

INTRODUCTION

The graph of Shakespearean productions on Calcutta stages does not reveal any radical departure from the general progress of proscenium theatre in all former British colonies. It may have started earlier in North America and the West Indies (seventeenth century), later in Australia and New Zealand (nineteenth century), and even later in Africa, but the common phases of dramatic growth in imperial British territories consisted of 'garrison theatre' for the entertainment of the soldiers and traders, followed by 'gentlemen amateurs' practising more ambitious plays, then a transitional period in which Prospero's tongue became Calibanized and texts naturalized in local languages, and finally postcolonial independence, which led to either a denial of the colonizer's legacy or a total appropriation of it in native terms.

We can easily trace this development in Calcutta with reference to Shakespeare. The expatriate British community enjoyed their social evenings at the playhouses run by resident English companies between 1780 and 1850 (chapter I-A). Next, the perception of English as the master's language, hence worth learning, resulted in Bengali gentry spending premium time on it and showing off their efforts through Shakespearean recitations, short scenes and ultimately full-scale productions between 1820 and 1920 (chapter I-B). Both these phases died natural deaths. No local British troupes appear to have existed in Calcutta after the First War of Indian Independence (1857), leading us to wonder whether the strain of governing India and quelling rebellions all over left no leisure time for the rulers. The Bengali *bhadralok*, on the other hand, outgrew the English language as a medium for theatre. Although they continued to act Shakespeare in English right up to the 1920s, the focus of their original dramatic creativity shifted as early as the 1870s to their mother tongue. Their attempts in English remained amateurish and faded after 1920, while the Bengali theatre had turned professional with a sociopolitical vengeance. Yet the list of luminaries who acted Shakespearean roles in English reads like a veritable who's who: Henry Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghosh, Krishnamohan Banerjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, Michael Madhusudan

Dutt, Rajendralala Mitra, Keshub Chunder Sen, Rajendra Prasad, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, to name just a few.

Some of the travelling English companies (chapter I-C) had considerable impact on future theatre workers in Calcutta. For example, the renowned actor-manager-dramatist Matheson Lang, who toured the world after working under Granville Barker in London, performed in Calcutta as early as 1911-12, influencing many viewers, including the soon-to-be legendary Bengali director, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri. We may speculate about the nature of the debt, because both acted in a realistic style. From the Second World War onwards, Geoffrey Kendal's Shakespeareana barnstormed through India, winning innumerable admirers and awestruck hangers-on, like Utpal Dutt and Shashi Kapoor. After India gained independence in 1947, the local production of plays in English (chapter I-D) magically revived, as if to prove that the Bengali no longer bore any ill will toward that language. Nevertheless, these entries most frequently describe shows by college students, educational institutions teaching English or societies connected to British cultural centres—in other words, an activity marginal to the city's mainstream.

The heart of Calcutta theatre is the Bengali stage (chapter II)—mainly commercial between 1872 and 1947, mainly amateur since then. Before Independence, we find the transitional approach to British texts in evidence: very few translations or adaptations produced, not too successful at the box office, the companies feeling their way about uncertainly. But afterwards comes a greater willingness to experiment and interpret Shakespeare indigenously. The difference could also have been caused by professional theatre's cautiousness about taking risks, whereas the 'group theatre' movement since 1947 openly espoused progressive ideas. Either way, the number of productions in chapter II is fewer than in chapter I. Bengali theatre's relatively lukewarm attitude to Shakespeare could perhaps be explained as the consequence of too much respect for the venerable Bard, and a paucity of translations perceived as stageworthy by directors.

Still, notable Bengali thespians distinguished themselves with Shakespeare. The father-figure of Bengali professional theatre, Girish Chandra Ghosh, may have flopped with *Macbeth* (1893), but his aim to present it authentically was most honourable. It starred such legends as Tinkari Dasi (Lady Macbeth) and the comedian Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi quintupling as Witch, Porter, First Murderer, Old Man

and Doctor! The respected Amarendra Dutt learnt the lesson that straightforward translation would not work with Bengali middle-class audiences, and adapted *Hamlet* into *Hariraj* (1897) for the biggest Shakespearean hit on Calcutta's popular stage. Even if not as successfully, he went on to score a point with *Macbeth* (1899), *Comedy of Errors* (*Konta Ke*, 1905) and *Merchant of Venice* (*Saudagar*, 1915), directed by another eminent theatre personality, Amritlal Basu. Dutt's leading lady, Tara sundari, considered by some authorities as the finest professional Bengali actress, performed a variety of Shakespearean roles: Ophelia, Jahanara (in *Midsummer Night's Dream*), Cleopatra, Portia and Desdemona (in 1919, aged forty-plus). For *Othello*, she teamed with Aparesh chandra Mukhopadhyay (the famous manager of Star Theatre) acting the part of Iago. The last of the great commercial actors, Ahindra Choudhury, later played *Othello* and *Macbeth* for a couple of variety programmes.

After group theatre took over, Utpal Dutt monopolized the lion's share of Shakespeare. He apprenticed himself in English, performing Richard III, *Othello*, Bottom, Mercutio, Brutus and Malvolia (chapter I-D), then reprised them all in Bengali except Richard III and Brutus, and added to that repertoire Shylock, *Macbeth* and Julius Caesar. Dutt led the Little Theatre Group, which at one time or another featured such excellent actors as Sekhar Chatterjee, Sova Sen, Rabi Ghosh and Satya Bandyopadhyay, and the trail-blazing lighting designer Tapas Sen in these shows. No other group staged more than a couple of Shakespeare plays in Bengali, although the quantity of productions overall in the last fifty years outnumbers that in seventy years of the professional theatre. The histrionic approach to Shakespeare also changed, in consonance with worldwide trends, from the declamatory bombast of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to more restrained, psychological portraits in the latter twentieth—though Western viewers may still reasonably think that our Shakespearean acting remains somewhat overdramatic.

Chapter III contains productions in languages other than English and Bengali. Adaptations and transmogrifications of Shakespeare into Urdu and Hindustani formed a staple of the Parsi theatre across India. Calcutta was no exception. Apart from these, resident Hindi troupes have done Shakespeare (one directed by Fritz Bennewitz of the German Democratic Republic), a unique performance in Sanskrit has taken place, and touring groups from elsewhere have

staged Hindi and Marathi versions by such celebrated directors as Bennewitz, Ebrahim Alkazi, B. V. Karanth and Habib Tanvir. Foreign companies have also come to town with Shakespeare in Bengali (chapter II-B), Arabic (chapter III-B) and of course English (I-C). Since 1947, in fact, many internationally acclaimed repertories have performed Shakespeare in Calcutta, including the Oxford Playhouse having Richard Burton as patron (1960); the Bristol Old Vic, the oldest working theatre in England (1963); the Royal Shakespeare Company (1976 and 1997); and the newer Leicester Haymarket (1989). Calcuttans have seen the work of famed directors like the India-born Norman Marshall (1950), Stratford pioneers John Barton and Terry Hands (1976), John Dexter of the Royal Court and National Theatre (1989), and Michael Bogdanov (1991), known for his epic history cycle. Visiting stars include the Shakespearean specialist Marius Goring (1958) and solo performer-playwright Steven Berkoff (1999), the classical actress Barbara Jefford (1969) and a young Maria Aitken whose Viola and Hermione impressed the Far East (1970). The designer Jocelyn Herbert, esteemed for her austere sets and costumes, came in 1989.

If a complete index to productions in Calcutta ever appears, we will probably discover that Shakespeare supplied the maximum number of plays by a single dramatist. My personal databank in my capacity as theatre critic for a local daily contains about 1000 shows reviewed over the last fifteen years; in it, Shakespeare occupies top place statistically, outstripping Tagore and Brecht, next in order. Admittedly, if we count Tagore's dance-dramas, perennially popular with amateur Bengali clubs and societies, Tagore no doubt soars ahead. Nevertheless, Shakespeare has a special relationship with Calcutta, which itself justifies this checklist. After all, Tagore's dominance covers the present century, and Brecht's impact only the last half-century, whereas Shakespeare spans the full 200 years. From the curious 'gentleman of doubtful gender' who cross-dressed as Desdemona in 1780 (significantly, *Othello* opened Shakespeare's account in Calcutta) to the dubious crash course through Shakespeare's complete works titled *Take-off with Shakespeare* which closed 1999 (our cut-off date), Calcutta has seen many unusual Shakespearean interpretations.

Perhaps the most interesting article in this compilation is placed in Appendix C, not only because of its enormous length but also because it does not belong to Calcutta theatre proper. (Other such

insertions can be found in chapter IV, in which we have tried to be as comprehensive as possible regarding the Shakespeare quatercentenary celebrations.) The production took place somewhere in 'Up-country Bengal', but positively demanded notice with its tongue-in-cheek description by an Englishman of what seems to be a Parsi-theatre-inspired Indianization of *Hamlet*, patronized as a 'command performance' by a local Raja. Such richly intercultural accounts have made this history exciting to put together.

II

The documentation of theatre having begun only recently in India—owing to various social prejudices about the art form similar to those commonly encountered in communities across the world—we may claim in all humility that this checklist represents seminal research in its field. We intended merely to assemble an exhaustive chronological catalogue of Shakespearean productions in Calcutta. This may seem a rather simple task but, as theatre scholars can vouch, it proved quite arduous. As a performing art, theatre has always resisted preservation. Only its scripts and lifeless costumes or props last the test of time, everything else evaporating into the air from which they emerged, somewhat like the images of the goddess Durga consigned to the river waters that produce the mud used to mould the very same idols. Since manuscripts and books survive, it becomes relatively easy for us to prepare a list of plays (as in Appendix A, though many of these, too, have disappeared), and literary scholars mistakenly assume that the text is all-important. Let us also not forget that ours was traditionally an oral culture of performance where the printed word did not carry much weight until recently.

To begin with, therefore, we have very few primary records of the artwork, except for the rare photograph. We must fall back on secondary sources, chiefly recollections of the artists who participated, and accounts and reviews by audience members—necessarily subjective. Of these, newspaper critics may form not only the comparatively objective viewers, but also the writers of the largest body of material, since their occupation is to report on the productions to their readership. I mention these truisms only to emphasize how little of the performance we can actually recreate, and how even those snippets come from mortals like ourselves who could have had a bad

day at work which coloured their printed opinions about the play.

The difficulties do not end there. Productions have taken place about which nobody has written a word; some have occurred of which reviews had appeared but are now lost; for most major ones, several papers published reviews but many have perished. Other obstacles crop up too. Unlike in the West, where some library or the other houses a complete run (now usually on microfilm) of any periodical that one may ever want, in India we cannot assume that we will find such repositories. It has become well-nigh impossible to locate copies or microfilm of our own nineteenth-century newspapers here. Thus, even if a secondary source tells us of a particular review citing paper and date, chances are that we cannot unearth it today. So we must depend on that secondary source, if it quotes extracts from the original.

Quite a few of these sources are themselves suspect, relying on unconfirmed and unverifiable material; but, in the absence of any means of authentication, we cannot reject them either. Wherever possible, we have attempted to obtain the originals. I should also observe that a few other books have appeared on the subject of Shakespeare in Calcutta theatres, which we consulted. However, none of these covered all languages as we do, and most ignored the sizeable number of touring companies from outside. In many cases, their own methodology was flawed, for instance, misdating and misquoting the originals.

The embryonic state of theatre studies in India means that no ready reference works exist to which a student can turn, comparable to, say, F. W. Faxon's *Cumulated Dramatic Index*, James Salem's *A Guide to Critical Reviews*, J. P. Waring's *The London Stage: A Calendar of Plays and Players*, the *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* or even *The New York Times Theatre Reviews* in eight volumes. We have to create our own databases; our book is a small step in this direction. The process of excerpting reviews follows the time-honoured practice of quoting not everything, but the most significant portions. There are bound to be errors of omission; we request readers to supply us with details of any production we have overlooked. Our data is stored on a computer, so we can update and revise continuously. We hope that this resource helps the future theatre researcher.

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