

Book Reviews

Monica Mottin. 2018. *Rehearsing for Life: Theatre for Social Change in Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In this important work Monica Mottin examines Nepali theatrical performance with focus upon 2004–2008, the years around King Gyanendra’s direct rule and the successful movement for democracy. As the book’s title suggests, it is not a study of theatre as such in any narrow sense, but of theatre in connection with social change. But moreover, it considers theatrical creative practice as it relates to such things as development, I/NGOs, politics, activism, communication, aesthetics, performance contexts, and professionalization. So this is what Mottin sets out to describe and disentangle.

She does so in eight chapters. There is one chapter on political street theatre—more precisely, *loktāntrik nāṭak*—as practiced by the influential Kathmandu-based Aarohan Theatre camp, and another on the same group as it works with social issues in Augusto Boal’s format of Forum Theatre. A third chapter considers Forum Theatre as employed by a Tharu activist NGO. There is also one chapter on Maoist cultural programs and one on the institutionalization and professionalization of theatre work. All this is prefaced with an introductory chapter more theoretically positioning theatre in the contexts of performance in general and Forum Theatre in particular—plus a historical background on Nepali theatre, an introduction to the Aarohan group, and a section on research methods. A second introductory chapter gives us a history of cultural activism and street protest theatre in Nepal, especially in the Panchayat era (1960–1990). The book’s final chapter lays out the conclusions of the study, comparing the different forms of theatre for social change that previous chapters have presented and wrapping up the discussion of professionalization.

A major theme of the book is how Forum Theatre—Boal’s internationally adopted methodology for a “Theatre of the Oppressed” (p. 125)—has been adapted to Nepali circumstances under the name of *kacaharī nāṭak*. This is a theatre for social change (as development actors conceive of it), designed to draw the audience into the performance. A *kacaharī* performance makes use of comedy, song, and dance to attract a crowd of spectators, and then goes

on to a dramatic frame that presents the issue at hand (such as HIV/AIDS or child labor) in a simple and realistic way. At a certain point the performance is stopped, and the audience is now invited to take an active role, to reflect upon the problem and suggest solutions which the artists then enact. One way of devising the dramatic frame is to conduct workshops with communities and to work out the script in cooperation. This, as Mottin observes, makes for a drama that is highly relevant to the audience but it is also immensely time-consuming for the artists. Aarohan and other groups therefore tend to skip the workshop and work out the frame themselves instead.

In Aarohan's case, a pre-existing theatre group goes out to find assignments for development theatre. Mottin also examines a case of *kacaharī* which is activist-based rather than actor-based. Here we are introduced to a local, grassroots NGO (Society Welfare Action Nepal) which has one specific aim: to eradicate the *kamlarī* practice, common among the local Tharu community, of sending young daughters to work for well-off households in the town or with a landlord. In the awareness-raising work of this NGO *kacaharī nāṭak* was an important part.

Both this NGO and the Aarohan theatre group relied upon development as a sector and its I/NGOs. Indeed almost all groups Mottin studied lived principally from development money, yet they were not keen to be seen as NGO theatre or development theatre. The exception from NGO dependence were the Maoist cultural groups. Towards the end of the People's War the Maoists had some 1,500 artists engaged full-time with composing and performing songs, dances and drama. At political meetings, before and in between political speeches, they performed—as Mottin notes—catchy melodies, wore colorful dresses, mixed classical mudras with clenched fists, and displayed real guns on stage in their dramas.

These insights—and what I presented above is of course only a fraction—were developed principally by means of several periods (including one that lasted some 15 months) of fieldwork from 2004 until 2008. The Aarohan group and its *Gurukul* center for teaching and performing was Mottin's principal field site, but she complemented this with stays with the *kamlarī* group in the Tarai and by traveling with a Maoist group. The methodological arsenal included interviews, recordings, and observations—most significantly, participant observation, the author living with theatre artists and taking part in performances. This methodological approach has paid off handsomely in empirically rich ethnography. In, for example, the

case of the *loktāntrik nāṭaks* that Aarohan (with Mottin among the actors) performed in the pivotal year of 2006—when the king’s direct rule was challenged and terminated—the vivid presentation and close-to-the-data analysis draws the reader into what happens in an almost *kacaharī*-like way.

Not surprisingly, Mottin observes that though her aim was to research theatre “it seemed to always end in politics” (p. 69). To spell out the political field within which artists-activists worked and struggled, both around 2005 and in the 1980s, she makes use of Richard Burghart’s work on “the spirit and practice of the Panchayat period” which, as she says, was “resurrected” (p. 70) by King Gyanendra. For Burghart and Mottin, this was a time of “counterfeit [public] worlds” where the king claimed absolute authority—public messages speaking only of unity and harmony, harsh censorship to prevent rival views and public challenges, a monopoly on the use of force, a monopoly also on public service (development, social change)—yet it was obvious to everybody that there were loopholes in the domination: forbidden political parties were active, rival messages were expressed. With Burghart, Mottin sees the claims to absolute authority as underpinned by a Hindu organic conception of society, with the king as a divine lord who in his person represented all Nepalis and was the thinking “mind” of the social “body.”

A few comments. The claims by the Panchayat regime and by King Gyanendra seem much as run-of-the mill authoritarianism—not different from, say, Communist Poland of the 1980s (Ash 1985) which of course was not underwritten by any Hindu ideas of divine lordships and organic societies. Moreover, similar claims were upheld also by the Maoists. As Mottin reports, when Maoists took command in their area, the local NGO that operated the *kamlarī* Forum Theatre saw its leader kidnapped and beaten by Maoist forces; a dramatic performance was interrupted and further performances were subject to Maoist terms and conditions; and development work such as microfinance and campaigning for land reform was ruled out.

A fundamental question here is, what role has the *political* in relation to *social* change? For instance, in her concluding pages Mottin mentions “political change by social mobilization” (p. 253)—but what about political mobilization driving social change? What the observation that things “seemed to always end in politics” might suggest is that politics should be the servant, yet in Nepal (like perhaps everywhere) it always turns out to be the master. Perhaps the development sector and its *kacaharī nāṭaks* are more likely agents for social change than is politics? Here Mottin could have taken her

analysis a step further by considering Dia Da Costa's work on the Bengali group *Jana Sanskriti* and its "development dramas"—Forum Theatre in many ways similar to that of Aarohan—and the analytical tools employed by her: neoliberalism, the larger political history of capitalism, and the ruling market episteme (Da Costa 2010).

Though the book's 26 pages of references—including works in Nepali, Italian and German—make clear that Mottin's work is based on extensive readings, Da Costa is in my view a case where a more sustained engagement with the scholarly literature could have been fruitful. Another such case is the works by Carol Davis on Nepali theatre—including street theatre, social action theatre and the work of Aarohan—which cover partly the same ground as Mottin's study. I think that the book would have benefited if Mottin had entered into dialogue with Davis' work.

But in its thorough interrogation of how theatrical performance works, the book is rich enough as it is. We learn how actors work out their performances, how they adapt to changing situations and improvise on the spot, how they are able to portray convincingly different well-known personalities by means of gestures, speaking mannerisms and rhetoric, how they engage the audience and make people laugh and respond emotionally. Mottin shows how performances build alternative futures, transform collective representations, create moral spaces, bring people together, establish dialogues with communities, raise awareness and—with Maoist cultural activists—spread political education, mobilize support and popularize ideology. Some performances, like those by Maoist groups, are top-down communication of political messages; in others, like Aarohan's *kacaharī*, the artists represent others' experiences in a more interactive way. What Mottin finds most powerful is when—like in *kamlarī* theatre, *loktāntrik nāṭak* and Maoist dramas—it is their own lives that the activists enact in the performance.

Whether they enact their own experiences or represent those of others, the artists-activists face real risks in their creative work for social change: they might be beaten up, by the police or by Maoist forces; they are affected by the violence of the war, being mutilated or even killed, or in some cases, be discarded when their cultural work is no longer needed. One response to this, and to the lingering social stigma of being a performer, is professionalization. Maoist activists take performance classes, Aarohan works hard to "sanitize" acting into a respectable profession that you can actually live from. All in

all, Mottin's book very aptly honors all those Nepali artists and activists who share the belief of one of her informants: "it is actually possible to change society through theatre" (p. 241).

References

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