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Editorial

The diverse region of the Indian sub-continent is home to several performance forms that have evolved through history and have formulated critical responses to socio cultural realities of the region across time. Contemporary theatres of the Indian sub-continent, in terms of their design, scenography, handling of space and innovative themes and subjects have provided an important critical framework to an understanding of the varied political, economic and social issues concerning these spaces. In his influential book *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka* (2014) Ashis Sengupta notes that the performance forms of the region are “germane to a comprehensive, critical understanding of the sociohistorical and politicocultural narratives of contemporary/postcolonial South Asian nation-states” (2).

While there have been increasing scholarship that takes into account diverse critical dimensions on theatre and the relationship between theatre practice and sociocultural issues for specific theatres at the national level, notions about transnational theatre and performance forms have been shrouded by old stereotypes. In “Hybridity, Modernity and Theatre”, the Introduction to the book *Modern Asian Theatre and Performance (1900—2000)* Kevin J Wetmore, Siyuan Liu and Erin B Mee observe that “‘Asian theatre’ in Western theatre histories and scholarship often, if not always, refers to the traditional theatres of Asia... Yet for over a century, every nation in Asia has had a vibrant, modern, contemporary theatre developed and shaped by internal and external forces of modernity and culture” (Introduction).

In this critical backdrop, the present issue of the Thespian magazine seeks to address the theatrical region of the Indian sub-continent with articles from both India and Bangladesh. This has been a much awaited volume, with researchers from two countries contributing scholarly essays on the theatres of these countries and their multiplicity. This issue also provides a much needed critical impetus to theatre movements and specific play texts from a transnational perspective while it focuses on contemporary theatres. It took us



some time to gather up our resources, but with the relentless efforts of the managing editor and his team, the issue is finally online.

The articles of this issue tackle crucial questions about general theatre historiography and specific theatre genres and practice. The English translation of Selim Al Deen's Bengali essay "Jatrar Udbhab Bishoiye" is probably the most important contribution of this issue, making available, for the first time, Selim Al Deen's thoughts on *Jatra* to English readers. Translated as "About the Origin of Jatra" by Sukanta Roy, the brief yet powerful essay debates about the origins of *Jatra* in Bengal. A group of articles focus on the historiography of theatre from specific marginal positions. Ashok Bachhar's article "Empowering Voices: The Evolution and Empowerment of Women in Indian Theatre and Drama" focuses on women in Indian theatre indicating how women playwrights and theatre directors have gradually taken up an otherwise male dominated space and brought in narratives that highlight gender disparity and social injustice. These help us understand the multifaceted experience of women of the Indian sub-continent with reference to Indian theatre. On the other hand Hrituparna Saha's article "Contemporary Indian Theatre: A Journey of Resistance from Classical Roots and Colonial Influences to Dalit Empowerment" traces the evolution of Indian theatre while emphasizing the feature of experimentation and innovation through unconventional narratives. Beginning with the *Natyasashtra*, this article traverses a vast range in Indian theatre touching upon the themes of diversity and closing with a focus on the emergence of Dalit theatre in India. Yet another historiographical focus, this time from Bangladesh, is through the Bengali article "Swadhinatar 50 Bachhar: Bangladesher Theatre" by Fahim Maleque. This article provides an important critical perspective to the evolution of Bangladeshi theatre after the independence of Bangladesh. It traces the influences on the modern theatre of Bangladesh, identifies its differences with the pre-Independence era, and seeks to identify the key genres, movements and traditions of the post-independence Bangladeshi theatre.

Three articles take a close critical look at individual plays. Arpita Pal's article "Situating *Chhenra Tar* in the Theatre of the Bengal Famine: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Play" considers the crossovers of theatre and the Bengal Famine. It critically



analyses how Tulsi Lahiri's play *Chhenra Tar* traces the period of the arrival of the famine till its aftermath along with its structural elements that align the play with the literature and performance of the famine. Braja Sourav Chattopadhyay's article on "Ghora Ghora", a play by Milon Mukhopadhyay, analyses the crisis of middle class society and its efforts to survive in a hostile society. Sanghamitra Ghatak's article "From Dilemma to Insanity: Representation of Colonial Horror in Gurcharan Das' *Larins Sahib*" forays into Indian English Drama through a close reading of Gurcharan Das's *Larins Sahib*, showing how the colonial oppression had its own dualisms. From here we move further towards the folk elements in Indian theatre. Sandip Sarkar's article "Re-Reading the Folk Performance: Gambhira as Subaltern Narrative of Resistance" examines the traditional folk performance form of Gambhira of Malda district in West Bengal, discussing how the form of Gambhira can be read as a performance of resistance of the 'subaltern' people against sociocultural ills. Again, Subhangi's article "Migration, Marriage, and Motherhood - A Close Reading of Bhikhari Thakur's Selected Plays", takes us to the domain of the traditional folk performance form of Bidesiya through an analysis of plays of its most famous exponent, Bhikhari Thakur. The article interestingly shows how the impact of indentured labour on issues of gender forms the backdrop of Bidesiya.

Moving away from such specific plays and forms, Mrityunjay Kumar Prabhakar and Dr Swati Roy Chowdhury's articles provide crucial theoretical perspectives to contemporary Indian theatre. Drawing upon Richard Schechner and Judith Butler, Prabhakar's article "Gender and Performance: Indian Perspective" shows how performance roles have also been shaped by gender identity, and how gender bias and its questioning are both evident across Indian theatre. Dr Chowdhury's article "Virtual Theatre: Its Prospects in Post-Covid World" examines the emergence of Virtual theatre as an alternative to proscenium spaces in the post-Covid world.

The essays in this issue hence bring out the multiplicity and diversity of theatrical cultures of India and Bangladesh. They also challenge any assumptions of monolithic constructions regarding the theatres and performances of the Indian sub-continent. It has been a privilege for me to be able to guest edit this special issue of the Thespian magazine that,



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hopefully, would contribute to the rising scholarship on the diverse and dynamic contemporary theatres of the Indian sub-continent.



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