Epic Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India | Manohar Khushalani

Event: A Talk by Prof. Paula Richman
Learning from Performance: Epic Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India
Venue: Seminar Rooms I & II, Kamaladevi Complex at IIC
Date: Sept. 7 2013
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Paula Richman, Danforth Professor of South Asian Religions at Oberlin
College in Ohio, USA, gave a talk on Learning from Performance using Epic
Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India. Supporting her as
the moderator was Prof. Rustom Bharucha, from the School of Arts and
Aesthetics, JNU, where Paula is also doing a short term Fellowship.
Richman's passion for Ramayana is well known, so much so, that her name
has become synonymous with the topic. Paula has travelled to many parts of
the world in hot pursuit of the 'Many Ramayanas ', which is

also the title of
one of her books. According to her, people for whom Ramayana is central
now live throughout the globe in countries as diverse as South Africa,
Trinidad, Surinam United Kingdom, Australia, USA, Canada, parts of Europe,
besides South East Asia, “it has indeed become a global text as well as a
global piece of theatre” she added. But the subject of her current research
was South India.

She began her talk with a Tamil ‘Morning Sickness Song’, relating to Queen
Kausalya’s condition when she was pregnant with her son Rama. The song
describes rituals that King Dasharatha and other women performed to
support her during her pregnancy, and her food cravings too. One day she
wants murukku, then idli, as another woman wants dosas! Idlis in Ayodhya?
Sounds weird, but, Tamilians can relate more easily to pregnant women who
crave for local dishes. Indian folklore believes in anthropomorphism. It bring
Gods closer by imagining that they behave like humans.

Paula also discussed a Kattaikkuttu play called RamaRavana. It expressed
the yearning for virtuous governance. One of its songs talks about how
people are still waiting to have an ideal, fair, and compassionate leader rule
– somewhat reminiscent of Ram Rajya.

Richman hopped from one topic to another as she gushed about

Yakshagana
dance-dramas of coastal Karnataka and finally, about how the legendary
actress Usha Nangiar enacted the role of Mandodari in one of her
performances.

Her underlining thrust was that live performances offer new ways of
understanding the experiences of Ramayana characters.

A New Paradigm of Development

TALK: *Sustainable Development – Imperatives for India*
Speaker: Dr. R.K. Pachauri
Chair : Professor P.S. Ramakrishnan
October 30

The developmental model of advanced nations based upon technological innovations that provided goods and services at less cost had resulted in the over-exploitation of natural resources, thus endangering the eco-system and supplanting human values by emphasising consumption and possession. The finiteness of resources, projected by the Club of Rome study, remained unacknowledged. The hazard of seeking infinite growth led to climatic change which would grow worse if ignored. Dr. Pachauri, chairman of the Inter-Government Group on Climate Change, is uniquely qualified to raise an alarm caused by the reduction of Arctic sea ice, thus raising the sea level by almost one metre, a threat to the island nations of the Maldives and Kiribati.

In order to deal with threats, he proposed a change in paradigm, out-of-the-box thinking, and solutions that cause less strain on natural resources. Since resources are not available for power plants and transmission losses make technology unaffordable for the poor, he opts for micro-grids that would provide lighting, perfect combustion with a blower that increases the efficiency of cooking with improved stoves, and the churning of milk with solar devices. He bids for public transport that would reduce the demand for fossil fuels and strain upon imports.

Whereas there are diverse agents of change at multiple layers in society, the government must take the initiative in creating healthy competition among innovators by assuring the demand of substantial quantities to encourage entrepreneurs to invest in technologies. The state pollution control boards ought to be accountable to people and not the government alone. A different kind of leadership that is visionary, responsible, and dedicated to humanitarian impulses is required for creating public awareness of hazards, dissemination of success stories, encouraging public transport, and water harvesting. India can surely show the way.

• P.S. BAWA

Epics and Theatre Traditions

TALK: *Learning from Performance – Epic Narrative in Regional Theatre Traditions of South India*
Speaker: Professor Paula Richman
Chair: Professor Rustom Bharucha
Collaboration: Lila Foundation, September 7

Paula Richman's passion for the *Ramayana* is well-known, so much so, that her name has become synonymous with the topic. Paula has travelled to many parts of the world in hot pursuit of the *Many Ramayanas*, which is also the title of one of her books. According to her, people for whom the *Ramayana* is central now live throughout the globe in countries as diverse as South Africa, Trinidad, Surinam, United Kingdom, Australia, USA, Canada, parts of Europe, besides South East Asia: 'it has indeed become a global text as well as a global piece of theatre', she added. But the subject of her current research is South India.

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Richman also discussed a *Kattaikkuttu* play called *RamaRavana*. It expressed the yearning for virtuous governance. One of its songs talks about how people are still waiting to have an ideal, fair, and compassionate leader rule—somewhat reminiscent of *Ram Rajya*.

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• MANOHAR KHUSHALANI

IIC Diary Sep-Oct 2013 Issue

Parthi Subba's VAALI MOKSHA

(Yakshagana) Director: Karemane Shivananda Hedge

Playwright: Parthi Subba
Director: Karemane Shivananda Hedge
Group: Sri Idagunji Mahaganapati Yakshgana Mandali, Keremane, Karnataka
Language: Kannada
Duration: 1 hr 30 mins

The Play
Vaali Moksha describes the incidents leading to the revelation and death of Vaali, the king of ‘Vaanaras’ or the tribe of the apes. The alliance between Rama and Sugreeva that happens here becomes a crucial point for the later happenings in the Ramayana.

Director’s Note
This episode is selected from the Aranya Khanda of the Ramayana composed by Parthi Subba, a 16th century Yakshagana playwright. This play has an interesting conflict between two communities, viz human and semi-human/ape like. Traditionally,

this play was limited to the dialogue/conversation/ vaachika based Taalamaddale. I have tried exploring the new interpretations and possibilities of already existing traditional theatre elements, music and rhythm which helped in enhancing the portrayal of characters and the story, using choreography to create a spectacle. Here one can see a spectrum of moods (other than the main-stream popular depiction of Veera, Bhayanak, Hasya) including Love (Shringara), Sorrow (Karuna), Wondor (Adbhuta) and Tranquility (Shanta). It is an effort to reach new audience, breaking the barriers of language through simple narration and direction, without losing the framework of impromptu dialogue delivery, dance and narrative motives of Yakshagana. A short and powerful presentation of the story within the limited performance time has made this play successful in and abroad India. To conclude in a nutshell, even though direction of this play was a challenge, I found it as an artistic opportunity.

The Director

Sri Keremane Shivanand Hegde is the present director of this Yakshagana Troupe. He is also Guru and Director of a Yakshagana Training Center – "Srimaya Yakshagana Ranga Shikshana Kendra" at a remote village of Coastal Karnataka. Shri Hegde is a fifth generation Yakshagana artist in Keremane family. He has studied and practiced many classical and folk dance forms apart from Yakshagana and has toured all over the globe heading the Yakshagana Mandali. He has been conferred with many awards (Aryabhata International Award, Kuvempu Deepa Award, Ajithashri, Kusumashri, Chittani Awards etc.) and titles (Yaksha Sarathi, Nritya Param etc.). Currently, he is Academic Council Member of Karnataka State Dr. Gangubhai Hangal Music and Performing Arts University, Mysore and Member of Executive Board and The Chairman of Folk and Tribal Community of Sangeet Natak Academy.

The Playwright

Yakshagana poet Parthi Subba, believed to have lived in about 1600AD, is a celebrated composer of many Yakshagana Prasangas (or poetic episodes). Subba is believed to be the originator of new regional style, the Tenkutittu, the 'Southern School' of Yakshagana. He is also believed to be the author (probably the compiler and editor) of Sabhalakshana, a collection of songs used for the preliminary (Purva Ranga) of Yakshagana. Himself a Bhaagwatha and an actor, Subba widely travelled. His Ramayana is being used all over Karnataka by the traditional theatre by all styles of Bayalata.

The Group

Yakshagana is a rare 500 year old operative art form which belongs to our rich Indian heritage originating in Karnataka. It is a combination of dance, drama, music, dialogues and stories taken from Indian epics and mythology. Sri Idagunji Mahaganapati Yakshagana Mandali, Keremane® was established in 1934 by my grandfather Shri Keremane Shivarama Hegde. This Mandali is a non-profit NGO, and the performing unit of our organization has toured extensively in India and abroad i.e. USA, England, Spain, Bahrain, France, China etc. Many awards and recognitions have been conferred to the Mandali from all over the world, the prestigious 'Raja Mansingh Tomar Award' conferred by MP Govt. being the most recent i.e. last year.

Cast & Credits

Shri Rama: Keremane Shivanand Hegde
Hanuman: Timmappa Hegde
Sugreeva: Ishwar Bhat Hamsalli
Stree Vesha – Tara: Sadashiv Bhat Yellapura
Vaali: Vighneshwar Havgodi
Ravana: Seetaram Hegde Mudare
Lakshmana: Shridhar Hegde Keremane
Angada: Chandrashekar N.
Poorva Ranga / Kapi: Vinayak Naik
Poorva Ranga: Nakula Gouda
Poorva Ranga: Lokesh Naik

Poorva Ranga: Ganapati Kunabi
Tere / Kapi: Krishna Marathi

Bhaagwatha (Singer): Ananta Hegde Dantalige
Chande Player: Krishna Yaji Idagunji
Maddale Player: Narasimha Hegde Mururu

Director, Choreographer & Guru: Keremane Shivanand Hegde

Nimmy Raphel's BALI

Playwright & Director: Nimmy Raphel

Group: Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Art Research, Pondicherry

Language: English

Duration: 1 hr 40 mins

The Play

One of the unsung heroes of the Indian epic *Ramayana* is the army of monkeys from the land of Kishkindha that helped King Ram win his war against the demon king Ravana. But before these simian soldiers followed him into war, the ruler of Kishkindha, Bali commanded them. A meditation on justice, ethics and morality, Adishakti's ***Bali*** is a retelling of the crucial events surrounding the death of king Bali, which helped Rama to ally himself with the army. Through a seamless transition from the epic to the everyday, Adishakti's Bali explores the notion of right and wrong in this tale of brotherhood and revenge.

Director's Note

The Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, have shaped our country's politics, arts and culture. Its stories have been retold and its characters reimagined in many ways through various retellings, which have been a part of the literary and performative traditions in India. Each retelling has challenged the traditional narrative by subverting the dominant versions of the text to throw a light on various other interpretations. Often, these interpretations strongly reflect the writer's subjective preferences with respect to his/her identity and ideologies. An excerpt from the Indian epic *Ramayana*, Adishakti's *Bali* is a retelling of various events that led to the battle between Bali, the ruler of Kishkindha and Ram, the King of Ayodhya and eventually, the death of Bali. Here, the writer has tried to explore the notion of right or wrong through its various characters, while steering clear of any subjective influences. Through this play, we explore how one evaluates this notion, and how it can change when each and every character is given an opportunity to voice thoughts and opinions. The play weaves multiple stories through the points of view of Bali, Tara, Sugreev, Angad, Ram and Ravan and talks about how each of them make decisions and take actions based on the ethics that define

their lives.

The Director & Playwright

Nimmy Raphel studied Mohiniyattam and Kuchipudi dance in Kerala Kalamandalam from 1995-2001, and has performed all over India. She is currently a resident actor, dancer, musician, and puppeteer at Adishakti, practicing its methodology of theatre since 2001. In 2010 Nimmy received the APPEX Fellowship, which took her to Bali. She collaborated with Indonesian dancer Sardono W. Kusumo to create a theatre production called *Rama, Hanuman, Ravana* which premiered in Adishakti. The production also went to The International Conference on Ramayana: Reinterpretation in Asia, in Singapore. In 2012 she was part of an exchange programme held in Korea between Adishakti and the performing group Tuida. As part of Adishakti's three-year Ramayana Project, in 2011 she created a play called *Nidrawathwam* which she wrote, directed, and performed in. Nimmy was also the recipient of the Junior Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture for the year of 2012-13. She is currently performing in the play *The Tenth Head* directed by Veenapani Chawla, and also in Veenapani's next production, *Sita*. Nimmy is also a recipient of Vinod Doshi Fellowship in 2015.

The Group

Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Art Research was founded in 1981 in Mumbai. It now has its campus on the outskirts of Pondicherry, where artists and experts from a variety of other fields come for residency programs, sabbaticals, performances and workshops. Adishakti also engages with different spaces and disciplines. Adishakti's work and experiments are driven, quite simply, by its comprehension of art/aesthetic practice as a unique bridge between a range of diverse realms, which are not normally, or visibly, in communication with each other.

Cast & Credits

On Stage: Vinay Kumar, Arvind Rane, Ashiqa Salvan, Kiyomi Mehta, Rijul Ray

Music Arrangement & Composition: Vinay Kumar

Sound Operation: Meedhu Miriyam

Light Desig: Vinay Kumar

Light Operation: Anand Satheendran

Creative Guidance: Anmol Vellani & Vinay Kumar

Stage Manager: Dhavamani Arumugam

Production Manager: Bharavi

Costumes: Viji Joy

Playwright & Director: **Nimmy Raphel**

Watch The Director’s Meet for the play