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Transformative Performance: Transnational Engagement with Indian Theater

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Transformative Performance

TRANSNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIAN THEATER



OF THE MANY PERFORMANCES, talks, and roundtables at *Global Flashpoints*, *The Wife's Letter* and a seminar led by Bishnupriya Dutt specifically addressed questions of race, gender, power, patriarchy, nationalism, and colonialism, and how these issues and others can and should be explored within a transnational context. The first event of the series was a performance of *The Wife's Letter*, followed by a discussion with the director and actors moderated by Anurima Banerji, Assistant Professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. On October 11, Bishnupriya Dutt, Professor of Theatre History in the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru Uni-

versity and coauthor of *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*, held a seminar on dance and acting in Indian theater. Both events addressed issues of gender and performance, the colonial and nationalist history of India as related to theater practices, barriers of language and culture, and, more broadly, the effects of holding events such as *Global Flashpoints*.

Based on a short story written by Rabindranath Tagore, *The Wife's Letter* was directed by Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry. In the program, Tagore is called "a Bengali mystic, poet, visual artist, playwright, novelist, and composer whose works reshaped Bengali literature and music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

In 1913, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature for *Gitanjali*, a collection of poetry. He traveled extensively in Europe and North America and had a substantial impact on the arts and politics during the period leading up to India's independence from Britain. In her notes in the program, Chowdhry explains Tagore's use of space as a commentary on the position of individuals in domestic roles in India. Tagore was very distrustful of the restricted, narrow, domestic interiors of the Indian bourgeois household, and he translated this distrust into a way of understanding or representing character. The precise contours of a character's inner life or aspirations may be viewed against their placement in a material space or

in the public. As a result, this has helped me to understand that even though the characters were subjected to a feudal and domestic order, they found their “imaginary” space where they could dream, weave games, and play.

The play focuses on the relationship between two young brides: Mrinal and Bindu. Mrinal is a slightly older protector of Bindu, a young, naïve girl who has been cast out by Mrinal’s in-laws. On the sparse, black stage, the actors perform domestic tasks, including dressing, washing, preparing meals, making offerings, gardening, and caring for livestock. The set is composed of a sleeping area, garden, pool for bathing and washing, and a stable for animals (represented onstage by a line drawing of a cow). Gick Grewal, a woman in her fifties, plays Bindu, and Vansh Bhardwaj, a young man, plays Mrinal. This unusual casting fascinated the audience and prompted the most discussion afterward. During the first few minutes of the performance, the age and gender of the actors highlight the central themes of patriarchy and male domination that the director chose to emphasize. According to Chowdhry, she chose to de-emphasize the nationalist, post-colonial themes in Tagore’s piece and instead to stress female bonding. This choice affirms the original short story’s attempts to represent breaks from patriarchal control. As Chowdhry put it in the post-performance roundtable discussion, “this female bonding was a survival technique, a space

of solution in a society eating itself from within through the patriarchal paradigm.”

Indeed, the bond between the characters creates the sisterly foundation from which the build-up to the tragic conclusion emerges. The title of the piece comes from monologues in which Mrinal addresses her husband in letter form, during which his physical absence in the performance places the audience in his role as the object of her address. Mrinal describes her budding relationship with Bindu, who affectionately calls her “Didi,” the Punjabi word for older sister. Mrinal reenacts moments from the death of her young daughter, embodied by an egg that Mrinal carefully cradles and then breaks. She then cleanses herself in the onstage pool. Indeed, Mrinal’s kindness toward and empathy for Bindu alienate the two from the rest of the family (who are also physically absent from the performance). This isolation eventually contributes to Bindu’s arranged marriage to a mentally unstable man and her subsequent suicide. Rather than succumbing to a similar fate, Mrinal informs her husband in a letter that she will instead embark on a pilgrimage.

The performance of the actors onstage was, for this viewer, a bit awkward at first, and their acting styles verged on hyperbolic imitation of young girls, particularly when the two feigned jump roping together while singing. For me, this seeming awkwardness was a result of the nontraditional casting. As I became immersed in the story, this

feeling soon dissipated. The necessity, however, of having to read the English subtitles projected on the black curtains upstage created a linguistic barrier that denied me complete immersion. The occasional typos and awkward phrasings created points of confusion and incompleteness that affected my experience of the performance. This barrier emphasized the difficulty in navigating works of art produced in a country with such a complex and volatile colonial history as India. How can an audience member engage with a play that involves such a complex interweaving of histories when one cannot even understand the spoken language? This also raises the question of how to navigate similar barriers in the context of an academic series of transnational events.

The Wife’s Letter is written in the first-person voice of a female character by a male author. It is not “My Letter” but “The Wife’s Letter,” and the title’s positioning of Mrinal as “the wife” reflects the primacy of that role in Indian society as well as Tagore’s simultaneous distance from and identification with his character. In the post-play discussion, Chowdhry discussed the potentially problematic aspects of such a narrative strategy. Is this text a man “speaking for a woman” or perhaps a kind of “imaginary ethnography”? The use of a male actor in the role of Mrinal was an exemplary method of making this contradictory narration and subjectivity manifest, and it also points to traditional Indian and British theater

traditions in which male actors played the parts of female characters on the stage.

In the post-performance discussion, the first audience question addressed the nontraditional casting. A member of the audience asked whether the all-male casts of Shakespearean theatre influenced the director's casting. Asking whether an Indian theatrical company's choice to cast a male actor in the role of a young bride was influenced by British stage history is a loaded endeavor. Chowdhry's response explored the influence of British colonial history in India as well as India's own theatrical traditions, and the interaction and blending of both over time. Referencing the historical role of female impersonation in Indian theater and performance, she said her intention was to avoid the stereotypes and external clichés, such as exaggerated gait and lipstick, often associated with those traditions. In the program's directorial notes Chowdhry explained, "the male actor who is playing Mrinal is not constructing the role as a female impersonator, nor is he playing androgynous. He is creating a de-gendering of his role, leading perhaps to a more egalitarian approach to performance."

It would, however, be disingenuous to ignore the fact that England also has a tradition of men portraying female characters and that this English tradition is well known in India. Making this complex interplay explicit, Chowdhry asked, "[If a male actor] can be Lear, why not Cordelia?" She

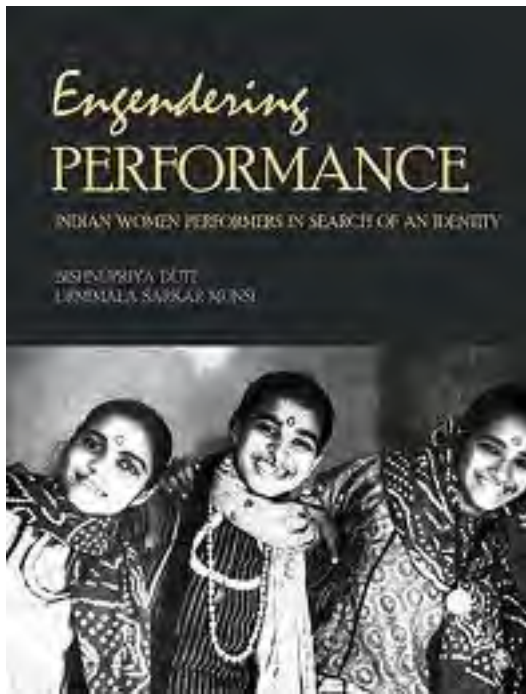
insisted that her casting choices were also simply practical: these actors worked well together and were able to express the bond between the two characters that forms the primary focus of the piece. Further, Chowdhry stated that she wanted the play to function as a commentary on a reprieve from social codes and from traditional concepts of gender. "What does gender and age mean on the stage?" she wanted to ask. "Is gender constructed performatively? Is [gender] biological?" She also intended to explore the ways in which everyone "dips into stereotypes of what it is to be your gender." The act of a female director casting a male actor in the role of a woman that was originally written by a male author speaking for her is simultaneously very unexpected and daring while also hearkening back to traditional practices.

In her seminar held on October 11, Bishnu-priya Dutt further elaborated on India's theatrical history in relation to colonialism and post-colonialism. The seminar focused on the history of dance and acting as separate and interrelated arts in India. Dutt began with an overview of some of what are generally acknowledged to be clear periods in India's colonial history as it relates to theater—though she emphasized the indistinct, muddled nature of time and history and the problematic practice of breaking up time into distinct sections. She discussed pre-colonial theater traditions dating back to the *Natya Shastra*, an ancient

treatise on the performing arts written between 200 BC and 200 AD; colonial theater between 1789 and 1930, in which certain types of dancers were banned; the ban of "nautch," a traditional northern Indian dance style performed by traveling group of girls who often wore very little clothing, between 1920 and 1934; post-Independent modernity between the 1950s and 1970s; and post-colonial reception from 1980 onward.

During the colonial period, Dutt explained, British forces shunned traditional Indian dances for other types of performances, directed to a specifically male audience, in which French dance and burlesque traditions were the norm. During the rise of Indian nationalism and subsequent post-Independence modernity, these types of theatrical performances were marginalized in favor of nationalistic, political narratives. Viewed as an exemplification of Indian culture, "classic" Indian dance reemerged. It was during this time that Tagore worked and wrote *The Wife's Letter*. The period from 1980 onward, which Dutt calls the post-colonial reception period, was typified by an embrace of capitalism and the death of alternate ideologies, where dancers (frequently middle- to upper-class urban women) performed "classical" dances that were reconstructed, cleansed, and removed from geographic and social contexts and others (often lower-caste women from villages) performed "folk" dances as showcases of "Indian-ness."

Dutt screened filmed performances of modern



***Engendering Performance:
Indian Women Performers in Search
of an Identity***

**Bishnupriya Dutt and
Urmimala Sarkar Munsri**

SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2010

plays in India to show different forms of contemporary theater performance. These pieces exemplified some of the problems and triumphs of international conferences and events, such as *Global Flashpoints*. One clip was from *Draupadi 1981*, a play in which a northeastern Indian woman living on the border of India and China is brutalized by men and eventually confronts them with her own naked body as a form of resistance. There are clear thematic connections of female oppression and resistance between this performance and *The Wife's Letter*. According to Dutt, *Draupadi 1981* was controversial and in 2004 led to demonstrations in northeastern India by women opposed to the state's military and political abuses. Apparently the actress from *Draupadi 1981* was invited to participate in *Global Flashpoints* but was, according to Dutt, wary of problems of language and misunderstanding, in part because she only speaks Manipuri, a language that none of the other visiting scholars and performers speak. This instance of language as a barrier mirrors the barrier created with the use of subtitles during *The Wife's Letter*, which brings up the larger question of trying to understand local issues internationally and across the boundaries of nation, language, politics, and personal knowledge and experience.

During Dutt's seminar, Professor Case noted that one of the greatest challenges to feminism remains the difficulty of "understanding issues of violence against women collectively." Addressing

these unavoidable and problematic issues of exoticism and the politics of "the subject" and "the other," Dutt responded that she sees potential in smaller strategies in which individuals attempt to make personal connections across differences in order to create positive expressions of resistance and cooperation. My experiences attending *The Wife's Letter* and Dutt's seminar were, I think, a version of this strategy. Acknowledging cultural difference and areas of similarity, exploring it among ourselves, and working through the varying gaps and wellsprings of knowledge of specific traditions created bands of understanding and confusion that I found simultaneously exciting and frustrating. Most of all, these bands make clear the necessity of organizing such events as *Global Flashpoints* in contemporary academia.

Linda Juhász-Wood is a first-year graduate student in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at UCLA. She received her BA from Mount Holyoke College in 2008, majoring in Film Studies with a minor in Art and Theatrical Design. She is particularly interested in feminist film theory, queer theory, and portrayals of girlhood in various forms of media.

Note: All photos courtesy of The Company.