HS. Shivprakash

Metamorphosis of Poetry on Stage by



Kalidasa's *Vikramorvashiyam*

*We surrender our hearts to the poetic beauty of Vikramorvashiyam. We marvel at its metaphorical patterns and nod in admiration at the skill of dialogues. But at the same time, we cannot help regretting the falling apart of its plot (**TN Srikantiah: 2006**).*

This is how one of the greatest authorities on Sanskrit traditions passed his verdict on Kalidasa's *Vikramorvashiyam.* Kalidasa has not been so lucky or as frequently performed as Bhasa or Shudraka on the modern Indian stage in spite of tradition extolling him as 'the most fascinating of dramatic poets.' *(kavyeshu natakam ramyam…natakeshu Kalidasah…)*. Thanks to its humanistic, existentialist and sociological significations, Sudraka's *Mrichakatikam* has been an immense success. So are Bhasa's one-act plays with their strong protest and anti-war message. Unlike these, the legendary guru of the clan of poets, Kavikulaguru, has proved quite intractable on modern

stage, his status of the classic notwithstanding. His intractability has however not prevented some of the stalwarts of contemporary Indian theatre from staging him. Kavalam, B.V Karanth and Ratan Thiyam, along with many other younger luminaries, have tried to contemporize Kalidasa for our times but with much lesser success than the productions of Bhasa or Sudraka or even Vishakadatta. At the same time, a handful of the successful stagings of Kalidasa have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that his plays have a lot to offer to the possibilities of contemporary stage.

Suresh Anagalli's stage exploration of *Meghadootam* was a case in point. Equally important and sustained are the efforts of K S Rajendran of National School of Drama (NSD) to bring to life the less stageable works of the great master. A couple of years ago, Rajendran proved this with his production of Kalidasa's so called "immature work" *Malavikagnimitram*, which turned out to be great fare for spectators. It was also a remarkable discovery. This production foregrounded the earthy and corporeal poetry of the play. It had a beauty and unity of its own, different from other romantic comedies like Bhasa's *Swapna Vasavadattam*. It was also different from Kalidasa's *tour de force, Shakuntalam,* which constitutes the greatest achievement of the ancient Indian theatrical imagination. With his recent production of *Vikramorvashiyam,* he has made another exciting discovery.

In spite of the fact that virtuosos like B.V. Karanth and Kavalam have tried staging *Vikramorvashiyam*, the outcome has not been very happy. Kavalam chose to do only the fourth act, probably because he was aware of the play's feeble plot, which is pointed out in T.N. Srikantiah's most sensitive verdict. Though *Vikramorvashiyam* is the most loosely constructed of Kalidasa's plays, it is in some ways the most irresistibly

fascinating. If the lascivious hero Agnimitra of Kalidasa's first play is the immature version of Dushyanta of *Shakuntalam*, Urvashi of Kalidasa's second play is the predecessor of Shakuntala. Furthermore, the play centres on a fascinating love story, which had gone through several transformations before Kalidasa.

The story that first appeared in the Rig Veda, tells of the tragic love between the heavenly damsel and the earthly hero, inverting the more common mytheme of the heavenly male and earthly woman. The later Puranic versions tried to mitigate the tragic end. Inspired by these versions, Kalidasa has further humanized the heartless Urvashi and given the play a happy ending in keeping with the usual practice of Sanskrit playwriting. But this is where things have gone wrong. Like all great drama, tragic, comic or farcical, Kalidasa's plays too stem from a tragic event that has already happened. Being situated in the tragic-comical structure, his second and third plays try to mitigate the primal agony through the transformation of the outcome. Though this is achieved admirably well in *Shakuntalam*, the attempt flounders in *Vikramorvashiyam*. Urvashi comes out as an obsessive lover clinging to her man at even at the cost of her motherly responsibilities. Unlike the happy ending of *Abhigyanashakuntalam*, the end of *Vikramorvashiyam*appears contrived and without 'the still sad music of humanity' at the end of *Shakuntalam*. Therefore it remains dramatically unjustified, as is the disposing of Pururava's first queen. These defects notwithstanding, the poetry of *Vikramorvashiyam* and the finesse of some portions, particularly the superb and unparalleled fourth act, is unique in all of Indian dramatic literature. These are the elements that Rajendran's production attempted to dramatize with unprecedented success.

While working on a play like *Vikramorvashiyam*, the most challenging task is: how to stage Kalidasa's rich verbal poetry? The presentation of verbal poetry has been one of the greatest problems of modern stage, with its technological tyranny. This is the question staring in the face of any modern producer of Kalidasa or Shakespeare. In the case of Sanskrit drama performed on the modern Indian stage, three strategies figure prominently. The first is to illustrate verbal poetry through non-verbal means. This results in the preposterous reduction of ancient classics to a kind of children's illustrated book on stage. Another strategy is to create a spectacular visual as in the case of Ratan Thiyam's production that has nothing to do at all with verbal poetry. It could have been just as well been staged with only choreographic miracles minus poetry. There is also another mode exemplified by Prasanna's celebrated production of *Uttara Ramacharitam* of Bhavabhooti in which the ancient classic was given a new anthropocentric interpretation with a specific message and meaning suited to contemporary society. Yet this commendable contemporizing of the play stripped it of the meanings, which go beyond the contemporary and constitute the quintessence of the text's dramatic poetry. The achievement of Rajendran the director and Anjana Rajan the choreographer consists in the fact that together they hit upon a new way of doing the old classic. The director here turned out to be neither an illustrator nor a creator of irrelevant spectacles or a contemporary interpreter. The new effort can be considered a breakthrough in presenting poetry on stage where the director becomes a sensitive editor and the choreographer, someone who replicates the verbal poetry through non-verbal kinetic means to make for a rich poly-rhythmic theatrical structure.

The task of editing *Vikramorvashiyam* is particularly challenging. *Malavikagnimitram*, though not very profound, is a

neat romantic comedy, while *Shakuntalam*, though highly complex and mature, has a masterfully constructed plot. *Vikramorvashiyam* has grown out of the youthful exuberance of the first play but has not yet attained the ripeness of *Shakuntalam*. It appears that *Vikramorvashiyam* has not yet discovered a dramatic structure to hold together its imaginative ambitions. Further *Malavikagnimitram* is a humanistic and earth-centered play. *Vikramorvashiyam* is closer to *Shakuntalam* in projecting the theme in an imaginative space where all the three worlds take part in action. Unlike Malavika, Urvashi is not jus an embodiment of nature. Part of the magic of the original story is that she is a heavenly damsel, born from the thighs (*uru*) of the sage Narayana and that her love for an earthly prince can only lead to a brief period of joy followed by the anguish of eternal separation. In order to mitigate this tragic denouement and to force a conventional happy ending, Kalidasa had to resort to several narrative strategies. These strategies unlike in *Shakuntalam*, do not quite work in *Vikramorvashiyam* since they do not add to the deepening of the theme or character, creating a gap between conception and execution. However, this badly made jewel box contains incomparable riches of poetry along with the alchemical touch of the master. The chief of these riches is the superb fourth act of the play unparalleled in Sanskrit drama. This act also marks an important transition in Kalidasa's heroes. It is possible to imagine the macho hero Agnimitra transforming into the mature Dushyanta of *Shakuntalam* through the agony of separation that leads to the crumbling of his male self in *Vikramorvashiyam.* The fourth act constitutes a self-complete play. It is written more in Maharasthtri Prakrit than in Sanskrit. Further the image of Pururava, driven insane by the absence of Urvashi now turned a creeper in Kumaravana (the groves of the virgin God) becomes the prototype of the whole tradition of Bhakti poetry of the succeeding ages, centring on the theme of the missing divine beloved. The metaphors and words of this immensely poetic act find resonance, for instance, in Kannada Bhakti

poetry from the twelfth century right up to the twentieth as well as in some portions of *Geetagovindam*. The fourth act of *Shakuntalam* has received the critical acclaim that it richly deserves, but the fourth act of *Vikramorvashiyam* is yet to receive the critical accolades it deserves not just in the context of the works of Kalidasa but also in the whole history of Indian poetic/dramatic imagination. The first three acts of *Vikramorvashiyam*have also received Kalidasa's master touch in the manner in which the experience of the visible and invisible worlds is deftly woven into the rich poetic fabric. However, after the fourth act, the play begins to nosedive. In the self-complete fourth act, the site of the metamorphosis of human into nature back into human, the play reaches its culminating point.

Keeping in mind the climactic nature of the fourth act, Rajendran's production ends at that point, and the first three acts are deftly edited to suit this end. For instance, the episode involving the obstacle created by Pururava's first wife has been completely eliminated. True, this deletion is justified from the gender-sensitive perspective of our times. But it has become more justified in aesthetics terms, as it otherwise would have impeded the flow of events leading to the climax. The result: we have in this production an imaginatively edited production script telling a touching story of meeting, union, separation and reunion of the heavenly danseuse and the earthly prince.

The action of the play with scenes moving up and down between heaven and earth was presented by inscribing several imaginative spaces into the physical stage space. The magic of the lighting technique also helped. The economy with which this strategy was executed has an important lesson for those trying to map out spatial shifts of contemporary stage that is

still bogged down in uni-linear spacio-temporality, thanks to its obsession with materialist history. However, the sets by H. V. Sharma though beautiful, did not quite gel with the dynamic multi-spatial action. At the same time, the innovating dance-language created by Anjana Rajan contributed greatly to it. She used the inherited lexicon of classical dance to create a new theatre language in which the verbal poetry was also foregrounded. Kalidasa's verbal poetry, unlike the best of Shakespeare's, is not dense or involved. It is elegant, laconic and compressed. The choreography of the play generated a new dance theatre language where the sense suggested by poetic lines was refracted and multiplied through different physical and gestural manifestations of the actors' bodies on stage, as in the first act, in which Urvashi's several attendants respond to the burgeoning of love between the heroine and the protagonist.

An interesting example of addition is the way a *praveshika*, (the prelude) is transformed into a full-fledged scene at the beginning of the second act. This involves the key incident of the plot in which Urvashi utters the name of Pururava by mistake instead of that of Lord Vishnu in the play within the play at the court of Indra directed by Bharata himself. In effect, Bharata curses and expels her to the earthly realm. By a stroke of good luck, Indra reads her thoughts and decrees that she should go and live with her human beloved, Pururava. The improvisation by the director, choreographer and the actors, of the prelude resulted in a magnificent scene of play within the play. This innovative addition intensified the drama of what can be called a Freudian slip, which is only hinted at in the source text. Putting together lines culled out from other texts by Kalidasa like *Malavikagnimitram* and *Meghadootam*, this scene is written afresh.

The same technique of refraction and multiplication was put to much greater sophisticated use in the staging of the unparalleled fourth act. The role of Pururava disintegrated by the agony of separation was distributed to several male actors so as to underline the different nuances of the love of separation, *vipralambha sringara.* The representation of birds and bees constituting the dramatis personae of the scene through human bodies underscored the humanization of nature that in turn, suggests the continuity of (wo) man- nature-heaven central to the imaginative scheme of things of the play. The childlike simplicity of the metamorphosis of the heroine into the creeper and back with the simple device of a green curtain was very effective in this context. The sequence of the different bits of the scene in which Pururava accosts the birds and beasts in vain to find the missing beloved for him gradually lead to his self-effacing embrace of the creeper metamorphosing back into the figure of Urvashi.

In the Kalidasa text, this metamorphosis is preceded by a supernatural agency, where a disembodied sagely voice admonishes Pururava to grasp *sangamaniva mani*, the 'diamond of union'. This is quite in keeping with recurrent supernatural interventions throughout the play. The deletion of the 'diamond' episode in Rajendran's production is debatable. Perhaps, the director wanted to jettison the unwanted baggage of the supernatural and to underline the purely human and natural content of the act. This is where the anthropocentric interpretation as a theme has come in; however, the retention of the diamond episode, which is an intensely poetic portion, would have further enriched the stage execution of this magic-o-poetic act. After all, unlike *Malavikagnimitram* and like *Shakuntalam*, *Vikramorvashiyam* seeks to dramatize not just the world of men, women and nature, but also that of sages, gods and demons. After all, the charm of the original story as of Kalidasa's version is inseparable from supernatural

resonances. What is more, the prayer in the invocation stanza of the dramatic text is for the attainment of the *nishreya*, or ultimate fulfillment beyond all the three worlds.

The director can of course take liberties with the source text by choosing to stage only those aspects that matter to him. However this has to done very consistently. We cannot retain the supernatural in one portion and eliminate it elsewhere without a comprehensive philosophy of the production in question. This debatable point notwithstanding, the director and the choreographer have, in the depiction of the fourth act, created one of the most unforgettable events in contemporary Indian theatre. It is regrettable that Govind Pandey's music was not adequately imaginative to contribute to the masterful efforts of the director and choreographer.

The recent NSD production of *Malavikagnimitram* is significant for several reasons. It represents a novel approach to the staging of ancient drama different from the existing strategies of illustration, spectacularization and contemporization. It points to a very interesting experiment with the stage language through the use of the actors' physical and emotional resources without the sacrificing the power of the word and poetry and the dimensions of universalization (*sadharanikarana*) inscribed into Kalidasa's texts. It has resulted in a new theatre choreography based on classical dance by going beyond it to make it work in Kalidasa's total theatre. It reminds us that, if a text is difficult to be staged, the reason is not the limitation of the text but that of our own inflexible stage notions bogged down in outmoded conventions.

The innovative production of *Vikramorvashiyam,* one hopes, will

pave the way to fresh approaches towards the handling of other intractable ancient dramatic texts on today’s stage..