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So Near, Yet So Far: Badal Sircar's Third Theatre by
Manujendra Kundu (review)

Sukanya Chakrabarti

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continued to write poems: where do these fit into the theatre/philosophy relation?

Kornhaber is broadly convincing in his readings of the dramatists who are presented in the book's second part, and readers with an interest in his chosen three will want to consult the chapters devoted to them. It is helpful to read how writers of this stature interpreted and responded to Nietzsche; the connections with Nietzsche in their plays are mostly strong and well grounded. But the promise – if this is Kornhaber's intention – that they give a *better* insight into Nietzsche is not always delivered upon. To take one theme: Kornhaber tends to divide Apollo and Dionysus (from *The Birth of Tragedy*) into dramatist and performer respectively, which enables him to analyse his chosen playwrights in terms of their views on each one, mapping them onto Nietzsche in that way. But acting in *The Birth of Tragedy* already has elements of Apollo within it. And as Nietzsche's analysis of lyric suggests, writing the poetry that accompanies performance does not isolate one from Dionysiac experience. So if Shaw thought he was following Nietzsche by accepting a "strict delineation of the dramatist's and the actor's artistry" (124), then I'm not sure he was getting Nietzsche right. And if Shaw indeed thought he was developing Nietzsche's Apollonian ideal when he wrote that the dramatist must make "the audience believe that real things are happening to real people" (122), then he was simply wrong: on the contrary, Apollo offers the dream that one *knows* is a dream.

In sum, this is a valuable book that makes a strong, careful case for a Nietzsche of the theatre and for a Nietzsche who influenced modern drama, but it does not, in itself, establish the bolder theses: that ignoring Nietzsche's interest in theatre has substantially damaged our understanding of him or that the dramatists' Nietzsche is somehow closer to the real thing.



MANUJENDRA KUNDU. *So Near, Yet So Far: Badal Sircar's Third Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 313, illustrated. \$50.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Sukanya Chakrabarti, Stanford University

Manujendra Kundu's *So Near, Yet So Far: Badal Sircar's Third Theatre* is the first extensive review of Badal Sircar's works, demonstrating assiduous research along with critical analysis. Adopting both a wide-lens perspective and a microscopic approach, Kundu weaves together a complex gamut of works through textual analyses, interviews with Badal Sircar himself and

members of his group Satabdi, and meticulous archival work. Delineating gradual developments in Bengali theatre through the implementation of the Dramatic Performances Act (1876), the war era, and the reactionary formation of the Bengal unit of the IPTA in 1943 as “the cultural unit of the Communist Party of India (CPI), with a view to fight against fascism” (46), Kundu illustrates how the elite class’s justification to “ensure the stability and permanence of a colonial culture” (29) led to the consequent disintegration of all indigenous forms (such as Jatra, Kabigan, Panchali, Tarja, and Half-Akhrai) against the backdrop of the emergence of English plays and urban, western-influenced proscenium theatre. Kundu’s primary argument in his first chapter – that, “in most cases, the real have-nots had no role to play, except for becoming the subject of the educated urban intelligentsia” (46), in spite of the inclusive communist ideologies of the IPTA – sets the stage for his eventual discussion of Sircar’s “Third Theatre.” Sircar’s Third Theatre was a new “theatre of synthesis” and “a portable, intimate, and money-less theatre” (5), which sought to bridge the gap between rural folk theatre and urban middle-class theatre. Kundu’s critique throughout is that Sircar’s ideological claims did not translate into his practice as a theatre worker and that his work remained entrenched in urban elitism.

In his second chapter, drawing from Sircar’s four-volume autobiography, letters, and diaries, Kundu traces Sircar’s youth and college days, his training in engineering, his deep involvement with the party politics of CPI, and his eventual disillusionment with those politics. Sircar’s interest in theatre gradually develops into an obsession, resulting in his first few proscenium plays and the formation of his group, Satabdi, in 1967.

In chapter three, analysing plays written during the first phase of Sircar’s theatrical career, Kundu concludes that “his problems remained tethered to the middle-class society” (115). Through detailed textual and historical analyses of the plays, Kundu notes that, despite major Indian political upheavals during the 1950s and 1960s, specifically in Bengal, Sircar focused on the individual middle-class family drama, therefore not engaging “politically.” Even though Kundu deems these plays apolitical, the themes explored in them are in fact representations of complex sociopolitical issues. While *Bara Pisima* (1959) is an example of metatheatre dealing with the politics of female participation in theatre, *Sanibar* (1959) brings to the surface concerns about unemployment and its consequential ramifications, all of which are committed to real-life political issues. *Ebong Indrajit* (1963) deals with the “absurdist” nothingness portrayed by the common man, albeit an urban bourgeois man. Kundu writes in his introduction, “Oddly, there is little evidence of his political adherence in the plays written in the first phase of his career. Most of them are comedies” (4), and moreover they focus on “worldwide war

atrocities, instead of the Indian situation" (5). The implication that political adherence precludes humour seems to me a limited view, as is Kundu's assertion that political commitment is demonstrated solely through a focus on domestic Indian concerns. In these sections of the book and elsewhere, Kundu's strength proves to be his weakness: his keen dissection and meticulous analyses sometimes turn into avoidable captious remarks.

Kundu, however, engages convincingly in a "process of disentanglement" (77) to reveal contradictions in Sircar's Third Theatre in subsequent chapters. Chapter four demonstrates Sircar's gradual move toward "a theatre of synthesis," an ideological endeavour to unite rural "folk" forms and urban performances. Even though spectators welcomed the new experience of intimacy in the Third Theatre, Kundu unearths instances of Sircar appropriating theatrical discourses from an already existing group called Silhouette, which had been performing in a park since a year before Satabdi started their open-air performances. At this stage in his career, Sircar reached out to villagers and sex workers, collaborating with them on unscripted, non-linear performances that evolved into direct communication with the audience. Kundu, however, is scathingly critical, as he finds these exercises futile in terms of making connections with the "people and folk culture" (141), decrying the experiments as "prying academic adventurism [that] does not yield anything except for showing off cerebral prowess" (141), "the worst sign of patriarchy" (142), and informed by a "monstrous bourgeois concept of righteousness" (142).

In chapter five, Kundu scrutinizes thirty-four plays written during the Third Theatre phase, revealing borrowed practices from western performance artists such as Joan Littlewood, Yuri Lyubimov, Jerzy Grotowski, and Richard Schechner. While Sircar's name would be widely publicized, his ex-wife, Bisakha Ray, would remain anonymous, despite having contributed significantly to his works. In the concluding chapters, Kundu's interviews with the former members of Satabdi unveil the superficiality of Sircar's understanding and incorporation of "folk theatre" and their deep discontent with Sircar's methods. Despite ideals of a "democratic approach," Kundu reveals a discouraging reality, uncovering a history of exclusion that subsequently collapsed the group.

In a context where Badal Sircar is a deified, iconic figure in modern Bengali as well as in international theatre, Kundu's fastidious research, despite limited existing documentation, and his unveiling of uncomfortable truths not only demonstrate his academic integrity but may also be deemed audacious. Kundu carefully navigates Sircar's extensive body of work, presenting analyses that are thoroughly researched and balanced and that are unquestionably the

result of rigorous investigation of modern Bengali theatre at large and Sircari theatre in particular.



VALERIE BARNES LIPSCOMB. *Performing Age in Modern Drama*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. ix + 202. \$95.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Benjamin Gillespie, The Graduate Center, CUNY

“Act your age.” How often this reproofing expression is flung around, performatively scripting behavioural norms across the life course. But if we understand age to be defined through performative acts, does it not follow that age identity is just as culturally mutable and individually fashioned over time as, say, gender? What cultural assumptions are we making when we scrutinize age-appropriateness both on stage and off? This line of questioning provides a jumping-off point for Valerie Barnes Lipscomb’s *Performing Age in Modern Drama*. In the book, Lipscomb bridges a wide gap in the field by focusing her analysis on the representation and performance of age and aging in American and British theatre and drama from the modern to the contemporary period. As one of the principal scholars leading the growing field of age-based theatre and performance studies, Lipscomb skilfully reconsiders the centrality of aging in the western canon from Thornton Wilder to Paula Vogel, theorizing the performativity of age through an analysis of both text and performance.

Drawing upon the interdisciplinary field of critical age studies, Lipscomb reveals the illusion of a static aging self, or “a longing to present a consistent, unified identity” (2), ultimately exposing the ways in which age identity is necessarily fragmented by time and lived experience. She argues that the idealized representation of an “ageless” or “timeless” self results in the erasure of actual experiences of aging (especially in middle to older age) and that this cultural invisibility is reflected in the lack of scholarship on age in the field of theatre and performance studies.

Lipscomb offers reparative close readings of more than a dozen canonical plays, thus allowing readers to reflect upon highly familiar texts with regard to age. She demonstrates convincingly how the self is continually (re-)formed over time through performance, rather than advancing chronologically into inevitable decline. Her perceptive textual analysis is bolstered by a survey of key productions and a plethora of critical reviews, providing the reader with the necessary context for situating these plays formally and historically. In the