MUKTADHARA 2016
Post event note

February 2017: Muktadhara, the international forum theatre festival organised by Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed was held from **5 – 20 Dec 2016**. This was the 7th edition of this bi-annual international forum theatre festival organised since 2004 and witnessed 28 participants from 14 different countries. Like always, the festival was held in two phases – first in Kolkata, then travelling with forum theatre performance to the villages of rural Bengal.

The important reason for organizing ***Muktadhara*** is that it becomes an international meeting ground for Forum Theatre teams and practitioners including those trained by Jana Sanskriti all over India. Each of these teams are active in their own regions; most of them are also heading organizations engaged in struggles to assert the rights of the marginalized. Though all these teams are linked to each other through their commitment to the Forum Theatre movement, they have had very little opportunity to interact with each other and see each other's work. At this Festival this valuable opportunity is provided. This interaction has, as seen from the last six festivals, no doubt imbibed each individual and team with the feeling that they are not alone in this challenging task of establishing dialogue in society.

Since 2004 ***Muktadhara*** has hosted hundreds of participants from over 40 countries. All expenses are borne by participants. These festivals have been highly successful and attended by noted theatre personalities from India as well as from all other continents.

The evenings after a full day workshop became a space for exchanging myriad work experiences/experiments/studies of participants. Short presentations were made by participants followed by inspiring discussions.

Striking forum plays were created from the workshop dealing with themes of oppressions like mental health, sexual abuse at work space, leadership and dictatorship, existential challenges faced by activist groups and other manifestations of oppression. These plays were later performed in front of rural audience in the villages of South 24 Parganas.

Performing phase of the festival was inaugurated at ICCR, Kolkata on ***12 December 2016*** by ***Shri. Goutam De, Regional Director, ICCR***. Jana Sanskriti staged their landmark play ***"Shonar Meye"*** on this occasion. This play already performed over 3,500 times in India and abroad was staged using shadow in a new form collaborating with Evan Hastings of Shadow Liberation.

Below listed are some feedbacks we received from some our participants –

Sergio Kob, Greece –

Usually, when we take time distance from things, we adopt a more "realistic" and less "sentimental" approach. Memories tend to fade with time. A once perfectly orange sunset is now pale, that girl you have once adored is now just another girl etc. Well, regarding my connection to Jana Sanskriti, it actually works the opposite way. In the past 20 days, I have been trying to describe to friends, TO practitioners, comrades and others here in Greece what JS have done - and are still doing. Sometimes I find it hard to explain. I really hope that people trust my judgement and can feel my deepest respect. My respect because JS are

contributing towards the creation of a new world. And the most important, the materials for the creation of that new world, instead of doctrines and certainties, are just human love, devotion, passion and hard work, that is, the elements that this new world should carry. I wish I can have the privilege to remain a JS supporter and, when distance allows us, collaborator of JS. With all my love. Sergio.

Kelly Howe, Chicago –

Now that the festival has ended (and hopefully you all are getting some much-deserved rest!!), I wanted to take this moment to write to you to say thank you so much to everyone for all the amazing work that everyone did to host Muktadhara. I was extremely grateful even to be there for the first half of the festival, and the beautiful time I had there during the first half only made me all the sadder that I could not remain for the second part of the festival in the villages. I have been reflecting a great deal on my time with all of you and all the conversations. Though I was a little quiet sometimes due to feeling sick, I learned a lot, and I am eager to return. I hope to do so either for JSIRRI this coming November or--if that timing does not work--for a visit very early in 2018. I'm very sorry I had to depart early.

The workshop, the beautiful food, the evening programs, the late-night (or early morning!) airport rides, the tea, the kindness so many of you shared in so many ways. . . I know that all of it took so much hard work from every single member of Jana Sanskriti who I met and also from many other members that I did not meet.

I hope that any member of Jana Sanskriti--or your friends and family--will think of our home in Chicago as your home if you are ever visiting the US.

Kate Coward, Cambodia –

There were 3 things that I would like to suggest from my experience at the workshop.

1) Participants turning up late for workshops: Every day some people were late and we would all have to wait for them to arrive before we started the workshop - I would prefer that we start the workshop without them, and it is up to them to catch up, and then the problem is for them or their group to resolve. When participants believe that the workshop is not going to start on time anyway, they don't bother to turn up on time, and this problem only gets worse as the workshop goes on, with no one respecting start time. While I appreciate that this is what you have to do when working with our respective communities and especially village people, in a workshop with people who have travelled a long way for a short amount of time, it is frustrating.

2) I think a white board would be very useful (or large pieces of butchers paper): Not only for outlining what is going to happen that day and reminding everyone of start times, but also for giving instructions. Things are constantly changing in a workshop, and everyone seems to have a different recollection of what Sanjoy wanted our groups to do. If he wrote it up on the white board where everyone can see it, it would help make instructions clearer, and avoid confusion, and save time.

3) More information on play structure for play building. One of the problems I saw in my own group and in others was that many people didn't seem to understand the structure of a Forum play and the importance of clarity and the intervention points as you are building the

play. Many of the participants seemed to either not know how to structure a Forum play or be accustomed to having months to create a play. In a workshop that is not a luxury you have. So giving them a simple structure to follow would save a lot of time, arguments and confusion, especially as everyone does it differently.

I would suggest that before developing their play as a group, they are clear on a few things:

** What is the oppression you are showing?*
** Who Is the oppressed?*
** Who is the oppressor?*
** Is this oppression going to be relevant to the people at the festival, given their culture and way of life in India?*

A brief outline of the structure I would suggest, e.g.

1. *Status Quo, or existing situation and introduce characters.*
2. *Inciting incident - a problem happens that the protagonist will now struggle against.*
3. *Show 2 (or 3) ways that the protagonist tries to resolve their problem but fails OR experiences the problem….these usually become the intervention points.*
4. *Tragic end/consequences - We see that the problem is unresolved.*

I really thought it was good that we had time in the beginning to be told about Jana Sanskriti and its history. India is not Europe, and its something a lot of westerners don't seem to understand. Cultural sensitivity is important and Im so pleased you had time to explain this. Thank you for all your kindness and for making this workshop available to us. Hope to see you again soon.

Giota Theodoropoulou, Greece –

I am happy to read your e-mail, now that one month has passed after I left India and the experience of Jana Sanskriti has deeply settled into me.

I want to express my gratitude for everything that you offered to us, the trainings, the theatre and dance performances, the heart-to-heart discussions. It meant so much to me. It woke me up and inspired me to be creative once again. It also allowed me to meet beautiful people from all over the world and learn from them.

Regarding the festival, as Pepi mentioned, it went far beyond my expectations. I knew TO before but I hadn't realised its importance before. Sometimes I thought that it is just another tool for fed-up Europeans to release their anger and frustration, a kind of privilege. In India I realised TO is an artistic space that gives people who are exploited and marginalised their voice. It makes them feel that not only they are doing sth for themselves but for their communities as well, and this empowers them and givves them a purpose to come together and create.

I was touched by the bond of your team. I would be very happy to have such a close network of friends and co-workers myself. It is rare but it is there were real power lies. Not in the offices, certainly not in politics and not in isolation. In the union for a common cause all individualities can flourish and use their skills, complementing each other instead of competing.

I remember one of the musicians making a little flower from paper and leaving it somewhere for people to see. Little acts that mean a lot.

Some moments when I was sitting down watching your plays in the villages, together with other villagers, I felt I was the luckiest person on earth!

I was happy that I had the chance to perform in the festival. Although we didn't have enough time to make serious work with the play, it was important to be active and not just watch.

This festival was a gift for me. I still keep the colours and the music in my mind. Many people felt sad when it was time to say goodbye but I wasn't. The reason is first of all because I am used to move from one place to the other and therefore, I have friends, dear ones, in so many countries and cities. My experience has showed me that out connection has never fade out and whenever we can we meet. Distance is not a barrier. Second, the mere fact that I got to know you and the people of the festival is a positive surprise for me and a starting point for further communication and creativity.

Coming to the research centre, as I wrote to Ralph, I would be more than happy to contribute. I don't know how. There are many ways I guess. I am a researcher and a writer. A storyteller and a part-time actress. If you have an idea let me know. The way I see it, the jana community should stay in contact, have a space to inform each other about social developments and planned activities worldwide and give the rest of the people the chance to contribute to their best possible way, be it through active presence or by sending sth, sharing information and experience. Information of what is going on and some space for co-creation.

Chris Karystinos, Greece

From scratch.

How do we start off changing the world when we cannot change our closest friends and family?

What is it easier? To change a complete stranger or our closest friend?

My visit in India made me skeptical and se from scratch how I see the world and my actions in it. It made me see how alienated I am from my own life and close friends and family. Because in the end, aren't they also part of the society? How am I so strict with society and angry with people that doesn't change their habits when I let my own people not changing. The fault is not in them, but in my perspective.

What helped me the most, was the unity and the way of life of Jana Sanskriti that inspired me for this thought. When I saw the members of JS living all together, sharing everything, from materialistic food to soul and spirit "food", I became amazed about this. In the simplest of actions, the coming together of a family, the coming together of a collective, is hidden the

magic of true unity and collectivity. Living together in a communal/communistic way with your own family and friends was not even a possibility in my naive mind.

Now, I believe that our individualistic way of life, of "doing things right alone" is not only not enough, but is what capitalism wants us to do, being separated, fighting each other with our "unique" lifestyles as weapons. I believe that covering your everyday needs in a communal way either with your theatre group or your friends, family, comrades is as important as your political action.

We thank all our participants for being such a wonderful group and hope to meet again very soon!