

# NATYA

THEATRE ARTS JOURNAL

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# CHINESE DRAMA TODAY

FIRST I must make clear what I mean by modern drama. I am not referring to modern developments of the many types of Chinese opera with their distinctive blend of speech, song and dance which are a time-honoured tradition in China. I mean plays with plots and dialogue, with scenes and acts, realistic decor and lighting, mirroring contemporary life or founded on historical fact. Such plays reached China from Europe little more than half a century ago.

## First Steps

In the years that followed the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, patriotic young Chinese intellectuals were quick to voice their pent-up indignation against imperial misrule and foreign aggression, and strove to rouse public opinion through all sorts of traditional forms such as Kunshan and Peking operas, and the rhythmic and patter ballad, all of which served their purpose to some extent. But in modern drama they found a fresh keen weapon, a new vehicle to express their political sentiments. Before that, missionary colleges in Shanghai, Canton and other places had staged Shakespeare and Moliere, but such productions had little obvious effect. It was the Spring Willow Club, organised by Chinese students studying in Japan, which really started to introduce drama in Western style to the Chinese people.

In 1907, the year after the death of Ibsen, Tseng Hsiao-ku, Li Hsi-shuang and others, all Chinese students studying the arts in Japan, staged Dumas Fils' *La Dame Aux Camelias* in Tokyo. A student studying commerce saw the performance and said admiringly, "Fancy there being plays like that in

by  
Tien Han

CHAIRMAN, UNION OF  
CHINESE DRAMATISTS

the world!" He promptly joined the theatrical company and became one of its most important members. That student was Ouyang Yu-chien, who was later to become the director of the Central Institute of Drama in New China and honoured as one who had devoted fifty years of his life to modern drama in China.

## New Influences

A still more powerful influence was the performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which they staged the same year. Tseng Hsiao-ku had turned Mrs. Stowe's novel into a seven-act play. The righteous indignation it expressed against national discrimination and oppression was completely in accord with the sentiments of the students pursuing their studies and the revolutionaries in exile in Japan. In 1911, on the eve of the revolution, Jen Tien-chih, a member of the Spring Willow Club, returned to China and produced the play in Shanghai. The effect was electric. New theatrical companies sprang up all over the country. After the success of the 1911 revolution, the Spring Willow Club itself returned to China and put on plays. The "new drama" swept the country, and the traditional opera was relegated to the background as "old stuff." In fact, traditional opera was, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by the "new drama," and took over from it a certain amount of stagecraft and gesture. Mei Lan-fang staged new productions of the Peking operas *Teng Hsia-ku* and *A Piece of Hemp Thread*, obviously modified by modern drama.

Yuan Shih-kai, who betrayed the revolution, suppressed most of the new, progressive theatrical companies. The



A scene from Act II of *Shakuntala*

new theatre movement with Shanghai as its centre was baffled. But even so, some companies managed to stage two plays, *Spring Dream inside Hsinhua Gate* and *Dream of an Emperor*, which held the traitor up to ridicule.

After 'May the Fourth Movement' of 1919, the new drama movement revived. Unfortunately, and quite wrongly, the traditional operas were

criticized indiscriminately as feudal and obscurantist, while modern drama was regarded as necessarily democratic and scientific. Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw were translated into Chinese fairly systematically. In an attempt to stop the theatre being commercialized and vulgarized, many dramatists advocated *aimai* (beauty loving) drama, a term ultimately derived from the word "amateur." The Jenyi School of



# THEATRE IN South-East Asia

... familiarity ... escapism ... new ideas ...

by Santha Rama Rau and Faubion Bowers

CONTRARY to the Westerner's preconception that the Chinese are inscrutable and expressionless, even the casual tourist cannot fail to notice the theatrical nature of the people and the daily dramas enacted on the streets of China. The simple business of paying a pedicab driver, or buying a handful of melon-seeds, can be made into a beautifully performed miniature drama of anger, pleading, philosophic disgust of all the world and even an imitation fight complete with all the movements and blows although no one is actually hit. That these performances usually improve according to the number of spectators shows a flair for the public, the severest test of the dramatic instinct, and one is confirmed in one's opinion that the Chinese are a nation of actors.

Perhaps, it is this great dramatic vitality of the Chinese that has produced the extensive and deep influence on the theatre of all the countries of South-East Asia; for anywhere you travel—from Hong Kong to Jakarta—you will see theatre recognizably derived from China's classical Peking Opera.

The stories may vary from country to country but the tradition of the drama, the fact that only men perform even the women's roles, the style of acting and of scenery, and the use of music, are very close to the Chinese. Consequently, to see the theatre in Saigon, Indo-China, you must go to the Chinese section of the city and watch the slow, stylized performances (in

which a stick with ribbons tied to it is a horse, or a solemn march around the stage means going on a long journey) accompanied by the crashing of cymbals and drums, with the dialogues between the leading characters sung in the high, piercing style of Peking Opera. The action is interspersed with sword-play and acrobatics.

This is true of all the main cities of South-East Asia, especially where there are large Chinese populations settled. The Siamese *Likay*, which is to be seen in Bangkok, is again Chinese in influence, with the comedy passages in verse full of puns and play on words, and the serious parts in song, while in Singapore one might just as well be back in China because most of the theatrical activity takes place in imitation of Shanghai's famous "Great World". The "Great World" is an enormous amusement park in which eight or ten plays ranging from vaudeville to classical tragedy are performed simultaneously in various sections of the place, and the audience wander from one to the other, getting as much enjoyment from their theatre as Americans get from Coney Island.

#### Village Theatres

In country areas of South-East Asia, the influence is not quite so strong. The village theatres of Cambodia, for instance, have modified this technique somewhat, partly because they cannot afford the elaborate costumes and stage props that such plays require, and partly because they perform their

## DRAMA IN INDIA

### *A Promise of Greatness in an Age of Doubt*

DRAMA has a very ancient tradition in India, going back to about 2,000 years. The recently discovered Sita-banga cave in Central

India is thought to contain one of the earliest theatres. Drama gave the structural pattern to Indian philosophy and aesthetics, rather than provide entertainment or pose vexatious problems to the audience. The ancient theatre offered a wide and rich range of dramas, social, mythological, allegorical monologues, farces, dance-dramas, operas. They aimed at expressing themes and ideas through symbolism and established conventionalism as contrasted with present day realism, offering continuous stimulus to the imagination. These could roughly be classed into the folk and the classical. The former largely developed and continue to survive around festivals, shrines and temples from which grew the hereditary artists.

The more outstanding of the folk theatres are still alive though in an attenuated form. The Jatra of Bengal, the Bhagvatam of the South, the Bhavai of Gujerat, Rashila of Saurashtra, the Nautanki of the North are perhaps some of the better known of these folk styles. They are important because while the classical Indian stage which attained a very high standard and refinement has all but disappeared, the folk form still continues not only to occupy a definite place in the cultural life of the country today but even acts as an inspiration in the current revival of the theatre and is being absorbed in the new dramatic forms that are being forged in this theatre renaissance, all

by

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

of which bears eloquent testimony to its vitality.

The end of the last and the beginning of this century saw the powerful impact of a new force from the West, aggressive and pervasive on rather a settled society, leading to an upsurge of intellectual ferment and the consequent burgeoning of new Indian cultural patterns. The first to take shape was literature and new forms of expression such as novels, short stories and the modern drama grew swiftly. It is difficult and unreal to speak yet of the Indian drama and theatre. Each language has developed its own course with its own characteristics. The *Indian* drama is still in the making but is evolving with speed. In tracing the current trends, however, one has to describe each language theatre.

#### The Bengali Theatre

The earliest to react to the new influences from outside was perhaps the Bengali theatre which came under the direct influence of the English theatre established in Calcutta. The early modern drama in Bengali dates back to 1852, beginning with translations of Sanskrit and English and later original works like those of Ram Narayan Tarakratna, Dinabayadhu Mitra, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, etc. But the professional theatre began around 1872, following the rise of noted actors like Girish Chandra Ghose, Amarendra Dutt, Raj Krisna Ray, etc.

By early twentieth century, the impact of political factors grew and the presentation of dramas like *Sirajuddaula*, *Mir Kassim*, *Chhatrapati Sivaji* drew





*Pheroza Cooper as Frasine, Hilla Cooper as Marianne and Bomi Kapadi as Harpagon in Moliere's The Miser*

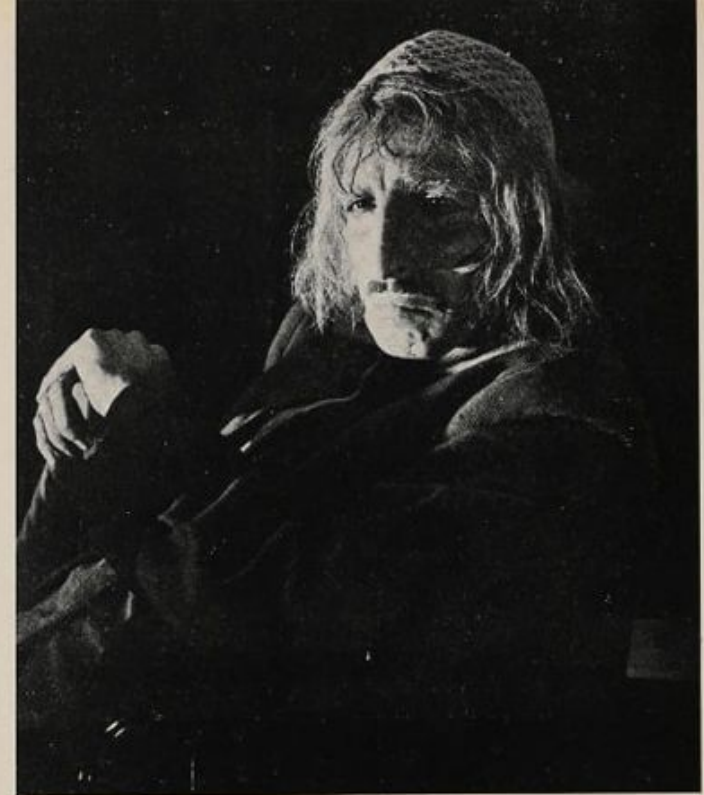
## Indian Amateur Drama

THOUGH it is fashionable in some quarters to decry amateur drama few would deny the contribution made by it to the advancement of the theatre. Led by dedicated and enthusiastic lovers of drama the amateur movement has often found it possible to ignore box-office and other economic considerations and engage in bold experimentation, with no comfort of profit and every risk of calumny.

In India there exists a very vigorous amateur theatre movement. Chiefly confined to the middle and upper middle class, the large output of this movement has rarely attained outstanding merit. Safe plays, traditional or well-known classics or "sure-fire" successes have usually been chosen chiefly because of financial considerations. Nevertheless, in recent times some groups have found enough courage to venture into difficult plays or controversial plays on an experimental level. More attention is paid

to form, decor, lighting, music and other accessories hitherto considered only incidental. The results have often reached unexpected and outstanding levels.

The groups most active in this vanguard have, lamentably enough, been confined in the main to the English language groups. Plays chosen, naturally, have been drawn from European and American drama. And yet in terms of exemplary significance their contribution is invaluable. The photographs which follow depict scenes from the productions of one of the many forward groups in India, the Theatre Unit of Bombay. Led by E. Alkazi this group has now achieved a standing beyond the mere amateur acting group. It has its own classes in dramaturgy and allows members to take an integrated interest in Drama through play production, lectures, discussions, music sessions and so on.



*Bomi Kapadi as Harpagon*

Alkazi's setting for *The Miser* (October 1957) consisted of a chequered platform raised eight inches above actual stage level, one chair, two stools, a table, a bird cage, and a wrought-iron lamp. Three steps framed by two narrow posts provided an entry on one side of the stage; on the other a small ramp served a similar purpose. Originally designed for the Jai Hind College Hall, Bombay, the same setting was adapted to open air conditions when the Theatre Unit presented the play at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla.

*A scene from the play*



# RUMANIAN THEATRE

... as free entertainment and an expression of rising patriotism...

It was towards the end of the 18th century that theatre came to Rumania. This was due to a widespread national liberation movement. In order to propagate this national consciousness and the urge for social justice theatre became a means of expression. Thereafter followed two increasingly antagonistic lines: on the one hand, free entertainment sponsored by the feudal nobility and on the other, the beginnings of a theatre movement destined to serve as an expression for rising patriotism.

The first theatre in Rumania was the creation of Princess Rahu when she had a well-known ballroom converted into a theatre. Following this example two more ballrooms were used as theatres in 1830 and 1848. Various troupes were invited to play in these halls and their repertory generally included variety shows, music-hall entertainment and melodrama as well as symphonic and opera programmes. In the field of theatre and music, these foreign troupes had a distinct effect on the people of Rumania.

In contrast to the light-hearted themes of foreign troupes, the national performers like the company at the Eteria mainly used drama as propaganda against despotism and oppression. Several of these performers like Theodor Gazi, Constantin Psomachis, Formian, Gheorghe Masu and Costache Aristia became national figures in the field of theatre and politics.

At the same time, a theatre movement arose in Moldavia. In a boarding school belonging to a French couple by the name of Germont, Professor Lincaut trained students in the art of acting and gave a number of performances.

The shows of Eteria's actors, played in Greek, helped greatly consolidate theatre consciousness. This movement was not lacking in courage because on the one hand the official language was not Rumanian, but Greek, Turkish or French. On the other hand, Prince Sutu, the ruler at that time had set up theatres whose aim was, by severe censorship of theatre repertories, to "safeguard morality and the State system."

Iordache Golescu, one of the outstanding intellectuals of the time, was the first to write plays in Rumanian. However, these satirical comedies against the nobility were only circulated among the people as pamphlets. A similar movement was taking place in Moldavia. One that has come to light is *The Sirdar of Orhei* written around 1811.

The first theatre performance in Rumanian took place in 1816 when Gheorghe Asachi decided to do an arrangement of *Myrthil and Chloe* by Florian and Gessner at Jassy. This was followed by Voltaire's *Alzire*. Although these plays were successful nothing followed, until twenty years later Asachi succeeded in setting up the Philharmonic Dramatic Conservatory for music and drama. In 1837, students of the Conservatory performed Aug de Kotzebue's plays *La Perouse* and *The Cunning Widow*.

In 1819 Iancu Vacarescu enunciated the social and national function of the theatre movement. This naturally invited great persecution from the feudal officials.

Following this persecution, a number of revolutionary cultural societies emerged. The best known was "The Phil-



Razvan and Vidra by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu on the Municipal Stage, Bucharest

harmonic". Connected with this organization were such names, as I. Cimpeanu, I. Vacarescu, I. Eliade, Cezar Boliac and Constantin Aristia. Their first repertory included a number of translations from universally known plays and it was their firm belief that they would eventually build a National Theatre.

Shortly after it was set up, the Philharmonic Society gave its first theatre musicals. Included among them were Voltaire's *Mahomet*, Moliere's comedy *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and arias from Bellini's opera *The Pirates*. Thereafter a number of excellent performers emerged whose fame spread abroad. Frosa Vlasto, under the name of Marcolini, for instance, was enthusiastically admired in France, Italy and Germany for her acting and for her voice.

In a very short period the Philharmonic Society succeeded in printing Rumanian translations of about ninety plays. In addition, they published two theatre journals—*The Rumanian Courier* and the *National Theatre Gazette*.

In 1836, however, internal dissensions and political intrigues brought about the liquidation of the Society. But although they were not able to build the National Theatre as they had hoped, the foundations of Rumanian theatre had been laid.

The impetuous movement which was preparing for the 1848 Revolution made the Rumanian theatre comprehensive and important. In Moldavia, the intellectuals gathered around the magazine *Dacia Literara* and in Bucharest new literary societies carried on their activities in the spirit of Nicolae Balcescu's revolutionary group—Dreptate-Fratie. There was close relationship between these literary groups.

The programme of this new group dwelt on the necessity of a literary and dramatic art which should find inspiration from local and topical social realities and draw from the people's life and struggle for freedom. The discovery of the treasures of Rumanian folklore went hand in hand with a resolute assertion of Rumanian theatre. Mihai

