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**Biswas, Siddhartha. *Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. Pages. 115, Hardcover, \$66.28. ISBN (10): 1-4438-9572-5; ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9572-9.**

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Most of the times, the books available on theatre are either a survey of western theatre history and forms (starting from Aristotle and so on) or based particularly on the Indian Theatre and aesthetics, injecting western theories and trying to fit in. This book is an attempt to move beyond the historical documentation and the studies currently available in the theatrical discourse. It is an in-depth study of theoretical issues and challenges (of both Western and Indian in all its multiplicity) and history plays a supporting role to explain the theories of performance, however, everything is presented objectively in a sequential order of progress. The author speaks as a learned practitioner. The book takes the discussion on Theatre and performance theories to an advanced level. It is a valuable work for the students and scholars of the field.

The book is divided into nine focused chapters. The first chapter is “Beginnings” which clearly asserts that theatre, being a reflection of the society, has never been non-political. Theatre has always been political by its nature and being instrumental to *correct* or *confirm* to the existing cultural norms. The introductory chapter brings out some interesting points such as the classification of folk/tribal art as the remnants of a primitive era and not considering it as an evolved form; how myth was used as a tool to justify the actions of the rulers and rituals to control life and time.

In the second chapter, Dr Biswas talks about the signs and semiotics of theatre which are culturally specific and without having knowledge of these cultural set of theatrical signs, audience might fail to comprehend and appreciate the performance. Meaning—making works at various levels and it is not only limited to the playwright and the director-actor in theatre but

extends to the level of readers and audiences (each of them interprets differently) that changes with a performance each time. “Theatre demands more from the audience” and claims to have its own language to get communicated, it becomes necessary to understand the semiotics of theatre (Biswas 11). The author clearly emphasizes that the signs not only include the dialogues but the body-language, make-up, costume, the setting of stage, lighting, acting, sound, music, all blends equally to create the performance perfectly comprehensive. Besides, signs are not only culturally specific but sometimes specific to the type of theatre or to the playwright. For example, the semiotics of Brechtian theatre is different from the Theatre of the Absurd and Pinter’s theatre of Absurd is different from Beckett’s. The author adds, “Since theatre claims to have its own language, it is worthwhile to look at it from the semiotic point of view” (10, 11).

The third chapter, “The Theatrical Text” marks a difference between ‘the written text’ and ‘the theatrical text’ since the written text is fixed whereas the theatrical text is always changing. Hence, it is practically impossible to collect the final impression of a text which is, in the postmodern world, more focused on the audience than the author. As the author asserts, “The relationship between the theatrical text and the written text is going through a major shift – in fact the stage or performance is no longer looking merely towards literary texts, but is looking at the world and generating necessary responses through its own elements of textuality” (23).

The purpose of drama is to disturb and initiate thinking as it is mentioned in the preface of the book itself (ix). The fourth chapter “Theatre and Politics” traces meticulously the history of plays that had been contested for the issues raised through performances. Since the theatrical plays based on the socio-political issues (no drama was ever completely non-political), having the purpose of consciousness-raising of the audience, is not a recent (post-18<sup>th</sup> Century) phenomenon. Euripides’ *Medea* is one of the oldest examples of it. The play gives a strong woman-centric message to the society. From Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* to the theatre of Bernard Shaw, Dario Fo and Brecht and later to John Osborne’s, Hansberry’s and Baraka’s theatres of protest. The chapter closes the discussion by talking about the Post-independence political movements in India, questioning class, caste and religion in general and Bengali theatre in particular.

“Performance and Performers”, the fifth chapter, talks about the actors and their acting skills in relation to the performance spaces which is required to create the maximum impact on

the audience. There was no well-defined guideline for acting before Russian theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavski. Instead of practicing the theories it was the other way round. Through practice, the theatrical skills and theories have been developed. Next segment discusses the major theatre practitioners of the West known for their experiments in theatre: Brecht, Artaud, and Pinter. Brecht's idea of Alienation Effect breaks the dramatic illusion and made theatre more dialectical; Antonin Artaud's plays promoted free play of instinctive impulses, agony of human heart using theatre as a strong medium of expression whereas Pinter avoids dictation, domination over the actors and any kind of labeling on theatre such as 'political theatre'. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Pinter said, "Sermonising has to be avoided at all cost. Objectivity is essential. The character must be allowed to breathe their own air" (qtd. in Biswas 61).

The chapter "The *Bhava-Rasa* Theory" interestingly brings a comparative analysis of Western theories of theatre and performance to the Indian theories which are largely based on the ancient text on dramaturgy titled *Natyashastra* by Bharat Muni. Meaning-making is a process and theatre has its own set of signs to construct meanings. Dr Biswas writes, "Reception is vital in the case of theatre" (67). Next chapter "Syncretic Theatre of India" continues the previous analysis and consciously avoids the western yardstick to judge Indian theatre. The discussion on hybridity of various methods and Indianized adaptation of all are quite engaging. In the syncretic theatre, the practitioner like K. N. Panicker, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and others combines the regional with dominant contemporary methods.

Postdramatic Theatre is a break from all the conventions – absence of dialogues, movements, properties, plot and stage directions as pointed out in the last chapter. It rejects most of the theatrical conventions in search of alternative ways of expression and to get communicated. The postdramatic theatre is a functional and inclusive theatre, "originated in practice" which cannot be theorized as it changes with the change of director who handles it (83). Manish Mitra's *Urubhangam* is one of the best examples of postdramatic theatre.

The book is an interrogation on theatre theories and without taking favour of one over another, it makes its reader learn to understand and value each of the theories. The reading of the book provokes to know more about the issues faced by theatrical texts to get staged in different performance spaces and how each director (like Stanislavski, Brecht, Pinter, Badal Sircar etc.) tackles it in his own unique way, hence, bringing into life a new theatre theory. The book

*Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation* by Dr Siddhartha Biswas brings clarity to the available discourse on theatre and hence, a remarkable contribution to the field of Theatre Studies and theatrics of performance.