



## Theatre and Life

### Theatre at the intersection of art, politics and international development

This book is about social and political theatre in Nepal. In particular, it examines how everyday social problems and macro-political conflicts are both represented and challenged through drama-based performances. How are theatre and social reality (dis)connected? How can reflexivity and ambiguity allow for the aesthetic space to become a transformative place? What differentiates street theatre performed in planned development from street theatre performed within social and political movements? How can performance and dramatic action move communities towards social action? To answer these questions I delve into both aesthetic and social performance contexts of three types of theatre and performance for social change available to Nepali audiences in the mid-2000s: *kachahari natak* (forum theatre/street theatre), *loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy) and Maoist political cultural programmes that may include *krantikari natak* (revolutionary theatre). In other words, the political theatre for democracy performed by Aarohan Theatre Group, development forum theatre performed by both Aarohan Theatre in Kathmandu and by the Kamlari Natak Samuha, a Tharu activist group, in the rural areas of western Nepal, the political performance of the Maoist cultural groups, all aim to bring about social change, but how are they similar and how do they differ?

Aarohan Theatre Group, a Kathmandu-based professional company and Gurukul, the theatre school associated with the group, is at the core of this ethnography. It is the main field site from which I tried to understand the world of theatre for social change in Nepal. To respond to what they describe as the ‘needs of the country’ Aarohan performed both political and street theatre in development projects. *Loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy) was staged voluntarily within the popular movement led by civil society organizations that developed as a reaction to the king’s coup and state of Emergency in 2005. *Kachahari natak* (forum theatre) was performed as part of donor-funded development projects. But project-funded development theatre was also a means for Aarohan and other theatre groups in Nepal to survive and continue developing their artistic stage productions. In fact, to develop theatre acting as a full-fledged profession in the emerging Nepali creative industries, Aarohan Theatre

also staged high profile proscenium plays at their halls in Gurukul. If *loktantrik natak* represented the ‘special’, once off response to the urgency of the political threats, *kachahari natak* undoubtedly constituted the everyday, the ‘ordinary’ NGO-funded project work that financially contributed to the sustenance of Aarohan Theatre as an organization. Understanding the challenges faced by Aarohan Theatre provides powerful insight into the impact that international development funding can have on emergent theatre groups, in particular in countries like Nepal in which the government does not subsidize the arts. But *kachahari* performed in Kathmandu by professionals is different from *kachahari* performed by activists in rural areas. To get a comparative perspective, I have focused on work of the Kamlari Natak Samuha in Deukhuri Valley, west Nepal, one of Aarohan partner groups. The Kamlari Natak Samuha is a group formed by activists who performed in their spare time and in their own communities to fight a form of indentured child labour. The performances were part of the advocacy campaign carried out by local grassroots and national NGOs. Similarly, political street theatre performed in the capital during the movement for democracy finds interesting comparative insight in the work of the Maoist cultural groups. In this case, political cultural work is an ‘ordinary’, everyday activity for full-time party cadres. Maoist performances in fact are deeply embedded in Maoist organizational and ideological structure, using well-defined formats, images and language. ‘Revolutionary theatre’ can be considered as a radical form of agit-prop, a militant form of art that is intended to emotionally and ideologically mobilize its audience within a wider political project.

Understanding the contributions and limitations of using street theatre in development intervention or in political and social movements is not possible without understanding the lived experiences, the hopes and the expectations of the theatre ‘makers’, the relationship between theatre groups, government institutions, political parties and donor agencies, the groups’ identities and the process of performance production. Yet, an additional form of performance emerged from the field. The critical years when Nepal moved from the 2005 autocracy to republic, via the 2006 People’s Movement, produced a fascinating flurry of contentious street performances: the king deployed a pseudo-theatrical apparatus to legitimize his power including processions, official ceremonies, religious festivals, slogans, radio announcements and metal billboards. Similarly, demonstrators furthered their claims for democracy through slogans, puppets, colourful symbolic actions and cultural programmes including political theatre. I argue that performances do not simply represent, but construct and deconstruct power because of the aesthetic space that is conjured up and the extent to which they capture the essence of ‘reality’. Performances also create the moral space to ground and sanction political struggle.

Performance is a notoriously contested and fluid concept. This book is therefore situated at the crossroads between anthropology, politics, theatre and international development. Recent research has moved away from a reductionist theatrical understanding of performance as mimicry, catharsis, or entertainment to embrace a broader, almost all-encompassing notion of performance as a way through which human beings make culture, engage with power and invent new ways of being in the world (Conquergood, 1995; Madison and Hamera, 2006). In particular, Conquergood suggests understanding 'the ubiquitous and generative force of performance that is beyond the theatrical' (Madison and Hamera, 2006, xii). Following this framework, cultural performance is distinguished from social performance. The first includes symbolic and self-conscious acts presented within specific and well-defined spaces, such as plays, rituals, circus, carnivals, concerts and storytelling. Social performance indicates the ordinary day-to-day interaction of individuals in the unfolding of social life, where behaviour is not 'marked' (Turner, 1982). In this study I want to go back to the theatrical and 'marked' performance to understand how social transformation is triggered at the blurred margins when the cultural fades into the social, where performance is actioned into performativity and back. Drawing from anthropological contributions to performance studies (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Schechner, 1993, 2002; Schechner and Turner, 1985), the work of Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982, 1987; St. John, 2008) concerning the interplay between ritual, theatre and everyday life, his theory of 'social dramas', concepts of the liminal/liminoid and *communitas* as well as his last works on the anthropology of experience are central to my analysis. They provide a framework within which to observe development theatre, political theatre and performative forms of protest as places in which conflictual practices, relationships and roles may be examined, and where possible resolutions may be articulated. The dramatic metaphor has often been employed to describe social life (Burke, 1945; Turner, 1982, 1984; Goffman, 1959) and anthropologists have documented its spectacular qualities (Cohen, 1993; Geertz, 1980; Turner, 1974). Roles, behaviour and social practices are understood as 'scripts' that are performed every day (Goffman, 1959; Trevino, 2003). However, performances do not simply provide transparent representations of social realities (*mimesis*), they create 'reflexive', contested representations to challenge both everyday social oppressions and macro-political conflict (*poiesis*). As Turner (1982) put it, performance is making, not faking. The theatrical space may become a place for reflexive awareness in which the 'actions' that make up the 'scripts' can be distanced, isolated, magnified and, in some cases, questioned, contested and changed, in ways similar to what Turner and Schechner describes as 'restored behaviour', 'twice-

behaved behaviour' (Schechner and Turner, 1985, 35–37). 'Reflexivity' rather than 'reflectivity' can trigger agency. Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz (2006, 77) highlight that 'reflective images are analogous to looking into a mirror and seeing an "accurate" representation'; conversely, 'reflexive images are those [...] wherein multiple representations are created through deliberate distortions (such as exaggeration, caricature, resonance) and utilized for interpretative purposes'. In short, reflexions are representations with a distortion, with a focus that can function as a model for some wished for world rather than a mirror of existing practices. This book will explore different forms of collective and public reflexive actions, some spontaneous such as street demonstrations, others planned like theatre for democracy. Conquergood adds a third element to the dichotomy mimesis (imitation) – poesis (production) and talks about kinesis (rupture) when performance is understood as 'breaking and remaking', unleashing forces that unsettle power hierarchies (Conquergood, 1995, 138). Taussig (1993) also complicates a static notion of mimesis and shows how powerless people represent practices and gestures of the powerful to subvert authority. In this way mimesis opens the way to creation and intervention. Trying to classify performance through categories is limiting as performance is processual, relational and fluid so, as we will see in the next chapters, representation merges into creation and disruption like an ebb and flow, often in relation to the perceived opposition that comes from the surroundings.

Boal's<sup>1</sup> research on theatre for social change and especially his techniques of Forum Theatre (1979, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2006; Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 1994; Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 2006) offer an interesting perspective through which to study social reality and the way in which real-life conflicts and oppressions are expressed and challenged via the theatrical. *Kachahari natak* is the Nepali adaptation of Forum Theatre. Practised all over the world, forum theatre is a dramaturgical technique that Brazilian director Augusto Boal systematized into a methodology called the Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). It is employed in several kinds of projects such as community development, personal or organizational development, advocacy and therapy. In Nepal, forum theatre is mostly used in international development projects.<sup>2</sup> Boal advocates an aesthetic transformation through theatre. He believed that what makes a performance really critical is neither the plot nor the dialogue but the structure itself: oppression is achieved through the separation between actors vs. audience, lead actors vs. chorus (Ibid., 1979). The process of identification that affects the spectator and generates catharsis does not produce effective changes in reality according to Boal. On the contrary, it reasserts the oppressive condition. What Boal suggests is to turn the spectators in spect-actors, that is actors that not only take part in the dramatic action, but who are also

creators of the drama: ‘some people ‘make’ theatre’ suggests Boal, but everybody ‘is’ theatre.’ Audience’s participation becomes therefore a significant element in order to understand how drama-based work can bring forward social change.

Boal wished to ‘activate’ the spectators by offering them the chance of entering the aesthetic space. ‘Simultaneous dramaturgy’ is the first attempt to break the barrier between actors and spectators, between fiction and reality. When the scene reaches a point of crisis, the play is stopped and the spectators can verbally offer alternative solutions that the actors enact on the spot: ‘the audience members ‘write’ and the actors ‘perform’ (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 1994, 238). However, telling someone to do something and actually doing it are two very different things. Boal recounts a famous example that transformed his theatre towards the even more participatory<sup>3</sup> methodology of forum theatre. A woman in the audience became so outraged by the actor’s inability to understand her suggestion that she went onto the stage and demonstrated what she meant through her own actions. Boal argues that

when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place. On stage the actor is an interpreter who, in the act of translating, plays false (1995, 7)

Trying to embody real-life dilemmas and enact possible solutions triggers off different involvement and emotions: for Boal ‘doing’ is different from ‘talking about doing’, ‘representing’ is different from ‘being’.

During a forum theatre performance, participants and audience belong both to the ‘real’ world they live in and to the imagined ‘representation’ created by the play. The performance arena becomes a metaxic space. Boal describes metaxis as

[t]he state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participants shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds; their reality and the image of their reality which she herself has created (1995, 43)

Through forum theatre techniques the boundaries between fiction and reality may become blurred. Words can become actions, but actions that are simultaneously ‘real’ but not in actual ‘real’ life situations. Actions are embedded within the assumed ‘fiction’ of the aesthetic space. While critics see participatory development as concealing power behind representation, and introducing ‘real’ power into the apolitical theatre of participations, Boal uses a parallel shift between

reality/play and on/off stage with the audience themselves in order to challenge power (see Chapter 4).

The anthropological critique of development, in particular the shift from ‘whether’ to ‘how’ development works provides the background against which to situate theatrical work as an intervention for social change (Long and Long, 1992; Mosse, 2004, 2005a). This involves revealing the complex agency and interests of the different actors involved in the processes, as well as the necessity of taking into account the ‘back stage’ of the different agendas. Mosse (2005a, 8) described development as representation and explained how the success of development projects is produced by the control over the interpretation of events that are themselves socially produced and maintained. Theatre, and art in general, occupies a ‘special’ place within the development discourse: it is often framed instrumentally as a means, as a tool towards the achievement of other development goals, or through which to showcase the success of development projects. The symbolic sphere is privileged over the material. However, Aarohan Theatre’s actions, commitments and dilemmas – as well as the artistic aspiration of Maoist cultural workers – show that the ‘theatre-making’ is indeed a goal in its own right. Theatre artists call themselves ‘theatre workers’, thus suggesting that theirs is an ‘ordinary’ profession and the Gurukul decade de facto ended by creating the basis of Nepali contemporary cultural economies.

The anthropology of power provided the *fil rouge* to understand how theatre and the theatrical mode can undo and expose the invisible workings of politics (Lukes, 2005; Ankersmit, 1996; Kertzer, 1988; Scott, 1985, 1990). Ankersmit (1996) explains that representation is political and always presents us an ‘aesthetic gap’ between the represented and the representation. In this aesthetic gap legitimate political power and political creativity originates. In fact, an effective use of ritual is crucial in the success of both conservative and revolutionary political groups.

Finally, I take a critical perspective considering theatre making as ‘a mode of socio-cultural practice’ (Zarrilli, 1995, 1) embedded in the wider socio-political-economic reality rather than a simple tool for behaviour change, and focus on how performance ‘affects’ rather than on how performance produces ‘effects’ (Zarrilli, 1995; Thompson, 2009). For these reasons, street drama performed within development projects has not been objectified as a ‘product of development’ and Maoist cultural work has not been dismissed as propaganda. Rather, both have been analysed as forms of popular culture to be understood within both the political and aesthetic conditions of their performance. Instead of directing primary attention to performance texts, this analysis sheds light on patterns of cultural practices, such as other forms of contentious performances questioning the social order, continuities



and innovations upon well-known themes and strategies, as well as artists' changing professional identities. While acknowledging the relevance of reception research and the productive role of any theatre audience (Bennet, 1997), I mostly focus on the production and performance stages – with just a brief incursion in reception. To understand how technical choices allowed for different degrees of audience participation and agency, I focus on Aarohan Theatre organizational development, the artists' identities and professional expectations. Similarly, by focusing on the artists' point of view instead of the audience's, I don't consider theatre as 'literature that happens to be on stage' but rather as a 'moving life force' (Berkoff in Hastrup, 2004, 29) capable of encouraging the audience to collectively fight for democracy or social justice as well as to inspire the artists to overcome their own hardships and turn a stigmatized passion into a respectable job.

### Theatre and power in Nepal

The words *natak* and *natya*, 'drama/theatre' in Nepali, have the same root as *nach* (informal) and *nrtya* (formal). They both mean 'dance' and immediately suggest that the two genres are connected. Often *nach* indicates a performance that includes songs, dance and dialogues. Unlike classical western theatre, largely word-based, Nepali theatre is rooted in actions and movements like Asian theatre (Brandon and Banham, 1997). Theatre thus becomes a privileged locus to study cultural practices. For anthropology, culture is not only inscribed and absorbed in the bodies of the actor, or dancer, or the spectator, but it is also contested and created through the body becoming embodied knowledge (Pavis, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990).

Nepali theatre(s)<sup>4</sup> reflects the country's geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity where Hindu and Buddhist religious-cultural traditions mingle with Indic, indigenous and western theatrical practices (Subedi, 2001, 2006). Subedi (2001) distinguishes three theatrical streams. First, folk theatre, diversified according to ethnic traditions; second, heritage performances, blending rituals, festivals and dance-dramas, and linked to folk and shamanic practices; third, proscenium theatre, influenced by Sanskrit and western traditions. For Subedi, 'the traditional forms, the mask dances, ritual dramas, traditional dance dramas, tabloids representing vibrant cultural forms, short dance dramas are participated in and watched by a larger number of people than any modern plays' (Ibid., 11). What's fascinating is the way in which theatre, ritual and performance relate to authority and power, both spiritual and political. Through this short historical background I want to highlight how such relationship has also determined Nepali theatre's ambivalent connection to political power, the Royal Palace in particular,

shaping the types of performances available to common citizens as well as affecting the establishment of acting as a profession.

Nepali theatre is thought to have begun during the Licchavi period (fifth to eighth century CE) though little remains of that kind of theatre except for statues and inscriptions (Subedi, 2006, 25; Malla, 1980, 11; Toffin, 2012; Davis, 2002). Art and architecture flourished thanks to the country's position along the commercial route linking India to China (Subedi, *Ibid.*). The Malla period (1200–1768) is regarded the 'golden age' of drama, theatre and arts (Subedi, 2006, 34). The kings performed as actors on the *dabali* or *dabu*, a performance platform where coronations also took place. They wrote dramas and patronized performances. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, kings, courtiers and common people watched plays performed on the *dabali*<sup>5</sup> situated in the middle of the *tole* (locality), near the palace and the temple. Until the end of the Rana rule, guards protected the *dabu* and only kings or artists could step on it.<sup>6</sup> Dramas were performed for festivals, religious celebrations, pilgrimages and for royal ceremonies such as weddings, births and coronations.<sup>7</sup>

In 1768, Prithvi Narayan Shah 'unified'<sup>8</sup> Nepal and brought about deep socio-economic, political, cultural and linguistic changes but this did not lead to significant theatrical development. The Shah Kings (1768–1846) participated in rituals and powerfully grounded their authority through performance and festivals but did not patronize theatre *per se* (Subedi, 2006, 15). King Prithvi Narayan Shah is believed to have exploited the power of performance when he conquered the Nepal Valley (Subedi, 2006, 14; van den Hoek, 1990). The Newar were celebrating the Indra Jatra festival:<sup>9</sup> the Newar King Jayaprakash Malla fled the chariot, which was supposed to carry him around the city. Prithvi Narayan himself took his place and was welcomed by the citizens with flowers (Subedi, *Ibid.*). Prithvi Narayan then submitted himself to the Kumari, the virgin incarnation of the Goddess of the Malla Taleju (van den Hoek, 1990, 149). Political occupation was sanctioned through the appropriation of ritual practices and reinforced annually in the streets. Though Indra is mythically associated with fertility and prosperity, the main aim of this public ritual<sup>10</sup> is to consolidate, renew and preserve the king's power (van den Hoek, 1990; Toffin, 1992, 2010). Through the festival the king is empowered by the *shakti* (power) of the city (van den Hoek, 1993, 371). The festival is mostly performed publicly in the streets and symbolically in key places of the capital. Indra Jatra festival lasts for eight days between the months of *Bhadra* (August–September) and *Ashwin* (September–October). The month of *Bhadra* is considered a month of contestation and licence in the Kathmandu Valley (Toffin, 1992). Demons threaten the universe and dance in the streets (*lakkhe pyakha*); improvised comic sketches (*khyalah*)



involve lampooning politicians and religious personalities (Ibid.). Indra Jatra closes the period, restoring the king's order over disruptive forces.

The Ranas (1846–1950) introduced great changes in theatre practices. They created theatre groups and established exclusive theatre houses inside their palaces for family members, officials and servants, that would sit according to their rank. These performances were influenced by the theatre of the royal courts of India as well as by western and Parsi performances, so-called because they were run by and bankrolled by Parsis in nineteenth-century India (Malla, 1980). Theatre in the Rana courts had no local connotations and used Hindi-Urdu language (Rijal, 2007, 26). Although confined to the courts, because the Ranas were not interested in creating a theatre public, Parsi theatre nevertheless influenced dramatic productions outside the court and the capital, in towns like Pokhara, Dharan, Dhankuta and Palpa (Subedi, 2006, 77). Artists outside the court tried to emulate the quality of Parsi dramas, by making use of magnificent scenic curtains, melodrama and mixing Urdu and Hindi in songs and dialogues, but their lack of resources and skills made such experiments short-lived (Ibid.). Rijal (2007, 27) suggests that such exclusivity was one of the ways in which the Ranas distanced themselves from the common people and retained their power: they lived in buildings that emulated western architecture, associated themselves with western art, photography, clothing and imported the theatre from India.

At the turn of the twentieth century, exchanges between India and Nepal were common. Dumber Shumsher Rana<sup>11</sup> was sent to Calcutta in 1893 to get training in dramaturgy while Manik Man Tuladhar was the first non-Rana to be trained in India in 1900 (Subedi, 2006, 80). However, during the Rana period, except for Sama's plays, dramas were usually not written in Nepali but translated from Sanskrit and Hindi. Nepali was mixed with Urdu and Hindi (Malla, 1980). While patronizing theatre in their courts, the Rana prevented any attempt to expand Parsi theatre to local tastes as they were worried about public uprisings (Rijal, 2007, 29). When Manik Man Tuladhar tried to perform a play as *Indrasabha* in Tundikhel, Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamser stopped him and ordered him to only perform for the people who can sponsor the shows (Malla in Rijal, 2007, 27).

The Ranas brought girls aged 13–14 from villages to their palaces. In every palace there were about 50–60 girls who were taught dance, drama, singing and music by Indian trainers. They resided in separate palaces and also received a salary. Inside the palace, women were responsible for all kinds of art and entertainment activities forbidden to men.<sup>12</sup> Prachanda Malla explains that in many palaces, trainers tuned a women's voice into a man's voice with 'lots and lots of practice'. Others retained their everyday female voice but in performance they could project their voice as a male.

In contrast, beyond the palaces, there were no stages or facilities and women were not allowed to perform. There were also no training facilities. Plays performed in the streets on the *dabali* during the same period were much simpler, without curtains and props. *Jyapunach*, the farmer's dance, was performed for eight days during Gai Jatra or Indra Jatra, provided the actors received permission from the Rana. Bekha Narayan Maharjan (1926–2006) and his group were among the most prominent performers. The audience would sit on straw mats around the *dabali* while street vendors sold peanuts and other foods (Subedi, 2006, 102). Artists were very popular at that time. Master Ratnadas, as Prachanda Malla refers to him, a singer and an actor, was considered a superstar. Having a good voice, in fact, was an essential quality for an actor.

Schools and colleges<sup>13</sup> in Kathmandu became the places where modern drama and theatre in Nepali language could develop. Dramatist Bhim Nidhi Tiwari (1911–73) writes of his play 'The Tolerant Sushila' (*Sahanshila Sushila*) being produced at Darbar High School in 1940, even though Rana officials and spies discouraged them (Rijal, 2007, 33). Balakrishna Sama (1903–81),<sup>14</sup> the most prominent Nepali dramatist, was also a strong supporter of the use of Nepali language in theatre and education (Onta, 1993). *Mukunda Indira* was the first Nepali play written and directed by Sama in 1937. Historians believe that this play marked the beginning of modern Nepali theatre in all aspects, 'language, costumes, story, emotions and feeling' (Malla cited in Rijal, 2007, 33). Prachanda Malla, one of Sama's students and actors, remembers his master's theatrical revolution:

Balkrishna Sama involved students of Darbar High School to stage this play. Women were not allowed to play, that's why men had to play female roles. He also changed the costumes, because initially, when they did plays in the palaces, costumes were made from very expensive clothes with real diamonds and pearls. But he used normal clothes that normal people wear. He did the play in pure and clear Nepali language. He didn't use painted screens but a black screen.<sup>15</sup>

There was a fracture between the theatre inside the palaces and what was emerging in schools. Rijal remarks that plays in Nepali created by 'teacher-dramatists and student-performers' were 'instrumental in creating a public sphere for theatre in Nepali' (2007, 34). Dramatists writing in Nepali considered Parsi theatre as a 'vulgar and foreign form of art', and emulated modern, in particular western, dramaturgy. The exaggerations of Parsi theatre were abandoned: realistic plots became popular; naturalistic acting replaced both the 'artificial style' of Parsi artists and the grandiosity of Sama's theatre (Rijal, 2007, 36). Despite the popularity of Parsi theatre troupes, after the 1950s the knowledge and techniques mastered by