

Protest through Theatre: Analysing Humour and Fantasy as Resistance Tropes in Badal Sircar's *Scandal in Fairyland* and *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*.

S Anas Ahmad¹, Dr. M. Rizwan Khan²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Email: anas.in994@gmail.com

²Professor, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Email: khanriz65@gmail.com

Article Info

Received: 06 Oct 2024,

Received in revised form: 04 Nov 2024,

Accepted: 10 Nov 2024,

Available online: 16 Nov 2024

Keywords— Badal Sircar, Fantasy, Humour, Indian Theatre, Political Theatre, Protest Theatre, Resistance

©2024 The Author(s). Published by AI Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract

*Theatre has long served as a powerful medium for registering dissent against injustice and oppression. This paper explores how Badal Sircar, a pioneering figure in modern Indian theatre, utilised humour and fantasy as resistance tropes in his "Third Theatre" concept. Focusing on two of Sircar's notable works, *Scandal in Fairyland* and *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*, this study examines how these elements function within the framework of protest theatre. The paper argues that Sircar's innovative approach, blending humour and fantasy with social critique, allowed him to address pressing societal issues while maintaining accessibility to a wide audience. By analysing these plays, we demonstrate how Sircar's theatrical techniques serve as a form of protest, challenging societal norms and power structures. This research contributes to the broader understanding of using art as a tool for social change and highlights Sircar's unique contribution to the tradition of protest theatre in India and globally.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Theatre has long served as a powerful medium for registering dissent against injustice and oppression. This form of artistic expression, often labelled as "agitprop" or "street theatre," has historically leaned heavily toward the political realm. As Pushpa Sundar (1989) notes, "the term 'protest theatre' [is] often used as a synonym for political theatre" (p. 123). Playwrights have wielded this format to voice their opposition to political parties, ideologies, or the state itself. However, a crucial yet

sometimes overlooked facet of protest theatre is its capacity to raise awareness of social injustices and foster new perspectives on societal realities.

In the Indian context, protest theatre emerged as a distinct entity following the arrival of the British and the establishment of imperial machinery. Traditional Indian theatre, bound by the conventions of classical dramaturgy as codified in the *Natyasastra*, had no inherent concept of protest in performance. As Sundar (1989) observes, "Though theatre has existed in

India for at least 2500 years, it would not have accommodated protest, political or social theatre, in the classical period of Sanskrit drama because of the conventions of dramaturgy by which it was bound" (p. 125).

The landscape of Indian protest theatre underwent a significant transformation with the emergence of Badal Sircar in the 1960s and his innovative "Third Theatre" concept in the following decades. Sircar's distinct theatrical approach, variously referred to as "Third Theatre" (Sircar, 2009, p. 2), "Free Theatre" (Sircar, 2009, p. 49), and "a theatre of change" (Sircar, 1982, p. 55), stands in stark contrast to the traditional commercial theatre. As Shayoni Mitra (2004) emphasises, "It is impossible to discuss the history of modern Indian theatre and not encounter the name of Badal Sircar" (p. 59).

Sircar's theatre is characterised by its focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people and its utilisation of local languages and cultural forms. The Third Theatre movement emerged in response to the commercialisation of Indian theatre, which Sircar felt was dominated by Western-influenced styles and themes that had little connection to the experiences of the common people. Mitra (2004) captures this sentiment, stating, "The formulation of a Third Theatre grew out of Sircar's dissatisfaction with the conditions of the proscenium stage" (p. 64).

Within this framework of protest theatre, Sircar employed various techniques to convey his message and challenge societal norms. Two particularly potent tools in his repertoire were humour and fantasy. These elements, often associated with entertainment, served as subversive tropes in Sircar's work, allowing him to question and resist prevailing narratives while engaging his audience in a manner that was both accessible and thought-provoking.

This paper explores how Sircar utilised humour and fantasy as resistance tropes in two notable works: *Scandal in Fairyland* and *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*. By analysing these plays, we seek to understand how Sircar's innovative approach to theatre served as a form of protest, challenging societal norms and power structures while remaining accessible to a wide audience. Through this examination, we hope to

shed light on the unique contribution of Badal Sircar to the tradition of protest theatre in India and the broader global context of using art as a tool for social change

II. HOW DOES THEATRE BECOME POLITICAL?

Before delving into the analysis of Sircar's plays, it is crucial to understand how theatre, a medium that can bring joy and amusement and is meant to evoke a "catharsis of emotions," can evolve into a political tool. Joe Kelleher (2009) cites Stefan Collini's definition of politics, emphasising the "important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space" (p. 10). Kelleher focuses on this specific definition because he is interested in how these "relations of power" function within the theatrical space. He argues that "any piece of theatre can be discussed in terms of its specific political dimensions" (p. 11).

Shalson (2017) expands on this idea, noting that theatre and protest are often closely interlinked in the contemporary cultural and political landscape. She observes, "Protest actions frequently take the form of performance, and the line between protest and performance art is often difficult to draw" (p. 2). This blurring of boundaries between theatre and protest creates a fertile ground for political engagement within theatrical spaces.

When considering theatre, one might envision oneself as either the performer or the audience, depending on the role one imagines. We use the term 'performance' because, as researchers, we believe that the performers and the audience engage in a distinct interplay of meaning-making within the theatrical space. According to Peter Brook (1996), a performance cannot exist in isolation: "in the theatre the audience completes the steps of creation" (p. 157). Max Herrmann reinforces this notion of performance as essential, emphasising that the audience is "not simply a receptive component, but an active part of the performance itself, so much so that without its involvement, the whole thing can never truly come to life" (as cited in Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz, 2013).

Shalson (2017) further elaborates on this point, introducing the concept of "contentious

performances" as defined by Charles Tilly. She describes protest as a form of contentious performance that involves "public actions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties" (p. 7). This framing helps us understand how theatre can become a site for political action and contestation.

A conventional proscenium space can be pictured as a closed hall with a designated stage for the performers and a designated space in front of the audience. Significantly, even if a theatrical performance is not overtly experimental, ideological, or genre-specific, it is generally expected to entertain the audience, who then respond with claps and cheers, motivating the performers. This is a continuous implicit exchange that occurs between the two roles, and this exchange is what generates meaning.

When meanings are constructed, they lead to the formation of a dialogue between the performer and the audience. By "dialogue," we do not mean a formal conversation but rather the subtler forms of communication that can include claps, cheers, or even jeers, any physical expression that can forge a connection between the performer and the spectator. In his influential work *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook (1996) describes the relationship between an actor and a spectator: "The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind: a gesture is statement, expression, communication and a private manifestation of loneliness...." (p. 61).

Shalson (2017) argues that this dialogue between performers and the audience can be harnessed for political purposes. She notes that theatre can "galvanise support for particular causes and to stage opposition to perceived injustices" (p. 2). This potential for theatre to inspire political action makes it a powerful tool for social movements and activists.

This creates a "dialogue" between the spectator and the performer, which can generate a discourse that is specific to the performance or the ideas explored. Discourse is also shaped by the space in which it is generated and the

relationship that the spectator and performer establish at any given point during the performance. Space, then, becomes inherently politicised; the relationship between the spectator and the performer becomes politicised since it is governed by the discourse produced. Every theatrical production involves choices that are informed by the "politics of space"; each performance setting creates a division between the audience and the performers and thus positions the performance space in relation to the public nature of theatre and, by extension, to society's "outside world" (Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz, 2013, pp. 21-22). Consequently, theatre becomes political.

III. PROTEST AND THEATRE

Having established the inherent political nature of theatre, we can delve deeper into how theatre, theatricality, and theatrical space function as tools for social protest. The relationship between theatre and protest is intricate and multifaceted, with theatre serving as a powerful medium for political and social change. Throughout history, theatre has provided a platform for expressing dissent and critiquing power structures. Plays like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Euripides' *The Bacchae* are often cited as some of the earliest examples of protest theatre, using satire and social commentary to challenge the status quo.

While protest theatre can be considered a subgenre of political theatre, its goals may not always be purely political. Political theatre typically grapples with political ideologies and concepts, often aiming to advocate for or criticise a specific political position. In contrast, protest theatre might seek to transform audience perspectives and attitudes to inspire social and political action. However, protest theatre can also function by simply raising awareness of specific issues, fostering critical examination of societal challenges, and prompting audiences to question existing power structures. The unifying thread of protest theatre lies in its focus on critiquing political, religious, or social authority (Sundar, 1989, p. 123).

As an art form, theatre cannot escape the influence of the prevailing social and political

climate. Lara Shalson (2017) underlines this connection: "theatre and protest are often closely interlinked in the contemporary cultural and political landscape. Protest actions frequently take the form of performance, and the line between protest and performance art is often difficult to draw" (p. 13). Protests often incorporate elements of theatricality, and "one reason why theatre and protest work so well together is because...protest is itself a form of performance" (p. 20). Consider a town procession – protesters might rehearse slogans and plan their responses to potential opposition from authorities. These performance elements capture public attention and rouse others to action or reaction. Strategic location choices also influence the impact of a protest. For instance, a protest held at a prominent landmark like India Gate or Jantar Mantar will garner more attention than one held in an obscure location.

Theatre institutions themselves have a long history of serving as platforms for protest. Protest theatre itself has often been inspired, shaped, and informed by ongoing social issues that create conflict between opposing factions or between the common people and the state. The form emerged as a distinct entity after the Russian Revolution when a disillusioned working class used theatre as a tool to rally support and voice their opposition to the capitalist regime. These performances were staged in the streets to galvanise the masses, and this form of theatre became known as "street theatre" or "agitprop" theatre, a term combining "agitation" and "propaganda." Protest theatre gradually spread to other parts of Europe, assuming political and social roles. Bertolt Brecht's works, such as *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*, are considered prime examples of political theatre that blur the lines between entertainment and social commentary.

3.1 Protest Theatre in India

In India, protest theatre only came onto the scene after the arrival of the British and the establishment of the imperial machinery. Traditional Indian theatre had no conception of protest inherent in performance. According to Pushpa Sundar (1989):

Though theatre has existed in India for at least 2500 years, it would not have accommodated protest, political or social theatre, in the classical period of Sanskrit drama because of the conventions of dramaturgy by which it was bound . . . These conventions, codified in the seminal work on dramaturgy, the *Natyasastra* . . . stated that the main object of drama is to instruct through amusement. (p. 125)

Western theatre in India was an imported one with its style and themes closely following what was practised in the West and had no local roots. The local intelligentsia emulated this imported theatre first to assimilate with the perceived refinement of the British and secondly for pure entertainment. Once they had ample exposure to the foreigner's language and education, the cultured upper classes began to use the acquired mediums to register protests against social problems prevalent in the country.

The first examples of protest theatre in India were social ones. *Kulin Kulascirvaswa* by Ram Narayan Tarkaratna, composed in 1853 and presented in 1857, was the first original Bangla drama officially categorised as a protest play. It emphasised harmful societal practices such as polygamy among the Kulin Brahmans of Bengal, marrying young girls to elderly men lest they remain spinsters, and males acquiring dowry cash via many weddings (Sundar, 1989, p. 126). Post the failed sepoy mutiny of 1857, Indians realised the perils of an alien rule. Protests through mediums like theatre turned from social issues and began to question the established political order.

By the early 20th century, the Indian nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi posed a significant challenge to British rule. The British government responded with censorship and suppression of dissent, targeting art forms like theatre that had the potential to rally the masses against colonial atrocities. Plays that attempted to circumvent censorship were readily banned. In this context, a group of committed artists came together in 1943 to establish the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

While IPTA's influence waned after independence, it fundamentally altered the landscape of Indian theatre by challenging established practices and audience expectations. Pushpa Sundar (1989) argues, "By virtue of being a protest movement, IPTA changed not only the content but also the structure and conception of theatre in India" (p. 130). IPTA's legacy lies in taking theatre beyond the proscenium arch and onto the streets, making it accessible to the common people and dismantling its status as an art form reserved for the wealthy or cultured. These developments paved the way for Badal Sircar's emergence in the 1960s and his innovative "Third Theatre" concept in the following decades.

3.2 Third Theatre as a form of Protest Theatre

Shayoni Mitra (2004) emphasises the undeniable influence of Badal Sircar on modern Indian theatre, stating, "It is impossible to discuss the history of modern Indian theatre and not encounter the name of Badal Sircar" (p. 59). Sircar, a prominent playwright, director, and theatre activist, is credited with pioneering India's "Third Theatre" concept. Sircar's distinct theatrical approach, variously referred to as "Third Theatre" (Sircar, 2009, p. 2), "Free Theatre" (Sircar, 2009, p. 49), and "a theatre of change" (Sircar, 1982, p. 55), stands in stark contrast to the traditional commercial theatre.

Sircar's theatre is characterised by its focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people and its utilisation of local languages and cultural forms. The Third Theatre movement emerged in response to the commercialisation of Indian theatre, which Sircar felt was dominated by Western-influenced styles and themes that had little connection to the experiences of the common people. Shayoni Mitra (2004) captures this sentiment, stating, "The formulation of a Third Theatre grew out of Sircar's dissatisfaction with the conditions of the proscenium stage" (p. 64). Sircar believed that theatre should be a reflection of the lives and struggles of the people it serves and that it should be accessible to all.

A defining characteristic of "Third Theatre" is its use of local languages, folk forms, and traditional performance styles. This marked a

clear departure from the Western-influenced theatre that relied heavily on English. Sircar believed that local languages and folk forms were essential for creating theatre that was deeply rooted in the culture and lived experiences of the people (Mitra, 2004, p. 64).

Sircar's Third Theatre also focused on ordinary people's everyday lives and struggles. According to Rustam Bharucha (1989), Sircar's theatre "is not explicitly political . . . The Third Theatre asserts its political independence by resisting party politics . . . It is the individual caught in the network of politics who concerns Sircar" (p. 132). Sircar's plays often dealt with themes of poverty, inequality, and social injustice. They frequently employed a Brechtian style of theatre, which utilises techniques like alienation and distanciation to encourage audiences to think critically about the issues presented on stage.

The Third Theatre of Badal Sircar can be categorised as protest theatre because it constituted a protest in both form and content. Sircar concluded that the proscenium stage was inadequate for the issues he sought to raise; his theatre needed to move beyond its confines and take to the streets. This was a protest against the institutionalised, commercial, proscenium theatre. Furthermore, it was a protest against the content that institutional theatres were offering to audiences – content that catered only to the Bengali *bhadralok* (elite class) and mimicked Western theatre, failing to resonate with the common people.

IV. HUMOUR AND FANTASY AS RESISTANCE

Humour and fantasy serve as powerful tools for resistance, enabling individuals and groups to express dissent and challenge power structures in ways that are often more subtle and less likely to be met with censorship or punishment. Both humour and fantasy can be used to critique dominant ideologies and provide a platform for marginalised voices. This section will explore how humour and fantasy have been utilised as forms of resistance throughout history and in contemporary society.

4.1 Humour as Resistance

Humour has served as a powerful tool for resistance throughout history. As Marjolein T. Hart (2007) argues, "Humor belongs to the rich instruments of communication and can be used as such in social protest" (p. 1). Satire, a form of humour that employs irony, wit, and sarcasm to critique and mock the powerful, is one of the most well-known examples. Satire has been used historically to challenge repressive regimes and expose societal flaws. For instance, in ancient Greece, playwrights like Aristophanes utilised satire to criticise the political and social issues of their time. During the French Revolution in 18th-century Europe, satirical prints and caricatures served as a form of criticism directed at the monarchy and aristocracy.

In his work *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the role of humour in social protest. He highlights how festivals like carnivals, where humour was prevalent, employed the "world upside down" strategy to subvert power relations during the late medieval and early modern periods (Hart, 2007, p. 4).

In societies where freedom of speech is restricted, humour can function as a means to express dissent and challenge the status quo. In Eastern Europe during the Soviet era, underground satire was used to criticise the government and provide a platform for the experiences of the oppressed. Social media platforms in contemporary China have become a space for satire and irony to challenge government censorship and give voice to the experiences of the subjugated. "Humor appeals to all human feelings, and in this way, it can lower political barriers" (Hart, 2007, p. 1).

Humour can also be a more subtle form of defiance employed through wordplay, puns, and jokes. These forms of humour can challenge dominant ideologies and provide a platform for marginalised perspectives in a way that is less likely to be censored or punished. As Sorensen (2008) argues, "Because humour works in more than one dimension . . . it can combine innocence with seriousness in a way that can alter relationships and transcend rationality" (p. 185).

In conclusion, humour is a powerful tool for protest, enabling individuals and groups to

express dissent and subvert power. It has a long history as a form of resistance, and it continues to be used to protest against oppression and challenge censorship in a non-violent way.

4.2 Fantasy as Resistance

According to W. A. Senior (2004), fantasy and politics share a symbiotic relationship, where "the latter seeks to expatiate upon the former through a representative or symbolic depiction of real events or issues" (p. 1). Fantasy, across literature, film, theatre, and other media, can be a powerful tool for resistance. It empowers individuals and groups to envision alternative realities and provide a platform for the oppressed. Fantasy also "subverts the world portrayed and makes the audience aware of the irregularities in the various power structures by playing up and laying bare the constituent parts of those structures in a seemingly humorous way" (Jana, 2020, p. 20). The use of fantasy as a form of resistance manifests in diverse ways, including symbolism, metaphor, and the creation of alternative realities.

One of the most potent applications of fantasy as a means of protest is through symbolism and metaphor. In societies with restricted freedom of speech, symbolism and metaphor in fantasy literature can serve as a means to express dissent. Fantasy literature and film can offer audiences an escape from their current reality, allowing them to explore different perspectives, ways of thinking, and modes of existence. This can be particularly empowering for marginalised communities, enabling them to envision the world from a different lens and imagine a reality free from oppression.

As Daina Chaviano observes, "Fantasy, and more generally the literature of the fantastic, often grows out of and develops from the seeds planted by politics and political situations, whatever their nature or origins" (as cited in Senior, 2004, p. 1). Fantasy literature, in particular, has a long history of being used as a form of resistance. For instance, 19th-century fantasy works like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* challenged the rigid social norms of the time and provided a platform for alternative perspectives. Similarly, 20th-century fantasy literature such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and C.S. Lewis's

The Chronicles of Narnia have been interpreted as critiques of the status quo and vehicles for marginalised voices.

V. ANALYSIS OF SCANDAL IN FAIRYLAND AND BEYOND THE LAND OF HATTAMALA

The section above highlights how humour and fantasy have been used to register protests. In this section, we try to understand how Sircar uses humour and fantasy as subverting tropes to question and resist prevailing narratives. In the play *Scandal in Fairyland*, Sircar problematises the overarching power of media and how it can be used as a propaganda tool, whereas, in the play *Beyond the Land of Hattmala*, he questions the validity of a capitalist mode of production and consumption vis a vis that of the communist/socialist one. Soumen Jana (2020) observes:

Badal Sircar has amply used this mode of fantasy in his Third Theatre plays to put across his message more prominently and emphatically, ensuring a creative fusion of form and content. In these 'fantastic' compositions, humour supplies him with the lethal tool to whip up the audience from their deep slumber about the pressing needs of the time. (p. 199)

Sircar (2009) understood the subversive nature that laughter had on the audience. In the preface to his play *Kabhikahni*, he wrote:

...we can express the greatest tragedy by means of laughter, we can present the most complex problem through laughter and come to terms with it. The value of laughter to me is, therefore, not at all insignificant. If laughter is healthy, if I can make others laugh without resorting to mere buffoonery, mannerisms or grimaces, I do not think such laughter can be pointless. (p. 450)

5.1 *Scandal in Fairyland*

The play *Roopkathar Kelenkari* (*Scandal in Fairyland*) was written in 1974 and performed in 1975 at Curzon Park, Calcutta, by Sircar's theatre group Satabdi. According to Samik Bandhopadhyay, the play was written to be performed in a park, and it was a close adaptation of a story written for children by Premendra Mitra (as cited in Bandhopadhyay,

1992, p. viii). However, Sircar's adaptation was not written for the children's theatre; in an interview given to Bandhopadhyay (1992), Sircar avers, "It is so hard to write for children . . . Whatever is thematically valuable in my play came from this [Premendra Mitra's] story" (p. viii).

In the play, Prince Thunderbolt goes on killing ogres, a dreaded race of monsters that have been threatening various kingdoms. After each successive victory, he scales to become a much-celebrated warrior owing to the reporting of his heroic deeds by the local newspaper "The Daily Fairy Green". Both Prince Thunderbolt and "The Daily Fairy Green" climb the ladder of admiration as it is only "The Daily Fairy Green" that brings "Sensational news" (Sircar, 1992, p. 42).

The play effectively uses repetition and chorus to emphasise the growing fame of Prince Thunderbolt:

ONE. Goldlandis.

TWO. Silver State.

THREE. Pearl Kingdom.

FOUR. Diamond Isle.

ONE. Emeraldia.

TWO. Land of Gems.

THREE. One after the other, the terrible doom

FOUR. threatening these six kingdoms-

ONE. In the form of six terrible man eating ogres

TWO. has been averted- THREE. by the brave Prince Thunderbolt (Sircar, 1992, p. 41-42)

This repetitive structure mirrors the sensationalist nature of the newspaper reports and the public's growing fascination with the Prince's exploits.

Kingdoms, namely, "Goldlandis", "Silver State", "Pearl Kingdom", "Diamond Isle", and "Emeraldia", are saved by Prince Thunderbolt's heroics and, in return, "offer half the kingdom and the hand of the princess in marriage". The prince, however, for six consecutive times, only accepts the gold but does not marry the girls.

He thereby becomes "the wealthiest, most powerful king in Fairyland" (Sircar, 1992, p. 43). The play uses the character of a Paperboy to connect the audience and the text, often breaking the fourth wall and addressing the viewers directly. His dialogues have a humorous undertone through which he can deliver the social subtext that pervades the whole act. For instance, he says:

I got to call out all that stuff like Special Evenin' Edition, and Hot News, or else they leave without buying my papers... Anyway, I guess you've sized up this situation. From time to time these ogres, giants, dragons, what have you-well, these monsters, they come wandering into Fairyland and they say they want a plump' n juicy human to eat every day or else they'll gobble up the whole kingdom. (Sircar, 1992, p. 44)

This meta-theatrical device allows Sircar to provide commentary on the action and critique the sensationalist media culture.

Sircar uses quintessential symbols of fantasy and weaves it into a fairytale with a warrior prince, princess, monsters, kingdoms and the "victorious sword". Shailaja B. Wadikar (2018) opines, "Scandal in Fairyland, which appears a fairytale outwardly, is actually a comedy with a relevant social message".

When ogres strike the seventh kingdom, "Copperland," the citizens of "fairyland" flock to get their copies of "The Daily Fairy Green". Their thirst for sensational news is captured in the following section:

Four: All of Copperland's citizens—

One: Wait avidly to know—

Two: Will Thunderbolt ask for gold again?

Three: Or will he marry the Princess of Copperland—

Four: And put an end to the days of his carefree bachelorhood? (Sircar, 1992, p. 43)

This passage illustrates how the public's fascination with the Prince's personal life has become intertwined with the political drama of saving kingdoms.

Prince Thunderbolt eventually decides to marry Princess Rose of Ironia after allegedly slaying the eighth ogre. "The Daily Fairy Queen" publishes a slanderous editorial to pent up its dwindling sales wherein it questions the prince's integrity and the killings' authenticity. The prince calls for a trial wherein it is revealed that the prince, the ogres, and the owner and editor of the newspaper "Midas Speculatorotti" colluded to create and sell sensational news.

This revelation is dramatised in a courtroom scene where Midas Speculatorotti defends his actions, saying:

Yeah, maybe he could've killed a tiny ogre and then taken half of some tiny kingdom and married its crummy princess and tried to make ends meet. And now? Think how he must be enjoying his huge estate—seven halves make three and a half kingdoms! And all that gold? How d'you think he's got such power and wealth? Who gave him the idea of making a deal with that ogre? Yours truly, Midas Speculatorotti. (Sircar, 1992, p. 56-57)

Sircar thus uses the third theatre to question the sensibilities of the general public; "he attacks people's craving for sensational news items and shows how unscrupulously media is determined upon providing thrilling accounts of news for the sake of money" (Wadikar, 2018, p. 174). Using fantasy and humour, he can lodge a protest against rampant corruption in the field of journalism without explicitly sounding moralistic.

The play's critique extends to the fickle nature of public opinion and the media's role in shaping it. When Prince Thunderbolt's fraud is exposed, the public quickly turns against him: "CHORUS (whispering to each other). Ogres—corpses—Thunderbolt—fraud—ogres—corpses—Prince Thunderbolt—ogres" (Sircar, 1992, p. 51). This swift change in public sentiment underscores Sircar's commentary on the power of media to influence public opinion.

The play ends with a seemingly happy resolution, but not without a final satirical twist. As the Paperboy notes in the final lines:

Yes sir, the Daily Fairy Green has folded up. I swear this rotten government paper

doesn't sell at all. Drat! I'd better go along to Bengal too. I betcha Midas has brought out a nice, juicy, quick-selling paper there already! (Sircar, 1992, p. 58)

This ending underscores Sircar's critique of sensationalist media and its persistence despite apparent resolutions. It also suggests that the cycle of corruption and sensationalism is likely to continue elsewhere, hinting at a broader societal issue.

"The play offers a fine blend of a fairytale and the Third Theatre. Like a fairytale, the play has a thrilling element in its story. However, in its performance and dialogues, it follows the Third Theatre convention" (Wadikar, 2018, p. 176). By using the familiar structure of a fairytale, Sircar makes his social critique more accessible and engaging to a wide audience while still maintaining the principles of Third Theatre in its performance style and direct audience engagement.

5.2 Beyond the Land of Hattamala

The play *Hattamalar Oprey* (Beyond the Land of Hattamala), written in 1977, was first performed in July 1977 at the Theosophical Society Hall, Calcutta, by Satabdi. It is based on the novel *Hattamalar Deshey*, written by Premendra Mishra and Leela Majumdar, serialised in the children's magazine *Sandesh*. Sircar recalls that he had read only a few of the *Sandesh* instalments, and that had been enough to spark him off (as cited in Bandhopadhyay, 1992, p. ix).

The play depicts the escapades of two thieves, Kena and Becha, in a fairyland where they end up by mistake. As one of their stealing deeds backfires, they plunge into a river and emerge in an unexpected region that is a natural paradise. This gorgeous fairyland resembles a magnificent garden where peace, harmony, and happiness reign in plenty. Crime, police abuse and aggression are unknown to this world.

The principles of buying and selling are nonexistent in this undiscovered realm; the residents all labour together according to their skills and share everything that is produced between themselves. People are oblivious to the concept of 'money', 'cash', 'shop' etc. Kena and Becha are perplexed because they cannot come to terms with this novel concept where

everything is free in a sense. This interesting excerpt sums up the confusion that exists between the two thieves and the local people:

THREE: What would you do with the dishes?

KENA: Sell them.

TWO: What does 'sell' mean?

BECHA: We'd give them to someone in return for money.

FOUR: Money? Those round discs?

THREE: Or those picture papers?

TWO: But no one has those things here. Though I've heard that there're some in the museum... (Sircar, 1992, p. 25)

This dialogue effectively illustrates the clash between the thieves' capitalist mindset and the communal society they've stumbled upon.

Towards the end of the story, and after going through several misadventures, they finally come across a "Doctor" who explains, "No. It isn't really free. We all work to the best of our abilities. That's why we get everything we need" (37). The two thieves are enlightened by this conversation and get reformed, where Kena becomes a builder, and Becha adopts the work of a gardener, per their wishes.

The play ends with a chorus that sums up the entire theme:

CHORUS (singing): Whatever we need in this world, whatever,

We can make it all if we work together...

We'll share everything we have together.

(p. 38)

To "work to the best of our abilities" becomes the play's rallying cry. The play was Sircar's manifesto of how he wanted society to function and closely aligned with his Marxist ideas, which he had outlined in *Prastab*:

If we can create a society where everyone works according to his ability and gets what he needs—a very sane arrangement, but it can only be done when everyone agrees at the same time—then money will become redundant. Not just money, but other things like war, weapons, banks, insurance, police—and an enormous

amount of energy will be released. I mean resources. (Sircar, 2009, p. 132)

Although dowsed in humour and fantasy, Sircar considered *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* one of those plays in which he took genuine pride (as cited in Bandhopadhyay, 1992, p. ix). He said, "I would still like to be able to write a play of that kind, but it probably happens once in a lifetime. It has a fairytale base with humour as its medium, and the colloquial dialogue goes well with every situation" (p. 122).

Thus, the play uses fantasy and humour to forward an idea that would keep the audience's attention. According to Sircar (2009), using tropes of fantasy and humour makes this play work "equally well in the Aganmanchha and the open air, in towns and villages, with adults and with children" (p. 122). As established in the sections above, humour makes criticism more palatable for the masses. Within the play, it makes palatable "moments of perceptual difference that emanate laughter and yet imply uncomfortable truths about the well-set ways of the world we inhabit" (Jana, 2020, p. 225).

Tropes of fantasy and humour work in tandem to push Sircar's message of the vices of a capitalist system rapidly making inroads in post-independent India in the 1970s. His idea of a socialist economy where wealth is community-owned and the fruits of labour are equitably distributed required the use of the Third Theatre medium that made the plays more accessible, open and "free" for anyone who could afford or wanted to pay.

VI. CONCLUSION

The symbiotic relationship between Third Theatre, fantasy, and humour shines through in both *Scandals in Fairyland* and *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*. Through these works, Sircar masterfully employs the Third Theatre idiom to illuminate the darker aspects of capitalism while painting a vision of a more equitable society. The plays' whimsical nature and humorous undertones make them accessible to children, though this was never Sircar's primary intent. As Sorensen notes, humour's ability to "attract more members" and bring "energy" made it particularly effective for the Third Theatre movement (2008, p. 175). Jana argues

that the fairytale framework allowed Sircar to "effortlessly produce a satiric realism" while maintaining audience engagement (2020, p. 201).

Despite their apparent simplicity, these plays grapple with complex moral and ethical questions. While Sircar did not specifically write for young audiences, he believed in theatre's potential to introduce children to meaningful social themes. As he noted, "They have adult themes, but children should become aware of these" (as cited in Bandhopadhyay, 2003, p. x). This perspective aligns perfectly with his vision of theatre as a catalyst for social transformation.

The genius of Sircar's approach lies in how he weaponises humour and fantasy to serve multiple ends. The fairytale settings create a disarming atmosphere that allows him to critique capitalism, media manipulation, and societal structures without alienating his audience. By placing his stories in fictional realms, he gains the freedom to examine Indian society's problems from a safe distance. The humour in these plays does more than simply entertain - it subverts and challenges established power structures. When *Scandal in Fairyland* pokes fun at media sensationalism, it reveals deep truths about journalism's failings. Similarly, the thieves' bewilderment in the moneyless society of *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* exposes the absurdities inherent in capitalist systems.

Within his Third Theatre framework, Sircar achieves something remarkable: protest theatre that manages to be both intellectually challenging and widely accessible. These plays demonstrate how innovative theatrical techniques can address pressing social issues while maintaining emotional resonance and entertainment value.

Sircar's masterful blend of humour and fantasy in these works exemplifies theatre's potential as a medium for social protest. Through his Third Theatre approach, he created productions that entertained while prompting audiences to question their social, political, and economic reality. These plays remain a powerful testament to Sircar's unwavering belief in theatre's capacity to drive social change,

showing how artistic innovation can effectively address society's most pressing challenges.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bandhopadhyay, S. (2000). Introduction. In *Beyond the Land of Hattamala and Scandal in Fairyland* (pp. vi–x). Seagull Books.
- [2] Bharucha, R. (1983). *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- [3] Brook, P. (1996). *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*. Simon and Schuster.
- [4] Fischer-Lichte, E., & Wihstutz, B. (2013). *Performance and the politics of space: Theatre and Topology*. Routledge.
- [5] Hart, M. ' (2007). Humour and social Protest: An introduction. *International Review of Social History*, 52(S15), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020859007003094>
- [6] Jana, S. (2020). *The Idea of Theatre in Badal Sircar A study of select Plays* [Vidyasagar University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/372741>
- [7] Kelleher, J. (2009). *Theatre and politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [8] Sircar, B. (1982). A Letter from Badal Sircar. November 23, 1981. *The Drama Review: TDR*, 26(2), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145430>
- [9] Sircar, B. (1992). *Beyond the Land of Hattamala and Scandal in Fairyland*. Seagull Books Pvt Ltd.
- [10] Sircar, B. (2009). *On theatre: Selected Essays*. Seagull Books Pvt Ltd.
- [11] Senior, W. A. (2004). The Politics of Fantasy. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 15(1 (57)), 1–3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308679>
- [12] Shalson, L. (2017). *Theatre & protest*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [13] Shayoni Mitra. (2004). Badal Sircar: Scripting a Movement. *TDR (1988-)*, 48(3), 59–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4488571>
- [14] Sorensen, M. J. (2008). Humor as a serious strategy of nonviolent resistance to oppression. *Peace & Change*, 33(2), 167–190. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2008.00488.x>
- [15] Sundar, P. (1989). Protest through theatre —The Indian experience. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 16(2), 123–138. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23002148>
- [16] Wadikar, S. B. (2018). *Badal Sircar: Peoples playwright*. Atlantic Publishers.