

With such contrasting contributions, this handbook will appeal to scholars in anthropology, history, sociology, environmental or postcolonial studies, along with theatre and performance scholars and artists looking for inspiration. It is an essential publication addressing migration through theatre and performance as one of the most pressing challenges of our time.

Theatre Research International 49:2 doi:10.1017/S0307883324000129

Brutal Beauty: Aesthetics and Aspiration in Urban India. By Jisha Menon.

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021. Pp. 248. \$99.95 Hb; \$34.95 Pb.

Reviewed by Ameet Parameswaran, Jawaharlal Nehru University, ameet@mail.jnu.ac.in

Jisha Menon's *Brutal Beauty: Aesthetics and Aspiration in Urban India* critically analyses new modes of identification and subjectivity emerging in the aftermath of the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. Menon highlights that the 1990s signalled a new era in Indian society, where the neoliberal started to function 'as a prescriptive and normative horizon' (p. 14) as neoliberal rationalities percolated beyond the economic terrain into all domains of life. Analysing a wide range of artistic practices across the media of painting, installations, photography and theatre, Menon critically shows how the post-liberalized era normalized identification driven by the value of aspiration. Arguing that aspiration is 'mimetic' and 'draws from [the] tension between who one is and what one desires to become' (p. 7), Menon isolates what she marks as 'scenes of aspiration and its affective repercussions' (p. 8), including those of different kinds of yearning, anxiety, panic, fear, shame, obsolescence and narcissism. To map the complexities of neoliberalism, Menon centres her analysis on the neoliberal city of Bangalore, a city that is at once 'global' and seamlessly connected to other global cities in the world while offering specific contradictions of its own. Drawing on Asher Ghertner's conceptualization of 'rule by aesthetics', which centres 'governmentality that utilizes aesthetics' (p. 175) beyond the strategies and imaginations of urban planners, Menon unravels the contradictions emerging in Bangalore as a restorative nostalgia that 'rationalizes brutal measures' (p. 175) and, in the process, makes invisible its underclass, slum dwellers and immigrants. Thereby, apart from being 'an economic, social, and political phenomenon', for Menon 'neoliberalism is also a profoundly aesthetic project' (p. 8).

The urban affects and afterworlds discussed in the book are not conceptualized as either normative or rebellious in themselves, but as linked to power and induced and modulated in diverse ways. While normative practices work through the affects of elite panic and suspicion of the unruly underclass and cordoning themselves into gated communities, as critiqued in the installation of Krishnaraj Chonat (*Private Sky*, 2007), the analysis of the theatrical works of Mahesh Dattani offers the critique that even queer activism and its imagination of cultural cosmopolitanism reduce 'the heterogeneity of sexual practices and subject positions into a Eurocentric model of LGBT politics' (p. 105). As against normative practices, the artworks induce and modulate these affects in complex ways that offer resistance. For instance, Menon argues that while Shantamani Muddaiah foregrounds 'the routinized panic that minorities endure in their perpetual unhomeliness in the nation' (p. 53) in his sculptures, the works of A. Revathy and the group Panmai centre intersectionality of caste, gender and sexuality and deploy the possibilities of role playing offered by theatre and theatrical witnessing for staging non-normative selfhoods. In the photographic work of N. Pushpamala (*Phantom Lady or Kismet* series, 1996–8, *Return of the Phantom Lady*, 2012), Menon highlights how narcissism becomes a productive category allowing 'libidinal dimensions of the city and its subjects' (p. 10) as we see the 'Phantom Lady' move through the precarious 'nonlegal city' (p. 122). What is

striking in Menon's selection and analysis of artworks is the way in which they offer a new sensory perception of the urban by taking both the artists and the spectators through experiences that take them beyond their secure status as individuals, where the artists, rather than wilfully 'moulding' the materials they use, foreground a process of 'yielding to its sensuous vitality' (p. 37) and their 'particularity and historicity' (p. 33). Menon thereby centres the durational, layered and meditative quality of works 'as a prerequisite to a new understanding' (p. 41) through critical reflection.

While the dominant theatre historiography in India is conceptualized through the lens of regional language-based theatres, with the English theatre often seen as elite and marginal, the book convincingly shows the contemporary political charge of the English-language theatre emerging in the neoliberal city as it engages with the intersectionality of queer lives. Neoliberal subjecthood constituted through aspiration is a critical framework to be read in relation to contemporary discourses of political theatre and performance, especially that of post-dramatic theatre. The book will interest scholars from across the disciplines and areas of theatre and performance studies, visual studies, urban history and cultural studies.

Theatre Research International 49:2 doi:10.1017/S0307883324000130

The Second Wave: Reflections on the Pandemic through Photography, Performance and Public Culture. By Rustom Barucha. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2022. Pp. xviii + 250. \$24.50/£18.99/₹599 Pb.
 Reviewed by Malavika Priyadarshini Rao, University of Exeter,
m.priyadarshini@exeter.ac.uk

Rustom Barucha's book *The Second Wave: Reflections on the Pandemic through Photography, Performance and Public Culture*, as the title suggests, makes a visceral, clinical and philosophical enquiry into the most elemental aspects of life, breath and breathlessness. Barucha reflects on shared suffering and collective memory, offering much-needed hope by highlighting moving occasions of human resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. His primary concern has to do with death, grief and mourning, (the inability to mourn), extinction and survival, and with how we experienced time, space and speed during the onslaught of the pandemic. He explores these by looking at a vast array of everyday cultural practices, multiple disciplinary practices, and artistic interventions from the Indian and Euro-American contexts.

The book is thematically divided into three chapters, each fathoming death, performance and censorship of grieving; lack of time and space to mourn; and subsequent extinction. Barucha's dramaturgical brilliance is reflected in the building of narrative, where he smoothly weaves exhaustive topics from climate justice, ecological disaster, the breakdown of public health systems, access/no access to oxygen in hospitals, approaches to mental health, local knowledge systems of healing, hierarchies in vaccine distribution, death rituals and crematoria, finally arriving at breath and breathwork, the most elemental manifestation of human existence. He does this by masterfully intertwining debates from scholars such as Deepesh Chakravarthy, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, John Berger, Judith Butler, Raymond Williams, Sunder Sarukkai and Susan Sontag, among others.

Speaking of the temporality of the virus, he states, 'It exists ... in an omnipresent state of volatility, at once palpable in its impact and invisible in its ambience' (p. xvi). His excellence as a dramaturge is reflected in his exploration of time in its multifaceted dimensions by looking at historical time, cosmic/ecological time, mythological time, fictive/narrative time and embodied time. He discusses the importance of engaging with the temporality of duration, therefore