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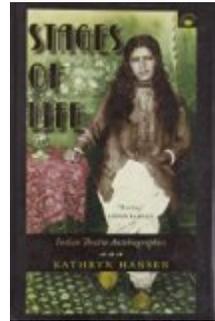
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathryn Hansen. *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*. London: Anthem Press, 2011. 392 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-7824-311-5.

Reviewed by Ashutosh Potdar (Independent Scholar)

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The Story of an Era

With her new book, *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*, an erudite scholar on Indian theater history, Kathryn Hansen attempts the recovery of little-known personal narratives from a fascinating historical period with different perspectives, and introduces them to the present-day reader. The book holds four autobiographies: Narayan Prasad Betab's *The Deeds of Betab*, Radheshyam Kathavachak's *My Theatre Days*, Jayshankar Sundari's *Some Blossoms, Some Tears*, and Fida Husain's *Fifty Years in the Parsi Theatre*. The autobiographies, translated into English from Hindi for the first time and complemented by the pictures of writers and the plays they wrote or acted in, mark the apex of the Parsi theater, covering the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, the "age of infectious song and story" (p. x).

An equally interesting portion of the book is Hansen's insightful critical analysis of the "performative self" with reference to the four autobiographies. The four chapters of analysis provide a frame of reference to read the chosen texts in two ways. First, they present the broad outline of the history of the Parsi theater, its emergence, development, and intersection with other theater forms of the time. Second, as one of the chapters, "Theatrical Memoirs and The Archives of Autobiography," suggests, Hansen investigates the autobiography as a source for writing cultural history. While tracing the history of the "self-referential texts" in India, Hansen reflects upon newer dramatic practices in various regional contexts and the emergence of theater as an institution

in India through the lens of contemporary social and political movements. In addition, each autobiography is prefaced with instructive introductions. The scrupulously written introductions cover the writers' personal histories, the stories behind writing their own stories, the translator's work on different versions of the available source texts, and creation of the final texts to include in the book.

Of the four autobiographies, *The Deeds of Betab*, written in thirty-seven *manzils* (stages), is the story of Narayan Prasad Betab, who was born to a sweet-maker's family four years after the commercial activities of the Parsi theater began in 1868. The moving prose of *The Deeds of Betab* brings to light one of the glorious eras in Indian theater when playwrights and their works were respected; they were offered a space or, to use today's buzz word, "residencies" by theater companies to enable them to focus on writing. Indeed, playwrights like Betab responded to this "luxury" with honesty and ingenuity by revising the plays and getting "exhilarated by the work on the scene" (p. 76). Betab received an invitation from a theater company run by Jamadar Saheb when he was working with a printing press as a compositor. On the invitation, Jamadar "upped the salary to thirty rupees, agreement was reached, and to show his affection he dropped me at the railway station in his cart. The ox-cart, back then, was a sign of great wealth, even more prestigious than a motorcar today. The ride in Lalaji's cart, the good wishes of my fellow employee, and the pomp of this farewell to poor Narayan—all lodged in my heart"

(p. 76). Betab in his fascinating story narrates some of the zestful experiences in his life, as when the the company was prosecuted for producing a sensational play *Qatl-e Nazir* that left “the whole city abuzz” (p. 78). He was summoned and his writing examined. Interestingly, elucidating the nexus of art and society, Betab reveals that the company’s lawyer “worked pro bono, fighting the case in exchange for a free pass” (p. 78). It must be added that Kathryn Hansen finalized the translated texts after deleting some portion of them. For example, “poetic couplets and whole dialogues” and “dramatic examples” that gave the original text “performative flair” and “meta-textual comment” on Betab’s “reputation as a poet” have not been included in the translation (pp. 55-56). However, considering Betab’s contribution to the playwriting and screenwriting in the early days of theater and cinema respectively, the deleted part might have enhanced the flavor of Betab’s creative writing.

Radheshyam Kathavachak’s autobiography, *My Theatre Days*, organized in six chapters, covers his life from childhood to old age, exhibiting his versatile personality of performing different roles. As a part of family tradition, Radheshyam gave recitals of the Ramayana and other devotional texts; while on contract with the Parsi theater company, he wrote plays; and as a screenwriter, he played an active role in the film industry. Radheshyam also started a publishing house that printed devotional literature. Writing about the lasting impact of his legacy, Hansen writes: “The Radheshyam Ramayan ... became one of the core texts utilized in the influential television serial directed by Ramanand Sagar in the 1980s. His legacy endures in regular productions of his plays at the National School of Drama and other urban venues, and in the continuing circulation of his devotional verses in the countryside. On a more sinister note, Radheshyam’s dramas contributed to the consolidation of Hindu nationalism, and some view him as a harbinger of the divisive Hindutva politics of recent decades” (pp. 103-104).

The autobiographies of the two actors, Jayshankar Prasad, a well-known female impersonator, and Fida Husain, are feasts for theater geeks. The self-portraits of these actors give details of salaries they were paid, the clothing they were provided by their theater companies, and the daily activities they had to follow, such as washing the cooking pots, sweeping the room, and doing the dishes, although someone like Jayshankar “hated this work” (p. 194). Unlike today, when an actor memorizes his/her own dialogue, attends rehearsals, and leaves after his/her role is rehearsed, in those days, an actor like Jayshankar “had to memorize every role, so that if one

of them was absent another could play his part” (p. 204). Importantly, the firsthand narratives throw light on the preparation of an actor before the modern training system of “direction” evolved. Jayshankar records, “everything was left to the actor” and “the logic was never explained.” He adds, “I had to figure out the system of knowledge by myself. Thrown into the water you learn to swim; so were taught to move our limbs, but there was no opportunity to learn the science behind it” (p. 193).

Jayashankar Prasad and Fida Husain represent the high time in theater history when the emerging entertainment economy and new forms of publicity changed relations between audience and actors, and theater companies presented women onstage through female impersonators. Some of the most mesmerizing and valuable accounts in the actors’ autobiographies are of the male actor performing female roles. Jayshankar shares his first experience of female impersonation by wearing a *choli* and *lahanga* (a bodice and long skirt). As if talking to his own mirror image, Jayshankar says, “he was transformed into a woman, or rather into the artistic form that expresses the feminine sensibility. A beautiful young female revealed herself inside me. Her shapely, intoxicating youth sparkled. Her feminine charm radiated fragrance. She had an easy grace in her eyes, and in her gait was the glory of Gujarat. She was not a man, she was a woman. An image such as this was the one I saw in the mirror” (p. 210). This representation of a woman was always of a certain sophisticated class as reflected in her accessories, hairstyle, and clothing. As with the legendary actor Balgandharva of the Marathi theater, it is remembered in *Some Blossoms, Some Tears*, which recounts that “women in society imitated Sundari” (p. 209). The public adored Jayshankar and he too graciously entertained them as a female impersonator. However, one might find it frustrating to see that Jayshankar, like several other female impersonators of the time, found himself locked in playing a female role. Jayshankar reveals that he was “unable to carry off a masculine gait, and people hooted [him] off the stage” when he wanted to play the male part of Muzaffar in the play *Haman* (p. 193).

The final autobiographical account of another female impersonator, *Fifty Years in the Parsi Theatre*, covers the Parsi theater well after the downturn in Indian theater that followed the release of talking movies in the 1930s. Theatre scholar Pratibha Agarwal’s interview with Fida Husain, which was published as “an oral history,” has come to be known as Husain’s autobiography. Fida Husain’s “fragmented, circular, and digressive” story, filtered through the “elicitor and editor” in order to “trigger

a version of self and history,” poses a few challenges (p. 254). First, it contests the authenticity of the written autobiography against the oral narrative of the interview in telling a story of self. Second, admittedly, while there is “the need to tell a story that works” (p. 254), the inclusion of a text, previously published under the authorship of Agarwal but now presented as an autobiography of Fida Husain, is problematic. Third, the text lacks the flow and intensity of the three other autobiographies, primarily because of Agarwal’s intervention (as the interviewer) into it, even though Hansen defends the interview format in her introduction to the text.

All the four autobiographers witnessed one of the critical and formative periods in India but, curiously, they do not seem to be going beyond the *mera natak, mera ghar* (my home, my theater) attitude, showing aloofness to the world outside their own and to the current happenings of the time. Jayshankar does refer to the visit by the heir to the British throne to India and the resulting riots between Maharashtrians, Gujaratis, and Parsis, and the reader comes to know that he had promised a Parsi family to save them in case of a crisis that in the end did not arise. Similarly, Fida Husain expresses, as Hansen points out in the final chapter, “no hint of sympathy with the political movement for Pakistan, nor does he mention whether he or his family ever considered whether they would remain in India or migrate at Partition” (p. 330).

Besides being indifferent, a prolific writer like Narayan Prasad Betab displays, at times, insensitivity to gender roles, especially in his discussion of and also in his tone towards widow marriages, when he writes that he was “not in favor of women being given the freedom to marry again and again.” Further in this vein, Betab writes, “However, I think that when men are widowed, they too should remain widowers. Or at least if they are going to remarry, they should marry a widow, not a vir-

gin” (p. 80). In connection to this, Hansen makes an important observation that “None of the other autobiographies, however, describes how it felt for a man to play a women’s role.” Against this background, possibly, Sita Devi, associated with the Moonlight Theatre, referred to in *Fifty Years in the Parsi Theatre*, might have been included in *Stages of Life* to get another view on female impersonation.

There is much documentation—a major portion compiled by Kathryn Hansen herself, about the Parsi theater in the nineteenth-century India. But there have been few efforts to analyze the Parsi theater in connection with theatrical expression in other languages. Hansen’s book enables the establishment of such connections and encourages an exchange of ideas between theatrical practices across different regions in India. Thus “these readings,” as Hansen expects, “provide no closure; they are meant rather to spark questions and encourage a range of responses” (p. xiii). In this context, it would be interesting to see, for example, how the Dongri Sangeet Natak Company, also known as the Bombay Royal Opera, established in 1881, became popular through its spectacular production of *Indrasabha* (1881), inspired by the Parsi theater. The Patankar Sangeet Mandali, known for its production of *Vikram Shashikala* (1891), was one of the earliest groups to have employed tunes from the contemporary Parsi theater in its performances. Thus, rightly, as Hansen observes, “the catchy music” and “tunes from the Parsi companies soon infiltrated the soundscapes.... The allure of the new mode was so great that by the turn of the century the Parsi theater had become a ubiquitous part of public culture across the subcontinent” (p. xi). *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies* should remain a source of inspiration for performing artists to contextualize their own practices and for scholars to build a critical discourse on the cultural story of an era.

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