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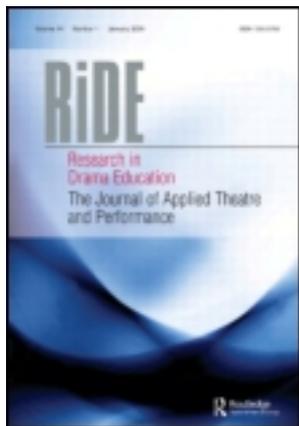
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Development dramas: reimagining rural political action in eastern India

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Development dramas: reimagining rural political action in eastern India, by Dia Da Costa, London/New York/New Delhi, Routledge, 2010, 304 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-55373-5

Dia Da Costa's ethnographic study on the theatre-based cultural work of the group *Jana Sanskriti* ('People's Culture') in West Bengal is an analysis of the developing state through the lens of rural political theatre. Rather than viewing theatre as merely a developmental tool, or a metaphor for understanding society, the study argues that theatre must be taken seriously as a form of social and political action. Methodologically, the study seeks to understand the 'macro-processes' of globalisation and development through the micro-lens of interactive theatre and its cultural articulations.

The introductory chapters provide the background and context of political theatre in India, with a focus on West Bengal, through colonialism and the foundation of the nation state, to the current scenario of neoliberal globalisation. *Jana Sanskriti's* use of the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed presents an anomaly in that it neither has a place in the canon of theatre history, nor has it received attention from a development studies perspective. Da Costa examines the complex and ambiguous relationship of rural citizens to agrarian reform and rural development as practised by the Communist government of West Bengal and gauges the position of the theatre group in terms of its Leftist opposition to a state with a long-standing, Left-oriented government. In a chapter on schooling and gender relations, Da Costa pays attention to implicit messages conveyed in the forum theatre interventions, which reveal various problems related to school education and gender equality. Another chapter self-reflexively addresses questions of faith in the context of *Jana Sanskriti's* work, demonstrating that rural subjectivity and agency do not neatly fit into categories such as 'religious' or 'traditionalist'. What constitutes cultural work and what is the importance of culture in development? These questions are addressed with a refreshing critical reading of theorists such as Amartya Sen and Partha Chatterjee.

From a theatre studies perspective, the study is significant for two reasons: first, it highlights and analyses rural theatre as worthy of study in its own right as contemporary political theatre, rather than being arrogantly pigeonholed into genres such as folk, traditional or street theatre. It contributes to thematically and methodologically filling what is an immense gap in the present theatre research, with its profound bias towards the urban. Second, the study opens a new perspective on studying the Theatre of the Oppressed in terms of its equal emphasis on on-stage and off-stage performativity. The study weaves together observations of the group's involvement in developmental politics, not simply in the way this engagement is represented and scripted on stage but also in how the Boalian 'rehearsal of revolution' expresses itself in the organisation, in the daily lives of its activists and its audiences. In this sense, the book offers more nuanced insights into *Jana Sanskriti's* theatrical politics and its impact in contemporary West Bengal, than the anecdotal, first-hand account by *Jana Sanskriti* founder, Sanjoy Ganguly, *Forum Theatre and Democracy in India*, also published by Routledge in 2010.

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