

**Carol C. Davis. 2019. *Theatre of Nepal and the People Who Make It*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.**

Scholarly publications on Nepali theater have undergone an impressive transformation in the last two decades. The field, which only saw a handful of publications until the late 1990s (e.g., Malla 2037 v.s.; Sama 2054 v.s.) has in the recent years seen a steady output of monographs and journal articles (e.g., Subedi 2006; Mottin 2018). There also seems to be a growing interest in the field amongst the foreign scholars. Carol Davis's *Theatre of Nepal and the People Who Make It* is an example of one such latest work in the field of Nepali theater.

Davis, who has had a long professional academic engagement with Nepali theater, has been visiting Nepal on a regular basis since 1980. She has closely followed the works of playwright and director Ashesh Malla

and his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Her multi-year study in Nepal and proximity to the key players in Nepali theater landscape, such as Sarubhakta, Abhi Subedi, Sunil Pokharel, Pushkar Gurung, Anup Baral, Ramesh Ranjan Jha, Sangita Rayamajhi and Bijaya Bisfot have allowed her to add ethnographic depth and richness to her narrative in this book. Davis is not shy about expressing her passion for Nepal and its people, particularly when she discusses the political transformations of the 1990 and the 2006 People's Movements. She considers those two events as critical turning points both in the history of Nepal and that of Nepali theater. The author is also keenly aware of the significance of the works of theater artists based in cities like Dharan, Pokhara and Janakpur, and allocates a significant space in the book to discuss them and their works. In doing so, she addresses the spirit of the artists across the country who have been taking up the cudgels to institutionalize the activities of their groups in their local working bases over the decades.

The way Davis traces the evolution of the contemporary Nepali theater alongside key historical developments is noteworthy. She discusses the making of the anti-Panchayat political consciousness during the 1980s, the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, the Maoist-led armed conflict of 1996–2006, the rise of King Gyanendra as an autocrat, the People's Uprising of 2005–2006, and the women's rights movement at considerable length throughout the narrative. Davis links the spirit of the theater, artists and their works to those crucial socio-political transformations in Nepali history. Davis, as part of her research, traveled extensively to remote parts of the country often as a member of a performing troupe. Davis, remarking on one such travel, states, "By the time the government-Maoist war made it too dangerous for the actors to be in unfamiliar territory, we had conducted 15,000 students through our health workshops and performed our play for over half a million villagers" (p. xviii). By use of deep and direct field ethnography, she was able to enter critical spaces and follow the history of Nepali theater up close. Yet despite such active engagement in the field, she makes it clear that her narrative is not an objective narration of the works of theater creators, and is instead a self-reflection on the history of the theater of a country undergoing unprecedented political transformations.

*Theatre of Nepal and the People Who Make It* is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter "From Darkness to Light: Antiquity through the

<sup>1</sup> Davis's other works have been published in the *Asian Theatre Journal* and the *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*.

Malla Golden Age” seeks to cover the Kirat and Lichhavi eras of Nepali history in a way that is familiar to the readers of Nepal’s ancient art and cultural history. It might be time to revisit the Kirat and the Lichhavi periods in more realistic manner. The second chapter “Ruthless Rulers: The Rise of the Shah and the Rana Takeover” offers similar broad sweep of theater history and the contributions of the individual talents such as Manik Man Tuladhar. The next chapter “The Drama of Nationalism: Sama Engaged” unpacks how Balkrishna Sama engaged with the “intimate,” alongside the saga of history he himself was a part of. The fourth chapter, “Modernism’s Advance: Post-Sama Dramatists” examines how the plays of the Malla brothers (namely, Govinda Bahadur Malla “Gothale” and Vijaya Malla) and of Gopal Prasad Rimal dramatized psycho-social reality of the time, and analytically looks at the activities taking place at the then Royal Nepal Academy and Rastriya Nachghar.

The first half of the book familiarizes readers with the historical evolution of theater culture in Nepal. It also shows Davis’s engagement with the existing academic scholarship on the history of performance culture of Nepal from the ancient times to about the 1970s. The author combines broad historical mapping with analysis of the plays and of the polity using critical lens. This is one of the strengths of the book. The second part focuses on the author’s personal encounters with Nepali theater creators from the early 1980s to the present moment.

The fifth chapter “The Pro-Democracy Movement: Ashesh Malla Takes to the Streets” critically examines Malla’s plays and the work of his Sarwanam Theatre. It makes a significant contribution to the existing corpus of academic research on Ashesh Malla’s theater activities. Similarly, in the following chapter titled “Cultivating Theatre Aesthetics: Sunil Pokharel’s Vision” she demonstrates her familiarity with the works of another maestro of the contemporary Nepali theater scene. Davis’s discussion of Sunil Pokharel’s works with Aarohan theater group and Gurukul School of Theatre is very engaging, particularly when she highlights the socio-political contexts of the plays produced by Pokharel’s team. In the second last chapter, “Diaspora: Urban Theatre Outside the Capital,” Davis follows and analyzes important theater practitioners from Dharan, Janakpur and Pokhara who have made important contributions in shaping the contemporary Nepali theater universe. The author’s analysis of Mithila Natya Parishad’s plays and productions in Janakpur and the plays of Sarubhakta and their productions by Pratibimba

Theatre Group in Pokhara adds new insights on the subject. The final chapter “Legacy: Contemporary Theatre in the Kathmandu Valley” highlights theater practitioners’ ongoing struggle to establish and carve out a safe niche for their profession (cf. Rijal 2015). The book ends on a positive note suggesting that the politically and socially liberal dreams of theater practitioners of this country would create a safe space for them.

Davis’s narrative draws liberally from the works of Prachanda Malla in her first and second chapters. And in her third chapter on Sama, she relies upon the critical insights developed by Onta in his 1997 article. Similarly, in the fourth chapter, her interpretation of the plays by Gopal Prasad Rimal, Vijaya Malla, Govinda Bahadur Malla “Gothale” and Bhimnidhi Tiwari is similar to those offered previously by scholars such as Abhi Subedi and Kumar Pradhan. Nevertheless, these chapters certainly highlight the author’s familiarity with the historiography of Nepali theater.

Davis’s interpretation of the plays by Ashesh Malla, Sarubhakta, Abhi Subedi as well as of other contemporary playwrights offers new information to the readers. She captures the euphoric as well as disheartening moments Sunil Pokharel and his team experienced during the years 2003–2012. She highlights the works and contributions of Sarubhakta, a Pokhara-based dramatist, and his major contributions to the expansion of modern theater in Nepal. She sums up the Janakpur-based Mithila Natya Parishad’s works as guiding “their audiences towards living healthier and more informed lives and turning their backs on superstitions and discrimination in favour of the potential equities of today” (p. 100). Her long personal association with Sarwanam allows her to build an engaging narrative centered around its works and performances. Davis’s long professional associations with key directors, playwrights, artists, and audiences allow her to gain rare insights into the world of Nepali theater. She also highlights the rebellious nature of the Nepali theater artists and their works. She celebrates the rise of theater groups such as Sarwanam and Aarohan and lauds the theater activities taking place outside the Kathmandu Valley.

In conclusion, Davis’s book points to a growing need for theater historians of Nepal to form professional networks to discuss and share common problems and work on tangible collective publication projects. These networks and projects are needed not only to mark and celebrate the theater history and culture of Nepal but also to nurture the collective spirit necessary for the continuation of theater karma in the days to come amid

massive challenges. Her statement “Nepal’s theatre and the people who make it are intimately and viscerally entwined and engaged with their country, and through their art, strive to make a stronger tomorrow” (p. 147) aptly captures that ethos.

## References

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