

THEATRESCIENCE in INDIA 2006

Introduction:

In September 2006 Rebecca Gould, Associate Director at the Theatre Royal Plymouth, Jeff Teare, Freelance Director and 'Theatre of Science' Consultant and Director and Simon Turley, Playwright, visited Kolkata, Mumbai and Bangalore. They wanted to explore ways in which Theatrescience – an idea developed from the Theatre Royal Plymouth's 'Theatre of Science' project and from other work developed by the team on a similar theme - could operate in India.

The idea for the visit initially sprang from a meeting between Sujata Sen (Director of the British Council in Kolkata) Simon Turley and Rebecca Gould, in Exeter in Jan 2006. Sujata was interested in the project as 'creativity in/with science' is an idea which is beginning to gain credence. Also, with the burgeoning number of Indian science and technology companies in the global market, we all felt it would be an interesting time to explore the ethics, moral dilemmas, economics and politics associated with new science, in India. Therefore, with the support of the Theatre Royal Plymouth and the British Council, Kolkata, and after extensive investigation via the net and email undertaken by Jeff Teare, the team were able to visit India for a research and development trip.

The Theatre Royal Plymouth is currently in the process (Oct 2006) of starting the last 'legacy' phase of their Theatre of Science project. As part of this process they will be exploring various spin-offs and developments from the work so far (including the development of a new play by Simon about CFS/ME).

Thus far the main aim of 'Theatrescience' and the 'Theatre of Science' has been to explore and express, in various dramatic forms, the moral, ethical, economic and political aspects of modern advances in biomedical science and particularly to discuss their impact on how we live in the 21st Century. Subjects explored have included HIV/Aids, Cloning, GM Crops, Inherited Disease, Genetic Predisposition, Biometrics, Sexual Health, 'Designer Babies' etc. However, given the location and identity of the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, most of the performances, with the exception of Simon Turley's 'Seeing Without Light' and the school pieces associated with it, have been based on a mainly eurocentric standpoint.

In light of the effects that many scientific advances are having, or potentially could have, in the developing world, Rebecca was increasingly driven to think about creating drama that explores the sometimes vast differences in thinking about science, medicine and biology in the developing, as opposed to the developed, world, and in particular in India.

Tathagata Chowdhury, who runs the theatre company Theatrician in Kolkata, assisted the team in India. Contact was made with 'TC' (as he is known in

theatrical circles) through the British Council as he produced their schools new writing festival, in partnership with Padatik, an arts centre in the city.

The Visit:

A total of seven workshops were held with theatre practitioners and students. Most of the workshops began with an introduction to the Theatrescience project and the viewing of video of this work in the UK. All of the workshops involved playing Theatrescience drama games ('Giant Body', 'DNA to protein', 'Nurture and/or Nature', Statues, 'Farmer, Farmer' etc.) and devising and performing short pieces based on (Indian) newspaper articles. Subjects explored included:

- Pesticide pollution
- Delayed parenthood
- Inherited disease
- Organ donation
- Kashmir birth rates
- Industrialisation
- Government censorship
- Cholera
- Organic farming
- Bionics
- HIV
- DDT
- Diabetes
- Genetic therapy
- Food allergies.

In addition to workshops, meetings were held with writers, directors, producers, performers and educationalists, all of whom generously gave us the team their time and expertise.

Kolkata 8th – 11th September

Two full-day workshops were held in Kolkata, one with Creative Arts, organised by Ramanjit Kaur, and one with Suman Mukhopahya's company at Padatik, organised by Mallika Jalan.

The Creative Arts workshop involved over 30 students and theatre practitioners. The morning session consisted of viewing UK Theatrescience/Theatre of Science video and discussion. The discussion clearly identified the need for more clarity in our intended outcomes (see below). The afternoon was entirely practical with a particularly interesting 'attitudes to science and art' statue/word game and an especially memorable devised piece about organ donation.

The workshop at Padatik was with 20 experienced theatre practitioners and quickly demonstrated the need for participants not to be made to work in English all the time. Much of the best devised work at this workshop was not in English and was movement and music based.

Simon's comments on this workshop – 'The writing that was generated was impressive and lively. The devised pieces were extremely involving and engaging – drawing on skilful performance and making use of a variety of stylistic approaches. This was a mature and intelligent group who worked with one another comfortably and allowed themselves to be challenged by the content of the workshops.'

Reflecting on both these workshops the Theatrescience team decided that it needed to be able to offer participating companies a much clearer vision of why the visit was taking place – of 'what was in it for them'. It was agreed that the team should make it explicit that they were not there to do anything other than promote Theatrescience as a possibly-new line of theatrical inquiry, and that any participants who wished to pursue matters further would be encouraged to pitch their own ideas in forthcoming weeks, via the Theatrescience website or directly to Rebecca at the Theatre Royal. Theatrescience and the Theatre Royal would then respond by offering support, and, if appropriate their expertise, so that such ideas could be brought to fruition. However, there would also be an explicit commitment that neither Theatrescience nor the Theatre Royal was seeking to take ownership or control of any such work. However, at this stage, after just two workshops and with two cities still to visit, the team were wary of suggesting anything more concrete.

A dinner with Kolkata theatre practitioners further defined the need for Theatrescience work in India to be Indian led.

A meeting was also had with Dr Jayanta Sthanapati mainly to find out about the Indian National Science Drama Festival organised by the National Council of Science Museums, which, on reflection, seems very close to the Wellcome Trust's Science Centrestage project (2002) in the UK.

Mumbai 12 – 16 September

Two workshops were held at the Mumbai University Academy of Theatre Arts thanks to Professor Waman Kendre. (These were taken by Jeff and Simon, as were those in Bangalore, as Rebecca had by then returned to the UK.)

One half-day workshop was held with 20 first year Theatre Arts students. A subsequent full-day workshop was held in association with the Prithvi Theatre for over twenty Theatre Arts second years, other students from the Indian Institute of Technology design course and a few theatre practitioners. The

writing section of this workshop was particularly effective, with a clear demonstration of the use of 'narrative question'. Nearly all of the devised work on both days was not in English, though was less movement and music based than that at Padatik. However, one particularly effective scene about an 'insecticide' that caused politicians to tell the truth did utilise drumming, singing and mime. The full-day workshop ended with a discussion about what exactly 'applied drama' might be.

A meeting with Sanjna Kapoor and Sameera Iyenger from the Prithvi Theatre began to explore the possibility of an Indian Theatrescience Festival in 2007.

Other meetings were organised with various writers, performers and producers. These greatly clarified the team's understanding of how most Indian theatre (especially Indian theatre in English) tends to be undertaken ('portfolio working'). Other issues discussed included – urban v rural work, the different perspectives on biomedical developments between the developed and the developing worlds ('ends of the telescope'), genetic imperialism and the plight of the Indian playwright.

Bangalore 17 – 20 September

Three workshops were held in Bangalore, one for 22 experienced theatre practitioners organised by Arundhati and Jagdish Raja of ART/Jagriti Theatre, and two in schools (also organised by Arundhati).

The practitioner workshop was held at the French Institute and was undertaken entirely in English (as were the school workshops). The work was of a very high quality, especially in the 'physical approaches to character'. An interesting extension of Theatrescience's 'DNA to Protein' game was also developed. The devised work was extremely accomplished, especially particularly effective pieces about 'bionics', Indian attitudes to organ donation and attitudes to HIV/Aids.

The two school workshops involved class groups (26-35) of 14-15 year old students. Teachers were also involved, with eight science teachers attending at the second school. These workshops were mainly interesting in comparison to the many we've undertaken in schools in the UK. The schools themselves were very well equipped and the Indian students' attention and enthusiasm were exemplary. However, we were surprised by their somewhat cavalier attitude to access to their DNA information.

Our Bangalore visit came to an inspiring end with a tour of the Jagriti Theatre which is currently under construction. We wish them well!

Outcomes:

By the end of the visit concrete realisations and outcomes were emerging:

- That India is alive to the political and ethical implications of developments in biomedical science.
- That Indian practitioners and educational establishments are attracted by the confluence of art and science, which the project encourages.
- That Theatrescience may confidently promote a festival of work in India which is written, devised, directed and performed by Indian practitioners.
- That some of this work might be seen in the UK.
- That contacts made with companies, university departments and schools could well be further developed (perhaps especially in terms of Plymouth and Bangalore).

At the time of writing (Oct 2006) the Theatre Royal, Plymouth and Theatrescience are actively exploring the immediate possibilities of an Indian Science Theatre Festival in 2007 and possible exchanges of individual theatre practitioners, groups and perhaps students between India and the UK.

On a personal note – A major thank you to all our new Indian colleagues/friends for making our (sadly) short visit so enjoyable (and that's not just our sojourn in the Bangalore Club), engaging and creative. Here's to the next time!

Jeff Teare

8/10/06