

Book Reviews

***Cultural Labour: Conceptualising the Folk Performance in India* by Brahma Prakash**

London: Oxford University Press, 2019, 333 pp. (hardcopy)

By Satkirti Sinha

In this investigation of the criticism and creativeness of folk culture, Brahma Prakash explores a broad conception of folk styles informed by a history of ‘caste and gender oppression in India’ (2019: 8). As per the Hindu law book *Manusmriti*, the Brahmins are considered to be the ‘purest’ of the four castes and in the caste hierarchy have been traditionally assigned as law-givers. With aid—historically—from colonial scholars, the Brahmins have generally imposed their own notion of culture in Hinduist India. This has resulted in the denigration of lower caste culture as vulgar and non-intellectual, and motivated the disappearance of folk performances from mainstream cultural style (13). Despite cultural persecution, Prakash evidences that these folk performances continue to provide a democratic space for those marginalised by caste hierarchies. His introduction emphasises that due to this history of caste hierarchy in India, folk culture and ‘classical styles’ have been allocated and conceptualised as two distinct practices; the former being mostly absent from the syllabus of modern education in India. Therefore, his research intends to amend this lack of representation in the academic field so that its practices and practitioners can ‘make their presence felt’ (9). Prakash argues that this negligence towards the folk culture is due to its performers being generally regarded as ‘untouchables’ (Shudra or Dalit) who pollute and shame their society; a bias that results in their work not being considered an ‘ideal form of performance’ (13).

Prakash implements various theories from theatre and performance studies such as landscape, materiality, viscerality, performativity, and choreopolitics to explore the aesthetics of folk

performance and analyse why it is comparatively deemed less culturally important, focusing predominantly on examples from the states of Bihar and Telangana. Prakash's case studies evidently justify his claims of social and academic inattention towards folk culture, while illuminating the reader on its value and importance in performing arts. The first chapter, 'Historiography: Performance between Traces and Trash', emphasises the urgent need for scholarly work on the historiography of Indian folk performances to redress its problematic demarcation in comparison to legacies of 'colonial and elite theatre' (54). Prakash elaborates that his approach of understanding the historiography of folk performance is through 'examining how theatre and performance history came to be written as it is, considering the approach that shaped theatre history writings in the nineteenth and twentieth centur[ies]' (56). In one such example he refers to the foundational Sanskrit text of the *Natyasastra*, which evidences that the marginalisation of folk artists was always a part of Hindu culture; and though encouraged by the British colonial government, it was not initiated by their regime (57). Although Prakash accepts that colonial writers misunderstood folk culture and did not consider it art, he surmises that it was originally the elite Brahmin caste 'who did not appreciate folk performances' (69). This informative and challenging argument demystifies the view championed by many Indian nationalists that British imperialists were solely to blame for the degradation and humiliation of folk artists in India.

In the second and third chapters, Prakash discusses the theatrical theories of landscape and materiality and formulates these concepts for analysis in folk culture through two examples from Bihar. Prakash believes that the theory of landscape and materiality drastically alters when applied to folk culture, such as when 'space which could be identified as a wild forest through a colonial or mainstream gaze acquires new meaning through this subaltern performance' (97). Similarly, in folk performance, 'a high level of visibility of materiality both in forms of bodily assertion and as well as in objectification of the body' (135) could be seen, which explains the different attitudes of marginalised and elite caste towards

obscenity and aesthetic judgment. Focusing on the landscape in the Bhuiyan Puja celebration and materiality in the Bidesiya folk style, Prakash describes how the elite caste and colonial scholars through written history have made 'subaltern community members believe that their folk culture is inferior, and they do not have any creativity' (101). Furthermore, he explains that the cultural propaganda of the elite caste establishes a different landscape and materiality for folk culture in comparison to the elite culture; for instance the practices of depicting violence, praying to demons, and performing nude have been assigned to sites inhabited by subaltern communities. Therefore, Prakash illustrates in these two chapters that it was members of the elite caste who constructed distinctions of morality to creative styles in the written history of performing arts in India. Moreover, these elites neglected to provide a platform for subaltern citizens to voice their perspective or defend their culture.

The last three chapters contain the theoretical highlights of the book, where Prakash employs the concepts of viscerality, performativity, and choreopolitics. He elaborates on how they reveal the ways in which folk performance provides a voice to subaltern communities. He argues that the viscerality of these performances develop a sense of community when 'an energetic flow of verbal and gesture communication takes place between the audience and artists' (176). Such impromptu energetic gestures are a crucial part of the folk culture as exemplified by Dugola performance, in which artists use erotic bodily movements to create a bonding between the members of the subaltern community. Prakash suggests that such performances 'obliterate the capacity of Dalits to see hierarchy and hidden injustice' (197), making them believe that they are equal, which in return forces social elites to go against the presence of viscerality in folk performance. The myth of Dalits being the servants of the higher castes is diluted by providing these so-called untouchables with a democratic space and allowing them to imagine their equality, which opposes the theology of orthodox Hinduism. Prakash further argues that such limitations and powerlessness creates performativity of its own and allows Dalit folk artists to challenge the

notion of morality established by the elite caste. The presence of Gaddar (a theatre activist) and Jana Natya Mandali (a theatre organisation) in Telengana are prime examples mentioned by Prakash in his last chapter that illustrate how Dalit activists have used theatre and the theory of choreopolitics to fight for an equal society and question the caste hierarchy in Hinduism.

Cultural Labour does have its limitations, however. Prakash often mentions the restrictions of hierarchy in folk performance—‘[c]aste determines where one can perform and where one cannot’—but this becomes repetitive rather than particularly advancing his arguments (20, 93, 238, 288). Additionally, despite India’s religious diversity, the focus on Hindu folk performance somewhat excludes the nation’s other marginalised groups. A further exploration of performance in Islamic sub-cultures, for example, may have alleviated this problematic aspect of the book and offered a broader overview of folk performance in India. Still, *Cultural Labour* remains a timely and essential text for any scholar of South Asian culture. Prakash’s focus on redressing hitherto overlooked forms of theatre and performance is both highly laudable and insightful. It allows readers to build a better understanding of a culture that has been neglected by the performing arts world and historically suppressed by certain groups. The different theatre theories mentioned by Prakash serve as useful tools to explain how folk performance establishes ‘an alternative mode of thinking, conceptualising and communication’ (288), which questions the socio-cultural issues associated with subaltern styles and challenges the denigrating views of elite caste and colonial scholars. Overall, *Cultural Labour Conceptualising the Folk Performance in India* is a transgressive and sincere effort to highlight the presence of caste hierarchy in Hinduist India and the role of folk performance to demystify the notion of morality.

Rehearsing Revolutions: The Labor Drama Experiment and the Radical Activism in the Early Twentieth Century
by Mary McAvoy

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019, 266 pp. (hardcopy)

By Alessandro Simari

Mary McAvoy's *Rehearsing Revolutions* is well situated within a growing corpus in the field of theatre history that focuses upon the intersection of labour politics and performance in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. McAvoy differentiates her monograph from similarly situated historical studies—such as the works of scholars Chrystyna Dail, Colette A. Hyman, and Ann Folino White—by its narrow focus on drama programmes established within American labour colleges during the interwar period. The structure of the book is shaped by the five labour colleges that are taken as subjects for historical survey and analysis: Portland Labor College (Oregon); Brookwood Labor College (Katonah, New York); Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry (various locations around Asheville, North Carolina); Highlander Folk School (Monteagle, Tennessee); and Commonwealth Labor College (Mena, Arkansas). McAvoy considers the theatrical activities undertaken within these institutions during a given period, and her historical analysis is focused primarily through close attention to the pedagogic practices of their respective drama instructors. Presenting these case studies in chronological order, McAvoy navigates the reader through a burgeoning American experiment with theatrical pedagogy as a form of radical political education for workers. Throughout, McAvoy reflects on the ways in which labour drama programmes (and their declared or alleged radical functions) were shaped by broader societal and political conditions, such as institutionalized forms of racism, the conservatism of labour unions, and Red Scare politics during the Progressive and New Deal eras.

The greatest strength of *Rehearsing Revolutions* is its clear and detailed presentation of an impressive array of archival records related

to the theatrical activities taking place within the walls of America's labour colleges. McAvoy's historical recounting and analysis leverages resources such as class plans, directors' reports, course materials, playscripts, newspaper coverage, conference speeches, and student interviews. A repeated occurrence identified by McAvoy across a number of the case studies was that many of the drama instructors who undertook the experimental work of labour-oriented theatrical pedagogy would later (in the context of political fear mongering over leftist politics) seek to distance themselves from or conceal their involvement with labour colleges once their own employment relationship with these institutions had concluded. For instance, biographical profiles of Doris Smith deliberately omitted mention of her leadership of Portland's Labor College Players once she began working for Portland Civic Theatre (56). McAvoy's historical analysis thus re-animates these often unexamined or unclaimed artistic, political, and pedagogical histories of American labour drama. Some theatre historians may find that the monograph's attention to this urgent project of historical recovery is too often deferred by a perhaps overgenerous supply of socio-political contextualisation. Nonetheless, McAvoy's historical narration effectively situates the reader within the artistic, institutional, and political *milieu* of a given labour college. This is exemplified by attentive readings of the increasingly radical one-act dramas performed by Hollace Ransdell and her students at the Southern Summer School and Hazel MacKaye's grappling with both philosophical questions and institutional obstacles in her attempt to develop a purposeful theatrical-educational programme for the students of Brookwood Labor College.

McAvoy is careful in her analysis to consider each labour drama programme on its own terms. For instance, her analysis is mindful of the specific ways that systemic racism shaped the political concerns and pedagogical practices of labour drama programmes in the context of the 'whites-only progressivism' of Portland (Chapter 2) as opposed to those programmes operating within the context of the repressive apparatuses set up through Jim Crow legislation (Chapters 4 through 6, but particularly Chapter 5 on Highlander Folk School). *Rehearsing*

Revolutions simultaneously proposes that the drama programmes here participate in a shared theatrical, pedagogical, and political lineage, as evidenced in the case study of Lee Hays (a former student of Highlander Folk School and drama instructor at Commonwealth Labor College). While the selected case studies are themselves interesting and provide McAvoy with abundant material for investigation, the monograph provides perhaps too brief an explanation as to the reasons why *these* specific programmes are to be taken as representative of ‘labor drama’s evolution’ (7). McAvoy identifies—to pick one example—geographic diversity as a criterion for case study selection. In this regard, it is not clear as to what historical conclusions a reader is expected to deduce (if any) from the fact that three of the five selected drama programmes are clustered in labour colleges located in south-eastern states. Is there something specific to the historical development of labour politics and/or the material conditions of production in this constellation of south-eastern states that make such localities more politically or culturally amenable to labour drama? Alternatively, what is to be surmised about the breadth of the labour drama movement given the absence of any case studies from the populous states of California or Texas, or in the states that comprise the American Midwest? McAvoy’s work is laudable for being one of the first substantive monographs on the American labour drama movement, yet a broader survey of the prevalence and relative importance of drama programmes within American labour colleges may have alleviated such historical and methodological ambiguities.

In addition to these opacities, the opening chapter of *Rehearsing Revolutions* raises a set of theoretical stakes that are not always maintained in the book’s subsequent historical analyses. McAvoy’s introduction asserts a conceptualisation of labour drama as political praxis that can, at times, seem unmoored from its subsequent historical analyses of the political functions of such programmes. As is pithily expressed in the title of the monograph, a worker’s involvement in theatrical production is understood as a ‘method of imagining and enacting emancipatory alternatives to the oppressive status quo of U.S. industry during the

interwar period' (3). The presentation of this theoretical understanding of labour drama in the monograph's opening chapter reads as jarringly optimistic when subsequently encountering a series of case studies in which such revolutionary potential is shown to have limited historical expression. McAvoy's analysis pinpoints—within the microcosm of a case study—the ways in which individual drama programmes were politically and institutionally conscribed by the material conditions in which they operated. Her historical analysis, however, shies away from engaging in a more comprehensive or inclusive assessment of American labour drama as a genre of revolutionary political activism that might have better enabled the reconciliation of this seeming contradiction. In a similar vein, McAvoy brings to the reader's attention the influence upon labour drama programmes of John Dewey's education philosophies, which are described as 'both an undeniably important component of these schools' missions and another form of experimentation within these institutions' (23). This may be the case, although further references to Dewey's philosophical emphasis on learning-by-doing are absent from the remainder of the monograph. Given the book's subject matter, this seems a particularly missed opportunity since Dewey's learning-by-doing theory of education might be understood as being consonant with conceptions of performativity that have been developed in performance studies scholarship. Dewey's philosophical and pedagogical influence upon labour education promises to be an important and fruitful topic for future scholarly study; as it stands, McAvoy's articulation of said influence in her introduction seemed to foreground an avenue of historical inquiry that was ultimately left untravelled in this monograph.

Still, it is a testament to McAvoy's judicious curation of archival materials and compelling presentation of subject matter that such further theoretical and historical questions so readily present themselves. As primarily a work of theatre history, McAvoy reconstructs—in often granular detail—a comprehensive view of the theatrical-pedagogical activities within a given labour college, in which theatrical performance is framed as an aesthetic, political, and pedagogical response in kind

to the labour politics of interwar America. In so doing, McAvoy has provided historical grist for scholars upon which subsequent political and formal theorizations about labour drama can be based. Both by virtue of the volume's historical subject matter and McAvoy's specific concern with the use of drama as a pedagogical and political tool, the scholarly appeal of *Rehearsing Revolutions* extends as much to theatre historians of twentieth-century America as to scholars and practitioners of applied theatre.

Works Cited

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