

Kathakali

The dance-drama tradition of *Kathakali* has been a living theatrical form since the sixteenth century (Zaririlli, 2000). It originated in the south-western state of Kerala, India. Over the centuries, it has developed from a religious genre performed at temples into a popular secular stage genre. Though many historical musical genres exist through preservation, *Kathakali* is a thriving form that is still growing and changing. New works continue to be produced within the genre.

According to Arnold (2000), *Kathakali* combines five different forms of Indian arts: *nrtta* (pure dance), *natya* (codified gesture), *sahitya* (poetic text interpretation), *sangita* (Karnatik music), and *cittram* (pictorial aspects). The traditional subjects and story lines of the genre center on mythological gods and creatures, regional heroes, and saints. They fall into three main character types: *satvik* is the divine or noble hero, *rajasik* is a greedy or passionate character, and *tamasik* is the evil villain (Arnold, 2000). Iyer (1955) describes the symbolism found within the genre, such as the stage representing the world in which these magnificent characters interact. A lamp that is placed on the stage represents the moon and sun while the curtain represents the darkness that divides the two worlds.

I had the pleasure of attending a lecture and demonstration on this unique theatrical genre. Having read about the history and practice of *Kathakali* did little to truly prepare me for the experience. Though I tried to enter with no expectations or preconceived ideas, I believed I had an understanding. The pre-lecture confirmed many of my readings and thoughts. However, when the demonstration began, my notions and understandings of *Kathakali* were completely

erased. What I experienced in the performance was very different from the technical aspects I was prepared for.

Sense of Space

The books and readings on *Kathakali* discussed the elaborate costumes and makeup the performers spend hours preparing. They also described the mythological subjects, characters, and story lines of the genre. These descriptions meant nothing as I first laid eyes on the performer in such an intimate setting. To say that the costume and makeup were elaborate is insufficient. The figure before me was no longer a man or performer; he truly took on the persona of the mythological creature of the story. The carefully designed costume transformed the performer and made the character come to life.

To portray this mythological demoness, the costume made the performer appear larger than life. The wide and voluminous skirt and the thickly layered top added a significant amount of “space” to the character, especially in such an intimate setting. The headdress added extreme height to the character, extending the space upward. The performer also wore metal finger attachments that elongated the fingers several inches. Again, this added to the size of the character and the amount of space she was able to occupy. I believe this sense of space is the basis of the overwhelming effect of the costume and performer in appearing mythical.

In addition to the sheer size of the costume, the makeup also served to enhance the sense of space. The black makeup around the eyes extended their area outwards and upwards. The makeup on the mouth made the lips appear large and full, exacting the most volume possible. The makeup also carefully blended the face into the headdress by detailing hair that was not truly there. This blending helped to extend the facial area and its sense of space.

Creating this sense of space was carried beyond the use of costume and makeup. Many of the performer's movements added volume to the character. Though books on *Kathakali* describe the prescribed hand gestures and footwork used by the performers, they do not capture how they play into the character's persona. One stance the character regularly took consisted of extending the legs outward and bending the knees so that the upper thighs were parallel with the ground. This wide stance extended the already voluminous skirt outwards allowing the character to occupy more space and have a grander presence.

Most of the hand gestures were extended away from the body utilizing the entire arm to occupy the space. Even forward hand movements still had an outward shape to them by having the elbows held away from the body. These careful movements, along with the finger attachments, served to extend the reach and sense of space of the character.

Some movements utilized the entire body to extend the space. Reaching to the side required the lowered, extended stance while the arms and upper body extended outward. This movement, in conjunction with the extension of the costume, created an enormous sense of space and presence.

All of these elements – costume, makeup, and movement – worked in conjunction to allow the character to occupy a larger sense of space. This larger space gave the performer a strong presence and “weight” that is needed to represent a mythological god-like creature. Though the elaborate costume and makeup, and the highly stylized movement, are important to the representation of the character, they would be less effective without the sense of space they create.

Rasa

Another area in which books do not sufficiently describe the role and importance is the concept of *rasa*. *Rasa* is an aesthetic principle used in various arts in India. Scholarly works often refer to the technical aspects of *rasa*, such as the eight different types, their corresponding deities, corresponding colors, and corresponding emotions. All of these technical aspects are utilized in *Kathakali* in the costumes, makeup, and gestures.

There is another aspect of *rasa* that is difficult to depict in prose and must be examined within the context of the *Kathakali* performance. The lecturer mentioned that the performers attempt to reach a "state of *rasa*" with the audience. This state is an intimate relationship between the performer and the audience in which the audience is completely immersed into the world the performers have created. There is an interaction between the two sides that must occur in which the performer evokes emotions within the audience members.

The technical language used to describe this state pales in comparison to experiencing it. Sitting in the audience of the *Kathakali* performance, I found myself enthralled and mesmerized by the character. Though I was there to experience *Kathakali* in general, I also intended to focus quite a bit on the music. However, I found myself so wrapped up in the performer that it was difficult to focus on the music. I continually found myself focused on the character and storyline. I realized that this mesmerizing effect must be the state of *rasa* that is intended in *Kathakali*.

Though there is significant symbolism in the movements, costumes, makeup, and gestures of the performer that are supposed to enhance the state of *rasa*, as an outsider, I knew nothing about this symbolism that may be clearly understood from someone within the culture. How, then, did I find myself so drawn into the performance? My first epiphany to answer that

question deals with the performer's eyes. As discussed earlier, the black makeup really draws attention to the performer's eyes by extending the space and emphasizing the area. There is also a reddening that is done to the immediate eye area that enhances the sense of mythology and otherworldliness. This makeup "sets the stage" for the elaborate use of eyes to draw the audience into the story.

There are detailed prescriptions for facial expressions in *Kathakali*. These include specifics for the eyes and eye area. These expressions mirror and enhance other gestures that serve to express the same ideas. All of these eye movements are very detailed and sometimes elaborate. One such movement, is a lower eye area "quiver" that is done in rhythm to the music and reflects other gestures. As an audience member, it is almost impossible not to be drawn into that movement. The eyes also follow the direction of the hands and body. If the hands are moving to the side, either the head follows completely or just the eyes follow the placement of the hands. They are very closely tied and serve to draw the audience further into the action.

The final use of eyes to enhance the state of *rasa* is through mere eye contact with the audience. In many theatrical genres, the performers do not really make eye contact with the audience; they merely focus on a point in certain directions. These are often points above the audience members' heads as though they are not there. This was not the case in the *Kathakali* performance. The performer looked directly at the audience and audience members. The character interacted with the audience through this eye contact and gestures. My realization of this concept came when the performer looked directly at me in a questioning manner. It was very unnerving, yet exciting, to have that relationship with the character. I felt as though I needed to respond, had to respond to the questioning look.

There were also moments where the character appeared to be pleading with the audience. At one point the character was interacting with other (invisible) characters, probably children. It felt as though those characters were within the audience. The performer looked directly at audience members while motioning them to “come in” or to “shoo.” The motions, facial expressions, and eye contact seemed to force internal reactions to the story.

Many theatrical genres draw you into the story and lives of the characters. Most of them do it through elaborate staging, costumes, props, text, and catchy music. However, I have never experienced anything as intimate and enthralling as the *Kathakali* performance with only one performer, no staging, no text, and unfamiliar music. It is undoubtedly the performer’s eye contact and interaction with the audience that creates this state of *rasa*.

Transcending the music

The music used in *Kathakali* is based on many traditional Indian musical practices. It utilizes *ragas* and *talas* as structural components, and specific traditional instruments (*madalam*, *canta*, *itaykka*, *cennala*, and *ilatala*), and voices to accompany the drama (Arnold, 2000). When a *Kathakali* work is written, the creator writes the text and indicates specific *ragas* and *talas* to be utilized as accompaniment. The *ragas* and *talas* change in accordance with mood and action of the storyline. The two singers and percussionists improvise within the structure of the *ragas* and *talas* to create the melodic material and rhythmic patterns.

As mentioned earlier, while attending the *Kathakali* demonstration, I often found myself unable to focus on the music. I left the performance with little insight into the music and how it functioned within the genre. This was somewhat disconcerting since that was one of my intended goals. I spent a great deal of time deliberating on the dilemma. There are many

logistical factors that may have contributed to the lack of focus on the musical aspects. The first factor is that the performance was accompanied by a prerecorded vocal and instrumental accompaniment. Had this been a complete performance of a *Kathakali* story, there would have been four musicians on stage with the character(s). Their mere physical presence could have brought attention to their role. Another factor that may have affected the lack of focus was the use of a different language, Manipravalam. The fact that the genre was so new and there were so many visual cues, with just the single performer, may have also contributed to this dilemma. Finally, my lack of experience with Indian music may have been an additional factor.

Following the performance I did additional reading on the genre with a focus on the musical structure and interplay. This reading assisted in finding my answer to the dilemma. The role of music in *Kathakali* is actually very different from many other theatrical genres that utilize music. Often these genres build the storyline and action around the musical components of the work. In *Kathakali*, it is the musicians' jobs to follow the performer, enhancing the storyline and drama. The actor/dancer does not follow the musicians, trying to portray the music accurately. The music is still extremely important; it just serves a different purpose in *Kathakali* than in many other theatrical music genres.

Understanding that the music is truly supposed to enhance the movement and drama, not take a leading role, brought me one step closer to my answer. However, it does not fully explain the dilemma. I specifically attempted to listen to and focus on the music several times during the performance but was unable to maintain the focus. I believe the answer lies within the state of *rasa* discussed earlier. It is one of the goals in *Kathakali* to draw the audience into this state of *rasa* so they are wholly enthralled in the mythological world created by the performers. The audience is lured in by the character, and controlled by the emotional states of the storyline. The

music's goal is to enhance these emotional states and action of the story. It is intended to be an integral tool for reaching this state of *rasa*. For the music to demand attention would undermine the storyline and the *rasa* aesthetic.

Answering that question leads to the more technical question of how did the performer overcome reacting to the music, especially a prerecorded accompaniment. When I was able to focus on the music, I noticed it was very rhythmic and fairly heavy with interlaced voices, drums, and gongs. This heaviness was not portrayed by the performer. The movement of the performer appeared to transcend the music. Many of the performer's movements coincided with the rhythms of the accompaniment, but in very subtle ways so that it was not obvious. One occurrence of this was when the performer was flicking his fingers. He flicked to the beat of the accompaniment but it did not appear rhythmic. There was no accent to the motion of the fingers. The performer had such control that the movement of the fingers outward and inward portrayed flicking but not beat or rhythm, even though it did occur with the beat. These controlled movements were found in most all aspects of movement to the music. I had to look carefully for the correspondence of the movement to the beat. The two did correspond but required extreme concentration.

Another way in which the movement transcended the music was through the use of stillness. In many places throughout the demonstration, the performer would remain very still, almost suspended in time. The music continued to play, not changing character, but it became even less of a focus than it had during movement. The performer's stillness was extremely dramatic but not a reflection of the music. This dramatic stillness served to draw the audience even further into the world and create that state of *rasa*.

Music and movement are both integral parts in *Kathakali*, with equal importance. It is the various interactions between the two that creates such dramatic effects. In order for a performance to be successful, the musicians must work to enhance the emotion of the story. The performer must control his movements to transcend the music in the telling of the story instead of merely moving rhythmically with the accompaniment. If the musicians and performer are successful in their roles, they can help to establish the state of *rasa* that is expected in *Kathakali*.

Kathakali is an extremely complex genre of dance-drama. It is filled with symbolism, religious and cultural elements, and its own aesthetic principles. Books can be a source of information on many of these elements but they do not translate into the actual practice and experience of *Kathakali*. Even viewing a video recording of a *Kathakali* performance does not accurately communicate the essential elements necessary to understand the genre. One must be in the presence of the imposing figures to become aware of the power and mysticism of the story.

It is the sense of space created by the performer, costume, makeup and movement that is essential in transforming him into the mythical creature of the story. When one envisions such an entity, there must be an otherworldliness to it, a larger than life aura. Elaborate costuming and makeup alone cannot communicate that idea. There must be a sense of space created and maintained throughout the performance. This sense of space created in *Kathakali* is a powerful element that must be experienced firsthand.

The state of *rasa* created in a *Kathakali* performance cannot be communicated through books or video either. One must be within the reach of the performer's gaze and able to see the detail of movement in the body and eyes. This must be experienced with relation to the music. The interactions between the performer and audience, the performer and music, and the audience

and music are essential in order to develop the state of *rasa* and draw the audience into the mythological world of the story.

Resources

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