



# theatre Seething Times in The Theatre

by Jean-Pierre Thibaudat

IN the fifties, directors like Roger Blin, Jean-Marie Serreau, Jacques Mauclair and Jean-Louis Barrault were on the look-out for new writing and, luckily, stumbled on the innovative work of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco or Jean Genet. Their aim was simple: to make these writers known. Their productions did good service to these plays, driving out a style of dramatic writing that had hardly changed since the 19th century. They served them with humility and defended them with pride.

A similar situation occurred in the nineteen sixties when Roger Planchon put on Arthur Adamov's bitter and lacerating plays (Paolo Paoli), when Marcel Maréchal savoured Jean Vauthier's theatrical work (Capitaine Bada) in which poetic language is exploited to its limits, and Roland Dubillard played in his own dreamlike yet comical works (La Maison d'os).

In the nineteen seventies and eighties, directors became the stars of the theatre, the contemporary playwright moving into the wings. It must be said, too, that after the formidable and exciting turmoil of the post-war years the "author phenomenon" lost its aura and its power. This did not prevent extraordinary projects like those of Armand Gatti, who wrote plays dealing with recent history or hotly debated issues (V comme Viet Nam).

Now the pendulum has swung the other way: for the past few years the writer has regained his rightful place (centre stage), his dignity — and thus many more plays bare being written. Symbolic proof of this is the way in which Patrice Chéreau's productions of Bernard-Marie Koltès' plays have evolved: here we see the production reign supreme (huge sets, work on the

image, etc.) the set designs at the Amandiers in Nanterre (near Paris) receding in favour of the actors' performance, interpreting a text on an almost bare stage.

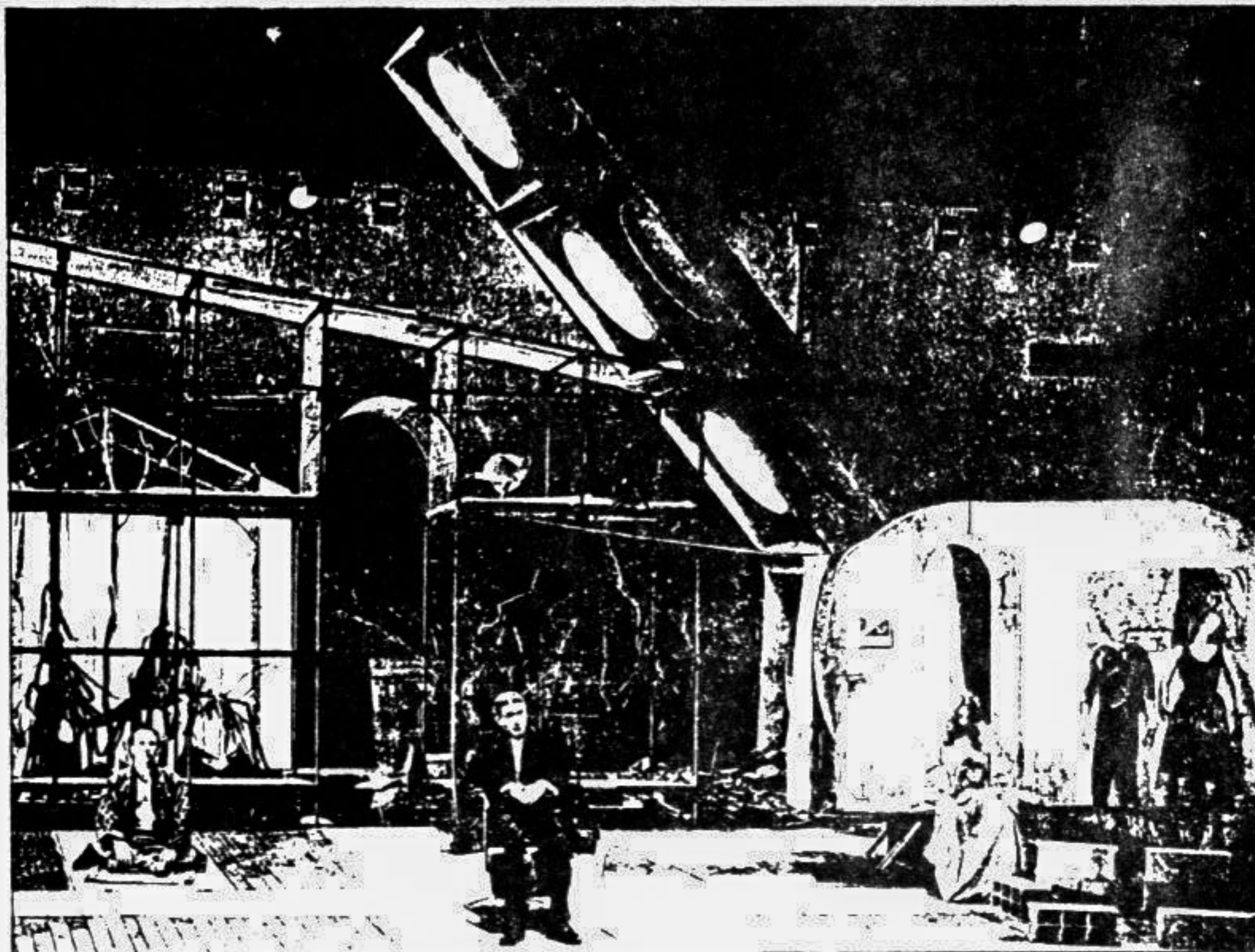
## From Text to Stage

A parallel development is that the author, who often used to keep well away from the theatre stage, is becoming more closely involved. While in the early nineteen forties Jean-Paul Sartre still adopted the traditional profile of the writer who "also" wrote plays, attended a few rehearsals but ventured little further into the heat of the theatrical kitchen, Albert Camus liked to direct that he wrote or adapted for the stage. This trend was to grow. Beckett, for example, ended up directing his own plays after having attended most of the rehearsals directed by his friend Roger Blin.

Nowadays, the new generations of authors are usually close to the boards. Either the writers are actors and directors too, like Catherine Anne, André Benedetto, Jean-Luc Lagarce, Olivier Py, Serge Valetti or Jean-Paul Wenzel; or they direct their own plays like Bruno Bayen, Michel Deutsch, Xavier Durringer, Didier-Georges Gabily or Valère Novarina; or they work closely with the theatre and the director.

The range of themes that interest authors today has broadened considerably. From plays which work the French language like clay such as Valère Novarina's *Le Drame de la vie*, to the lunatic and lively work of Copi, the mad Argentinian of Paris (*La Journée d'une réveuse*), with Yasmina Reza's conventional but distinctive *Art* somewhere in between, we find, in short, all the various paths explored by literature over the last century and which today cohabit, from the revolutionary to the

*At a time when the big names of the post-war period are being rediscovered — Beckett, Ionesco, Genet — the French theatre is teeming with new writers and directors in search of an audience.*



conservative.

This close relationship of writing and production is not without consequences, some of which may be unfortunate. Since the theatre does not have enormous budgets, authors are taking account of financial realities, to some extent consciously, in the writing process: plays with fewer characters — easier to put on because they're cheaper — are legion. Happily, however, many

authors are challenging this trend, either because they keep well away from the theatre world, like Michel Vinaver (*Iphigénie untel*), or because, as directors and authors what they do is powerful enough to carry all before them: as with Didier-Georges Gabily, who died suddenly two years ago (*Gibiers du temps*).

On the other hand, daily contact with actors may be a lively source of inspi-

ration (which is certainly nothing new, Molière wrote for his company) and a productive way of testing a first draft of the text. Here we find author-directors working with a company of loyal actors, as in the case of Olivier Py (*La Servante*) or the famous pairings of author and director who find each other as did Louis Jouvet and Jean Giraudoux in the not so distant past. Here too we find Jean-Christophe Bailly (*Pandora*) and Georges Lavaudant, Bernard Chartreux (*Vichy-Fictions*) and Jean-Pierre Vincent, Hélène Cixous (*La Ville parjure*) and Ariane Mnouchkine and, of course, Bernard-Marie Koltès (*Combat de nègre et de chiens*) and Patrice Chéreau. Writing is, more than ever before, in direct contact with the theatre.

Since the early nineteen eighties, there has been a concerted effort made to encourage the emergence of new plays and to stage them successfully: assistance for new work from the Ministry of Culture, various forms of aid from the Centre National des Lettres, a body subsidised by the State, and even "extra-mural" grants from la Villa Médicis. Nor should the establishments for which contemporary authors are their bread and butter be forgotten, such as the Théâtre Ouvert, the Centre des Ecritures Contemporaines de la Chartreuse at Villeneuve-les-Avignon [Modern Writing Centre] and the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris.

The author's best friends and most durable supporters are still the actors and the director who speak for him. In the director of the nineties we find the noble position of "servant of the text" as were their predecessors in the immediate post-war period. Moreover, some rather forgotten authors from those years, such as Roland Dubillard or Arthur Adamov, are coming back into

favour with young directors, who, furthermore, are taking a fresh look at Beckett, Genet or Robert Pinget. Director Claude Rigy, with his incandescent concentration on modern worm (not only that of Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute but also that of the German writer Botho Strauss, the English playwright Gregory Motton, etc.) is, for all this new generation, a model of the atrical truth.

It should be noted that the vast majority of productions from the repertoire of authors of these new generations have appeared on the many and varied stages of publicly owned theatres (subsidised), in the provinces as much as in Paris (while the movement in the nineteen fifties was Paris centred and primarily arose in privately owned theatres).

Finally, the theatre is no longer the insular world denounced not so long ago by Michel Vinaver (*Les Voisins*), himself a well-known author (put on by Roger Planchon, Antoine Vitez and Jacques Lassalle). In an age of computers and virtual reality, the theatre is once more becoming a bond and a living place, a community experience. It pays cash. Writers here talk about the world as it is and are forming a bridge with its roots: from the homeless to the wandering heroes of Greek mythology, is but a short step. The language is still an inexhaustible crucible. It even seems that the usual coolness of theatre managers to modern plays in retreating a little.

The enormous and well deserved success enjoyed by the plays of Bernard-Marie Koltès demonstrates, if such demonstration be needed, that young French playwrights have found their way and their voice. And their audience has recognised it.

# poetry Moniruzzaman — A Lyricist Par Excellence

by A Z M Haider

LYRICISM is one of the finest and the most sophisticated forms of poetic expression. Poetry as a literary species provides a larger canvas for expression of poetic experiences and emotions.

But lyricism as a poetic genre presents much shorter space for a poet to give vent to his ideas and emotions. He is required to compress his emotions to accommodate it in a shorter frame. It is an inordinately arduous exercise to constrict an emotional experience in a strictly shorter lyrical frame. Only a master mind like Tagore and Nazrul could do that with consummate skill without a parallel in the history of Bengali literature.

Nazrul's literary career spans over roughly 20 years and it was during such a short stretch of time that he produced as many as 4000 songs most of which are of such high lyrical excellence that he would have remained immortal if he had not written anything other than those exquisite songs. The rapturous melody of his love songs is so enchantingly sweet that it dies away in silence leaving its listeners still listening. Tagore's songs are of entirely different genus. His songs, whether they relate to romantic love or to spiritualism, are so sublime in tone and tenor that they ennoble minds of listeners.

The poets of the thirties, after Tagore and Nazrul, who appeared in the firmament of Bengali poetry were mostly professors of English literature. Jibananda Das, Bishnu Dey, Buddh Dev Basu, Shudhindranath Datta etc (all of them without exception were professors of English literature) were so deeply influenced by T S Eliot and W B Yeats, Bodelier, Rilke etc that they preferred writing poetry after modern European technique and tradition to lyricism. In fact, they left lyricism with lesser minds and that trend set by poets of the thirties is even today continuing in West Bengal.

But in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) major poets like Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Farruk Ahmed, Ahsan Habib Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, Gazi Mazharul Islam, Mohammed Rafiquzamman and above all Moniruzzaman have written soul-stirring lyrics. Moniruzzaman, who has a passion for lyricism, has a distinction of producing as many as 2000 songs many of which are of high lyrical excellence.

Mohammed Moniruzzaman is without doubt an important poet of Bangladesh. But as a lyricist he occupies the foremost position in the literary world of this country. The principal themes of his songs are deep patriotism,

abiding love for Bengali language, nature and amorous passion. One of his most popular songs, which expresses his firm and unflinching commitment to his motherland, is as follows

My heart is filled  
with the odour of my motherland  
I need nothing other than  
its soft green touches  
The melody of that land  
is only playing in the heart of my heart  
Golden panorama spread all over  
horizon  
ceaselessly caressing my heart  
My fresh dream is swinging in the air  
My voice always raises its echo  
My songs are only resounding  
hope of bright dawn n life.  
(English rendering by A Z M Haider)

This and numerous other exquisite songs he has composed present golden paddy fields, vast vacant expanse stretching to distant horizon flowing rivers, sylvan, surroundings of nature, singing larks returning to their nests, crimson glow of the setting sun, splendour of rainbow and the moon-lit night in such vivid details that they lead to the logical conclusion that one cannot write such elegant and intensely sweet songs on ones country unless one is passionately attached to it. The enchanting imageries he has deployed to describe the beauty the land of his love show that while composing those songs he has laid open his heart to it.

The songs he has composed on the language movement, love and nature are so enthralling that they fire imagination of listeners. One of his popular songs on the language movement, often played by Radio Bangladesh, is

Barkat, Salam's blood  
Tinged streets of Bengal  
That blood will not go in vain  
This is a solemn pledge of invincible Bengalees  
Brothers remain aflame in language and hope  
Mothers speak of dreams  
Darkness of despair will be dispelled  
Bengalee homes will turn into townships  
Eternally invulnerable and indomitable  
We represent hopes of martyred brothers  
We express for millions of heart  
We are, therefore, stalking hand in hand  
(English rendering by A Z M Haider)

The poet was an intermediate student when the language movement was sweeping the country. That fiery event

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that took the country by storm stirred the adolescent poet to the depth of his soul and the cried out in pride and indignation  
The language of my tongue  
is dearer than my life  
In life and dream, in joys and tears  
It is bright and beautiful  
A child mutters the word mother in this language  
My countrymen know name of this language  
In the voice of a poet language is truth  
sublime and immortal  
In eyes of masses image of this language  
keeps swinging  
and expressing hopes of millions of minds  
Lustre of the language lies in every home  
Dream of every mind marks one ardent  
The language is my greatest pride  
It is glorious and adorable  
(English rendering by A Z M Haider)

Moniruzzaman has inoculated his romantic love songs with such intense passion that they stir listeners to their roots. As a matter of fact, one cannot write such passionate love songs unless one is in love. Shakespears has an unknown dark lady to serve as the source of inspiration for his elegant sonnets pouring forth deep romantic emotion of his love-laden soul. It is not known if Moniruzzaman has any lady, dark or far, it arouse him to heights of such deeply amorous passion as expressed in his hundreds of love songs. In writing love songs he was greatly influenced by Nazrul Islam. But far from imitating Nazrul, he wrote his love songs in a style and technique distinctly different and refreshingly original.

His critics censure him for writing songs for commercial feature films. Indeed, he has done it without however compromising literary excellence of his songs. The two exquisite love songs presented below will exemplify the veracity of this assertion.

written in blood  
We are tied by the same bond  
Dont go away by untangling it  
All the melody of my heart  
I have dedicated to you

## event



An Auspicious Reunion: The French poet Baudelaire once said, "Only a poet understands a poet." Not always. At least not in our poetic milieu. The trinity who were in their 20s in post-partition time bubbling with the dream to construct a new poetic language that would put Bangladeshi literature to a symbolic foothold drifted from each other so far as to stop any verbal communications between them let alone seeing each other. The reason was un-poetic, you guessed right, our abominable political culture. The troika after a long 11 years came close to talking terms, dined together at a restaurant on December 11, 1998. The catalyst was a poet and the occasion was a reception given by Kabikantha in honour of the front-ranking Pakistani poet Ahmad Faraz (2nd from left). The stalwarts are Shamsur Rahman (2nd from right), Al Mahmud (3rd from right) and Fazal Shahabuddin (extreme right). Long live the friendship.