The Story of Fluke

An Examination of English Theatre as "Class Culture" in Chennai

Nayantara Nayar

ABSTRACT

The paper asks the question "What is English theatre?" with specific reference to theatre happening in Chennai these last sixty years. The researcher's interrogation of this cultural practice stemmed from her involvement in this practice and curiosity about whether certain trends she noticed during her time as a performer and director—those of professionalisation and financialisation—would lead to actual growth and self-sufficiency within the community. By using data collected via interviews with various members of the theatre community in Chennai, the author seeks to complicate the understanding of where the tradition of English theatre comes from and also question the nature of the discourse that surrounds it.

KEYWORDS

theatre, English theatre, Chennai, Madras, upper-middle class, neoliberalism, class cultures

When I was a student completing my graduation in media and cultural studies in Mumbai, the need to find a research topic for my thesis arose. Many topics were explored, but eventually, my mind wandered to theatre, in which I had participated for two years during and right after my undergraduate degree in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. This mostly consisted of proscenium theatre performed in English. However, it was not the plays I was interested in studying, but the culture that allowed English theatre (ET) to come into being and continue to exist as a cultural product in Chennai. The research I undertook used a mixed methodology that was distinctively qualitative: a combination of interviews[1] I had conducted with 14 people (a mixture of theatre practitioners, aficionados, and festival organisers); and time spent as a flâneuse moving through the city and my

own experiences of this theatre. My methodology could be described as "autobiographical ethnography" or "auto-ethnography". It combined the autobiographical writing, where "an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences", and the ethnographic style, where researchers "study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping *insiders* (cultural members) and *outsiders* (cultural strangers) better understand the culture (MASO, 2001)" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). This particular methodology allowed me to collect and organise information about ET, the city of Chennai, and the cultural practices of the upper-middle class. In this paper, I would like to look specifically at what ET is, the people who prastice it, and why it is practised. I hope to paint a picture of ET in Chennai that, even if not holistic, provides an adequate introduction that can be used as a foundation for future research.

AREA OF STUDY

The ET complicates the very task of defining what "modern" Indian theatre is. In her book *Theatres of Independence,* Aparna Dharwadker defines and classifies "modern, Indian" theatre by writing:

> To a significant extent, the historical origins of this evolving tradition of texts and performance practices lie in the genres, discourses, and institutions of theatrical modernity that emerged under European influence in such colonial cities as Calcutta and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century. But to an equally significant degree, practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization. (Dharwadker 2005: 2)

Dharwadker assumes that the post-Independence "modern" nation-state is removed from its colonial contexts. She does acknowledge the influence of colonial rule on theatre in large urban spaces, but her assumption that Indian theatre *is* this "new" drama and that its practitioners wish to cast off the mantle of colonial influence to achieve "effective decolonisation" is problematic. Feminist theatre practitioner A. Mangai expresses a similar discomfort with academic work done around post-Independence theatre in general and with Dharwadker's work in specific. Mangai points out that academic work on modern theatre tends to concentrate on "the relationship between the colonial and post-colonial, in other words with the 'nation-modern' being brought in

to counter colonial categories." (2015: 19) She further states that "nation-modern" is such a loaded term because modernity and all that it promised was by no means "a bloodless process or even a complete one" (Mangai 2015: 18). ET is an excellent example of how true that is.

It certainly throws a wrench in the reclamation of "classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization" (Dharwadker 2005: 2). The ET done in Chennai does engage with classical Indian forms and stories, but a sizable portion of the cultural products follow staging and production guidelines that were put in place by Western proscenium theatre. I do not claim that colonial theatrical forms continue to exist unchanged in Chennai, but neither does the "modern Indian" theatre of Dahrwadker. Classification is always a matter of degrees. As one interviewee put it when asked what ET was,

> We try to compartmentalise things and it's very difficult to box things. And at every level of analysis, the criteria for what takes precedence changes ... number one it's a language. Now within the language, I say "What is ET?", and then it's what is outside the country. So Girsh Karnad translated into English is not as English as Shakespeare or Sarah Kane or Carrie Churchill or a translated version of Daniel Defoe. So it changes at every level. (Interviewee Seven 2015)

What this implies in the context of research methodologies is that classification is prone to leaving gaps. Arjun Appadurai (1988: 36) makes an interesting argument about the genealogies of hierarchy within anthropology, stating that "hierarchy is one of an anthropology of images within and through which anthropologists have frozen the contributions of specific cultures to our own understanding of the human condition."[2] Such a freezing process is easily transferred to other disciplines with the social sciences. After all, what determines the research areas we choose? More often than we realise, they are determined by what has already been studied.

When I first proposed wanting to study this particular class culture, the research area was thought to be too insulated, too self-contained to be worth the effort. "Nothing" was going on, so why write about it? Additionally, no academic work existed around ET in Chennai at the time of my research. Even when I did manage to get some primary information through the interviews, interviewees themselves insisted that the lack of impact ET made, disqualified it as a worthwhile area of study. Admittedly, ET in Chennai does not, at first glance, have an impact of any significance. But on closer inspection, that is not quite true: With over twenty theatre groups that

work in English, Chennai boasts an active amateur and professional theatre scene. In the months of August, September, and October, two large festivals take place: One is the MetroPlus Theatre Festival (now The Hindu Theatre Festival) organised by *The Hindu*, which is devoted solely to theatrical performances, and the other is the Park's New Festival organised by the Times group, which hosts a number of cultural events including plays. In June–July, "Short n' Sweet", a competition of ten-minute plays, used to take place in Chennai. These are just the better-known events; half-a-dozen smaller theatre festivals are organised and conducted throughout the year. In addition to this, there are plays performed throughout the year by various groups and amateur college theatre clubs. Theatre workshops and classes in schools and even for adults and corporate partners take place. Relative to the population of Chennai, the ET community is tiny, but considering that Chennai's estimated population is eight million people, the numbers are not insignificant.

We are then presented with the possibility that there is a second reason that ET is thought of as an unworthy research area. The ET in Chennai is very much a cultural practice that belongs to a particular segment of the middle class: the upper-middle class. As such, the class cultures of the middle class are identified first and foremost as cultures of consumption. As Bourdieu (1984: 2) suggests, "Consumption is ... a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code." Bourdieu is mounting a defence of the "reading of art", but his point could be extended to make a similar case for all kinds of consumption. The extension of the argument does not justify or grant legitimacy to the act of consumption itself but instead allows us to consider various kinds of consumption within their specific contexts and then decide what sort of communications are taking place. Then, the cultures of the upper-middle class are never *just* cultures of consumption. They are complex, with ... myriad forms of competing cultural capital, its ambiguous and anxiety-inducing relationship with the capitalist market, its intricate systems of dissimulation (whereby it hides its class privilege in everyday practice)—along with its increasingly dominant role in cultural process worldwide, that makes it an important and timely subject of anthropological inquiry. (Liechty 2006: 10–11)

THE FLUKE

I usually began my interviews by asking, "So what was your first experience with theatre?" Consider this selection of answers:

Oh it started in school, *just randomly* a friend and I wrote a script and did for a school function. It was a great way to beat the boredom of school… College theatre was different. It started off as something I wanted to do in my free time and it became something I had to do all the time because I was so passionate about it. (Interviewee Seven 2015; emphasis mine)

In school where I had *very randomly been picked* by my teacher to come in for an English play for the Annual Day. My school has a tendency to go a little grand with their plays and they call in professionals from across the board to train us too. Later I did a play called *Ravanan* in which I played Hanuman … that was my first taste of theatre. (Interviewee Three 2015; emphasis mine)

I got into it very late—I always had a love of theatre and I grew up in the Kalakshetra and dance drama is theatre, it has all the elements of a spoken drama. I've grown up seeing it- I've been a theatre critic across India and seen lots of festivals abroad also, I've always been interested in theatre, but I never thought of taking it up as a profession. *It was a fluke.* I was writing something and an actor friend—I just wrote it as a dialogue—he read it and said, "When are the rehearsals starting?" That's when I realised it had possibilities as a play. (Interviewee Four 2015; emphasis mine)

This idea that their respective entries into theatre were "flukes" or "random" is a common one amongst the people that take part in ET in Chennai. My own story followed a similar tune: There was a chance encounter, an unlikely partnership, a play produced on both whim and prayer. There is an almost mythic quality to the story, and indeed, when Joseph Campbell talks about the myth and the story of the hero's journey, he speaks specifically about the place of the "blunder", stating that:

A blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood. As Freud has shown, blunders are not the merest chance. They are the result of suppressed desires and conflicts. They are ripples on the surface of life, produced by unsuspected springs. And these may be very deep—as deep as the soul itself. The blunder may amount to the opening of a destiny. (Campbell 2012: 46).

It is neither a deep-seated desire nor destiny that interests us—that is to say, it is not the fluke-like nature of that first experience that is interesting: It is how this "story of the fluke" is an integral part of the interviewees' stories of theatrical origin. The story of fluke provides us with an insight into the discourse around ET cultures in Chennai. Practitioners have the urge to establish the "randomness" of the occurrence, which in turn indicates them being swept up by something elusive and *grand*: a grand tradition that is both the tradition of "theatre" as a whole, and the tradition of ET in Chennai. But just where does this idea of "tradition of ET" even come from?

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF ENGLISH THEATRE

While some Western theatre was being performed in the Pantheon[3] (now the Madras[4] Museum Theatre) during the early 1800s, local folk and street theatre performances were certainly more popular. According to M.S.S. Pandian, in the late 1890s, another form of theatre called company drama also grew popular. Company drama was one kind of Tamil theatre performed mostly in urban spaces (as opposed to *therukoothu*, or traditional Tamil performances, which was usually performed in villages). These plays traversed the urban–rural divide regularly:

> The repertoire of these companies was limited to a few mythologicals, written as musicals. The stories were standardised in a series of songs. The playwright, in these companies, called "vathiyar" (teacher), wrote the songs, composed the music and also directed the plays. All the actors had to be singers, including the clown. And there was the pit orchestra, with a harmonium and a tabla. The emphasis was on singing, not on drama. (cited in Pandian 2014)

However, company dramas like therukoothu were looked down upon by "elites". A "modern" Indian theatre on a proscenium stage, with props, lighting, music, and sets—essentially a theatrical production much closer to what we see today in ET in Chennai—was available to non-elite audiences only towards the end of the 1800s with the coming of the travelling Parsi theatre.

These travelling troupes offered something wholly different to Madras audiences. Their scripts, while having Indian mythologies, also often adapted Western narratives and added very different kinds of music and dance. Even if they were using Indian mythological texts, the production of the play itself was stylistically rooted in European proscenium theatre. Kathryn Hansen talks about the origins of Parsi theatre in Mumbai, explaining that European plays were first seen on a proscenium

stage located on the Bombay Green, which opened in 1776. This theatre—the Bombay Amateur Theatre—eventually burned down, but several other theatre spaces were soon to follow and, eventually, in 1876, C.S. Nazir, a Parsi actor-manager, built the Gaiety Theatre. Hansen writes,

> Designed by an architect named Campbell, its stage dimensions were seventy by forty feet, with a curtain height of twenty-two feet. The Governor, Sir Richard Temple, took responsibility for supervising the crafting of the painted drop scene. The image chosen was one to reinforce civic pride: "a fine view of Back Bay with the new public buildings—of which the High Courts, the Clock Tower, and the Secretariat are the most prominent—from Malabar Point". (2002: 40–9)

What this description tells us is that Parsi theatre was born in a setting that belonged to a theatrical tradition different from both the classical and folk styles commonly seen in India.[5] The European proscenium stage was a technological marvel as well as the epitome of "good theatre". The Parsi troupes that played in Madras presented audiences with an alternative to the traditional therukoothu performances, which were rarely seen in urban spaces in any case, while also presenting a new kind of engagement with the proscenium stage, which was reserved for the elites (either elite English theatre or for elite musical and dance performances) until then. So, when Bhaskaran writes about the popularity of the travelling Parsi troupes in Madras in the 1870s ("Popular Theatre and the Rise of Nationalism in South India" in Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader, Oxford University Press, 2011), he is also writing about the rise of a very specific kind of theatre and how it became the norm for certain sections of the local populace. The class of people that enjoyed and were influenced by Parsi theatre was primarily the growing labour class, whose interest in theatre stemmed in part from wanting to establish a cultural stronghold different from classical or "official" culture in the city. Workers used it as a means of entertainment, but also as a space in which their issues, troubles, etc., could be aired. Bhaskaran (2011: 134) writes, "During the 1870s Parsi and Marathi drama companies who camped and played in Madras demonstrate that dramatic organisations were a commercial proposition." He goes on to talk about how some local Tamil troupes borrowed from Parsi theatre in terms of style, dramatic structure, and in some cases the structure of the troupe itself. There was also another class of people who were interested in what the Parsi theatre troupes were doing.

Around the same time that company drama was being influenced by Parsi theatre, a smaller,

educated elite took an interest in it. Theatre artists like Pammal Sambandam Mudaliar who founded the Suguna Vilasa Sabha in Madras began to see in theatre the possibility of a higher art form. Mudaliar, considered the "father of modern Tamil theatre", was also one of the more serious theatre artists responsible for giving Tamil theatre an aura of respectability: an aura that was until then thought to be seriously lacking in the "low-class" performances that also took place in the city (referring to therukoothu, company dramas, and special dramas). In *The Oxford Companion to Modern Indian Theatre*, it is noted:

> Born in Madras he (Mudaliar) detested Tamil plays, which he found obscene and crude, but held some respect for English drama…. Mudaliar's productions brought to the forefront the dignity of theatre as a profession and dealt with actors as respectable citizens. Eminent personalities patronised his shows. He was responsible for earning theatre a legitimate space in the cultural activity of Tamil Nadu.[6] (Lal 2004: 267; emphasis mine)

This legitimacy was granted under the aegis of "Sabha theatre". The Sabha was an institution that decided what was staged and what was not; it decided where plays happened, provided funding in some instances, and, most importantly, it provided theatre producers with audiences. By the 1960s, when Sabha theatre was reaching its zenith, plays were happening regularly and theatres were packed.

With protests and demonstrations in aid of the independence movement occurring in the 1920s and 1930s, theatre artists and writers contributed to the cause by performing plays and composing songs and poems about the same. The process of political awakening, Bhaskaran says, was much slower to take root in Madras. However, when it did take root amongst theatre artists, it was seen as extremely beneficial: "Such encouragement did not only give a fillip to the drama movement but also conferred on the theatre artists a respectability that they had not enjoyed hitherto" (Bhaskaran 2011: 143). Sabha theatre, however, had a different relationship to such political awakenings. Talking about Sabha theatre, Interviewee One said,

> I saw every Tamil play that happened in Chennai at that time [the 1960s]. There were many troupes that were operating: there was satire which was done by Cho and his group, called "Viveka Fine Arts". They did political satire. Then there was S.V. Sahasranamam and his group; [they] did what was called social theatre-like *Policekaran*

> *Magal* and *Vadivelu Vathiyaar*: strong, socially-oriented plays for whole families. And then there was this old follower of Nawab Raja Manickam, R.S. Manohar, who did mythological plays and legends. They were huge plays like *Indarjith* and *Elangeswaran*, you know, with legendary characters from mythologies, and he had a staff of 100 people working for him, so a lot of special effects and all that. Then, for comedy, there was Poornam Viswanathan, who did very middle-class comedy, a lot like "Washington into the Manam". It connected with middle-class families and so he had his slot. (Interviewee One 2016)

So the contents of Sabha theatre though capable of political commentary, were not political in the same way that street theatre and special theatre of the previous decades had been. By the 1950s and 1960s, the urgency of the independence movement had faded and had been replaced by a new kind of urgency—the urgency to modernise and catch up with the rest of the world. The process of modernisation required many different kinds of processes and infrastructures, but the most interesting process was related to the work that went into the "imagination" of the modern itself. Appadurai writes of the "imagination of the global" with reference to the relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences, saying that "the work of the imagination, viewed in this context (referring to the post-electronic world), is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a contested space within which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern." (1996: 4)

In the period that we are discussing, the nature of the image had already changed, and film viewing was a popular alternative to theatre. The people of Madras who engaged in Tamil theatre were exposed to global discourses of feminism, humanitarianism, and the call to return to one's cultural roots. The plays that were being performed at the time—especially social and mythological plays—were thus part of a certain imagination of what modern Tamil society needed to look like, what it needed to stand for, and what it could not forget. At the same time, the Sabha played quite well into the modern ideal of organised culture. The audiences were mostly middle class (a mix of both the lower-middle and upper-middle-class). The upper-middle-class here was an interesting addition to the audience base because initially, they considered all drama vulgar. The explanation for this change of heart could be that most of the theatre groups functioning in the Sabha circuit were in fact started, owned, and operated by men from the upper-middle-class and upper-caste families. Also, like amateur performers today, the actors, directors, and writers all had full-time jobs and

pursued theatre out of a personal interest and passion for it. The class and caste these theatre artists belonged to was, therefore, very different from the class of the artists who worked in company dramas.[7] Theatre was made "respectable" by this fact.

THE MADRAS PLAYERS AND ENGLISH THEATRE IN CHENNAI

Around that same time, a much smaller theatre group was also achieving moderate success amongst an even more exclusive section of Madras society. In 1955, Madras Players was established and it was certainly one of a kind. The group was extremely small: There were 10 to 15 members at most and their audience numbered between 50 and 60. It all began, the story goes, when a group of young people, students, and working professionals started to take part in the regular play readings and smaller performances organised by the British Council in Madras in the 1950s. According to Interviewee One,

> The British Council used to have the Madras Dramatic Society and the expats used to regale themselves with doing plays: You know they were doing Shaw and Wilde and things and the natives—so to speak—were doing backstage, moving furniture, and were doing maybe non-speaking roles or small speaking roles. (2015)

Later on, these young students and working professionals began to participate in the plays themselves and the British Council, which had already become a foreign institute keen on promoting the arts, culture, and literacy in English by this time, handed the reins over to local amateurs. Madras Players was, thus, established as an amateur theatre group independent of the British Council, though they admit that in the early years, the Council gave them considerable support and encouragement.

What is not talked about in this narrative is a connection—any connection—to the Tamil theatre mentioned earlier. The interviewee who provided me with information about the beginnings of Madras Players told me emphatically that there had been no interaction between the Tamil Sabha theatre of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and Madras Players. This is not a lie: There are absolutely no references to Madras Players working with any Tamil groups in that period, and there are no references to common audiences or collaborative works. Tamil and English theatre grew separately, or so it seems at first glance. The people that participated in ET had their imagination of what that modern Indian state needed to look like, and so it is not very hard to understand that there was a

disassociation between the two. However, it must be noted that Tamil theatre, both the older traditions and those that grew alongside the Madras Players, made tangible contributions to ET. The practices of Tamil theatre inadvertently created a space for performance in Madras. I do not mean here the actual physical space but the milieu of theatre itself that was created by the vibrant Tamil troupes and performers that worked in the city. This is especially true of Sabha theatre of the 1940s and 1950s, which was similar to the English theatre of the same period in terms of production aesthetics and narrative structures. In the 1970s, just after having reached its zenith, Tamil theatre began to go into a sort of decline. In Madras, this was true of the amateur/semi-professional groups previously mentioned. Interviewee One describes both the height of Tamil theatre and its decline:

> There was this set of seven plays that were really a turning point in Tamil theatre. They were directed by K. Balachander who, at that time, was superintendent, or whatever he was, at the AG's [attorney general's] office—this was before he went into film. He did a series of seven plays: massive successes under the title of Ragini Recreations. He started with *Major Chandrakanth*. That play was how Major Sundarrajan, the actor, got his name. Then a play called *Mirugapathi* and a lot of plays with Nagesh: *Neer Kumizhi*, *Ethirneechal*, *Nanal* ... and in the seven plays, he introduced the idea of the one-set play to Tamil theatre. Until then, everything was curtains and lifting up scenery to go to the next scene. Balachander introduced the concept of character, story, and the one-set play. And, of course, many of his plays were made into films. Yes, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a lot of Tamil theatre happening. Every Saturday and Sunday was either a Cho play or a Y.G. Parthasarthy play or a Balachander play, and they played to full houses. It was when the television soaps started that the death knell of Tamil theatre rang. All the audiences went there. And the artists also automatically went into serials—that was full time work and they had work every day, [got] paid after every day's shoot. So, a majority of them did go into television. Only a few remained with theatre because of the passion. (2016)

Whether the death knell of Tamil theatre has been rung is arguable: Numerous groups that work in Chennai currently would undoubtedly object to being thus written off. What is true, however, is that Tamil theatre did lose audiences to television and film. And yet, this same period saw the rise of ET via Madras Players. Madras Players was doing some of their best work: They had access to

competent technicians, stage directors, set designers, and sponsors, and were also drawing in relatively much larger audiences. What happened was that the theatre created and performed by Madras Players and other theatre groups active in the 1980s and 1990s (such as Magic Lantern, Masquerade, and The Little Theatre) led to the creation of a "sentient" ET-going audience between the 1950s and 1990s.

Lynn M. Voskuil talks of the popularity of sensation theatre in London during the mid-and late 1800s and how "in their shared, somatic responses to sensation plays, Victorians envisioned a kind of affective adhesive that massed them to each other in an inchoate but tenacious nineteenth-century incarnation of the English public sphere" (2002: 245). Voskuil uses the idea of "sentience" to talk about how spectators "felt responses" to what they were seeing on stage "believed they felt them in common" (2002: 245). Voskuil goes on to claim that the audiences constituted through the watching of sensation theatre created a sort of public sphere that was divorced from what she considers the constraining requirements of "space" and "discourse" demanded of most public spheres. Through the production and staging of ET in Chennai from the 1950s, very specific segments of the middle class were being constituted as performers and audiences who "performed" and "responded" to the theatre "properly". While I cannot argue that a kind of public sphere was created, there was a process of identification and classification that created a sense of shared cultural space and values defined by class.

DEFINING ENGLISH THEATRE

In order to discuss these shared cultural values, let us discuss what ET is. According to one interviewee,

> To me it's always a language. It's a language of communication that is sometimes chosen because of the simplicity, because it is the easier language to use to reach out to audiences in India. But it has never meant to me a certain kind of theatre. (Interviewee Six 2015)

Two things are of interest to us in that idea of ET: first, the idea of the simplicity of English as a link language; and second, interviewees claiming not to consider ET a kind of theatre. Here, we first deal with English as a language. Anne Norton (2004: 13) writes that language is "a means of movement into the external world, a medium into which interiority escapes the self. This process

is reciprocal: the self extends its will, its thoughts, itself, into the external world, and the world enters the innermost self though the medium of language." This understanding of language is useful because it allows us to ask questions about those selves and the external worlds they occupy. In the last 70 odd years English has indeed undergone the processes of 1) "abrogation" or "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 37); and 2) "appropriation" or "the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 38). English has entered local Indian cultural fabrics while losing or adapting some of its colonial contexts. The language and whatever morality it once carried with it has changed drastically over the years. The question, then, is: What has it become? The argument that within theatre it is primarily a link language is seemingly unexceptionable. Until you ask the question, "Who is English making things simple for?" In the case of ET, there is always already a pre-existing group that already "knows" English and they are always the target audience. So, then, ET does not necessarily function to link disparate populaces, and any instances of it doing so might be coincidental or even superficial.

Though English might not work to link disparate populaces, it certainly acts as a common language within the existing class culture. This brings us directly to our second point of interest: Interviewee Six had mentioned an inability to identify with ET being "a kind of theatre". Interviewee Seven was of a similar frame of mind. In response to the question "Is ET a kind of theatre—a class of theatre even?", they said,

> I don't agree with either. Especially now. A lot of people are engaging with what we called experimental theatre or forum theatre so more than the language, more the way you approach the process of creating the theatre is changing. And it's exciting. So, I don't know whether people are entering the theatre with a mindset of an English identity. I would personally believe that they're a part of it because they like the process of storytelling and performance. And whether it is movement based or dialogue based or language based, mythology based it shouldn't matter as much as the need to tell a story. (Interviewee Seven 2015)

The interviewee's assumption that people's participation in and enjoyment of theatre lies outside of their identities is an interesting one. It harks to that old argument of "art for art's sake" or at least to one interpretation of it. The idea that art—and by extension practitioners of the arts—must stand outside of social mores, norms, and utilitarian value is not an uncommon one. It is, however, difficult to implement. After all, how does one stand aside from a class, a personal history, the morality that it fosters, and the aesthetic that it nurtures? Surely their participation in an artistic practice cannot somehow cut them off from the larger culture they inadvertently add to? If that were the case, where would this "need to tell a story" come from in the first place?

MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITIES

The term "middle class" is broadly accepted in academic research and understood to mean a certain level of monetary independence and access to resources, but a specific definition is lacking. A study conducted by Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav on a panel survey conducted by the Centre for Advanced Study of India where they asked people whether they considered themselves "middle class". The answers were surprising because "nearly half (49 per cent) of all survey respondents believed their family is a middle-class family... Self-identification as middle class is expectedly more prevalent amongst urban respondents (56 per cent) but the share of rural individuals claiming to be middle class is also remarkably high (46 per cent)" (Kapur and Vaishnav 2014). The most popular understanding of the term "middle class" looks to the idea of income (per day or annum). However, such definitions are more appropriate when deciding what constitutes a middle-income household, a term that is not synonymous with middle class, though often used interchangeably (Kochhar 2015). While there exist several contesting opinions of how middle-income households should be categorised, we do not go into them in detail here. It would suffice to point out that most indicators of income levels use absolute scales such as per capita income and daily wage.

Historically, the middle class was formed as the result of historical processes that began during colonial rule. Fernandes states that these processes instituted by the British created different middle classes in different regions that shared some elements like

> specific kinds of socioeconomic resources such as access to English education and modern forms of professional employment ... an emerging set of political claims of public representativeness that this group made within the realm of democratic civic life ... claim of representation which was continually accompanied by a project of

self-identification that was marked by a politics of distinction from both the colonial

state and more marginalized social groups. (Fernandes 2006: 2)

In this way, Fernandes establishes a firm link between middle-class identity and colonial influence. In the 300-odd-year period of British involvement in and control of life on the Indian subcontinent, colonialism was a "social thing"[8] that impacted—and continues to impact—local cultures in different ways: the formation of the middle class is an excellent example of that. But the middle class is also an identity that references an imagination of its role in the state: It is also, therefore, "a *class-in-practice*—that is, as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position" (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 487). This links directly to what Appadurai discusses when he writes about imagination "in its collective forms", where "ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labour prospects" are created (Appadurai 1996: 7). The middle class is then a class that partakes in "practices of imagination", where the creation of a class identity rests quite heavily on the ability of the members of the class to imagine themselves as belonging to the class and simultaneously imagining what the nation/state/community they resided in is, what the material realities of this space are, and what specific roles they play in bringing these realities about.

In this process of imagination, there also rises a series of cultural expectations and experiences. In the last 40 years, those expectations have varied significantly. Rajgopal then tells us that post-independence and, more specifically, post Emergency, the relationship between the Indian middle class and government transformed. The middle class's perception of the state's functions with regard to governance, coercion and consent, and national development shifted. He states that the economic policy in the 1980s and 1990s was influenced by how "the state itself participated in the transferral of legitimacy away from itself to the market and in promoting the initiative of private forces in economic progress and nation-building…. These events are critical to understanding the formation of the new middle class in India as a category that increasingly comes under the sway of corporate capital expressing itself through cultural and consumerist forms of identity and is less identified with the state" (Rajgopal 2011: 6). When Rajgopal talks of the "new" Indian middle class, he does not mean the actual creation of a whole new class but the transformation of the middle class's perceptions of itself: a class of middlemen existing between coloniser and colony, and perhaps later as the class that could best assist the newly created nation in its search for unity,

development, and modernity. The "new" middle class alternatively thinks of itself as a class that can (and has to) actively participate in the quickly globalising world.

CLASS CULTURE

One way to approach the cultural expectations and experiences of the middle class would be to analyse the class within the ambit of class cultures. We discussed this earlier when trying to understand why middle-class practices are studied less often. To expand on that, the idea of class culture suggests that the class positions of people affect the kinds of cultural practices they take part in and support. The idea is in many ways obvious, but it is not easily implemented. First, we face the problem of acknowledging the transitory nature of culture itself. Culture is not fixed in space or time, or, one could argue, to a social group. Appadurai refers to this when discussing the cultural aspects of globalisation. Culture, he points out, is better analysed not in its noun form "culture" but as an adjective ("cultural") because the latter does not fall into the trap of having to "substantialise" culture. Instead, it allows for culture to be looked at as an aspect or a characteristic of a certain set of practices or of certain abstract imaginations that highlight, not its physicalities but the differences that are borne from it. Appadurai writes,

> Culture is not usefully regarded as a substance but is better regarded as a dimension of phenomena, a dimension that attends to situated and embodied differences. Stressing the dimensionality of culture rather than its substantiality permits our thinking of culture less as a property of individuals and groups and more as a heuristic device that we can use to talk about difference.[9] (1996: 13)

Looking at culture in such a way denies the existence of "actual social groups as cultures". It moves analysis away from the trap of having to contend with the question of ownership within class cultures. From here, it is easier to highlight the fact that the set of cultural activities that may form a particular class culture *has* to be transitory and constantly shifting. As Mark Liechty states, "class culture is always a *work-in-progress*" (2002: 4). This was a problem that came up during my attempt to define and categorise how ET becomes a sort of class culture for the upper-middle-class elite of the city. The ever-changing nature of the theatre groups, the allowances of some cross-class exchanges, the hybrid theatre groups that worked in both vernacular languages and English but still catered to specific class expectations, the strange relationships between theatre and the digital,

and attempts to create original content—all this has to be accounted for. If the idea of the class culture is problematic, then why use it? The answer to that lies in the rest of Liechty's statement: "Class culture is always a *work-in-progress*", he says, but adds, "a perpetual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the 'concrete' of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who jointly negotiate their social identities." (2002: 4) There is always an economic and therefore productive aspect to culture.

CONCLUSION

Theatre offers an interesting point of analysis from which to consider contemporary urban culture. Theatre's complicated relationship with the people who practise it and with the community it claims to serve means that analysis through theatre can lay bare the collective imaginations of the people involved and allow a study of how these imaginations result in practices and actions that have material impacts. Appadurai puts it best when he talks about the projective capabilities of the imagination in the modern world:

> The imagination [….] has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise. Fantasy can dissipate [….] but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape. (1996: 7)

When Rajgopal writes about the shifting preoccupations and concerns of the middle class, he also references a shifting imagination. Post-liberalisation, the policy changes wrought in the country had a real effect on how citizens produced and consumed cultural items. Toor writes that the liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) policies implemented in India "under the watchful eye of the IMF/World Bank" were intended to "reintegrate" India "into the world economy in 1991–92" (2000: 2). She further writes that though liberalisation was being experimented within the 1980s in India, the policies of 1991–2 present a much clearer break from the experiments with socialism that defined the Indian economy in the post-independence period. It was only several years after the LPG policies were in place that "the ideology of global-local

capitalism has managed to construct the level of hegemony that allows a globally-oriented capitalist consumer culture to truly manifest itself in Indian society" (Toor 2000: 1). The most important facet of liberalisation is not the change that it may have wrought in the ways that goods and services were produced but in how it was "the beginning of a new way of relating to the rest of the world" (Toor 2000: 27). By the mid-2000s, Madras had been Chennai for eight years and had been feeling the effects of liberalisation for 13. The idea that the city and its people were entering a new era was certainly in the air. With ET groups, there were movements made towards professionalisation and financialisation, especially by newer groups who had sprung up in the 2000s. While we cannot go into it all in this paper, I propose that these shifts towards monetised models of theatre-making followed from the changed perceptions that theatre-makers had about themselves and the role their art form played in the city, and that these perceptions are heavily influenced by the presence of neoliberal rationalities, where "market values" are extended to "all institutions and social action".[10] Such rationalities find the story of fluke a perfect foundation from which to adjust the collective imaginations of all participants. The story of fluke, after all, discounts historical continuity, favouring narratives that place individuals and institutions in vacuums, where success and failure are solely matters of effort, and rarely about cultural settings, privilege, and access to resources.

APPENDIX

Interviewee Profiles

S. no.	Interviewee	Age	Education and/or Profession	Hometown
1.	Interviewee One	70	Voice actor and writer	Chennai
2.	Interviewee Two	22	BA Economics	Chennai
3	Interviewee Three	27	Chartered Accountancy	Chennai
4	Interviewee Four	65	Theatre Director, Writer	Chennai

5	Interviewee Five	30	Head of Human Resources	Chennai
6	Interviewee Six	42	Theatre Director, Trainer, and Actor	Delhi
7	Interviewee Seven	26	Theatre Trainer and Actor	Jaipur
8	Interviewee Eight	23	Theatre Trainer and Actor; studying acting	Chennai
9	Interviewee Nine	39	MBA, Theatre Producer	Bhopal
10	Interviewee Ten	50	Theatre Trainer, Actor, Writer, and Director	Chennai
11	Interviewee Eleven	60	Theatre Director	Chennai
12	Interviewee Twelve	59	Journalism	Chennai
13	Interviewee Thirteen	47	Production Design and Theatre Director and Actor	Chennai
14	Interviewee Fourteen	23	BA English, Theatre Director and Actor	Chennai

Interview Guide

The Question Guide

1) a) Name

   b) Age

   c) Occupation and/or educational qualification

   d) Home town

   e) Caste (later omitted)

2) What was your first experience with theatre?

3) How did your involvement in theatre go on from there?

4) What were areas of interest within theatre?

5) What does production mean to you?

6) What do you think English theatre means?

7) Do you see theatre as a political tool? Should it be?

8) Do you see theatre as an employment opportunity?

9) Did/Do you watch a lot of other plays in the city?

10) What do you think of these plays?

11) Where do you find yourself performing the most? Why?

12) What do you think of theatre festivals happening in the city?

The structure of the interviews was extremely loose, and in most cases, these questions acted only as a guide. In some interviews, certain questions were forgone; in others, as the conversation progressed, questions changed form. The large area of discussion, however, remained theatre in the city and the experiences of the interviewees. In some cases, where theatre spaces were being discussed and conversation veered towards discussions of the city itself, the interview was abandoned so as to maintain the flow of conversation. Similarly, when interviewees were able to provide rich histories of theatre from the mid- and late 1900s, the interview guide was not referred to.

Nayantara Nayar is a playwright, researcher, and storyteller based out of Chennai, India. She has a background in theatre and education, documentary film and sociology. Her play "The Lottery" was short-listed for the Hindu PlayWriting Award 2018. It was further selected to be workshopped at UnBlock 2019, conducted by Rage Theatre, Mumbai, and Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, UK. Her most recent works include "Limits of Change", a performance–visual art project about the Indian involvement in the Korean War in 1953 and "The Body", a play commissioned by Rage Theatre, Mumbai, and Enacte Theatre, California, USA, for production in July of 2021.

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[1] Though I do not mention them by name, I have provided a list of profiles for each of the interviewees in the Appendix. Also in the appendix is the questionnaire I used for the interviews, though in several interviews, the conversation turned away from the questions I was asking, usually to more interesting subjects, and in those instances, I have gone off-script. In this way, the interviews provided me with a base from which I could begin analysis.

[2] Appadurai talks of how writing that analyses caste in India tended to follow three streams of Western thought: those of essentialising it, exoticising it, and totalising it.

[3] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Pantheon or the Public Assembly Rooms was a space available to the European community in Madras for galas, theatre, balls, etc.

[4] Madras is the older name of the city of Chennai. The name is now associated with the British and their rule.

[5] This European tradition influenced the way in which Parsi troupes created and represented on stage narratives and spaces, leading them towards a more realistic approach to theatre. Troupes could use well-crafted and elaborate screen paintings and backdrops to draw audiences into the narrative of the play more effectively. They also used the structure of the proscenium to create optical illusions: to make characters appear and disappear or to transport audiences to distant lands. The proscenium allowed for a sort of hyper-real fantasy setting that awed and excited audiences wherever they toured.

[6] Mudaliar did go on to become a prolific theatre writer and director, and his troupe, Suguna Vilasa Sabha, used prose as a necessary part of its plays, creating two- to three-hour-long performances that had many similarities to European theatre. Mudaliar's theatre heralded the time of the "sabha natakan".

[7] Company drama itself was severely affected by the growth of the Tamil film industry. The stage lost many actors, writers, and musicians to Tamil films, and in Madras at least, company drama never adapted and, hence, never recovered. In many ways, Sabha theatre did fill the growing vacuum company drama left, but the content,

audiences, and intent was wholly different. It is important to point out that these dramas, influenced and inspired by Parsi theatre, had their own role to play in the transformation of Tamil theatre.

[8] Durkheim called this property of certain events or chains of action within history "the social fact" (Durkheim, E. 2013: 29) and I think it is not too different from C.W. Mills's (2000) "the sociological imagination" either. Avoiding any positivist trends that such a concept can lend itself to, I use the term to delineate an area in which I believe a "sociology of knowledge" could be applied so that we can examine *how we think* about various phenomena.

[9] Appadurai continues:

> But there are many kinds of differences in the world and only some of these are cultural. And here I bring in a second component of my proposal about the adjectival form of the word culture. I suggest that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities. (1996: 13)

[10] According to Brown (2005: 39–40),

Neoliberalism is not simply a set of economic policies; it is not only about facilitating free trade, maximising corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player.