

Engaging with the Practices of Political Theatre in India

By Jerome Allen, BA, Drama, College of Performing Arts

“Against every injustice, the struggle is our slogan. Against all oppression, the struggle is our slogan. This is just a battle, the war comes ahead.” Taken from the play *Halla Bol* by Safdar Hashmi, this declaration was heard in the streets of Jhandapur, Uttar Pradesh for crowds swelling to the hundreds, including those most of the working class. Notably, this made it where anyone was able to view the production without cost prohibition, and thus, represented the spirit of political theatre and theatre for social change (“India”). It galvanized individuals to strive for unionized labor forces, but adversely, for the politically-motivated murder of Hashmi at the hands of people from the Indian National Congress, one of the major political parties of India (“India”). Hashmi and his work with *Jana Natya Manch* (People’s Front Theatre) lives on today through many current plays, techniques, theatre practitioners, such as myself. Motivated by Hashmi, his contemporary, Augusto Boal, and their mentor, Bertolt Brecht, I intended to enhance my experience with street theatre, political theatre, and theatre for social change through working with related groups in Bangalore, Karnataka, India in the summer of 2020. Due to the unforeseen circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not able to come to fruition. Both travel and live performances were halted and have not fully recovered as of December 2021. Vaccine distribution was slow in India and has recently gained strides (“COVID-19”). Given the COVID-19 disruption, I decided to retool my project to analyze the transition from in-person theatre to virtual theatre in both the United States and India.

Both countries mandated lockdowns: shuttering of in-person business activities, ban on large group gatherings, and required physical distancing between citizens. These rules, though safe and necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, rendered in-person theatre and other performances impossible. This revealed the fragility of the business. Financially, theatre practitioners were unable to support themselves, and due to this, many mutual aid funds were started and benefit-virtual theatre began. These performances were primarily held on Zoom or were recorded and/or streamed live without an audience. I attended many – some successful, some not, and this ultimately flattened the difference in theatre between the United States and India. Every theatre and artist was experiencing this virtual reality simultaneously and for the first time. Born from the isolation of the lockdowns, there was a new liminal theatrical space within the confines of Zoom boxes and homes/apartments (ultimately, sparking new creativity with camera work and individual-led content).

One of my community partners, Bangalore Little Theatre performed many plays through this medium, i.e. Sharon Puthur's Three Candles for the Dead as well as hosted events, i.e. Play Day Sunday where participants read plays for fun. Over time, the work began to turn inward. The globalized theatre community converged and assembled on online forums held through Zoom. For the first time, working internationally became accessible and generated many support groups, i.e. "Theatre Folx of Color" on Facebook. I was able to work on a scene with an Indian director and actress, based in Delhi, and attended some forums. I found this fruitful for the experience and cultural exchange. Another one of my community partners, the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change in Bangalore conducted forums for practitioners to reevaluate the field and their work – how can art and performance be used now? How can political theatre work without being able to talk to audience members one on one after the show? I attended a few of these sessions and found myself reevaluating my own love for the craft. Not exactly where I predicted I would be at the conception of this project, but I had learned that I needed to refine my mission and that it would come under these extreme circumstances.

The transition back to in-person theatre started in the United States with Broadway for the Fall 2021 season and has recently hit turbulence due to the Omicron COVID-19 variant surge. Over 10 Broadway productions have closed and the uncertainty of 2020 has resurfaced going into 2022 (News). I was able to experience some theatre in Manhattan before the surge started. India is seeing some of the same missteps. The path back to performances abundant will be long and hard, yet the community has been made stronger by it all.

Given this experience, my inability to travel and create theatre with my community partners was disappointing and stunted my project. I do maintain that I will be able to both travel to India after my graduation in May 2022 and work with Little Bangalore Theatre, the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change, and hopefully, Jana Natya, as well. I am grateful that the global theatre community was able to converge, even just for a little bit. I was able to find myself in rehearsal rooms with young Indian artists, soon to be in NYC, and to work with Indian actors in Delhi on new works. Though this was only a sliver of the work I hoped for, I gained a love for my craft that comes from struggle, for "the war comes ahead".

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