

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)  
is the institutional research repository for  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

Wald, Erica. 2019. Reading Social Spaces: the life of the Bombay Theatre, 1770-1843. In: Prashant Kidambi; Manjiri Kamat and Rachel Dwyer, eds. Bombay before Mumbai: Essays in Honour of Jim Masselos. London: Hurst Publishers, pp. 99-116. ISBN 9781787381483 [Book Section]

## Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/25123/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

## Reading Social Spaces: the Life of the Bombay Theatre, 1770-1843

[Erica Wald](#)

In 1770, a group of theatre aficionados joined together to propose the establishment of an amateur theatre in Bombay. By 1775 supporters had raised a public subscription, government indicated its support through a grant of land and a theatre built within the grounds of the Fort on the Bombay Green.<sup>1</sup> The Bombay Theatre was one of the earliest English theatres in India, with only the short-lived Calcutta Playhouse predating it. For the next forty years the theatre was the site of amateur performances of popular comedies, farces and melodramas. The mood was kept resolutely light-hearted and emphatically 'popular'.

By the 1830s the theatre, which in its early years had enjoyed both European and Indian patronage as well as the support of sympathetic Governors, had drifted out of government and popular favour. Performances slowed and the theatre was shuttered. In 1835 Mr Newnham, the theatre's last manager, prepared for his departure to Europe. As the only remaining manager in Bombay, he found himself personally liable for the theatre's debt: Rs 30,000 owed to Messrs Forbes & Co. He begged the government to grant him, and by association the theatre, relief from the debt. However, while government had continued to support the theatre through its grant of rent-free land, by the 1830s the idea that it might continue to grant the theatre further funds to promote public enjoyment was deemed ridiculous. This was influenced by a narrowing sense of *who* the deserving public was, as well as a changed sense of the Company's own obligations. The Bombay Government quickly dismissed the possibility of sanctioning further grants to support the theatre,

---

<sup>1</sup> Now Horniman Circle. The exact date of the theatre's founding is unclear. Consultations on the sale of the theatre in 1836 cite 1775 as a founding date, while others have insisted it was founded in 1770. It is possible that the theatre operated in an unofficial capacity for a few years before receiving official support in the form of a grant of land. See OIOC F/4/1775/73032. *Extract Bombay General Consultation, 11 May 1836, Proceedings Regarding the Erection of Markets in Bombay and the Proposed Appropriation of the Surplus Fund Derived from the Sale of the Bombay Theatre for this Purpose, Board's Collections, 1836.* And RK Yajnik, *The Indian Theatre: its Origins and its Later Developments under European Influence. With Special Reference to Western India* (London: 1933).

but nonetheless exonerated Newnham from the debt. The theatre was stripped of its assets and the building and land sold. Writing in 1839, Marianna Postans lamented that, 'Bombay is deficient in places of public amusement...[the Theatre] has lately been sold, and there are neither fancy fairs, or concerts, to dissipate ennui....there is little to offer entertainment to society in general.'<sup>2</sup>

If the Bombay Theatre is now remembered, it is mentioned in a line or commands a footnote, at best. However, during its operation, it was lauded as an important social space for 'respectable' Bombay (colonial) society. The Anglo-Indian press stressed the great contributions that its mere existence made to Bombay - to alleviating the monotony of social life, but perhaps more importantly, as a signifier of Bombay's position as a civilised and cultured metropolis.<sup>3</sup> This chapter uses an exploration of the life of the theatre to understand the place of shared leisure in the construction of colonial respectability. It argues that the theatre was, for a time, an important location for the articulation of urban life by those who claimed to represent Bombay 'Society'.<sup>4</sup> The Bombay Theatre raises a number of questions about the tenor of public life in Bombay in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a time, it functioned as a shared social space for the colonial elite and their Indian collaborators. No doubt this was primarily a *European* entertainment and European space - drawing civil and military society together- but nevertheless, the theatre opened its door to the Indian collaborators of the Company, who not only attended performances, but were a very visible presence on the lists of subscribers. As Bombay transformed, the theatre continued to remain a shared social space for these agents of colonialism.

---

<sup>2</sup> Marianna Postans, *Western India in 1838* (London: 1839), 32.

<sup>3</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Courier*, 10 February 1821.

<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, this phrase used to describe the self-identified 'respectable' classes - both Indian and European - whose relative wealth ensured their place in this leisured group.

With its 600 seats, the theatre neatly filled with this self-selecting group of colonial officials, Indian collaborators and miscellaneous elites who deemed themselves the *truly* significant Bombay public. Here this section of society could be observed at each performance, seated in order of precedence and rank. The most respectable families could expect champagne in their boxes while the 'common' European soldiers could be found drinking beer in the gallery. While performances often did not begin until much later, the doors to the theatre opened at 5pm to allow ticket-holders to socialize in this place of 'rational' enjoyment.<sup>5</sup> In the Bombay Theatre, people came together not simply to experience a performance, but to perform their own respectability. This chapter suggests some of the ways in which Bombay 'Society' utilized the theatre in this manner. Indeed, as Marty Gould has argued (with regard to empire-related performances in Britain), theatre was an important tool in the construction of the culture of empire.<sup>6</sup>

Colonial officials, newspapers and socialites held up the existence of the theatre as evidence of the 'refinement' and respectability of Bombay's colonial society. This was true regardless of the nature of the plays performed. For the theatre's attendees, it mattered little whether the pieces chosen were frivolous melodramas or pun-laden farces. Moreover, unlike in London, the same play could be repeated a number of times without eliciting much complaint. These 'respectable' (read: European) entertainments (presumably in contrast with earlier forms of shared entertainment such as the *nautch*) that could appeal to the small body of European 'ladies' of the city, were a coded signifier implying a new form of sociability that emerged in the late eighteenth century. This chapter suggests the ways in which we might read the theatre not simply as a metaphor for the broader colonial social frame, but that we can examine the ways in which imperial power was encoded and embedded in the operation of this social space. This chapter uses the Theatre Manager's

---

<sup>5</sup> For an indication of timings see 'Advertisement - Bombay Theatre' *Bombay Courier*, 19 December 1818.

<sup>6</sup> Marty Gould, *Nineteenth century theatre and the Imperial encounter* (London: 2011), 5.

diaries<sup>7</sup>, along with Court of Directors and Military Board proceedings, as well as contemporary accounts from individuals and the Anglo-Indian press to piece together a picture of the theatre and its place within Bombay's changing urban and social landscape.

The theatre's decline, and the responses to its failure are equally important, as these reflected a political and social shift already clearly felt by the 1830s. The decline and fall of the theatre overlaps with a period of great political and social change for both Bombay and the Company. I suggest that this changed political climate can be seen clearly when we read across the life of the theatre. The responses to the theatre, by both government and newspaper editors (and, for that matter, letters to the editor), suggest definitive shifts in ideas about segregation, separate spaces, and appropriate sociability.

This work draws upon Jim Masselos' notion of temporally-located 'templates' of everyday urban space<sup>8</sup> and suggests that the theatre was one such space where there was some overlap – individuals whose 'templates' would not normally have drawn them into contact with each other found a common space where they met, albeit briefly and irregularly. The groupings and associations formed (most often) in the boxes the theatre took place in the decades before the era of associational politics (and the focus of Masselos' path-breaking study).<sup>9</sup> This chapter highlights some of the ways in which debates over respectability and more specifically, *who* could claim the right to represent the Bombay 'public' over social matters were significant precursors to the associational politics of the later nineteenth century.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sadly, only two volumes of these diaries survive. They are held in the Maharashtra State Archives. See MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*, 1819. And MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 602. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*, 1830.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Masselos, 'Appropriating Urban Space: Social Constructs of Bombay in the Time of the Raj,' *South Asia: Journal of Asian Studies* XIV no. 1 (1991).

<sup>9</sup> Jim C. Masselos, *Towards Nationalism: Group Affiliations and the Politics of Public Associations in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Bombay: 1974).

The majority of studies on European theatre in colonial India have focused on its role in replicating European or 'metropolitan' cultures in India.<sup>10</sup> In these, the Calcutta and Bombay theatres are examined as a starting point for elite Indian engagement with European theatre.<sup>11</sup> There is a vibrant literature on the resulting transformation of traditional theatre forms (whether Bengali *jatras* or Marathi folk theatre) to a new form, often associated with the proto- or early nationalist movement and one which the colonial government would regard with great suspicion, if not outright hostility. Plays and the theatres themselves were frequently the site of nationalist agitation, particularly in the years after the publication and performance of Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* (*The Indigo Planter's Mirror*) in 1860.<sup>12</sup> At this time, there was a transformation in the language used to describe Indian forms of popular entertainment. The successors of the Bombay Theatre, including the new theatre at Grant Road, the Gaiety, and the Novelty theatre became, as Kathryn Hansen has shown, new sites for spectatorship and patronage in the later nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> As Lata Singh has shown, colonial authorities painted such entertainments as lacking in respectability and conversely, English theatre 'proper' and respectable.<sup>14</sup> The Anglo-Indian press was quick to identify lewd or salacious content in Indian performances while ignoring the bawdy outbursts of many popular English farces.

#### *Dramatic imperialism: theatres in colonial India*

While our attention is often drawn to the more imposing, official spaces and structures of empire, the presence of social spaces (however loosely defined)

---

<sup>10</sup> Lata Singh, *Playhouse of Power : Theatre in Colonial India* (New Delhi: 2009), 121.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Jyotsna Singh, *Colonial narratives/cultural dialogues : 'discoveries' of India in the language of colonialism* (London: 1996), 122; Sudipto Chatterjee, *The Colonial Staged : Theatre in Colonial Calcutta* (London: 2007); Anand Patil, *Western Influence on Marathi Drama : a Case Study* (Panaji, Goa: 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Vasudha Dalmia, 'Urban Theatre and the Turn Toward Folk,' *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (Cambridge ; New York: 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Hansen, 'Parsi Theatre and the City: Locations, Patrons, Audiences,' *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life*, ed. Ravi S Vasudevan, et al. (Delhi: 2002), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Singh, 5.

whether theatres, cricket grounds or reading rooms, deserves greater study. As British rule was consolidated across the subcontinent, military officers and governors oversaw the construction of the essential *structures* of rule, whether forts, cantonments, jails, or courts. However, at a relatively early date – 1745 – the *non-essential* (even frivolous) structure of the English amateur theatre first appeared in Calcutta. This suggests that, indeed, these spaces were seen as integral to colonial society.

The Calcutta Playhouse was established by a club of ‘Young Writers of John Company’ and was, like most European theatres in India, an amateur theatre.<sup>15</sup> The growth of amateur theatres across Britain and the empire had come as a result of the English Licensing Act of 1737, which aimed to more closely monitor theatre performances for any sign of sedition. This restricted ‘serious’ theatre performances to two Patent Theatres in London: the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. This meant that the majority of theatres in London and those English theatres established in India, including the Playhouse, produced ‘popular’ entertainments. The Calcutta Playhouse was relatively short-lived and met a violent end. Unfortunately, little evidence remains to illuminate the operation or inner workings of the theatre. However, for the purpose of this chapter, its location suggests its importance. Like the Bombay Theatre after it, the Calcutta Playhouse was situated at the heart of British space, directly adjacent to the old Fort. Indeed, this fact was linked to the circumstances of its demise. When the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daula moved to eject the British from the city in June 1756, his forces turned the theatre into a battery. From here, he was able to successfully besiege the British fort and the Playhouse was destroyed in the fighting that followed.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Hema Dahiya, *Shakespeare Studies in Colonial Bengal : the Early Phase* (Cambridge: 2014), 52.

<sup>16</sup> Yajnik, 83.

The Playhouse was eventually rebuilt following the defeat of Siraj ud-Daula. The New (or Second) Calcutta Theatre opened shortly after the Bombay Theatre in 1775. The New Theatre was re-established in an equally central location just to the north of the Writers' Buildings, one of the central nodes of political power in Calcutta. The theatre counted Warren Hastings, Sir Elijah Impey and Chief Justice Hyde among its patrons.<sup>17</sup> Its contemporaries in Calcutta, the Chowringhee (built 1813) and Sans Souci (built 1839), were also successful and frequently held up as evidence of the city's sophistication and importance. Like the Bombay Theatre, these theatres featured a repertoire of musical comedies and farces.

Located within the Fort area, the Bombay Green was the centre of Bombay's white town in the eighteenth century. Speaking to the centrality of Bombay's trading history, until the mid-nineteenth century the area was the site of the cotton market. By the mid eighteenth century, this area developed into the space around which European social life revolved.<sup>18</sup> The theatre occupied a prime position on the north side of the Green, near the Cathedral. Some time between 1771 and 1775, Governor William Hornby sanctioned a grant of land for the theatre. His vision for Bombay appeared to include public sites like the theatre. Low-lying land, like the area on which the theatre stood, was reinforced, or reclaimed. Later discussion on the value (monetary and social) of the theatre stressed this transformation: it was built on swampy land that had previously held a stagnant tank.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Hornby began his more famous project to link the islands of Bombay by causeway. We can see

---

<sup>17</sup> Derek Forbes, 'Our Theatrical Attempts in This Distant Quarter': The British Stage in Eighteenth Century Calcutta,' *Theatre Notebook, Society for Theatre Research* 61, no. 2 (2007). The Playhouse also counted David Garrick among its chief supporters.

<sup>18</sup> Mariam Dossal, *Imperial Designs and Indian Realities : the Planning of Bombay City, 1845-1875* (Bombay ; Oxford: 1991), 19.

<sup>19</sup> In William Newnham's letter to government, he recounts that when the theatre was rebuilt in 1817 (at the expense of the community), the foundations revealed the existence of a 'tank of impure water'. See OIOC F/4/1536/60993. *Letter to Secretary, General Department, from William Newnham, 11 December 1834, Extract Bombay General Consultations, 17 December 1834, Proceedings on the Sale of the Bombay Theatre, Board's Collections, 1835-6.*

the construction of the theatre as part of a colonial attempt to re-define land and space: from 'waste' to 'respectable' sites.

Hornby's successor, William Meadows, signaled his continued support for the theatre, arguing that the theatre, operating as it did for 'public' enjoyment, would not be held responsible for paying rent to the government.<sup>20</sup> British officials continued to meticulously oversee the use of space within the white town, most noticeably in the wake of the devastating fire that destroyed much of the fort in 1803. Following the fire, town planners argued for the wholesale removal of Indian businesses and homes from the fort area, ostensibly on the grounds of safety, thus making more explicit the expanding segregation of space.<sup>21</sup>

The patronage of prominent officials remained important throughout the theatre's existence. Shortly before commencing his term as Governor in 1819, Mountstuart Elphinstone donated a cache of plays, comedies and farces to the theatre's library and appears to have made a donation to commission a performance.<sup>22</sup> Not only did Bombay's leading officials grant monetary benefits to the theatre, but their physical presence in the box seats was critical for the perceived success of the theatre.<sup>23</sup> Through these connections, the theatre enjoyed a place of privileged, demi-official sociability. As such, for the Bombay elite, it became important not just to attend the theatre, but be seen to support and contribute toward its success. As the importance of Bombay grew, the theatre served as a signifier of its society's refinement. One Bombay paper enthused, 'We are happy to observe, that the late successful effort of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Of course, this notion of the 'public' was as selective as that of colonial notions of (capital 'S') 'Society' – with many overlaps between the two concepts.

<sup>21</sup> From the remaining records, it is unclear whether the fire damaged the Theatre. However, later loans from Forbes & Company contain a 2% charge to insure against fire. MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Letter to James Farish, Secretary to Government, from William Newnham, Manager of the Bombay Theatre, 6 August 1824, Diary, Bombay Theatre Records, 1824.*

<sup>22</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records.*

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the subscription list and ledger of ticket sales. MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 602. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records.*

Votaries of the Drama, has awakened in the Public the dormant attachment to so *rational* a recreation.'<sup>24</sup> A mixture of high-ranking European Civilians and military officers vied with Brahmin merchants and Parsi ship-builders (among others) to demonstrate their generosity in contributing to the theatre's subscription rounds- all the while stressing the virtue and 'rationality' of Bombay Society.

In her work on Bombay and the colonial urban environment, Miriam Dossal has argued that there was a direct link between cultural segregation and political control.<sup>25</sup> I am particularly interested in exploring this dynamic in the context of the Bombay theatre. Jyotsna Singh has shown that the Calcutta theatres reflected a very particular, segregated kind of colonial 'Society' - they were exclusively white spaces in their early years.<sup>26</sup> The Calcutta theatres only gradually opened their doors to elite Indian patrons.<sup>27</sup> However, the operation of the Bombay Theatre suggests that here, 'Society' was conceived of differently. The exclusionary practices that kept Bengalis out of the Calcutta theatre were not present in Bombay. This approach not only suggested the relative power of wealthy Parsi and Brahmin intermediaries but also the unsettled political terrain of western India at the time. The records of the Bombay theatre suggest that Indian patrons ranked among its earliest subscribers and contributed in each of the subscription round.<sup>28</sup>

The theatre was enmeshed in in Bombay life. The staff and suppliers who provided the goods and services that allowed the theatre to function were

---

<sup>24</sup> 'Review,' *Bombay Courier*, 25 January 1794. My italics.

<sup>25</sup> Dossal, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Singh, 122

<sup>27</sup> The exception to this can be found in the short-lived Bengally Theatre, which was built by the Russian Herasim Lebedeff in Dom Tollah Lane (present-day Ezra Street in Kolkata). Here, mixed elite audiences viewed English plays translated into Bengali and performed by Indian actors (and actresses). See Yajnik, 84.

<sup>28</sup> The presence of lower-class European soldiers is perhaps more surprising. The theatre seemingly represented one of the few social spaces European soldiers (normally relegated to more disreputable establishments) shared entertainments, though did not mix with, the middle and upper echelons of Bombay colonial society.

Indian artisans and traders well-known across the city. The Manager's diary contains account ledgers which detail payment to unspecified scene shifters, workmen, chandlers and itemise the specialised items required such as hats from the milliner Vully Muhamed [sic], costumes from the dressmaker Khanajee Gonnajee [sic] and tailoring from Balcrustna Maistry.<sup>29</sup> Bills to the liquor merchant, Mr Framjee, also suggest the necessities of beer, wine and liquor were available at every performance.<sup>30</sup>

Lest this suggest an overly-idealized picture, to clarify, the ideology of segregation was present. However, it was expressed in different ways and can instead be read through the organisation of the theatre. As an Amateur theatre, it depended on participation from various social groups, but each of these roles remained carefully segregated. Indian stage hands worked behind the scenes operating the sets; Indian suppliers who provided the essential necessities of the theatre were unseen by audiences; European Civilians, higher ranking military officers and surgeons served as managers or filled the more 'serious' acting roles; and those (more limited) numbers of the 'respectable' European rank-and-file, largely artillery Gunners and infantry Ensigns, sang or filled comedy roles.<sup>31</sup>

Newspaper reviews were often gushing in describing the abilities of the Amateurs (suggesting too a keen awareness of the performer's rank within Bombay's social framework). Instead, they reserved any criticism for the contours of the theatre itself. Hence, the actors' dramatic merits were praised as 'worthy' of the London stage, costumes occupied a middle ground, while the stage 'machinery' was deemed rough or rudimentary. A 1794 review of *The Minor* praised the ability of the actors, but nevertheless lamented that the

---

<sup>29</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 602. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>31</sup> Most high-ranking officers held that the numbers of 'respectable' rank-and-file were limited across the army at large, and varied from station to station. On the rank-and-file see Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India* (Basingstoke: 2014). For distinctions between the Company and Crown armies, see Peter Stanley, *White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India, 1825-1875* (London: 1998).

scenery and 'stage evolution' was less advanced on the Indian stage than in Europe.<sup>32</sup> To this end, he blamed Indian set designers, lamenting, '...the natives here to whom much must necessarily be trusted are miserable mechanics, and having no conception of what is proposed to be effected by the machinery they are directed to conduct, are both inattentive and indifferent to their duty'.<sup>33</sup> The supposed refinements of the theatre, the plays themselves, and the actors were in this way repeatedly contrasted to the supposedly rough and uncivilized Indian labourer who supplied the theatre with its more practical needs.

William Milburn, in his 1813 guide for European traders operating across India, China and Japan used similar language to praise the European spaces of the Green: 'well built' European houses, the 'commodious' and 'airy' Church, and the 'neat', 'handsome' theatre.<sup>34</sup> After a later subscription round once more rebuilt the theatre, the *Bombay Courier* hailed its refurbishment as a great move forward for refinement and civilisation in Bombay. Once more, the space itself was identified as a particularly 'European' space. The editorial pointed to its 'elegance' and careful, clear organisation, with its boxes, neat rows and promenade. The scenery, the *Courier* assured its readers, was organised on the most current 'principles now observed on the London theatres'.<sup>35</sup> The *Gazette* echoed this praise of the updated interiors, noting, 'in this country, the decorations must of course be very limited but all that has been done in a way is as chaste and appropriate as we could wish. The boxes have been much enlarged and are of the same form as those of our most approved theatres.'<sup>36</sup> These types of spatial distinctions - associating European space with order, neatness and refinement while Indian space

---

<sup>32</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Courier*, 16 August 1794.

<sup>33</sup> 'Review,' *Bombay Courier*, 25 January 1794.

<sup>34</sup> William Milburn, *Oriental Commerce; containing a geographical description of the principal places in the East Indies, China and Japan, with their produce, manufactures and trade ... also the ... progress of the trade of the ... European Nations with the Eastern World, particularly that of the English East India Company, etc* (London: 1813), 170.

<sup>35</sup> 'Bombay Theatre,' *Bombay Courier*, 9 January 1819.

<sup>36</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Gazette* 6 January 1819.

remained 'hodgepodge', cluttered and, by implication, unrefined - increased as the century progressed. And yet, it is important to remind ourselves that the Bombay theatre was by definition amateur. Rehearsals and performances were often untidy and always a bit rowdy. Later, critics seeking to explain the failure of the theatre would point to the overly-convivial (or even lax) attitude of managers. Suggesting that such an approach led to a mismanagement of funds, with over spending on 'frivolous' expenses cited in the discussions about the theatre's finances. The irregular schedule of performances and the extravagance of 'stage management' was blamed or the theatre's inability to repay its debt to Forbes & Co. Reporting in 1842 on the failings of the theatre, the language of the *Courier* now turned accusatory, arguing that some Amateurs were quick to submit their (unnecessary) expenses that included palanquin hire, a pair of Wellingtons which never made their way to the wardrobe, silk stockings, feathers and fancy hats.<sup>37</sup>

*Performing Respectability and Refinement: Seeing and Being Seen in the Theatre*

As an Amateur theatre, the theatre operated an irregular schedule and choice of productions. With a few exceptions, the theatre produced plays in the cooler months - from September to April - as the lack of ventilation meant that the building was stifling in summer months, and, as a consequence, poorly attended. Moreover, performances not only depended on the selections of the managers (which was itself dependent on the availability of scripts from England), but on the availability of the performers. As such, the *Courier* had frequent cause to lament the departure of a particular regiment or troopship meant that the stock of 'Amateurs' had been depleted or a planned performance cancelled.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> 'Bombay Theatre,' *Bombay Courier*, 7 January 1842.

<sup>38</sup> In April 1819, the news of the (November) death of Queen Charlotte reached Bombay and the planned performance was cancelled. The subsequent departure of HMS Malabar meant the loss of most of the Amateurs. See 'Bombay Theatre,' *Bombay Courier*, 9 January 1819.

However erratic the schedule, it was particularly important to be *seen* at the theatre. In their reviews, the Bombay newspapers paid particular attention to the composition of the audience- stressing the presence (or absence) of particular families, or the Governor, in the audience.<sup>39</sup> In early January 1794, Holcroft's successful 1792 comedy, *The Road to Ruin* was first produced in Bombay.<sup>40</sup> The *Bombay Courier*, in its review of the piece, stressed that nearly all of the families at the Presidency were in attendance.

In between the often erratic schedule of plays, the theatre also played host to a number of meetings, public assemblies, exhibitions and general sales. There is nothing in the records to indicate the reasons behind this diversification, however we can assume that it provided a much-needed additional source of revenue for the theatre. Just a week after the *Road to Ruin* was performed in 1794, the *Bombay Courier* lamented that the theatre was 'neglected' and being used for the purposes of a 'Europe shop.'<sup>41</sup> These critiques implied that the need to diversify the use of space was a great detriment to the drama. Unpicking these statements, we can read that in *proper* European society, each building should operate as a homogenous space. The messiness of mixed-use space was, in this case, thought unbecoming to current imperial pretensions. However, given the theatre's finances, it appears that this diversification was required for it to continue to exist. The *Courier* pleaded, 'May not this circumstance rouse the Votaries of the Dramatic muse once more to assert her rights!'<sup>42</sup> This rallying cry had some effect; later that month, the amateurs soon resumed their repertoire of popular farce, and produced *The Minor*, along with the accompanying pantomime of *Mungo in Freedom*.

Despite this flurry of activity, little mention of the theatre was made until 1817 when it again re-entered the public's imagination. At this time, the

---

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, 'Theatre,' *Bombay Courier*, 4 January 1794; 'Review,' *Bombay Courier*, 25 January 1794.

<sup>40</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*.

<sup>41</sup> 'Theatre,' *Bombay Courier*, 4 January 1794.

<sup>42</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Courier*, 16 August 1794.

managers pleaded that the theatre was now in a dangerous state of disrepair. The dilapidated state of the building as well as that of the props and curtains led the managers to reach out to the 'enlightened society' of Bombay once more for support. Laying bare the financial difficulties of the theatre, the managers pressed not simply for a repairs fund, but for a bolder option: to enlarge and improve the theatre, 'in a manner worthy of this settlement'. They estimated that this would cost an additional Rs 12-15,000. Subscribers responded with Rs 14,025 in donations. This amount was again augmented by further contributions from government.<sup>43</sup>

In anticipation of its re-opening, the managers placed a notice in the *Courier* to request that the theatre's 'poetical friends' submit original addresses to commemorate the re-launch of the theatre.<sup>44</sup> In December 1818, the managers (in an unintentional, ironic foreshadowing of events to come) announced that the comedy *The Road to Ruin* would re-open the theatre. Once more, newspaper reviews examined the occupants of the boxes almost as much as the performers on stage. The *Gazette* proudly insisted the performance 'called forth the repeated applause of the numerous and respectable audience, constituting, we believe, the whole of our society.'<sup>45</sup> The *Courier*, in reviewing the performance, implied that the manager's choice of play reflected the 'rationality' of Bombay society, noting that, '[the title of the play] may have been waggishly suggested, thus to shew our contempt of such sinister omens; to display our present might; and to prove what can be effected by its energies.'<sup>46</sup>

The evening began with the recitation of the 'poetical' address written for the occasion. While the idea of empire may have been unevenly felt in the farces and melodramas performed in the theatre, this address demonstrated a

---

<sup>43</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*.

<sup>44</sup> 'Bombay Theatre' *Bombay Courier*, 4 July 1818.

<sup>45</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Gazette* 6 January 1819.

<sup>46</sup> 'Bombay Theatre,' *Bombay Courier*, 9 January 1819.

particularly martial and profoundly imperial framing of recent events. It situated violent conquest alongside 'culture' and 'refinement' as the essential components of the broader imperial project. The address was filled with allusions to British military strength and portrayed a submissive, grateful 'Hindostania', with a poor 'wretched Ryott [sic]'. Both, the address went on were, '...redeemed by Britain's fostering hand, [which] spreads joy and safety thro' the bleeding land'.<sup>47</sup> The address then proceeded to recount the recent battle of Koregaon<sup>48</sup> with the lines:

One troop I spy, by valiant Staunton led;  
At Korygaum, the gallant heroes bled!  
At Korygaum! the noble deed was done!  
At Korygaum! the immortal meed was won!!  
The keen fought struggle of that glorious day  
What pen can trace, what pencil could pourtray!<sup>49</sup>

The connection between warfare and the theatre was made explicit with the stanza, 'To Britain's valiant sons, war is the stage; and this they've nobly trod from age to age.'<sup>50</sup> The address continued on to eulogize Britain's military prowess and linked this directly to a celebration of the dramatic muse in Bombay. Such jingoism was well-matched not only to the composition of the audience, but to the players themselves. The cast list for the production reflected the broader (European) composition of Bombay - weighted heavily toward military personnel, rather than civilians. Ten cast members, six of whom held a military rank, filled the 21 parts in *The Road to Ruin*. Of the military men, five were higher-ranking colonels or captains.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> 'Address on Opening the New Theatre at Bombay, 1 January 1819,' *Bombay Gazette* 13 January 1819.

<sup>48</sup> The battle of Koregaon, an episode in the larger conflict between the British and the Maratha Confederacy. The battle was fought on 1 January 1818 between troops of the Bombay Native Infantry, led by Captain Francis Staunton, and the forces of the Maratha Peshwa, Bajji Rao III.

<sup>49</sup> 'Address on Opening the New Theatre at Bombay, 1 January 1819,' *Bombay Gazette* 13 January 1819.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records.*

The trend for amateur dramatics within the military appears to have flourished at this time. In October 1819, shortly after the successful refurbishment of the Bombay Theatre, the *Gazette* noted the presence of two military theatres in the Bombay area: the Artillery Theatre at Matunga and the Fort George Theatre, which also produced farces and comedies.<sup>52</sup> The presence of these two additional 'respectable' theatres appeared to confirm the cosmopolitan status of Bombay. The Bombay newspapers continued to report on the growing popularity of the drama across the army with discussions not just of the Bombay-area theatres, but of military drama further afield at larger stations like Kaira and Dum Dum.<sup>53</sup>

In its final decade, the Bombay Theatre itself was more noticeably a military space. The composition of the audience began to shift as the civilian luminaries of European society withdrew and greater numbers of European soldiers, officers and Indian merchants filled their seats. Over the course of the next few years, more lower-ranking gunners and ensigns joined the ranks of the amateurs, often performing the minor, unnamed parts (for example as the 'Clown' or 'Villager'), or the female roles. An evening in late April 1821 reflects the growing involvement of military men on the Bombay amateur stage. The evening began with a Prologue recited by the 'Poet of Matoonga', a well-regarded private in the Artillery. The popular farces of *Fortune's Frolic* and *The Sleeping Draught* (an 1818 play whose plot revolved around the accidental consumption of opium) followed and both featured a number of soldiers in the cast. In between the two main farces, two Gunners sang popular music hall songs for the assembled audience.<sup>54</sup>

### *Theatre of Benevolent Society*

---

<sup>52</sup> *Bombay Gazette* 20 October 1819.

<sup>53</sup> Present-day Kheda. From informal beginnings, correspondents noted that the Kaira theatre was refined and formalized, until an 1824 letter in the *Courier* reported the opening of the 'Black Camp Theatre' at the station, marked by a performance by a number of NCOs and privates of the Horse Artillery. See 'Letters,' *Bombay Courier*, 17 November 1821.

<sup>54</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Courier*, 10 February 1821.

In contrast to the earlier ways in which the theatre as a 'Europe Shop' was regarded, the newspapers responded positively and enthusiastically when the theatre was used as a site for the demonstration of the 'charitable' or virtuous nature of Bombay Society. During these events, the luminaries of Bombay, European and Indian, were called upon to support causes deemed the most worthy: support for (European) widows and children in Bombay and famine relief (in *Ireland*). Following an explosion that killed European and Indian troops in Hornby's Battery in 1820, the theatre staged a charity performance to raise money for the widows and children of the dead. On this occasion, Dr Riddell, a Bombay medical officer, volunteered to perform a series of farces and musical interludes, as well as presenting shorter pieces that he wrote himself. While the assembled audience reportedly received Dr Riddell's (by all accounts lengthy and extended) performance with some impatience, the *Bombay Courier* was far more generous, gently suggesting that had he attempted less, 'the rays of his genius would have shown forth with more powerful lustre.'<sup>55</sup> In a robustly self-congratulatory tone the paper pronounced that the 'humane' purposes of the production had been satisfied.<sup>56</sup> Such gatherings allowed Bombay Society to reflect on its benevolence and charitability.

In 1822, on the suggestion of Sir Charles Colville, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bombay and serving Commander-in-Chief of the Bombay Army, Bombay Society enthusiastically joined together once more. On this occasion, Colville argued that that the British inhabitants of Bombay *must* help mitigate the effects of the on-going Irish famine and organised a subscription fund for the purpose. Bombay society complied and the manager reported that the players performed to an 'overflowing' audience and raised Rs 2,500 for famine relief.<sup>57</sup> No mention is made of any similar subscription for any of the Indian famines which took place during the theatre's lifespan, the two most

---

<sup>55</sup> *Bombay Courier*, 16 September 1820.

<sup>56</sup> 'Bombay Theatre' *Bombay Courier*, 16 September 1820.

<sup>57</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*.

devastating of which were the 1783-4 famine across large parts of north and central India and the 1791-2 famine that killed as many as 11 million people across the Maratha Confederacy, Hyderabad and (British-controlled) Madras Presidency.

By late 1824, the managers once again expressed concern over the theatre's financial affairs, as the loan for earlier repairs with its high interest rate, had proved unmanageable. A request for a further loan from Forbes & Co was declined and the managers turned to other plans for reviving the fortunes of the theatre. This time, the Anglo-Indian press displayed a more negative attitude and a series of sour comments about the state of the theatre appeared in a number of editorials. No doubt this further contributed to declining audience numbers. By the late 1820s, the number of performances dropped and the theatre sank further into disrepair. With the exception of a charity performance to support the widow of a 'respected' shopkeeper, performances were rare. The condition of the theatre was now so dire that the managers worried that, '...it would be hazardous again to attempt any dramatic representations even if a company could be got together for there was...little chance of a respectable audience honouring the house with its attendance.'<sup>58</sup>

The writer and newspaper editor Joachim Stocqueler assumed the position of theatre manager in 1830. He attempted to revive the theatre's fortunes with yet another subscription fund. Among the most vocal supporters of the theatre during this round was the wealthy businessman Jaganath Shunkerseth. Shunkerseth had been a regular attendee at the theatre and enthusiastically donated alongside such patrons as Governor Sir John Malcolm, William Newnham (the Chief Secretary to Government and the Theatre's final manager) and prominent businessmen and merchants including Bomanjee Hormusjee, Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy and Framjee

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Cowasjee.<sup>59</sup> On the back of this fund, the theatre re-launched with a production to honour the departing Governor, Sir John Malcolm.<sup>60</sup> The theatre staggered on for the next few years, featuring occasional productions enacted by the local European soldiery. While still bringing in money for the theatre, these productions were not enough to stage a revival in the drama or save the theatre.

*Death and afterlife- public interest and changing taste*

William Newnham was the final manager of the theatre and his preparations for departure in December 1834 precipitated its final closure. Newnham joined the theatre's board of managers around 1814.<sup>61</sup> However, by the time of his departure, 20 years later, he lamented that the 'taste for amateur performances has decayed' and he saw little hope that it would be revived.<sup>62</sup> As the last manager, technically, that debt still owing to Forbes & Co fell to Newnham to repay. He expressed his hope that Government would continue to support the theatre, but this idea was flatly rejected. One unnamed official writing in the margins of the Bombay Government correspondence proclaimed that this was 'an absurd proposition'.<sup>63</sup> However, perhaps due to Newnham's own ranking within the Company, the Directors deemed it appropriate to release him from the debt, repaying the money to Forbes.

The Board of Directors released Mr Newnham from his financial responsibility and then embarked on discussions about what to do with the building and (perhaps more importantly) the land on which it sat. The owner of the neighbouring property, Bomanjee Hormusjee, was eager to buy the

---

<sup>59</sup> The 1830 subscription list is a veritable who's who of Indian philanthropists. See MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 602. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*.

<sup>60</sup> MSA Miscellaneous Files, Vol 601. *Diary, Bombay Theatre Records*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> OIOC F/4/1536/60993. *Letter to Secretary, General Department, from William Newnham, 11 December 1834.*

<sup>63</sup> OIOC F/4/1536/60993. *Letter to Honourable Court of Directors from R Grant, J Keane, J Sutherland, and E Ironside, dated 12 November 1835, Proceedings on the Sale of the Bombay Theatre, 21 April 1836, Board's Collections, 1836.*

grounds. Hormusjee had supported the theatre in the recent subscription round and now offered to maintain it in exchange for the sale. However, the General Department was suspicious of his generosity and suggested that he was simply trying to deceive government. A Government surveyor suggested a high valuation for the land which Hormusjee rejected, protesting that the asking price (Rs 75,000) did not accurately reflect the deteriorating state of the Bombay property market. He suggested that following the removal of various government and public offices to the Town Hall, the value of land in the Fort area had declined precipitously.<sup>64</sup> Following a protracted (and ultimately failed) negotiation, the land and premises was sold by public auction in late September 1835 to Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy for Rs 50,000.<sup>65</sup> Raising a lament against the loss of the theatre, the *Bombay Gazette* woefully wondered if, should an 'Indian Shakespeare' arise, '...shall there be no stage to call forth the creations of his fancy?'<sup>66</sup>

After the debt to Forbes & Co was repaid, Government earmarked the surplus to be used for the 'public good'. However, exactly what this entailed was now actively debated. The public good now represented something very different than it had 40 years earlier. A protracted battle ensued, with different groups each claiming their right to represent the interests of Bombay 'society' debating the best use of this money. The first group met at the Town Hall in April 1836 to discuss proposals for the 'betterment' of Bombay. A committee was formed convey the wishes of this public to government. It included military officials, surgeons, civil servants, and Parsi businessmen. The three most popular suggestions to emerge from the meeting were the construction of a new market, funds to support the General Library, and the construction

---

<sup>64</sup> OIOC F/4/1536/60993. *Letter to the Secretary, General Department, from Bomanjee Hormusjee dated 9 March 1835, Extract Bombay General Consultations, 17 March 1835, Proceedings on the Sale of the Bombay Theatre, 21 April 1836, Board's Collections, 1836.*

<sup>65</sup> OIOC F/4/1536/60993. *Letter to Honourable Court of Directors from R Grant, J Keane, J Sutherland, and E Ironside, dated 12 November 1835.*

<sup>66</sup> 'Editorial,' *Bombay Gazette* 12 September 1835.

of a new dispensary.<sup>67</sup> In introducing the proposals to the Bombay Government, the committee's Chairman stressed that the erection of public markets was

...a measure so enthusiastically conducive to public health, comfort, cleanliness, so necessary in a moral point of view, in order to remove a state of things productive in the minds of Hindoos of offence, disgust and contempt for the European character, in a word a measure so loudly called for by the disgracefully filthy condition of the places where articles of food are now exposed for sale...<sup>68</sup>

The committee was careful to note the inter-communal nature of the favoured proposals. The market would benefit Europeans *and* Indians and the public library maintained the only reading room where Europeans of 'humble or even moderate' origin, *and* all Indians could resort. These measures won the approval of Governor Robert Grant and he forwarded them to the Court of Directors with his support.

However benevolent these proposals appeared, they were not unanimously supported, least of all by those who considered themselves to be the true representatives of the 'public', or, related to this, to constitute Bombay 'Society'. Definitions of the 'public good' were actively contested and were always murky. The debates that followed demonstrate the unsettled, discursive atmosphere that characterized social politics in the unsettled 1830s and 1840s.

---

<sup>67</sup> OIOC F/4/1775/73032. *Letter to the Honourable Court of Directors from R Grant, 14 January 1837, Proceedings Regarding the Erection of Markets in Bombay and the Proposed Appropriation of the Surplus Fund Derived from the Sale of the Bombay Theatre for this Purpose, Board's Collections, 1839.*

<sup>68</sup> OIOC F/4/1775/73032. *Letter to the General Department from the Chairman of the Committee [formed to communicate with Government regarding the funds realised from the sale of the Theatre], 4 June 1836, Extract Bombay General Consultation, 31 August 1836, Proceedings Regarding the Erection of Markets in Bombay and the Proposed Appropriation of the Surplus Fund Derived from the Sale of the Bombay Theatre for this Purpose, Board's Collections, 1839.*

In 1841, while the Court of Directors debated the first proposal, a separate public committee submitted a counter-petition.<sup>69</sup> These petitioners also claimed to represent the 'public' and styled themselves into a 'Committee for the New Theatre'. They insisted that the construction of a new theatre would not only promote 'good humour' but would 'induce a desirable tone of feeling in Society at large.'<sup>70</sup> James Farish, who had previously served as interim governor prior to Rivett Carnac's arrival (and was famous for his fractious relationship with a number of Parsis), dismissed the proposal of the petitioners flatly. The majority of the signatories, he sneered, were Indians, and those who were not were either 'younger members of society, or those in the lower walks of life.'<sup>71</sup> As such, Farish asserted, the petition '...by no means, expresses the majority of the *good sense*, or the general opinion of the community of Bombay.'<sup>72</sup>

The New Theatre Committee, however, did not give up. After Rivett Carnac replaced Farish as Governor, it again asserted its claim to the money received from the sale of the old theatre. Eventually, the drama enthusiasts won the day after the wealthy businessman and Bombay philanthropist Jaganath Shunkerseth offered land adjacent to his own property on the north side of the new Grant Road for the construction of a new theatre. In 1841, the Court of Directors relented, noting,

The Theatre, having been upwards of half a century in undisturbed possession of the ground, has, on liberal consideration, a claim to the sale Proceeds, if, with this aid, it can be again established with a prospect of success, but we desire that further aid from the Government may not be granted to it. No other public work in

---

<sup>69</sup> OIOC F/4/1902/81104. *Letter to the Honourable Sir James Rivett Carnac, Governor, the Humble Memorial of the Undersigned Inhabitants of Bombay, Petition of Certain Inhabitants of Bombay respecting the Appropriation of the Funds Realised by the Sale of the Bombay Theatre, Public Department, 1841.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> OIOC F/4/1902/81104. *Minute by the Honourable James Farish, 9 September 1840, Petition of Certain Inhabitants of Bombay Respecting the Appropriation of the Funds Realised by the Sale of the Bombay Theatre, Bombay Public Department 1841.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* My italics.

Bombay has any claim to the Balance arising from the proceeds of the sale.<sup>73</sup>

Following this success, the committee went further still, stressing that all previous communications from government contained an error in the sums- they calculated now that the surplus from the sale, along with 4 % rate of interest, meant that they were now owed Rs 27,379.<sup>74</sup> Mr Fawcett, the Chairman of the new Theatre Committee, submitted extensive plans for the new theatre and stressed the need for the full amount owing to be paid to the Committee, without which, the grand boxes, proscenium, saloon and stage machinery- that which would make for a 'respectable' theatre- could not be completed.

In 1843, the Court of Directors relented and agreed that the full amount should be paid to the Theatre Committee, allowing the construction to go ahead, and the theatre to open on Grant Road in the most current fashion.<sup>75</sup> The new committee raised another public subscription for the building's construction.<sup>76</sup> The Grant Road Theatre was finally opened in February 1846.<sup>77</sup> In her inaugural address at the opening, the new manager, Mrs Deacle (an English actress previously in residence at the Sans Souci) promised that the future programme would feature, 'Old wines made mellow and improved by age; New fruits, but late from the London stage.'<sup>78</sup>

The debates on the merits, or otherwise, of a public theatre for Bombay reflect the ways in which ideas about the composition of the categories of 'public'

---

<sup>73</sup> MSA General Department, Vol 96, No 721, Proceeding 112. *Extract of a letter from the Honourable the Court of Directors, 1 September 1841, 1842.*

<sup>74</sup> MSA General Department, Vol 96, No 721, Proceeding 112. *Letter to WR Morris, Secretary to Government General Department Bombay, from Mr Fawcett, Chairman Theatrical Committee, 14 February 1842.*

<sup>75</sup> MSA General Department, Vol 80, No 805, Proceeding 515. *Letter to E Montgomerie, Acting General Paymaster, From W Escombe, Secretary to Government, 24 June 1843.*

<sup>76</sup> *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, (Bombay: 1910), Vol III, 365.

<sup>77</sup> For a discussion on the spatial shifts in Bombay's cultural fabric and the Grant Road Theatre, see Hansen.

<sup>78</sup> Patil, 111.

and 'Society' had changed. The place of the theatre in Bombay colonial life in the early nineteenth century suggest the role this space played in creating Bombay as a 'respectable' city. However 'amateur' and ultimately unsuccessful, in its lifetime, the Bombay Theatre was held up as evidence of Bombay's advancing sophistication and its society's refinement. So useful was this distinction that throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Bombay Governors and East India Directors offered official support to promote this site of 'rational' pleasures. The theatre offered a shared social space where members of the self-designated group of 'Society' gathered, not simply to watch melodramas and farces, but to demonstrate their own respectability and benevolence.

The particular composition of Bombay 'Society' was defined by its cultural and social engagements. However, as the political climate of colonial India shifted, so too did its social one. In the twentieth century, Grant Road would become an epicenter for both theatre and cinema-goers, but with the sale of the Bombay Theatre, the official support for such forms of entertainment receded into the background.