Natya Shodh Sansthan, Kolkata is India’s largest repository of archival material and documentation covering the entire history of Indian theatre in all its different languages, with special emphasis on folk and traditional forms and post-independence Indian theatre.

It is a repository of books, journals, audio and video recordings, photographs, models of outstanding sets, costumes, manuscripts and rare materials. All related to theatre.

Natya Shodh Sansthan began its journey in July, 1981 as a theatre archive from 11. Pretoria Street, Kolkata, as a unit of Upchar Trust. The modest holding of a few journals, leaflets and diaries grew and the Sansthan built up its collection of priceless materials. Seminars, discussions and talks were regularly organized to record various aspects of histrionics on a pan-Indian level.

With the new building established in 2019 (left hand side images), the Museum found its present address at EE 8, Sector 2, Salt Lake (Bidhan Nagar), Kolkata.

Experience & Engage with a Museum

With the aim to experience and engage with this unique archival museum, we have taken up four theatre stalwarts of post-independent India (who have been documented in the archives of Natya Shodh Sansthan), and their best work. These personalities have acted, directed, written and produced plays of which some have also been made into cinema. They have trained and inspired various theatre actors and have been instrumental in creating a legacy in Indian contemporary theatre.

These are some of the questions, we would like you to consider after going through this document:

- Are the plays still relevant? Do you relate to the theme?
- Whether the next generation would still be interested in these plays?
- They have combined both the Indian classical and folk tradition and also translation from western dramas and stories
- The importance of an archive like Natya Shodh Sansthan in documenting this heritage.
Sombhu Mitra

Sombhu Mitra (1915–97) was a stalwart of the Indian theatre. He first appeared on the Bengali stage as an actor in the commercial public theatre after which he joined the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), and emerged also as a director. In 1951, he formed his own theatre group, Bohurupee, where his genius came to fruition. In search for an Indian way of doing theatre, he disavowed the modes of naturalism as the only form of theatrical expression.

He took upon the challenge of staging Tagore successfully when Bengali public theatre had practically rejected Tagore as "unplayable". Mitra disagreed. In 1956, he directed Bohurupee's production of Tagore's symbolic play Raktakarobi (Red Oleanders), which dealt with the tyrannical oppression of workers stuck in a "no exit" gold mine by a King who remains mostly unseen, and is present only as a disembodied voice until the very last moment when he breaks out of himself to cast a stone to his own tyrannical image.

With Raktakarabi, Sombhu Mitra appeared as a theatre visionary - throwing open the doors of Bengali theatre that had until then been closed.

Notable Films - Dharti Ke Lal (1946), Jagte Raho (1956)
Notable Plays - Rakta Karabi, Chand Baniker Pala

 Acting should attune itself to express naturally the poetry of passions—the language of poetry. It cannot be accomplished through a naturalistic style alone. We must find a way to pass easily from the naturalistic plane to the subjective. Exterior and interior life should rub shoulders with each other and remain organically related.15

A scene from a Bengali play. 'Char Adhyay', staged in 1951 in Kolkata. Photo: Wikimedia Commons


If you have gone through the above information on Sombhu Mitra and his play Raktakarabi, here are some questions worth pondering:

- What do you find distinctive about his plays? Story, characters or sets?
- What is the social message you get from this play?
- Do you find it entertaining and relevant?
Badal Sircar

Badal Sircar (1925 – 2011) was an influential Indian dramatist and theatre director, known for his anti-establishment plays during the Naxalite movement in the 1970s and taking theatre out of the proscenium and into public arena.

A pioneering figure in street theatre as well as in experimental and contemporary Bengali theatre with his egalitarian “Third Theatre”, where he created a direct communication with audience and emphasised on expressionist acting along with realism. He prolifically wrote scripts for his Aanganmanch (courtyard stage) performances, and remains one of the most translated Indian playwrights. Though his early comedies were popular, it was his angst-ridden Evam Indrajit (And Indrajit) that became a landmark play in Indian theatre.

Evam Indrajeet, 1963

Evam Indrajit is an abstract, absurdist play with a central theme of the monotony of a mechanical existence. It explores the writing process and the search for inspiration and something exciting to motivate creation. Focus of the play is a writer, who narrates the story without ever being given a firm identity of his own. He struggles with writer’s block, striving to write his play but falling short and unaware of the root causes. He has never experienced life in its most primal way, instead being focused on his own experience as a writer. As such, he doesn’t have the material to write about, and instead focuses on the audience of the play. He attempts to write about them, but is frustrated there as well. He frequently becomes enraged and tears up his manuscripts. He finally finds inspiration in a woman named Manasi.

Notable Plays:
- Evam Indrajeet, 1963
- Baaki Itihaash (Remaining History), 1965
- Pralap (Delirium), 1966
- Tringsha Shatabdi (Thirtieth Century), 1966
- Pagla Ghoda (Mad Horse), 1967
- Shesh Naai (There’s No End), 1969

Watch his play, Evam Indrajeet, here:

Think

- What do you think about Badal Sircar’s (approach) street plays and his unique way of approaching and showcasing acting without any sets and engaging the audience?
- Do you relate with his themes, particularly about the one in question - Evam Indrajeet?
- What do you think about the relevance of his type of theatre - themes, engagement with the audience, and whether it will still be entertaining?
Vijay Tendulkar

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (1928–2008) was a leading Indian playwright, movie and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist, and social commentator primarily in Marathi. Many of Tendulkar's plays derived inspiration from real-life incidents or social upheavals.

He has written more than 30 full-length Marathi-language plays and numerous one-act plays, short stories, and movie scripts about controversial social themes, including violence, poverty, women's rights, and corruption.

**Notable Work:**
- **Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe** (1967)
- **Ghashiram Kotwal** (1972)
- **Sakhārām Binder** (1972)

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**Ghashiram Kotwal, 1972**

Vijay Tendulkar wrote this political satire, in response to the rise of a political party, in Maharashtra. It is based on the life of Nana Phadnavis (1741–1800), one of the prominent ministers in the court of the Peshwa of Pune and Ghashiram Kotwal, the police chief of the city.

Set in late 18th century Pune, the play documents the degeneration of the socio-political fabric during the last days of the Peshwa rule. The theme being how men in power give rise to ideologies to serve their purposes, and later destroy them when they become useless. First performed in 1973, the play was initially banned for its alleged anti-Brahman stance and for its portrayal of Nana Phadnavis, in a historically inaccurate light. The production was subsequently revived. The play is considered a classic in modern Indian Theatre.

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**READ**

Q. ..what makes a historical play like Ghashiram seem so relevant to the contemporary times?

Tendulkar: I never approached Ghashiram as a historical play. The impulse to write the play was provoked by the contemporary political situation of the time, specifically the rise to power of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. But it has been interpreted differently with changing political situations including the Emergency. Performed with sensitivity and intelligence, a play can be infinitely renewed to suit the current milieu. Take the case of Shakespeare, who remains the most widely performed playwright despite the passage of time. But the openness of the play to interpretation is not intentional on the part of the playwright. Rather, it is innate to the play. Though Ghashiram was a product of my reflections on the rise of the Shiv Sena, I was ultimately interested in examining the situations which lead to the creation of Ghashiram-like forces in society. The Ghashirams of the world die, but the situations, which give birth to such forces, recur and are personified in the character of Nana Phadnavis. Beneath the superficial changes in history, the larger dynamics of power are cyclical. That is why such a play continues to evoke interest.

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**WATCH**

Ghasiram Kotwal here

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**THINK**

- What do you think about the political and social issues raised in Vijay Tendulkar's plays?
- Do you find them to be relevant even today?
- What do you think about different interpretations and the response of the critics to his play Ghasiram Kotwal?
Girish Karnad

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) was an Indian actor, film director, Kannada writer, playwright and a Rhodes Scholar, who predominantly worked in South Indian cinema and Bollywood. His rise as a playwright in the 1960s marked the coming of age of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada. He was a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India.

He aspired to become an English poet but that was soon replaced with the urge to be a Kannada playwright. His first play - Yayati, the story of a mythological king, was penned in 1960, while he was still in Oxford. But it was Tughluq (1964), the story of the 14th-century sultan of Delhi Muhammad bin Tughluq, that was the most celebrated. It was staged in multiple Indian languages by different theatre groups.

For four decades Karnad composed plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He translated his plays into English and received acclaim.

Tughlaq, 1964

Tughlaq, a 13-scene play focusing on the 14th century Turko-Indian ruler Mohammad bin Tughlaq, is both a historical play as well as a commentary on the contemporary politics of the 1960s. The Times of India comments: "In the play, the protagonist, Tughlaq, is portrayed as having great ideas and a grand vision, but his reign was an abject failure. He started his rule with great ideals of a unified India, but his degenerated into anarchy and his kingdom." The play is considered an allegory on the Nehruvian era which started with ambitious idealism and ended up in disillusionment.

WATeR

Watch this documentary on the playwright:

Part 1

Part 2

THINK

- From this play, what interpretation of Muhammad bin Tughlaq do you get - a good and successful ruler or a bad/unsuccessful one?
- Does it resemble the Nehruvian era as some of the critics have pointed out?
- Is the play relevant in the present times and would it be in the future?