

## Noisy dialogues: Some remarks on tablas and plastic barrels

Till Baumann

'You have to come to India to play with us', Sanjoy Ganguly told us after he had seen and heard a plastic barrel performance in the squatted house which is the home base of the Aktionstheatergruppe in Halle/Germany. One of the noisy performances that seem to make the walls of the old house shake and that warm you up even in cold and wet November.

The town of Halle is situated in a region in East Germany, where the radical change from something called communism to a capitalist economic system has caused the widespread closure of chemical plants and massive unemployment. There is great lack of work and perspectives, but not of empty plastic barrels from former industrial times. We had been playing and experimenting for years with the sound and vision of blue and black plastic barrels.

Sanjoy was on one of the various journeys that he, Sima Ganguly and Jana Sanskriti made to Halle and Berlin. This night he was visibly moved and shaken by what he had heard and seen. He was convinced and subsequently convinced us that playing drums on blue and black plastic barrels was something that needed to be tried out at the Jana Sanskriti centre in Badu and that could add a very special note to the upcoming festival Muktheadhara III in Kolkata. Sanjoy's enthusiasm is contagious, as some of the readers might have already experienced. There was no way not to do it. And a few months later what had sounded like a dream (or at least a wonderful, but slightly unrealistic idea) became reality.

Stop. Doesn't this sound strange: to try to merge Jana Sanskriti's wonderfully gentle and incredibly dynamic musical energy, Satya's beautiful choir arrangements and Tapan's flying fingers on the tabla – with the noisy and sometimes brute sounds of plastic barrels? Would this be possible?

It would. In November 2008 we shared five memorable and incredibly dense workshop days with Jana Sanskriti activists in Girish Bhawan, the Jana Sanskriti main centre in Badu, close to Kolkata.<sup>1</sup> Some of the musicians were members of the main forum theatre group, some were activists from rural West Bengal that could only come to Badu after being liberated from their harvesting duties. There was no common spoken language among the

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<sup>1</sup> I conducted the workshop together with Anke Zimpel and Peter Igelmund from Aktionstheatergruppe Halle.

participants. Luckily, during parts of the workshop we had some Bengali-English translation, but most of the communication was by music, rhythm, movement and the funny sign and whistle language that drum groups use when it is too loud to understand each others' words.

Wonderful musical combinations were born out of this communication in Girish Bhawan: Brazilian-style Samba-Reggae and Afoxé grooves met songs and dances from Jana Sanskriti plays, Bengali folk songs were arranged with a noisy plastic barrel base and call-and-response-patterns for two tablas and sixteen barrels were developed.

'Abad badao, phashal pholao bachar asha teh' (cultivate your land, grow your own food to fulfill the hope of survival) is the beginning of the famous farmers' anthem that Jana Sanskriti has been singing for years. Together we arranged it for voices, tablas and plastic barrels, it became the opening and closing song of the six musical performances that the group had during the days of Muktheadhara III.<sup>2</sup> One of the performances was on a lively street corner in the centre of Kolkata, where our barrel sounds competed with the noise of hundreds of car and rickshaw horns. We had been invited to contribute to a protest rally against the Germany-based corporation Metro Cash & Carry, which is destroying local Bengali markets with its aggressive marketing strategies. Acting and activism, as Sanjoy would say.

In the last 25 years Jana Sanskriti has shown the huge potentials of combining acting and activism: by playing and spreading forum theatre, the group has initiated grass-roots emancipation and community-organizing processes on a large scale. It has translated Augusto Boal's ideas and practice into an Indian context, embedding them deeply into the struggles of social movements for a radical transformation of local and global realities. Jana Sanskriti has created an extraordinary aesthetics, new to forum theatre and to theatre in general, a beautiful combination of dance, song and acting. And by travelling the world, the group has impressed and inspired numerous people and groups and has invited them to take part in a different form of globalization.

Many of those aspects were present in our musical encounters in Girish Bhawan in November and December 2008. Having been initially inspired by Jana Sanskriti, we experienced a process of mutual inspiration and collective creativity. Human connection creates aesthetics, as Sanjoy says. Our starting point was a pile of blue and black plastic barrels<sup>3</sup>, the rest was a deeply human encounter, shared musical feelings and a lot of connection and communication. Together we created a soundtrack for our very own form of globalization. And no matter if people spoke the same verbal language or not: there was dialogue. Even between tablas and noisy plastic barrels.

Happy birthday, Jana Sanskriti!



**Tablas and Barrels, Source: Photograph taken by Author**



**Onstage with Tablas and Barrels at Muktheadhara,  
Source: Photograph taken by Author**



**At the Metro Cash and Carry Protest,**  
Source: Photograph taken by the Author



**Tablas and Barrels at the Village Rally,**  
Source: Photograph taken by Jana Sanskriti



**Silence in Girish Bhavan**  
Source: Photograph taken by Author

# Imagining Spect-Actor Rallies all Over the World

Mariana Villani

When I was a child I received a multi-artistic education. At a very young age, I began to tuck plenty of classes and workshops in ballet, puppetry, theatre, piano, flute, body language and more. While growing up I focused my perspective on art as a social function that goes further than mere aesthetics. Later I became a 'Cultural facilitator with a specialisation in drama', and started to lead workshops with groups and communities.

In my youth, my political activity was through the so-called left-wing political parties. But, I always found them to be hierarchical, patriarchal, paternalist and dogmatic. After about 10 years, I found myself tired of this way of making politics, and I stopped participating in these kinds of organizations. Very disappointed, I thought my activism ended there.

When I discovered the existence of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), I found the synthesis between two important facets of my life, art and activism. TO helped me discover a different form of activism, more collective, and less dogmatic. The practice of this Method enables people to think critically, to engage in discussion, to be protagonists of their own lives, to transform reality by transforming oneself. I started to believe in changing the world by changing ourselves, having the chance to rehearse reality within the fiction of theatre and search for possible alternatives to transform it. Or, as Sanjoy says: 'To be actors on the stage and activists off of it.'

When I arrived in Barcelona for the second time in my life, in 2004, I was looking for work and the first door I came to was Pa'tothom. This is the first theatre school in Barcelona that taught TO, and I started collaborating with them almost immediately. Was this a coincidence or a sign? It's ironic that I had discovered TO in Europe, considering the fact that it was created in Brazil, and some techniques were even developed in Argentina. I spent many years making theatre, leading workshops and community groups in Argentina, and yet I didn't know of the existence of TO.

One of the first jobs in collaboration with Patothom was to be Sanjoy Ganguly's interpreter in a workshop. To prepare myself, I researched on Jana Sanskriti (JS) and Sanjoy's work. From that very first moment, even before meeting Sanjoy in person, I was full of admiration and respect.

This was going to be my second time as an interpreter in a workshop. The first time was horrible because the participating public had been very demanding and unsympathetic with my non-technical English and my lack of experience as a translator. It was a difficult experience and I had promised myself I would not do this ever again. On my way to the workshop with Sanjoy

Ganguly I couldn't stop asking myself: 'Why am I doing this? It will be horrible!' But the moment I met Sanjoy<sup>da</sup> I relaxed. His peaceful gaze and his manner of speaking made me enter into his world and forget all my worries and strife. The workshop was amazing and although my job was to be the interpreter, I enjoyed it so much and learned a lot. I felt that a door had opened in front of me, although at that time I wasn't able to understand where it led.

Almost a year later, Julian Boal led a workshop in Barcelona and he told us about the next Muktheadhara (II) in October 2006. I knew immediately that I was going to India. I worked very hard for several months and saved money to go to India. And I made it!

The arrival in Calcutta was an experience in itself. The discovery of new smells, colours, tastes, sounds, weather, everything was so different to what I knew and so exciting at the same time! The hospitality that the JS members extended to us was absolutely incredible from the very first moment. Not just the accommodation and food, but the love and affection, the humanity, the interaction that made us feel like a genuine part of their family. We had a few days to get used to the weather, to get to know everybody in the JS centre, and the work started: As part of the Muktheadhara II, a workshop was organized by JS, between the 17th and the 21st of October, in which 46 people from 13 different countries participated.

The workshop was intense. For me, this was the first real approach to the politics of the Method, and also to a creative process that until that moment I didn't know. As Sanjoy<sup>da</sup> puts it, 'scripting the play instead of playing the script'. That was the beginning (my beginning) of really looking instead of just seeing and discovering the metaphor behind each game and exercise. I loved the way Sanjoy<sup>da</sup> gave the workshop, always from a humble position, never showing himself up as 'the master', accepting everything the group gave, and open to dialogue and criticism. At the end of each day of seven or more hours of work, I felt totally inspired, wishing the next day to come quickly so I could keep working. I couldn't believe the people that complained of being tired! Neither the heat, nor the humidity, nor the hours of intense body and intellectual work could have stopped me. I was absolutely moved by a special energy that filled me with strength and desire to dedicate my life to the study and practice of TO. The internal revolution was beginning inside me!

I remember the very first day at the JS centre. After having some breakfast, my first contact with Sima Ganguly was making the signs for the spect-actor rally that was going to take place later. I couldn't have imagined at that point that Sima<sup>di</sup> was going to become such an important person for me (my Indian mother!), nor what this spect-actors' rally was going to be. I didn't know how to going to affect my own life. I didn't even realise that these very same signs we were tying to sticks, were going to be the ones filling the streets of Calcutta

on the 22nd October 2006, when the spect-actors rally was held.

It was absolutely amazing to see more than 12,000 people (the majority of them women), coming from far-off villages throughout West Bengal, travelling between 4 and 12 hours to be there, coming by boat, train, bus and foot, to participate in the march and then return home to their daily lives. They came to show their support, respect and gratitude to the first group to practice TO in India, demanding that the means of artistic production are returned to the people and celebrating the birth of a new national organisation that has chosen to use TO as a political key for social change: The Indian Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed.

At the end of the line, the group of foreigners joined the march led by Augusto Boal (who travelled especially from Brazil to be part of this event), along with Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly. We marched for several hours under the sun through the streets of Calcutta, united in one voice: Long live Jana Sanskriti, Long live Forum Theatre, Long live the art of the people! At the end, we joined the masses of Jana Sanskriti's spect-actors and we sat together to hear the speeches of several delegates.

Augusto Boal gave an inspiring speech where he emphasized the historical moment that we were living, 'when something that has never happened before, happens for the first time. That something that never existed, is born... You came here to shout out loud, that it's possible to create a new world where all of us can be happy, without oppression, where every human being can live in a human way.'<sup>1</sup>

Two delegates of the group of foreigners read a document in which we expressed our support and respect for JS's invaluable work and commitment. One of the JS women's teams sang a beautiful song and Sima Ganguly gave a speech. After more interventions of different delegates of JS teams and political organizations that form part of the Indian Federation of TO, the act came to a close with Sanjoy's speech and the group of foreigners singing a song on the stage. I will never forget this day. It is imprinted forever in my mind and my soul.

Two days later, the workshop participants got into two buses early in the morning to go to Digambarpur, a little village in the Sunderbans, in the forests of West Bengal, where JS started their activity more than 25 years ago. After almost 5 hours by bus plus 20 more minutes in rickshaws we arrived at a beautiful place surrounded by all the different shades of green imaginable. Our excitement trumped our fatigue. We walked for about 2 km when we saw a group of people from afar and as we got closer we realized that they were

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1 From Augusto Boal's speech

waiting for us. At the entrance of the Mukta Mancha, they welcomed us with a song, giving us a little bunch of flowers and painting the 'bindi' on our foreheads. This welcome brought out our first tears. They gave us some time to recover ourselves from the journey (and the emotion) and then we had the opportunity to take a look around the place.

The JS team with Sima herself served us a lovely lunch. Later the CTO Rio team played some songs and we all sang together and then we started to walk to the stage that was around 500 meters away. It was a circle drawn on the ground and marked by bamboo sticks in the usual JS style. The main team of JS performed the forum play 'Shonar Meye' (The Golden Girl), which talks about the situations of Indian women before, during, and after marriage.

Afterwards, the participants of the workshop showed the forum plays that we created during our time there. The interventions of the spect-actors were limited to two for each play due to the short time we had. Six plays were shown depicting gender-violence, racial discrimination, the abuse of workers, the abuse by the authorities, and the oppressive relationships within the family. The participation during the forums was active and spontaneous even though the plays were in different languages. One of the most important reasons that I believe helped to break the language barrier, was the richness of allegorical images, music, and metaphors that create the aesthetics of the plays, that we had learned during the workshop. Aesthetics that, unfortunately, we are not very used to seeing in the European forum theatre, but which allows the message of the scenes to be portrayed visually and with a clarity that goes beyond spoken dialogue.

In this village of experienced spect-actors, sometimes it seemed unnecessary to include the role of the joker. On one occasion, for instance, a woman shouted: 'Stop!', before the scene had finished. Sima told me later that the attitude of that woman was very meaningful, precisely because she was a widow, and widows are 'traditionally' rejected by Indian society. I believe this is one of the results of the constant intervention of JS in the villages, returning self-confidence to people, opening places where they can discuss, relate with each other, find their own voices and finally act politically.

We were all singing and dancing together, when the time to say goodbye suddenly came. We all shared the last hugs. An old woman couldn't stop thanking me while she was hugging me intensely for a long time. Even though I don't know her name and I don't know if I'll ever see her again, it was a very powerful moment in my life which I will definitely never forget. I thank her, and through her, the villagers of Digambarpur. I celebrate their struggle, strength and power, their consistency and all the love they gave to every single one of us.

The next day (if I remember well) was the last day in JS centre. Before the

goodbye party, we had a round of conclusions and feedback with all the participants and Sanjoyda. It was there where I felt the inspiration to become a TO activist, even though I was already practising it for almost two years at that time. It was after living those days of the workshop, the march, the festival, the trip to Digambarpur, when I felt a fire starting inside me and something told me: this is the way.

A month later, I wrote: 'Just one last thought about this: can you imagine a spect-actor rally like this one, in your own country?' In that moment, I was being sarcastic and I imagined that the answer would be no for the majority of countries. Now, I can say that the experience in India revealed to me that it is possible in contexts where there are people with the desire of change, because their lives aren't the most comfortable, and where the need for a different world is urgent. This is where, I believe, it's possible to act politically, through the practice of TO.

During that time I also wrote: 'I look into myself searching for the words that could express how deeply this experience has touched us, and still I cannot structure a whole sentence, although these words come along: People's art. Power. Discussion. Relation. Struggle. Possibility. Democratize the reality. Humanize the humanity'. Today I can say that these words are still with me, and that they have transformed into action, because that was the birth of my desire to go back to Barcelona and share with my group (Teatraviesas, created one year before that), all of my experience in Muktheadhara. My colleague Bibiana Lopera and I created a workshop to transmit the experience to our group. This workshop evolved into the intensive workshop that nowadays Teatraviesas uses to do an introduction to TO with groups or communities that invite us to work. These words (and the fact of getting to know the very big network of JS all over India) gave me the idea of creating a project to take around Argentina, a project that was under-way within a year.

I wanted to go back to the country that I left a long time ago and share this experience with my people. Between September 2007 and March 2008, I led a series of multiplication workshops around the country, putting the participants of these workshops in contact with each-other. One of the achievements of this project was the creation of RelatoSur (Latin-American network of TO), a network of individuals and groups that practice TO in Argentina, which since then has grown to include many other countries within Latin America.

In August 2009, with the support of Teatraviesas, I had the opportunity and the great honour to invite Sanjoy and Sima to Argentina, to the first encounter of RelatoSur where they shared a workshop with us and participated in all of the activities organised. This encounter was held with the aim of creating the network and getting to know each other in person. 42 people from all over Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia participated. In that opportunity the network

started to plan a bigger encounter, which was held only five months later. In January 2010 in Jujuy, north of Argentina, the RelatoSur organized the First Latin American Encounter of TO, where more than 200 people from Argentina, Brasil, Uruguay, Colombia, Bolivia, Guatemala and more participated!

I always thought that theatre had to have a social function, but it wasn't until I found TO that I realized how powerful theatre could be as a tool for transformation. And it wasn't until I was in India, seeing the work of JS that I was able to imagine the real scope of this Method.

JS is my inspiration: to know that it exists, to know all the goals they have achieved, to see their political commitment, their transparency, and to feel their love from a distance, is what makes me keep going, believing that change is possible, that the transformation of the people into actors of their own reality is possible, to be protagonists, to look for answers, but more: to question the world instead of blindly accepting it.

## Visiting Jana Sanskriti

Martha Lee Kemper

My visit to JS came about serendipitously. I had already booked my ticket for November 2, 2009, from Philadelphia to Delhi and made plans to visit India and lead Theatre of the Oppressed (henceforth TO) work in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The plans and itinerary of my trip had been made with the help of Archana Gour (a Quaker friend who trains Indian teachers to work in rural schools), and another Quaker friend, American Viv Hawkins. Archana had generously given of her time to set up opportunities for me to work with teachers' training in Pachmarhi as well as with actors in Jabalpur. Viv and Archana had both made contact with Quaker activist, Stuart Morton, with British Friends' organization Quaker Peace and Social Witness, who was playing a key role in the South Asia Peace Alliance (SAPA) conference near Gwalior (Jaura). I was scheduled to lead a TO workshop on nonviolence there.

My plans had not included any visit to Kolkata. Then in October, less than a month before my scheduled departure, I attended a TO workshop in Boston, where I met Julian Boal. Julian made frequent references to JS (henceforth JS) during the workshop. At a break I approached him and told him I was going to India and would be leading TO work there. I said I was going to Madhya Pradesh and didn't plan to be in West Bengal where JS is located. He said, 'If you are going to India and you're not planning to visit JS, you don't really care about Theatre of the Oppressed.' That was a challenge not to be dismissed. I rearranged my trip to include the 30 hour train trip from Bhopal to Kolkata, and to allow me to spend five nights with JS. I am so glad that I did.

I was trained in classical theatre by Alvina Krause, an American master, a teacher of professional actors in the U.S. She taught at Northwestern University for twenty years and many of her students became professional film and stage actors. I met her when she was in her 80's. She had retired to Bloomsburg, a small town in the US state of Pennsylvania. There, at the age of 83, she became the artistic director of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, a company which, as an actor and teacher and founding member, I helped to create. I relate this part of my background because so crucial to Alvina Krause's teaching were two ideas that I saw writ large in JS: the importance of *Ensemble* theatre and the integral part theatre plays in the larger *community*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Network of Ensemble Theatres (NET), 'An ensemble is a group of individuals dedicated to collaborative creation, committed to working together consistently over years to develop a distinctive body of work and practices' (<http://ensembletheaters.net/about/>). Although 'ensemble theatre' is not *always* progressive, the NET mission of advancing theatre that 'strives to bring about change in the world beyond ourselves through the transformative power of collaborative theater,' does describe the original mission and identity of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble.

In JS, too, both ensemble theatre and dedication to the community are crucial. But with JS, it is as if these two concepts merge. It is difficult to see where ensemble theatre ends and integration into life of their surrounding community begins: community members form their own JS affiliated theatre troupes, while JS 'core team' members take on advocacy and activist roles in the community.

As a member of the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, I remember our practice of morning work-outs—company sessions of member-led exercises, stretching and aerobic, vocal and physical, that brought us together in mind, body and spirit. This was a practice we did not only for the fitness benefits, but to underscore and deepen our identity as an *ensemble*. That was over 20 years ago. No longer a member of a theatre ensemble, I now find something of that experience of group warm ups in my local yoga class. This morning, lying on my aqua rubber mat in corpse pose, I chose not to move into the seated posture which the rest of the class was taking for the last few moments of yoga class. Lying in Shavasana I heard, from the 30 or so students in the class, 'Namaste', the ritual close of our class. According to Wikipedia, 'Namaste' might translate into any number of phrases, including: 'I honor the place in you in which the entire Universe dwells, I honor the place in you which is of Love, of Integrity, of Wisdom and of Peace. When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are One.' I inwardly noted the curiousness of lying still in this large, mirrored, wooden floored room in an American fitness center and hearing a chorus of thirty or more Americans intoning, 'Namaste.'

My thoughts traveled to the members of JS and their morning practice. It wasn't yoga that they engaged in to start each day together. It was badminton! They'd gather sleepy eyed, in the back yard of the JS center, and while they waited for breakfast—daal, rice, bread, vegetables—cooked by company cooks, they'd play badminton. (Their kitchen is a cookhouse whose open porch is the company dining area, and their company cooks, all women while I was visiting, include one or two members of the core team as well as family members of the company). While waiting for breakfast, one or two among the group would take up a game of badminton, and after breakfast, another pair or two would play.

At the same time, other members of the company might begin stretching and doing physical and vocal warm ups on the circular cement platform in the middle of the yard. This company practice, not only of sharing meals, but of warming up with a fun game and life giving exercises, brings the group together with ease in a relaxed way, and reveals their commitment as actors and ensemble members.

When I watched the company and joined with them for the morning stretching and movement, it took me back 25 years, to life as a company member at the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (BTE). BTE's ensemble identity included

a commitment to their wider community. In describing BTE's mission, its artistic director Alvina Krause had said, 'theatre should be, can be, a vital part of the community-I think just as important as the school, the church, or for that matter the grocery store. All theatre is entertainment first of all, but theatre can illuminate what life is' (Northwestern Alumni News, 1980). Krause's words about theatre and community inspired



The Performance circle at Jana Sanskriti Center. Badminton net tied to tree in foreground.

the creation and the identity of The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, founded in 1978. American Theatre Magazine called BTE 'a perfect illustration of commitment to place' (<http://www.bte.org/index.php?page=the-ensemble>).

So, I am familiar with ensemble theatre integrated into the lives of cities or towns. But in spite of my formation as an ensemble artist with BTE, I did not fully realize how vital theatre can be to a community until I visited JS and went with them to Rangafala, Shyamnagar, and Digambarpur—villages where the company has been performing and doing activism for over 15 years. I wrote a friend at home about my trip to the villages:

All was amazing. Most amazing, perhaps, was HOW SIGNIFICANT a role theatre is playing in social change and life in India. These villages have their own teams of TO actors. In one village a man donated land and the village built a theatre space for their JS team. Apart from JS, civil rights groups use theatre as part of their strategy—they go to many places where people can't read, so they use theatre as a *core* strategy for empowering, educating people.

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In the first village, Shyamnagar, we walked down a long path of bricks which had been laid within the past few years. We walked past many homes and fields and ponds. We walked by homes where long colorful cloths—saris—were hanging to dry, and we passed villagers carrying great stacks of hay, hanging over their heads. (photo right)

As we walked, people we passed waved, or came to greet Jana Sanskriti core team member, actor and, founding member, Sima Ganguly, with whom I was walking. A teenage boy greeted her warmly and walked with us. They knew each other well, and talked animatedly together.

It was clear that the company was known and welcomed here. We walked until we reached the village of Rangafala, and the outdoor space where JS was to perform. That night

they would present Sanjoy Ganguly's *Where We Stand*, a play that arises from Sanjoy Ganguly's real life experiences of encountering the intimidation and threats to his life by the Communist party when he tried to expose corruption



that party officials wanted to keep hidden. This play shows the corruption and lies that political parties, and competing branches of the communist party, were engaged in. The performance space was simply designated by sticks in the ground, and generator-operated lights.

The villagers began arriving as evening was coming on. By the time the play started a large crowd had gathered (between two and three hundred people), and were sitting on the ground (children in front), or standing behind those who were seated. This crowd was no coincidental gathering of curious onlookers with time on their hands: the performance was during harvest time, so men and women had been working since early in the morning. Still, they made it a priority to come to the performance. Nor was this gathering the result of prodigious publicity efforts in weeks previous. No, word of the performance had gone out just a day or so prior to the event. So, what brought this enthusiastic crowd?



The answer seemed to be the long relationship JS has with the villages where they perform. In Rangafala, Shyamnagar and Digambarpur, the company's work goes back over many years. Sima Ganguly said how important relationships were to JS, both among company members, and with the people in the villages where JS plays such a crucial role. 'Several of the company members come from villages where their parents or family members are still living. We have relationships with those families. Pradip Sardar's family, Satya Pal's family—in the villages—they have known us for 18 years. These relationships are part of the company identity.' Relationships were perhaps the most startling and impressive aspect I observed in the experience of staying and traveling with JS. These relationships seem to be key to the company's effectiveness in raising the consciousness of their audiences and effecting change in their lives.

I was surprised to learn (though people more familiar with JS's practice will not be surprised) that the company may revisit a community several times, performing the same play over and over. Take the example of JS's play, *BPL* (Below the Poverty Line). The play exposes corrupt practices in the sale of goods intended to be sold at subsidized prices to people who are below the poverty line. The first time the play might be performed for a particular audience, interventions from spect-actors might be characterized by the spontaneous anger and outrage that audience members feel on first hearing the injustices and corrupt practices.

A few months later, when the play is performed again for the same village, discussions about the issues raised in the play will have taken place. Spectator responses are likely to have evolved, moving beyond the anger or violence that appeared in their first performance, to a more rational level of dialogue. By the third time, the play is performed for that community, concrete proposals for change may be offered in the forum, or may even have been put into practice in real life. The invitation to bring the play back and revisit the issue testifies to the community's trust of JS, and to the company's commitment to the communities they serve. Sima Ganguly said that the bonds that JS had with the villages were reflection of the bonds among company members. 'We are *like* family. Renuka is like my younger sister. When she was sick, I was a sister to her.'

**Aesthetic beauty, traditional arts and mythic elements combine with progressive thinking**

The play *Golden Girl* embodies some of JS's signature characteristics. These are: (a) aesthetic beauty, exemplified below by the staging in which Renuka



a

walks gracefully across the backs of other company members (b) the use of traditional folk arts like the stick dance that begins all JS performances and (c) drumming that accompanies the actions onstage (d) mythic elements like the incorporation of the goddess Durga, 'one who can redeem in situations of utmost distress' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durga>). JS combines these



b

aspects—aesthetic, cultural, and formal—with progressive thinking that challenges oppressive social practice. *Golden Girl* challenges male supremacy and the dowry system. Although the set-up of the show—whether in a village or in a Kolkata neighborhood—is simple, the care and attention JS



c

gives to costumes, props and music, and the purposeful way with which they designate the performing area raises the interest of people nearby, drawing an audience before the play begins. The company's professionalism and humanity combine to draw



d

crowds. The crowds remain engaged throughout the show because this very professional group of actors gives their audiences a top-notch performance of emotional truth which speaks to the audience's condition, and portrays scenes familiar to

viewers' lives. In a Kolkata performance, I watched tears running down a woman's face. She put her head down when the actors asked for a volunteer—she did not raise her hand to speak or get up to act, but clearly she was deeply involved.



Audiences watch with wonder and recognition as the play brings the grim reality of an abusive marriage to life with simplicity, humor and pain.



The scripted play has been presented to thousands of audience members. It is the same play every time. That is, until the spect-actors are invited to intervene.

JS performed *Golden Girl* twice the day we visited Kolkata. In the first performance, the crowd that gathered watched intently while the play was performed. It reached the forum theatre's finish, one of defeat: the woman has been slapped, denigrated and is thoroughly demoralized. The actors ask the audience if this is real, and there is broad assent—yes. Then the actors ask for a volunteer. Hands go up (photo below left) and a spect-actor is chosen.



Assisted by Sima Ganguly, the spect-actor uses her experience with marriage and unjust dowry practices to play the role of the wife in *Golden Girl*. Other JS actors stay in role and engage the spect-actor, giving reasons why the woman should stay in a subservient role and defending the dowry practices. The woman chosen speaks vehemently from her own personal experience. She smiles as the audience applauds her. She is emboldened. The situation of tyrannical dowry practice and an in-law's family treating a woman abusively is painfully familiar to this spect-actor. She brings strength, vehemence, and an articulate argument for the rights of the woman to life. The audience cheers! Defeat is transformed into victory and the people affirm her with applause. The enthusiastic involvement of the audience, the embodied, articulate empowerment of the spect-actor, the intelligent co-creation of the JS team, responding to this spect-actor's contribution: the performance exemplifies Forum theatre.

Before I saw Jana Sanskriti's performances of *Golden Girl* in Kolkata, my exposure to live Forum had been only what I had seen and co-created in workshops. These were workshops I attended in the United States: one led by Lisa Jo Epstein in Philadelphia, another led by Julian Boal in Boston, or otherwise

workshops I myself had led, in my Penn State classroom, or in India. In those situations, participants had grappled with themes of oppression during the workshop or class time, and had produced a Forum play within a framework that was three days or shorter. Those school, classroom, or workshop-generated pieces—intelligent, relevant, passionate and creative as they were—did not prepare me for the scripted, formal style, and repertory use of Jana Sanskriti's work. Aesthetic beauty, traditional arts, mythic dimension, and progressive thinking characterize a JS production.

### **Activism**

When I asked JS member, Satya Pal if he was an actor, he said, 'Yes. And I'm an activist.' Activism is alive in India and in grassroots democracy. India is an example for the world. While tremendous violence may also be part of India's culture, Gandhi introduced nonviolent action on a massive scale, and organized non violence has become a part of India's culture. Jana Sanskriti's TO activism is one with the company's political identity.

A day of activism took place in the theatre space (photo below) at Digambarpur, the village where JS core member, Satya Pal grew up, and where members of his family continue to live. His father gave the land where this theatre sits, and members of the village helped to build it



The core team, with actors and activists from Digambarpur, Shyamnagar (Pradip Sardar's village), worked with each other to draft a statement to be presented to the provincial government. With this document, they intended to influence legislation on education in West Bengal including the implementation of regulations affecting school children. Approximately 20 men and women worked in small groups. The group I joined arrived at a list of 14 essentials that they recommended for implementation in every school. The legislation concerned bringing all schools, all grades, up to a certain level. This was not only about academic standards. It concerned clean school conditions, bathroom facilities, and other very basic needs.

### **Jana Sanskriti's Impact on One Village**

In Satya Pal's village, women from village teams gathered in the theatre space, along with other people from the village and from the core team, to share some of their experience of working with JS and doing TO in their communities. Most of the women had performed the play about liquor which village women had created. They spoke passionately about how the work had impacted their lives and the lives of their families. One woman who had been acting in the team for years, spoke with deep emotion about how this work with JS had really saved her life: it had given her strength to stand up to abuse in her marriage, and given her a sense of pride, as she had discovered that she could act in the plays, and through Forum theatre, could introduce change to the communities.

The play that these women scripted shows how liquor destroys life in a family. The husband/father leaves home for an evening, joins his drinking buddies, and spends all the money the family would have used for basic needs. Women play all the parts. There is humor in their portrayal of the drunken husband. In response to a question about how this play has affected the lives of the assembled group, Pradip Sardar (a male member of the core team) spoke up and said that families are experiencing the good effects of the play. He spoke of children who previously suffered in homes where a parent drank and spent money from the family's savings on liquor, where fights had been frequent due to the drunkenness and spending. Performance of the play about liquor has led to awareness and discussion. Having the problem out in the open has led to empowerment on the part of the women whose families were affected by this problem. In many cases, situations have greatly improved. Children in these families are now living in an atmosphere free of drunkenness and the hostility and conflict caused by drinking. The level of awareness about the destructive effects of liquor has been raised. The play, and the discussions it has raised, has had a visible, significant impact on the lives of the people.

All around the circle gathered in the theatre space, women asserted their

pride in participating in the women's teams. I was moved by the ardor with which they asserted how powerfully their theatre work has affected their own lives.

Seeing the village teams, hearing the women testify to the power Forum theatre and participation with JS has had in their lives—these experiences have directly impacted my work and life as an actor and theatre teacher living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. In a recent workshop I attended at Bryn Mawr College on the subject of Educational Change, I was asked 'What is a dream you have for the future of education?' Immediately I answered, 'More theatre. I don't mean Broadway theatre. I mean the kind of theatre I saw in India. In villages where people may not read, they are creating theatre about issues in their lives. They are empowering their communities to participate in changing the laws that govern their lives.' I can imagine doing TO in Germantown High school.<sup>2</sup> There are students there, who may have given up on learning reading or math, but I am sure that given the opportunity to create Forum pieces about the problems in their neighborhoods—problems of gun violence, alcoholism, and domestic violence—they can manifest the same powerful commitment, intention and creativity that I saw in the village teams. I am designing a course called Theatre for Social Change at Penn State Abington where I teach, which I plan to offer in Fall 2011. I will be sending my students out to Philadelphia area high schools, urban community centers, churches, synagogues, mosques and other gathering places, to study the issues of oppression in the neighborhoods where they live. They will work with people in these communities to create forum pieces about the issues of their lives. Thanks to JS, I have a big picture of what this work can accomplish.

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<sup>2</sup> Germantown High School in northwest Philadelphia 'has a chronic problem with recorded class attendance, graduation and dropout rates of the students enrolled each school year. As it stands, the School District of Philadelphia's website reports the dropout rate for Germantown High to be higher than that of enrollment for the past four years running, and shows that about 86 percent of attending students live in economically disadvantaged households.' ( from the Multimedia Urban Report Lab at Temple University (<http://murltemple.blogspot.com/2010/06/germantown-high-school-that-speaks.html>)).

## **‘Respect for Imperfection’: Friendships in Intercultural Spaces of Theatermaking**

**Brian Brophy**

I am deeply honored by the invitation from Sanjoy Ganguly to write an essay on Jana Sanskriti (JS). Several years ago I sent an inquiring letter to Sanjoy, one of the few active practitioners of Theater of the Oppressed (TO) in India, at that time. The handwritten response to my inquiry was sent from Calcutta, and the sender had invited me to come to West Bengal and participate in his experiments with TO among Bengalis and other Indians. At the time, it seemed like a great dream to share in the theatrical experiments of India unleashed by Augusto Boal. Having studied with Augusto in Rainbow of Desire, Forum and Legislative Theater techniques and Games, I was very curious as to how the intercultural encounter between Brazilian TO methodology and Indian Theater was being played out. A full ten years after Sanjoy’s invitation, I arrived in India to witness first-hand the praxis and power of Indian theater and social change.

In discussing JS in the field of theatre for social change<sup>1</sup> (henceforth, tfsc), Rustom Bharucha’s explication of the inter/intracultural entanglements among Indians and non-Indians helps to situate my own observations (2000). Bharucha’s guiding principle in narrativizing his observations comes out of his ‘discipline in theater’ and his belief that theater is the ‘laboratory of the world’ (Bharucha 2000, 21). In helping to navigate through the terrain of Indian activist theater, I have reduced Bharucha’s cautionary guidelines to three simple points: 1) Globalization absorbs the specificity of indigenous culture 2) Cultural voyeurs can ‘purchase’ folk traditions in order to craft their own original work outside of the specific cultural expression without any attribution and 3) Framing cultural expression with little regard for context, mystifies intentions and creates distrust among subjects under investigation.<sup>2</sup>

In my subject position, as a white American male who does not speak any Indian languages, working with Indian actors, educators, and community/cultural activists, I am keenly aware that any inter/intracultural encounters in tfsc cannot escape the tension between religious narratives and secularist

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<sup>1</sup> Street theater, activist theater, theater for social change (tfsc), community based theater (cbt) liberation theater, TO, theater for development (tfd) all cohere around theater/performance as unique cultural expression. To avoid any confusion, I will use the acronym tfsc to contain the many variants of cultural-theatrical activity.

<sup>2</sup> These might be very reductive categories and overlap with each other, but hopefully it allows the reader to get a glimpse of Bharucha’s critique.

critiques. This is true for example, when it comes to the problematic interpretation of mythological figures and religious narratives. Vaishnavite poems or vedas sung, dance with *jatra* and folk forms such as *gaajan* in song and dance, for example, open up an intense cultural discourse entwined within religion, politics, the state and theater. This contested territory to Bharucha leads into the 'most confused area in secular cultural discourse, in which the discriminations between religion and culture are either dichotomized or collapsed into falsely reductive religiosity' (Bharucha 1998, 35). Keeping Bharucha's words in mind, it is important to state that I have the roadblock of language in understanding my Indian counterparts, and that I have nonetheless attempted to find metaphors and images to document my observations of mythological images and metaphors in the play *Sonar Meye*. Ultimately, my central argument in this essay asks us to consider what Bharucha calls a 'respect for imperfection,' in shaping and reflecting on our inter/multi/intra/transcultural collaborations.

My first intercultural encounter with activist theater from India occurred during my post at Pomona College. My colleague Betty Bernhard invited some of the most respected practitioners of tfsc from India such as Mallika Sarabhai from Ahmedabad,<sup>3</sup> Pune's Sushama Deshpande,<sup>4</sup> Kailash Pandaya the venerated director from Ahmedabad whose work in the Bhavai form and social change made no distinction between art and politics and finally, the social activist Mangai (Padma) from Chennai. Mangai's documentary on street theater performances in the villages of Tamil Nadu opened up intriguing intracultural performative spaces rife with tension and uncertainty. The documentary, in Kannada with English subtitles, showed Padma and her actors engaged with villagers in public spaces (telling stories through song and dialogue) regarding birth control and provoking public awareness of male complicity in attitudes towards the subjugation of women and female infanticide. Most of the men warily watched the proceedings from the periphery of the space, until they realized they were the object of the group's attention, and vocally responded in an awkward kind of defensiveness. An accusatory mood hung in the air.

Much to my surprise, however, scowls turned into laughter, defusing tensions so that a kind of awareness of sorts flushed across the men's faces.

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<sup>3</sup> Risking her life and livelihood by speaking out against extremist Hindus Ms. Sarabhai, continues to be a beacon of hope for millions of Indians the world over, having narrowly been defeated in last year's Gujarati elections for PM

<sup>4</sup> Her most recent documentary on prostitutes with Betty Bernhard in Maharashtra, provoked even the most diligent feminist to self reflect on the ethical dimensions of making money and empowerment.

Brecht might label this the *alienation* moment, maybe a recognition of a fatal flaw. However, the performance had opened up a space for something to happen, possibly a new perception of themselves in relation to others, possibly even to the women in their village. To me, it was an act of true moral courage; an intracultural negotiation that altered the villagers in ways that I can only imagine.

During my first encampment in India, deep in the Sunderbans of West Bengal, I witnessed first hand a similar courage in Sanjoy and his wife Sima and their company Jana Sanskriti (JS). With the advantage of performance techniques from Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (TO) arsenal, JS illuminated the 'culture of silence' by throwing light into the far reaches of rural and urban India and giving voice to the voiceless. In good Boalian fashion, I should begin with images that might illuminate the boundaries of the cultural in the idea of the intercultural and how inhabiting spaces across cultural boundaries, not always marked by national belonging, forges creative intercultural friendships and alliances.

A few images that come into focus when I contemplate Sanjoy date from the Muktadhara II festival and in Varanasi the following year. First, at the Raj Bhavan in the middle of Calcutta: after 'joking' several Forum Theater plays about corruption of public officials, revenge killings against women and defiance of parental authority, Sanjoy has left the stage and wraps his arm around Julian Boal and poses for the camera. Both are dressed in short sleeved orange shirts—Sanjoy's face set with an intense unshakeable seriousness (betrays none of the happiness that animates his soul). Then, like a storm lighting up the Gangetic plain, Sanjoy's smile bursts out and his stony exterior is replaced by a humble and heartfelt calm. This flash revealing his social genius and darkness—the intense, internal focus, marks my memory of him.

The following year during my Fulbright residency at Malaviya Center for Peace Studies in 2007, I was most fortunate to present Sanjoy and JS in the *Peacebuilding Through Theater in the Age of Globalization* Conference at Benares Hindu University (BHU). Organizing train schedules, housing, stipends and food for twelve company members of JS gave me a rare insight into the true meaning of interculturalism. JS presented *Sonar Meye* and their newest Forum around violence at *Nandigram*. The Uddapa Auditorium at BHU was packed with University officials, reporters, students, faculty and local Banarasis along with the executive director of the Fulbright in India. After the obligatory speeches and kulgeet, JS launched into their presentations. It was a great success that culminated the following day in a Boalian workshop open to locals and BHU students.

My favorite moment with Sanjoy and Sima occurred on the ghats at Benares with my wife Cynthia, professor Meenaskshi Chabra and Ambedkar University

professor Sheshi Bharhnapurkar. The smoke and incense swirled through the crowds as the sadhus cooled off the Ganges with their peacock feathers and bells putting the great river to sleep for the night. Our families mingled with each other in friendship, fearless, limitless and happy. It was the first time Sanjoy had witnessed the blessed closing of the day and the rituals of putting the Ganges to sleep. It was a calm and friendly communion for me, the city drenched in the holiness of five thousand years, the colorful portrait of lord Shiva painted on the Ghats behind us.

My third image opens up into my first full intercultural encounter with Sanjoy and company: I am sprawled out in the YWCA in Kolkata, a bit feverish in my new home, sleepless from the twenty-eight hour plane ride. Wandering in and out of sleep, dust balls, roaches and mosquitoes, I settle into some shallow shut-eye. The morning brings the whisper of brooms in the hallway the junior tennis team in the courts start to practice, and a Christian missionary sermonizes to a packed room of Indians in the next room over. After a breakfast of eggs, white bread, bananas and chai, I called up Badu and was directed to take the subway to the Dum Dum station board a taxi out to Madhyamgram. Once I arrived, I was to call the phone number they gave me so that someone would come to pick me up and deliver me to Badu. I took a local train out to Madhyamgram instead of the taxi and was then whisked into a small village by Satya Pal and another member of JS.

Disoriented, and time-zone challenged, the very recognizable sounds of Julian Boal wafted over the dense green foliage. Alongside Sanjoy, who I had not met yet, Julian conducted forty plus participants in the creation of new Forum Theater plays. As I was standing at the periphery of the smooth and flattened space of ground, film cameras rolling, Julian stepped out and embraced me warmly. Suddenly the unfamiliar was very familiar. Inquisitive Bengalis greeted me and after the workshop, I found my mentor and reason for being in India in the first place, Augusto Boal, conversing with other JS members back at Badu headquarters.

To me these interpersonal moments, and the quiet transcultural connections represent friendship forged out of our shared pursuits of Theater, Joy and Liberation—the three elements that drove us together. Indeed Sanjoy's first experience of the Benares ritual, assumed by myself to be familiar to him and other Indians as well, animated the intracultural differences between the Bengali and other Indians, as well; the secular theater director from West Bengal and his American host in Benares connected across the boundary of the national-cultural in encounter with Hindu rituals in Benares. This bridge between us bound by Boal in the thematic universe of social change brought me to the village of Digambarpur.

After a four-hour bus ride from Kolkata into the Sunderbans we transferred

onto motor-powered bikes with flat beds, bouncing for several miles down well-laid herringbone patterned bricks for roads and mud houses with thatched roofs. Cows crowded the shoulders and wandered holily between rice fields and green vistas of water. Once the bikes could pass no further, and the paved road ended, a hard-packed well-worn ground greeted us with muddy interludes. Finally the remote village beyond the beaten path, appeared and a multitude of women in colorful green streaked yellow, flowing saris patterned and blue, pink and yellow, black and red with innumerable designs, swirled about us. Men of all ages approached us, some bare-chested with wrapped fabric (lungis) below while most of the younger men wore simple, collared shirts in red patterns and khaki, blue and white beige, not unlike teenagers anywhere in the world, sans Ipod.

Our hosts invited us to rest beneath a round thatched roof held aloft by several wooden pillars and we laid our belongings on yellow plastic sheets and conversed among each other—all in different languages: French, Italian, Austrian, Spanish, Portugese, Brazilian, and almost everyone spoke English. This gathering of mostly middle-class European theater practitioners and the indigenous local communities from rural areas offered wonderous intercultural possibilities. The villagers moved within the smooth three-foot walls that enclosed us and watched us as we drank bottled water and took pictures of them watching us. At one point Sanjoy, invited us to tour the village with the permission of the Pal family. Satya Pal, who had picked me up from the train station, brought us delightedly into his family's living quarters.

Inside their kitchen, several women rolled out grains and flour. They smiled and enjoyed the attention from the curious flock of visitors. As we roamed the grounds of the small compound with its gardens, huge vats of un-husked rice, and the ubiquitous cow dung pies laid out neatly by the back door for fuel, the audience grew. We dined on potatoes, spiced vegetables, fresh chapatis with fried bananas, mangoes for dessert and the ever-present chai.

Just as I was adjusting to the absence of electrical sounds and the magnetic humming of urban spaces, a loudspeaker, crackled out in the coming dusk. Connected to a small microphone and run through a battered receiver powered by an ancient, rusted generator, a tinny mixture of Bengali and English bleated out greetings to the audience.

The theater space was demarcated by thin bamboo strips circled round a flat, smooth, dirt floor, with Jana Sanskriti's yellow banner and red letters, stretched across the upstage area with speakers hanging from bamboo supports on the wings. As the performers took their position, most of us settled down on the yellow sheets, kicked off shoes as others stood on the periphery of the proceedings. Sanjoy, Julian, and Sima introduced the performers and the thematic content of the play, alternating between French, Bengali, English and

the local dialect. It was time for the performance.

The evening began with choreographed movements from the *jatra* tradition with four men dressed in all white kurtas to their knees with red sashes and four women in yellow-orange saris wielding short wooden staffs. All of them were barefoot. Mimed actions transmitted the domestic life of two families with minimal dialogue. The couple's amorous courtship followed their wedding preparations and quick-paced family scenes blended with dance and song. The mother doted over the bride to be and the groom's mother and father fatuously catered to their son's every need. These episodes elicited great laughter from the audience.

Suddenly masked demons beset the young husband, but he falters under the pressure of his family and community while three demons descend upon the dream state of our protagonist, the young bride Sima. In the play Sima dreams that she is Durga and a fierce warrior—always successful. Yet when Sima wakes up, she is ordered to work: 'go search water', 'do the cooking', 'where is my wallet' and so on. Each time they ask her for something, they tie her with a rope. The demons/villagers/actors pull Durga/Sima in every direction by multiple ropes around her waist and then, suddenly, the play ends, as she is caught in the snares of her oppression. Her otherworldly powers were of no use in the temporal coordinates of her every day village existence. Not even the gods could save her. She needed the help of others, in the *real* world, to assist her as allies in her struggle for survival.<sup>5</sup>

What followed was an active, participatory lesson in transcultural community-building and problem-solving as dictated by the public presence of bodies, voices and wills: the villagers and the visitors played into the evening with each others' Forum Theater interventions. The boundaries of the 'cultural' were effaced by the interventions of the European visitors and the villagers' reciprocal solutions into the oppressions of the Europeans. Indeed the ironic display of how the gods were powerless to help the mortal *Golden Girl*, reverberated through layers of religious narratives not misunderstood in the coordinates of Sanjoy's secularist critique of religion in social change.

Eight hours later we made our way in the darkness with a few hand-held flashlights and candle-lit homes along the trail, and songs of devotion floating in the cool breeze. As we shuttled back to Calcutta, past night-time bonfires, roads blocked with frenzied celebration and dances in honor of Kali, the holy

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<sup>5</sup> At first, *Sonar Meye* viscerally connected with me—the episodes and their deeper meanings unfolded through conversations with Julian Boal, Nilambar Bhuinya, Sanjoy and many others. No matter how imperfect my interpretation of the play, the journey to understanding, situated within the multiple contexts of the events and participants leads into the heart of intercultural collaborations.

spectacle resonated with very little in my western cultural epistemology.

Back in my YWCA quarters in Calcutta, infused with the power and spiritual intensity of the celebration, and the confirmation of the efficacious praxis of TO in the lives of the villagers, I sought out any metaphors to assist in the explication of events and turned to the history and origin of Calcutta. Shiva, disconsolate at the death of his consort Sati, pounds the universe in grief. He dances a dance of destruction with the expired Sati in his arms. So devastating was the performance that many of the other gods intervened to stop him. When most of them proved unable to stop the destruction, Vishnu, the preserver, flung his disk out from one of his four arms and spliced Sati into many pieces whereby they rained down upon the land of India. The toe landing in Calcutta. Vishnu's disk, in my research, represented the

*ascendant, unifying, intellectual tendency of a human being...the power that destroys the ignorance and the darkness, just as it is a symbol of a killing weapon, and of the sun. It destroys the evil through the process of illumination.*<sup>6</sup>

Once this image of Vishnu's disk took hold of my late night imagination, this disc seemed to me to be an apt metaphor for the interventions of TO at the hands of Sanjoy and his company. I was risking possible ridicule for even suggesting any metaphorical parallel to Vishnu, especially from Sanjoy who writes: 'I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim or anything, sincerely' (Ganguly 2007: 47). Yet if Vishnu always found ways to eliminate the demons when the balance of power was upset, so indeed did Sanjoy illuminate the hopeful world; his talisman was the probity of conscience into the heart of 'the culture of silence.'

At this intersection of cultural practice in the fields of West Bengal surrounded by the effluence of Vaishnavite poetry, and nurtured in the intellectual and spiritual tradition of the Brama Samaj in Vivekananda, Tagore, and of Sri Ramaskrishna, and his reluctant disciple Girish Chandra Ghosh, the hero of Bengali Theater, and namesake for Badu's headquarters Girish Bhavan, Sanjoy moves with and against the restraints of 'emergent cultural identities.' If Sanjoy is bringing light into the darkness of intractable social maladies, and exposing the fissures of inequality, the mythological metaphor most closely linked to his beloved Bengal was Vishnu.

Yet to Sanjoy, it is the debate linked to 'reason and humanism' that together form the possibility of change and ultimately empowerment. The chance to witness the original plays of JS with its spect-actors and participate in public interventions of their specific intractable social/political dilemmas proves to

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<sup>6</sup> So many websites, books, and manuscripts expand upon the religious and symbolic nature of Sati and Shiva. [http://1stholistic.com/Prayer/Hindu/hol\\_Hindu-vishnu.htm](http://1stholistic.com/Prayer/Hindu/hol_Hindu-vishnu.htm)

be a political act as much as a spiritual one and forms the core of new subject formations in the future of India.

After having spent time with Sanjoy over the last few years, it is clear to me, that he seeks to illuminate the process of engaged theater as cultural practice and the struggle between the collective and the individual within the vast networks of globalization and politics. Between global capital and the lived reality of village/city existence, JS with Boalian ammunition, uses theater as a powerful tool to reveal the constructedness of daily predicaments and address power publicly to rehearse positive social change. In attempts to nurture the imaginative spaces created in communities where specific interactions disrupt the objective world through its subjective transformation of individuals at a community based level (Mohan 2004), Sanjoy and many other theatermakers, in favor of the people, can alter the substantive character of democracy.

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## **The Healing Embrace of Jana Sanskriti in Europe/Austria**

**Birgit Fritz**

'Sanjoy Ganguly is in Europe, I can send him to you. It's a great opportunity!' My friend Julian Boal's words still echo in my ears. My students helped set up a workshop, Sanjoy arrived with a huge suitcase full of books. 'I don't get the chance to read much when I am travelling, but just in case', he says. This was in 2005. In 2006, he came to Vienna again for a second workshop. Then we went to India for the Muktheadhara Festival, including a visit to Digambarpur, where it all started. In 2007, we met in Kyrgyzstan. 2008 in Pula, Croatia. The next meeting was in Rio to commemorate our great teacher Augusto Boal. In Austria in 2009, the Forum Theatre Festival in Graz, and the short but memorable visit to Carinthia. In 2006, I met Sima for the first time, then a second time in Pula, then in Rio, and again in Austria. We don't like dentists too much, either of us. In Pula, I was able to interview her. I met the members of the Jana Sanskriti (henceforth JS) core team in India, in Pula, and in Austria.

Amar naam Birgit – my name is Birgit. But who am I?

Born in Carinthia in an atmosphere of fear and silence, of post-war traumatic orderliness where you were told 'not to' most of the time and couldn't really analyse the problem, I was turned into a nomadic young person. I travelled to Mexico and other places, where I felt more at ease, because life seemed more direct—more honestly and openly difficult than 'at home'. Later I studied languages and was convinced that the root of everything was buried in the inability to communicate—an invisible wall that shuts us off from our parents and grand-parents, a paralyzing vacuum. I got caught up in a marriage that fits the same description, not realizing that in the meantime I was carrying the problem within me.

In the year 1999, I started to work with the Theatre of the Oppressed (henceforth TO). Step by step, workshop by workshop I made my way through—I am very grateful for that—the writings of Freire and Boal. As a teacher and facilitator I became something of 'a better person'. At last I could do something, opening spaces where communication with and without words could flow, where people could start feeling who they were and the potentials and talents they were carrying within. But way back then, even though I was aware of my own needs to be an artist, I could not even begin to take this desire seriously, because neither the schools I attended nor my family had nourished my desires. Consequently, I did not give myself permission. I carried the oppression within me still.

On a political level, whereas in earlier days I had led quite a provincial life and not known so much about global issues, I had always sensed that things were going wrong. But I had been too involved in ‘personal’ issues to be able to relate to the world in any meaningful way.

‘Even an ant bites when it gets stepped on’, says Sanjoy, ‘an ant knows the spirit of protest’. As a student, I never knew what to protest about. My fellow students squatted in houses and said they had no space, but I sincerely couldn’t relate to that. The way I saw it, we had everything we needed in a material way. I wouldn’t have known who to blame for what. There was food on my table and university access was free in those days in Austria. If I didn’t succeed, it was due to my failing. This was what my reasoning told me.

In Austria we tend to psychologize things. After all, we are Freud’s country. As we live in the ‘first’ world, we are aware that there is plenty of everything and if for whatever reason we fail, our relationships break up, we suffer from depression, aggressive behaviour, burn out syndromes, heart attacks, or feel alone and empty—this is because we are in some way not functioning well. Once you see the structural causes behind these societal symptoms, things of course, change. Maybe we do not want to swallow the bitter pills doctors are prescribing to us? Maybe we do not want to eat genetically-engineered food? Maybe we do not want fellow human beings drowning in the Mediterranean, dying in their attempt to reach Europe? Maybe we do not want human trafficking to happen? Maybe we do not want the destruction of the forests, the destruction of indigenous sacred places, and the destruction of the sources of creativity of young people by short-sighted school systems? Maybe we do not want the mainstream dominant culture of monologue, of never-ending consumption, and of exploitation. But we feel cut off from others around us, making us powerless and guilty at the same time. The official narrative, telling us, that we live in the best system that there could possibly be, makes us feel arrogant, guilty and helpless at the same time.

In theatre, we can learn and experience that we are connected. And in reality, JS has been proving this to us. ‘When I see women in Europe I feel very worried about them’, Sima said in an interview we did. ‘They can drive cars, they have jobs, but they are very lonely, very isolated. In the workshops in Europe I see images of abandonment, of despair, of depression.’ And Sanjoy explained in Kyrgyzstan: ‘the perception of individualism as a sort of freedom is a mistake. Freedom can be found in a collective, where everybody is seen as an individual but also as a part of the collective.’ And I saw it, not only in India. In Kyrgyzstan, people stand up and sing, recite poems no matter if they have wonderful voices—which

many of them have—or not. But nobody would laugh at another person. Everybody appreciates the contribution to the community, the expression of the self and respects the individual, who in turn, never fear being expelled by the community if their performance is far from perfect. When I see the young women in my workshops with their arms clinging to their bodies and their fear of moving around because they expect to be judged, or simply are extremely shy, it makes me sad, because they don't seem to be enjoying themselves and their creative potential. When I take the Vienna underground in the mornings I often see defeated and unhealthy faces. We are not a sane society. Far from it. (And I don't think I need to go further into that.)

When Sima said to me in Pula: 'Never ever feel alone in your life, because we are here, we are your family', tears were running down my cheeks. The love of the JS family has helped me to forgive myself, for clinging on to the past and projecting it onto the present and the future. I am sure of that.

JS has shown us that there is another way of living, another way of life. At first we only heard Sanjoy's words, amongst the many significant ones. Maybe the most important thing for me at the time were attitude and oneness. When you live the TO way, which you might choose to do to different degrees, your attitude changes everything. If you get the chance to understand yourself as a part of a collective, you will heal. When you look at your activities as part of a job, you will burn out. The suffering on this planet is too big to deal with.

When you are connected to the TO network there are times, when news hit you that you might not know how to digest. One year, before getting to know JS, I remember writing to Julian: TO has bulldozed its way into my life, I don't know what to do with it anymore. I was breaking down under the pressure of thinking that I had to cope with too many issues that couldn't possibly be solved (asylum laws in Austria being amongst them). I will never forget Julian's response to my despair: 'I hope this will pass and you are just having a bad day.' And Sanjoy asked at another occasion: 'Who are you to think that you invented the world?' Both answers aimed consciously or unconsciously at the same arrogance of thinking that I must have all the answers. It is a path of humility to go for high goals but to expect nothing in return. I am not sure which Indian philosopher Sanjoy quoted during another occasion when he said: 'It does not matter, whether you see the results of your work during your life time or not'. When I heard him speak like this, his words deeply impressed me, considering all the incredible work JS does and the endurance and determination they have shown. I understood that there was a completely different kind of thinking

going on to which I had not previously been exposed.

The inner pressure I had put on myself, by wanting to live up to TO, with political activism, multiplying, facilitating and living as a single person was too much. Later I had a little revelation when I saw in the paper of an Australian colleague that she qualified single people living alone, amongst the fragile in any society. Up to that point I had never thought of that, it was just what life had given me. People here say, 'Oh you are single so you have many possibilities. You are free and independent'. When disconnectedness and isolation are the basis of your existence, there is nothing that can satisfy that vacuum you feel. I am not sure what kept me on my journey. Somewhere inside of me, I knew, like Rosario Castellanos, the Mexican feminist writer did, that there must be 'another way to be'. I was in need to find that place and I was ready to work hard for it.

One thing that I could rule out for myself was that money and material things could not possibly have anything to do with this other way to be, because, in my surroundings, I could only see people who were manipulating others through money or being manipulated by it. I didn't believe in anything the path of money promised. My inner 'poverty' almost demanded also an exterior one. What I call inner poverty now, is the result of isolation, abuse, and the powerlessness that I experienced as a female child. The poverty consisted in the fact that there was no alternative for a long time. I was not connected to any other style of life, than the damaging one. I wanted to focus on the 'other way to be' and to find out about solidarity. The following years were years of experimenting, of following the belly and the heart rather than the head and to keep searching. To live solidarity worked on a personal level but when aiming at the social or legal system of our country there was hardly anything to be achieved.

There needs to be activism and in different global contexts this can take on many different shapes. One type of activism is creating something that has not existed before. And this is what JS has been doing. They are creating collectives, community, and a space in which people can heal, be stronger, and share their thoughts and opinions. They connect to their creative potential, 'have the courage to be happy', and shape their own realities. Necessarily this has an effect towards the inner and outer worlds. When people get a sense of the power they have, they start using it for the sake of a healthy life, a sane society, a respectful and sustainable surrounding. When they experience that they do have the power to change things then they will keep doing it. The law of order and chaos provides for that in a safe environment people will take choices that are positive, life-affirming, and generous.

When we came to India for the first time we experienced a kind of

hospitality that touched me to the core. The nine other women who had come with me from Austria were taken care of in the most generous way possible. As westerners we proved quite useless in the Indian environment. We did not speak the languages, didn't know how to cook, we were attracting diarrhoea and other inconveniences due to our exposure to a different climate and new space. We were sheer troublemakers in a world of hard working people. JS showed to us, what family means. For every problem no matter how small or large there was an answer, a remedy, and support. Patience is their middle name. And through accepting us into their context and making it as natural and stress-free as possible we had the great opportunity to see behind the curtains and to sense the strong social relationships that tied them together.

What we could see there was strength, solidarity, generosity, commitment, respect, confidence, to sum it up: love and oneness. When the curtains of prejudices, assumptions, self-righteousness and cultural shock we had brought with us vanished, a whole new world appeared. Recollecting Margaret Mead's famous quotation all it takes to change the world is a handful of determined people. And that is what has ever changed anything in the world: a handful of determined people. JS reveals the power of the people and also the spirit of love. It is a spirituality that is beyond the limitations of any one religion. It is the marriage of intellect and the heart, as Sanjoy so often writes and says. This is the art.

The TO is a people's theatre that was born in Latin America and then travelled to the northern hemisphere until it reached literally every corner of the world. Still, there has been a large and natural gap between the north and the south. The invasion of the Europeans in the Americas over 500 years ago left one of the planet's biggest wounds and we are still living in its aftermath. It is our heritage and our challenge. Paulo Freire says, the oppressors can only learn and change with the help of the oppressed. Many years have passed and spiritual voids (one can also call it drugs/addictions/depressions/suicides/human trafficking/child abuse/violence of any kind) have taken the spaces where the spirit of conquest had once made its home. Now we need to help each other to overcome these barriers and to enter spaces where we can all tap on the sources of our creativity to find ways to transcend what we have at hand: a globalised, exploited, consumption-based society that feels powerless in the face of the economic networks and money making strategies.

Money is printed paper and since the US has refused to open their accounts and instead they hide how much they actually produce, it has lost its connectedness to the actual material world altogether. It is a means of manipulation and we can only succeed if we think the world without it.

And by this I don't want to come across as an unrealistic dreamer, neither do I advocate that poverty makes a noble man. Naturally, we must deal with the world as it is and be practical about it. Only we should not allow ourselves to be determined by the context of greed but follow the visions we have. Then, eventually, we will also come to a point when the inner and the outer abundance will not scare us anymore.

The practice of TO as JS is living it is not about projects with deadlines and funding that can run out any time. It is an informed and felt decision, a determination to live and to dream life differently than the mainstream culture of monologue wants us to believe is possible. And in this there is so much beauty that it is contagious. We must stop thinking and living in divisions and separations. We must feel the connections and the oneness. In this way, by living the TO life, we are at the same time overcoming it and healing in a very profound way.

'Undoing privileges' is the famous essay by the Indian post-colonial philosopher Gayatri Spivak. And she is right in what she is writing. And only referring to the title and not to the whole essay, I want to say clearly: it is a huge privilege to know and to learn from and to be friends with the wonderful family of JS members. To use the preferred word of the time: sustainability is not about giving up anything it is about acquiring something else instead.

And this is the revolutionary transformation of feeling the connectedness, of not only knowing and believing it intellectually but of 'it' turning into an embodied experience. And when in our work we can get to a point where we can transport some of this embodied experience through the wonderful art of people's theatre, than we are on a good path.

I have mentioned earlier that I was not impressed with the activism in my student days. Somehow, it felt narrow, as if the worldview could go no further than the Austrian Alps. When Boal demands the 'humanisation of mankind', then a part of this, for me, is, to understand that we are one. By being one, I mean spiritual oneness of all life on earth. The crazy separations and divisions that we find everywhere damage all realms of life. I feel responsible for people but not for animals. I feel responsible for children but not for the old. So many charity organisations function with such divisions and separations. Life is at all times intertwined and connected. We are human beings, we must accept that. We will be imperfect and our best intentions will probably be always thriving towards and not achieving. Who said, 'The horizon is there to be walked towards but not to be reached'? We are one. The planet earth (some call it mother earth), and all its inhabitants, including mountains, rivers, flora and fauna. If we get out of balance, everything will. We need to understand that we are 'part of'

instead of 'above everything'. We must understand that we are one. That already is the transformation. To arrive there, is a form of activism. Because this will change the attitude towards everything that you are doing.

When the TO family gathered in July 2009 to collectively mourn the loss of our great teacher Augusto Boal, we were all there united from so many different countries of the world and from all continents. In a nutshell we had it all there. All our strengths and all our weaknesses, our differences and our similarities. TO people are not better people in any way than others. And it is not about being good. It is about the willingness to put our feet on a path, the outcome of which we don't know because we only know the world as it is. It is about thinking the unthinkable. And this is what the strength is and in this lies the love that this community shares. With their travels and their festivals JS serve as an important catalyst for bridge-making, for mutual learning and for a movement that is ready for the unknown. Now that Sanjoy Ganguly's important book is out, many can have access to the Jana Sanskriti's way of thinking and living and we will make sure that it will get translated into as many languages as possible. We can hope the wisdom of the east will help the north and the south to overcome their past.

# **It's when theatre is over that our work begins': the example of Jana Sanskriti**

**By Julian Boal**

Translated from French by : ?

Jana Sanskriti or, People's Culture, is very likely a singular movement in the world. For perhaps the first time in history, what we see is not a political organization creating a cultural front for the purpose of bringing in new militants or to instruct them. On the contrary, Jana Sanskriti (henceforth JS) began as a theatre group to become a major political force in the state of West Bengal in India. This force was made clear to everybody on October 22nd 2006 when more than 12,000 peasant members of JS made their way to Calcutta, often after traveling ten hours or so, to attend a demonstration asking for the creation of a Theatre of the Oppressed Indian Federation.

JS was started in 1985 when a group of urban youth decided to break from the CPIM (Communist Party of India - Marxist) having judged its functioning to be anti-democratic and unable to achieve the political program they advertised. Their decision wasn't a dismissal of this politics as a whole but a will to create a movement which would present *de facto* the working class aspiration and where militants would actively contribute to the elaboration of their organisation's political line rather than serve the aggrandizement of leaders.

In that way, the course of JS is typical of what is commonly referred to as mass movements in India. In the 1980's, many urban militants throughout India decided to organize politically in rural areas away from traditional parties and unions. Those organizations have in common an aim to address specific audiences in given areas—such as women, indigenous communities known as *adivasis* in India, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> They rejected political party structures which felt antidemocratic. They also refused money from foreign institutions which were viewed as part of a neo-colonialist ideology. These organisations always deal with specific issues. 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' in which Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy take part is perhaps the most famous example of a mass movement in which thousands of peasants act against the building of dams which flood the valley they inhabit.

Very likely, mass movements decided to go towards the countryside because of a combination of a wide range of ideologies—from Maoist to Gandhian

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<sup>1</sup> Adivasi is the term for original dwellers or indigenous communities in India.

philosophy—which, for different reasons, see the ‘India of the Villages’ as a resource and/or a goal. In the case of the people of JS, the decision to go to the villages was also taken by three other concrete elements:

First, the brutal repression and murder of dissident groups by the CPI(M) that was happening in Kolkata.

Second, the social structure of slums in India which fill up with village people looking for temporary jobs during the slack season in the fields make it harder to build up organisations in urban environments where people only live part-time.

Third, many slums inhabitants identified rural social problems as the cause/root of problems in life in slums.

Settling in the villages was not an easy task. The way of life was quite drastically different from what this handful of urban people who left their jobs were used to. Moreover, the peasants were more than distrustful. The newcomers had no social role in the village, they had no reason to be here and the explanation for their presence led to various speculations. Some said that they were bandits who had come to loot their village, or guerillas inclined to enroll them in an armed struggle or, catholic priests (since some of them had a beard) who wanted to convert them. Because of the lack of a specific role inside the communities, these young militants were encouraged to become artists because they had no other specific role they could take on in the villages. Sanjoy Ganguly along with his wife Sima Ganguly are the only founding members of JS, who continue to be part of JS. Sanjoy Ganguly remembers how people in the villages took another look at them when they started to put up theatre shows. He decided on this activity when he realized the importance, diversity, and efficacy of cultural practices in the villages.

Village people regularly came to group performances and started to offer the urban youth their hospitality. Some of them even joined the group. Even so, a few years later, according to Sanjoy Ganguly, the group felt they had not managed to overcome the feudal structure undermining any theatre act and that the division between spectators and actors didn’t enable them to engage in a real debate with the audience. The audience felt that the actors were the ‘owners’ of a speech and a talent that is foreign to them and that they could not reappropriate it for themselves. When Sanjoy Ganguly was sharing these frustrations with his friend, he was told about Theatre of the Oppressed (henceforth TO). Since the first time that he heard of TO, Ganguly decided to put this method into practice.

For the contemporary observer I am, it is rather hard to define a JS style since it has more than thirty teams which can perform (repertoire plays) but

which most of the time re-adapt them or play creations. It would be completely impossible for me to identify what is the common style among JS groups and themes. Nevertheless, over the past ten years I have had the opportunity to attend several performances of the same play, 'Shonar Meye' (The Golden Girl), by different teams.

This play has been performed throughout India more than 3000 times by JS. Its theme is about women's condition in rural areas. The play structures itself around three parts—the girl's life in her natal family, her wedding arrangements, and her life with her in-laws. These parts, although in a chronological order, could be played separately. Each piece has its internal logic and if needed, could be performed in another order without any major change to the content of the play. The distinct parts of the play have possibly perhaps sprouted from specific constraints linked to performances that are held in the open in villages. After all, some spectators will not attend the beginning of the play. Others will probably leave before its end. Nevertheless, fragmentation is an element which enables the 'de-individualisation' or generalization of the story.

This is not the life of a particular woman which is shown but the different stages of women's lives in rural areas. The majority of women in the audience are living some version of these stages depicted in the play. Staging and acting enhance distancing from the particular to tell a general and abstract story about patriarchy itself. The transition between parts is rendered through dancing and singing. Human statues that intersperse the plot underline one point or the other. Actors will sometimes address the audience directly. The father-in-law only grumbles indistinctly but his gestures are so typical that they invariably spur bursts of laughter. The protagonist cries copious tears in one scene and then proceeds to dance with other actors in the very next scene, and these others have also quit their roles just as suddenly.

If the play denounces the dowry system as the utmost symbol of patriarchy it also clearly points out that the stages of a woman's life are situations of oppression. There is no such thing as a haven of peace either in her biological family or with her in-laws. The family is a 'corporation' in which women's tasks, although daily and extremely strenuous are considered valueless since only men's tasks are directed to the market and therefore bring in an income. Women's education is seen as a losing investment since their work will go to someone else's family. The dowry seals the alleged worthlessness of women since the drain of the woman to another family (which we might think of as 'exportation') has to be paid for with huge amounts of money and presents. The self-reliance of women cannot be imagined in a context in which they always depend on the patriarch who owns both the fields where the family works and the house where they all live. The play shows that men are favored by this system, as far as their education is concerned and by their capacity to take up

public space. The play also shows that the patriarch alone can make decisions for the whole family. The other male characters are shown either powerless to demonstrate effectively any kind of solidarity or stupid or puppets. That is, the play depicts patriarchy as not just about men's relation to women, but men's relation to other men as well.

Shonar Meye is always the first play performed by JS when they are trying to settle in a village. This is the case for two reasons. First, JS firmly believes that when women are allowed to talk freely of their condition, then and only then, the village as a whole can start up a wider process towards their emancipation. Gender divisions undermine broader village alliances and struggles. Second, patriarchy isn't identified by local despots as a threat to their privileges and thus they do not forbid the performances.

Jana Sanskriti's strategy of infiltrating a village always unwinds in the same way. First, a youth club or a local NGO or a non-party political group in a village invites JS. A performance of Shonar Meye takes place once about every month for three months. A Forum Theatre session includes two sequences. To start off, the show is performed as if it were a conventional play. Then, the play is done a second time exactly as it was done the first time, but the spectators are told that they can stop it at any time and go onstage to replace the oppressed protagonist and try to bring about a better solution to the situation they disagree with. This form of theatre was created in Brazil by Augusto Boal in the 1970s. The idea underlying this form is that the artist who acts for oppressed classes can only establish with them an authoritarian relationship if he only renders a ready-made product. The oppressed must take over for themselves the means of theatrical production in order to free themselves from dominating representations which mentally enslave them.

The relationship between actors and spectators in the prevailing theatre is parallel to the relationship between politicians and citizens in a bourgeois democracy. So, not only does new content need to be introduced in theatre but theatrical form itself must be transformed to enable the democratic incorporation of new content. A 'democratisation of culture' insofar as this involves taking Moliere and Shakespeare to the slums and housing projects is not all that is at stake here. The transformation of theatre is articulated with the transformation of society as a whole. As Augusto Boal put it, 'Elites tend to think that theatre cannot and must not be popular. We think that not only must theatre be popular but all the rest as well-in particular the State and the Power, food, factories, beaches, universities, life' (Boal 1972, 9).

Forum Theatre offers to audiences the possibility of being onstage and replacing the protagonist. This is a novel experience to which spectators must be given the opportunity to get accustomed. During the first performance of Shonar Meye, in a village unfamiliar with Forum Theatre performance, only a

few members of the audience will go onstage to try to defeat oppressors. But after few such performances, there will be more interventions that are well-considered and increasingly thoughtful.

More explanations about villages are needed to put Jana Sanskriti's work into perspective. When someone is born in a village, it is highly likely that one will spend his or her whole life there, or at the most about 20 kilometres away if one is a woman and marries in another village. All the members of the village know each other. They are related by family links, business, neighborhood activities, and mutual help. It is thus very brave to get onstage to fight fictive oppressors who have their actual counterparts in the audience. For example, it is likely in front of her family, maybe even in-laws and husband that a spect-actress decides to go onstage to 'perform' against patriarchy.

During the three performances, every act of participation is noted down. JS activists know who spoke and what was said. After the theatre team has analysed the interventions of people who had gone onstage and put forward issues which match Jana Sanskriti's analysis, these people are contacted and asked if they would like to create a new JS team in their village.

If they accept, Jana Sankriti provides two training sessions of one week each in their center. The workshops are divided into two weeks in order to keep the interested members able to withstand the pressures of their daily lives as well as from their oppressors (including in-laws, CPI(M) activists, illegal alcohol dealers and so forth). The first week mixes classical theatrical training (expression exercises, singing, games), techniques of live sculptures in which participants have to try to reflect their oppressive realities, as well as political training. The second week focuses on the staging of a show by the new team about a theme they decide upon through the workshop. After having played a few times under the supervision of JS members, the team will start playing on its own. It will regularly go back to the center to follow up its training, learn plays from the repertoire, put up its own show and watch those of others. It will officially become part of JS after a year or two. The new team performs plays in its village as well as in the surrounding areas so that each team performs in a dozen villages, while conducting TO workshops, as well as mobilizing political activism. No man from JS is allowed to ask for a dowry if he marries.

Each JS team has a Soviet-like structure. Should a delegate fail in his or her duties she or he will be relieved by those who had elected him or her. Two of its members, generally a man and a woman, will represent the team for the General Council. The council meets once a year to decide on the general political orientation of oncoming campaigns based on the will expressed in the spect-actor committees. The plan for the year will then be coordinated by the central group whose members hardly ever change. The central group is made up of about fifteen JS members, two of whom are the only urban people still part of

the movement to this day: Sanjoy and Sima Ganguly. Members of the main group are the only ones to be employed by JS, when funding is available to pay them salaries. Their tasks are huge and extremely varied—from performing onstage, leading workshops, preparing for demonstrations, accountancy, delivering food in flooded areas, and resisting the eviction of 40,000 peasants from their lands. Since they have to respond to so many urgent situations, the main group is trusted with great autonomy from the village theatre teams.

By foregrounding democracy, Jana Sanskriti's work has resulted in the creation of a collective of spect-actors. This stemmed from the fact that not everybody wanted to or could become an actor. But Jana Sanskriti's work nonetheless ensures an independent space where village people can meet outside the presence of JS members to try to express requests for the village without any interference. In the last resort, the spect-actor committees decide on the themes for the next campaigns and the actions which should go with them. They assess the quality of the shows and their adequacy to the issue being addressed. If JS has about 600 members in the strict sense of the term, 20,000 persons take part in the collectives of spect-actors.

The JS campaigns are varied in their themes, forms and scales. During parades before elections, JS members dress up as clowns who urge people to treat politicians in the same way they treat citizens—like buffoons. During a campaign in favour of state funding to ensure work all year round in villages, 50 members of the JS covered the 1307 km from Calcutta to Delhi on bike. They campaigned for days so that village people wouldn't have to seasonally emigrate to towns where they are overexploited. At each stop on their way to Delhi, a mass movement allied with the same campaign gathered an audience for a theatrical performance. In Delhi, thousands of people attended the performance.

The sale of illegal alcohol is a huge problem in rural areas, these liquors are extremely damaging to health. Village bars are gambling dens since gambling is very popular among peasants who have been known to lose even their house in one evening of gambling. JS plays denouncing alcoholism generated debates among people and worked them up to such fury that many collectives decided to pull down alcohol production houses. Although disagreeing with such an initiative, JS went along with them, because the owners of these warehouses constitute a sort of mafia and don't hesitate to use violence. It was finally decided to block the nearby roads and the police had to come round to disperse the crowd. At this point, people demanded the seizure of the illegal alcohol which the police typically turn a blind eye to since they are bribed. However, faced with 400 persons the police had to abide.

Another JS campaign under progress which enables us to understand its functioning is the campaign concerned with education. Since 2000, JS has built schools in which more than 2000 very young children have had access to

schooling that is superior in quality to that provided in government schools. At the same time, having their kids in schools allowed many women to be relieved from some of their household chores and get more involved in the village organization. JS is currently closing the schools so that the State can be faced with its responsibilities in the education sector. Forum Theatre debates about education were performed for all of 2009 giving about 150,000 persons the opportunity to see the play roughly four times, generating repeated opportunities to speak up for themselves, and to take part in a collective debate about education. All the interventions were noted down and forwarded to the collectives, which will then decide on further actions.

JS takes up a fact perceived as mundane and natural, and points it out as questionable and changeable. It does so in a way that allows a large population to analyse and debate about it collectively, while keeping practical challenges in mind. The village people who voice their discontent or their analysis in public are led to consider what has been said and act out decisions taken, thanks to the working frame offered by the JS. Once an issue has been identified, it's up to the people to decide whether it is a legitimate one or not and which action is appropriate. JS unveils the power struggle undermining daily activities. It organizes people by asking the population what actions should be taken in order to reclaim some power over their lives. All the JS campaigns share a common feature—village people alone can decide on what concerns them.

TO as practiced by JS has echoed widely amongst mass movements in India. Countless workshops have been held and alliances created. Thus, in October 2006, the Indian Federation of the Theatre of the Oppressed was founded. It currently unites about thirty mass movements. If members are added up, it's about 2 million persons who are united in the federation. The mass movements sometimes come from very distant areas. The languages spoken are most of the time different from one state to the next. The issues raised do not necessarily overlap since they stem from specific populations with very different problems due to the wide range of geographical areas in India. Political analyses coincide even less and represent as different opinions as the different trends of Marxism or Gandhism. A daunting challenge for these movements is to converge through the federation to address their differences and work out a joint political prospect.

I have tried to describe JS going by facts as much as possible because of my known love for this movement. In this article, I have tried something that might be impossible: to objectively explain my endless admiration. I have never heard of a movement of such a scope using so intensively cultural practice in order to make decision-making and political action. The main characteristics of the movement seem to be its constant articulation between the expression of the oppressed and their actual emancipation.

I would like now to offer a story I have heard. A long time ago, the core

group noticed that one of its members was working extremely hard for JS even though he was extremely poor. He was not only not receiving any money for his work for JS, he was losing money because he was spending his time for the group and not working enough on his fields, or as contracted worker on someone else's plantation. All the members of the group knew that this particular member was extremely poor. Both as a way to signify their appreciation and as a way to help him, they mandated Sanjoy to talk to him and offer him some money. Well, this member, whose name I will not disclose, refused the money. Basically he argued that the day that he would get some money for the work he was doing for JS then this work would lose all meaning.

I particularly like this story not because I believe money is dirty or that activists should not be paid. I guess that I really love this story because it shows that JS introduces something that maybe never existed before in Indian villages, the possibility to decide to 'lose' your time. Peasants are no longer confined in the obligation of producing in order to survive and to rest after it in order to keep producing. Now they do have an option, now they can do something else than just to keep themselves in the cycle of the reproduction of their lives. By joining JS they can be part of a movement that claims that life can be changed, can be different, that no one needs to be confined in any role, any function. JS might be fundamentally this: the decision that life can have room for decisions, that life cannot be reduced to the repetition of actions needed to ensure our food, health, and shelter.

I will always have a profound debt, love and admiration for JS because they, with many others, were able to unveil for me the power that Theatre of the Oppressed can have.

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# **The Poet and the Pedant**

**Jane Plastow**

I first met Sanjoy Ganguly a decade ago at a large international conference in Brighton, England, where we were discussing the use of theatre in development contexts. It was, I remember, extremely hot. The conference brought together a host of activist artists from around the world. This should have been exciting, but I am always overcome with awkwardness in large meetings of strangers. I have no idea of how to approach people in such situations and remain entirely unsure as to whether it is appropriate to simply make small talk or if, on the contrary, one is supposed to launch into deep and meaningful conversation. I remember looking around the chattering room during a break in proceedings on the first day and seeing a small, quiet bearded gentleman of Asian origin. He looked a restful sort of a person to approach. I did. And thus I encountered one of the most remarkable men it has been my honour to call a friend.

I was so beguiled by Sanjoy and what he told me of Jana Sanskriti that by the end of the conference I had persuaded him to write a chapter about the work of the company for a book I was editing on theatre and empowerment. Although Jana Sanskriti published an in-house magazine and was developing videos about its work it was still relatively unknown internationally. I was excited to have an opportunity of letting people know more about this remarkable organisation that had been working and growing steadily, against great social and political odds, with minimal funding and a network of unpaid volunteer actors, in northern India for 15 years. I explained to Sanjoy that I would like him to let people know how the organisation worked and how it had grown over the years. He was enthusiastic and we parted with a plan in place.

Some months later I received a quite substantial piece of writing from India. The book I was working on with my friend and colleague, Richard Boon (Boon & Plastow 2004), was to contain essays from around the world about a range of socially engaged theatre projects; some from practitioners and some from researchers who had links to particular projects. It is always interesting to work with different kinds of writers. The academically trained generally know that what is required is some contextual background, a helpful smattering of dates, a trajectory through the project, some moments of detailed imagery to bring the whole thing alive, and analysis of the significance of the work. The proportions of these elements will vary but there is a broad consensus about what they should be. When you work with practitioners you never quite know what you will get, even after a range of verbal and written discussions, because

what strikes the artist/maker as important is not necessarily the same as that required by scholarly training. When the artist is also a passionate activist like Sanjoy Ganguly what alchemy will take place during the process of writing is even more unpredictable. And so it was that I received a beautiful essay that wooed with its fire, its poetry and its storytelling, while simultaneously leaving the academic in me hugely frustrated with the elusiveness of timeline, hard facts, numbers, dates or just about anything that would help me pin Jana Sanskriti down as a company caught, chloroformed, categorised and laid out as an exhibit in my academic lepidopterist's display cabinet.

We had some emailed discussions, and I seem to remember that Sanjoy did placate me by putting in a few morsels of factual information, but I was an easy sell. The chapter was framed by a series of undated letters to a friend, discussing the politics and philosophy informing Sanjoy's burgeoning understanding of what it meant to create theatre not for but with ordinary people over the lifetime of Jana Sanskriti. He also wrote about Indian politics, philosophy and spirituality, about Marxism and of course about Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed. He spent much time telling stories: true stories of peasant women who could cut a playwright and intellectual down to size with a single question to puncture his complacency; and of young men who beat their wives until one day their actions mirrored on stage reduced them to tears of repentance. I could have spent all day reading those stories that whisked me into the world of the villages outside Kolkata and the struggle of a peasantry to claim its birthright as conscious, responsible and creative human beings. But what really grabbed me was the humility of the man who wrote. This was the man I had met in Brighton amongst the clamouring voices of artists and academics, not competing for voice or space, but just talking to people as the opportunity arose. This was the man who had given up his comforts and middle class prestige for life in the Indian villages. This was the man always seeking to learn from everyone; always asking himself difficult questions about how to challenge his own arrogance, assumptions and education. This was the man who did not proclaim expertise but offered his experience as a meditation and a conversation with a friend.

A few years later Sanjoy invited me to travel to India for his first Theatre of the Oppressed festival and I had the opportunity to see something of the scope of Jana Sanskriti, the multitude of groups it had given birth to and linked with, and the eagerness of the spectators in a park in Kolkata to participate in the debates the forum performances gave rise to. At the end of the festival Sanjoy invited a group of us to come and visit Jana Sanskriti's training centre in the village of Badu on the outskirts of the city.

I will never forget my first glimpse of that centre. It was dusk, and all around the perimeter of the wall and lining the path into the compound small clay oil

lamps were burning. There must have been hundreds. They fed every fantasy I'd ever had of the magic of the East (I beg as an excuse that this was my first ever visit to Asia) as the actors led us in to the simple concrete raised circular stage at the centre of the compound which is both Jana Sanskriti's home performance arena and a fabulous metaphor for the inclusiveness of the organisation's philosophy.

Since that time Sanjoy and I have maintained regular email contact and he has come to Leeds to stay with me and run a workshop for my students. Then, maybe three years ago, he mentioned that he was thinking of writing a book about his life with Jana Sanskriti and asked if I would be willing to help him as editor. I was delighted. Of course I would help. Sanjoy would send over chunks of writing and I would comment on it. I sent emails emphasising the need for a timeline and a history of the movement as a helpful beginning to the book.

I waited. Some months later a wodge of words arrived in my email inbox. There were almost no facts. Certainly there was no timeline. What there was, was a political diatribe denouncing bureaucratic communism as practised by the regional government in Kolkata and discussing Marxism, Augusto Boal and various Indian thinkers I had no knowledge of. I sat and thought for some time how I could most helpfully respond to Sanjoy. I suggested yet again that we needed facts, and that political ranting was not popular with international publishers, however passionate and heartfelt it might be. I also suggested that since he was such a fabulous storyteller, stories might be a way he could tell the tale of Jana Sanskriti. As always in our communications Sanjoy was gracious and said he was happy to rewrite. Over the coming months we exchanged a number of emails with his containing rewrites and mine obviously very disappointingly saying that I still thought his writing needed reworking to make it clearer, more objective. The sub-text was that I was demanding a more scholarly approach; I was asking for facts but also an attempt at least some of the time at a dispassionate analysis of the approach and achievements of Jana Sanskriti, while Sanjoy kept sending me political, philosophical and spiritual prose-poetry. I felt like a pedant rejecting a poet. Goodness knows what Sanjoy felt like but he eventually very sensibly decided to call it a day trying to work with me, and while maintaining our friendship he quietly turned to Ralph Yarrow for help.

In hindsight Ralph would have been a much better choice from the start. He has spent much time in India and written extensively about Indian theatre. I am sure he was simply much more in tune with writing coming from that culture than I was. I have absolutely no knowledge of how writer and editor worked together but the efficacy of the partnership is clear in that the book was published in the spring of 2010 (Ganguly 2010).

I have just finished reading Sanjoy's book and I think it is a gem. It's a gem

that irritates me no end. It makes me want to sit down with Sanjoy and ask a list of factual questions and forbid him to move until he answers them. Why can't he just straightforwardly tell me things like what he was doing that led him to go to the village; who he went with and how they survived? I still want to know when the first group was set up, and who was in it, what was the first play they made, and how it was received. I want to know how the groups started to multiply, how they combine political activism and theatre, and how and who has funded the work. At a more conceptual level I have queries about the process of play writing. Sanjoy says that he writes the plays with the actors, but my understanding—and I may be wrong—is that multiple troupes put on the same play, so how can this be true? Do other people in Jana Sanskriti also take the lead in scripting plays? Or in directing them? He talks of the importance of repeated showings of a play over weeks or months in one place as being crucial to a deepening response and learning from the play, but I'm not sure how this works. I want a case study to demonstrate it to me. And these are just the questions that came to me as I sat typing this article. I have many more.

But still the book is a jewel and a joy. I was thinking what other books it reminded me of and two immediately came into my head; Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). The Freire is hardly surprising. After all Freire had a huge influence on Augusto Boal, Sanjoy's own mentor, who named his seminal text, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) in homage to the older man. There is a lineage from Freire to Ganguly. But what is important, and why I immediately thought of Fanon (though I have no knowledge of whether Sanjoy has read his work) is that all these books are calls for human liberation, and for the liberation into humanity of the most marginalised—the 'wretched' and the 'oppressed'. They call for liberation, not through stale theory or the dogmatic codes of political or religious rhetoric, but through recognition of common humanity and most profoundly, though the word is never spoken, through love. All three writers are great lovers: of the rights of man and woman, of humanity's potential (all humanity—oppressor as well as oppressed), of creativity and of the possibility of a transformed, because more human, future. They are also great socialists because they see socialism as a progressive, optimistic and rational force for empowerment, though Ganguly in particular is damning of the Communist parties that fight for power in India at the expense of the people. The flip side is that they are also great haters of the forces of oppression; economic, military, political, spiritual and psychological. Moreover all these men are Gramscian organic intellectuals who see an absolute need for the educated and privileged to identify with the marginalised and to work alongside them, recognising that while the privileged may be putting their education at the service of the oppressed those same people have much to teach in an exchange that humanises

both parties. And of course what is hugely attractive in these men is that we know they did/do live their ideology. Sanjoy Ganguly has now given 25 years to Jana Sanskriti, and I see no sign he is about to take comfortable retirement in a Kolkata suburb.

There is another reason why the three books are linked in my mind, and that is to do with difficulties I have encountered with the writing style of each of them. The problem is least pronounced for me in Fanon who does give case studies as well as stories. I (and my students too) have long bemoaned the convoluted language and the conceptual jumping around one experiences in reading Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The effect is that at one minute I am transported with delight at the daring clarity of radical thought, while at the next I find myself almost unable to move forward as I wrestle with a section of particularly opaque and obscure wordiness. Maybe it's just the translation from Portuguese, but somehow I doubt it. And then there is Sanjoy. Time and again I have moments of recognition; I am compelled by a story of powerful transformative action, or I am fascinated by an argument—Sanjoy's repeated assertions that humanity can only be achieved in the collective are massively challenging for western readers brought up on a diet of aspiring individualism. But then Sanjoy loses me as he speaks of Indian thinkers and politics I have no handle on, or launches into a passage of Marxist-born invective (often against Indian Marxism) that leaves my academic objectivity reeling as I yearn for some analytic debate that will help me think rather than just emotionally accepting or rejecting his rage.

And then I find myself thinking, maybe the problem is in me, maybe it is in all of us trained by the West and Western influenced academies. Freire, Fanon and Ganguly all received their formal education from Western, colonially inspired academe, but they went on to reject the elitist model it propagates, and to argue for a completely different base of experiential learning as the basis for promoting analytic thought and human liberation. They do not reject ideas gleaned from learning across the world, but they privilege creativity and education that springs from lived experience. And of course none of them are Westerners. All have had other influences, as Sanjoy evidences when he speaks of Indian philosophy, literature and folk culture. All are 'othered' from the central discourses of neo-liberalism controlled by Europe and the US that still dominate norms of thinking, and the forms in which that thinking is generally authorised for published dissemination. They come from radically different cultures—from Martinique, Brazil and India—but across the miles and years they speak to us powerfully, not as objective rationalist post-enlightenment theorists, but as men who have rejected the constraints of a kind of Western thought that sometimes substitutes a reifying of facts, theories and distanced objectivity for real engagement with real societies, so that they are now free to

speak and live with passion. They can bring together as Sanjoy does, unlikely marriages of the political and spiritual. They can hammer the reader with a diatribe or seduce with poetic imagery, and they can dare to argue that the privileged might have much to learn from the 'wretched' of the earth.

Maybe I am just a pedant who can only see truth in verifiable, dated and footnoted fact. I hope not. Sanjoy Ganguly is one of those whose life and words I find compelling and deeply hopeful. But even after this meditation on the possible inadequacies of my academic training, I don't see that it would be impossible or even undesirable for the poetry of transformative action to be leavened with a few dates.

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# Identity in Diversity<sup>1</sup>

**Bárbara Santos**

Translated from Portuguese by Justine Williams

**2006, November, India:** After a long and tiring journey, from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, we arrive for one last edition of the Muktadhara, a Festival of Theatre of the Oppressed (henceforth TO) organized by the group Jana Sanskriti (henceforth JS), in Calcutta. We are the team of the Centro de Teatro do Oprimido, who develops projects and research in several areas, conducted with Augusto Boal, the creator of the TO Methodology and our Artistic Diretor for 23 years.

First time in India. The entire mystique of the place, even more so, the entire mystique of our imagined ideas about the place filters our way of seeing what we look at, of listening to what we hear and of feeling what we touch, or what we want to touch. Even the smallest detail has fragrance, flavor and a sense of adventure.

In New Delhi, the first stop, we were on our own. The arrival, the taxi-drivers, the porters. We try to communicate in English. Despite the exchange of words giving the impression that we are in a dialogue, we realize that the codes of communication are different. We feel, that using a language is not a guarantee to make ourselves understood.

From Delhi to Calcutta. The differences stand out in everything: in the taste, in the climate, in the colors and in their combinations, in the garments, in content and in appearance. In the sound of the voices, in the rhythm of the language, in the volume of the conversations. In the drawing of steps and in the rhythm of the steps. In the manner of stopping and following. In the geography of bodies and the environment. In the characteristics of the faces and the residents. In the importance and the beauty of the temples. In the concept of beauty. The differences evidence themselves in volume and in depth.

In the streets, we not only feel observed but even investigated. The eyes that look at us are not satisfied with a superficial glance. They look at us as if through a microscope. We feel like strangers: foreigners. We notice that the way of seeing is different. We realize that there is a way of perceiving that is absolutely different from our own. The differences are obvious to the eyes, to the nose, to the hands, to the mouth, and to the entire body. They seem so intense and

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Brent Blair for his contributions in footnotes 1, 2, and 3

present that they challenge our belief in the possibility that we could share a common language and that we will be understood through dialogue.

We leave the center of the city. The organization, JS, the oldest TO group in Asia, is located in a village. Their rehearsal space is circular and in open air. A warm reception in a familial environment gives us the impression of having arrived at home, even though the house is unrecognizable to us.

A group of foreigners, mostly coming from Europe, are integrated into one of the workshops offered by JS that precedes the Festival. The participants seem delighted with the atmosphere of the place: a field open to the sky where it is also possible to maintain contact with the community. When they talk about JS, the participants of the workshop give the impression of referencing something almost spiritual, between magic and mysticism. They mention things such as enchantment, energy, spirituality, sacredness, tranquility and various other attributes that, in a certain way, point more in the direction of a temple than to that of the combat field, more in the direction of Hindu monks than to that of political artists-activists.

A kind of mystified view that surrounds the imaginary of Indians and of India appears to provoke projections that distort the perception of the real image of JS, superimposing a projected image on JS which is a group that fights against the mystification of reality, working throughout several segments of Indian society. JS looks instead to reveal, through aesthetic means, that the transformation of reality does not depend on personal relations with the sacred, on miracles or on divine benevolence, but that necessitates the concrete actions of real citizens to be effective.

Idealized images of countries, people and cultures circumscribe India, as well as many other Asian countries, in the contexts of spirituality, of meditation and the search for contact with the sacred. This is a vision that does not consider, for example, the grandeur of the Indian film industry or the international importance of software production in the country. It does not cite the express production of automotive vehicles, amongst other industrialized goods. This aesthetized imaginary view condones still a colonialist vision that acts as much within the socio-cultural field as within the economy.

It is also an aesthetization of an imaginary that propagates the idea that Africans and Latin Americans are more casual, sensual, musical and emotional than Europeans who, for their part, are more cold, rational and logical. Ideas spread largely through aesthetic means—through image, sound, word. On the one hand, these ideas invade our sensitive thought and influence our perception of reality, and on the other, they reveal views that are often used as much for attributing as for denying value.

If a European white man speaks, before he even says the first word, he already has the advantage of a higher value added to his image, set of ideas

that associates him with objectivity, logic, and effectiveness. For a black African or South American woman, the movement will be the reverse, on account of 'folkloric' notions that have been aesthetically attached to her real image, her intellectual value will be subtracted before she has even made herself understood.

Investigating to what extent these neo-colonial views continue to act upon and mediate our perceptions of reality must be the urgent task for all of TO practitioners. Every time the mystification of India or of Indians is superimposed on the real image of JS—a movement of political activists—the view of who they are and what their work is about is distorted. The danger of mystifying and idealizing how the work is effectively realized is to put the organization in a place that, symbolically, has no relation to reality. Indeed, it amounts to passing an impression that the actual organisational results have more to do with the mystical character of a place than to the political action of people. Or even more deceptively, imprisoning the achievements as idealized beauty rather than recognising them as both intellectual and practical outcomes.

Probably, the members of JS, individually, embody a great deal of their Indian cultural influences. In the meantime, these cultural influences do not determine *a priori* who they are nor what they do while they are a collective. The specificity of this group's work, with its own set of characteristics, inside quite a particular context, cannot obstruct the recognition of the wealth of knowledge that has been constructed by them through their work process, and of its necessary diffusion. Another way to build a theatre process, even from a very particular context, it can serve as a reference and enrich the process of building our own way to do our work.

**2009, July, Brazil** – The First International Theater of the Oppressed Conference, carried out in Rio de Janeiro, by the team at the Centro de Teatro do Oprimido (henceforth CTO), had 250 registered participants from 28 countries (10 European, 6 Latin American, 5 African, 4 Asian, 2 North American and Australia) and 18 states from Brazil. This extensive and diverse participation was a concrete demonstration of the impressive international diffusion of the Theatrical Method created by Augusto Boal. At this event, it was possible to notice the same kind of mechanism that we perceive in India.

In the aesthetization of Brazil and of Brazilians, images have been created and propagated that are strongly based in carnival and in football, replete with bananas, ball-dribbling, hip-swinging, samba, sensuality, joy, casualness, hustling and improvisation. Images that do not incorporate, for example, the economic and political power of the country in a globalized world—a country that was able to better face the most recent global economic crisis thanks to a strong domestic market. Nor does it emphasize Brazil's pioneering technological contributions in the area of oil research in deep waters, or in participatory

technologies like Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Participatory Budgets, Forum Theater, Legislative Theater, amongst others, which are disseminated throughout the world.

This 'mystique' about Brazil and the Brazilians seems to have been superimposed on the real image of the team at the CTO during the Conference. A distorted image put into question the capacity of this collective to carry out the event even though we had systematized innovative theatre techniques together with Boal. In our view, for several of the participants, the Conference should have followed a determined paradigm of conception and organization. It should reproduce a way of doing, understood at best, in accordance with a kind of conceptual monopoly of 'democracy', 'participation', 'efficiency', etc. That, of course, the South should import from the North of the Globe. A set of pre-given signifiers that, for a few observers, were not in line with this mystified meaning of the CTO team.

I consider it fundamental to affirm a historic necessity of finding ways to confront the aesthetic war into which we have all been inserted. We have to be aware of it and to get ready to fight with efficiency. In a community of TO practitioners, it is necessary to develop skills that help us to perceive and to fight against post-colonialist and aesthetized views that add and subtract value, that distort images and prevent us from seeing what we look at. As representatives of so many societies that were colonizers and many societies that have been colonized, we are still subject to such ideological invasions and we need to combat them.

Our Methodology is about essence rather than appearance.

**2006, November, India** – A group of us from the CTO meet with JS, through our shows, in one of the public squares of Calcutta. Our show presents the story of a woman who yearns for space to investigate, to discover, to work, to love, to love herself. A space to be. A Brazilian woman, absolutely urban, who speaks Portuguese, does not go without rice and beans, only attends football during the World Cup and likes the beach.

In the Indian show, another woman who, in her own way, struggles for space to study, to investigate, to discover, to choose, to refuse. A space to be. This second woman is from the Bengal region, speaks Bengali, does not eat without pepper, wears long and colorful clothes, has much musicality and lives in a village.

Two different women meet in the same struggle, on the same stage with the same persistence and the same objective: to question patriarchal society and to achieve equality of rights. On the stage they question the audience, provoke reactions, stimulate interventions. The women who play these women, fight in their reality on the stage and in life.

I represent the woman on this side over here. Sima Ganguly is the woman

on that side over there. We represent many and ourselves in the life of these others. Like the characters we represent, we are very different in our details, and, at the same time, in an impressive coincidence, we have much in common. We are more or less the same age, we are mothers of only children—youth of the same generation—and we entered the road of TO more or less at the same time. In spite of passing by different rivers and scenery, our roads are each processes under-construction and they travel towards similar destinations.

The first time that we met was in 1993, during the Seventh International Festival of Theater of the Oppressed, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. A two week event, organized by the CTO, which consisted of participation from 12 Brazilian groups and 12 foreign groups, including JS. Many years later, we meet in France, at the invitation of Muriel Naessens, of Feminism ENJEUX, for a series of activities around the topic of the struggle against violence against women.

Already in 1993, Sima was portraying this woman. Thirteen years later, she continued to find reasons to keep on staging the same story. More than that, she was interpreting it with an emotion so authentic and deep that it gave the impression of being a recent production. Sima's interpretation, mature and conscientious, opened space for the subjectivity of the character who becomes still more interesting.

What calls our attention is the fact that the Sima we met several times outside of India was quite different from the Sima that lived in Calcutta. Abroad, we had the opportunity to interact with an extraordinary actress and with the dedicated wife of one admired Joker in the TO international community.<sup>2</sup> Meantime, in Calcutta, we had the pleasure of having access to the woman who assumes responsibility for the leadership of their collective work and who is a strong reference point for women and men, besides being an effective and warm Joker who stimulates participation and analysis from the spect-actors, who conducts the entire Forum session with equilibrium, balancing delicacy and determination without losing sight of the focus on the necessity of finding alternatives for the staged question.

We experienced the same surprise in relation to several other women of the group, such as Kavita and Renuka. Abroad, we have access only to the actresses who, in a certain way, appear before our prejudiced eyes like sweet and smiling Indians, with a loaded image of innocence and a certain passivity. In these international spaces, the realization of the power of these 'warrior women' escapes us—these women who mobilize communities, coordinate collectives and act politically. Dynamic and determined women. Abroad, the barriers of

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<sup>2</sup> The Joker in TO techniques is the mediator between actors onstage and audience offstage and instigates spect-actor participation in Forum Theatre.

language and culture obstruct our access to the power of these women.

Despite their importance, we must be able to understand the limitations of the international events. We should pay attention to the fact that events are instantaneous episodes from which we could scarcely achieve the essential aspects of projects or people. Therefore, we should not permit ourselves to be easily captured by appearances and stereotypes.

For instance, a woman from GTO-Bissau (Theatre of the Oppressed group from Guinea Bissau, Africa) could seem a bit unsure, timid and dependent in a Theatre Festival in Brazil. This should not allow us to conclude that she is like that. On the contrary, we should create opportunities to get to experience her on her own terms, including somehow the context where she mobilizes action.

Once more: our Methodology is about essence rather than appearance. However, to get the essence it is necessary to work hard, while appearance, we can take for free.

To see Sima, Kavita, Renuka, and other women in action, to realize the importance and the power in what they do, impacted our vision of the group profoundly. We understand that the women of JS also act in the leadership levels and build spaces of power. Several of them, as actress-activists, were responsible for the foundation of social movements that had succeeded in mobilizing thousands of participants.

**2009, July, Brazil** – Our experience in India and our understanding of the work developed by the women inside the group convinced us of the importance of guaranteeing the presence of a female representative from JS at the First International Conference of Theatre of the Oppressed. We understood that it was necessary to guarantee space for the perspective of the women in the group to be known. Also, to create conditions so that it could be understood that the discreet, gentle and delicate posture of the women of JS does not mean that they are lacking initiative. It was essential to present the force of these women to the international TO community.

Our travel to India reinforced our conviction that, in the context of TO, it is urgent and essential to find ways to guarantee the representation of countries from the global south and, in particular, the women of these countries at the international events that we promote. Like Boal said, this must be an international movement of men and women.

The fact that we guaranteed the presence and the effective participation of representatives, women as much as men, from several countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America was a priority and an important conquest of this First International Conference of Theatre of the Oppressed.

**2006, November, India** – Although we understood a little more about the force and the power of these women, the strategy of continuing to stage the same show for so many years was still causing us unease. For what? When

questioning this subject, Sima said that she would keep on playing that woman until the situation had changed in a significant way. To that end, the lives of millions of women in India are still very similar to the life of that woman depicted on the stage. In spite of the fact that the work of JS has already provoked many concrete actions regarding this question, the problem is far from being resolved. Since there is still much to do, they understand it to be necessary to keep on staging the same play.

Aside from being presented many years ago, the show is staged by several casts. We realize that, more than a specific work mounted by and for a specific cast, this show represents a kind of flag, a standard for groups from different localities where JS has planted seeds and continues to take care of the fruits borne as a result. Many young people interpret the same woman. Thousands of women are recognized within this one woman and they empathize with her. In spite of having understood that the treatment of this show was a different paradigm of multiplication, for us, it continued to feel difficult to understand the reasons behind this strategy of action.<sup>3</sup>

**1997/2010, Brazil** – At the Centro de Teatro do Oprimido, we also work with many popular groups. In the last thirteen years, we have dedicated ourselves to the development of qualification programs for multipliers in the Methodology. During these political-aesthetic-pedagogical processes, we have worked in 18 states, in a country of continental proportions, with people who are involved in social-cultural action, linked to organizations committed to transformative community-based actions. Also, we have supervised the processes of multiplication in Mozambique and in Guinea-Bissau and supported the groups' diffusion of the Methodology in Senegal, in Angola and, in a less structured way, even for several new groups formed in Latin America, in particular, in Argentina.

In these contexts, it is essential to create conditions for the participants to appropriate the entire production process for themselves, the only form of guaranteeing an autonomous multiplication that does not depend on our constant presence. We long for a multiplication committed to the essential fundamentals of the Methodology, along with political aims and aesthetic development.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Portuguese-speaking TO community, '*multiplicação*' is widely used to describe the formal training and development of new jokers, but it includes the nuanced idea of 'disseminating' or 'spreading' the work by virtue of newly trained jokers to diverse new communities. In Boal's image, they are as birds who digest the seeds from the tree of TO and then spread these to new communities, building new TO practices in other parts of the world. 'Multiplication' is an awkward substitute with other implications in English, but short of 'training'—which is the loose translation for '*formação*'—there are few better words.

In this sense, all our work is based on the fact that each qualified multiplier is enabled to organize community nuclei and to produce their own scenes through Forum Theater. Even though certain themes will repeat with great frequency (oppression against women, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, social discrimination, discrimination against black people of African descent, homophobia, amongst other themes), and even though many shows will be similar, with histories that will again repeat, each production is singular, with its own identity.

Looking from our reference, our paradigm of diffusion of the Method, it was not easy for us to understand the JS process of multiplication. At least as much as we were able to perceive it, with the little access that we had to the local social context, to the codes of familiarity and to historical aspects.

**2006, November, India** – In fact, in the beginning, it looked to us not only strange, but also not very creative that various groups staged the same show. What was happening there? A lack of time for local process? Too many people to approach? Were they missing something or were they treating it as a question of another strategy with internal and coherent reasons based on concrete experiences? Was this strategy responding to some specific necessity of the local work, which was motivating the choice to work in this way?

Realizing the quantity of groups with whom they were working, the diversity of the casts that were staging the same shows and the community involvement of all, it was logical to come to the conclusion that the strategy developed there was responding to a specific and concrete necessity. In a context absolutely different from our own, where the local codes were inaccessible to us, we found a very different paradigm that was very distinct from the one that we use. A strategy that, in principle, would not be applicable to our reality nor to our style of action, but there, it seemed to work very well. A strategy from where certainly we could learn a lot.

It was enough to observe the action of these Indian community groups—they were staging shows as if they were their own particular dramas—and in the subsequent sessions of Forum Theater, we perceived intense commitment to the struggle and a connection to the themes presented. Groups clearly formed by actor-activists, people engaged in community action.

Through these performances that we saw in Calcutta and in the villages, the cast of JS and their community groups presents stories that contain many other stories. Well-contextualized dramatic structures that enable us to understand the social conditions that enfold the characters and determine the form of interaction. The shows join aesthetic power with political clarity. Through the combination of simple and accessible objects, colorful masks and impeccable physical movements, they facilitate an understanding of the political context in a way that is accessible to anyone.

Even without understanding the social, cultural, economical and political reasons and motivations that produced their paradigm of multiplication, we agreed with what had been developed there, in terms of the aesthetics as much as the political.

We shared the same work for structuring a political movement committed to the transformation of reality, which makes its political intervention in society as a part of and through aesthetic means. And, more than that, a movement that understands the political importance of the development of an Aesthetics of the Oppressed. That image is language!

We were managing to identify a movement behind each show and within each community-based cast and that was what was linking us together. The fact that they are not only a group, but yes, a part of something that moves, transforms, multiplies and develops, was affirming our identity. We were looking at them and seeing ourselves in the mirror. Like a movement, we were beginning to feeling represented.

Finally, we profoundly understood the sense of fondness, wonder and enthusiasm that our beloved Boal felt when he would tirelessly cite JS, as example and inspiration, in our work meetings at the Centro de Teatro do Oprimido.

A cast that produces many casts, but that is not in the surface of the work. It is not about having a show to reproduce with different casts formed by actors. It is not about the work of specialists in Forum Theater who write shows for oppressed people, trying to translate their lives, feelings and perceptions. It is about real work with casts formed by actor-activists. They are militants in a struggle for the transformation of Indian society.

In spite of the fact that we had no conditions to precisely grasp the process of building and disseminating these theatre plays, the commitment to and the identification with the struggles of the oppressed were evident. It was clear that the process had been appropriated by the oppressed. A different type of appropriation from what we knew, but even so, it could still be realized by us in its concreteness, in everything that we were seeing.

How can two processes apparently so different flow together in identification? How can two different ways reveal the same commitment to the fundamentals of the Methodology: the solidarity in the base, in the constitution of the movement, and the transformation of reality, as an aim? Besides the differences in the multiplication strategies, we could easily identify the common extract: the foundations and the aims of the theater that we do.

That is how TO must be: in each location, identified with the culture, the history and the objective conditions that define that context. This is what causes the TO from Brazil to be Brazilian. The one from India to be Indian. The one from Mozambique to be Mozambican. In each place, it must be appropriated

by those locations, it must belong from that place, and be integrated into the local language. To understand the traditions and the traditional people, but to create the conditions of questioning them, when necessary.

At the same time, it must be unified, able to be identified in spite of the specificities of each place. Everywhere, the democratic, humanist and revolutionary essence, which is based on ethics and solidarity, must strive for social organization, through the stimulation and the promotion of concrete and continued social actions. The TO is a language and, as such, it can be used in varied cultures. As a methodology based on ethics and not on moral conviction, it aims for the promotion of basic human rights and not for the maintenance of standards of behavior.

Accompanying the cast of JS in their presentations in the villages, we were able to see the intrinsic relationship and the organic bond between the group and the community. More than that, it was clear that they were not treated just as a cast, but as the representatives of a social organization. Actors and spect-actors integrating into the same movement. This demonstrates the force of Jana Sanskriti's action in that all their work is structured on this solid foundation.

This community-oriented commitment was confirmed in Boal's speech, given in a public square in Calcutta. The conference in the square was a kind of meeting place for those who joined in the gigantic March, which numbered 12,000 Indian participants, a grand majority of whom were women, members of community-based associations of spect-actors who interact and engage with casts and multipliers of JS. Beside this, there were dozens of foreigners there, all to mark the launch of and the foundation of the Indian Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed, which in its nascency already represented three million people.

Just like CTO, JS has an unquestionable commitment to multiplication, to social organization for political transformation. They know that in TO the end of the Forum Theater session is only the beginning of the search for the realization of concrete and continued social actions. They know that all the practices aim towards the search for alternatives for intervention in real life. From the most simple exercises to the most complex techniques and shows, all the activities of TO must be based on this revolutionary goal, which begins in self-understanding, advances towards consciousness of the greater social context of the group and then to an understanding of the relations that encompass society as a whole.

It is about the discovery of individual and collective potentialities as stimulus and strengthening for the citizenship action. The understanding that TO is not a Methodology of entertaining the victim, but rather of strengthening the oppressed in the struggle for attainment of rights and happiness.

**2010 International TO Community** – Just like in India, in various other places, TO has flourished in community spaces and taken root through the

actions of groups and nuclei. Places such as Mozambique, where in less than ten years the methodology was spread from the north to the south of the country, with the GTO-Maputo work, becoming a strategy of notable socio-cultural recognition. The 167 community-based groups acting in conjunction with one another, developing projects and sharing resources, through the RETEC (National Network of Community-based Theater), with representatives from all the provinces of the country.

Or in Senegal, where the group Kaddú Yaraax was able to disseminate the methodology through the formation of multipliers from different regions of the country, strengthening community groups. In the annual Festival of Forum Theater in Dakar, one could observe the group's strong connection to the greater community of Yaraax, who participated actively from the planning of the event up to its realization.

In Guinea-Bissau, in spite of all the financial difficulties and political instability, one also sees this kind of action based on diffusion and on deepening. Associating itself with the qualification of multipliers towards the formation of regional nuclei.

In several countries of Latin America, close to Brazil, especially in Argentina, in spite of recent events, TO already appears to constitute a movement through the variety of groups that are trying to act as a network, looking for forms of contact and collaboration. The meeting of Jujuy in January 2010 was a concrete demonstration of this aim and of the awareness of this necessity. What happened in Latin America is recent and still incipient, yet even so, their efforts already demonstrate the direction in which the TO is moving throughout the region.

In several European countries, one must call attention to the significant increase in the number of practitioners of the Methodology who, on one side, are aware of the necessity of collective action and, on the other side, have dedicated themselves to the organization of committed theater nuclei in the struggle for social transformation.

In Barcelona, Spain, where it is only recently that they have even spoken of 'social theater', collectives that consider themselves TO groups seek to act as a network, PLATFORMA. Through this initiative, they promote theoretical and practical meetings, they open spaces for qualification and they share experiences and resources. These groups work in such a way that the political dimension of TO is the basis for their actions.

Groups such as ATG – Aktionstheater Halle (Germany), GTO-Lisbon, (Portugal), amongst others, know that it is necessary to move beyond workshops, presentations of thematic shows and timely discussions. They are aware of the necessity of diffusing and deepening the work towards the constitution of social movements that are concentrated on transformation. TO must be a martial art made up of collectives.

From the perspective of this list of examples I have seen up-close—which is certainly not an exhaustive list of examples—Brazil, India and Mozambique are important references. All of the work that the CTO develops rotates around multiplication, social organization and the promotion of concrete actions. Even in the context of research into new techniques, everything is directed towards the improvement of work in the field. We realize the same thing regarding the work developed by GTO-Maputo and by JS which have solid community bases that are strengthened by each action, producing new possibilities for subsequent actions, accumulating experience, amplifying both their political impact and the quantity of associates and collaborators.

The productive process of TO must not limit itself solely to aesthetic and pedagogical challenges. Its ethics demand a political positioning, therefore, it is necessary and fundamental that practitioners of the methodology—the artists—become activists in the struggle by questioning and by transforming authoritarian, oppressive and unjust social structures.

JS, one of the most representative movements of the Methodology of August Boal, affirms, with their commitment to action, that TO is not only seen as a collective art, but must be a martial art made up of collectives. It is an art of investigation, discovery, systematization<sup>4</sup> and citizenship<sup>5</sup> action that becomes a vehicle for the transformation of society.

Viva Boal!

Viva Theatre of the Oppressed!

Viva Jana Sanskriti!

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<sup>4</sup> The word in Portuguese and Spanish, '*sistematizar*', widely used in TO circles in areas where these languages are spoken, nonetheless lacks an appropriate translation in English. Loosely translated, it refers to the process of 'wrapping things up', the critical conclusion of a process and its subsequent documentation which formulates a 'system' designed to describe the event that transpired. Boal '*systematized*' TO in his many techniques that are recorded extensively in his books and articles, and in the writings and teachings of many others around the world. Group process is frequently documented by witnesses or scribes who then '*systematize*' (encapsulate, 'wrap up') the group dialogues in order to deliver this information back to the wider group in more succinct form. One might say 'conclude', but perhaps 'formulate' is more accurate. 'Systematize' seems too mechanical, so this translator opted for 'systematically formulate' instead, preserving the essential core of the word 'system'.

<sup>5</sup> In the framework of TO in many countries where 'citizenship' is denied many immigrants such as in the United States, despite their long-standing residency in the host country, the word 'citizen' is problematic. TO encourages people to take on the role of a productive member of society, despite status of their national citizenship. Here, a more inclusive 'citizen of humanity' is inferred.

## **‘Fierce Elegance’ and our Jana Sanskriti**

**Doug Paterson**

It is an honor to be asked to write a brief essay on the work and indeed the remarkable life of Jana Sanskriti (henceforth JS). I first encountered six of the company at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro in the summer of 1993. I was happy to have been invited by Augusto Boal, whom I had invited to the 1992 National Conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in Atlanta, Georgia. But I was still very new to Theatre of the Oppressed (henceforth TO) theory and practice. Imagine my surprise, then, to see dozens of performing groups from around the world, including JS’s startling *Shonar Meye* (Golden Girl) performance about a young woman and her journey from happy youthfulness into the horrific world of arranged marriage. While this was over seventeen years ago, I still remember complete sweeps of this story told with brilliant yellow and red costumes, exquisite yet martial movements, and an invitation to intervene in a beautiful silken world filled with horror.

I have seen the piece on two other occasions since: at the Ripple Conference in Toronto, Canada, in 1997 and during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Muktheadhara at the original JS site three hours outside Kolkata, India, in October 2006. The site is a long bus ride, a rough cart ride, and a hefty walk from Kolkata, in a sense truly emphasizing for us, the attendees, the true grassroots origins of Jana Sanskriti’s project. To be honest, I wasn’t quite prepared for the sometimes grueling character of the journey and thought it a lot to ask. But this practice of asking much from people and much more from themselves is, I think, a core characteristic of JS.

The performance at their original site was much simpler than the ones in Rio and Toronto. A plain white building served as background to a literal circle in which the audience sat and the actors performed. Costume colors were now black and white—very clean—and the performers were newer and younger. But the story was unmistakable and strong. As the late afternoon sun waned into evening, I found myself trying to imagine this circle of people expanding from a near anonymous rural intimacy into a national and even global force for change. There must have been many reasons Augusto Boal supported Jana’s work so passionately, but certainly one had to be Jana’s realization of his observation that if we can’t imagine anything else, there won’t be anything else. If Jana, if this core and growing network could imagine something different, something more, and yet continue to retain their commitment to deep community, then indeed anything *was* possible.

The Muktheadhara Festival itself was for me a further realization of Jana’s

reach always exceeding its grasp, and thus the remarkable achievements and vision of its reach. The Festival contained perhaps too much. Going by me and my wife, Marghee's participation, it began with an enormous march by people from across India, marching to demand more resources for TO. It seemed an endless stream of people, organized, energized, and all carrying signs with various configurations of 'We want to practice TO' on each sign. After a two hour walk, the people concluded with a rally. This was followed by the trip to Jana's original site the next day. Whew! The following day began the theatre festival itself with performances in a city park during the evening and TO plenary sessions in nearby buildings during the day. Plenaries, performances, cultural safari, and a mass march: after a week I was spent.

What is notable is that JS, and artistic director Sanjoy Ganguly—those who are doing this work every day and have been for twenty-one years—are *not* spent. Not remotely. They have, in fact, expanded their circle from a dozen to hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions, depending on how one defines their circle. Nor have they achieved this by imagination alone, but rather by Jana's collective imagination extending their reach always further, and thus extending the hard work of their grasp beyond certainly my imagination. While the male supremacist practice of arranged marriages continues to be a cornerstone of their critique, they confront a dizzying array of struggles, including land reform to corporate appropriation of cities; religious and political divisions to wholesale globalization of the economy of India; from agricultural matters to family oppressions; and from health issues to racism. This list is of course wholly inadequate.

In Rio in 1993 I had an opportunity to speak with three of the Jana women who performed *Shonar Meye*. Like the performance, this dialogue too stands out clearly in my mind. I asked about the matter of forced marriage and the status of women, as well as about their being in the performance group, and was struck by each one's inner strength and by their connectedness to each other and to the struggle for justice. I was also taken by their quiet resolve. These were also characteristics of the men in the company, especially Sanjoy Ganguly. Given the violence of the subject and the implied and actual disruption a *Shonar Meye* performance could cause, there was what I would call a fierce elegance about all that Jana said and did.

How else could a theatre company begin to move the stone of history? How else can we explain a community-based theatre company networking hundreds of thousands of people? How otherwise might we explain this many-handed grasp continually pursuing a further reach? There must have to be a ferocity—ferociousness—in the very initial attempt, to say nothing of the twenty-year, daily journey. Let us concede that virtually any fight for social justice has embedded within it a core of principle and ferocity combined. Yet it is also this

very ferocity that can wear us down, burn us out in self-combustion. We need a point-of-view, a bearing, with which to carry such productive and destructive energy. Jana is certainly teaching me the lesson: elegance in the midst of tumult; composure as the struggle grows.

That old British imperialist, hyper-individualist, and no-friend-of-India Kipling had it wrong again. It is not a matter of 'If you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs,' but rather, Rudyard, eliminate the imperial 'you' and the supremacist 'others'. Learn how JS gently keeps its heads, and hearts and hands, AND extends them fiercely when oppression causes *we the people* to lose ours. There is with JS quiet in a sea of storm, elegance with their unrelenting and ferocious fight for justice. As they move into their third decade, I can only marvel at their grasp and stand in awe of their seeming endless vision

## What next? Some questions to think about

Ralph Yarrow

Dear Sanjoy

*This is a kind of 'virtual letter', in that you are not replying to me within the text; though you have read much of it and indicated that you are happy with it. It is also an 'open letter', since it puts on the table for discussion within Jana Sanskriti and its friends and associates issues about current and future practice and as it were invites people from many places to be a part of the debate about them. I think that is also an anti-monological procedure.*

*First, let me ask: do you recognise the summary which follows as representative of Jana Sanskriti's principles and position? What have I missed? I wonder what you would change if this were a real, and not a virtual letter? (Apart from the style, I mean!)*

What you have created is vital for local democracy in India. In your work, theatre manifests the creativity and the intelligence of its makers: the people. And Jana Sanskriti has also become a signpost for the work of engagement through theatre which validates and inspires activists around the world.

India is changing fast, although key deficiencies and imbalances remain, and the story of vested interest in power, politics and privilege is constant. Jana Sanskriti too is changing: its members travel more within and beyond India, it is a player in national and international associations and networks, its reputation is more extensive.

What has to be retained and what has to be refocused, revised, reconfigured? What can or should be added? What are the challenges, the possibilities, the dangers?

I'm sure you know in more detail than me about most of those things. But you also know that I've been thinking and talking about them with you for many years. I think we agree about many things, and we have slightly different perspectives on some others, like for instance the issue of inclusion or exclusion of different categories of people doing activist theatre work within Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) associations. Maybe it will be useful to try to set out examples of both of these kinds of issues.

Jana Sanskriti has been your life for 25 years. That testifies to an almost unbelievable commitment, vision and input. It also means it is quite difficult for you to see the picture from outside. And although I've visited and worked with Jana Sanskriti regularly for over a decade, I cannot know in day-to-day detail or indeed in direct transmission (i.e. using Bengali) what it is like to operate on the ground in the conditions in which you work. One of the ways

in which Jana Sanskriti is shifting or being shifted is that it now has to be seen (also) as an international operation, with all the problems that brings with it as well as the advantages. So for instance in this respect, you are aware in detail of the difficulties which this involves in terms of legal and financial status under Indian law. Additionally, you understand the constraints of working in a State which has been (nominally, at least, though not necessarily in terms of policy in many areas) run by the left—a left with strong nostalgic links with the days of Internationalist Socialism. In such a context, it is not uncommon for ‘imperialist’ funding to be viewed with suspicion, however contradictory such a stance may be in terms of the ruling party’s actual behaviour towards, for instance, global finance as operated by Indian billionaires.

Here are some of the things I see as challenges, both to Jana Sanskriti and to your role within it:

- Avoiding basking in complacency due to international reputation and the kinds of deserved but ubiquitous praise I suspect we will find in this volume (I also could easily highlight Jana Sankriti’s many achievements both aesthetic and political, and say lots about the talent and commitment of its members, with whom I always find it an enormous privilege to work).
- Maintaining artistic quality and liveliness: learning new skills and finding new roles (both performative and organisational) for as many members of the Jana Sanskriti family as possible.
- Negotiating the politics of group democracy: within local groups, in the Indian Federation of Theatre of the Oppressed (FOTO) and in the context of international networking.
- Avoiding rigidity of hierarchy and/or exclusiveness: attitudes towards other Theatre for Development/Applied Theatre practitioners as well as negotiating and ‘policing’ attitudes towards other Forum practitioners and uses of Forum in other contexts on the social/economic/political spectrum both within and beyond India.
- Interacting and negotiating with other entities/organizations: local and national political organisations, parties, governments as well as other providers of services and activist organisations, and NGOs.
- Avoidance of guru-mentality vis-à-vis Augusto, post-Boal: the need to ‘reframe/rewrite’ Boal.
- Establishment and development of a Research and Development arm in Digambarpur or Badu.
- Development of educational work: training, theatre as pedagogy/alternative education, Forum and articulation/promotion of aims for educational provision in rural areas.
- Need to keep the local focus: building strong organisational structures

around local and regional teams and avoiding excessive dispersion of energies, not least your own.

- Fundraising and finance.

These are some of the many issues we have discussed over the years, and I want to recall some of them and raise others in order to ask what kinds of challenges and opportunities face Jana Sanskriti now, and how you see them. Before doing that it is useful to set out what kind of organisation Jana Sanskriti is and how it has come to be like that.

Your book tells the story of Jana Sanskriti's growth and development, and shows that it is rooted in:

- A commitment to the value of education
- A belief in the intelligence and the rational creative capacity of all people
- Strong opposition to any form of culture of monologue
- Extensive direct experience of life in (mainly) rural communities
- A perception that aesthetics is a key force in stimulating understanding
- A realisation that theatre can directly and actively engage spectators as well as performers
- A reformulation of Indian thought which defines the spiritual as the human capacity for relationship
- The elaboration of a series of stages of the development of collective rationality engendered through theatre
- The belief, based on experience, that humans of all social and economic classes can evolve an active model of participatory democracy
- A strong commitment to the essentials of Augusto Boal's social and political vision and a willingness to use and adapt his theatre practice in order to realise it
- A growing sense of the responsibility of an organisation based on the foregoing principles to establish a national and international profile and consider how to maintain and develop these dimensions

In addition, my contacts with you and the Jana Sanskriti core team confirm that these principles and goals are pursued with extraordinary commitment and integrity, and a concern to balance the need to remain rooted in the day-to-day life of people and communities with the need to be open to the international spectrum of theatre and social engagement. As I see it, these things mean that Jana Sanskriti, as a community of individuals, as a local, national and global organisation, as a model for collective democracy, and as an example of Boalian theatre practice, therefore represents and proposes:

- A practice of theatre
- A social and communal ethics
- A political strategy
- An educational model
- A local, regional, national and international symbolic function

These are large dimensions. They are justified by history and practice, as I am sure other contributors to this volume emphasise. But it is important to signal them, to be clear about them, to interrogate them, in order to recognise the responsibilities, challenges and opportunities they enclose.

So what are the challenges? They can be organised in two categories, context-related and theatre-related. Of course these are in another sense inseparable, since your work is always *theatre in context* (by, with, and for the spect-actor community, highlighting and engaging with its issues) and *theatre as context* (framing those issues as embodied and ongoing dialogue). But it may help my attempt to clarify the range of concerns to divide them arbitrarily at first.

a) Context-related:

I'm not sure how far India can be said to be evolving, in light of your understanding of this term (i.e. a quest of mind to encompass more and to embody it and extend understanding and action). But I think that you would like to persuade India to do so. In any case, it is changing fast, if reactively and under the influence of an economics which seems to both of us to be divisive rather than productive. So the challenge here is how you can adapt practice to the kinds of change you are already seeing in attitudes and behaviour, even in the rural areas. Even here, adspreak rules in the sense that self-interest is increasingly – though not, I think, totally—taken for granted. Can TO work where 'community' is beginning to become more a temporary, ad-hoc phenomenon which may split into oppositional factions, as I know you have recognised recently? Or was community always to a large extent like this, in spite of nostalgic myth? How does theatre practice which seeks to initiate dialogue around issues, and to offer a place for passionate engagement as well as rational debate, negotiate these very passions if they are increasingly linked to vested political and economic interests (Tata, CPI(M) and so on)? And this in an environment where, as you point out in your book, they have often been manipulated and escalated to murderous violence. Is the methodology of *Rainbow* adequate to cope with this? Can Forum and Joking handle it during the performance, and are your resources of people and time able to deal with the ongoing aftermath and the tendency to take sides which strong interventions may provoke? How can you strengthen your hand?

The term 'community' is in any case somewhat suspect, since it tends to assume general agreement (convenient for 'development' purposes) which may conceal important divisions and power plays. I know your work tries to uncover problems (e.g. between gendered positions), so in many ways you are alert to this. Politics on the ground has to get beyond comfortable assumptions about the heterogeneity of community, and Forum is indeed a means to tackle this through the actualisation and problematisation of conflict within a negotiatory framework.

So I know that many of the strategies you have in place face up to these issues. Your local teams work regularly and repeatedly within their communities; the way in which many of them have become focal points for community action and have acquired great responsibility and respect is living proof of it. Your book beautifully articulates the theatrical strategy which moves spectators through various stages of action and rationality, and shows that your theatre practice, from workshop to post-production engagement, is constructed as a demonstration of how community and dialogue can work as and through the compiling and crafting of real stories of people's everyday lives so that they can understand the forces acting upon them and recognise that this is already a fulcrum for change. So your operation is indeed declaring itself a model and a vision for the belief that community can change and be changed, can acquire strategies by which it can adapt. Maybe the specific question is whether your local committees and teams and their ability to practice and hand on skills need to be strengthened. I think I ask this not because I doubt the skill, commitment and resolution of your colleagues, but because I know something of the power of the entrenched corporate and political forces you may be up against. You can also point to signal successes like the resistance to SEZs. So I am asking: is there a way to provide a more robust safety-net for your workers, maybe through networking along the lines of say Amnesty or Avaaz? Is there a role for the international to support the national and regional here?

This of course touches only one aspect of the political context. I know there is also a need for Jana Sanskriti to continually review its position in the local and regional political scenario (by which I don't mean its stance, its absolute commitment to remain non-aligned to party politics, which is a *sine qua non* of its work) and with reference to other activist organisations. Some or all of this is a regular topic of discussion at meetings of Jana Sanskriti groups and of the Indian Federation of the Theatre of the Oppressed and, given the volatile nature and constant pressures of party politics in India and particularly West Bengal, will need to continue to be so. I also know that you are frequently engaged in dialogue with thinkers like Amartya Sen and others engaged in 'development' and social democracy, and have sought to manifest this context

through seminars at the biannual Muktheadhara festival. So the question here is how this aspect of your work can be underpinned and strengthened. I think one dimension of this relates to what I will call the Digambarpur project for a research and training centre, and I'll come back to that later as well.

A further level of this wider context is of course the national and international profile of Jana Sanskriti. How can the company keep these functions going, in that it represents all kinds of things—a model of activism and engagement, a model of theatrical practice, a resource for others (which requires time-and-energy management)? It is also central (as is your own role as coordinator) to the national association (IFTO). By extension, is there a risk that you, and perhaps other senior members, are pressed into functioning as a guru in this context, and if so, how do you avoid it? In many cases of course, as above, the answer is to keep doing, on site and in specific situations, the things that you do. That way, the work remains rooted in immediate and practical concerns. But I also know from talking with you that these things are not just time-consuming but also—and quite properly—demanding. If we add to that the privilege—or burden—of being seen internationally as one of the leading advocates of Augusto's legacy—a position which your book will only enhance—it does mean that there are further questions about where and how you manage important aspects of your own and the company's activity, which I return to below.

The development of the company's activity and status may also impact on how it goes about its everyday business. A couple of these things—the risk of a degree of 'globalisation' and the problem of creating a universally recognisable format of TO, which involves a degree of 'translation' both linguistic and cultural—relate more specifically to theatre practice, so I'll talk about them there. The organisational issues have to do with things like 'who is Jana Sanskriti when it's on tour?' and 'who 'manages' it when it is operating as a national and international player'? Up till now the answer has largely been 'Sanjoy' and 'Sanjoy and the core team'. Should it go on being that? Can it? What would be gained and lost if this were to change? Is it time for members of other local groups (e.g. from Delhi) to be part of overseas tours? Should other formal roles be designated locally and nationally?

The last thing I will mention under this section is Digambarpur – or wherever you eventually decide to situate it. This seems to me an immensely exciting project and I know it has support in some useful quarters. To set up a (national? international?) training, resource and research centre for TO and to locate it in a village and in a community which has given so much to your work is a wonderful idea, and one which does justice both to your work in India and to your advocacy of Augusto's contribution to theatre and society. Immediately lots of questions come up about planning, structure, day-to-day

running, accommodation and services, and of course above all about finance. I guess Shantiniketan may be one model in your thinking. There are also other international ones like Gardzienice, Copeau's place in Burgundy, Odin's Holstebro and so on. You will need to decide how your vision differs from all of these and what its key principles are. You will probably need to locate an international team of advisers. You will certainly need to think about how to run and finance such an operation and who will do it. In a way, this project sums up much of what your and Jana Sanskriti's position now is and what it can be in the future.

I will recall later some or all of the questions I raise under each heading, and propose some possible strategies and action points.

b) Theatre-related (i.e. considerations which relate directly to the day-to-day practice of the core team and its linked teams, to the spectator communities which they serve and the ongoing interactions with them):

The challenges and opportunities here can be divided into the following categories:

- organisation, roles, internal politics, management, funding and sustainability
- training, aesthetic quality and issues of style
- audience and communities, local committees

As I expected, I've already touched on quite a lot of these. I know you too have begun for instance to devolve responsibilities so that some of the organisational roles and functions can be carried out by people other than yourself. But this is a key point in terms of sustainability, and one which many activist and innovative theatre groups face. It is also central to Jana Sanskriti's method and principles of democracy. I know you will go on addressing this regularly both locally and nationally. Maybe it's also the kind of thing which could benefit from sharing ideas and experiences via the website, which I also know that you would like to activate further (you and I and Franc Chamberlain are in discussion about how best to do this at the moment).

One of the areas in which this sharing might be valuable is funding. It's particularly important that regional and local teams begin to develop their own capacity to raise funds and move towards sustainability, in order to relieve the core West Bengal operation of this increasingly burdensome responsibility whenever major expenditure is required (e.g. to attend national events). So, procedures for swapping strategies and ideas, suggesting and assisting with contacts need to be strengthened further. I also remember Julian Boal proposing an international channel for funding (Friends of Jana Sanskriti), but I don't know if it has really operated. It's an idea which needs to be mooted again, foregrounded perhaps via the website, to see if it can

function in practice. Of course most ToO practitioners don't have superfluous funds, but a small amount can turn into a lot of rupees.

In terms of training, let me start with an aesthetic challenge. The style of your plays has evolved with the company, as and through its actors, and it is an individual blend of Indian folk and popular forms of music, dance and dialogue with key features of image and Forum theatre. It is theatrically and politically effective. However, when they've seen it at Muktheadhara festivals performed by Jana Sanskriti groups from various states, some international observers have asked whether it begins to look like 'Forum by numbers', in that they all seem to adopt the same structural features (e.g. opening dance, frequent tableaux). I realise that this comment may in fact be irrelevant within the normal, everyday, Indian context, in that each audience will only see *one* play; and also that you have created at least one scripted play which does not adopt the Forum model; but it does open up a potentially useful question about training. Perhaps it might be fruitful to think whether more frequent and structured ways of working with groups from other continents might be part of a practical aesthetic debate. We know that most theatre practice of all kinds involves borrowing and adaptation. Are there ways in which this could become more overtly a territory for negotiation? Of course, it would also be an appropriate outcome in particular cases to say: 'fine, this is very interesting and beneficial in giving us an understanding of why other groups work like this, but it also helps us to be clear that we want to maintain our own style'. But there might be some useful outcomes. And if this kind of practical debating process does seem useful, what would it take to set it up more systematically?

This debate, as a set of practical encounters, might in fact be a way to engage with the work of groups who are, as it were, 'on the fringe' of your field—the kinds of activist or NGO group for instance which you are critical of in your book, because they tend to address short-term issues which they take up as 'commissions' rather than as part of a sustainable engagement; or because they are not composed at all, or not entirely, of people who are themselves 'the oppressed' in the ways you define this. I know that you are insistent that Forum should lead communities to interrogate the structural causes rather than deal with isolated symptoms, and ideologically I think you're right. But I wonder if aesthetic 'potlatch' rather than head-on political confrontation might be a useful way to turn this suspicion into a move towards positive support. There is often a lot of good will and energy in these groups, for all their shortcomings. Maybe Jana Sanskriti's 'house style' is itself a potential method of education and development here. At the same time it is important to continue to discuss, both nationally and internationally, what the best structures are which will allow challenges and exchanges of ideas and practice, but retain key principles.

You are giving more workshops abroad, which is good for those groups which benefit from your input; and also helps to finance work in India. Is there also a case for drawing up a 'menu' of training sessions in India to be given by other practitioners, both Indian and foreign – not just at Muktheadhara, but as part of the training for regional groups? I know this has been a part of your practice, since I've done some of it myself! I therefore know that you do not find it incompatible with what you do as a trainer to incorporate the expertise of other practitioners, and I'm asking if there is a way in which this could be extended as a means both to relieve you of having to do so much and in order to maximise the range of training available. If so, how could this be financed?

Audiences and communities: I don't think I have major questions here, since it seems to me that you have in place a very sophisticated understanding of methodology and highly effective processes both for practising Forum in the areas in which you work and for ongoing forms of engagement within communities. What you are engaging in is an important mode of strengthening and building not just communities but community. The abstract emerges from the concrete, as so often in your work: individuals who experience the conditions, learn to reflect them in performance and reflect on them through dialogue, and transform themselves in the process into agents of change. So maybe what I want to ask is: could this be the basis for developing a model of engagement, a set of useful steps which could be applied by other theatre groups working in similar situations? What could emerge is both a set of practical suggestions: what kinds of tactics and exercises to use, what kinds of structures to implement, and when to do this, and a theoretical framework which could usefully be compared to others. I am thinking in particular of another project I know (Vidya, working with girl children in the slums in Ahmedabad largely through Forum), which is about to produce a Handbook giving (non-prescriptive) suggestions and examples of how to carry through all the stages of work like this from the initial forming of a company up to and including its methods of long-term engagement with its client communities. Although each situation is different, there are many structural features which are common. That also looks like a useful subject for investigation in the Digambapur possibility. Perhaps too it's worth considering a series of workshops for local and regional groups, not on performance and play-development but on managerial and organisational skills.

I think that from what I've discussed above, the following emerge as key areas to target:

- Education and skilling, including strengthening resources of local teams and committees

- Research and Development, including developing a model to enable sharing performance and organisational skills, creating a resource base
- Financial models, ways of sharing best practice
- Interface between theatre, politics and 'development' practice
- National and international Networking

Many of these things you may say that you already have in hand, others you are considering, and others are not priorities. But I invite you to use this as a (flawed, incomplete) checklist and to get back to me with any kind of reciprocal challenges you can devise. I am prepared to put my energies into addressing them.

All good wishes

Ralph