



REHEARSING FOR LIFE

Theatre for Social Change
in Nepal

Monica Mottin

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This work examines the production and performance of theatrical activities aimed at bringing about social change in both development and political intervention in Nepal. If everyday social problems can be both represented and challenged through drama-based performances, then what differentiates street theatre performed in planned development from street theatre performed within social and political movements? This multi-sited ethnography attempts to answer this question by following the works of Aarohan Theatre – a Kathmandu-based professional company, performing both *loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy) in the context of the 2005–06 popular movement, and *kachahari natak* (forum theatre) for development projects. The analysis then extends to the forum theatre produced by one of Aarohan's partner groups, the Kamlari Natak Samuha – a Tharu grass-roots activist organization based in Deukhuri Valley (West Nepal) campaigning against indentured child labour. The book explores how Maoist cultural troupes moving out of the People's War into the peace process used cultural programmes as a tool to enroll their audience into the changing political project.

Employing a critical perspective and considering theatre as a mode of socio-cultural practice embedded in the wider socio-political reality, the book looks at the groups' organizational structures, the artists' identities and professional aspirations in a context where lack of State support for arts turned development aid into a crucial source of livelihood for theatre artists.

What emerges is an account of what it means to perform theatre and live by theatre. This study explores the challenges of being a professional artist engaged in activism, the pressures felt by Maoist cultural activists to 'professionalize' their productions when performing in the capital after the end of the war, and closely analyzes how a group of theatre workers who are committed to transforming a stigmatized passion into a respectable and glamorous job in contemporary Nepal.

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For my parents, Aldo and Adriana

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Theatre and Life

Theatre at the intersection of art, politics and international development

This book is about social and political theatre in Nepal. In particular, it examines how everyday social problems and macro-political conflicts are both represented and challenged through drama-based performances. How are theatre and social reality (dis)connected? How can reflexivity and ambiguity allow for the aesthetic space to become a transformative place? What differentiates street theatre performed in planned development from street theatre performed within social and political movements? How can performance and dramatic action move communities towards social action? To answer these questions I delve into both aesthetic and social performance contexts of three types of theatre and performance for social change available to Nepali audiences in the mid-2000s: *kachahari natak* (forum theatre/street theatre), *loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy) and Maoist political cultural programmes that may include *krantikari natak* (revolutionary theatre). In other words, the political theatre for democracy performed by Aarohan Theatre Group, development forum theatre performed by both Aarohan Theatre in Kathmandu and by the Kamlari Natak Samuha, a Tharu activist group, in the rural areas of western Nepal, the political performance of the Maoist cultural groups, all aim to bring about social change, but how are they similar and how do they differ?

Aarohan Theatre Group, a Kathmandu-based professional company and Gurukul, the theatre school associated with the group, is at the core of this ethnography. It is the main field site from which I tried to understand the world of theatre for social change in Nepal. To respond to what they describe as the 'needs of the country' Aarohan performed both political and street theatre in development projects. *Loktantrik natak* (theatre for democracy) was staged voluntarily within the popular movement led by civil society organizations that developed as a reaction to the king's coup and state of Emergency in 2005. *Kachahari natak* (forum theatre) was performed as part of donor-funded development projects. But project-funded development theatre was also a means for Aarohan and other theatre groups in Nepal to survive and continue developing their artistic stage productions. In fact, to develop theatre acting as a full-fledged profession in the emerging Nepali creative industries, Aarohan Theatre

also staged high profile proscenium plays at their halls in Gurukul. If *loktantrik natak* represented the 'special', once off response to the urgency of the political threats, *kachahari natak* undoubtedly constituted the everyday, the 'ordinary' NGO-funded project work that financially contributed to the sustenance of Aarohan Theatre as an organization. Understanding the challenges faced by Aarohan Theatre provides powerful insight into the impact that international development funding can have on emergent theatre groups, in particular in countries like Nepal in which the government does not subsidize the arts. But *kachahari* performed in Kathmandu by professionals is different from *kachahari* performed by activists in rural areas. To get a comparative perspective, I have focused on work of the Kamlari Natak Samuha in Deukhuri Valley, west Nepal, one of Aarohan partner groups. The Kamlari Natak Samuha is a group formed by activists who performed in their spare time and in their own communities to fight a form of indentured child labour. The performances were part of the advocacy campaign carried out by local grassroots and national NGOs. Similarly, political street theatre performed in the capital during the movement for democracy finds interesting comparative insight in the work of the Maoist cultural groups. In this case, political cultural work is an 'ordinary', everyday activity for full-time party cadres. Maoist performances in fact are deeply embedded in Maoist organizational and ideological structure, using well-defined formats, images and language. 'Revolutionary theatre' can be considered as a radical form of agit-prop, a militant form of art that is intended to emotionally and ideologically mobilize its audience within a wider political project.

Understanding the contributions and limitations of using street theatre in development intervention or in political and social movements is not possible without understanding the lived experiences, the hopes and the expectations of the theatre 'makers', the relationship between theatre groups, government institutions, political parties and donor agencies, the groups' identities and the process of performance production. Yet, an additional form of performance emerged from the field. The critical years when Nepal moved from the 2005 autocracy to republic, via the 2006 People's Movement, produced a fascinating flurry of contentious street performances: the king deployed a pseudo-theatrical apparatus to legitimize his power including processions, official ceremonies, religious festivals, slogans, radio announcements and metal billboards. Similarly, demonstrators furthered their claims for democracy through slogans, puppets, colourful symbolic actions and cultural programmes including political theatre. I argue that performances do not simply represent, but construct and deconstruct power because of the aesthetic space that is conjured up and the extent to which they capture the essence of 'reality'. Performances also create the moral space to ground and sanction political struggle.

Performance is a notoriously contested and fluid concept. This book is therefore situated at the crossroads between anthropology, politics, theatre and international development. Recent research has moved away from a reductionist theatrical understanding of performance as mimicry, catharsis, or entertainment to embrace a broader, almost all-encompassing notion of performance as a way through which human beings make culture, engage with power and invent new ways of being in the world (Conquergood, 1995; Madison and Hamera, 2006). In particular, Conquergood suggests understanding 'the ubiquitous and generative force of performance that is beyond the theatrical' (Madison and Hamera, 2006, xii). Following this framework, cultural performance is distinguished from social performance. The first includes symbolic and self-conscious acts presented within specific and well-defined spaces, such as plays, rituals, circus, carnivals, concerts and storytelling. Social performance indicates the ordinary day-to-day interaction of individuals in the unfolding of social life, where behaviour is not 'marked' (Turner, 1982). In this study I want to go back to the theatrical and 'marked' performance to understand how social transformation is triggered at the blurred margins when the cultural fades into the social, where performance is actioned into performativity and back. Drawing from anthropological contributions to performance studies (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Schechner, 1993, 2002; Schechner and Turner, 1985), the work of Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982, 1987; St. John, 2008) concerning the interplay between ritual, theatre and everyday life, his theory of 'social dramas', concepts of the liminal/liminoid and *communitas* as well as his last works on the anthropology of experience are central to my analysis. They provide a framework within which to observe development theatre, political theatre and performative forms of protest as places in which conflictual practices, relationships and roles may be examined, and where possible resolutions may be articulated. The dramatic metaphor has often been employed to describe social life (Burke, 1945; Turner, 1982, 1984; Goffman, 1959) and anthropologists have documented its spectacular qualities (Cohen, 1993; Geertz, 1980; Turner, 1974). Roles, behaviour and social practices are understood as 'scripts' that are performed every day (Goffman, 1959; Trevino, 2003). However, performances do not simply provide transparent representations of social realities (*mimesis*), they create 'reflexive', contested representations to challenge both everyday social oppressions and macro-political conflict (*poiesis*). As Turner (1982) put it, performance is making, not faking. The theatrical space may become a place for reflexive awareness in which the 'actions' that make up the 'scripts' can be distanced, isolated, magnified and, in some cases, questioned, contested and changed, in ways similar to what Turner and Schechner describes as 'restored behaviour', 'twice-

behaved behaviour' (Schechner and Turner, 1985, 35–37). 'Reflexivity' rather than 'reflectivity' can trigger agency. Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz (2006, 77) highlight that 'reflective images are analogous to looking into a mirror and seeing an "accurate" representation'; conversely, 'reflexive images are those [...] wherein multiple representations are created through deliberate distortions (such as exaggeration, caricature, resonance) and utilized for interpretative purposes'. In short, reflexions are representations with a distortion, with a focus that can function as a model for some wished for world rather than a mirror of existing practices. This book will explore different forms of collective and public reflexive actions, some spontaneous such as street demonstrations, others planned like theatre for democracy. Conquergood adds a third element to the dichotomy mimesis (imitation) – poiesis (production) and talks about kinesis (rupture) when performance is understood as 'breaking and remaking', unleashing forces that unsettle power hierarchies (Conquergood, 1995, 138). Taussig (1993) also complicates a static notion of mimesis and shows how powerless people represent practices and gestures of the powerful to subvert authority. In this way mimesis opens the way to creation and intervention. Trying to classify performance through categories is limiting as performance is processual, relational and fluid so, as we will see in the next chapters, representation merges into creation and disruption like an ebb and flow, often in relation to the perceived opposition that comes from the surroundings.

Boal's¹ research on theatre for social change and especially his techniques of Forum Theatre (1979, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2006; Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 1994; Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 2006) offer an interesting perspective through which to study social reality and the way in which real-life conflicts and oppressions are expressed and challenged via the theatrical. *Kachahari natak* is the Nepali adaptation of Forum Theatre. Practised all over the world, forum theatre is a dramaturgical technique that Brazilian director Augusto Boal systematized into a methodology called the Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). It is employed in several kinds of projects such as community development, personal or organizational development, advocacy and therapy. In Nepal, forum theatre is mostly used in international development projects.² Boal advocates an aesthetic transformation through theatre. He believed that what makes a performance really critical is neither the plot nor the dialogue but the structure itself: oppression is achieved through the separation between actors vs. audience, lead actors vs. chorus (Ibid., 1979). The process of identification that affects the spectator and generates catharsis does not produce effective changes in reality according to Boal. On the contrary, it reasserts the oppressive condition. What Boal suggests is to turn the spectators in spect-actors, that is actors that not only take part in the dramatic action, but who are also

creators of the drama: 'some people 'make' theatre' suggests Boal, but everybody 'is' theatre'. Audience's participation becomes therefore a significant element in order to understand how drama-based work can bring forward social change.

Boal wished to 'activate' the spectators by offering them the chance of entering the aesthetic space. 'Simultaneous dramaturgy' is the first attempt to break the barrier between actors and spectators, between fiction and reality. When the scene reaches a point of crisis, the play is stopped and the spectators can verbally offer alternative solutions that the actors enact on the spot: 'the audience members 'write' and the actors 'perform' (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 1994, 238). However, telling someone to do something and actually doing it are two very different things. Boal recounts a famous example that transformed his theatre towards the even more participatory³ methodology of forum theatre. A woman in the audience became so outraged by the actor's inability to understand her suggestion that she went onto the stage and demonstrated what she meant through her own actions. Boal argues that

when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place. On stage the actor is an interpreter who, in the act of translating, plays false (1995, 7)

Trying to embody real-life dilemmas and enact possible solutions triggers off different involvement and emotions: for Boal 'doing' is different from 'talking about doing', 'representing' is different from 'being'.

During a forum theatre performance, participants and audience belong both to the 'real' world they live in and to the imagined 'representation' created by the play. The performance arena becomes a metaxic space. Boal describes metaxis as

[t]he state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participants shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds; their reality and the image of their reality which she herself has created (1995, 43)

Through forum theatre techniques the boundaries between fiction and reality may become blurred. Words can become actions, but actions that are simultaneously 'real' but not in actual 'real' life situations. Actions are embedded within the assumed 'fiction' of the aesthetic space. While critics see participatory development as concealing power behind representation, and introducing 'real' power into the apolitical theatre of participations, Boal uses a parallel shift between

reality/play and on/off stage with the audience themselves in order to challenge power (see Chapter 4).

The anthropological critique of development, in particular the shift from 'whether' to 'how' development works provides the background against which to situate theatrical work as an intervention for social change (Long and Long, 1992; Mosse, 2004, 2005a). This involves revealing the complex agency and interests of the different actors involved in the processes, as well as the necessity of taking into account the 'back stage' of the different agendas. Mosse (2005a, 8) described development as representation and explained how the success of development projects is produced by the control over the interpretation of events that are themselves socially produced and maintained. Theatre, and art in general, occupies a 'special' place within the development discourse: it is often framed instrumentally as a means, as a tool towards the achievement of other development goals, or through which to showcase the success of development projects. The symbolic sphere is privileged over the material. However, Aarohan Theatre's actions, commitments and dilemmas – as well as the artistic aspiration of Maoist cultural workers – show that the 'theatre-making' is indeed a goal in its own right. Theatre artists call themselves 'theatre workers', thus suggesting that theirs is an 'ordinary' profession and the Gurukul decade de facto ended by creating the basis of Nepali contemporary cultural economies.

The anthropology of power provided the *fil rouge* to understand how theatre and the theatrical mode can undo and expose the invisible workings of politics (Lukes, 2005; Ankersmit, 1996; Kertzer, 1988; Scott, 1985, 1990). Ankersmit (1996) explains that representation is political and always presents us an 'aesthetic gap' between the represented and the representation. In this aesthetic gap legitimate political power and political creativity originates. In fact, an effective use of ritual is crucial in the success of both conservative and revolutionary political groups.

Finally, I take a critical perspective considering theatre making as 'a mode of socio-cultural practice' (Zarrilli, 1995, 1) embedded in the wider socio-political-economic reality rather than a simple tool for behaviour change, and focus on how performance 'affects' rather than on how performance produces 'effects' (Zarrilli, 1995; Thompson, 2009). For these reasons, street drama performed within development projects has not been objectified as a 'product of development' and Maoist cultural work has not been dismissed as propaganda. Rather, both have been analysed as forms of popular culture to be understood within both the political and aesthetic conditions of their performance. Instead of directing primary attention to performance texts, this analysis sheds light on patterns of cultural practices, such as other forms of contentious performances questioning the social order, continuities

and innovations upon well-known themes and strategies, as well as artists' changing professional identities. While acknowledging the relevance of reception research and the productive role of any theatre audience (Bennet, 1997), I mostly focus on the production and performance stages – with just a brief incursion in reception. To understand how technical choices allowed for different degrees of audience participation and agency, I focus on Aarohan Theatre organizational development, the artists' identities and professional expectations. Similarly, by focusing on the artists' point of view instead of the audience's, I don't consider theatre as 'literature that happens to be on stage' but rather as a 'moving life force' (Berkoff in Hastrup, 2004, 29) capable of encouraging the audience to collectively fight for democracy or social justice as well as to inspire the artists to overcome their own hardships and turn a stigmatized passion into a respectable job.

Theatre and power in Nepal

The words *natak* and *natya*, 'drama/theatre' in Nepali, have the same root as *nach* (informal) and *nrtya* (formal). They both mean 'dance' and immediately suggest that the two genres are connected. Often *nach* indicates a performance that includes songs, dance and dialogues. Unlike classical western theatre, largely word-based, Nepali theatre is rooted in actions and movements like Asian theatre (Brandon and Banham, 1997). Theatre thus becomes a privileged locus to study cultural practices. For anthropology, culture is not only inscribed and absorbed in the bodies of the actor, or dancer, or the spectator, but it is also contested and created through the body becoming embodied knowledge (Pavis, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990).

Nepali theatre(s)⁴ reflects the country's geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity where Hindu and Buddhist religious-cultural traditions mingle with Indic, indigenous and western theatrical practices (Subedi, 2001, 2006). Subedi (2001) distinguishes three theatrical streams. First, folk theatre, diversified according to ethnic traditions; second, heritage performances, blending rituals, festivals and dance-dramas, and linked to folk and shamanic practices; third, proscenium theatre, influenced by Sanskrit and western traditions. For Subedi, 'the traditional forms, the mask dances, ritual dramas, traditional dance dramas, tabloids representing vibrant cultural forms, short dance dramas are participated in and watched by a larger number of people than any modern plays' (Ibid., 11). What's fascinating is the way in which theatre, ritual and performance relate to authority and power, both spiritual and political. Through this short historical background I want to highlight how such relationship has also determined Nepali theatre's ambivalent connection to political power, the Royal Palace in particular,

shaping the types of performances available to common citizens as well as affecting the establishment of acting as a profession.

Nepali theatre is thought to have begun during the Licchavi period (fifth to eighth century CE) though little remains of that kind of theatre except for statues and inscriptions (Subedi, 2006, 25; Malla, 1980, 11; Toffin, 2012; Davis, 2002). Art and architecture flourished thanks to the country's position along the commercial route linking India to China (Subedi, *Ibid.*). The Malla period (1200–1768) is regarded the 'golden age' of drama, theatre and arts (Subedi, 2006, 34). The kings performed as actors on the *dabali* or *dabu*, a performance platform where coronations also took place. They wrote dramas and patronized performances. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, kings, courtiers and common people watched plays performed on the *dabali*⁵ situated in the middle of the *tole* (locality), near the palace and the temple. Until the end of the Rana rule, guards protected the *dabu* and only kings or artists could step on it.⁶ Dramas were performed for festivals, religious celebrations, pilgrimages and for royal ceremonies such as weddings, births and coronations.⁷

In 1768, Prithvi Narayan Shah 'unified'⁸ Nepal and brought about deep socio-economic, political, cultural and linguistic changes but this did not lead to significant theatrical development. The Shah Kings (1768–1846) participated in rituals and powerfully grounded their authority through performance and festivals but did not patronize theatre *per se* (Subedi, 2006, 15). King Prithvi Narayan Shah is believed to have exploited the power of performance when he conquered the Nepal Valley (Subedi, 2006, 14; van den Hoek, 1990). The Newar were celebrating the Indra Jatra festival:⁹ the Newar King Jayaprakash Malla fled the chariot, which was supposed to carry him around the city. Prithvi Narayan himself took his place and was welcomed by the citizens with flowers (Subedi, *Ibid.*). Prithvi Narayan then submitted himself to the Kumari, the virgin incarnation of the Goddess of the Malla Taleju (van den Hoek, 1990, 149). Political occupation was sanctioned through the appropriation of ritual practices and reinforced annually in the streets. Though Indra is mythically associated with fertility and prosperity, the main aim of this public ritual¹⁰ is to consolidate, renew and preserve the king's power (van den Hoek, 1990; Toffin, 1992, 2010). Through the festival the king is empowered by the *shakti* (power) of the city (van den Hoek, 1993, 371). The festival is mostly performed publicly in the streets and symbolically in key places of the capital. Indra Jatra festival lasts for eight days between the months of *Bhadra* (August-September) and *Ashwin* (September-October). The month of *Bhadra* is considered a month of contestation and licence in the Kathmandu Valley (Toffin, 1992). Demons threaten the universe and dance in the streets (*lakkhe pyakha*); improvised comic sketches (*khyalah*)

involve lampooning politicians and religious personalities (Ibid.). Indra Jatra closes the period, restoring the king's order over disruptive forces.

The Ranas (1846–1950) introduced great changes in theatre practices. They created theatre groups and established exclusive theatre houses inside their palaces for family members, officials and servants, that would sit according to their rank. These performances were influenced by the theatre of the royal courts of India as well as by western and Parsi performances, so-called because they were run by and bankrolled by Parsis in nineteenth-century India (Malla, 1980). Theatre in the Rana courts had no local connotations and used Hindi-Urdu language (Rijal, 2007, 26). Although confined to the courts, because the Ranas were not interested in creating a theatre public, Parsi theatre nevertheless influenced dramatic productions outside the court and the capital, in towns like Pokhara, Dharan, Dhankuta and Palpa (Subedi, 2006, 77). Artists outside the court tried to emulate the quality of Parsi dramas, by making use of magnificent scenic curtains, melodrama and mixing Urdu and Hindi in songs and dialogues, but their lack of resources and skills made such experiments short-lived (Ibid.). Rijal (2007, 27) suggests that such exclusivity was one of the ways in which the Ranas distanced themselves from the common people and retained their power: they lived in buildings that emulated western architecture, associated themselves with western art, photography, clothing and imported the theatre from India.

At the turn of the twentieth century, exchanges between India and Nepal were common. Dumber Shumsher Rana¹¹ was sent to Calcutta in 1893 to get training in dramaturgy while Manik Man Tuladhar was the first non-Rana to be trained in India in 1900 (Subedi, 2006, 80). However, during the Rana period, except for Sama's plays, dramas were usually not written in Nepali but translated from Sanskrit and Hindi. Nepali was mixed with Urdu and Hindi (Malla, 1980). While patronizing theatre in their courts, the Rana prevented any attempt to expand Parsi theatre to local tastes as they were worried about public uprisings (Rijal, 2007, 29). When Manik Man Tuladhar tried to perform a play as *Indrasabha* in Tundikhel, Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamser stopped him and ordered him to only perform for the people who can sponsor the shows (Malla in Rijal, 2007, 27).

The Ranas brought girls aged 13–14 from villages to their palaces. In every palace there were about 50–60 girls who were taught dance, drama, singing and music by Indian trainers. They resided in separate palaces and also received a salary. Inside the palace, women were responsible for all kinds of art and entertainment activities forbidden to men.¹² Prachanda Malla explains that in many palaces, trainers tuned a women's voice into a man's voice with 'lots and lots of practice'. Others retained their everyday female voice but in performance they could project their voice as a male.

In contrast, beyond the palaces, there were no stages or facilities and women were not allowed to perform. There were also no training facilities. Plays performed in the streets on the *dabali* during the same period were much simpler, without curtains and props. *Jyapunach*, the farmer's dance, was performed for eight days during Gai Jatra or Indra Jatra, provided the actors received permission from the Rana. Bekha Narayan Maharjan (1926–2006) and his group were among the most prominent performers. The audience would sit on straw mats around the *dabali* while street vendors sold peanuts and other foods (Subedi, 2006, 102). Artists were very popular at that time. Master Ratnadas, as Prachanda Malla refers to him, a singer and an actor, was considered a superstar. Having a good voice, in fact, was an essential quality for an actor.

Schools and colleges¹³ in Kathmandu became the places where modern drama and theatre in Nepali language could develop. Dramatist Bhim Nidhi Tiwari (1911–73) writes of his play 'The Tolerant Sushila' (*Sahanshila Sushila*) being produced at Darbar High School in 1940, even though Rana officials and spies discouraged them (Rijal, 2007, 33). Balakrishna Sama (1903–81),¹⁴ the most prominent Nepali dramatist, was also a strong supporter of the use of Nepali language in theatre and education (Onta, 1993). *Mukunda Indira* was the first Nepali play written and directed by Sama in 1937. Historians believe that this play marked the beginning of modern Nepali theatre in all aspects, 'language, costumes, story, emotions and feeling' (Malla cited in Rijal, 2007, 33). Prachanda Malla, one of Sama's students and actors, remembers his master's theatrical revolution:

Balakrishna Sama involved students of Darbar High School to stage this play. Women were not allowed to play, that's why men had to play female roles. He also changed the costumes, because initially, when they did plays in the palaces, costumes were made from very expensive clothes with real diamonds and pearls. But he used normal clothes that normal people wear. He did the play in pure and clear Nepali language. He didn't use painted screens but a black screen.¹⁵

There was a fracture between the theatre inside the palaces and what was emerging in schools. Rijal remarks that plays in Nepali created by 'teacher-dramatists and student-performers' were 'instrumental in creating a public sphere for theatre in Nepali' (2007, 34). Dramatists writing in Nepali considered Parsi theatre as a 'vulgar and foreign form of art', and emulated modern, in particular western, dramaturgy. The exaggerations of Parsi theatre were abandoned: realistic plots became popular; naturalistic acting replaced both the 'artificial style' of Parsi artists and the grandiosity of Sama's theatre (Rijal, 2007, 36). Despite the popularity of Parsi theatre troupes, after the 1950s the knowledge and techniques mastered by

Parsi practitioners did not transfer outside the palaces. Rijal explains that '[b]oth the patrons and art forms died as democracy and modern theatre in Nepali came into prominence in the country' (2007, 29).

With the restoration of the Shah dynasty in 1951, the theatre was strengthened. King Mahendra himself is frequently represented as a great lover of the arts. He was well aware of the celebrative power of art, requested artists to write plays in his honour, and sponsored the construction of the Nepal Academy (*Pragya Pratishthan*)¹⁶ in 1958 and many theatre halls in the capital. The Nepal Academy aimed to support research on Nepali languages, literature, arts, culture and science, as well as to train and honour artists, learned people and authors and to develop arts and philosophy in Nepal. The National Theatre (*Rastriya Nachghar*)/Cultural Corporation (*Sanskritik Samsthan*) was established in 1972. Focusing only on performing arts, it aimed to promote, preserve and perform music, dance, songs and drama. Unlike the Academy, the Cultural Corporation did not follow the academic side of the performing arts. The Academy was the first institution to provide acting courses, well before the Cultural Corporation, but stopped because of financial shortage. Both the Academy and the Cultural Corporation cast permanent artists to perform in their productions. Independent artists were employed on a short-term basis according to need. The artists of the Corporation performed on official occasions such as welcoming international guests and heads of governments, thus representing the official state sponsored image of the country. The government directly supported also the groups associated with the Police and the Army, that had their own repertory and yearly dance and song competitions. Theatre thus became 'academised', a means through which to popularize the government's social and political projects. Subedi (2006, 52) explains that artists wrote

poetry on nationalistic topics given by King Mahindra. Performances were managed accordingly. The Academy became an extension of the Royal Opera House that the palace used to house in the past. It became the centre for performances which would please its patron.

While cultural and traditional street performances continued, the 1970s were characterized by popular well-made sentimental and often nationalistic plays (Rijal in Subedi 2006, 142) as well as *gitinatak*, musical plays mirroring Hindi film stories and style. In the 1980s, a theatre of humour and political satire hitting the corrupt practices of ministers, politicians and bureaucrats increased in popularity (Ibid.). Street theatre and poetry festivals, including ethnic and language festivals, expressed 'permitted' resistance to Panchayat rule. The early 1980s also marked the beginning of a new kind of street theatre in Nepal that I will describe in Chapter 2.

From this short historical background, five points are worth emphasizing. First, theatricality helps in conveying the sacredness of the ritual pertaining to the highest levels of power. Political power, the king's power in this case, was reinforced symbolically and publicly through popular participation in the streets. In Chapter 3 I will provide contemporary instances of the royal power's manipulation of symbols and public ceremonies during the Emergency 2005 and describe how theatrical street demonstrations worked to delegitimize it. Second, with the end of the Malla period, royal and popular audiences were separated. Theatre entered the palaces and popular performances developed outside. Some artists like Bekha Narayan Maharjan and Hari Prasad Rimal had access to and performed in both spaces. Subedi (2006, 107) defines them

bridge between the courts and the public, but they did not act as liaisons between these two worlds represented by the Rana rulers and their feudatory relatives and those of the common mass because there was nothing in common between the entertainment structure inside the courts and the people's powerful traditions of performance culture outside.

Third, Aarohan Theatre was inspired by both Balkrishna Sama and Gopal Prasad Rimal, dedicating their two halls to them. Through these two very different artists arose two important revolutions: Balakrishna Sama popularized theatre and carried out important stylistic changes while Gopal Prasad Rimal powerfully introduced social themes (Subedi, 2006; Hutt, 1991). Fourth, from a caste perspective, theatre emerges as predominantly the domain of Bahuns and Newars. Lastly, theatre could not develop as an independent art outside the palaces until the end of the Rana rule, thus affecting the establishment of professional acting. This also reinforces the apparent fracture between the official, government-sponsored theatre offered by the Academy, the National Theatre and the independent theatre groups that emerged from the pro-democracy street theatre of the 1980s, growing in opposition to the Royal Palace and animating the independent, creative economy emerging in Kathmandu. This vacuum was filled by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that acted as 'patrons' for theatre groups (Rijal, 2007). A powerful narrative of lack was common in artists' descriptions of the theatrical scene during my fieldwork: the lack of state policies regarding the arts, the lack of a developed stage theatre circuit and culture, the lack of financial sustainability, a lack of training facilities, an unstable political situation, dependence on development work shaped by development agencies' practices, an on-going process of theatre professionalization, which restricted actors' possibilities of developing their own careers across different groups and a centralization of professional theatrical activities in the capital, Kathmandu.

Aarohan Theatre Group and the growth of theatre in Nepal

Aarohan Theatre Group was established in 1982 under the direction of Sunil Pokharel. Sunil was born in the eastern hills of Nepal but was introduced to theatre in Biratnagar, where his parents had migrated. Situated near the Indian border, at the time Biratnagar was a very active and lively city, full of theatre, literature and poetry. A Brahmin boy who grew up with lots of restrictions, Sunil found in the theatre a means of self-expression and in Badri Adhikari, now a film director, a supporter. As a teenager, Sunil was selected for dance, drama and voice training at the Royal Nepal Academy. However, this was only for two hours per day. After completing the training, Sunil remained for another couple of years as an actor. Despite having facilities, teachers, theatre halls and a salary, he felt dissatisfied with the lack of productions and the fact that they were not free to decide which plays to perform. With Badri Adhikari, who in the meantime had arrived in Kathmandu, and his future wife Nisha's sister, Suryamala, also an artist at the Academy, Sunil established Aarohan. The group soon defined itself in opposition to mainstream popular entertainment. A leaflet from the late 1990s stresses that the main objective of Aarohan was to perform 'meaningful plays in Nepalese Theatre', an objective the group shared with other regional groups active in the 1980s like Janam in India (Hashmi, 1989) or Ajoka Theatre in Pakistan (Afzal-Khan, 1997, 2005). Explaining the ideals that moved them to found a theatre group, Sunil¹⁷ remarked that they were 'young, dissatisfied with Bollywood movies that were very popular in Nepal', and that they 'wanted to change the world'. These words sum up the double soul of the group, committed to artistic proscenium theatre on the one hand, and to political and social street theatre on the other.

Aarohan staged many foreign plays in Nepal for the first time, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus* in 1985. The reviewer of *The Rising Nepal*¹⁸ praised the choice of staging the classics as 'a matter of great cultural value'. Then in 1989–90 Aarohan organized what was described as a groundbreaking programme in Kathmandu. *Aarohan Shanibar* (Aarohan Saturday) scheduled a new play every month, by Nepali and world playwrights alternately. Each drama was performed for four Saturdays in a row, at 3 p.m., for a membership-based audience at the French Cultural Centre. In 1989 the membership fee was 200 Nepali Rupees (NRs.) a year and around 400 members joined the programme.¹⁹ The group performed works by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertold Brecht, Mohan Rakesh, Alexander Vampolov, Junji Kinoshita, as well as by Nepali playwrights such as Govinda Bahadur Malla 'Gothale', and Balkrishna Sama. Performing diverse work seemed a heartfelt concern for Aarohan's artists. Documents of the time suggest that the plays targeted a specific audience composed of philosophers, professors, lawyers, journalists and the intelligentsia of Nepal.

Even an information sheet produced by the French Cultural Centre for the 1989 edition highlights the targeting of a restricted audience, emphasizing that ‘those plays will be classical texts intended for a learned audience’, hinting at a search for a formal and official recognition of the cultural activities organized by the group. The long production was a catalyst for motivating artists and art lovers in the capital. Throughout the year, a poem, a picture and a painting were also displayed, alongside the performance of each play. Commenting upon the project 15 years later, Sunil explained that it failed financially, many spectators did not pay the membership fee and artists had to volunteer, but it created a wave of interest for the theatre. The audience participated, asking questions after the plays, and helping with the organization by sponsoring brochures or tea. The network of connections created at the time is still in existence and includes present-day politicians and journalists. The 1990s were a critical time for Nepali theatre. Aarohan staged some proscenium plays, such as ‘Dr. Knox’, ‘Ask the Yogi about his Caste’ (*Jat Sodhnu Yogiko*), and ‘Oedipus’, but they ran only for a few days, as was usual practice at the time because of the high rents of the theatre halls and uncertain audience participation.

From the very beginning, Aarohan’s identity was associated with artistic, ‘serious’ (Subedi 2006, 157) and meaningful theatre work for the capital’s intellectuals; therefore, having a positive response from the public was important for self-sustainability. In fact, in the late 1980s, artists strategically used what was considered as ‘respectable’, ‘written’ Nepali and foreign dramas, to legitimize not only their productions but also their art itself. Distancing themselves from popular street and traditional performances, they attempted to give dignity and recognition to their work. Although Aarohan performed street theatre since the 80s, both during political demonstrations and for development projects, the label of an intellectual and élite group followed them, as I was occasionally told by some research participants. Artists outside the group criticized Aarohan for staging too many foreign plays. Sunil explained that there were several reasons behind their choice. First, staging foreign plays was important to train artists by exposing them to different artistic styles and forms. Second, there were not many ‘meaningful’ Nepali plays to stage. And then, by presenting foreign plays, actors aimed at giving ‘respectability’ to their job. Respectability was perceived as being connected to the ‘intellectuality’ of the work, through the ‘thoughts’. He explains that when they started,

theatre wasn’t a prestigious job. It was a third-rate thing in our families, because we came from middle-class families, Brahmin families. And theatre as a job was like what prostitutes do, or like that, uneducated people, under SLC [school leaving certificate] people, they do theatre. That was the basic idea. At least in my 25 years in theatre I

tried to prove that 'no, theatre is good work'. There are thoughts...²⁰
 That's why we did lots of foreign plays and [to] shock people actually.
 We did Camus and people [said] 'Camus? Wow!'²¹

For some significant time, foreign plays have been strategically used to assert the actors' value. For example, Krishna Shah Yatri, an actor and director of Jyoti Punja Theatre, remembered staging plays for Dashain festival in the late 1980s. When he was a teenager, groups of people in his community gathered to organize the plays. They joined spontaneously, and staged religious-cultural works. On the contrary, for Dasain 2006, the youth of his village staged Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet'. The youth justified their choice saying 'if we do a foreign play, people will say this is good, people will say he's one who knows'. Krishna commented that in this way the 'typical culture and identity is lost'. Conversely, his observations recall the criticism raised against Aarohan's choices. There is a hierarchy of 'knowledge' at stake. 'Knowledge' serves to achieve prestige and recognition. 'Foreign knowledge' pays higher than 'Nepali knowledge'. A more practical issue needs to be considered at this point though. Staging proscenium plays require funding, which is provided neither by NGOs nor by international organizations. Artists reported that even the British Council preferred to fund development projects rather than proscenium plays. It is often foreign embassies that sponsor the staging of theatrical pieces, providing they are written by playwrights from their country. Therefore, the relationship between Nepali theatre and 'foreignness' is controversial, not only a matter of theatrical identity but also of 'professional identity'. Nepali's relationship with 'foreign goods' in general is a contradicting co-existence between attraction and rejection (see Liechty, 1997; Hachhethu, 1990; Onta, 1997). In theatre, staging foreign plays²² can simultaneously be a source of prestige but may also attract accusations of lacking 'Nepaliness'.

Performance continuity was a huge problem for theatre groups in Nepal. What granted continuity to Aarohan was the leading actors' personal involvement and commitment through decades. From 1984 to 1987 Sunil studied direction at the National School of Drama (NSD) in New Delhi, India, but he returned to Nepal every year during holidays to stage theatrical productions. For many years the group only gathered sporadically as necessary to rehearse stage productions or dramas for development projects as at that time most of the actors were making a living through other jobs. In fact, many of the founding members of Aarohan left theatre for income-generating work because the theatre did not provide sustenance. In the 1980s and 1990s, only artists regularly employed at the government institutions, and those engaged in television productions or in the upper echelons of the movie industry could live from their acting. When my fieldwork started in 2004, the only

founding members still actively involved in the group were Sunil Pokharel, Nisha Sharma Pokharel and Basanta Bhatta. They managed to find time for Aarohan rehearsals, and as a source of income took roles in films, tele-serials, radio dramas and produced documentaries for NGOs when not doing theatre. While officially retaining their membership of the group, all other artists were effectively only present as sympathizers. Sunil, Nisha, and Basanta supervised decision-making and group management. Sunil recalls that the group's 'office' was contained in his bag until the establishment of Gurukul.²³ Sunil and Nisha's narratives reveal the great personal effort invested to give continuity to Aarohan. They took personal risks, which resulted in a profound sense of commitment.

Other members did too. Basanta juggled his job at the Home Ministry with his passion for acting for 20 years. His participation in theatrical productions were independent of his professional occupation though he relied on being granted permission to take leave. He recounts that he only joined rehearsals because his managers often allowed him time; they knew he was an artist, and because he was good at his office job they were generous and accommodating of his requests. Even when he was transferred to the Indian border in Karkharbitta he still found time to go to Kathmandu for rehearsals. However, in the subsequent period, when he worked in the Sunauli border in 1994–95, he had to stop acting. His workload was heavy and thus leave was restricted. He therefore asked for an assignment in Kathmandu. At the time, Basanta was working in the immigration office at the Indian border, and his boss was happy with his work performance:

When I told him, 'Sir, I am an actor, if I go to the western side I could not do theatre and my life is finished. So if you love me, please give me a place here [in Kathmandu]', so that I can do theatre on weekly holidays'...the boss said, 'he's a national actor, please give him facilities.'²⁴

It was only in 2004, that Basanta, then in his 40s, was able to finally be employed full-time in theatre. To sum up, Aarohan Theatre Group had been active since 1982. However, such involvement, like that of other Nepali theatre groups, had been discontinuous. The emotional, economic and time investment of the committed members created permanent bonds as the theatre group became the focal point of their lives. But it was only with the establishment of the Gurukul School of Theatre that it developed into a structured and stable organization representing, for the three leading artists, the possibility of fulfilling their dreams.

In 2006 I rehearsed for a month in Gurukul a play produced by another independent theatre group. I experienced first-hand what I had often heard stories of: artists not turning up for rehearsals, or arriving 2–3 hours late, by which time

those who had been punctual had finished or left; artists quitting a few days before the opening; dancers coming to only one in four rehearsals. At the beginning I was very committed and I dedicated the whole month to observing 'how a play was built'. But after weeks of disruption, even my enthusiasm diminished. In the end, I also turned up only when I had time, and prioritized my other research work. There was desperation and anger. The director threatened to leave if actors did not behave more responsibly, and then skipped the following day's rehearsal, thus disappointing those actors who were trying to follow the 'agreements'. There were long discussions about the necessity of taking theatre more 'seriously'. An actor expressed their frustration, saying 'This is why *bikas* (development) is not coming to Nepal! People don't take responsibilities'. At that time, we did not manage to do even one full rehearsal before the opening. Because of the lack of a proper sound-check, many voices could hardly be heard. There was a saying, then, that in Nepal the opening was the grand rehearsal.

Creating a formal school of theatre was therefore a response to the needs for improved artistic skills, ownership of the performance space and means of production, offering performance continuity, and the stable employment of full-time actors. These were the main objectives guiding Sunil's ideation of Gurukul, the first independent theatre school in Nepal. Gurukul was established in 2002 in Purano Baneshwor and it took six months of hard work to set up Sama Natak Ghar (Sama Theatre Hall), accommodating around 200 people, which was inaugurated in 2003. A second hall, Rimal Natak Ghar, hosting around 450 people, was set up in 2007. The Gurukul compound comprised the two theatre halls, a main building whose lower floors were dedicated to the group office, a library, actors' and guests' bedrooms (hostel) and rehearsal hall, an open-air canteen situated under a tin roof on the north flank of the hill and the lodgings of the night guard and helper Devi Khatri and his family. The Tarai-based landlord used the top floor of the main building as a residence during his trips to Kathmandu. The thatched roof, wooden gazebo, under which visitors and artists would spend hours talking, was another landmark of Gurukul, together with the Tibetan prayer flags that often decorated the space infusing a sense of peace. For the first two years students got NR 3,000 a month scholarship for living expenses. After graduating, they got a monthly salary of NR. 5,000. At the beginning, the group paid NR. 10,000 rent for the building and seven *ropanis*²⁵ of land. The rent would be raised up to NR. 60,000 in 2005/06, and continued to increase, creating problems of sustainability that would eventually lead to the closure of Gurukul in 2012. In 2009, the group opened a similar school and arts centre in Biratnagar. Aarohan Gurukul Biratnagar is still active.

Aiming at professionalizing theatre in Nepal, Gurukul had maintained its