

**Noisy dialogues –  
some remarks on tablas and plastic**



## **Noisy dialogues – some remarks on tablas and plastic barrels**

”You have to come to India to play with us“, Sanjoy Ganguly told us after he had seen and heard a plastic barrel performance in the squatted house which is the home base of the Aktionstheatergruppe in Halle/Germany. One of the noisy performances that seem to make the walls of the old house shake and that warm you up even in cold and wet November.

The town of Halle is situated in a region in East Germany, where the radical change from something called communism to a capitalist economic system has caused the widespread closure of chemical plants and massive unemployment. There is great lack of work and perspectives, but not of empty plastic barrels from former industrial times. We had been playing and experimenting for years with the sound and vision of blue and black plastic barrels.

Sanjoy was on one of the various journeys he, Sima Ganguly and Jana Sanskriti made to Halle and Berlin. This night he was visibly moved and shaken by what he had heard and seen. He was convinced and subsequently convinced us that playing drums on blue and black plastic barrels was something that needed to be tried out at the Jana Sanskriti centre in Badu and that could add a very special note to the upcoming festival Muktheadhara III in Kolkata. Sanjoy’s enthusiasm is contagious, as some of the readers might have already experienced. There was no way not to do it. And a few months later what had sounded like a dream (or at least a wonderful, but slightly unrealistic idea) became reality.

Stop. Doesn’t this sound strange: to try to merge Jana Sanskriti’s wonderfully gentle and incredibly dynamic musical energy, Satya’s beautiful choir arrangements and Tapan’s flying fingers on the tabla – with the noisy and sometimes brute sounds of plastic barrels? Would this be possible?

It would. In November 2008 we<sup>1</sup> shared five memorable and incredibly dense workshop days with Jana Sanskriti activists in Girish Bhawan, the Jana Sanskriti main centre in Badu, close to Kolkata. Some of the musicians were members of the main forum theatre group, some were activists from rural West Bengal that could only come to Badu after being liberated from their harvesting duties. There was no common spoken language among the participants. Luckily, during parts of the workshop we had some Bengali-English-translation, but most of the communication was by music, rhythm, movement and the funny sign and whistle language that drum groups use when it is too loud to understand each others’ words.

Wonderful musical combinations were born out of this communication in Girish Bhawan: Brazilian-style Samba-Reggae and Afoxé grooves met songs and dances from Jana Sanskriti plays, Bengali folk songs were arranged with a noisy plastic barrel base and call-and-response-patterns for two tablas and sixteen barrels were developed.

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<sup>1</sup> I conducted the workshop together with Anke Zimpel and Peter Igelmund from Aktionstheatergruppe Halle.

“Abad badao, phashal pholao bachar asha teh“ (cultivate your land, grow your own food to fulfill the hope of survival) is the beginning of the famous farmers’ anthem that Jana Sanskriti has been singing for years. Together we arranged it for voices, tablas and plastic barrels, it became the opening and closing song of the six musical performances that the group had during the days of Muktaadhara III.<sup>2</sup> One of the performances was on a lively street corner in the centre of Kolkata, where our barrel sounds competed with the noise of hundreds of car and rickshaw horns. We had been invited to contribute to a protest rally against the Germany-based corporation Metro Cash & Carry, which is destroying local Bengali markets with its aggressive marketing strategies. Acting and activism, as Sanjoy would say.

In the last 25 years Jana Sanskriti has shown the huge potentials of combining acting and activism: by playing and spreading forum theatre, the group has initiated grass-roots emancipation and community-organizing processes on a large scale. It has translated Augusto Boal’s ideas and practice into an Indian context, embedding them deeply into the struggles of social movements for a radical transformation of local and global realities. Jana Sanskriti has created an extraordinary aesthetics, new to forum theatre and to theatre in general, a beautiful combination of dance, song and acting. And by travelling the world, the group has impressed and inspired numerous people and groups and has invited them to take part in a different form of globalization.

Many of those aspects were present in our musical encounters in Girish Bhavan in November and December 2008. Having been initially inspired by Jana Sanskriti, we experienced a process of mutual inspiration and collective creativity. Human connection creates aesthetics, as Sanjoy says. Our starting point was a pile of blue and black plastic barrels<sup>3</sup>, the rest was a deeply human encounter, shared musical feelings and a lot of connection and communication. Together we created a soundtrack for our very own form of globalization. And no matter if people spoke the same verbal language or not: there was dialogue. Even between tablas and noisy plastic barrels.

Happy birthday, Jana Sanskriti!

Till Baumann

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<sup>2</sup> It is not easy to write about how music sounds, it has to be heard and seen. Some of it can be found on youtube: check out the key words „Jana Sanskriti“, „plastic barrels“, „farmers’ anthem“ and „air shehnai“. Some people might have had the opportunity to see us play together at the closing party of the World Forum Theatre Festival in Graz, Austria, in November 2009, this time even more global: with musicians from CTO-Rio.

<sup>3</sup> By the way: one of the most practical aspects of blue and black plastic barrels is that you find them almost everywhere in the world.





photos: Jana Sanskriti and Till Baumann