Nandi Bhatia. ***Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India***. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. 206p.

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This is an important study of the crucial role indigenous theater played in resisting British rule and in developing a national consciousness in India. The coupling of the words "theater" and "politics" in the book's subtitle is apt: Indian theater could not avoid being political, either in colonial times, when dramatists had to contend with censorship laws, or in the years following independence, when underrepresented groups, including women, had to struggle against some of the very "Indian traditions" that had helped sustain resistance to colonialism. Bhatia's account of these acts of resistance is a much-needed counterweight to the current overemphasis on print culture.

The challenge here, of course, is that theater, as performance art, thrives on direct interaction with audiences; with topical concerns; and with the idiosyncrasies of times, places, and actors. Bhatia must, for this reason, rely on "historical documents, governmental policies, acts, official correspondences, and journalistic accounts in order to reconstruct…a historically grounded analysis of the intimate links between theater and colonial history" (8). In much the same way that the pioneering subaltern historian Ranajit Guha drew upon official publications to tease out the anxieties and obsessions of British administrators, Bhatia creatively explores the subtleties and implications of contemporary legislation, such as the Censorship Act of 1876, which sought to "prohibit dramatic performances which [were] seditious or obscene" (19). The Act's eliding of sedition with obscenity, and therefore of "morality" with censorship, is a stark but, as Bhatia shows, ultimately unsuccessful attempt on the part of colonial administrators to control local theater. Indeed, local vernacular performances became only more expressive of nationalist, anti-European ideals.

But the story is not quite so simple. In a fresh evaluation of the famous controversy surrounding the 1860 Bengali play *Nil Darpan*, Bhatia demonstrates how British administrators, European indigo planters, and missionaries feuded with one another over their various interpretations of the play's depiction of rapacious planters. Administrators predictably targeted it, whereas missionaries saw it (rightly) as an accurate reflection of the violence endemic to plantations. More importantly, Bhatia explains how the play's publicity (it was eventually translated into English and drew a European audience) set the stage for a host of other dramas that more explicitly attacked the excesses of European agendas in the subcontinent. Within a decade, by

the mid-1870s, Britain's Raj had adopted all the trappings of high imperialism, and Indian theater responded with the creation of a sophisticated network of "national theaters for the express purpose of awakening a sense of nationalism and patriotism." An important result was "the establishment [in 1875] of the Great National Theatre in Calcutta" (35), a city that had long been (and to a degree continues to be) a center of intellectual and social justice movements.

Besides this clear exposition of how censorship laws inadvertently fed India's nascent nationalism, Bhatia considers, in other chapters, vernacular productions and adaptations of Shakespeare (51-75); the formation and legacy of the Indian People's Theatre Association (76-94); the marxist impulse behind Utpal Dutt's Brechtian Little Theatre Group, with its recuperation of history (particularly the 1857 war) as commentary on post-independence India (95-110); and a variety of street theater groups around the country that focus attention on the exploitation of women and on casteism (111-119). In each of these sections, Bhatia illuminates the surprising turns that theater can take in its various incarnations. For example, the 19th-century Hindi playwright Bharatendu Harishchandra's adaptations of Shakespeare, especially the popular *Durlabh Bandhu* (*Dependable Friend*), could follow the original storyline fairly closely while signaling clearly its antipathy to British rule and its demand for independence (64). Even the 1965 Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah*, which is based on the experiences of the Kendal family's "Shakespeareana" troupe as they crisscrossed the subcontinent before and after independence, helped, despite its "[iconic] representation of the Bard" for English-speaking audiences, to deflate stereotypes of the "East" as a place of "spiritual enlightenment" (73-74).

The rich history of modern Indian theater thus reflects an eclectic and sometimes conflicting mix of religious—often patriarchal—glorification, class critique, linguistic deconstruction, and, more recently, woman-centered narration. This is not surprising since it is a theater that draws on traditions of Sanskritic, Mughal, Parsi, folk, and western drama to ensure the widest possible appeal and the fullest aesthetic expression—a feature that extends to cinema, from the romances of Bollywood to the realism of Bengali New Wave. Bhatia's study spotlights a hugely popular and successful art form that cannot be left out of analyses of postcolonial literatures. This book thereby disproves the casual rejoinder that indigenous drama is not accessible or amenable to western critique. Quite the contrary: an interdisciplinary project of this sort is a necessary corrective to novel-heavy postcolonial criticism, whose very predominance has tended to naturalize, rather than truly to question, the printed word's western imprimatur. ❊