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REVIEW ESSAY

Ananda Lal, Centrestage: *Essays on Theatre, India and Intercultural*
Seagull Books, Calcutta. 2025. Pp.187. Rs. 699.

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Whereas fiction in Indian/English Literature enjoys a lion's share, drama occupies a secondary or even a tertiary place. Comparatively speaking the bulk of drama or dramatic literature produced by writers in India is very little and rare. But the theatrical study of drama is perhaps the rarest in India. It is unfortunate that several important plays written and performed in the regional languages in India have not been translated into English. I felt this problem acutely when I, as Chairman of the Board of Studies of our Karnatak University, Dharwad was hectically searching for good English translations of regional plays of India from different languages for prescription. The translated plays are not subjected to rigorous critical analyses nor are they staged widely in English. Even if and when, by a miracle, they are staged, their theatrical history is never recorded prominently by any theatre critic in any media channel. Theatre Study and history is something unknown to or neglected by the educational institutes like Universities. There are no books dealing with the entire gamut of Indian Theatre written by Indian scholars as it happens to be a much neglected area. But *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* published in 2004 edited by Ananda Lal happens to be an excellent reference volume on Indian Theatre described as 'something fantastic' by Girish Karnad in his review of it in *The Deccan Herald*.

Ananda Lal's excellent book *Centrestage* fills in this lacuna to some extent. That is because it contains many essays dealing with the theatre history of Indian Regional plays and Indian English plays not attempted by many critics of India. Although there may be performances of several regional plays in different cities of India, their performances are commented upon by the local critics in their own regional languages but it never gets publicized in English for the national readership. Therefore the information about their theatre history remains unknown and not accessible to national and international scholars. Ananda Lal's book does this adventurous task of

presenting the theatre-history of Indian Drama, though mainly centred on West Bengal but peripherally touching on the other regions of the vast sub-continent called India. The main handicap is the deplorable absence of critical books in English on Indian Drama and Theatre.

There are two parts in the present book. The first part deals with Indian English Drama in brief and offers a brief historiography of Modern Indian Theatre. He rightly opines how the early Indian English drama was, though written by some Indians like M.M. Dutt and others, (*The Persecuted, Rizia, Kaminee...*) was primarily meant for the English people of the Raj and was not meant for the wider public of India for the natural reason of language barrier. He meticulously records the details of their performances, their successes and failures and the response of the audiences in a typically research-oriented manner. Then he discusses some important theatrical performances of plays in Kolkata from which he himself hails and happens to be a Professor of English at Jadavpur University. His method is quite different from that of a literary critic on Drama. Far from offering an elaborate analysis of the thematic concerns of the plays, he, like a typical theatre critic and historian, begins with a brief mention of the central theme of the play and the playwright and then moves on to the discussion of the directors and actors and actresses and their professional qualifications, theatrical aspects like the manuscript, stage properties like costumes, curtains, light and sound arrangements, choreography, the audience response and the brief theatre history reported in the newspapers of the local areas. This kind of discussion will be very useful to the directors, actors and actresses of drama all over India, though it may not interest the literary critic of drama. Ananda Lal marshals his profound theatre scholarship backed up by his training in dramatics abroad and his first-hand knowledge and experience in directing many plays at Jadavpur University of Kolkata. He offers all the details like facts and dates meticulously by dipping into the archives thereby setting a model for other scholars of India to accomplish a similar job. Being a Bangla scholar, he has concentrated on Bangla Drama including Tagore's. Such excellent books have not come from any scholar from Mumbai, New Delhi or Bengaluru where theatrical activities are quite alive. Random newspaper reports about dramatic performances in different cities of India are not enough for a systematic study of the whole gamut of Indian Theatre. Most Indian newspaper reporters happen to be confined to their regional languages as they do not have the necessary scholarship in English and experience of theatre on a national and international level. That is why even the international publishers like Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press feel handicapped and fail to get the total picture of Indian theatre activities through English publications. There are several difficulties like this in this virgin field.

In the fifth essay in the first part, Dr. Ananda Lal suggests that theatre art in all its details should be taught in the Departments of English in the courses on Drama accompanied by the participation of students in reading the dialogues of a play loudly. This is a good ideal and a wishful dream of his and his-like scholars. But the question is – is it possible in the Indian Universities where specialization in teaching is not encouraged at all for various reasons. A professor of American Literature is made to teach Indian English Literature and a professor of Indian English Literature is made to teach modern critical theories in which he is not trained or interested or has no previous

teaching experience. A professor of fiction is made to teach drama under duress, although he is not qualitatively qualified to do it. Similarly, students, who come from poor educational background and are habituated to heavy spoon-feeding, hesitate to participate in the loud reading of the dialogues lest their deficiencies in pronunciation should be exposed and laughed at. Such contingencies happen in Indian Universities whenever some professor is transferred or retires from service and the available professors have to make do with all these inconveniences and keep the machine of teaching going technically. Nobody is bothered about the quality or high excellence of teaching or knowledge. Many professors do not have an ideal combination of academic scholarship and theatre knowledge and experience like Dr. Ananda Lal. That is why Dr. Ananda Lal's ideal remains a distant dream in the Indian academia.

In the second part, Dr. Ananda Lal discusses the problems of intercultural theatre in India and also abroad. He shows briefly how the Indian dramatists plagiarized the Western plays by adapting them cleverly to Indian situations and how the Western dramatists tried to incorporate the Indian forms of *kathakkali*, Balinese dance, music, yoga and myths in their experimental performances. Thus, a sort of transaction of give and take happened between the West and the Orient including India. He offers examples of August Strindberg, Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht, Richard Schechner, who tried to incorporate the Oriental theatre element in the Western or European theatre and also by shifting from monolingual dialogues to multi-lingual dialogues in their plays thereby creating a new, hybrid and exotic effect on the spectators. He shows how Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was presented in an intercultural manner by Tim Supple by investing it with an Oriental dimension... Then Ananda Lal discusses in some detail Peter Brook's stage version of his film of the same name, *Mahabharata*, where he has experimented with intercultural element like costumes of different cultures, actors and actresses of different nations, songs and music of different cultures etc, but by removing its Indian cultural aura and highlighting only its universality of text and message. He has shown how this experiment was appreciated in the West, but it was not appreciated by the Indian spectators and theatre critics equally well. Thus, multi-cultural experimentation with theatre, though bold and adventurous creates contradictory reactions among the spectators for various reasons. But Peter Brook believed in the principle that all theatre lives by surprise.

In the next section Ananda Lal has shown authoritatively and meticulously how the western tomes like *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* edited by Martin Benham and published by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* edited by Farley Richmond and published by the University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* edited by James R. Brandon, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* edited by John Russell Brown and *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, Volume V: Asia/Pacific*, published by Routledge, London contain innumerable errors of dates, facts, proper names, place-names, institutes, Universities, actors and actresses and spellings etc, in spite of the editors' best intention of offering a broad perspective on Indian Theatre due to their lack of knowledge of Indian regional languages which acts as a bar to their communication with the native

informants and their hurried tours across India. While it is admirable that the foreign funding bodies like the British Council and others provided lavish funds for these projects, the editors, most of whom were Europeans or non-Indians could not stay for long in India during their tours and gather the correct information from the native providers of data. The mistake is not one-sided. The Indians are also responsible for such problems. The native Indians who do not know either Hindi or English, cannot communicate properly with foreign scholars and provide the right kind of information about their culture to the latter. For example, Balawant Gargi felt the same difficulty when he came to India to study the Folk Theater of India to write his excellent book on the topic (and publish it from the Washington University Press), but he could not get the right and sufficient information about some parts of India, for example the folk theatre of North Karnataka consisting of *Doddata* and *Sannata*. Ananda Lal has to be appreciated for his courage of conviction and expert knowledge of the theatre of India for finding fault with these tomes published by the Western scholars. But this raises a very relevant question as to why the foreign scholars alone have to undertake such an adventurous task on India and why not the Indian scholars and the Indian Publishing Houses? What has happened to them? What are the five hundred plus Universities (both State and Central) of India doing? What are the so-called national publishers of India doing? Indians have got to answer this question satisfactorily.

On the whole, it may be said that Ananda Lal's *Centrestage* is an excellent work of research on Indian Theatre offering a wealth of information about the various aspects of theatre so criminally neglected by other scholars of India. Such works have not come on Delhi or Madras or Mumbai or Bengaluru - based theatre activities so far, which is unfortunate. The book is produced excellently and deserves to be in every library of Indian educational institutes. *Kudos* to Ananda Lal.