Evenings Out

Attending Political Theatre in West Bengal

Himani Bannerji

Nothing is irrelevant to society and its affairs. The elements that are clearly defined and can be mastered must be presented in relation to those that are unclear and cannot; these too have a place [in our theatre].

Bertolt Brecht: The Messingkauf Dialogues

The experience of theatre starts long before the curtain rises and the play begins. Our theatre exists in the world in which we live, and our theatre experience, shaped by that world, rises from it and returns to it. The world of theatre is not sufficient unto itself. Neither art nor its experience is a separate reality.

Towards the end of the 1930s, and especially since the foundation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (1943), there developed among the middle classes of Bengal a political theatre movement which was centred in Calcutta. This movement, which originated and continued to develop in the context of a growing Marxism and communalism in India, created a new tradition of explicitly political theatre which has become dominant in non-commercial theatre in West Bengal and thrown up figures who are considered the most important theatre producers of West Bengal in the post-independence (1947) era. These playwrights see their theatre work as a form of conscious intervention and a part of the overall revolutionary process, and as such they are entirely preoccupied with representations of class and class struggle. My attempt here has been to describe the audience of two actual performances of such plays. These two evenings out are meant to capture the cross-currents of social relations which structure the audience's experience of the mainstream political theatre in Calcutta, West Bengal.

The two descriptions are meant to reveal certain features which are crucial both to the construction and study of this theatre. If we look at them closely, it becomes apparent that they arise in relation to an ex-colonial capitalist economy and a bourgeois socio-cultural environment. They display certain dramatic forms and social-political relations which are peculiar to these realities. On the one hand, we have the direct political intentions of the playwrights-directors, on the other, equally political, through indirect and unsaid, the pressure of the existing social relations and dramatic conventions which shape the representational effects. These mediational aspects of theatre production shape indirectly the final politics of this theatre, as they also shape the way reality is represented.

An Evening in an Auditorium

It was 5.30 in the afternoon. I was sitting at a bus stop going to see a play that started at 7 p.m. The bus-stop, as usual, was very crowded, and each time a bus-crowd of people rushed to get in. I missed three buses, then spotted a taxi, hiked myself into it before it quite stopped, and arranged clothes, bag, hat, said, "Academy of Fine Arts please."

We sped through street filled with vehicles and people. The crowd of buses, cycles,rickshaws, cars, taxis and pedestrians parted and swerved and made room for each other. Through the taxi windows I looked at the houses that we passed by—two to four stories high, old, shoulder to shoulder, every balcony jammed with people, clothes hanging. They could all do with repairs and a coat of paint. And the ground floor of each had a small or a middle-sized shop. Shop keepers sat on chairs at the door of the shops. No electricity because of "load-shedding"—a term for eight to ten hours of power cut every day. Small kerosene lamps and big petrol lamps were being lit. Some better off shops had private electrical generators roaring away. Hot and humid weather. Clothes stuck to the body. Everywhere on the walls people had put their policies in bold letters, colours and images. Bright red hammer and sickle with "V.C.P.V. Party of India (Marxist) for a better life" confronted the cảnhed right hand of Congress (India) raised in benediction. The taxi sped through this towards the Academy of Fine Arts.

As we went toward the Academy the streets changed. Sidewalks had walking room and the stalls and vendors disappeared. The houses were
big, set back within a garden. They had high walls, topped with pieces of broken glass and often guards in Khaki uniforms sat outside the gate, brandishing tobacco in their palms. Paths were filled with flowers, not bowls and clothes drying on bushes. The poor fussed now in some service role and every house had electricity, meaning their private generators. The few shops there featured expensive goods. We passed by the Calcutta Club, with a Victorian fat-bottomed opulence, and the housing complex of the Americans, complete with 12 to 14-foot high walls topped with electrified wire. Now I had reached the edge of the huge "mudflats", an open stretch of parklands and trees, containing Fort William, the race course, and the golf course. Rising out to a sea of dark green foliage, against a shell-pink sky, was the capitol of the Victoria Memorial Museum. The angel on the dome, now a silhouette against the evening sky, raised her head to blow her trumpet.

There it was, the Academy of Fine Arts, across the tree-lined street, a place of new culture facing the old culture of colonial India. It stood among a cluster of what could be called "cultural buildings," such as the Nehru Memorial Museum, Calcutta Information Centre and Rabindra Sadan, a huge auditorium, complete with fountains, murals, mirrors, red carpets, chandeliers and plush seats, named after the nation's poet, Rabindranath Tagore. The grounds of this building are going to be shared by the West Bengal government's new cultural complex. To the left of the Academy there is the huge neo-gothic Anglican Cathedral of St. Paul's. The grounds are laid out sumptuously and spires of the church soar out of a huge clump of trees.

The Academy of Fine Arts is a two-story building but relatively tall, dove grey, with brick-red mosaics and terra-cotta friezes. It occupies a large campus filled with tall flowering bushes and flower beds, with a fountain at the entrance and old, massive trees beside the high wall that surrounds it. It has both an auditorium and an art gallery. In the left section of the grounds there is a small two-story bungalow, which belongs to Lady Renu Malherji, the owner, who has taken the private initiative to create a public space for art.

In front of this cultural edifice I got out in a hurry. I had neither booked nor bought my ticket, but my hope was that a few university teachers that I know, who are also theatre critics and writers, would have got here earlier and bought them. I rushed over to the box-office windows and found that indeed my friends had bought the tickets, and what is more, the director, who is a friend of some of us, was standing there. With my friends there were three men, whom I knew slightly, who are novelists and critics. I greeted these people. The director said that he had to go in, to put on his costume and make-up. He was both the lead actor and the writer of this play. As we walked towards the entrance of the auditorium, we ran into many people we knew. They were all somehow connected with writing, teaching and theatre. The editor of a well-known left theatre magazine, Group Theatre, was with us.
He stopped every few steps to chat with someone. At the three other box-office windows which sell tickets for shows on other days, people were buying advance tickets. I passed by the greatest of ladies strolling with sculptures that looked ancient and uncanny in the evening light. I overheard conversations about a film by a young left film-maker, about the new German cinema, about bits of politics. There were a few women walking past me, who looked as though the chauffeured cars waiting outside the gate belonged to their families. The theatre producers were not themselves rich.

As I stood there thinking, waiting for the first bell to go, someone tugged the end of my suit. I looked around and saw this young person, an archetypal, who could be called, a little vendor’s boy, who said earnestly, “Didi (older sister) do you want tea or coffee?” He was a great contrast to the well-clad people, who bustled around the place or stood in small groups, the men smoking. He was very thin, contrasting with the pudgy softness of many of the others, his skin lacked their smoothness. It was dry and when looking. He was very short, probably small for his age, and his clothes were evidently second-hand from a rich family. He had a sharp nose, small mouth, thin-lipped face, and small hands. His eyes were the same with the rest, a great intensity in them. He was eager, expectant and pleasing. He varied his address for me and said, “Buy some coffee, or fanta or thumbs-up, more Sabah.” “The word “more Sabah” was originally used as an appellation for white women, and by now applied to Westernized and upper class Indian women “You think I am a more Sabah?” I asked. “No, didi,” he said, “But I try everything. Do you or your friends want tea or coffee?” I asked him to bring four coffees and two teas. He ran up to the snack bar, filled with covered boxes of snacks and kettles of tea and coffee. A very thin man who sat as the boy, with light lips and killed hair, stood at the bar. He was better off than the boy, having a pair of intact trousers, and a graying and stained shirt. He and another similarly dressed man standing by him, undeniably the same race, were not “gentlemen,” bhadraloks. They were only “men.” When I went to pay he spoke to me in the homely “you” and I should have used the familiar form. His teeth were stained with pan (betel nuts and leaves). They surveyed this theatre scene and culture-seeking people calmly—entirely interested in their business.

“Have you seen this play?” I asked.

“No,” said the thin man, “we don’t go to shows here.”

“Well? I presented. Too expensive!”

“No,” he said rather curtly. But his companion was more loquacious, “These things are for you people, for the gentlfolk. Don’t understand what’s going on, what’s being said.”

“More fun,” said the boy.

“How do you know what it is like if you haven’t seen it?”

“Oh, we’ve been inside over twice, and he,” pointing to the boy, “goes in with messages all the time. But why do you want to know all this more Sabah?”

“Oh, just curious. Never mind. Here’s your money.”

His palm was broad and the line of his thumb had been rubbed out by callouses, his nails were dirty and broken. I could hear the first bell, I walked toward the entrance, past the mural and the statues. The play, called Jajnamath, was about to begin. It is about a landless peasant who has become inadventently mixed up with nationalist politics. The point at the door showed a man in a torn undershirt, thin, with sharply pointing collarbones, not unlike the vendors themselves.

Unlike the outside, the air-conditioned auditorium was cool and dry. I sat in the second row of an auditorium which holds 850 people, including the seats in the balcony. And before the light went out I looked around at the audience. They were people like myself, gentrified and middle class—no fear, no flash. Educated men and women—office-workers, teachers, writers, critics—"cultured" people, who have been the backbone of Bengali culture since the last century. People of modest or even low income who attended political theatre—plays about the peasantry. The same people would also go to plays because it was "art" rather than "entertainment." It is their patronage that developed the non-commercial theatre of Calcutta from the early 1940s. They had some understanding of the non-commercial theatre’s project of connecting public education and art. Many of them seemed to be coming from work. They had briefcases with them. The women were no make-up. They wore nice cotton sari, not silk, nor many ornaments. They were “across” Bengali women. They were probably among those in the cities and the countryside of Bengal who had voted the communist-led left front state government into power, and helped to maintain it there. Plagued by inflation and unemployment, it made sense that they would be there, trying to understand the role of the peasantry in Indian politics. Like them, I was here as well, waiting for the curtain to rise.

And the curtain did not rise as the lights went out. We sat in a pitch darkness which only auditors can have, and people waited expectantly. Someone said, “Oh brother, its lead-shedding here too!” People coughed and fidgeted and a voice, after the amplifying system, very clearly enunciated the following lines—“Jagannath Das has been hung by the British government as a terrorist. We will now observe a minute’s silence to show our respect for him.” The voice had a magical effect, the audience stopped fidgeting and whispering. Without expectation, everyone who had not realized that this was the beginning of the play, fell into a deep silence. A minute fell endlessly, and having produced the necessary attention, the lights in the screen slowly went into action and the curtain began to rise. At this point we noticed a man standing on the outer edge of the apron of the stage. In a prisoner’s striped clothes he stood, framed by a circle of light, isolated by that light as though in his prison cell.

The play had minimum properties. A raised
platform at the back with a sacrificial block that is used in temples, a barred door on the right hand corner, and a door frame on the left side, that was all. A little group had formed in the corner of the stage, of three or four men. They discussed the British government’s curious choice of victims in its attempts to repress the freedom struggle in India. Why hung Jagannath as a freedom fighter, they asked? Born in the lowest caste and the lowest class, a cowardly, landless peasant, something of a slave and a bullfighter, an opportunist that knocked on any door, including that of an informed. Why was he hung in an exemplary punishment by the British state as a political activist? This great unknown, the poorest of the rural poor, how had he become mixed up with our nationalist politics? Who was he really, this Jagannath Das?, asked the most millions of the freedom fighters, upon which one of the other men stepped out of the group and came to the very edge of the stage.

Facing the audience, talking to them directly, he said, “I have known Jagannath since his childhood. He is from my village...” The rest of the play was an attempt to answer the question of the freedom fighter—not however as an individual’s biography, but rather as a display of a set of social relations specific to the lives of such people as Jagannath. It was interesting that it was the middle-class ex-freedom fighter who had initiated this long-awaited question about the peasantry. The play was more an exploration of a problem rather than a story. The story, if one can call it that, through extremely fragmented narrative techniques, was inspired by the True Story of Ah-Go by the Chinese novelist Lu Xun.

The people sat, as though mesmerized, throughout the play. Combining different acting styles, using a great deal of the lead actor’s body, using Grotowski-style physical acting—the play came to a conclusion when Jagannath slowly climbed up to the steps of the galleries, smiled at the audience, took up the noose and put it around his neck. The audience broke into a thunderous applause. All through the play they had been very quiet, and the auditorium had no children, nor frequent getting up and coming back.

During the break I sat out and smoked with my friends. They felt that it was a very well-done play, very well acted, with evenly paced movement from scene to scene, but that the episodes with women characters smacked of sentimentality and the acting style of Bengali commercial cinema. There were also questions to be asked about the representation of the nationalist movement. People sat and chatted in small groups or stood around smoking. When the bell rang they trooped back in and some people, returning to their seats just as the curtain rose, lowered themselves so as not to obscure the view of the stage. Altogether it was a theater-trained, or rather an auditorium-trained audience.

What, I asked myself in my journal, happened that evening between me/us, the audience and the stage? The play, having begun in this abrupt way, drew us right in, but again pushed us away by using the stage in a stylized, non-naturalistic way. The groupings/blockings on the stage, the mime-sketches in the main/formative episodes of Jagannath’s life, the expansion of each of them into a scene, all made it appear to us that this was theatre, not life—that this was a problem, not a biography. And yet, and for that reason perhaps, the play carried us relentlessly to the end. The director was playing with both what is probable and what is possible. The multiplicity of enacted possibilities, and not only the excellent acting (particularly that of the director/lead actor Arun Mukherji), outlined some of the roles for peasants in politics and the relationship between them and the middle class. Class became palatable as a social relation in each episode between this cowardly, abject, yet imaginative and angry peasant and his superiors and equals. I, and all the other members of the audience, sat at the edge of our seats and saw ourselves and our ancestors, members of the middle class and landed gentry, and we saw in Jagannath a man with whom our contact through centuries has been only through exploitation and service.

We saw him as our silent servants, the squalid, obedient voter or the bussed-in rally-attender, the railroad platform who won’t touch your eyes, the street vendor who sells musty must, the coalite at the railway station whose back is permanently bowed from carrying massive weight. Many hows, many functions—all of servitude. His body itself is humble, thin, starving at each muscle, like a weak buffalo bedazzled to a heavy cart. And we also saw his anger—which we glimpse in the ferocious struggle with the coalites at the railway station, the cold ruthlessness with which they will cheat you, the angry eyes of the railroad platform when you buy a ticket. We don’t give him the union rate, their servant as he stands at bay in front of the master unable to balance his account because he can’t count, with his eyes smoldering.

Jagannath’s ineffectual fantasies of power, his cheerful fantasies of massacre of the landlords, showed the sleeping, smoking volcano in the peasant’s mind. What are we, the middle class, supposed to do? After all we do want to engage in a revolutionary movement a serious movement, and what do we like about it, upon whom our knowledge is at best incomplete, mostly inaccurate. It became clear that this man’s survival will not make him a valid political agent, but his anger will. But that anger is directed towards our class, us as employers or servants, users of the familiar pronoun towards all lower classes, as the urban, educated middle class—rational and civilized. If we want to be part of this politics, or more accurately want him to be a part of ours, then we must learn to deal with his anger and our fear. And here we were—acres, director, playwright, audience—all middle class, asking and trying to answer, without a peasant audience or peasant actors or any form of input from the peasantry—what is a peasant’s state of political consciousness? What can be the contribution to a revolutionary movement and how must the middle class leader of a movement conceptualize the peasant? We have the right and the necessity to ask the question, but do we have the ability to answer it? Throughout the evening my head buzzed with questions. The play had a Brechtian quality to it, and had made us think. It is...
Before the lights went out I looked around at the audience. They were people like myself, genteel and middle class—educated men and women. "Cultured" people, who have been the backbone of Bengali culture since the last century.

A Calcutta street. Photograph by Michael Kutner.
The women look thin, angular, awkward by the plump standards of the middle class. Their hair was well oiled, slicked back, the vermilion put on thick and bright on the part at the middle, big red spot in the centre of the forehead, with lots of plastic and imitation gold jewelry. They had put on their best clothes, and dressed their children too in bright clothes with hair tightly braided. The men sat or stood about dressed in the usual pants—frayed at the edges, cheap—also with hair oiled and slicked back, seemed lower middle class, and working class. Some men were in baju (like a saron) which no gentleman would wear out for the evening. There seemed to be a student youth population floating about—of threadbare gentry, most likely unemployed. They came from the local "refugee" families. CPIM has a very strong base among this part of the population. But the majority of the people, while generally positive to CPIM, certainly not afraid of communism, seem there because it was in their neighbourhood. And every evening there were songs, movies, plays and speeches from the different departments of government and the Party.

The director of the play asked me to keep an ear open to audience reaction. They had distributed a questionnaire as some previous shows at the Academy of Fine Arts, but since the method of a questionnaire-based opinion survey seemed to make no sense here, and since he had no part in the play, the director Amin Mukherji decided to plant himself and some of us in strategic places to talk with people during the break and after the play. So about six of us—members and friends of the group—spread themselves in the audience.

I found myself sitting in a group of women—two or three old ones and a few young ones—as well as in a child who was forgetting all the time. The women seemed to be of the social status of maidens—actual potential—and called me di di (older sister—an address of respect) and used the homeric "yes." But on the other hand, when I used the same homronic "yes" to them, they were uncomfortable. One woman—an old one—said, "Why do you ask? (voiced?)?" Call us Tami (you)." We started talking. Initially they were uncomfortable, not used to nor trusting of social exchange with superiors. My clothes, accent, way of holding myself, my vocabulary all show my class as well, as an employer of women like themselves. A kid who was driving her mother and us insane provided something to talk about, but at the same time parts of the conversation were somewhat disturbing for me. "See this diabólo," they said to her, "keep quiet or she'll get really mad at you." This of course had an effect on the kid because she had accompanied her mother to the employer's house—where the ladies of the house—the powers that be, had told her to keep quiet, to sit still, or had probably even given her a candy or are here at this time? the evening?" Auntie, noone, while we were younger women. "No way. They can't be sisters?" I ask. This with the kid laugh.---what were we? Mow fooli living together is of course! "So you like we saw more palak (lived in the villages, in the Paja season when of the young women, not much by the way) and see movies in the cinema during Sarawari, see Are movies in Ait "and movies?" I ask

"Do you understand there are songs, dance. look at what they do you like best?" women. Of the old far—once said, "I saw it. It was a holy pti distant shrines in the her folded palms to the net like songs and not.

"But you are?" Well films—more feeling other day and said it at a moment they answer "Please quieten down mind your kids. Don't scream." at the Democratic Women, dragging two.

The play was about the development of love for her son's slow standing of the established within the Brecht traces a move and the local into the protagonists of the play as a main protagonist is a few women in the.in the evening, as the everyday work strikes, lay-offs, etc. Concerns, there was an identity with, incame the transition, in which with politics—singing as an act to protect the chance of being god-fearing, uphold man. Many of the concerned with this woman, at the play seemed to them that—a we are more abundant. It see and yet sentimental, blindness to everyday emphasized by the jee on placards or cloth
given her a candy sometimes. "How come you are here at this time?" I asked. "No cooking for the evening?" "Auntie here cooked in the after-
noon, while we were at work," said one of the younger women. "Nothing much to do any-
way. They can heat that up and eat later." "You are sisterly," I ask. The two young women sitting with the kid-laugh—how could we be together if we were? "How foolish of me—married women living to-gether in a family are sister-in-law of course!—So you like plays," I continue. "Well, we
saw more pala (indigenous plays) when we lived in the village, I still see quite a few during the Pujah season when I visit my father," said one of the young women, "but here in the city there is not much by the way of pala. Kids from the neighborhood put on one in the field of the library during Saraswati Puja—but now what we see are movies in Aleya (nearby movie theatre)." "Indian movies?" I ask. "Hindi and Bengali both." "Do you understand Hindi?" "Very little." "And do you have any songs and dances—if you look at what you do you git it sort of?" "Which do you like best?" "Hit," said a couple of women. Of the old women who were silent so far—one said, "I saw a Bengali movie some years ago. It was a holy picture—about visiting some distant shrines in the Himalayas." She touched her folded palms to her forehead. "Guido's does not like songs and dances," explained someone. "But you do?" "Well I do—they announced the play was beginning. "Please quiet down now," said the voice, "and mind your kids. Don't let them run around wildly or scream." At a distance I saw a friend, she broke the Democratic Women's Federation for this area, drugging up a chair by the arm. "The play was about different stages of revolu-
tionary development," said a story of a mother's love for her son slowly changing into an under-
standing of the revolutionary process. Finally estab-
lished itself within the context of class struggle. Brecht traces a movement from the immediate and the local into that of class consciousness. The protagonists of the play are working class. The
main protagonist is a woman, and there are quite a few women in the play. The world portrayed is that of the poor and the problems dealt with were the everyday worries of the working class—strikers, lay-offs, etc. In terms of content and
concerns, there was quite a lot for the audience to identify with, including the beginning point of the transition, in which a mother gets involved with politics—not to be politically engaged but as an act to protect her son—and agrees to take the chance of being caught. She is an illiterate, god-fearing, apolitical working-class wo-
man. Many of the women there could identify with this woman, at least more than I could. And yet the play seemed to happen even further away than that—at a level which was not higher, but more abstract. It seemed distant, artificial; stiff, and yet sentimental. It had a kind of ideological blindness to everyday life that was all the more emphasized by the posters of Lenin, the slogan on placards or cloth banners, the red flag of the
strike-takers, and the heroic stance of the striking
worker. The play seemed like a garish, over-
coloured political poster. The performance was
both right and wrong, as though the director did
not know the terms of the play or the politics, but had copied the stencils, sequences and groupings from a Soviet poster book. The image of the working class came from book to life, not the other way.

And of course this problem was heightened because not only was there an established con-
vention of acting, but also the names of the characters, their clothes (not so important for men, but for women) and their food were alien. But the most important distancing device was that of language. The workers, in the play as a whole, spoke in the language of 'political liter-
ture,' in the language of pamphlets and posters. And finally there was the stage—the raised pro-
scenium stage—which in this field, where the audience was on the ground, the action seemed to happen at a literally "elevated" level and marked it off from "life." This was didactic theatre to educate the masses, to immerse them to class consciousness to expose them to the dif-
ferent elements of revolutionary struggle, and to hold before them a typical example. It was a
highly normative theatre.

What did it really tell the audience about class
relations and organization? How did it organize the relations during this performance, in this getting itself? (How did it depict class and gender relations, for instance?)

During the break and even during the per-
formance I spoke to people. The director had
great expectations of this production. The Party had approved of it—that is why they were invited here—and later in the year he was taking it to the
industrial workers. So whether or not the "masses" actually related to this play was an important thing to find out.

My impression was that people were watch-
ing the play literally. This audience of three to
four thousand people was very quiet. The women I sat with never talked, except to ask me at times what was being said (the microphone was not always working so well) and also to question the kids. During the break I asked the young woman next to me how she liked it. She pondered a bit
and then said, "I like it—I don't know—it's dif-
ferent from the movies we see at home. It's got less
story—no kings or queens—it's not about the
gods. In fact it's hardly got a story at all except
that he [Pavel, the son] dies and she is sick and
then she gets up to go out and gets into a fight with people—they hit her. I can't get what's all
about, the copper [Russia and World War I]. To
be honest I can't get this story, but I like some of
it. I think they are kind of communist. "Why?" I
ask. "What makes you say that?" "The flags," she
said, "they have flags like that in front of the

During this conversation others were listen-
ing with keen interest. Now I got offered a pan
dulche leaf) from a little box by the seat at the back end of
one of the elderly women. The other woman
who was in a green sari and liked Hindi movies now spoke up. She said, "I know they were communists from the very beginning—way before they brought the red flag. Remember they were speaking about strikes. I have seen a lot of strikes. When they closed the Usha Company and laid off workers, I worked at a house near there. Every morning I saw people at the gates—they spoke—god, so luckily—like everyone around
them was dead! They kept on saying, "You have
accepted our demands." So did you like the play?" I asked. "The piece I understood, but they
were not speaking like we do. When people speak
like that I don't understand. I get something of
what is going on—the old woman has got into the strike remnants—and then some fights, but I
don't get what happens, they want a biplab (revo-
lution)—but there are all these words. For
instance, what does 'biplobi' mean?" I said.

"Well, the rich—the mahal (the owner)—rich
businessmen." "Well why don't they just say that?" Another woman said, "They were saying
it's aplay about Mofu—but where's the mother
in this?" There is a mother—you know that
woman in the blue dress?" replies another.

"That's a mother! She's dressed in a frock, like a
little girl." "Grandmother," said one of the girls,
"that mother is not like you and me. It's a white
people's mother."