

Revolutionary Theatre in Postcolonial Asia and Africa: Interviews with Eugene van Erven and Sudhanva Deshpande

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Abstract: Dutch theatre scholar and practitioner Eugene van Erven is the author of such titles as *Radical People's Theatre* (1989), *Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia* (1992), and *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (2001). Van Erven is also the artistic director of the International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam. Sudhanva Deshpande is a high-profile member of India's radical street theatre outfit *Jana Natya Manch* (People's Theatre Front). JANAM, as the outfit is popularly known, articulates the struggles of Indian people through a tradition of dissent.

The following interview with Eugene van Erven was conducted in Utrecht, the Netherlands, on September 15, 2011.

What is your notion of revolutionary theatre?

My notion of this concept goes back [to] when I was doing research into revolutionary theatre, at least theatre that was used as an instrument to destabilize dictatorships in Asia. I think my frame of reference is all about practices in various Asian countries and to a lesser degree Latin America and Africa. I don't know if you want me to go into the details of what I think theatre can and cannot do. Do you?

Please do.

My frame of reference goes back more than twenty years ago and is largely based on my experiences as an outside observer and, to some degree, also someone on the inside—particularly in countries like the

Philippines, but also places like South Korea and Indonesia where once there were staunch, severe dictatorships.

And India also?

Yes, and Pakistan and Thailand.

Do you believe in the theatre as an instrument of social revolution? If yes, what do you consider to be the strength[s] and weaknesses of such theatre? If no, why not?

Well, that's several questions. (*General laughter*) To answer that question you would have to have a working definition of what you consider revolution. In my mind, revolution is a quite intense, very radical upheaval of a political status quo by all kinds of instruments including armed struggle. And my experiences of theatre are largely of a specific nature. I know I used the title "revolution" for the book I wrote about the experiences in Asia.

Yes, Playful Revolution.

Yes, that was more like a play on words. (*General laughter*) The artists involved in this would comprise the whole spectrum, from those who supported the armed struggle to those who are opposed to armed struggle but perhaps favour a much more evolutionary, humane approach that is quite against violence. And there are artists that had dual, above ground and underground, identities. And there was also theatre that operates within the guerilla movement for the purposes of team building and exploring issues that affected those very tight communities, which are revolutionary armed groups. I did not see so much of this and may be only caught a glimpse of it. But perhaps I'm not sure I'm addressing the question. Your question is, what are the strong points of revolutionary theatre? I think there are many different kinds of theatre that operate within what you could call a proto revolutionary context or situation. You have propaganda theatre that is largely issue-based and message-driven and on the street quite often where groups of performers try to bring across a particular anti-dictatorial message. I have also seen it used as propaganda for the government. Theatre itself is a neutral medium. It can be used for

any kind of purpose. I do believe in the social transformative power of theatre. But it can be used and abused. And the power of theatre itself to explore social issues I think is enormous. That power should be used very wisely, so one should not be romantic or naïve about it. It depends in whose hands you place the weapon and what they do with it.

So you definitely acknowledge the theatre as a “weapon,” just like Boal¹ for instance?

The word “weapon” I find troubling. Let’s call it an instrument. (*Brief general laughter*)

When you were in Asia conducting research for your book The Playful Revolution, did you find anything of interest about Asian theatre practitioners which you consider worthy of emulation by the rest of the world, especially in the developing countries?

Well, yes, plenty of things. I think one of the most interesting and useful things I found was artists under pressure of very stark and oppressive political and social circumstances finding creativity to develop artistic methods that they can implement in community settings, and with an idea of actually leaving behind skills so that the people they had exposed to these methods could then carry on and bring art to their communities to explore social issues. So it’s the idea of networking and building a movement through artistic methods. I think that’s a very powerful thing . . . in terms of people having in their hands a medium through which they can explore their artistry and also explore issues that matter to them. I think in the Philippines particularly, they were very smart, creative, and intelligent in terms of developing their own methodology that worked in their own context.

It’s not that there is one universal foolproof method of doing this. Every method has ingredients that can be useful in another context, but the artist embracing it should be smart and also not self-centered to then adapt it to their own local circumstances. Actually it’s a process of trial and error. What I also found, again in the Philippines, is the artist also being smart in terms of both creating space for themselves to express themselves and explore their own artistry so that they can do their thing

and basically nourish their own desire to be an artist and express things the way they want in their own sort of niche but at the same time also fully accepting responsibility in other circumstances by putting their artistic ego aside, the ego, I suppose, that drives one to shine in the limelight and place their talents and gifts in the hands of others so that they can also explore that essential part of their humanity through the arts. And the last concept in relation to this that I would like to mention is ATOR. It stands for Artist, Teacher, Organizer, and Researcher. It's like a multiple identity and different professional compartments which combine to make an artist to have his or her feet firmly in the soil of the community. ATOR represents the four essential ingredients for an artist wishing to bring about a sustainable, non-violent social change in the community.

I very much appreciate the concept of ATOR because a lot of the criticisms of African revolutionary drama, as represented by Nigeria for instance, [are] that they are being written by university-educated playwrights, and most of the time they are staged on university campuses. Critics have expressed doubt that this type of theatre cannot lead to a revolution and that it will be better to go to the community and engage the people. What do you think?

I think what you are alluding to right now is something that we also see here [in the Netherlands]. Right now I'm very much active in what we call community arts in Europe. In the Netherlands, and I think elsewhere, there are different systems in which art and culture operate. In the Netherlands and [the] Western world in general, there is a hermetically sealed-off system in which the arts operate; we call it the mainstream. It is the system within which the professional theatre functions in the sense that during four to five weeks, maybe a playwright writes a play about something he intellectually thinks is important. It could be a progressive or even a revolutionary play as you say in terms of the theme and content, but [it] then operates within that system and that system caters to the high-educated elite. In the Netherlands that elite is largely white, middle class and above, which comprises fifteen percent of the national population, and which is to say that eighty percent of the national population is not nourished by this. It's like a student audience in

Lagos goes to see a revolutionary play on campus and [is] stimulated intellectually by it and then go[es] back to their dorm room and watch[es] the next soccer match or listen[s] to music and do[es]n't do anything. So as long as it [the play] continues to circulate within that system, nothing happens, and I think we need to find a way also here in the Netherlands to open up that system so that things can actually move up and down. And if a play, an intellectual play, written for an intellectual audience on a university campus does not function in the village, then I think there is something essentially wrong with it. I suppose we need to create plays that function everywhere and that requires a new kind of form.

Scholars usually praise Ngugi wa Thiong'o², the Kenyan writer, when it comes to this idea of alternative method in African revolutionary drama. He worked with the peasants in the Kenyan village of Kamiriithu in the late 1970s and early 1980s and collectively produced the play I Will Marry When I Want, which landed him in jail.

Yes. I think that project is still worthy of analyzing because here we have an intellectual and internationally respected novelist and playwright understanding that, first of all, he needs to write in a local language; secondly that he needs to develop his plays together with a community; and then you rise up together with the community and your play functions organically within the community. There is still an important lesson in that for anyone wishing to create revolutionary theatre.

Language is one of the perennial sources of critical debate in African literature: that is, whether it should be written in European or local languages?

I think there is a place for both. Ngugi wrote both in English and Gikuyu. To capture the essence of African life, it is also important to do so at [an] international level so that "stupid" people like me can perhaps better understand what makes Africa distinct. We need to understand one another across the world. The world does not end at the edge of an African village but is now a big place where people communicate freely, but at the same time I think it is more important to develop art in conjunction with local people and for that it's unavoidable to use local languages. I haven't made a study of this, and I think it will be an in-

teresting one—of, say, who are the major African artists and what their social background is and what their ambitions are. Is it to win the Nobel Prize, for instance, or to genuinely make a change and share their sensibility and insights and poetic talents with the people who need it most?

Wole Soyinka remains the only black African to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. And some critics feel his works are not ideologically committed. Any views?

I think it is important for the world to know that people with this kind of talent also come from places like Nigeria or Trinidad, and that it is not only white or Western artists who are the best in literary arts. I think it is really important to break through the stereotypes and prejudices that exist. At the same time, I really don't know the works of Wole Soyinka enough to comment on [them] in detail. What I do find interesting from a Western perspective is his interest in exploring the cultural traditions and integrating them into his performances. I think that's important. I have never been to Nigeria. The only African countries I have been to are Kenya and Morocco. So I have no idea how Wole Soyinka's work functions, if at all, in a small rural Nigerian village today in 2011. I have no idea. And I think there would also be a measure of the importance of his works. If his work has no resonance in a Nigerian village in 2011, then one can seriously wonder what the importance of Wole Soyinka is. I really have no idea how Wole Soyinka's works function today in a Nigerian village. Can you answer that question?

Well, this forum is meant for hearing your views. I wouldn't want to usurp your role. (Sustained laughter) And now the next question: what do you think should be the role of a playwright in society?

(After a relatively prolonged meditation) First of all, I have a pretty biased view about this. I see playwrights in the Netherlands operating exclusively without exception, or maybe one or two exceptions, in that system I described earlier. They write plays in which they express their own individual point of view about a personal, psychological, or social issue and hope it will be picked up by a theatre company that will pro-

duce it, bring in an audience, and then get some reviews in a newspaper and thereby advance their status as playwrights in the society. But they only function at the intellectual and elite level. I'm more interested in the role of the theatre artist than the role of the playwright. What I'm mostly interested in and do think really matters is when a playwright or theatre artist or a team of theatre-makers, which a playwright or a director with playwriting skills can be part of, develops plays from the bottom up with people in a neighbourhood about issues that matter to them, develop[s] the best possible plays along with people who will then become the performers in this play and also become the audience. And there I think art has a social function, and there I think theatre is most powerful when it develops and evolves organically within a community; then a playwright or theatre artist is at his most powerful and most effective in terms of having value for social change.

Thank you very much, Professor Van Erven.

Thank you and best wishes.

The following interview with Sudhanva Deshpande was conducted in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on September 28, 2011.

What is your notion of revolutionary theatre?

Well, in the first place, I think revolutionary theatre is something that has to be understood in the context of the revolution; in other words, you must have some revolutionary movement taking place in the society for there to be revolutionary theatre. I don't believe that you will have revolutionary theatre unless there is actual revolutionary movement on the ground. I think it is important for a theatre of this kind to be connected to, to become an ally of, and become support for a large number of grassroots organizations that may or may not see themselves as revolutionary in the strict sense of it, but certainly organizations that are working towards change at the grassroots. Unless theatre is connected to organizations, unless it is connected to people who want change in the society, theatre by itself is not going to bring any revolution.

Can you briefly explain how you became involved with Jana Natya Manch as well as the nature of this theatre outfit?

Well, the nature of the theatre outfit is something that is completely flexible; it's very open. It doesn't have a membership system in the formal sense of it. There are no entry barriers. Anybody can come and join and equally leave when they want. So we have a large number of young people who keep coming into the group all the time. At any point that you come into our rehearsal space, you find lots of young people, and if you come six months later you find some of the faces still there, but most of them would have moved on and lots of new people have come. So that's the nature of the organization. We are voluntary; the artists are not paid for what they do. I got attached to it completely by fluke or by chance, you can say. As a young person, I watched some of JANAM's plays, and I was attracted to it, and then Safdar became a friend; I mean Safdar Hashmi³. He was of course older than me, thirteen or fourteen years older. But he has a way of becoming friends with young people, and I was a young student at that time, and I became friends with him, and slowly I was sucked into the theatre.

Do you believe in the theatre as an instrument of social revolution? If yes, what do you consider to be the strength[s] and weaknesses of such theatre? If no, why not?

As an instrument for social change, yes, but whether or not to call it a social revolution is of course a different issue; it is something to aid change. We must always remember that no art on its own can bring about change; there are all sorts of factors that work in society to bring about change. It's not the function of art alone to be able to do that. But art can certainly do something, and that's what we try to do in our plays—that is, to give expression to the yearning for change. People want change, and you've got to give expression to that yearning; you've got to give expression to this anger; you've got to be able to show artistically in a very powerful, strong way people's bitterness; you've got to be able to show people how they can come together for solidarity and, most importantly, you've got to be able to seek new ideas. People

always want change in every aspect of their lives. For instance, you can have a factory worker who hates the employer and hates the capitalist system and wants to destroy that system. But does he also want to destroy patriarchy? Or does he want to stop being the boss at home with his wife? So it's not like everybody who wants change wants all kinds of change. So it's important for the theatre or any art to seek new ideas and say to people, look, there are things that need to be thought about.

How do you think we should evaluate the transformative force of revolutionary theatre? Is it by specific dramaturgical devices in the plays or by the transformative effect generated by the plays in the consciousness of audiences and constituencies?

Frankly, I don't have the answer to this because I think it is an awfully complicated question; it's a question that many of us that have been part of theatre for social change have grappled with and have not come up with easy answers. But I'm not even sure anymore whether one wants to put in place evaluative strategies because they tend to indicate that you want to quantify change, and one doesn't want to quantify change but wants to see change happen, yes, but how much of that change is happening because of theatre and how much of that change is happening because of other factors is something that is very hard to distinguish.

How have you been able to cope since the death of Safdar Hashmi?

Well, as a theatre organization, as a group, we were of course deeply affected by his death. It was a huge loss for us. Safdar was clearly the most important theatre and organizational leader of the group. Replacing someone like him is never easy, but we try to do as best as we can. You can never replace a person like that; these are very special people. He was a very special talent, so you can never replace him, but certainly you can try several strategies that will enable you to forge ahead.

Who is technically responsible for the death of Hashmi?

You see people who attacked him on that day; they have been indicted by court. They have been judged and proven to be guilty; now they want to hire a lawyer and appeal, and we don't know what will happen. The names of these people and so on are well known. It's not a secret.

Do you think the government was directly or remotely responsible for the death?

I don't think the government was responsible. But certainly the ruling politicians, the ruling party at that time, were involved in it.

Overall, how would you assess the impact of the theatre as a tool of socio-political liberation in contemporary India?

I think it is a very important work happening at various levels. There are various organizations that are raising very important issues of gender—remember what I was saying in the lecture.⁴ There is a whole range of theatre work that is happening in India today raising very serious questions about social inequities, emancipation, and so forth.

Is there any feature of your theatre that you consider worthy of emulation by the rest of the world, especially developing countries?

India is a poor country in spite of all the growth rates that people are talking about and despite our government trying to have a permanent place in the United Nations' Security Council and all that. I think India is a very poor country in the sense that a large number of people are tremendously poor. Now for other poor countries like India, what we have seen work best for us is that our theatre is very light; it doesn't have other paraphernalia. It is something that can be done anywhere, any time. We are not dependent on technology; we are not dependent on money and spaces and so on. Fortunately, the climate in India is such that we can always perform, but I'm sure the same goes for Africa. I think in large parts of Africa the climate is such that you can perform in the morning and evening, may be the afternoon is a little hot. There are large open spaces in Africa as well as in America and large parts of Asia. I think we must make use of all these spaces, both physical and conceptual. I think that's what works for us generally.

Thank you very much, Mr. Deshpande.

Thank you.

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Notes

- 1 Augusto Boal (1931-2009) was a Brazilian theatre practitioner and founder of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a radical popular theatrical form that focuses on the liberation of the underprivileged from all kinds of oppression.
- 2 Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-) is an internationally acclaimed Kenyan novelist, playwright, and literary critic. His other notable titles include *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), *Wizard of the Crow* (2007), and plays such as *The Black Hermit* (1968), *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), and *Mother Sing for Me* (1982).
- 3 Safdar Hashmi (1954-1989) was an Indian street theatre activist and founding member of *Jana Natya Manch* (People's Theatre Front.) He was killed in January 1989 in New Delhi during the street performance of *Hallal Bol (Attack!)*, a play that demonstrates sympathy with the nation's labour movement.
- 4 Deshpande had immediately prior given a lecture in the Theatre Department of the University of Amsterdam.