

BOOK REVIEW

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Rustom Bharucha, *Terror and Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

Although it may seem unnecessary to introduce Rustom Bharucha as his name resonates across many fields of interest of performance scholars and cultural theorists, it is not excessive to address the full breadth and proportion of his academic, artistic and political commitments. Besides being a director, dramatist, writer, festival director and project advisor on several continents, he is also a professor at the School of Arts and Aesthetics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and is tirelessly involved in grassroots cultural organisations and various ethnic communities as an ethnographer and activist. He is the author of ten important and widely appreciated publications, including: *Rehearsals of Revolution*, *The Question of Faith*, *Theatre and the World*, and *Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*. These books address the ethics and politics of traditional and contemporary theatre cultures in India, and elsewhere in the non-western world. They specifically focus on the ways in which these cultures and their mythological, religious or philosophical backgrounds are interpreted and translated into western art and theory, often being misunderstood, misused, exploited or distorted for aesthetic or political reasons.

Bharucha's recent publication, *Terror and Performance*, has a title which is as

provocative as it is potentially misleading, as the author warns us from the outset: a title that contains nothing obvious in its seeming simplicity. He argues that there is an uncanny affinity between its two terms, a hydra-like quality that they share, an all-embracing capacity that runs the risk of being misappropriated and of obscuring the many sites, forms, procedures, and strategies of their occurrence and manifestation. When faced with their looming entropy, it is crucial to maintain a sense of nuance and context, and to pay close attention not only to their manifold mutual enforcements, but also to who uses them, how, and for what purpose. This is especially true given the multitude of national, regional and local articulations of the two phenomena, and the industries (including academia) that profit from their dissemination and publicity. Terror, which is a theme that unfortunately involves us all to various degrees, is encountered in theatre from its very beginnings, as one of its privileged scripts and representations. It is, however, rarely conceived of, let alone productively countered, in largely unscripted and undetermined *performance*. This is precisely why it is worth mentioning that Bharucha refuses to entirely dispense of theatre and its terminological apparatus, with all its seemingly archaic flavour, in the age of virtual wars. Even though he is critical of its "auto-immunizing" tendencies, he believes that disciplinary rifts between theatre studies and performance studies should not obfuscate the fact that we are living at a moment in which it is better not to melt down distinctions, but to forge alliances in order to "strategize which language is most appropriate for a particular enquiry in a particular context".

While we tend to perceive terror and terrorism as modern predicaments,

and to confide simultaneously in performance's liminal norm and its subversive and critical potential, Rustom Bharucha warns us of the many disturbing and unpredictable ways these factors can intertwine. Here Bharucha asks to what extent we are aware of collusions between terror and performance, and questions if we are sufficiently informed about the various conditions of their common development. He also queries whether we are conceptually equipped to acknowledge these nuances and potential paths towards understanding. This applies not only to what we count as terror and performance, but to how we strive for an effective resistance to the no-exit situation in which we seem to find ourselves, with respect to both terror and its pernicious and multi-layered performativity.

392

This book consists of four essays, which analyse many instances of mutual enhancement or destruction occurring between terror and performance in the Philippines, the United States, the Middle East, the Republic of South Africa, Rwanda, and India. Underneath this juxtaposition of equally engaging instances of terror, one can discern a narrative logic of redemption. This takes us through the four stages of dealing with terror: shock and incomprehension; finding someone to blame; healing the wounds; and seeking a non-violent form of opposition. The first is most dramatically expressed in the reaction of some American intellectuals, particularly those trying to grasp it in terms of performance, to the widely mediated, horror inducing and globally mourned events of September 11. The second is symbolised in the performative construction of a terrorist—who, in the contemporary world of the War on Terror, is most often a Muslim—and the subsequent victimisa-

tion of anyone who *passes* as one. This is something Bharucha himself often experienced as a representative of this Other, or, in Erving Goffman's words, someone who is unable to *cover* his or her *stigma*, an arbitrary mark denoting a person as socially, politically, and therefore existentially, unacceptable. The third stage embraces performative strategies, as undertaken by courts and reconciliation rituals established after the end of apartheid in South Africa and the genocide in Rwanda. Unfortunately, these strategies seemed to ensure only an illusion of normality, with spectres of horror looming beneath. Finally, the fourth stage seeks to answer the immediate needs of sufferers, beyond the often endless deferrals of justice, especially of the kind implemented by existing legal institutions. The last, most touching and most neuralgic part of this book is centred upon the self-sacrificial figure of Gandhi. It ends with a "dark hope", a syntagm by David Shulman that encapsulates the feelings shared by the lonely few in both conflicted parties, those who refuse to be enemies no matter what it costs, and who, in their struggle for peace, rely on nothing—no force of Law, no Constitution, no Political Agenda—but their "dogged convictions about what it means to be human".

Bharucha's impressive and detailed account of the specific circumstances in which terror and its subsequent reactions manifested themselves, or were experienced as performances in their own right, is built upon an inevitably selective and largely mediated ethnography, since there are many parts of the world in which other, comparable instances of terror can be found.

As the author dedicates his book to two Slavs, his former professor Jan Kott and his colleague Dragan Klaić, it

is worthwhile to consider *Terror and Performance* in the context of the relatively recent war in Croatia, during which scholars were confronted with the same emotional trajectory that structures this book. First came the shock: the war was supposed to happen elsewhere, to others, because of others, not in our neighbourhoods, to our friends and relatives, or because of us. Then, the war unleashed a media discourse that some of us tried to deconstruct, since it produced in itself a terror of sorts. Performances flourished on both collective and individual scales, in the form of protests, state ceremonies, and everyday rituals of survival; refugees and displaced persons had to radically redefine both their personal and civil identities. The justice brought by the International War Tribunal either came late or had disappointing outcomes, which were consequently loudly contested. Finally, more than twenty years passed before women who were raped could organise the informal Women's Court, a unique regional initiative designed to address the issue of gendered violence during the conflict in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and its immediate aftermath. Consequently, the war is still with us: we still do not know how to come to terms with what happened, and we pretend that Croatia's current economic, legal and political crises are not related to it.

In terms of Bharucha's methodological approach, his care for words is of primary importance. This involves a powerful weighing of their gestures and performative charge in specific contexts; rather than defining terror, *Terror and Performance* questions the legitimacy of those who would appropriate and impose its meaning so it suits their interests—to make it, for instance, an exclusively anti-American phenomenon of recent

provenance, which can no longer pertain to the myriad ways in which people are inhumanely treated across the globe. But in this book terror is not only a physical threat. It is no less fiercely deployed in discourse, not only by governments and the media, but by those with the best of intentions, such as the authors of the legal doctrine promoting egalitarian politics based on universal rights, which assumes that differences can be simply erased or buried, regardless of economic, cultural or educational disparities. Nor is terror evaded when performance studies praise the blurring and hybridising of identities, the transgressing of official norms, and other forms of creativity that are simply not at the disposal of all. There are still those whose lives are spent under the duress of normative performances of identities, and whose corporeal, moral or other identity marks are demonised or romanticised—depending on the rhetoric and its propagandist aims—if they are not downright desecrated, mutilated, or killed. The author's close readings should be admired, even of those accounts that produce what he calls "the hermeneutic excess", intended for the benefit of victims but inadvertently becoming a misapprehension of the true stakes of violence. This is the case in Tanika Sarkar's discussion of genocidal foeticide in Gujarat, or in Appadurai's discursive sweeps discussing violence across incommensurable cultural contexts.

Sensitivity, however, is equally required, and is demonstrated by Bharucha when he deals with the word "performance": rather than hastily labelling various manifestations of terror as performances, Bharucha asks under which conditions and in which contexts they are treated as such: because of which attributes, what kind of efficacy, and ac-

cording to which disciplinary set of protocols and expertise? For instance, how can Stockhausen's blunder that 9/11 was the most magnificent work of art there has ever been be distinguished from the outpouring of grief and empathy performed on the pages of *Theatre Journal* by conscientious American performance scholars, who were completely oblivious of any of the event's contradictions? When can we claim that performances are exempt from larger hegemonic narratives and discourses, and how can we be sure that by empathising or judging we are not playing in someone else's scenario? *Terror and Performance* is dominated by its interest in this performative framing, rather than in reconstructing performances themselves. The author is wary of any kind of mindless exaltation, whether it be of Artaud's violent metaphors of burning flames and cruelty, or of blatantly self-sacrificial and non-violent performances by Gandhi, which he places in their rightful poetic or religious genealogy, aware that they cannot function as templates for just any kind of protest enactment.

A measure of criticality, to use Irit Rogoff's term, is directed towards the limits of efficiency of two juridical experiments: the trials following the genocide in Rwanda, and the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the end of apartheid in South Africa. I use the term "criticality" because it implies metadisciplinary criticism. Bharucha does not claim to have had direct access to the processes that seem to be the topic of his intervention, although he does draw interesting comparisons with the situation in India and the failed attempts to organise a similar structure of conflict resolution there. Rather, what interests him is the way these juridical forms tend to be viewed through the

lenses of theatre and performance, both by the states legislating new etiquettes of repentance or organising theatres of confession, and in scholarly work. Again it seems that the available terminology of performance studies is overinvested. Either it cracks under the gravity of phenomena one attempts to analyse and explain—brutalities and massacres on such a scale that naming them "behaviour", and their trials "the restoration of behaviour" sounds too anaesthetic to give full due to their victims' wounds—or the language of performance misfires, unable to describe the larger theatricality of the event, the vacuity of a wishful discourse on common emotions that would sanction cathartic healing effects too quickly, without regard to the degree of emotional involvement of all involved, perpetrators as well as survivors. Our attention is drawn to the responsibility of watching, scrutinising and writing about, or performing, these events once the evidence of experience has subsided and can no longer legitimate whatever their narrative doom will be.

Terror and Performance is ruthless in its demand of a scholarship and public discourse on terror and violence that would not simply collapse vital distinctions of context, background, level, scale, intention, procedure and outcome of terror and performance for the sake of non-reflective, over-generalised arguments. Having experienced a phase of utter distaste with the way some western anthropologists dealt with the war in the former Yugoslavia, I can say that Bharucha's standards of self-questioning may prove to be essential to the complex understanding of certain processes, and to the ethics of reconstructing the torn fabric of divided societies.

There are, however, some vexing questions that remain to be answered,

or posed anew: for instance, Bharucha starts his book with an account of his own work as director on Genet's *Maids* in Manila, which was suddenly interrupted by a spectacular performance of the 9/11 terror, that seemed for a moment to render senseless any investment in the subtleties of Genet's multi-layered theatricality. And yet, Genet's play and its performance proved to be an eloquent reminder of how theatre channels the unconscious workings of and investments into violence. The author insists that he finds theatre and the vocabulary of theatre studies equally pertinent to his study, as languages of performance and performativity. However, once he uses them as metaphors operating outside artistic frames, the theatricality in his text engenders mostly negative connotations of something premeditated, hollow, illusory—as is the case in the analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee hearings—while performance and performativity tend to retain their solemn core features of efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness, regardless of their ethical dimensions and implications. Con-

versely, when he deals with performance art, Australian Mike Parr's body art in particular, he questions it as though it is not structurally in a position to live up to its ethical and political ambitions, if compared, for instance, to the largely invisible corporeal activism of refugees and asylum seekers in detention camps, the urgency of whose intentionality seems to warrant their entitlement to such a performance. Is there, beyond the variety of forms Bharucha deals with, an implicit ethical hierarchy of scholarly urgency and interest? Was it not precisely this hierarchy that made Rabih Mroué stop performing *Three Posters*, when he felt he risked being misunderstood as an apologist for al-Qaida suicide-bombers? Do we have room for these relatively autonomous aesthetics of performance art, which deal with such overloaded issues? Or is the discipline bound to succumb to the pressures of referentiality, and, consequently, performativity that are sometimes wrongfully attributed to it?

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