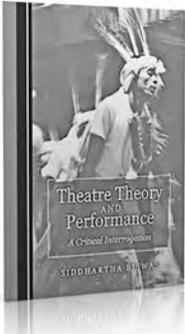


REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
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**Theatre Theory and
Performance:
A Critical Interrogation**
Siddhartha Biswas

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Lady Stephenson Library, Welbeck Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE6 2PA, UK. Website: <https://www.cambridgescholars.com>. 2017. 115 pp. £58.99. HB. ISBN 9781443895729.

The book under review offers an original analysis of theatre in Bengal and other hyper-local theatres throughout the world. Siddhartha Biswas, in this non-obscurantist book, explains the role of Utpal Dutt in contemporary Bengali theatre through a scrutiny of the Bengali middle-class. It is interesting to note that Biswas, in his chapter, 'Theatre and Politics' (25–42), does not once take to philosophical rants, which are the norm today in academia, but through close readings of literary archives offline and online, contributes meaningfully to the philosophy of performance.

'Theatre and Politics' is a tour de force in revisionary Marxist analysis of Utpal Dutt's theatre and ideology without giving away the fact that Biswas is refashioning the vast, extant scholarship in English and Bengali on Dutt. It is within this established canon of dramaturgy that Biswas enacts his cultural qua philosophical work:

Utpal Dutt's theatre was much more nation-centric than that of [Bertolt] Brecht's. The latter's plays focused on class and ideology while Dutt looked at class with a very specific geopolitical agenda. As his relationship with the Communist Party of India shows, he was more focused on the state of the masses than on any 'universal' (at least deemed so) ideology that was projected as the answer. He believed in [Konstantin] Stanislavsky and his theatre became this fusion of

the epic, the naturalistic and the mythical traditions. The other departure from Brecht was in the construction of the protagonist. While the Epic [theatre] did not believe in heroes, Dutt was looking for central figures that epitomize the idea and spearhead the action. ... The urban middle-class Bengali has very rarely been good in actual action. This is a major problem even on the stage itself. The actors and directors have imported characters and stories or such inspiration from all over the world, but whatever the costume might be, very rarely has the production been able to transcend the local cultural flavour. This has not been limited to the inadequate costumes or make-up, but to the entire factor of representation. In the case of adaptations, the values and ideations have been brought nearer to the regional, and much has been lost in the process (38).

Therefore, Biswas rightly concludes that Dutt started searching for newer forms of protest which would prod Dutt's audience to seek what the ancient Greeks termed Cosmopolitanism; which is now all the more needed in a world polarised by alt-right forces. Dutt himself wanted theatre to 'constitute a perpetual reminder ... for those whose growing absorption in the narrowing business of life tends to make them forget [the revolutionary role of theatre] ... and take [it] merely as a hypocritical satisfaction of their aesthetic conscience' (Utpal Dutt, 'Shakespeare and the Modern Stage', *Epic Theatre: Subarnajayanti Sankalan Vol. 1*, ed. Arup Mukhopadhyay (Kolkata: Deep, 1988), 283–90 quoted in Naina Dey, 'Utpal Dutt and *Macbeth* Translated', *Performing Shakespeare in India: Exploring Indianness, Literatures and Cultures*, eds Shormishtha Panja and Babli Moitra Saraf (New Delhi: Sage, 2016), 191–203).

The hyper-local nature of theatre production and performance, analysed by Biswas, is a rebuttal to the venture-capitalists', multinationals',

industrial demands of what Guy Standing terms rightly as demands of a 'precariat economy' (See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011)). It is within these discourses of inequitable distribution of power and capital-resources that Biswas's analysis of Indian theatre as 'activist theatre movements' (42) should be contextualised. The book under review is a supplement, as it were, to Arundhati Roy's non-fiction corpus, now collected and published together as *My Seditious Heart* (See Arundhati Roy, *My Seditious Heart* (New York: Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2019)).

It is not merely that Utpal Dutt or Safdar Hashmi are activists whom Biswas quotes at length in the chapter 'Theatre and Politics', but it is Biswas himself who comes out as a disrupting academic force in a very Antonio Gramsci-Walter Benjamin like manner. Biswas's stress on non-hegemonic open-ended qualia puts him squarely in the ideologic lineage of those whom he so passionately comments on in this chapter and throughout the book. The magic of Biswas's literary sleuthing is that without him spewing jargon, he becomes a philosopher of literature or theatre as much as Ania Loomba alone now, is a philosopher of literature.

Biswas's philosophical roots do not derive from Francophone philosophers but are to be found in the references in Loomba's recently published *Revolutionary Desires* (See Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism and Feminism in India* (London: Routledge, 2018)). Biswas's debt to the communist women and men referred to by Loomba is beyond the scope of this review but needs to be worked out in detail in the future. In a very Dutt- and Hashmi-like sense, this chapter is a protest against the status quo of our zeitgeist. When a literary critic takes the job of literary analyses seriously, then alone that critic becomes a philosopher and a political agent of positive systematic change. This is not to say that Biswas is a mere philosopher; his insights are always tempered by someone who knows the inner-workings of literature or theatre.

In the very next chapter, 'Performance and Performers' (43–50), Biswas writes of the actual problematics of acting. He begins with

the innocuous statement that in '*A Midsummer Night's Dream* Bottom lays out many rules of performance' (43) and then taking us through Greek (44) and Elizabethan issues of performativity (45), Biswas concludes that:

Technical issues can be replicated, but acting cannot be. The performative aspect of day to day living also problematizes the issue further. Everything we do can be categorized as performance. However, theatrical performance is bound by the norms of theatricality and artificiality. It takes place at a designated place and at a designated time. So, unless there is a conscious manipulation of the space—temporarily blurring the boundary between the audience and the performers—the theatrical space/time is understood to be separate from the real. The presence of the audience is a very significant part of the performance. ... In all these [live streaming shows] the performance is live and the audience actively engaged, and in most of these the performance is premeditated if not rehearsed. So, in a way, the boundary between a play being acted and such a programme being presented may not seem so different, even on an aesthetic scale. This, in fact, emphatically proves the artificiality and dishonesty our civilization is practicing more and more (48–9).

Biswas's insistence on not conflating simulations for the real gives a numinous quality to his exegetical sweep on contemporary theatre leading to the chapter on Indian poetics, 'The *Bhava-Rasa* Theory' (65–73).

This chapter is one of the most accessible chapters on Indian dramaturgy available to the Western world today. Unlike Sheldon Pollock, who robs the idea of the holy from his readings of *Rasa* in his *Rasa Reader* (See *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Sheldon Pollock (New York: Columbia University, 2016)); Biswas, who professes Marxism, sees the archaeology of Hindu *bhava-rasa* theory and theatre correctly; as being definitively transcendental. Biswas writes that both Western and Eastern theatres 'share the same design—preservation of social hierarchy and harmony. The Western theory [of dramaturgy] speaks of pity and fear, the Eastern [theory] overlooks the entire overt political construct

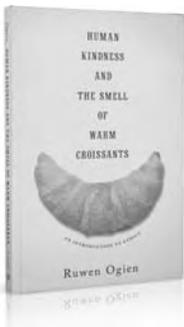
and focuses on a different human-divine association. The latter does not even allow the focus to fall on any discord or protest that might go against the structure and constructs a completely stylized theory of representation dealing more in terms of the “spiritual” (71). The difference between Pollock’s much-acclaimed learning and Biswas’s comparatively unknown book is that Biswas has the inner mettle to write: ‘Perhaps one may just respectfully comment that all early high-brow art forms were aimed at a limited audience’ (73).

First Biswas mentions, albeit sceptically, the ‘spiritual’, and then fairly assesses Western art as being as high brow as Eastern art. This assertion of Biswas’s can be contested, but unlike Pollock, he does not pose to be a lover of all things Eastern, while secretly degrading Indian theatre of its inherent spirituality. To illustrate through a Western lens; this reviewer may choose to see the *Book of Job* as a testament to Yahweh’s cruelty in toying in a Zeus-like fashion with Job, or, this reviewer might choose to read that ‘Wisdom’ book as high art, which shows the Majesty of Yahweh within Covenant Love. One may not agree in the reality of hesed, but accepting Biswas’s aforementioned respectful humility, one may sincerely try to enter the world of Biblical wisdom literature. Pollock shows no such humility anywhere.

Biswas’s book is a manifesto for protest and revolution in a world that is searching for reductionist neo-Kantian verities, being ruled by zealous of various colours.

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***Human Kindness and the
Smell of Warm Croissants:
An Introduction to Ethics***

Ruwen Ogien

Translated by Martin Thom

Columbia University Press, 61 West
62 Street, New York, NY 10023, USA.
Website: <https://www.cup.columbia.edu>. 2015. 256 pp. \$30. PB. ISBN
9780231169233.

Ruwen Ogien pleasantly reminds us the pleasures of doing philosophy through this extremely lucid and accessible primer on ethics. Presenting nineteen moral puzzles and seven chapters on moral intuitions, Ogien shows the readers that philosophy is not the distant and dry discipline far from life that it is made out to be. Philosophy has to do with the daily junctures of thinking and difficult decision-making. It is ingrained in every aspect of human endeavour and understanding.

There are different schools of philosophy and there is the general attitude of philosophy; Ogien concentrates on the latter and helps the reader to develop one’s own standpoint rather than quoting some thinker. He refers to psychology research to support his arguments apart from citing philosophers from Immanuel Kant to John Rawls. Ogien brings a fresh perspective to the problems of philosophy by including experiments on human behaviour with a critical angle. He emphasises the importance of thought experiments notwithstanding the objection that they are far removed from reality.

As in most textbooks of philosophy, Ogien does the classical error of focussing only on Eurocentric, Anglophile thought, not dwelling on parallels outside the Western academia. Indian philosophers have shown why ethics without foundations stands on a shaky ground. If ethics is dependent only on the principle that one should not do to others what one would not have others do to oneself, a life of selfish engrossment in pleasures will be quite ethical.

Thought experiments that Ogien acclaims and expounds were the common staple of Indian thinkers when they posited the *purva-paksha*, the opponent, in their arguments establishing their school of thought. Excluding such patterns only encourages polarising forces that are supremacist and racist, fundamentalism and the alt-right.

Ogien has created a delight for those interested in the intricacies of human thought, especially for those who want to get a hold on doing philosophy.

Swami Narasimhananda
Editor, *Prabuddha Bharata*