

Global Performances in Jaipur

Report >
South Asia

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The International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) held its annual conference in Jaipur under the joint sponsorship of the Jawahar Kala Kendra and the University of Rajasthan, with the theme 'Ethnicity and identity: global performance'. This was the first time that the IFTR (founded in 1955) has held its annual conference in an Asian nation, signalling a new recognition for the importance of Asian theatre scholarship and practice in the field of world theatre.

Hobby-horse dancing in the inner courtyard of the Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur.



All photos: Matthew Cohen

By Matthew Isaac Cohen

Theatre studies is, in many European and non-European countries, a subsidiary field of literature and, consequently, is oriented toward the study of dramatic texts. Theatre studies in Britain, for example, emerged in the 1950s from the field of English literature, and the concerns of scholars were largely historical and textual well into the 1980s. Theatrical practitioners in European nations have in contrast been fascinated with the traditional theatres of Japan, China, India, and Indonesia since the eighteenth century. The influence of Asian theatres on playwrights as diverse as Goethe, Brecht, and Yeats, and most of the major directors of the past century, is undeniable. The aca-

ademic Ravi Chaturvedi managed to attract the IFTR's annual conference to the pink city of Jaipur.

Asian theatre and the IFTR

The IFTR, despite its 'international' nomenclature, has been in historical practice centred on Europe. African conference delegates are predominantly white South Africans, Latin Americans are few and far between, and North Americans participate preferentially at the annual Association for Theatre in Higher Education conferences. The organization has recognized Asia, and has had Asian members since its inception, but it was only in the last years that a significant concentration of delegates coalesced to rally for an Asian conference.

duction of Jean Genet's *The Maids* in Manila that he rehearsed in September 2001. Christina Nygren sited itinerant commercial theatres in Japan, China, India, and Bangladesh, sketching portraits of numerous popular theatres and their audiences. Tim Prentki related his version of *Theatre for Development*, arguing for the necessity of community-oriented art as an antidote to the monoculture of McDonald's and Microsoft. Jung Soon Shim discussed the purging of Han historical trauma in Park Jo-yol's *The Toenails of General Oh*, while Ranbir Singh related the significance of Parsi theatre in India's nationalist movement.

A definite highpoint of the conference was a plenary panel of three British scholars discussing the current West End musical hit, *Bombay Dreams*. This rags-to-riches tale of a child of the Mumbai slums who makes good in the Bombay film world is essentially a stage version of a Bollywood movie. This panel discussion of a recycled version of an Asian cinematic form tailored for a South Asian diasporic audience and the globalized cultural market garnered considerable attention from the local media. The musical's commercial trajectory was described as disrupting national dichotomies, offering multiculturalism as consumer brand.

Most of the panels featured Indian scholars of theatre, history, political science, literature, and folklore speaking about a large range of Indian and non-Indian theatres. Such was the degree that Asian performance was embraced in the conference that a newly established working group in Asian and Pacific Theatre that was scheduled to meet parallel to the papers failed to garner sufficient interest as the papers in the general conference were of so much relevance to Asian theatre scholars.

Evening performances also gave insights into Indian theatre forms and processes. The conference organizers had programmed a series of art theatre, including adaptations of *Medea* and Goethe's *Iphigenie in Tauris*. These productions, though well-intended, were of uneven quality, and did not by-and-large excite the imagination of interna-

tional delegates. The same could not have been said of two impromptu performances, organized at the last minute at the craft village adjoining the Jawahar Kala Kendra. Rajasthan folk performance is renowned for its variety and vitality and it was a great treat to see these performances enacted in a more-or-less appropriate context, with the conference's student volunteers response-singing. A Shekhawati Khayal group performed a folk version of *The Killing of Kichaka*, in a style clearly influenced by Parsi theatre, and a Kathputli group presented a new play with string puppets and music entitled *Bhutraj*, which I devised together with the Jaipur-based puppeteer-musician Gajadhar Bharat. At the same time that the conference was taking place in the Jawahar Kala Kendra, this same arts centre was being used to audition and rehearse a troupe of Rajasthani folk performers for a tour of the Middle East. Partially as a result of this, other performances and workshops (including hobby-horse dancing and social dancing) blended into the conference in less formal modalities and spaces.

Many scholars attending the IFTR had never previously been to India and gained for the first time an in-depth exposure and appreciation of Asia's rich theatrical past and present. Robyn Marie Campbell, a young dance scholar, came to the IFTR to speak of her research on Ballet Frankfurt at the New Researcher's Forum, but left with a fascination for Korean dance. Numerous contacts were established between scholars based in Europe, the United States, Israel, and Australia with academics from India and elsewhere in Asia. This fruitful interchange allowed many of us to recognize the existence

of historical links and contemporary commonalities across Asian theatre and shared methodological issues that engage scholars of all 'ethnic' and non-Western performance. Many questions emerge in such encounters. How does one introduce a complex theatre of an ethnic other to a 'lay audience' while attending to both artistic richness and socio-cultural location? What is the responsibility of the scholar to explicate non-local influences and origins, and if one does study such matters does this then deprive a theatre of its appearance of originality? Does any academic study of an unfamiliar theatre run the risk of being appropriated by agents of a state or cultural actors as a validation or celebration of their activities, even if not intended by the author? Does a scholar have the moral ground to stand on to be critical of a non-Western theatre in the same sense that one can be critical of one's own theatre? All of these questions (and more) could be engaged among the very special confluence of scholars gathered in Jaipur.

At the conference's closing session, a number of possibilities were discussed for channelling the energy and inertia generated in this Asian theatre focussed conference. The IFTR conference, as well as the international conference on 'Audiences, patrons and performers in the performing arts of Asia' held in Leiden in 2000, demonstrated that scholars of Asian theatre and performance have special concerns and interests that are not addressed in existing organizations. Asian theatre has its own internal dynamics that do not have precise equivalents in the theatres of Europe or other continents. In Europe and North America, Asian performance is too often relegated to a cabinet of curiosities. Rather than taking Asian performance on its own terms, Asian scholarship is judged in terms of what it can contribute to understanding the West's own history of interculturalism. This in effect condemns scholars of Asian performance to the status of clerks and documentalists in the service of imperialism. It is to be hoped that there will be more opportunities where scholars of Asian and non-Western performance can meet for discussion and investigation of our mutual interests. <

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'Backstage' at a Shekhawati Khayal folk drama performance at the craft village adjoining the Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur. The play performed was an episode from the Mahabharata, 'The Killing of Kichaka'.

democratic discipline of theatre studies has been slower than practitioners to recognize the significance of the theatrical practices of Asia, and other parts of the world, in its disciplinary organization. Few European-language academic programmes or research clusters currently address non-European theatrical practise as a central focus. (The University of Hawaii's Asian performance master's programme is a rare exception.) The *Asian Theatre Journal*, published by the University of Hawaii Press, remains the sole English-language journal devoted exclusively to Asian theatre. Academic positions in non-Western theatre in the United States, Australia, Europe, and New Zealand have increased over the last decade, but there is also a tendency for these same positions to be defined in terms of minority and immigrant groups. A faculty member appointment in Asian theatre in the United States, for example, will typically be expected to teach Asian-American theatre, and reverse discrimination policy often pressures universities to appoint ethnic minority representatives to fill such slots over non-minority candidates more qualified to teach about theatres outside the West. The IFTR has reflected these general tendencies in the field: despite its 'international' designation, it has been slow to recognize the importance of Asian theatre scholarship. Until this year, when the endlessly ener-

Concerns about health and safety in India were manifest at the 2003 IFTR meeting in Jaipur. Numerous delegates (including many American scholars) elected not to attend in response to the threatening war between India and Pakistan. Yet this did not prevent this conference from being a highly memorable event, and a watershed in the academic study of theatre.

IFTR conferences are organized to accommodate a combination of panels for the presentation of academic papers, working groups and plenary addresses. Working groups at this year's conference remained European-focused, but the predominance of papers presented elsewhere focussed on types of theatre rarely mentioned in mainstream academia. The daily plenary addresses are a good index of the catholic and eclectic approach to world theatre that the conference as a whole embraced. Mrinalini Sarabhai presented a personal account of her post-Partition innovations in the classical Indian dance field, dwelling fondly on her bharatanatyam-based social dance-dramas and her studies with Yogyakarta dance-master Teja Kusuma. David Roman analysed a one-man Broadway show written and performed by the comedian John Leguizamo as a celebration of Latino identity. Rustam Bharucha described his intracultural interventions in Indian theatre, and reflected on terrorism through a pro-



Musical prelude to a kathputli (string puppet) performance by Gajadhar Bharat and company at the craft village adjoining the Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur.