Subject: Popular Theatre & Performance

Category: Kathakali



Kathakali *dance-drama is a distinctive genre of South Asian performance which developed during the sixteenth and seventeeth centuries in the Malayalam speaking coastal region of south-west India known today as Kerala State. Like Japanese* noh *and China’s* jingju *(Beijing Opera),* kathakali *has become internationally known during the past three or four decades as troupes regularly tour throughout the world as part of government-sponsored international cultural exchanges or through private initiatives. The vast majority of these performances have been* kathakali*’s dance-drama versions of episodes from the Indian epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) or stories from the* puranas *– encyclopaedic collections of traditional stories and knowledge. While there is a long history of ‘experimentation’ with content and technique, recent performances of new* kathakali *have brought increasing attention to and arguments about the place and role of experimentation and change in* kathakali *performance today.* From *Kathakali Dance-Drama* (Routledge, 2002), *by Phillip Zarrilli*

Introduction to Kathakali Dance-Drama

*Videotaped in Kerala, India in 1993 and 1995, the footage and voiceover on this video explain Kathakali's basic make-up types/characters, the context of performance, the process and techniques of training, and performance preliminaries.*

*Film-maker: Phillip Zarrilli and the Killimangalam Centre for Documentation of the Performing Arts, Kerala*

**Overview**

Length: 26 mins 29 secs

Cast Members

* **M1:** Director – Phillip Arrilli
* **M2:** Actor 2
* **M3:** Actor 3
* **M4:** Actor 4

[00:00:01]

**M1:** [Video footage is shown throughout]. An introduction to Kathakali Dance Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play. Kathakali Dance Drama is the traditional dance drama of Kerala, South Western Coastal India. In this introductory video tape, we’ll first look at characters and make-up types. First is the pacca, or heroic type, whose face make-up is primarily green in colour, demonstrating his idealised goodness. Here, Rugmamgada, a king from Rugmamgada Caritam, King Rugmamgada’s Law. Here, we see Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, with his special crown. A second type is the minukku, or radiant type. Here, we see a Brahmin from Santanogopalam and, now, Lord Parasurama, the sage, who dances out his anger before the Brahmin, from the play Sitaswayamvaram. The radiant make-up refers to the golden hue of this particular colour and is also used, as we’ll see later, for female characters.

[00:01:17]

**M1:** Here, the idealised female character, always idealised, this particular female type includes such characters as Sita or Mohini from the Play Rugmamgada Caritam.

[00:01:45]

**M1:** The katti, or knife type, is used for demon kings, such as Ravana, the ten-headed demon king. Here, Ravana appears with his wife at the opening of one of the Kathakali plays in acting the stories of the demon king. Here, Ravana’s ten heads are represented by the additional crowns. The stylised moustache within the facial frame marks this as a demon king. The beard types include the white beard. Here, Hanuman from The Flower of Good Fortune, who, disturbed from his meditation in the forest, awakens from his meditation as the sound splits his ears. Other beard types include the red beard or the evil demon’s, such as Dussassna from The Killing of Duryodhana, associated with the forest, here performing his [inaudible]. These great red beard characters have the largest crowns in Kathakali.

[00:03:24]

**M1:** The kari are the black characters or demonesses. Here, we see the demoness from The Killing of Kirmmira, Simhika, whose breasts and nose have just been cut, crying out in pain and anguish.

[00:03:52]

**M1:** There are also special make-up types, such as Narasimha, Vishnu’s incarnation as the lion. Here, Narasimha is disembowelling the Demon King Prahlada, at the conclusion of the play Prahlada Caritam.

[00:04:17]

**M1:** Kathakali training begins with offerings to the teacher or the guru. This footage, taken at Killimangalam Temple, depicts two advanced students who have undergone six years of Kathakali training re-enacting the ritual of offerings given to the guru and then return the giving of the katcha to the student, which would traditionally begin the student’s training process. Oil is placed by the teacher onto the student’s body, symbolically in this case, as they undertake their training. Kathakali’s basic exercises and jumps are derived from the traditional martial art of Kerala, Kalarippayat. Students begin by oiling their bodies and then undergo a series of prostrations to Ganpati[?]. Here, students perform a series of jumps, or cattam[?]. Now, the students prostrate themselves before the south-west corner of the kalari, a term taken from the traditional practice of the martial art. A kalari was traditionally a special pit dug out of the ground where martial training took place, and originally Kathakali actors were all trained in this martial art. The exercises have been codified over the years, especially in the Kerala Kalamandalam tradition which we’re seeing here. These codified exercises are intended to make the body supple and flexible, to develop balance and control, and here the students are again performing that prostration to Lord Ganesha. Now, a series of kicks, which, again, have been codified over the years so that they are particularly relevant to the performance of Kathakali. The two advanced students making the demonstration here are doing so under the guidance of N.P. Sanakaran Namboodiri, former principal of the Kerala Kalamandalam.

[00:07:12]

**M1:** Several different styles of Kathakali training emerged historically over the years; one in the South of Kerala, one in the far North of Kerala, and this particular style at the Kerala Kalamandalam, which developed in the 1930s and the 1940s, and to its current codified state.

[00:07:38]

**M1:** This particular exercise in which the student always maintains a lengthened spine helps to develop a circling of the body, which is crucial to the correct Kathakali style of performance. These athletic and gymnastic body flips, stands and jumps, are all a part of the traditional martial arts training, especially in the far north of Kerala. In addition to the basic body exercises we’ve just seen, students also undergo a series of codified trainings in basic steps. Dance steps are of a number of different types, which are performed in different speeds, increasingly fast, as you can see here. The teacher keeps time of the basic tala, or time, on a stool as the students dance out the basic rhythmic patterns. All aspects of Kathakali training have broken down each aspect of the training process into its smallest units so that each unit is individually mastered, and eventually put back together again in performance. As you can hear, the rhythmic patterns have been increased in speed, and now are decreasing. A crucial part of the training process is the traditional massage, which is undertaken each year during the most intensive part of the training process during monsoon, the coolest part of the year, which usually begins in late May or early June, and lasts into August. The massage, like the basic training exercises, are based on the traditional martial arts form of massage, where the teacher holds onto ropes, or in this case, now, a bar, so that he can put his entire weight, as you see here, on the student’s body. The Kathakali version of this massage, called [uliccil?], given with the feet, as you can see, places these doughnut shape mats underneath the knees to attain full turnout of the legs. The Kalarippayat form of massage, as well as the Kathakali form of massage, are understood to awaken and cleanse the channels of the supple body associated with yoga practice.

[00:11:12]

**M1:** The massage in Kathakali often lasts several months a year during this six basic years of training. Along with the exercises, the massage, then, renders the actor’s body over the lengthy period of training supple, flexible, balanced and controlled. At the end of each massage, the student always massages the master’s legs and then follows this intense experience by performing jumps, the splits and exercises. Yet another part of the training are the basic rhythmic cycles which are learned in an afternoon sitting class. Here, the students are with the watchful eye of the instructor, going through all of the basic rhythmic patterns that they then perform when performing the basic steps. Early morning classes are taken up traditionally with eye exercises performed in nine different directions at three different speeds. The students follow the teacher’s finger as it traces the basic patterns back and forth, up and down, to the diagonals and circles and in figure eights. From very, very slow patterns to increasingly faster patterns. Facial exercises form yet another part of the basic training. Independent use of each part of the facial musculature is crucial in Kathakali training. Here, exercising the lower lids, the lips. There are also independent exercises for the wrists and hands. The nine basic bhavas, or facial expressions, are codified in Kathakali and learned, beginning with the erotic sentiment. Eight of these were codified in the Natyasastra and a ninth added later. The humorous, sadness, which we see here, the lower lips being moved. Anger emphasising activity in the lower lids, and the heroic, especially associated with pacca characters, the green. Fear, disgust, wonder, and, finally, atonement; serenity, added by Abhinavagupta in the 12th Century. Also codified are the hand gestures or mudras of Kathakali. There are 24 mudras, which is like a vocabulary. When this basic vocabulary is put together and spoken, the actors are able to deliver the entire text of Kathakali plays with their hand gestures. The hand gestures, of course, will only be understood by an educated audience, attuned to the specific vocabulary that the actors have learned. Some of the gestures are obvious since they are mimetic, but others, such as saying ‘et cetera’ in a sentence, can only be known to the connoisseur.

[00:16:21]

**M1:** Chuzhipa are very important exercises in the training since they bring together basic rhythmic patterns, the use of eyes and facial expression, with a circling of the body. Chuzhipa are of several types and take the student through the essential combination of all of the basic performative elements needed to deliver and perform, as well as dance, the text. These are performed in increasingly complex rhythmic patterns and cycles whose speed increases, just as in the eye exercises. As in the basic training, spinal alignment is crucial and essential in correct performance to keep the actor’s energy alive, as well as to make the entire figure, the performer and performance, visible and appropriate for the audience. Kalashans are the basic dance endings that punctuate each section of a text as it’s performed. Kalashans are a wide variety of types. The particular type, the speed at which it’s performed, and so on, depends upon the dramatic context. These dance endings are intended to punctuate and highlight the particular bhava, or mood, of a particular scene. Slower kalashans emphasise, for example, the erotic sentiment. Very, very fast and short kalashans may accentuate the furious, anger or angry, as a sentiment or mood.

[00:18:40]

**M1:** Now, we’ll take a look at the context in which performances traditionally take place. Performances traditionally took place most often at temple festivals. This is the Killimangalam Temple in Central Kerala. For annual temple festivals, performances usually took place outside the temple proper. First of all, we’ll take a look at backstage make-up and costumes. In this case, costuming and make-up is being prepared inside the temple. Popular cinema music plays in the background, just to create a festive environment for the evening’s performance. Inside this traditional temple’s outer walls, all of the costumes and accoutrements of performance have been laid out by the make-up specialists in preparation for the evening performance. Traditionally known as the green room, this temporary area is prepared and specialist make-up artists ready their rice paste with which they will attach the facial frames of the actors. Here the famous actor Kalamandalam Gopi Asan prepares for a performance of a pacca role, the pacca role of Bhima in The Flower of Good Fortune. Tracing the outline of the basic make-up on his face, he will then give himself over to the make-up artist to attach the facial frame or chutti with rice paste. Heavily starched undergarments are prepared by other costume specialists and assistants backstage as the yards and yards of undergarment are prepared. Today’s backstage crew also includes an electrician, who will prepare the electric lights. Artists not preparing for their make-up yet are visiting with the family that’s hosting them in Killimanagalam. Back inside the temple proper, make-up continues, often taking three to four to prepare before a performance.

[00:21:17]

**M1:** Ramgutty Nair Asan[?] prepares for the role of Hanuman in The Flower of Good Fortune. Facial frames are cut out of special paper which has only been introduced in the past forty to fifty years. Originally, the facial frame was made entirely of rice paste. Once the whole facial frame is in place, the actor completes his own make-up. Here, Ramgutty Nair Asan continues the make-up process for the role of Hanuman, the white beard character. Outside, meanwhile, stage attendants prepare the stage area, ready the oil lamp for the evening’s performance and the sound system, as well as lights. A minnuku role being prepared, the brilliant, radiant type, used for females. Eventually, the actor is wrapped in the undergarments with a katcha, a very long cloth, traditionally used in martial arts training, through which the heavily starched claws are prepared. Padmanabhan Asan[?] prays before one of the deities of the temple before undertaking his own make-up process.

[00:22:55]

**M1:** Eventually, the singers will ready and sing the Vandana Slokam to set the mood for the evening. Further preparations are underway backstage and in this case a special performance is about to be undertaken of the preliminary dance, the puruppattu, pictured here as Martha Schonenberg, an American woman who’s been undergoing Kathakali training and on this particular night she will perform the puruppattu, the opening dance, as her arangetram first performance, before some of the famous Kathakali actors take the stage for a performance of The Flower of Good Fortune. Here we will see an excerpt from the puruppattu, or preliminary dance, one of the two main training dancers in Kathakali. The first performance of the puruppattu is something of an initiation by the fire since performers will not have worn the full costume and make-up before. Here, we’re seeing a seasoned Kathakali actor on the right, and on your left, Martha Schonenberg, performing her arangetram. Both are costumed and made up in pacca make-up and a special crown used for Lord Krishna.

[00:24:48]

**M1:** With many of today’s performers, the entire puruppattu is often not performed or may not be performed at all, and edited versions of evening performances to save time. Another one of the main preliminaries in the Kathakali performance is the melappadam or the drumming. The melappadam is an opportunity for the percussionist to display their great talents as they challenge one another in increasingly complex and fast rhythmic patterns, something which the performers themselves often greatly enjoy. All of these preliminaries have prepared the way for traditional full evening of Kathalaki Dance Drama, which would last from dusk until dawn, when a final concluding dance would end a performance. This introduction is an invitation to see a full performance of a Kathakali play.

[END]