.

This survey does not set out to comprehensively record the history of political open-space performances across the world. To say the least, that is a task which verges on the impossible. However, my endeavour is to seek parallels for the Jana Natya Manch and its response to the political situations in India. This will allow me to understand and evaluate the work of the Jana Natya Manch.

Just as there could be a debate over the definition of the term “Street Theatre” it is necessary to define “political open-space performances”. Why am I not attempting a survey of “street theatre”? The parallel I am trying to draw between the Jana Natya Manch and other groups is not that of form but conditions under which they perform. That is, their theatrical activity is carried on in response to a particular situation of political repression, being partisan to the struggles of the oppressed people. The variety in the forms of the responses is innumerable. Jana Natya Manch’s choice of the street theatre is one of such responses. It is therefore important for us not to restrict ourselves on the grounds of form when we look for instances of similar experiences in politically diverse locations. Therefore, I have chosen the broad based term “open space theatre” — thereby I emphasise on the efforts of the ups to reach out to greater sections of its target audience; to take theatre to the people rather than for the audiences to come to the theatre. However, I have not followed this demarcation very strictly. In countries about whose theatre movement I have scarce information I have included other forms of political performances as well, even proscenium — here I follow Safdar Hashmi’s debunking of the contradiction between proscenium and non-proscenium theatre saying that the ‘contradiction lies between pro-people and anti-people theatre’. And I use the term “performance” instead of political open-space theatre”. This allows me to include forms of performances at protest gatherings etc. What needs to be kept in mind is that in most cases the urge to do theatre arises out of an urge

Quoted in Gopalakrishnan (2003).
Idiom for Change

to take across a politics: it is politics not theatre which assumes priority. Therefore, the choice of form, for the performers of the "political open-space" is very often created out of exigencies and not a proper training in theatre.

The reason why I have to make use of all available performances of protest is the paucity of material and information on such performances. Not only does the "political open-space" suffer from a lack of resources in its practice, it also manages precious little publicity. Also publicity is not in its priority for its immediate target group is more often geographically restricted and has no access to the media which would inform distant people of their work. It is also extremely disturbing to see how poorly works of "political open-space performances" are archived. Needless to say, the mainstream media, and top academic research journals do not chose to prioritise such performances. Since most of my knowledge of groups come from secondary sources this has led to the danger of a skewed availability of material in favour of groups located in the imperialist, advanced capitalist countries getting information on radical performances in imperialised countries has been difficult on two counts — firstly, the lack of adequate resources, and secondly, the lack of a common language of communication; the latter has been particularly a hindrance in the case of Latin America.

It is possible to classify the different performative responses to different political conditions under two broad types — one, performances which try to respond to issues of exploitation and class contradictions while operating within a bourgeois democratic set up; and two, groups which operate under dictatorships or martial law and therefore, very often work underground. The two situations have tremendous impact in the way the groups present their performances, as well as the way in which they organise themselves. Although it would be simplistic to look for geographical correspondences to these two categories — the first category of performances is more prevalent in the imperialist countries of Europe and North America; where as the performances of the second category are more prevalent in the imperialised countries. The determining factor, of course, is not the performance or the performing group, but politics — it is a historical fact that the former colonised countries have been ravaged by civil strife and dictatorship which have been, more often than not directly sponsored by imperialism. But we have also had instances of fascist dictatorship in Europe, as in Italy, Germany and Spain. For my study it is important to seek a link between political conditions and performance types and to situate a particular performance practice within the context it emerges from.

When I look at various examples of political open-space performance, I shall not merely be engaging in a descriptive act. Rather, I will be focussing on different aspects of the performances which will prepare a basis for the study of the Jana Natya Manch; namely — the reasons for the choice of
open-space, choice of subject, organisational structure, the creative process, choices of form and negotiations with tradition, sources of funding and the response to difficulties in the shape of repression and challenges of the mainstream media.

RUSSIA

My account of political open-space theatre begins with Russia in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Once again I must repeat that very little is known about the political theatrical practices of the Bolsheviks in the pre-October Revolution phase. The groups belonging to the Bolshevik cultural front between 1905-17 mostly functioned underground. In fact they were not cultural groups in the strict sense of the term. They were groups of political workers who functioned under the garb of folklore groups. They used this garb to reach out to the proletarian population while escaping the attention of the czarist guards. In between the folk performances they would discuss politics with the people. These groups would constantly have to contend with police informers and repression. Groups would also be forced to disband themselves and regroup repeatedly.2

Post-revolution Russia or the Soviet Union saw a sea change in the manner of proletarian performances. The proletarian power, in the form of the Bolshevik party now was in control of the state machinery. After the 1917 revolution, as part of a state project the arts became part of a programme of national transformation. The efforts to increase accessibility to theatre was not only restricted to the consumption side, but also the production. Soviet actor N. Cherkasov recorded in his memoirs the tremendous impetus his dreams of becoming an actor received with the changes brought about by the revolution in the theatre system, a dream which was unrealisable in the pre-revolution years.3 The primary accent of the project was to make art more participative and accessible. Access to theatre was increased by throwing open public galleries and the theatres to the people.4 Another mode of making art accessible to larger sections of the people was to resort to a large canvas. Mayakovsky's posters ROSTA, the Russian Telegraph Agency, were designed to this end. Accessibility of theatre was enhanced by taking theatre out of the auditoria. Proletarian performances were planned by the Soviet Government. The performances were ordered for by the State and included large scale participation both in planning and performance. The organisation of the performances involved agencies like the Soviet of People's Commissars, and Mass Performances and Spectacles Department of the Theatrical Department of the Commissariat for Education.

2 Interview with Prof. Abahy Maurya.
Idiom for Change

There was also a conscious effort to mark a significant break from bourgeois, czarist art and theatre and create a people's art and theatre.

The good example of the grand performances of the post-revolution phase is the mass dramatisation of the 'Storming of the Winter Palace' on 6 November 1920 at the Utrisky Square. This enactment included as its actors the very people who had been the participants of the revolutionary events. One of the stated aims of this spectacle being to give the people a sense of history, a history which they have created, a history in which they were the principal protagonists. The number of actors in the performances was ten thousand. But a more truly participative spectacle – from the perspective of mass-planning – was the May Day festivities on the streets of Moscow in 1920. The performance was entitled "The Mystery of Liberated Labour". Although a preliminary draft was drawn up by the Section of Mass Performances and Spectacles, the proposals were then sent for discussion to various proletarian groups. The performance was fine tuned through repeated rehearsals. The participation of vast numbers of performers demanded that voice and gestures be substituted by movement and sound. The emphasis was also on the use of devices to ensure that the masses did not revert to passive contemplation as they had been accustomed to in the hither to performed art. So a series of easily surmountable obstacles, steps and slopes were put in the route of the action to involuntarily force the masses to be active participants in the action. At the onset of the planning for the performance a debate over the choice of theme had to be clinched. The use of the myth of Prometheus' struggle against the gods was suggested to be used to symbolically represent the struggle of the proletariat against capitalism. But the suggestion was rejected as the myth of Prometheus was embedded with mythical traditions and the new art of the proletariat could not be tainted with 'deposits from alien cults, from Biblical myths or Christian rites, even from the civic festivities of the French Revolution'. The history of the path to socialism was chosen as the appropriate theme. The history of the struggles of oppressed peoples was depicted through the struggles of the Roman slaves under Spartacus, peasants led by Stepan Razin, the Jacobins, and finally the Red Army and the Russian proletariat. It also traced the history of the three internationals and the achievements of the October Revolution and the transition to the socialist way of life. The route of the May Day procession was transformed into a Communist City of the future. All the squares where the action was scheduled were named after the

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7 ibid., p.19.

8 Smith (1997).
arts and the sciences – for instance, the Geography Square, the Astronomy Square and the Political Economy Square. The performances which were designed to cultivate a proletarian identity for the people and thereby garner support for the Bolshevik government during the civil war had to contend with one principal problem, and that was the illiteracy of the people. The large scale mass performances were effective in appealing to the illiterate Russian population.

Blue Blouse

The alternative method to make theatre accessible to the people by taking it beyond the professional stage was through small scale performances. The Workers' Theatre Movement in the form of the Blue Blouse (Sinyaya Bluza) network took political theatre to the people through performances initially in factory clubs, and later also in pubs canteens and tea houses. These groups were usually attached to the factory clubs and consisted of working people. Having come to existence in 1923, by 1927 the Blue Blouse network consisted of an estimated 7000 workers' circles. These troupes performed what came to be known as the ‘living newspaper’ which dramatised latest happenings on the stage along with criticism. This form of agitprop had a common root with Mayakovsky’s ROSTA posters – the fairground Petrouchka puppet shows which the comic treatment of which was extremely popular with the Russian people. A precursor of the Blue Blouse was the Terevsat (Theatre of Revolutionary Satire), founded in 1919 gave a living shape to the comic-like forms in the ROSTA posters. The travelling character of both Terevsat and the Blue Blouse traces itself from the popular spectacles – commedia dell’arte, vaudeville, demonstrative story-telling, music hall and the fairground performances. This influence was aided by Meyerhold’s theatrical innovations using the elements of mime, jugglery and acrobatics in the Russian professional stage. In choosing these techniques Meyerhold had emphasised their effectiveness in communicating directly with the audience.

Stourac and McCreery suggests that the emergence of the mass performative was a resultant of the altered framework of everyday life in post-revolution Russia – it now consisted of public meetings, demonstrations and mass actions; the collective experience had entered into the consciousness of the ordinary people.

The Blue Blouse troupes took their name from the costumes used by the actors – the attire of

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10 ibid., p.17.
12 Ibid. p.3.
13 Ibid. p.11.
14 Ibid. p.8-9.
the industrial worker – blue blouses, black trousers and skirts, black stockings and shoes. Unlike in an auditorium there would be no written programmes and the actors would be introduced in a collective entry along with song and music. The actors would put on their costumes in full view of the audience. The performances usually consisted of several pieces adding up to one entire evening of entertainment. The ‘living newspaper’ portrays important domestic and international events and provide and interpretation of the events. There would be a constant demand for the inclusion of the latest turn of events from the local factory union or from the audience. Although some of the pieces would be centrally produced or circulated the local troupe would be required to innovate a response to the latest developments or include references to events of local importance. The dominant themes of the performances would also include sections on ‘Everyday Life’ – like ‘About the Slavery of the Kitchen’ and ‘Marriage and the Family’, and ‘Trade Union’ – like ‘You Will Raise Your Wages By One Means – Productivity of Labour’ and ‘Find Your Ally Not in Vodka and Beer But in the Club and in the Cooperative’.

The characters of consisted of personifications of abstract qualities or social forces – eg. Capital, Soviet Russia. They would make use of painted cut-outs or form images through the actors’ bodies. The language used was that of the common people. The use of music, however, was not so easily resolved. The lack of trained musicians in most of the troupes led to revolutionary words being set to tunes of popular ballads and operettas. But this meant that the audiences would soon forget the revolutionary content and continue to hum the popular tunes. Later Blue Blouse songs were set to the tunes of workers’ songs, peasant rebel songs and revolutionary songs of pre and post-October. There was ample use of sounds and bio-mechanic movements representing the work processes, the rhythm, mechanical metre, humming of a tractor, the screeching, the chugging of trains, the whistles of factories and steamers.

The treatment of the Blue Blouse repertoire underwent a change when the network decided to step out of the factory clubs to pubs, canteens and streets. Propaganda was seen as an intrusion into public spaces and in pubs the owners complained, as unlike music, the performances did not remain in the background and affected business. Also the public space was full of distractions which competed with the Blue Blouse performers for the spectator’s attention. The challenge was to device a performance style which would be visually attractive and amusing enough to grab the audiences’ attention.

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15 Ibid. p. 54.
16 Ibid. p. 59.
17 Ibid. p. 30-38.
18 Ibid. p. 52.
19 Ibid. p. 42.
attention without forsaking its politics. Other than strengthening the visual effects the Blue Blouse innovated with the use of the Master of Ceremonies who explained the political significance of a scene through a few crisp phrases.

By the early 1930s Blue Blouse network became dysfunctional due to organisational reasons related to the Bolshevik Party takeover of the Blue Blouse leadership over the questions of adherence to Socialist Realism. In its heyday it held tremendous sway among the popular masses of Russia. The Blue Blouse was, however, not the only group performing ‘living newspapers’. Cherkasov describes how, as a student of the Leningrad Institute of Stage Art, he was part of a vacation tour through the Soviet Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, performing ‘living newspapers’ on contemporary political themes. In another account there were as many as 24,000 theatre groups in the USSR in 1927.

GERMANY

The Bolshevik revolution left a deep impact on the political history of the twentieth century, a century which was dominated by people’s movements. It did exercise a tremendous influence over the anti-colonial mass movements in Asia and Africa. Alongside it also caused a rethink in cultural practices and among writers and artists through platforms like the Anti-Fascist Writers Association. The German Volksbuhne and its theatre practitioners have asserted a tremendous impact over twentieth century theatre.

Agitprop theatre in Germany was born out of a long tradition of political theatre. Throughout the second half of the 19th century didactic and satirical plays on topical issues, were written and produced by functionaries and sympathisers of the workers organizations. Inspired by the Soviet experience Germany too had its share of mass spectacles a form which gave artistic expression to occasions of collective experience in mass meetings and demonstrations. However, one needs to note, that unlike in the USSR the mass spectacles were not state sponsored but funded by the meagre resources of the workers’ organizations.

The emergence of political open space theatre in Germany was principally backed by three influences. One, as in Russia the existing forms of popular entertainment – the fairground, the circus, the travelling showman and the street singer – were ready models for the agitprop troupes to follow when they took theatre outside the auditorium. Two, Erwin Piscator’s attempts to engage in “direct

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20 Cherkasov op cit. p. 38.
action” led his Proletarian Theatre to venture out in the form of the Red Riot Revue (R.R.R.). Explaining the choice Piscator wrote that he hoped to “achieve propagandist effects which would be more powerful than was possible with plays, where the ponderous structure and problems tempt you to psychologize and constantly erect barriers between the stage and the auditorium”. Three, a visit by the Moscow Blue Blouse to Germany in 1927 tremendously boosted agitprop theatre performances in German workers’ theatre.

There were several groups which performed agitprop theatre in Germany – the Red Riot Revue, the Red Rockets, Red Megaphone, Red Blouse, Left Column – which were aligned to various workers’ organisations and their branches. In fact, the progress and record of the agitprop troupes were deeply affected by the ideological differences within the German communist movement. This also affected the attitude that the theatre organisations held about the role of culture in the revolution. While the right deviationists tended to emphasise cultural work to the extent of neglecting political mobilisation, deemphasised class struggle and undermining the role of the working class in the leadership, the Left wing criticised the KPD (German Communist Party) for placing excessive importance to the cultural fronts. It was only in 1928 at the Tenth Congress of the workers’ theatre organisations that the Left groups managed to isolate the right. This led to increased efforts to radicalise the theatre workers and increased involvement in agitprop theatre over in-auditoria performances.

In order to perform outside the auditorium at the workers’ meeting places within limited costs of traveling, the agitprop troupes had to minimise the use of technical equipment. For the same reason their performing would be mostly restricted to ten. The troupes used simple costumes like, cheap black track suits, to which a few effects could be added. Even though a majority of the actors were full time actors the troupes were funded by contributions from their low wages. The troupes, however, would also collect money from the audience. But the task of the troupes was not restricted to performances. At the end of the show the actors would recruit members of the audience for the revolutionary mass organisations.

For visual effects the troupes included gymnasts, cartoonists and singers. Piscator had emphasised on reducing the verbal content of the plays and increase the stylization and visual content. Agitational dialogue became part of the dramatic arsenal of agitprop. The performances also made use

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26 Ibid. p. 146.

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of the chorus and orchestral pieces and plots wielding around the individual characters were discouraged. The predominant themes of the plays were scenes from the workers' lives, their daily needs, the factory and the revolutionary struggle. An evening's programme would include various items like 'The Rocket Song', 'The Political Musical Clock' and 'Capital and the Press'. The living newspaper form also included a section called 'Proletarian Self-Criticism' which portrayed and criticised incorrect behaviour of a socialist worker within his family – “Communism and comradeship exist in marriage, too”.

In the Proletarian Theatre Piscator made attempts to replace capitalist hierarchy of the established theatre with a collective approach. A committee was chosen from among the working class audience to act as a check on the Proletarian Theatre's adherence to the cultural and propagandist goals of the revolution. The agitprop troupes wrote and composed their own material. Almost all troupe members were involved the play making process in keeping with the principle that 'it was wrong to breed specialists'. Some troupes also allowed public access to their rehearsals. Suggestions from comrades from other troupes and non-actors created a scope for criticism and improvement. Groups in less developed districts would use existing scripts but adapted them to local and recent events.

The workers' theatre troupes had to face harassment from the police of the Social Democratic government. This included recording personal details of theatre activists. In May 1929 the Berlin Police opened fire on 200,000 workers participating in a May Day march – 30 died. After this incident troupes belonging to Red Rockets and the Red Front League were banned. But the troupes did not stop performing. They devised various innovative ways to evade police action. In one such instance, even though the factory management had called for the police to prevent a show, a triple ring of two thousand workers protected the performance. As a result of the ban the troupes started to camouflage their sharper attacks, and superficial defamations of the enemies of the working class. This resulted in a widening of the appeal of the performances. As the National Conference of the workers' theatre troupes noted:

Unwittingly the bourgeoisie corrects our methods of work .... it's an old law that one can achieve much greater effects by hinting .... The audience understands and has the pleasure of thinking through what was only inferred.

But, outside the USSR, Germany had the strongest and most effective the workers' theatre

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27 Ibid. p. 94-98.
29 Ibid. p. 151.
31 Ibid. p. 151.
32 Ibid. p. 149.
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network. Between August 1930 and April 1931 the Berlin based groups gave 1400 performances for half a million spectators and recruited 6000 members for the workers' organisations. A statistic which worried the ruling class and subsequently police repression of the performances increased.

BRITAIN

The experience of the workers' theatre movement in Britain was a contrast to the Soviet Union and Germany. To begin with, the workers' movement within Britain was not as strong and mature and it was the forces of social democracy in the form of the Labour Party which emerged far stronger than the Communist Party. And even the Communist Party did not give much importance to cultural propaganda and cultural activism like its German and Soviet counterparts. In fact, those who were interested in the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) were looked upon by other Party members as dodging 'proper' Party work. Stourac and Mcreery traces this attitude to an overall disregard for theory among the members of the British Communist Party. This anti-intellectual attitude looked upon deliberating on theoretical matters to be a waste of time in the face of immediate tasks at hand. Culture was part of this dispensable intellectualism. The growth of workers' theatre in Britain, therefore, was despite the Communist Party.33

This lack of cooperation from and coordination with the Communist Party deeply affected the functioning of the worker's theatre in Britain and meant that the groups could not follow the curve of development as their German and Russian counterparts. To begin with the groups had difficulty in organising shows. Without the support of the Party the Trade Unions seldom organised independent shows for the troupes. Groups like the Red Players put forward the idea of putting up short pieces during the breaks of Trade Union meetings. But though it was looked upon by the Trade Union leadership as mere diversion, the performance of the sketches would hold the membership entrapt.34 Though the workers' theatre troupes managed to find their performance spaces the fact remained that they had a lack of greater mass contact and often ended up 'preaching among the converted'. This had two consequences. First, this lack of mass contact meant that the troupes did not get regular feedback from audiences with low levels of political consciousness there was no dialectical correction of the plays. The Central Committee of the WTM stepped in to fill up this lacuna. Lacking in organisational maturity sketches and plays were written, not collectively, but by one or two members of the troupe. These scripts were then sent to the Central Committee of the WTM for approval. Even then most of the scripts which were performed by the troupes were centrally produced. Thus, there was a large

33 Stourac and Mcreery. op cit. p. 205-06.

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degree of centralisation. Second, the absence of dialectical correction led to sectarian approach. One of the London branches of the WTM was simply called the Hammer and Sickle Group. The didactic tone of the plays with their constant sloganeering made them unattractive to the politically non-committed yet potential sympathisers.

The members of the workers' theatre troupes came mostly from the working class and were members or sympathisers of the Communist Party. The ratio of proletarian members were higher in groups from the industrial north which consisted of miners, weavers etc. The London groups consisted more of middle class members who were clerks, teachers and educated unemployed.

In Britain the experiments with pageants and mass spectacles were unsuccessful due to lack of resources. On the other hand a large part of the Left theatre workers, unable to think beyond the dominant naturalistic form of theatre, continued to perform within the auditoria. Unable to meet the costs of performing on the West End theatres they performed in the East End or tried to set up their own theatres, again without much success. Another problem that plagued them unceasingly was a lack of good plays. In the event they had to perform plays by Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy or plays written in the United States. There were only two plays which received mentionable reception – Clifford Odet's Waiting for Lefty and Where's That Bomb by Herbert Hodge, a London taxi-driver.

In 1930 Tom Thomas attended the first congress of the International Worker's Theatre in Germany. This visit resulted in a wider acceptability of the revue form among the British troupes. This shift was also assisted by the thesis of 'Social Fascism' formulated by the Communist International in 1928 which meant that all traces of bourgeois forms were to be abjured. The agitprop was, therefore, chosen over naturalism. But the initiative with agitprop theatre was short-lived. In 1933 a twenty member team of theatre activists from Britain participated in the Workers' Theatre Olympiad in Moscow. In Moscow, the underdeveloped and novitiate productions of the British troupes were severely criticized. By then the Comintern had abandoned the 'Social Fascist' thesis and had put forward the strategy of 'Popular Front' against Fascism. The Russians accused the British of formalism, and argued in favour of social realism. But the Russians were arguing from a position of strength both in terms of politics and resources. This criticism resulted in the British workers' theatre returning to the proscenium.

38 Davies. op cit. p. 102-16.
Idiom for Change

POST WORLD WAR II

The next major break in the movement for a people's theatre in Western Europe and the United States, which took theatre out of the auditoria and on to the streets, came with the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. The 1960s with its student protests, the human rights movements and the anti-war protests caused young artists of the generation to be discontented with existing institutional system of the arts. In fact, many of the long standing radical theatre groups in Western Europe and the United States were formed as an aftermath of the events of 1968. The end of Europe's post-World War II honeymoon with social democracy was a far more widespread phenomenon than merely the formation of radical theatre groups. In their disillusionment with the authoritarian social structures the youth and the masses of the 1960s sought inspiration from various popular and revolutionary figures — MaoTse Tung, Fidel Castro, Ernesto Che Guevra, Malcom X, Martin Luther King and Ho Chi Minh. Van Erven points out that the 'ideas that inspired the actions of radical young theatre artists all over Western Europe and the United States by no means originated in the mid-sixties but had been around in some form or the other since the beginning of the century' as reflected in the writings of Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. Beyond the theatre it influenced the popular arts through the figures of — Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Beatles, the Doors, Jimmi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, Marlon Brando and Mohammad Ali. The democratic search for alternative was meted by authoritarian measures of the state through the figure of John McCarthy, Charles De Gaulle and the Cold War and the Bay of Pigs. In short the 1960s was a decade in which the contradictions between capitalism and its opponents were at a high pitch.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I shall begin the discussion of the 1960s from imperialism's own country — the United States of America — a country, the government of which, flaunts itself to be the watchdog of 'democracy' on the globe. But this humbug is exposed before the repression faced by the groups engaged in radical theatre in the United States. Radical groups in the United States have repeatedly taken to public spaces with performances challenging the imperialist policies of their government. 'Free speech and expression', the 'red-herrings' for which the United States have toppled countless third world governments, and supported numerous coups, has suppressed any movement which have sought to challenge its imperialist policies — be it the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations or the demonstrations against the US occupation of Iraq (it should be emphasised that these measures have been exercised by the US on its

40 ibid.

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own citizens). The radical theatre groups have had to face repression through denial of permission, stopping of funding and even arrests using old, outdated laws.

The USA, however, lacked a countrywide theatre movement. What we witness in that country is single unit theatre groups, made up of politically committed artists who define the goals of the organisation. Most of these groups have an individual artist or organiser who is the principal sustainer. The San Francisco Mime Troupe, only the oldest standing radical theatre companies in the United States, was founded by Ron Davis. Although Ron left the group in 1970 the foundations of the group continued to be the same for its subsequent development. The founder of the El Teatro Campesino, Luis Valdez continues to play the primary role in determining the activities and goals of the group. Their political commitment has repeatedly led these groups to step out of indoor spaces. Born in the sixties in the atmosphere charged with the spirit of the Cuban Revolution, the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, these groups have displayed exceptional courage in challenging the policies of the US government, both domestic and foreign. In fact, both San Francisco Mime Troupe and Bread and Puppet Theatre toured Nicaragua in the mid-1980s at a time when the US government was sponsoring the Contra rebels to dismantle the Sandinista government. Plagued by a lack of funds these groups have been continuously tempted towards the commercial stage or towards accepting grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a United States government funding agency.

The El Teatro Campesino is the only group to have had a direct link with a political organisation. It emerged as the cultural wing of the Mexican-American farmworkers' union. Therefore, unlike other groups which reached out to a wider range of audiences, the plays of El Teatro Campesino focussed on the political and cultural struggles of the Mexican-American farmworkers.41 As the cultural wing of the union it played its role in mobilising farmworkers for struggles and enhancing their faith in the union. Although it can be debated whether assertion of cultural identity as a mode of resistance against an oppressive cultural assault is reactionary or progressive, what is undeniable is that El Teatro Campesino's increasing attention to cultural symbols and more sophisticated theatrical forms caused it to forsake open-space performances for the theatre. By 1986, the group was no longer a street theatre group. Having forsaken its original farm location long ago, it now settled for the security and commercial success of the El Teatro Campesino Playhouse at San Juan Batista. Today a greater part of El Teatro Campesino's energies is spent on producing films, musicals and commercially viable productions for the theatres of Californian cities. In fact, today El Teatro Campesino's publicity slogan

41 Ibid. p.43.
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celebrates the shift — “From the Fields to Hollywood”. The group also received funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the California Arts Council, and is no longer dependent on workers’ collections for its funds. Though it hasn’t given up its foundational farmworkers’ identity the question to be asked is whether a theatre can be genuinely people’s theatre if it cannot be accessed by the people?

Neither the San Francisco Mime Troupe nor the Bread and Puppet were ever in any direct association with any political organisation. But both were founded in an atmosphere of political commitment of the 1960s. In 1964, when US President Johnson ordered the bombing of Vietnam, Peter Schumann led the Bread and Puppet Theatre to demonstrations, a tradition that continues to this very day. These groups, therefore, are political in the very act of solidarity towards political issues, concerns and movements. However, their politics is also evident and expressed in their commitment to use of performance space – the outside. Peter Schumann explains the political significance of the open-space:

Most of what we do is performed outside.... In what way are we a political theatre? Well, there are two aspects of political theatre; one is to work on political themes, and the other is to get in a political way to the audience, which could mean different things. It could mean that you support the existing political movement or that you confront the general status quo or stupidity, or whatever you want to call it, of a general, normal audience.

Both the groups, however, have their story of struggle to maintain the right to perform even in open-spaces. The Mime Troupe has had to legally defend its right perform in open-spaces on several occasions. The Bread and Puppet Theatre on the other hand had started out of New York. But its first major production Fire, an indoor production was dedicated to those who died in the Vietnam War and specifically to three Americans who immolated themselves in anti-Vietnam protests. Bread and Puppet took Fire on tour to Europe, but returned to find itself expelled from its New York City rehearsal space. It then shifted base to Vermont at the invitation of the Goddard College. This shift had significant influences on the work of Bread and Puppet. Other than a decisive shift to the open-space Bread and Puppet also had to tone down its political rhetoric in order to gain greater acceptability among the people of Vermont. Today Bread and Puppet is an integral part of the Vermont cultural life and is able to put across its political message to a far wider section. How is Bread and Puppet’s toning down of its politics different from the mysticism of El Teatro Campesino? Bread and Puppet has not moved so far away politics so as to cater only to elite audiences of the cities. Entry to the open-space performances of both Bread and Puppet and the Mime Troupe continue to be free. The San Fransisco Mime Troupe funds itself by “passing the hat around” after a show with the call

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We ask people to donate what they paid for their last movie, if they can; to pay for others who can’t afford to donate; if they can; and if they can’t, to give what they can, thus making our accessible theatre truly accessible for everyone.44

Bread and Puppet practices what it calls ‘Poor Theatre’ – making all their material themselves on the Vermont farm, making its masks and puppets out of papier mache, and recycling junk sometimes picked out of the garbage!

The second aspect of the adaptation is aesthetic. As we have already seen in the Blue Blouse and the German workers’ theatre groups the American groups also use adaptations of medieval art forms – commedia dell’arte and puppetry. And to compete with the distractions of both sight and sound – the performers make use of a loud and large acting style. Contrary to its name the San Francisco Mime Troupe does not perform mime.45 Other than speaking characters, music forms a significant part of its productions. Commedia dell’arte features like broad gestures, stock characters, farcical and grotesque situations, colourful language, puns and laughter are instrumental for the Mime Troupe’s communicating to its audiences in the open-space. The Mime Troupe is strongly influenced by Brechtian theory of alienation.46 The group and its actors accept that the play itself will not change the world and the audience, made aware by the play must act. The actors try to break down the psychological barriers between themselves and the audience. While the makeshift stage is being set up they engage in loud singing and warm up exercises. In between their exits and entrances the actors emerge from backstage to watch the performance along with the audience. Actors step out of their roles to communicate directly to the audience. Finally, at the end of the play the actors actively engage in discussions with the audience. A supreme example of interventionist activist acting is 1985 (1984) – a play which endeavoured to encourage voter registration to foil Ronald Reagan’s bid to re-enter the White House.47 By the end of the play Ebenezer, the apathetic voter, is broken out of his apathy and realises that his vote counts. But he discovered that he is not registered for voting. At this point the actor playing Ebenezer broke out of his character and urged all members of the audience who were not yet registered for voting to do so without delay. In fact, he led them to a nearby registration desk.

Bread and Puppet theatre’s link with the tradition of oppositional popular theatrical forms is through puppetry. Traditionally puppetry has always responded to political situations through satire. The puppets help create a fresh language of expression and also allow flexibility to the artists to improvise at each instance. The use of giant and mostly, grotesque puppets also serve to exaggerating

44 www.sfmt.org
45 According to the Mime Troupe’s website it uses ‘mime’ according to its original definition – ‘exaggeration of daily loife through story and song’ - and not as ‘silent imitation’.
Idiom for Change

the visual quality of the performances. This is a style ideal for street shows and demonstrations. Accompanying the puppets is live loud percussion music and banners and posters which form part of the action. The very spectacle catches the attention of the disinterested passer-by. Thus, Bread and Puppet's choice of form is well-suited to take 'theatre to the non-theatre audience'. Bread and Puppet's performance also takes the shape of a circus, another popular art form which the group has politicised. Numerous small acts go on to build up one large show. The biggest circus of them is the Annual Domestic Resurrection Circus, an event which is held for three days on Bread and Puppet's Vermont farm. People from across the United States and the world assemble to celebrate the event. In this circus several acts are on simultaneously at various parts of the farm recreating the atmosphere of the medieval fairs. The audience remains free to walk from one show to another and also have their own picnic at the 'Circus'. Along with the picturesque setting the Domestic Resurrection Circus is a visual treat. With its signature style the Bread and Puppet has influenced similar use of puppets and masks at political demonstrations.

EUROPE

Radical open space theatre in Europe in the post World War II period was dominated primarily by the revolutionary mood of the 1968. However, this was not the only factor responsible for the growth of radical theatre groups in Europe, many of whom continue to be active even today. The tours of Europe by the American groups Bread and Puppet and San Francisco Mime Troupe bore an impact on European theatre persons. The tradition of Living Newspaper performances of the prewar period, also, influenced the forsaking of established theatrical spaces for a more 'accessible' form of theatre. Finally, the political motivation for the theatre activists were drawn from the political circumstances in their own countries. Although Britain and Germany have vibrant political theatre groups – the Red Ladder and 7:84 Theatre Company in Britain; and the Grips Theatre in Berlin – I shall dwell briefly over three instances of postwar theatre activism in Europe: Paris and France during and in the immediate aftermath of the 'events' of 1968, the theatre of Dario Fo in Italy, and in Spain under Franco.

France

It is to be noted that the street theatre which was played out in the streets of Paris in 1968-69 was not under the auspices of any organized movement. The attractive power of the legend of 1968 was the very spontaneity of the movement (and perhaps it could be argued that this was the cause of its ultimate non-realisation, but that is a separate debate). Being spontaneous and largely unorganized the streets of Paris was transformed into a free-for-all space, which resulted in experimentation in
various modes of expression of the revolutionary potential. The drawback being that, like other aspects of the ‘events’ of 1968, there precious little records exist of its theatrical activism. My primary insight into the theatre of the Parisian uprisings is through the account of Jean-Jacques Lebel, one of the chief activists of the Odeon theatre occupation.\footnote{Jean-Jacques Lebel. ‘Notes on Political Street Theatre, Paris: 1968, 1969’ in Jan Cohen-Cruz (1998). pp. 179-84.} Reclaiming the streets as part of the challenge to the capitalist hegemony was a central idea of the 1968 Parisian movement. As part of the mass demonstrations during the unrest large effigies of the symbols of power and tyranny, including those of the French Riot Police and de Gaulle were created. They were burnt accompanied by the performance of ‘short, funny theatrical rituals’. In a tradition similar to that of the ‘living newspaper’ various groups would enact interpretation of each day’s developments. These comic acts would form the basis of discussions among the audience. As is stressed by Lebel, most of these performers ‘were totally inexperienced and were brought together mostly by their desire to work out some different means of political activity’. Thus, creation of most of the forms of these street performances was like the overall movement – spontaneous.

The performances, however, outlived the uprising and continued into the subsequent years. The primary motive of these performances was to address the ‘fence sitters’ among the French people and those sections which did not translate their support into action. They aimed to counter the hegemonic views which were propagated by the official media. Exposing the hidden workings of imperialism was one of the primary themes of the plays. These sketches relied heavily on satire and the use of stereotypical characters to represent the peasant, the revolutionary, the repressive state, the capitalist and other such entities. Adaptations were made to the theatrical forms, to suit the performances to the requirements of the street. The storyline was simple, almost replicating the frame-by-frame shots of newsreel movies. Dialogue was kept to a minimum, its place taken by words or phrases on placards. Costumes were exaggerated and caricatured. The performances, however, took place in an extremely hostile environment. Lebel describes:

While the four actors are performing, about five others kneel in a circle around them to clear the small space which they need. Meanwhile about ten people are busy putting up posters and painting slogans on as many walls as possible in the immediate vicinity. Six or eight others stand by to participate in discussions or to protect the actors in case of trouble with the police. The group has on occasion used collective self-defense so as not to let any of its members get busted – in such cases it also depends on the help of the audience bystanders – since it is politically important not to let the police interfere with the ‘play’ or the discussions.

Though the most significant, Paris was, however, only one of the centres of popular uprising of 1968. The ‘events’ drew their tremendous impact from the support and active participation of large
sections of the working class spread across different regions of France. Subsequent popular theatre activities in France were, therefore, a powerful regional theatre. Groups like Le Theatre Populaire de Lorraine and Lo Teatre de La Carriera assert a regional cultural identity against the dominant French culture.

**Italy**

The theater of Dario Fo, Franka Rame and II Collecttivo Treactrale La Comune may not strictly be termed as open space. Most of the performances actually take place in covered spaces. But the desire to make theatre accessible, the choice of popular forms for their theatre, a content which is partisan in favour of the people and the sheer influence and respect Fo's theatre wields among people's theatre activists worldwide are reasons enough to make a brief discussion of Fo's theatre inevitable.

II Collecttivo Treactrale La Comune is a culmination of a series of attempts by Fo and Rame to form a politically committed theatre collective. It was the Vietnam protests and the Cultural Revolution in China that inspired Fo and Rame to quit the bourgeois stage and attempt to develop a proletarian theatre in association with the Italian Communist Party (PCI). But by 1970 fissures had developed between the PCI and Fo who accused the PCI for using his troupe 'as a mere cultural signboard that was forced to reflect the party's political stance'. The PCI on the other hand did not take Fo's criticism of the Party kindly. Fo and the PCI parted ways. Fo and II Collecttivo Treactrale La Comune have, however, continued to be unflinchingly committed to a progressive politics. Fo and his group has repeatedly performed in striking factories and at political rallies.

Fo's political commitment, however, has repeatedly led to difficulties with the officialdom. Having decided to work towards advancing a proletarian consciousness the group decided to base itself in the working class environment of Milan. With the help of local residents they converted an abandoned vegetable warehouse into the Palazzina Liberty cultural centre. However, they could do so only after a long legal battle with the city council. But financial woes continued to plague the group. With its meager resources the group managed to pay wages to its actors. But in the difficult times many of the actors were not prepared to accept wage cuts. Financial difficulties ultimately meant that the Milan city authority cut off electric supply and the Palazzina Liberty ceased to exist. II Collecttivo Treactrale La Comune has not received funds from the Milan City Council or from the Italian government. Its work has largely been ignored by the mainstream press. Other than ticket sales it has taken up foreign tours to fund its activities.

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50 Ibid. p. 126.
Radical Open Space Performances

Yet the popularity of Dario Fo is immense. Perhaps the most popular of Fo’s performances is *Mistero Buffo* (1969). The one man performance of *Mistero Buffo* falls within several traditions – the commedia dell’arte, the traveling minstrel and the storyteller. It requires one man to jump in and out of many roles, relies on powerful acting and provides ample space for improvisation. It is mobile and requires the minimum resources for performance and can enthrall audiences in the most hi-tech circumstances as well – Fo set a viewership record on Italian television with a three hour performance of *Mistero Buffo*. The satire in the play is directed at the rulers of the society and its humour derives from the oppressed’s lack of respect for the ‘superiors’. In the various actos of the play Fo uses a myriad devices of popular theatre – comic stock devices, slap stick, mistaken identity, obscene language, farcical mimicry and acrobatics. The performance is generally followed by a discussion with the audience.\(^{51}\)

Among Fo’s other productions mention has to be made of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (*Morte Accidentale di un Anarchico*, 1971). The play was originally devised to provide alternative information, views which were suppressed by mainstream reporting and police briefings, during the legal investigations into the the suspicious custodial death of an anarchist railroad worker Giuseppe Pinelli in 1969. In his proposal for the play Fo suggested that Pinelli’s lawyers would report to him the days proceeding in court each day. And Fo would incorporate the latest developments in the evenings’s performance. The performance would become the occasion for discussions between the actors and the audience. These improvised performances continued and the play grew for two years. It was instrumental in mobilizing public opinion which paved the way for the acquittal of the other anarchists. But Fo and Rame had to pay a heavy price for their partisanship. Fo was arrested and jailed and in 1973 Franca Rame was kidnapped and assaulted by the members of a fascist group.\(^{52}\)

Spain

If Dario Fo carried forward his theatrical activism under challenging conditions, the dictatorial regime of Franco had virtually tried to make radical theatre impossible in its reign. But the resilience of the radical theatre activists converted a disadvantage into a virtue.

In his account of radical political theatre in Spain Eugene van Erven points out with alarm the glaring absence of concern for the tyrannical rule of Franco in Spain in the work of the various radical theatre groups in other European countries. While they did show much concern about Vietnam and

\(^{51}\) Ibid. p. 130-33.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid. p. 134-43.
the working class they failed to express solidarity with the Spanish people.53

The fascist Franco regime sought to bar all possible expressions of freedom and independent opinion, even those which were in no way critical of the regime. A fine was imposed for kissing in the streets! A fine which amounted to 500 pesetas in the 70s. Street theatre performances were forbidden. And to ensure that proscenium spaces remained commercial and non-radical the law prohibited more than two shows of any play in a city. But such was the fortitude of that the radical theatre groups, instead of being cowed down took to further radicalization of their activity. These groups relied more on tours and spread out into the countryside and regional Spain, leaving the precincts of the city. Without the repressive law the theatre movement in Spain could have met the same fate as those of most European groups, be restricted to the urban centers of the country. The law then, uncannily was instrumental in sowing the seeds of radical theatre in Bilbao, San Sebastian, Seville, and Santander, cities which had no tradition of serious theatre. The other fall out of such branching out was that the radical theatre, which was unable to reach out to a the regular theatre goers, actively sought its audience among people who were not habitual theatre goers. For this they adopted a form of accessible theatre with affordable or waived ticket prices and highly entertaining shows. Thus radical theatre in Spain, known as Teatro Independiente had a wide net of activities with els Joglars, els Commediantes, and la Claca from Catalonia; Tabano, Goliards, and Teatro Catarro from Madrid; la Cuadra and Esperanto from Seville; and Akelarre and Teatro Geroa from the Basque provinces.54

Other than restricting the number of performances the fascist state tried to control criticism of the repressive regime by a strict censorship of the plays. But this was again an area where the radical groups circumvented the law enforcers. They resorted to a theatre which made minimal use of dialogue. Or the political meaning was located not in the fixed script but in the changeable gesture. For this they fell back to the traditional forms of popular entertainment regional folk dance forms like the Andalisian song and dance, peasant farces, stand-up comedies, zarzuelas, musical revues, circus and cabaret. The other ruse to dupe the police was through building a partnership with the audience where the actors and the audience communicated through a share code of gestures, a domain which excluded the police. Van Erven records an instance:

Tabano [a group from Madrid], for example, often located its plays from Opera del bandido ("Bandit's Opera"), a drastically rewritten version of John Gay's Beggar's Opera, the audience would go wild and give the company a five-minute standing ovation:

(Sound of whistles. The police enter, led by Lockit. The lord hides himself in a trunk. Macky hides behind Jenny.)

53 Ibid. p. 145.
54 Ibid. p. 147.
THE GIRLS: Alarm, alarm, the cops, the cops. Danger! etc.
LOCKIT: Nobody move or I'll shoot in the air!
ALL: Please! Not in the air, not in the air!
This seemingly absurd audience reaction was in response to the typical reporting of Franco-controlled newspapers, which, whenever some demonstrators had been killed in an antigovernment rally, would feature headlines like: "Police shoots in the air: two people die." 55

Themselves opposed to authoritarianism the groups of the Teatro Independiente made a break from organisational hierarchies within the groups. Instead of a distinction between lead actors, directors, designers and other specialisations they worked as a collective with all constituents contributing to all fields according to their talent. On the credits their names appeared without any specialisations. 56

Needless to say the radical activities of these groups received no financial assistance from the Franco regime nor from the governments which succeeded Franco. However, the lure of money, fame and establishment did test the commitment of the theatre activists and the possibility of defection to the state patronage continued to plague the movement. When Luis Iturri, the director of Akelarre accepted a job as manager of the municipal Arriaga Theatre in Bilbao in 1982, his group died a silent death. 57 The same fate occurred to Tabano in 1984, when its director Guillermo Heras became the director of the Centro de Nuevas Tendencias Escenicas, a government sponsored institution for avant-garde theatre experiments. 58

THIRD WORLD

The rest of the chapter will be concerned on countries outside Europe and North America. Is there a way to describe these countries other than through geography? Though it is impossible to generalize about the vast multitudes of humanity and the diversity of contexts, I would like to trace a few trajectories which serve as a median for the diverse coordinates of what is loosely described as the third world. Other than Russia or the Soviet Union the other countries discussed so far have exerted colonial control over other peoples at some time in their past. In that respect the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, either have been yoked by colonialism or still continue to languish under imperialism. And if colonialism has been a reality in these countries so has been the history of anti-colonial, national movements. The nature and class character of the leadership of the anti-colonial national movement in a country determined the nature of the post-Independence state in that country. In countries already ravaged by colonialism the rule established by a westernized minority failed to

55 Ibid. p. 149.
56 Ibid. p. 150.
57 Ibid. p. 152.
58 Ibid. p. 159.
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address the ideals of the national movement. The westernized rulers existed in an in-between position of being superior to the vast majority of the citizens, and in a position of dependence, for stability and aggrandizement, on the former colonizers. When the resulting discontent began crystallizing into mass agitations, the state clamped down in the form of military rule or authoritarian regimes. It was in moments like these that resistance theatre, radical political performances, guerrilla theatre, street theatre, theatre of liberation were born in these countries.

The other trajectory in the history of the third world countries in the second half of the 20th century is the victory of socialism in countries like China, Cuba and Vietnam. Other than these socialist countries that continue to display their fortitude against the imperialist might after the demise of the Soviet Union, the people in countries like Chile, Angola, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Bolivia formed the arena of the ‘cold war’ battle between socialism and imperialism. In these countries radical political theatre played a major role in mobilizing the masses into revolutionary action.

China

Unlike for Russia we do have some accounts of Chinese radical open space theatre from the pre-revolution period. These performances were broadly of two types - one, groups of the Communist Red Army whose role, other than propaganda was also to entertain army units; two, civilian groups which performed the task of entertainment and propaganda for the peasant masses in the “liberated zones” of the Kiangsi and Yenan Soviets.

The earliest known attempt to organize political theatre teams by the communists in China was in 1929 in the Red Army for the purpose of entertaining the troops. However, the party and the army soon realized the effectiveness of theatre in propaganda. It was then that the Red Army groups started performing for the local peasants. With the establishment of the Kiangsi Soviet in 1934, after a long period the Communists could work openly. At Kiangsi the Communists attempted to create a revolutionary state which could serve as an example before the peasantry from other regions. The Communists’ strategy was to break the power of the gentry by carrying out radical land reforms. For this the Communists needed to garner support among the people and dispel fears about the programme of the Communist Party. This was a task which was effectively performed by the Soviet Drama Troupes. Soviet Drama Troupes, however, served other purposes as well. Firstly, it presented the culture starved peasantry with recreation which they grabbed with eagerness – ’some would travel for miles with their families and sit spellbound for hours in the cold night air’ to witness a

60 Ibid. p. 193.
Secondly, the Communist Party laid a great stress on education and literacy as weapons to empower the people and further the revolution. The Soviet Drama Troupes provided effective assistance to this campaign.

After the conceding defeat to the Kuomintang forces the Red Army undertook the Long March, which ended with the establishment of the Yenan Forum in the North of the country in 1936. Yenan was a more backward region than Kiangsi and its people more culturally starved. Though, the Communist Party built upon the strategies of cultural mobilization that were developed in Kiangsi, a transformation had taken place corresponding to the Party's political line – United Front with the Kuomintang to defeat Japanese imperialism. The dominant themes, therefore, were – anti-Nipponism and revolution.

Both at Kiangsi and at Yenan the Communist Party tried to develop an institutional mechanism for the training of cultural and theatre workers. At Kiangsi the training began as part of the emphasis on extracurricular and recreational activities at the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army School. Later the Entertainment Club of the Red Army School formed the Gorky Drama School and under Chu Chiu Pai's guidance recruitment of potential actors took place from the peasant population itself. It must be noted that the conditions for theatrical training were not very adequate at the Drama School. In fact, Kuomintang prisoners of war who had experience of theatre were called in to teach in the Gorky Drama School. At Yenan the training process was more organised in a two tier structure. Training was provided to activists, who were recruited from among the peasants of the Soviet, at the Central level. After two years of training the cultural activists went to the local units to recruit and organise local troupes. So, other than dramatic techniques, the training curriculum imparted guidance on organizational skills as well.

The first Soviet drama troupe outside the Red Army – the “August First Dramatic Troupe” – was formed at Kiangsi in 1931. By the time of its demise the Kiangsi Soviet had an army of 1656 local units and 50000 cultural activists. Every army unit had its own drama troupe. These troupes functioned on the principle of the collective. Subjects were decided by discussion. The task of scripting was assigned to the literate members of the troupe. The script was finalised through a series of collective discussions and re-writings. Also, the very use of the open-space for rehearsals meant that peasant onlookers could give their suggestions. After the first set of rehearsals the play was presented

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61 Ibid. p. 205.
62 Ibid. p. 201-03.
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before a Party official like Chu for suggestions. However, plays were also produced at the central level to be taken up for performance by various local units. But the local groups actively incorporated local issue, added a local flavour to the language and updated the content according to recent events.65

Chu Chiu Pai and other leaders of the cultural movement advocated a close study of the local cultural traditions and forms. In fact, this was one motivation for the increased emphasis on recruitment of peasants for theatrical activity. A major component of the activities of the Soviet drama troupes was the “living newspaper”, which like in the post-October Revolution Russia was important in explaining to the illiterate peasant population the programmes of the Communist Party and the news on the war front.

But the penetration and reach of the troupes was dependent on the willingness of the troupe members to walk miles from village to village across the Soviet. They had very little by way of costumes and props. Depended on the villagers for their food and rest. But they could hardly be idle as ‘every troupe had long waiting lists of requests from village soviets’.66 But the effect, as recorded by Edgar Snow in the Red Star Over China, spoke of a magical partnership between the actors and the spectators:

The first playlet was called Invasion. It opened in a Manchurian village in 1931, with the Japanese officers banqueted in a peasant’s home, using Chinese men for chairs and making love to their wives. Another scene showed Japanese dope peddlers selling morphine and heroin and forcing every peasant to buy a quantity...

A scene in the village market place showed small merchants peacefully selling their wares. Suddenly Japanese soldiers arrived .... Two Japanese officers gorged themselves on a peddler’s pork. When he asked for money they looked at him in astonishment. ‘You ask for payment? Why, Chiang Kai-shek gave us Manchuria, Jehol, Chahar, the Tangku Truce, the Ho-Umewste Agreement, and the Hopei-Chahar Council without asking a single copper! And you want us to pay for a little pork!’ Whereupon they impaled him as a ‘bandit’.

... all that proved too much for the villagers. Merchants turned over their stands and umbrellas, farmers rushed forth with their spears, women and children came with their knives, and all swore to ‘fight to death’ against the Jih-pen-kuei – the ‘Japanese devils’.67

Philippines and South Korea

The people of Philippines had to suffer a military-dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos. On the other hand South Korea is a declared democracy, recognised by most countries of the world. Yet the conditions from which the radical people’s theatre in these countries emerged are markedly similar. In the period of the Cold War against communism, the repressive regimes of both the countries were supported by the United States, with South Korea hosting a permanent US military base within its

66 Cohen-Cruz. op cit. p. 29.
67 Quoted in Cohen-Cruz. op cit. p. 27.
Of the two countries the wider radical theatre movement existed in Philippines in the form networks of groups, the foremost among which was the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA). The PETA was originally formed in 1967. But the vision of its founder Cecilia Reyes Guidote, for a Philippine National Theatre did not have much space for the oppressed sections of the Philippine society. In fact, within a few years she was coopted into the dictatorial regime at the call of Imelda Marcos and millions of dollars. It was only then that Guidote's authoritarian style of functioning was replaced by a greater democratisation of the decision-making process. But PETA's transition to the streets occurred only in 1982 when it performed at a political rally against the assassination of the opposition leader Benigno Aquino. In fact, the movement against Aquino's assassination sparked off the pro-democracy movement which ultimately overthrew the Marcos rule. PETA's street performances were a part of that ascent.

South Korea did not suffer a formal dictator and was much publicised by the US media as 'democratic', as opposed to the communist North Korea. The government ruled by planting a 'Red Scare' in the minds of the people by repeated military exercises in constant preparation for an armed attack from the communist North. In the grip of fear the government, the police and indeed the secret police maintain a tight control over all public affairs. Therefore, any resistance activity can only be underground and carefully disguised in forms such as traditional folk performances.

Censorship can take various forms. As most of the plays of the political performances do not have a written text direct censorship is not possible. So censorship takes the form of direct repression of the group. Van Erven tells us of repeated instances of police attacks on demonstrators and actors and the performers having to run for their lives to escape the bullets of the riot police. The actors of the Philippine group U.P.-Periyante used light masks, throw away props, and little or no costumes which allows them to mingle easily into the crowd to avoid identification by the police. Thus they can engage in 'hit-and-run' performances. The fear of communists created in the minds of the people by government propaganda in both countries, act as a deterrent for potential recruits to the political theatre network. In fact, CIA sponsored rightwing vigilante groups working in localities can act as police informers and cause the arrest of theatre activists. These vigilante groups are also 'licensed' to kill. In such circumstances the only way the groups can function is by building strong bonds with the community and penetrating to the grassroots. Behn Cervantes, the director of the group U.P.-Rep,

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69 Ibid. p. 97.
70 Ibid. p. 46.
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gives us an account of a performance in Manila after the declaration of military rule in 1972:

Children helped us to set up the stage. The military couldn't get to us because Tondo was already a very organised slum community. But two thirds of the way through the play they shut down the generator and we lost our lights. It was amazing how fast the people ran to their houses to get their gas lamps, and before we knew it the stage was lit up with the eerie light from these gazeras.\(^\text{71}\)

The South Korean political theatre uses the traditional Madang form. The Madang literally means 'open square' or 'meeting place'. The most remarkable aspect of the Madang is its ability to work up the audience to an excitable state. This potential of Madang is, therefore, used in mass demonstrations and political rallies.\(^\text{72}\)

The PETA has developed a three tier modular workshop structure: (1) a 'get-to-know-you' group integration phase; (2) a structural analysis phase in which local stories and social problems are extracted from the participants; and (3) basic training, followed by the production of a script written by the workshop participants and performed for a local audience. The PETA follows a prototype of the workshops which is customisable according to the specific needs and requirements of the a particular community or group of enthusiasts. The PETA trainers initiate a workshop with exercises which help them prepare a 'social map' of the participants, on the basis of which they make appropriate alterations to the plan for the workshop. Further, at the end of each day the participants and the trainers sit in a round for a feedback session. On the basis of the feedback changes are made in the plan for the subsequent days.

In his account of the PETA Eugene van Erven has noted with some discomfort the attempts by the PETA to attract international attention and foreign funding. It has received substantial foreign funds for its actors' training workshops. According to him this has caused 'irritation among groups in the provinces'.\(^\text{73}\) It is not clear from van Erven's account, however, what the exact cause of 'irritation' is. It is not clear if the receipt of funds have affected PETA's performances or its political sharpness has been blunted!

Vietnam

Among the encounters between Imperialism and Socialism (an encounter which the Capitalist world chooses to look upon as a clash between 'Democracy' and 'Totalitarianism') one of the most celebrated victories of the socialist camp was achieved in Vietnam. The victory of a determined Viet Cong over the superior firepower of the United States army inspired numerous youth all across the

\(^{\text{71}}\) Quoted in ibid. p. 35.
\(^{\text{72}}\) Ibid. p. 18.
\(^{\text{73}}\) Ibid. p. 62.
world to join the anti-imperialist ranks, before the Reagan administration with impunity took decisive measures to turn the tide in favour of imperialism. If a superior knowledge of the jungle terrain of the tropical Vietnam served as an obvious advantage for the Viet Cong, the Viet Cong was also assisted by the greater support of and closeness with the Vietnamese people. Theatre played an extremely crucial role in generating this support and countering enemy propaganda during the war. The effectiveness of the political theatre can be gauged from the measures taken by the US Military authorities to curb the activities of these groups. The Joint US Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) issued an ordinance prohibiting playwrights from travelling to Vietnam. In fact the JUSPAO even started promoting similar performances through pro-US South Vietnamese groups.\textsuperscript{74}

The groups associated with the National Liberation Front of Vietnam and the Viet Cong travelled from village to village and from hamlet to hamlet educating the people on communist policies and ideas and calling on them to actively resist the South Vietnamese and US forces. In their plays the groups drew on a long tradition of performances in Vietnam. One of the traditional performances, that of Cheo, takes the form of the “boat play”. In a country where very often rivers, rather than roads, provide the primary link in remote areas the “boat play” is effective in reaching out to the ‘man on the “bank” (sic)’. The performers would address the people along the bank of the rivers and invite them to join the performance. Needless to say in both forms the groups did not charge any ‘entrance’ fees. Both the forms, on land and water relied heavily on visual messages. There was a low emphasis on written scripts. Due to the immediacy of the campaign the groups were prepared to make necessary changes to the plays, both in light of the immediate events as well as the audience being addressed to. Also as most of the activity took place in a time of action, all resources were concentrated on the theatre and not on keeping records of the action for posterity. It is due to this lack of written records that we do not know enough about this vibrant theatre action.

Palestine

The image of the stone-throwing Palestinian youth, against the Israeli police in heavy combat gear, conjures before us the image of David and Goliath. Israel’s colonial occupation of Palestine relies on a complete disregard to the right of the Palestinians to a homeland. Other than crushing any Palestinian uprising, the Israeli authorities also systematically prevent any expression of Palestinian identity or of expression of Arabic culture in the occupied territories. A Palestinian artist, Fathi Ghabin was imprisoned for exhibiting a painting whose prominent colours were red, black, green and white –

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the colours of the Palestinian flag forbidden by the Israeli government. The placing of heavy restrictions on the movements of Palestinians make it extremely difficult for the performers to reach their audiences:

Before the intifada, the drive to Al-Kasaba theatre in Ramallah took about twenty minutes. But three months later, the Palestinian uprising against the Israelis began; and one response was a brutal clampdown on Palestinians' movement making it often impossible, and always difficult, for any Palestinian to go from anywhere to anywhere else. These days, the drive from Jerusalem to Al-Kasaba can take four hours.... if there's something they don't like about your papers perhaps your car registration, or the fact that you're from Hebron then you simply, probably, won't reach Al-Kasaba theatre at all.

And yet Palestinian theatre survives in the face of severe repression and censorship.

Although permission is necessary for all theatrical performance in Israel and the occupied territories, permission is granted selectively and is often arbitrary. When the El-Hakawati Theatre of Arab East Jerusalem sought permission to perform The 1001 Nights if a Stom Thrower and Ali the Galilean in the Israeli territory it was granted. But when they sought to perform in the West Bank they could not find any competent authority responsible for granting a similar permission. There was a peculiar situation. Their application to the military governor received no response. The records of the El-Hakawati describes the situation:

Both these plays have not been performed in the West Bank. If we received a negative response to the submitted play we would have something to fight on. In the meantime the fact remains that we perform before the Israelis in Tel-Aviv but not before our audiences in the West Bank. We may perform in "proper" theatres but not in village schoolyards.

If elusiveness was a strategy of the Israeli censorship to frustrate the Palestine democratic determination the Palestinian theatre activists hit back with the strategy which we already seen many other groups take recourse to – a theatre without an available script. The El-Hakawati did not perform from fixed scripts: "Let it be known that we write texts especially for the censorship as El-Hakawati does not work from written texts." Their plays emerged from workshops, improvisations and group interaction.

Another method of avoiding the censors to which we have been acquainted to already is the use of innuendos and secret language of communication a "form of a Morse code, a hidden language, because direct statements under occupation can spell disaster". Al-Asafir (The Birds), a proscenium play best illustrates this usage. The very title of the play is an allusion to an Israeli riddle joke: "How do

76 "Alive from Palestine". <http://www.liftfest.org/lift01/performances/aliveinpalestineprod.html>
77 Quoted in Slymovics. op cit. p. 31.
78 Ibid. p. 28.
79 Radi Shehdeh, a member of the El-Hakawati, quoted in Slymovics. op cit. p. 22-23.
we know that Palestinians can fly? Because so many die when the Israeli army shoots warning shots into the air.\footnote{Ibid. p. 20. Does this allusion bear an uncanny similarity to the a similar joke shared between the actors and the audiences in the play \textit{Opéra del bandido} by the Spanish group, which I've described earlier in the chapter? If repressors use similar techniques of brutality the voice of protest seeks a similar idiom!}

Although \textit{Al-Asafir} is a stage play, in the Palestinian theatre the boundary between the stage and the street is greatly blurred. For the subject of the stage is the street. But the story of the Palestinian streets, however, have a more appropriate format. The use of the centuries' old tradition of the Arab storyteller. Written accounts of Arab and European travellers from the medieval times bear witness to the flourishing tradition of puppet shows, shadow plays, taziya performances, travelling farce players, and dramatic recitations of medieval romances by professional storytellers.\footnote{Ibid. p. 22.} Palestinian theatre artists have adopted the style of the storyteller to script a new tradition of protest performance. In fact, the name of the group El-Hakawati translates to 'story-teller' in Arabic. It is not a replication of the tradition but using the form to make it anew, appropriate for the modern day needs of the Palestinians.

Other than El-Hakawati individual actors have also made storytelling their vocation. Muhammed Bakri and George Ibrahim are the two most prominent names. The storytellers perform in the occasion of demonstrations or mass actions as well as independently organised shows in settlements, market places and schools. While relying on humour, irony, physicality and a powerful stage presence, the content of the performances base themselves on an intense identification between the audience and the actors, an identification which shares the horrors of occupation and police intervention which makes life a fulltime imprisonment. It is the performance itself, the shared space, the shared experiences, the shared laughter which forms both a relief from and a challenge to the repression. Susan Slyomovics recounts a storytelling act by Radi Shahdeh of the El-Hakawati:

In his unpublished memoirs, Shahdeh also describes an innovative way to initiate oral poetic performance while at the prevailing political order. During Ramadan he toured al-Mukabber, a suburb of Jerusalem, in a car with a loudspeaker mounted on it, inviting the residents to attend performances in the main square. His amplified announcement mimicked the orders of the Isreali military government, whose public pronouncements generally presage disaster. Instead of curfews, arrests, and imprisonment, the townspeople were enjoined to attend a storytelling session and to rejoice...

"O people of al-Mukabber, by order of the Theatrical Governor [not the Military Governor], it is absolutely forbidden to remain at home, switch of your television sets or radios, and otherwise not be there in the town square directly after the canon shot ... El-Hakawati will be there awaiting you."
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Sri Lanka

The people of the island country of Sri Lanka have been undergoing a 'time of terror' since the 1980s. Rift between the Tamil separatists led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the Sinhala fascist National Freedom Party (JVP) and an authoritarian and undemocratic Sri Lankan government the common Sri Lankan, be it Tamil or Sinhala, has had to live with the horror of arrests, abductions, killings, and dead bodies displayed in public places or floating down rivers. Yet, as Ranjini Obeyesekere notes, there was an exponential growth in theatrical activity during this period! Unlike the brutal censorship and control of the media and other forms of communication, theatre — that is, established proscenium theatre — was never banned. Obeyesekere traces two possible reasons which explain this apparent act of sensitivity. First, she argues that tolerance towards anti-establishment portrayals and political satire in rituals and performances are an integral part of the island's tradition. Second, according to Obeyesekere, the Sri Lankan government of Jayawardene actually pursued a policy of active support for theatre in the late 1970s by funding a multi-tiered National Theatre Festival and instituting National Awards. Even when the theatre took increasingly critical stances on government actions there were no attempts to influence the content of the plays. The government also encouraged the establishment of Youth Councils to provide an outlet for the unemployed and discontented youth and to prevent them from falling into the ranks of the JVP. These councils took an active interest in organising drama productions and drama workshops. Even though there were cases of military excesses on the Youth Councils on charge of anti-establishment productions and JVP activities, the theatre by and large continued.

However, the freehand given to the proscenium performances did not extend to the realm of street theatre. Although there was never any official ban on street theatre the greater subversive potential of open spaces and the directness of political satire and appeal caused the authorities to deny permission for shows and even disrupt the shows. These groups worked with shoe-string budgets under severe conditions. Most performances were free, although small collections could be made at the end of some shows. The use of innuendoes, acrobatics, mime, minimalist costumes were some of the characteristic features of the street theatre practice in this country. The constant threat of disruption both from extremists and the police called for a high degree of mobility for the groups.

83 Ibid. p. 50.
84 Ibid. p. 50-51.
Pakistan

The original march of people's theatre in the subcontinent began through the IPTA and the IPTA had set up it branches in Lahore and Karachi in the late 30s. Indeed, despite the partition, cultural exchange between the two countries and the two peoples have been deep in times of peace. Along with music and films, theatre has played a major role in this exchange. Many Indians of my generation would remember the Pakistani television plays which would be a tremendous attraction. Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi (shortly before his death), had held a series of workshops in Karachi and Lahore. In 1989 an Indo-Pak theatre conference was held at Lahore in honour of Safdar Hashmi. 87

Yet there are a lot of dissimilarities between the political trajectories of the two countries. While post-Independence India was founded as a secular state with a democratic constitution, Pakistan was an Islamic state and unable to tackle the mounting contradictions between the ruling elite and the disillusioned masses it fell quickly into a military dictatorship. Theatre in Pakistan had to face a dual enemy – the strict imposition of 'Islamic' codes meant that films, paintings and theatre were considered un-Islamic and so discouraged. And wherever theatre could take place it had to suffer a severe censorship from both governmental and non-governmental forces. Van Ervene mentions that the Police routinely eliminate words like 'pregnancy', 'uterus', 'womb' and 'motherhood' from the play-scripts. It makes it difficult for groups to recruit women actors. In fact, according to Fawzia Afzal-Khan, at places, the very idea and effort of organising mixed gender performances is revolutionary. Police non-cooperation has severely restricted the performance spaces of the groups. In Karachi the police devised an extremely innovative rule to ensure that the performances never reached the majority of the people. They did not cause much difficulties for any political plays in which the entrance charges were at least Rupees Thirty! This kept the politics only to the wealthy elites and allowed the government to drum up a myth of 'freedom of speech'.

But it was during the Martial Law regime of Zia-ul-Haque that most of the street theatre groups in Pakistan were formed. The most prominent group Ajoka (Today's Theatre) is based at Lahore; the Punjab Lok Rehas is also a Lahore based group; Sanjh is based in Rawalpindi; Saik Lok

86 Ibid. 157.
88 Van Ervene. op cit. 160.
89 Ibid. 183.
90 Afzal-Khan. op cit. 39.
91 Van Ervene. op cit. 163.
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Tamasha, in Multan; and Tehrik-i-Niswan, Dastak, Sevak, and Baang in Karachi. In the face of severe repression and censorship the groups rely more on suggestive allegories and metaphors. The connection with the audience comes from a shared consciousness. In 1985, when Ajoka performed Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the hanging of the Governor at the beginning of the play evoked whispers from the audience 'Bhutto... Bhutto.' Eugene van Ervene describes an Ajoka play *Marya Hua Kutta* (The Dead Dog), in which the stench of the dead dog signifies the rot in the system corrupt, authoritarian and fundamentalist. The various characters representing power – the mullah, the police, the politician – fail to trace the foul smell to the dog, blaming other things instead. Thus the play comments on the attempts by the powered elite to divert peoples' attention from the real issues to non-issues. At the end of the play the actors walk into the audience and distribute incense sticks, telling them 'if you want more incense you can come to the mosque where the mullah will give you as much as you want.' Thus provoking the audience to a self-criticism that the solution to the problem is not a looking away from it but to confront it.

Despite the conditions being unfavourable for women in theatre, Pakistan has a committed women's theatre movement. Many strong plays against gender discrimination have been performed by the groups. A description of a performance of *Dhee Rani* by Ajoka in a school courtyard tells how the play brings out the contradictions among the audience. The play depicts the story of a girl-child – Dhee Rani – unwanted, repressed, kept away from education, and destined to receive a living burial within the four walls of her husband's home. The performance found an enthusiastic audience in the local women: “Most said they were there because the performance provided them with a welcome excuse to suspend their daily chores and come out of their homes; they hoped it was going to be 'good entertainment'. Yes, they knew Ajoka did 'issue-oriented' theatre, or theatre for social change; but after all, it was theatre, drama, music – spectacle!” The women respond with laughter whenever a male character makes lewd gestures and comments to suppress her desire to educate herself. On another occasion while Ajoka was performing *Dhee Rani* in the courtyard of a village house, one of the men realising that the play advocated education for women hurled expletives at the troupe members. Soon other men joined him and Ajoka had to make an ignominious exit. In yet another instance of patriarchal reaction to women's participation in theatre Sheema Kermani of Tehrik-i-Niswan recounts a performance in Karachi University on International Women's Day in 1983: “there were fundamentalists who explicitly threatened to start shooting the moment a man and a woman would

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92 Afzal-Khan. op cit. 40.
93 Van Ervene. op cit. 165.
94 Ibid. 166-68.
95 Afzal-Khan. op cit. 50-52.
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come on stage together. But luckily the auditorium was filled with 3000 girls, so I think they got a bit scared."96

This courage and commitment, coupled with the closeness and support of its audiences has sustained political theatre in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Like in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, theatre activists in two other South Asian countries – Bangladesh and Nepal – have also had to work under conditions of severe repression. Particularly, in Nepal street theatre and other cultural activism played a major role in the pro-democracy movement which preceded the establishment of the constitution of 1990. theatre also forms a major part of the propaganda work of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

Like Asia, the instances of peoples' theatre in the countries of Africa emerge from a history of a continuous struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism. In a vast majority of the African countries political Independence in the 1960s and 70s, resulted in the transfer of power from the European colonisers to the under-developed middle class, whom Franz Fanon described as the 'manager for Western enterprise'.97 There was very little for that the people gained and they continued to exist in abject poverty and conditions of severe repression. The hopes and aspirations which had been kindled by the anti-colonial struggle remained betrayed and therefore, the same goals became the issues before the new resistance movements and the new resistance theatre.

Kenya

In 1978, the death of the first President of independent Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, resulted in power being taken over by the dictatorial regime of Daniel arap Moi. With this began a phase of extreme repression of democratic activities and freedom of expression. One of the casualties of such repression was the Kamiriithu theatre, an initiative to institute a truly peoples' theatre. One of the principal figures behind the founding of the Kamiriithu village theatre, Ngugi wa Thiongo, has analysed the Kamiriithu theatre as 'a product of ... [the] history of struggle against colonialism and of the subsequent monumental betrayal into neo-colonialism'.98 According to Ngugi, there thrived a vibrant tradition of dramatic performances in pre-colonial Kenya, performances which represented the struggles of man with nature and with other men. Most of these performances took place in the 'empty space', and were therefore, the asset of the entire community. But the British colonisers destroyed that tradition in the name of them being 'works of the devil'.99 The Christian church and the colonial administration collaborated to prevent any cultural gathering of the Kenyan people including a ban on

96 Van Ervene, op cit. 182.
97 Fanon (1990). 123.
99 Ibid. 37.

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ritual ceremonies. Instead of the 'empty space' the British tried to confine the cultural sphere to the supervised spaces of the community halls, church buildings and the proscenium. These institutions, too, were monopolized by the white men. The plays produced in such spaces portrayed the Africans as subhumans. The Africans were taught to despise themselves. Comedies would encourage Africans to laugh at their own stupidity. Ironically, even after independence the expatriate white members continued to run the Kenyan National Theatre. The Kamiriithu village theatre ran counter to these conditions. While on the one hand, it sought to reclaim the 'empty space' for the Africans, on the other hand it attempted to bring to the centre of theatre the life, history and struggles of the people.

The Kamiriithu village theatre was at the centre of a larger project of empowering the people of the village of Kamiriithu in Kenya under the aegis of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Culture Centre. Though peasants made up the majority of the participants of the Kamiriithu theatre, it also included landlords, businessmen, professionals and the middle class. The Kamiriithu theatre began with the conversion of four acres of 'empty space' reserved for the Youth Centre in 1977. The peasants and workers of the village built raised semi-circular platform for the stage, which was backed by a semi-circular bamboo wall. The audience was seated on a wooden gallery. However, the space itself was limitless and uninhibited. In one performance, an actor climbed up to one of the surrounding trees, completely unrehearsed, and sang from there. Thus, the audience could be much beyond those immediately seated in the gallery. The theatre had 'open' auditions and rehearsals, partly due to the 'openness' of the space. All villagers could watch and comment on the rehearsals and even try out various roles. But one of the greatest interventions made by the Kamiriithu village theatre was in the field of the language of theatre. A theatre of the workers and peasants chose for itself the language of the people. Gikuyu was used for the plays. As Ngugi wrote, 'the question of audience settled the problem of language choice; and the language choice settled the question of audience.' The Kamiriithu theatre performed before a rural and almost illiterate audience. This experience enhanced the status of the peoples' languages and inspired the institution of people-based cultural festivals like the annual Vihiga Cultural Festival in western Kenya.

The first performance of the group was of the play Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want, 1977). The play was primarily based on the struggle of the Kenyan people for land in the 1950s during the Mau Mau movement. But the play addressed the issue of land in a manner which held tremendous implications in the politics of contemporary Kenya. The play was immensely successful.

100 Ibid. 56.
101 Ibid. 44.
102 Ibid. 60.

4-34
Ngugi recounts how people came in droves— in buses and taxis—from far off places to watch the play. In a particular performance, which was disrupted thrice by rain. The audience and the performers waited patiently, each time, before they resumed the performance.\textsuperscript{103} The success and the effectiveness of \textit{Ngaahika Ndeenda} prompted the Daniel Moi government to ban the play. Ngugi was arrested and held in a maximum security prison for almost an year. The ban on \textit{Ngaahika Ndeenda} had severe implications on Kenyan peoples' theatre. An unprecedented censorship on theatre followed. Ngugi and the Kamiriithu theatre was not allowed any licence to perform further. When the workers and peasants wanted to bring their theatre to the city, all halls were instructed to keep them out. Finally, on 12 March 1982, three truckloads of armed personnel went to Kamiriithu and razed the 'theatre to rubble. Ngugi was forced to flee the country and continues to be in exile. Since then there has hardly been a play which articulated the conditions of the workers and the peasants. In fact, the education system and the academic institutions have ensured that no intellectual in Kenya has any sympathies for the peasantry and the working class.\textsuperscript{104}

In August 2004, Ngugi returned to Kenya after 22 years in exile. He and wife Njeeri wa Ngugi were attacked in a Nairobi flat. Ngugi was severely beaten and burned with cigarettes. Njeeri was raped.

\textbf{South Africa}

The history of Apartheid South Africa is perhaps the most complicated among all the countries that I have discussed in this chapter. Not only was there a most inhuman repression of the black people at the hands of the white settlers, the country also became the site for an almost complete segregation of people on the basis of colour, so much so that one community was almost unaware of the existence and life of the other. Coupled with this were the tremendous restrictions placed on the cultural expression of the blacks and the coloured peoples. Moreover, the Apartheid regime practised a differential treatment of the various communities and tribes among the blacks and the coloured— the Zulus, the Xhosas, the Sothos, the Tswanas, the Vendas, the East Indian population, the South East-Asian population. There were differing laws throughout the country and different attitudes towards enforcing the laws. Due to this the anti-apartheid theatre in South Africa has had to formulate varying strategies and has had to constantly debate the modes of resistance.

The task of the resistance theatre was made extremely difficult by very strict censorship laws. A censorship law enacted in 1974 abolished the possibility of appeal against any unilateral decision by the
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government. In 1973 almost the entire leadership of the Black Consciousness movement, which included a large number of theatre activists, were 'banned'. When a person was 'banned', restrictions were placed on the person's movement and activities and (s)he was not allowed to associate with more than one person at a time. This severely depleted the membership of the black theatre groups. The members of the Peoples' Experimental Theatre, who produced the radical protest play *Shanti* (1976), were detained under the Terrorism Act for conspiring to 'make, produce, publish, or distribute subversive and anti-White utterances, writings, plays, and dramas'. All together the black theatre in South Africa suffered from several hurdles. Since, no theatre halls were available to them they had to make do with makeshift locations, like community halls, which lacked proper theatre facilities. Since such halls could not be booked for more than a week, the groups could not enjoy a performance run of more than a week. This severely incapacitated their reach. This also meant that the theatre never earned enough to be able to pay its actors a wage which was sufficient for them to consider theatre as a full time activity. Moreover, the political disturbances and police harassment caused untold harm to black theatre.

Despite, all such difficulties black resistance theatre continued to shape itself as a rallying point for assertion of black identities and anti-apartheid politics. One of the earliest black plays of significance was *King Kong* (1959), which was staged by the Union of South African Artists. This was the first black play which exposed the whites to the tradition of jazz. It exposed the whites to the talent and the culture of blacks, thus refuting the racist assumptions of the blacks being 'cultureless'. The Black Consciousness movement, led by the Black People's Convention (BPC) and the South African Students Organization (SASO), provided the ideological impetus to much of black resistance theatre through an assertion of black identity. To prepare themselves for the struggle against apartheid the blacks first had to identify themselves, rid themselves of the inferiority resulting from regular oppression and insult. *Pula* (Rain, 1982) was a play which addressed these needs. The play, written by Matsemela Manaka, was performed in a community hall in Soweto. The play shows how the African land was taken over by the whites and demonstrates that unity among the blacks is indispensable if that history had to be overturned. The play ends with a direct appeal to its audiences to ensure black
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unity. Pula is replete with mimes and songs. Most of the songs are in African languages, unintelligible to the whites. In fact, like most black plays in South Africa, Pula follows the oral tradition of art. The play did have a written script. But due to strict imposition of censorship, the groups submit a toned down script for approval, but the production itself is different.

Among other mentionable examples of black protest theatre are the 'worker plays' of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company of Johannesburg. Formed in 1979, its plays highlight the abject working conditions; dismissals from work and industrial disputes; and the plight of domestic workers. Perhaps the most interesting and significant story of black protest performance remains untold. Jan Cohen-Cruz has described his unsuccessful quest to recover the history of protest performances which surrounded the funeral of the victims of apartheid violence.112 These performances took place illegally, in complete secrecy. In a situation where blacks were not allowed to peacefully gather in public, the funerals became excuses for developing a solidarity among them. The song and dance in the funerals which were traditional rituals to honour the dead, were used to sing of the anti-apartheid struggle. Unfortunately, the very secrecy which surrounded these performances has meant that no record of them exists.

In the course of the struggle the black theatre in South Africa were faced with certain crucial questions related to the path of the struggle. One was the question of language. There was an increasing tendency among the black playwrights to use African languages instead of English in their performances. Very often the plays would be multilingual. Two, was the question of audience – a question which was related to the first. Whom should the back theatre perform for? There was an opinion within the black groups that they should not perform before white audiences, for they feared that the presence of whites in the audience would imply that the groups would be conscious of the white tastes. This would dampen the work on the assertion and portrayal of black identity.113 They asserted, therefore, that the black artists should abjure English.

Latin America

I end this chapter with a note of regret. In the last few years the people of the Latin American countries have been in the fore front of the fight against neo-liberal globalisation. Other than the impressive fight against the privatisation of water resources in Cochabamba in Bolivia, the reinstatement of Hugo Chavez to the Presidency after a US backed military coup in Venezuela, the

111 Wakashe op cit. 44.
112 Cohen-Cruz (198). 282-87.
113 Vandenbroucke op cit. 50.
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capitulation of successive governments before protesting people in Argentina, countries across Latin America have seen political parties and leaders of the anti-globalization hue being voted into power. Each of these victories of the parties of the Left, social democrats and indigenous people, have been preceded by participative mass movements over the right of the people to natural resources and other matters of sustainable development. As we have witnessed in the various instances described in this chapter, mass movements across the globe have included open-space performances as a tool for mobilization as well as theorization of the struggle. So it is very much likely that there is a very vibrant street theatre movement in the various countries of Latin America. But unfortunately, the language barrier with these countries has made the task of gathering information on these countries extremely difficult. What also emerges is that Latin American theatre in general, and political open-space performances in particular, have not received the attention of the English-speaking western academia. So, even in accounts which record theatre in Latin American countries, they tell us very little of the open-space performances. But the little which is known to me of political open-space theatre in Latin America points to a vast scope for exploration.

The take over of state power by the communists, through guerilla war, in Cuba in 1969 was a preceded and succeeded by revolutionary tasks and propaganda among the largely agricultural population. Founded in February 1958, the Teatro Estudio participated in the fight against the Batista regime. The formation of the socialist government under the leadership of Fidel Castro led to the intervention of the government in the theatre. This intervention battled with the debates on form and content, and this led to a split within the progressive artists. The Teatro Estudio split into two groups. One group formed the Los Doce, which involved itself in experimentation with theatrical forms but performed mostly in Havana. The other group, Teatro Escambray, left Havana to perform among the people in the Escambray mountains. Teatro Escambray used its theatre to formulate theoretical understanding of the problems faced by the people and thus help them to fight counter-revolutionaries. Its theatre helped the people understand the drawbacks in their society, such as the unreliability of a single crop production, and helped overcome them.114

In Chile, before the termination of the socialist government of Salvador Allende, in a US backed military coup in 1973, theatre played a major role in consolidating the demands for a more equitable distribution of wealth, establishment of social justice, and enhancement of educational opportunities. The Chilean government under General Pinochet, therefore, targeted theatre activism and imposed strict curbs on theatre. Plays which criticised the dictatorial rule used innuendos and other

Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, which I have discussed in Chapter Three, also emerged within the context of peoples’ movements in South America. Boal’s techniques, however, stretched much beyond Latin America in its influence.

Radical Open-Space Performances: An Assessment

My account of radical open-space performances stretches across a century as well as across the globe. Each instance of such performances have responded faithfully to the needs of the democratic movement. It would be inappropriate to draw any conclusive definition of radical open-space performances.

Features of Radical Open-Space Performances

The purpose of this survey of radical open-space performances of the last century, as I stated at the beginning of the chapter, is to prepare a perspective on performances of resistance, on the basis of which to assess the work of the Jana Natya Manch. At the end of the survey, therefore, we need to identify certain broad features of the performances.

Radical open-space performances emerge out of the requirements of a political situation. Under conditions extreme repression the political forces which oppose the restriction face a difficulty in propagating the ideas of a rebellion. In such situation these groups seek every possible way to communicate to the people, especially ways which may allow them to escape prosecution. Theatre has been a universal favourite in such circumstances. For theatre is a collective activity which has woven in it a spirit of democracy and, therefore, an opposition to authoritarianism.

It learns from its practice. In most cases the activists who pioneer in radical open-space theatre in a particular country do not possess any prior training in the field. They learn the skills of taking theatre to the people, and performing in hostile conditions. It is only after a few years of performance, when a group has established itself, does it manage to develop connections with similar groups in other regions. Only in certain cases, as the Blue Blouse troupes of the Soviet Union or the PETA in the Philippines, have the radical theatre groups in a particular country been able to set up a collaborative network. These networks, once established, have helped sustain and consolidate the groups in the network. Groups in each country respond to the specific political system prevailing within that country, also to the local cultural traditions. It is, therefore, difficult to forge an international strategy for radical open-space theatre groups.

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The primary audience is the oppressed peoples. Since the principal objective of the radical theatre groups is to bring about a political change in the direction of a more democratic society, they choose to address the section of the population which would benefit the most from any such change — i.e. the oppressed. The oppressed seldom go to playhouses. The radical theatre groups, therefore, mostly perform before non-theatrical audiences. They either function as community theatre groups, that is, groups which are embedded in the community which they seek to mobilize for political change, or groups which tour extensively to reach out to larger sections of the people.

Links to the larger movement. The pursuit of social change is not one which can be achieved through a cultural movement alone. In fact, the theatrical or cultural movement often springs out from a socio-political movement. The theatrical groups, therefore, bear ideological linkages to political groups, parties, trade unions or other mass organisations. Many a times they exist in a symbiotic relationship with these political organisations. While the groups participate in campaigns for the organisations they in turn provide logistic support to the group. But in certain cases the collaboration may come into conflict when a group feels stifled by the control of the larger political formation. In such cases the group breaks free from the relationship.

Functioning under a scarcity of resources. The unfavourable conditions in which the performers of radical open-space theatre function include an extreme paucity of funds. Since, they perform among the oppressed they are unable to make profit from their theatre. These groups lack access to resources and are forced innovate to survive. So, they have to use properties and costumes which are self-made out of cheap material. Also, they cannot pay their actors. In most case these groups are made up of part-time actors. In certain cases the groups have chosen to tide over the difficulty of resources by accepting funds from the government or from funding agencies. But they have been caught in an ideological conflict of accepting funds from the same dispensation which they sought to oppose. Or they have felt stifled by the control exerted by the fund provider. In numerous cases funding has resulted in a deradicalisation of the groups. In other cases the ideological conflicts surrounding the issue of funding have split a group.

Low production costs. The consequence of operating under severe financial constraints require the groups to keep production costs low. For this, they use minimal costumes and properties. Costumes and properties are mostly hand made, out of cheap or recycled material, and are suggestive — they rely on the interpretative and imaginative powers of the spectators and are not totally realistic.

Strategies of escaping repression. Many of the groups which operate under conditions of severe repression devise strategies to overcome censorship or more brutal crackdown. They may take resort
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to parables or oblique references to real events or characters. Or in certain cases they may need the actors to be physically protected by political supporters of the group from attacks by opponents or the police. In extreme circumstances the actors of radical theatre groups may have to take up arms to protect themselves.

Collective functioning. A majority of the radical open-space theatre groups function collectively. Other than taking most decisions concerning the group, including artistic decisions, collectively, the actors of these groups try not to develop specialisations. Thus, various members of the group learn various tasks of the theatre and take on responsibilities on rotation. The groups also try to minimise the cultivation of stardom.

Plays are revisable. The radical popular theatre does not operate under the concept of a fixed script. Since their plays are responses to political situations, they have to be adapted to changing political conditions. The plays have to be regularly revised or updated according to recent events. Suitable alterations also need to be brought into a play when it is performed before audiences in different locations. It is, therefore, difficult to trace any single authentic version of a play in the tradition of radical theatre.

Use traditional and folk forms. Since radical theatre groups work to resist dominant cultural forms, they seek to encourage the traditional and folk forms which are very often suppressed by the dominant. In doing so, they try to revive the spirit of opposition and cultural diversity which can be found in folk and traditional forms. This also helps them fight the attempt of the ruling classes to impose a hegemonic and monolithic cultural identity which makes the oppressed detest their own identity and culture. But the radical groups’ adoption of tradition is not uncritical. In fact, by using traditional and folk forms to further a democratic politics these groups and artists modernise these forms.

Use of satire. Radical open-space performances are noted for their use of satire. Satire is a political tool. It is meant to ridicule the enemy—in most cases the ruling classes. Satire teaches the spectators to recognize that their oppressors dehumanize themselves. Satire prepares the oppressed for the act of rebellion.

Use of the language of the people. The language used by the radical theatre is the language of its spectators. Since most radical theatre groups are embedded in a community, the language used by them is the language of the community. The usage of local language also extends to in-depth references to local events, lifestyles and jokes. But this also limits the comprehension of the play if and when the group chooses to venture outside its community.