

Understanding Theatre: A Study of Actors in Assam

(Synopsis)

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1. Introduction and Rationale of the Study

Theatre is a performing art that portrays imagination or real-life events in front of a live audience using actors, musicians, and dancers in a specific space, often a stage. Beyond entertainment, theatre is a significant part of the cultural economy, involving immaterial labour and contributing to artistic production. Recognised as a driver of sustainable development, the 2010 Millennium Development Goal Summit emphasised culture's capacity to generate social, economic, and environmental impact. With its rich cultural heritage, India has preserved its traditions through various forms, including theatre, which reflects the country's culture, fosters self-expression, and serves as a source of entertainment.

The sociological significance of theatre lies in its historical role as a reflection of societal values, norms, and conflicts. Theatre transcends its entertainment value, acting as a mirror to the complexities of human social life. It provides a platform where communities explore collective identities, confront social issues, and negotiate meanings. By allowing individuals to embody different perspectives and emotions, theatre fosters empathy and understanding of the human experience. This immersive process enables actors to bring to life subjective experiences that resonate with audiences, highlighting and sometimes subverting the norms governing social interactions. Thus, the stage serves as a microcosm of society, creating a shared space for reflection and meaning-making. This process reveals underlying social structures, enhancing our understanding of the social world.

Examining theatre through a sociological lens provides insights into how it shapes and is shaped by cultural, economic, and political forces. This understanding connects individuals and communities to the diverse traditions of Indian theatre, such as "Jatra" and "Baul" in Bengal, "Yatra" in Odisha, "Tamasha" in Maharashtra, "Nautanki" and "Ramleela" in North India, and "Ankiya Naat/Bhaona" in Assam (Konwar, 2016). These traditions exemplify the intricate tapestry of India's cultural heritage and the evolving role of theatre in society.

1.1 Research Problem

The professional landscape of theatre is multifaceted, encompassing acting, scriptwriting, direction, production, technical crew, costume designing, and set designing. Among these, theatre acting stands out as a profession that requires not only the development of craft but also profound emotional engagement. Actors must navigate the complexities of artistic livelihoods while sustaining emotions to bring their roles to life. This process can have significant physical and emotional consequences. Furthermore, the theatre industry is shaped

by gender dynamics that influence actors' experiences, opportunities, and approaches to their work.

This study addresses these intertwined aspects, focusing on the professional demands, livelihoods, emotional labour, and gender dynamics within the theatre industry. It aims to:

- a) determine the nature of work in theatre and investigate the dimensions of acting as a profession,
- b) interpret how stage actors create emotions to inhabit roles and examine the emotional consequences of this process, and
- c) analyse gender dynamics to understand how they influence the experiences of actors in the theatre industry.

This research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of theatre as a profession and its sociological implications, particularly within the Indian context.

1.2 Indian Theatre

Indian theatre has a rich history, evolving through classical, traditional, and modern periods. The classical period was dominated by the *Natyashastra* and Sanskrit dramas, emphasising physicality and movement. The traditional period saw the rise of regional dialects, improvisation, and oral storytelling. The modern period was influenced by Western theatre, introducing realism, proscenium stages, and commercialisation.

1.2.1 Theatre in Assam

Assam has three main forms of theatre:

- **Ankiya Naat/Bhaona:** Traditional, religious theatre used to promote Neo-Vaishnavism. Performed in *Sattras* (religious institutions) and often features amateur actors with a strong cultural and social attachment to the art form.
- **Mobile Theatre (Bhramyomaan):** Commercial theatre performed on makeshift stages, emphasising entertainment and often adapting Western stories. It has a wide reach and employs many artists but can prioritise commercial success over artistic quality.
- **Contemporary Assamese Theatre:** Influenced by Western theatre, often performed on proscenium stages and dealing with secular themes. It is popular in urban areas and emphasises realistic portrayals of characters and situations.

1.3 Theatre as Work

Theatre is part of the cultural and creative industries. It involves emotional labour, requiring actors to manage and regulate their feelings to meet professional demands. Acting also has physical demands, including agility, stamina, along with body movements and vocal projection. It involves immaterial labour, producing cultural content, and shaping artistic standards. Actors are skilled emotional managers who use their voice, body, and feelings to portray characters, making their work process unique compared to other professions.

1.4 Review of Extant Literature

Extensive studies on creative livelihoods, emotional labour, and gender in theatre have been conducted to identify existing research and gaps, particularly in the context of India and Assam. These reviews were instrumental in formulating research questions and refining the study's focus, emphasising critical paradigms across these areas.

The creative sector contributes significantly to the global economy (UNCTAD, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). Despite this, individuals in creative industries, including theatre, often struggle with financial instability. Research highlights that many artists rely on supplementary non-art-related jobs to make ends meet due to irregular payments and limited opportunities within the artistic labour market (TBR's Creative & Cultural Team, 2018). Additionally, the precarious nature of artistic work, characterised by high costs and low pay, makes economic survival particularly challenging for young and emerging artists, as explored by Alper and Wassall (2006) and Menger (1999). Government policies and schemes designed to support the creative sector have often fallen short in providing adequate recognition or assistance, with Devi (2016) highlighting this gap in the context of Assam. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerabilities of creative livelihoods, severely disrupting the theatre industry and forcing many artists to seek alternative income sources. This period underscored the need for robust government support and structural reforms, as noted by Fitzgibbon (2020), Langston (2022), and Pietrzak-Franger et al. (2023).

The emotional labour involved in acting has been a significant area of scholarly interest, particularly its impact on actors' personal and professional lives. Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labour, describing how actors regulate their emotions to convincingly portray characters. Konijn (2001) expanded this by identifying "task emotions," which actors experience during performances. Authenticity in acting often requires actors to draw on personal experiences, blurring the lines between their own emotions and those of their

characters, as observed by Bergman Blix (2010). The process of managing and controlling emotions, both during rehearsals and live performances, demands specialised techniques (MacDonald & Sirianni, 1996). Orzechowicz (2008) highlighted the role of rehearsals in refining emotional management skills. Actors employ surface acting, where they modify outward expressions, and deep acting, where they internalise emotions to embody their roles (Hochschild, 1983). While these techniques can enhance performances, they also carry psychological implications. Deep acting, in particular, can impact the identities of the actors, stress levels, and sense of authenticity, as discussed by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993).

Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping theatrical performances and the experiences of actors. Butler's (1988, 2006) conceptualisation of gender as a performative act challenges traditional notions of fixed gender identities, highlighting the socially constructed nature of gender roles. Historically, theatre has reflected societal gender inequalities, with women being excluded from many traditions and opportunities, as explored by Thomas (2017), Singh (2010), and Sarma and Dutta (2009). The male gaze, as articulated by Berger (1972) and Brand (2007), continues to influence the portrayal of women in theatre, often reinforcing traditional roles and limiting opportunities for female actors. Queer representation in theatre also faces challenges, with individuals often subject to stereotypical portrayals and marginalisation. Hazarika (2022) asserts the need for greater inclusivity and authentic representation of queer identities in theatre. Furthermore, the body plays a crucial role in how actors express gender on stage, with cultural norms and expectations shaping these portrayals, as discussed by Bordo (1993, 1999) and Shilling (2003). Power dynamics within the theatre industry, often dominated by male leadership, further influence gender representation and opportunities for women and queer actors, as explored through Foucault's (1977, 1978) framework.

While a substantive body of knowledge exists in these areas, gaps remain, particularly in the Indian and Assamese contexts. Existing literature highlights the need for more nuanced, region-specific studies to address these gaps and contribute to the evolving discourse on creative livelihoods, emotional labour, and gender in theatre.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of the study:

- To determine the nature of theatre work and investigate the various dimensions of acting as a profession.
- To interpret how actors create emotions for their roles and analyse the emotional consequences of this work.
- To examine the gender dynamics and changing trends within the theatre industry.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by focusing on the subjective experiences of theatre artists in Assam, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. By providing a comprehensive understanding of how actors navigate the challenges and complexities of their profession, the research offers valuable insights into the interconnected personal and professional dimensions of their work. The study's methodological approach, which combines phenomenology and ethnomethodology, provides a robust framework for examining both individual lived experiences and the broader social structures shaping theatre practices. Furthermore, the focus on gender dynamics and the evolving trends within the theatre industry contributes to the discourse on the changing landscape of theatre, offering new perspectives on its implications for actors and the industry as a whole.

2. Methodology

2.1 Nature of Research

This research explores theatre artists' perceptions of their work, focusing on their subjective experiences and the multifaceted nature of their creative livelihoods. Using a qualitative methodology rooted in phenomenology and ethnomethodology, it examines how artists navigate the complexities of their profession through their interactions with social environments, including audience and community demands. Drawing on ethnographic principles and employing thick descriptions, the study captures the lived experiences of Assamese theatre artists through detailed interviews and observational analyses. Integrating these approaches provides a nuanced understanding of the social processes, cultural contexts, and emotional dimensions shaping the professional lives of the theatre artists.

2.2 Sampling

This study employed snowball sampling to select participants, beginning with a small group of theatre artists and expanding through their professional networks. The sample

consisted of 25 theatre artists from Assam, representing diverse demographics, including novice and semi-professional actors. The group was inclusive, comprising 14 females, 9 males, and 2 queer individuals as participants, ensuring varied perspectives on theatre practices and experiences.

2.3 Timeline and Study Site

The data collection process spanned three years, from 2021 to 2023, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the theatre industry in Assam. The study was conducted primarily in Guwahati, Assam, with data gathered through interviews and observations in various informal and formal settings, such as restaurants, rehearsal spaces, and workplaces.

2.4 Primary Source of Data Collection

The study relied on qualitative data collection methods. In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with participants to delve into their perceptions, experiences, and challenges within the theatre industry. Additionally, observational techniques were employed to document rehearsals and performances across diverse theatre forms, including proscenium plays, mobile theatre, and Bhaona. This provided firsthand insights into the actors' work environments and artistic practices.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns and themes within qualitative data. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the complex realities faced by theatre artists in Assam.

2.6 Ethical Concerns

Ethical considerations were integral to this research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity and protect participants' identities. Necessary permissions were secured for audio recordings and photographs during interviews and observations, ensuring that the research adhered to ethical standards at every stage.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Theatre Actors and Their Creative Livelihoods

3.1.1 Nature of Work

Theatre in Assam encompasses diverse roles, including actors, directors, and producers, across various settings such as traditional venues, mobile theatres, and modern auditoriums. The state's theatre industry primarily revolves around three forms: ankiya naat/bhaona, mobile theatre (bhramyomaan), and modern contemporary Assamese theatre, each characterised by distinct traits. Bhaona, deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, often involves amateur performers and reflects traditional values. Mobile theatre, on the other hand, emphasises entertainment and commercial viability, frequently attracting established film actors. Modern Assamese theatre focuses on relatable storytelling and addresses a broad spectrum of themes. Employment patterns in theatre vary widely, with actors working as freelancers, under contracts with repertory companies, or as part of permanent theatre groups. While repertory companies offer job stability, they restrict opportunities outside the organisation. Freelancing provides greater flexibility but often comes with income instability. Theatre work is also hierarchical, with producers and directors shaping the artistic vision and actors operating within this structured framework.

3.1.2 Training and Rehearsals

Actors acquire their skills through a combination of formal education, practical training, and on-the-job experiences. Rehearsals play a pivotal role in honing their craft, though practices differ across theatre forms. For instance, mobile theatre often employs experienced performers, whereas Bhaona relies heavily on amateur actors. Continuous learning is integral to an actor's growth, achieved through performances, workshops, and mentorship programs that focus on language, movement, and emotional depth.

3.1.3 Workplace

The work environments for theatre actors vary significantly, ranging from traditional religious spaces (Bhaona) to temporary stages (mobile theatre) and permanent venues (modern theatre). These spaces often lack essential amenities such as hygienic restrooms, adequate green rooms, and safety measures, which are particularly concerning for female actors. Additionally, long working hours and the risk of burnout are common challenges faced by artists.

3.1.4 Wage Determination and Social Security

Income disparities are pronounced within Assam's theatre industry. While artists employed in repertory companies or by the Ministry of Culture receive fixed salaries, freelancers face irregular and unpredictable income. Newcomers often work for minimal pay or none at all to gain experience. Payment delays and discrepancies are prevalent, with mobile theatre prioritising higher wages for popular actors but undercompensating others. In contrast, Bhaona actors often perform without financial motivations, driven by cultural or spiritual commitments. Ticket sales play a vital role in sustaining theatre financially, with pricing and promotional strategies differing across forms. Mobile theatre relies heavily on marketing, while modern theatre depends on word-of-mouth. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated financial instability in the sector, forcing many artists to seek alternative income sources. Although some government support was available, its reach and effectiveness were limited.

3.1.5 Schemes and Policies

Various government schemes, such as scholarships, grants, and financial aid programs, aim to support theatre artists, but these are often underutilised due to limited awareness and accessibility. State-level initiatives in Assam, such as the Artiste Welfare Fund and Silpi Pension, provide some support but are insufficient to address the broader challenges faced by artists. During the COVID-19 pandemic, additional measures like online programmes and financial assistance were introduced, yet many artists remained unaware of these initiatives, reducing their impact.

3.1.6 Future Plans

Despite their passion for theatre, many actors face challenges in pursuing it as a full-time career due to financial instability, limited opportunities, and the absence of social security. Networking plays a crucial role in securing jobs, but it can also perpetuate favouritism and inequality. The lack of organisational structures and robust support systems further complicates the ability of theatre artists to build financial resilience and long-term career plans. While actors' unions have proven effective globally, their influence in India, particularly in Assam, remains limited. This leaves theatre artists with fewer avenues to address grievances or advocate for improved working conditions, underscoring the need for stronger union representation and industry support mechanisms.

3.2 The Presentation of Emotions on Stage

3.2.1 Stage Acting

Bringing characters to life on stage requires a combination of preparation, authenticity, and technical skill. Actors dedicate significant effort to theoretical study, research, and rehearsals to embody their roles convincingly. Authentic acting appears effortless and spontaneous, as performers connect deeply with their characters and the audience. This process combines physical and vocal expression to convey emotional depth, making the characters believable.

3.2.1.1 Stage Actors and Their Character Roles

Actors often immerse themselves deeply in their characters, sometimes blurring the boundaries between their own identities and the roles they portray. To enhance their performance, many actors create detailed backstories for their characters, delving into their emotional lives and motivations. Techniques like method acting involve drawing on personal experiences and memories to evoke genuine emotions, allowing actors to connect with their roles on a profound level.

3.2.2 Acting Work: Embodiment and Emotional Labour

Acting requires significant emotional labour, as performers regulate their emotions to meet the demands of their roles and engage the audience effectively. Techniques such as Stanislavski's method acting stress on full immersion in a character, while approaches like Diderot's accentuate observing and replicating emotions without personal involvement. Brecht's epic theatre, meanwhile, encourages maintaining a critical distance from the character. Actors use both surface acting, which involves managing outward expressions, and deep acting, which engages inner feelings to enhance their portrayal. Rehearsals play a crucial role in helping actors develop emotional habits, refine their characters, and build relationships with other characters in the play.

3.2.2.1 Application of Emotional Labour

The concept of emotional labour is not unique to acting but also applies to service industries, where individuals manage emotions to satisfy others. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis uses theatre as a metaphor for life, exploring impression management and performance. Hochschild critiques Goffman by highlighting the effort required in deep acting, where personal memories and experiences are used to evoke emotions. Actors often balance

surface and deep acting, using techniques such as habituation (repeated practice), double agency (observing and managing simultaneously), and decoupling (separating personal and professional emotions).

3.2.2.2 Rehearsal Space

Rehearsal spaces serve as crucial environments where actors can practice, experiment, and develop their characters in a safe and collaborative setting. These spaces foster interaction between actors and directors, enabling them to explore character relationships and the thematic depth of the play. While rehearsals can be emotionally demanding, they also create a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among performers.

3.2.3 Professionalisation of Emotions

Actors must maintain control over their emotions while portraying them, balancing authenticity with the demands of the performance. Through techniques like decoupling, they separate their personal feelings from their characters' emotions, creating a clear boundary between professional and personal identities. Repeated practice often leads to habituation, allowing actors to convincingly portray emotions even when not feeling them internally. However, this process can blur the boundaries between self and character, potentially causing emotional exhaustion and identity confusion.

3.2.4 Blurred Bounds of 'Work'

The immersive nature of acting often blurs the lines between work and personal identity. By embodying characters deeply, actors connect with their emotions and motivations, which can lead to psychological implications such as shifts in self-perception and emotional strain. The intense focus on a role can result in lingering character traits or emotions even after the performance ends.

3.2.4.1 Psychological Implications of Theatre Acting: Shifting Self-Identity

Acting involves profound identity transformation, as performers adopt and embody various characters. This process can lead to emotional exhaustion, identity confusion, and psychological strain. Traits and emotions from a role may persist beyond the stage, prompting actors to reflect on their own identities. This heightened self-awareness can be both a challenge and an opportunity for personal growth.

3.2.4.2 Body and Physical Toll

The physical demands of theatre acting are significant, requiring performers to use their bodies to express emotions and execute actions. The emotional labour involved in acting often translates into physical strain, including tension and fatigue. Actors undergo transformative practices to adapt their bodies and voices to their characters, which can be physically and emotionally taxing.

3.2.4.3 Social Perceptions and Expectations

Theatre acting is accompanied by unique social pressures, including societal scrutiny and judgment. Female actors, in particular, may face criticism for their career choices and unconventional working hours. The irregular and demanding nature of the profession often disrupts work-life balance, straining personal relationships. Familial expectations can further compound these challenges, as families may struggle to understand or support the demands of an acting career.

3.3 Gendering the Theatre

3.3.1 Gender and Theatre

Gender profoundly influences the world of theatre, shaping characters, narratives, actors' approaches, and audience perceptions. Female actors often face distinct challenges, including scrutiny over their appearance and adherence to societal norms of femininity. The themes explored in plays are also influenced by gender, with issues of masculinity, femininity, and gender identity frequently taking centre stage. Audience perceptions of performances are shaped by gendered expectations, further underscoring its impact on theatre.

3.3.1.1 Gender Representation in Theatre

Historically, women faced exclusion from performing on stage in many cultures, and gender roles were rigidly defined. In traditional Indian theatre, women's roles were often limited to familial archetypes like daughters, wives, or mothers, reflecting patriarchal norms. Similarly, in classical Western theatre, female characters were frequently portrayed as docile and subservient. Over time, these portrayals evolved, and contemporary Indian theatre now challenges traditional gender roles, offering more nuanced representations. The feminist theatre movement has played a pivotal role in amplifying women's voices and addressing gender stereotypes in storytelling.

3.3.1.2 Gender Reversal in Theatre

Cross-gender casting has a long history, initially emerging from the exclusion of women from performing. While gender reversal became less common with the inclusion of women in modern theatre, it remains a powerful tool for challenging gender norms and exploring diverse identities. Women occasionally take on male roles, showcasing their versatility and pushing the boundaries of traditional gendered expectations in theatre.

3.3.1.3 Evolution in the Portrayal of Women in Theatre

The 19th and 20th centuries marked a significant increase in women's participation in theatre, both as performers and creators. Contemporary Indian theatre is at the forefront of challenging stereotypes, presenting women in multifaceted and empowered roles. Women playwrights and directors continue to create works that address issues such as gender, sexuality, and identity, broadening the scope of representation in theatre.

3.3.2 Power Relations and Hierarchy

In theatre, power is not concentrated in individuals but exists within a network of relationships and practices, as theorised by Foucault. Directors often hold significant influence, shaping actors' performances and representations of gender. However, actors can challenge and negotiate this authority, contributing their creativity to productions. While directors play a pivotal role in portraying gender roles on stage, ethical considerations are vital, particularly in casting decisions involving minors.

3.3.2.1 Women in Leadership Roles in Theatre

Women remain underrepresented in leadership roles such as playwrights, directors, and producers. Despite this, female leaders bring unique perspectives, fostering collaboration and challenging traditional norms. However, women in these positions often face challenges, including sexism, limited support, and the struggle to balance personal and professional commitments.

3.3.3 Gender and Sexuality in Theatre Work

Theatre serves as a platform where gender is performed and shaped by cultural norms, echoing Butler's theory of performativity. The body plays a central role in how gender is performed and perceived, with male actors often expected to exude strength while female actors face pressures related to beauty standards and traditional femininity. Female performers

are particularly vulnerable to objectification and sexualisation, which can lead to discomfort and exploitation.

3.3.3.1 Role of the Body in Shaping Gendered Performances

The body is a powerful tool for communication in theatre, but its representation is often shaped by gender norms. Male actors may be expected to embody power and control, while female actors are subjected to beauty standards and portrayals of vulnerability. Women's bodies are sometimes objectified or depicted as sites of violence, reflecting societal biases. Actors remain highly conscious of their physical presence on stage, managing the physical and emotional demands of their roles while contending with societal expectations.

3.3.3.2 Gendered Vulnerability: Objectification and Sexualisation

Directors have a responsibility to create a safe and inclusive environment, but power imbalances sometimes result in the objectification or sexualisation of actors, particularly women. Instances of sexual harassment highlight the vulnerability of female actors in the industry. Acknowledging and respecting the agency of female performers is essential for fostering an equitable theatre environment that prioritises empowerment and safety.

3.3.4 Staging Identity: Queer Actors in Theatre

Queer actors face unique challenges, including underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayals. Many are hesitant to disclose their identities due to fear of stigma, discrimination, or professional repercussions. Safety concerns and hostile working environments further exacerbate these issues. The lack of openly queer role models can lead to feelings of isolation for aspiring queer performers. Despite these challenges, queer actors bring valuable perspectives that enrich the theatre landscape, and their inclusion is vital for fostering diversity and representation.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Dynamics of Theatre Work

Theatre in Assam is a vibrant and multifaceted industry, encompassing diverse forms such as *Ankiya Naat/Bhaona*, Mobile Theatre, and Contemporary Assamese Theatre. These forms reflect the dynamic and collaborative nature of the profession, with each having unique cultural and artistic significance. Actors' perceptions of theatre work vary across these forms, shaped by factors such as religious sentiments, economic motives, and the pursuit of

entertainment value. Rehearsal processes are central to the craft, differing significantly across the various types of theatre. Actors acquire their skills through a combination of formal education and hands-on practical training, emphasising the need for continuous learning in this ever-evolving field.

Despite the artistic fulfilment that theatre offers, actors face numerous workplace challenges, including inadequate access to basic necessities, long working hours, and unsafe conditions. Income disparities are another significant concern, with freelancers experiencing greater financial uncertainty and newcomers often working for little or no pay. The financial sustainability of theatre productions largely depends on ticket sales and promotional strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted the industry, leading to widespread job losses, financial hardship, and a pressing need for adaptation to survive the crisis.

4.2 The Actor's Journey Through Theatre

The journey of an actor involves a profound engagement with characters, requiring emotional labour, physicality, and a deep understanding of the human condition. The process of embodying characters is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally demanding, with actors employing various techniques, such as surface acting and deep acting, to connect with their roles and the audience. Rehearsals play a critical role in this journey, helping actors build emotional depth, alleviate performance anxiety, and foster camaraderie with their peers.

However, the immersive nature of acting can blur the boundaries between an actor's identity and their character, posing psychological challenges and making it difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Furthermore, acting takes a physical and emotional toll, as performers navigate societal expectations, manage body consciousness, and contend with objectification and vulnerability. The ability to manage these demands is crucial for sustaining a career in theatre while preserving personal well-being.

The journey of an actor involves a profound engagement with characters, demanding emotional labour, physicality, and a deep understanding of the human condition. Hochschild's concept of emotional labour aligns closely with this process, as actors regulate emotions through the surface and deep acting to embody their roles authentically. Rehearsals play a critical role in helping actors develop emotional depth and camaraderie, enabling them to internalise techniques that enhance authenticity. As noted by Konijn, actors experience "task emotions" like tension and excitement, distinct from their characters' emotions, underscoring the psychological complexity of balancing personal feelings with professional demands.

This dynamic aligns with theories of impression management and dramaturgy, emphasising the interplay between backstage authenticity and front-stage performance. Beyond individual efforts, collective emotional labour, suggested by Watson et al, contributes to crafting relational atmospheres among cast, crew, and audiences. Additionally, aesthetic labour, including body management and navigating societal expectations, adds to the physical and emotional toll actors endure. These theoretical insights reveal the challenges of maintaining well-being while performing emotionally and physically demanding roles, highlighting the intricate and often overlooked labour that sustains the art of acting.

4.3 Gender Constructs and Power Structures in Theatre

Gender plays a significant role in shaping theatre, influencing everything from character development and narratives to actors' approaches and audience perceptions. While the portrayal of gender in theatre has evolved over time, challenges persist, especially for female and queer actors. Historically rooted in patriarchal norms, theatre often marginalised women and queer identities, perpetuating stereotypes and limiting representation. Contemporary efforts have brought more diversity to the stage, but systemic biases remain.

Power dynamics in the theatre industry are often unequal, favouring cisgender males and limiting opportunities for women and queer performers. This imbalance aligns with Butler's concept of gender performativity, which helps analyse how heteronormative norms are reinforced within theatre, categorising queerness as aberrant or abnormal. Directors hold significant authority in shaping gender representation and influencing the performances of the actors, making their role pivotal in fostering inclusivity and challenging stereotypes. Female and queer actors continue to face unique challenges, such as underrepresentation, typecasting, and discrimination, as well as safety concerns and a lack of supportive networks. Foucault's conceptualisation of power as dispersed and enacted through societal norms highlights the structural inequalities that restrict opportunities for women and queer performers. Simultaneously, Butler's theory of gender performativity aligns with the portrayal of actors on stage, as they embody and challenge societal norms through their performances.

The body remains central to the performance of gender in theatre, with cultural norms and expectations dictating how actors present themselves physically. The centrality of the body in theatre, as theorised by Bordo and Shilling, reflects societal norms dictating physical presentation and gendered behaviour, reinforcing expectations of femininity and masculinity. Female performers are particularly pressured to conform to beauty standards, facing

objectification and vulnerability in their roles, which Foucault would view as an extension of societal surveillance and power dynamics. These dynamics and findings highlight the ongoing need for systemic change to create a theatre environment that values inclusivity, equity, and the empowerment of all actors, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

Theatre stands out as a unique and powerful art form, blending immediacy, interaction, and collaborative storytelling. Its ability to reflect society, provoke thought, and evoke emotions makes it an essential medium of expression. However, theatre actors face a range of challenges that distinguish their profession. These include the intense emotional labour required to embody characters, the physical demands of performances, job insecurity, and often difficult working conditions.

Gender dynamics and ethical concerns are pressing issues within the theatre industry. Gender inequality, instances of sexual harassment, and the ethical considerations around the portrayal of sensitive topics demand urgent attention. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating a fair, safe, and empowering environment for all theatre practitioners. Furthermore, the industry would benefit significantly from enhanced support systems, greater collaboration among stakeholders, and innovative promotional strategies to ensure its sustainability and inclusivity in the face of evolving challenges.

4.5 Contributions to Knowledge

This research enriches the understanding of theatre labour, particularly the emotional and psychological intricacies involved in acting. By shedding light on the complex processes of theatre work, it provides valuable insights into the experiences of actors and the unique demands of their profession. The study also delves into gender dynamics and power structures within the theatre industry, contributing to broader conversations on gender equality and representation in the arts.

Additionally, this research bridges the gap between performance and academia by emphasising their interdependence. Institutions like the Majuli University of Culture play a pivotal role in merging theoretical knowledge with practical applications, fostering a holistic approach to theatre education and practice. This integration is vital for nurturing a new generation of performers and theatre professionals.

4.5.1 Practical Implications

The findings hold significant practical value for various stakeholders in the theatre ecosystem. For practitioners, policymakers, and educators, it offers a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the industry. Promoting inclusivity is a key takeaway, as the research advocates for a supportive environment for all actors, particularly women and queer individuals.

Moreover, the study highlights the potential of integrating cultural tourism with theatre to enhance the visibility and economic sustainability of local performances. Collaboration between academic institutions and theatre practitioners can also lead to the development of more robust training programs and research initiatives, fostering innovation and excellence in the field.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to fieldwork and data collection, restricting the scope and depth of the research. Additionally, the regional focus on Assam limits the generalisability of the findings to other regions and cultural contexts.

Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theatre industry. Expanding the sample size and including other theatre professionals, such as directors and playwrights, could offer a broader perspective. Furthermore, comparative studies across different regions and cultural settings would enrich the discourse, illuminating the diverse dynamics of theatre practices worldwide. Such efforts would contribute to building a more inclusive and sustainable theatre landscape.

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