

Con + Tempus in Bangladesh Theatre: From Dramatic Text to Performance Text

Syed Jamil Ahmed*

Abstract

Is playwriting in the contemporary theatre in Bangladesh seeking a new horizon? In attempting to answer this question, this paper deploys two theoretical premises. Firstly, the notion of ‘contemporary’ points not only to ‘a present without a direction towards the future [...], which privileges experience over reflection’ (Kaminska 2009: 241), but also ‘to awareness of what is it to be in the present whilst being alert to the “presence” of other kinds of time’ (Smith 2011: 4-5). Secondly, ‘dramatic text’ signifies ‘the play, script, music score, or dance notation that exists prior to being staged’, while ‘performance text’ signifies ‘everything that takes place on stage that a spectator experiences’ (Schechner 2013: 227). Within the parameter of the theoretical premises, the paper shows that playwriting in Bangladesh contemporary theatre is moving away from the dramatic text to the visual text of the performance space contributing to one of the multiple components of an intricate performance text. It demonstrates the above by discussing five productions: *Chākā* (2006), *Chandrabindu* (1993), *Yuddha Purān* (2014), *Somapur Kathan* (2014), and *Wāri-Bateshwar* (2014).

I will begin with two premises. Firstly, because the term ‘contemporary’ is rooted to Latin ‘con’ (“with”) and ‘tempus’ (“time”), the notion of ‘contemporary’ points not only to an ‘infatuation and thickening of the present—a present without a direction towards the future, one which exists only in the moment and in the instant, and which privileges experience over reflection’ (Kaminska 2009: 241), but also to ‘a multiplicity of ways of being in time — in particular, to awareness of what is it to be in the present whilst being alert to the “presence” of other kinds of time’ (Smith 2011: 4-5). Secondly, ‘dramatic text’, signifying ‘the play, script, music score, or dance notation that exists prior to being staged’, needs to be distinguished from ‘performance text’, i.e., ‘everything that takes place on stage that a spectator experiences’, from the movements and verbal signs in the soundscape, ‘to the lighting, sets, and other technical and multimedia effects’ (Schechner 2013: 227). Underpinned by these two premises, I intend to show that playwriting in the contemporary theatre in Bangladesh is seeking a new horizon by moving away from the dramatic text to the verbal text of the soundscape contributing to one of the multiple components of an intricate performance text. In order to demonstrate how, I will first set the

*Professor, Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka.

contemporary as con + tempus by discussing *Chākā* (2006), and then draw on four examples ‘of what is it to be in the present whilst being alert to the “presence” of other kinds of time’, in this case, the time of the War of Liberation in 1971 expounded in *Yuddha Purān* (2014), the time of Language Movement from 1947 to 1954 in *Chandrabindu* (1993), the time of the Buddhist monarchs from the 8th to the 12th century CE in *Somapur Kathan* (2014), and the time of 450 BCE in *Wāri-Bateshwar* (2014).

The move from the dramatic to the verbal signs in the performance text was initiated by Selim Al Deen in 1991, when he composed *Chākā* (*The Wheel*). Following Rabindranath, but perhaps not quite along the grain of his theorized praxis, Selim Al Deen (1949-2008) sought a new horizon in post-independence Bangladesh theatre by recovering the epic struggle of the rural population, etched in terms of distinct cultural ‘roots’ of the people in Bangladesh. Structured less in terms of a Marxist teleology of class-struggle and more of a magical realism embedded in mysticism, Al Deen’s plays from the middle and the late period, such as *Chākā* (*The Wheel*, 1991), *Jaibati Kanyār Man* (*The Heart of the Youthful Maiden*, 1992), and *Nimajjan* (*The Submersion*, 2004), abandon dramatic conflict, dialogue and even a linear cause-to-effect relationship in the development of the action in the plot. Instead, he embraces whole-heartedly the narrative mode as seen in the indigenous theatre of Bangladesh, and infuses his prose with an inbuilt poetic inflexion. Not surprisingly, he refused to categorize his work as drama or *natak*, and asserted that his texts transcend all generic parameters. Unquestionably Al Deen is a postcolonial *adhunik* (modern) who unmoors decisively from Imperialist paradigms of dramaturgy.

Al Deen’s post-colonial challenge to implicit bias for ‘Western’ mode/s of representation is best articulated in the performance of a Hindi translation of *Chākā*, titled *Pahiye*, (performed at the National School of Drama, New Delhi, in 2006), which literally had overturned the Abhimanch theatre, by having the spectators sit on the stage. They viewed the action in the auditorium, from where white death-masks placed at the top end of the auditorium seats gazed back at the spectators. It was thus that the rural landscape of Bangladesh in Al Deen’s text was decontextualized into a performance text that evoked the contemporary human condition of anonymous death all over the world. The performance unfolded in a presentational mode to show an ox-cart driver, along with an old man and a youth, embark on a journey to deliver a corpse of an anonymous man to his home at a village. One never learns who the dead man is or how he died, although the corpse is

the central character of the play around which the action is woven. As the living trio travel with the dead through rural landscape, each small detail emerges with compelling clarity, melting in phantasmal memories and fantasies of the three, engulfing them with a touch of the uncanny (Figure 1). The trio begins to ‘touch’ the ‘dead’ in a manner that defies the ‘real’. Driven from place to place, the driver and his two companions bury the dead on a dry riverbed. By that time, the dead has already arisen in each of them. Thus burying and yet refusing to bury the dead, the three continue towards their destination.



Figure 1: A scene from the Hindi translation of *Chākā*, titled *Pahiye*, at the National School of Drama, New Delhi, in 2006.

Quite independent of Salim Al Deen, Ashish Khondokar began to carve out a bold new performance domain in 1991, by a mode that he called Paribesh Theatre, which, literally would translate as “environmental theatre”, but was significantly different from Schechner’s (1968) notion of the ‘environmental theatre’ in many aspects. Perhaps best described as another angst-driven Antonin Artaud, Ashish Khondakar was not in any way staking a claim that ‘the events of the play were happening in the real world and in real time’ (Shank 1982:91), nor that ‘traditional distinctions between art and life no longer function at the root of aesthetics’ (Schechner 1968: 41), although he chose to devise his performances in actual environs that inspired him. By means of seventeen performances devised from 1991 to 1994, some of

which performances—such as *Karkhana* (“Factory”, TSC, Dhaka, 1991), *Mohammad Amin* (Fine Arts Institute, Dhaka 1991), and *Chandrabinu* (“The Dotted Moon”,¹ Bangla Academy, Dhaka 1993)—remain memorably etched in the minds of many spectators who attended these. For *Chandrabinu*, a performance inspired by Bengali Language Movement (1947-1954), Ashish Khondakar did not create a dramatic text. Instead, he researched extensively by drawing on Badruddin Umar’s *Purba Banglar Bhasa Andolon O Totkalin Rajniti* (1970, 1975 and 1985), acknowledged as one of the foundational researches on the movement, and even sought firsthand insight from him. Having thus doused himself with ‘authentic’ data drawn from ‘manifest history’, he probed into the ‘hidden history’ inscribed on the edifice of Burdwan House,² which, as the residence of the Chief Minister of East Bengal from 1947 to 1954, housed Khwaza Nazimuddin and Nurul Amin,³ two key political figures who opposed the demands of the Bengalis that Bangla language should be one of the two state languages of Pakistan. Stimulated by the space, its spiritual vibrations, and its memory of political struggle inscribed on its walls, arches and doorways, portico, arcaded verandah, balustrade railings, or perhaps, haunted by what Michael Chekhov would recognize as ‘objective atmosphere’ of the edifice, and the ‘creative imagination’ of a performance-maker (Chekhov 26-36 and 1-14), almost to the point of being seized by ‘a delirium like the plague’ (Artaud 1970: 18), Ashish Khondakar articulated an oral text to his associates, who inscribed them frantically on paper. After editing these to suit the dramatic impulse of contemporary spectators, and using the actors as instruments of articulation, he shaped the performance text with further employment of lighting, and other technical means he could afford. The performance text of the three-hour-long *Chandrabinu* that finally emerged, dispensed with any attempt to create a linear narrative, and instead, was built with, fragments of incidents torn apart from the actual lives of Khwaza Nazimuddin and Nurul Amin.⁴

Some twenty years after *Chandrabinu*, Debashish Ghosh staged a performance titled *Somapur Kathan* on the northern face of the archaeological site of Somapur Mahavihar, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, located some 240 km north-east of Dhaka city, in Paharpur (Badalgachhi Upazila, Naogaon District). It is here that we definitely land on the ‘blurred genre’ that has lately made its appearance as ‘theatre/archaeology’, where the two disciplines of theatre and archaeology are no longer held discrete, but coexist as a science/fiction, and are ‘jointly active in mobilizing the past, in making creative use of its various fragments in forging cultural memory out of varied interests

and remains, [...] and in their joint address to particular sites and themes, [function as] a significant resource in constructing and energising contemporary identities' (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 131). *Somapur Kathan* was a forty-eight-minute long site-specific performance of epic proportion, and was produced on 20 April 2014 on the ruins of the north wall of the Somapur Monastery, in a space measuring about a hundred feet in width. It held ten thousand spectators spell-bound as they watched seventy performers stage various scenes depicting the life of the Buddhist monks of the monastery, as well as the life of the lay populace. Based on a dramatic text that echoed Al Deen's interest, *Somapur Kathan* was entirely composed as a linear narrative in prose that described the rise of the monastery in the 8th century during the reign of the Pala monarch Dharma Pala, and the fall during the Sena reign in the 12th century, but also incorporated Charya songs and Buddhist chants (Figure 2).⁵



Figure 2: A scene from *Somapur Kathan* on the ruins of the north wall of the Somapur Monastery, on 20 April 2014.

Exploring the connection between site-specific performance and interpretation of the past, another production named *Wāri-Bateshwar* also laid claim to the 'blurred genre' of 'theatre/archaeology' a few months after *Somapur Kathan*, on 6 and 7 June in 2014. Directed by Dr. Samrat Pramanik, the hour-long performance of *Wāri-Bateshwar* was produced on the ruins of a Buddhist temple, excavated at Tongir Tek in

Wāri-Bateshwar region, constituted by the two adjoining villages of Wāri and Bateshwar in Belabo Upazila of Narsingdi District. Named after Wāri-Bateshwar, the site of an ancient fort city dating back to 450 BCE, the performance of *Wāri-Bateshwar* rearticulated fragments of the past as a real-time event by means of a dramatic text written by Tanvir Ahmed Sydney, and performed by twenty-eight actors. Composed of prose narration as well as scenes structured with dialogues, and cutting back and forth in time, *Wāri-Bateshwar* showed the contemporary time where student-archaeologists and their teachers work at the site, and the past imagined in the 7th-8th century CE and 5th century BCE, where Buddhist monks are shown engaging in intellectual pursuits in a temple, as well as lay populace engaging in everyday activities of hunting, bead making, weaving and sailing (Figure 3).⁶



Figure 3: A scene from *Wāri-Bateshwar* produced on the ruins of a Buddhist temple, excavated at Tongir Tek in Wāri-Bateshwar region on 7 June 2014.

A few months before the mounting of *Wāri-Bateshwar*, on 19 March 2014, Anisul Haque Borun presented the premiere of a twenty-minute-long performance of reminiscence theatre, titled *Yuddha Purān*, at Mirpur on the outskirts of Dhaka city, where stands the Jalladkhana ("Butcher's Den").⁷ The site is inscribed with memories of an immeasurable silence, testified by tiny imprints of an untold horror that was performed here in 1971: a pair of broken spectacles, a sandal with its straps torn, human skulls and bones. From the archives of the Liberation War Museum at Dhaka, Barun and his team of 35 performers collected two sets of unpublished documents based on interviews of local residents

where they testify how about fifty Bengalis were butchered at the site. From these testimonies written in the third person, the production team selected eleven, and rewrote them in the first person. Before the actual performance began, the performers briefed the spectators about what they would witness, helped them to wear hooded black robes over their everyday attires, and offered them tumblers of coloured sherbet to drink. Then the spectators were led into the performance space by groups of two or three, each group led by a performer holding their hands and narrating to them one of the eleven testimonies in first person. At this instance, it was ensured that the performers narrating the testimonies would have freezing cold hands that had been inserted in ice before the performance began. At the point where all the testimonies had been narrated, the spectators jointly witnessed a collage of scenes that recalled the harrowing time of 1971, when the people narrated in the testimonies were killed. These scenes were created not only with movement of the performers, and scraps of words, songs and poems rendered by them, but also with the help of lights, burning resin, incense, camphor, and a recorded soundscape that created the ambience of pain, torture and death composed of groaning, howling, and whispering voices, as well as music composed with the flute, drum and keyboard (Figure 4). The effect was



Figure 4: A scene from *Yuddha Purān* at Jalladkhana in Mirpur, Dhaka city, 19 March 2014.

startling: Borun and his performers had created a performance text that effectively mobilized the entire gamut of the sensory system comprised

of the visual, the auditory, the somatic, the gustatory, and the olfactory, which, by working as transducers of the energy received from the physical world to the realm of the mind, viscerally attacked the spectators with the experience of death at Jalladkhana. *Yuddha Purān* had thus lived up to Heiner Müller's belief that 'what's specific to the theatre is not the presence of the living actor or the living spectator, but rather the presence of the person who has the potential to die' (cited in Gritzer 2010: 5).⁸

Having thus led you through a narrative of the Con + Tempus in Bangladesh Theatre, i.e., led you through one explication of what it is to be 'with time' in the domain of theatre in Bangladesh, allow me to conclude by drawing another explication of the significance of the 'awareness of what is it to be in the present whilst being alert to the "presence" of other kinds of time', that this presentation gathered before you. In brief, in the ongoing 'social drama' of cultural nationalism contesting religious nationalism in Bangladesh today, all the five performance texts of *Chākā*, *Yuddha Purān*, *Chandrabindu*, *Somapur Kathan*, and *Wāri-Bateshwar* are exercises in alerting the spectators 'to the "presence" of other kinds of time', simply to imagine the Bengali nation underpinned by cultural nationalism. Perhaps now it would be 'in time' to seek the Other of the cultural nationalists, i.e., the religious nationalists, in a 'face-to-face' [encounter that] eludes every category,' the face-to-face encounter articulated 'not only as glance, but as the original unity of glance and speech, eyes and mouth[s]' that pronounce their hunger, the face-to-face 'which hears the invisible' (Derrida 1978: 100). Perhaps such a 'face-to-face' encounter would better serve the people, for whom the modern theatre practitioners in Bangladesh claim to perform; for, instead of narrating the nation with shreds, scraps and fragments from the past, excavating the past to exacerbate the wound of 1971, and thus living out of time, let us find ways and means to let the people live productively and peacefully 'in time', by seeking the contemporary that explicates '*a multiplicity of relationships between being and time*' (Smith 2009: 4). Perhaps the theatre practitioners need to consider seriously whether their infatuation with the past, predilection for letting the past thicken and haunt the present, and enthrallment for privileging past experience over reflection on the future, can all be abandoned by deploying a Derridean 'face-to-face' encounter with the religious nationalists, such that the wound is remembered only to seek a closure, and at the same time it is not forgotten that the 'other' may also be wounded.

End Notes

1. *Chandrabindu*, known as the ‘dotted moon’, nasalizes a vowel and is actually used as a diacritical mark in Bengali, but traditionally it is recited as a part of the alphabet.
2. The Maharaja of Burdwan, Sir Bijoy Chand Mahtab, a member of the Administrative Council (1919-1924) came to Dhaka on official work once a year. It is said that he built the Burdwan House in 1906 for his convenience. The Burdwan House contains an exclusive colonial style of late-19th and early-20th centuries.
3. Khawaja Nazimuddin was the Chief Minister of East Bengal from 15 August 1947 to 14 September 1948, and Nurul Amin held the same post from 14 September 1948 to 3 April 1954.
4. Personal communication received from Ashish Khondakar received over telephone on 1 February 2015.
5. Based on personal communication received from Debashish Ghosh on 1 February 2015, and a video recording of the performance he holds at his disposal.
6. Based on personal communication received from Dr Samrat Pramanik on 1 and February 2015, and the dramatic text of the performance.
7. A total of twenty performances of *Yuddha Purān* were presented. Twelve of these were at the Jalladkhana on 19, 20 and 21 March of 2014 (four performances each evening), and eight more at the Experimental Theatre of Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka, on 26 March and 19 July (again, four performances each evening).
8. Based on personal communication received from Anisul Haque Borun on 27 January 2015, and a video recording of the performance he holds at his disposal.

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