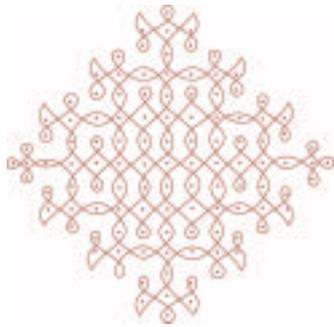


The Yakshagana Kendra has been holding regular weekend and holiday classes for children, teenagers and adults with overwhelming response. This amateur scene generates a broad interest and an engaged community of *aficionados*, thus securing future patronage and sponsorship for the professional troupes and a public interest in the survival and transmission of the Yakshagana tradition of coastal Karnataka.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following text mostly refers to the Northern style, although much of it is true for the Southern style as well.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, performers from the *billava* community (classified as backward class/caste) protested against their discrimination to perform in the famous Mandarti (and Maranakatte) troupes. They obtained a partial success. An initially all-Dalit troupe now employs performers from all caste backgrounds. □



## Creativity and Tradition: Two Different Worlds?

### AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW ON EDUCATION IN THE PERFORMING ARTS IN INDIA

~~~~~ Evelien Pullens ~~~~~

*Evelien Pullens* is a theatre maker, puppeteer and author of children's books from the Netherlands. She taught puppetry at the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School (Kanchipuram) and gave workshops at Ninasam (Heggodu) and Rangayana (Mysore).

The musicians are playing a strong melody. A student comes in and sings loud, clearly a complicated song. He dances in a circle with fast steps. The teacher corrects him. He shows how he should do the steps and the student does it again.

It is fascinating to join the Kattaikkuttu rehearsals with thirty enthusiastic children of the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School. Kattaikkuttu, or Kuttu, is a traditional music theatre from Tamil Nadu. Though I don't

understand the Tamil language I never get bored of the strong emotional way of singing of Kuttu. I enjoy the energy of the steps and the acting that goes along with the music. Good Kuttu performances have a high energy level and have different layers, ranging from profound religious songs to light, humorous and at times banal jokes. As a foreigner educated in a country without many traditional roots, I am attracted by this colourful, meaningful theatre. In Kuttu I find elements that most theatre makers in the West have lost. What are those? Is it the connection with religion and rituals? The unity and duration of a Kuttu play? The beautiful costumes?

To observe a Ninasam voice training is another experience. Also fascinating. Ninasam is a modern Drama School in Karnataka. A group of students stand in a circle. The sound they produce is loud. All have a different pitch so the cacophony is terrible. But the energy is fantastic. It reminds me of my own voice training at my Drama School where we had to search for an open voice. At first I had no idea how to find it. The Ninasam students try to listen and to find the tremble of the sound in their bodies. Students hold each other's belly to help. They are concentrated and caring. I feel the joy of expression. The same kind of joy that I experienced in the Kuttu class, but with a slightly different colour. Another focus.

I had my theatre education at the Art and Drama School in Utrecht in Holland. My training concentrated basically on creativity and improvisation. 'Learning by experience' has a high value in modern European drama training. The underlying idea is that everything you can possibly express exists in yourself. In modern theatre we are not looking for a repetition of what has already been done, but we are looking for new creative ideas. Though we had a lot of fun at the Drama School and made enriching experiences and playful discoveries, the artistic work felt sometimes meaningless, without any base.

When I began to follow Bharata Natyam lessons in Holland I was confronted with a completely different system of teaching. First I had to learn the basic steps before we could even start learning a dance. To add some creative input became only possible after the *arangetram*.



Puppetry workshop with Evelien Pullens for the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam December 2003.



Workshop with Maya Krishna Rao for the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam  
December 2003

As I learned, this was not only because of the system of teaching; it had also religious reasons and was based on the idea that you have to respect not only your teacher but also the whole heritage of

knowledge that is involved in the art form.

The religious and cultural impact of the Bharata Natyam training fascinated me. It made me feel I was learning something really special and gave the dance a more profound meaning. On the other hand I became restless, because I couldn't use my individual creative ideas in this dance style. My fascination and restlessness made me curious. Is it possible to combine creativity and tradition? Or are these two different worlds? Is it meaningful to use exercises meant to express creativity in traditional training? And is it useful to teach traditional art forms in a modern drama school?

In Ninasam, where most teachers come from the National School of Drama, I found an educational system that is based on the contemporary Western method. The Ninasam Theatre Art School exists for twenty years. It gives formal theatre arts training to young enthusiasts to develop the contemporary performing arts in Karnataka. Students are trained in voice, movement and acting basically to make their body and mind a flexible and open instrument. They learn to improvise and to become creative through drama exercises. They also gain experience as actors by playing in modern theatre plays.

Students of Ninasam get a limited training in Yakshagana, the traditional folk theatre of Karnataka and in traditional arts of Kerala. As far as I could see, the training is given to empower the body and to build some knowledge about the past. Sometimes the steps, costumes and other elements from Yakshagana and Kathakali are used in modern plays dissociated from the original setting. I think it is useful to confront the modern students with their past, but for a real understanding and use, longer training is required. The lessons they get at Ninasam are not enough to understand the deeper meaning and power of traditional arts.

I gave a sixteen days workshop at the Ninasam School. During my lessons in contemporary creative puppetry I noticed a few times that students used some of their village folk culture background in the task I gave them. For instance, they made a big puppet like they had seen in village ceremonies. In this case the creativity training brings elements of traditional theatre and rituals in a new way on stage. What does it show? Only the shape

or also the power behind it? Is this a mix of creativity and tradition, or is it too superficial to make it meaningful?

I didn't stay long enough in other *gurukulams* to find out if they use any creativity training in their education. Only at the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School (KYTS) I had the chance to observe and join the classes. In this School I found many mixtures of both worlds.

The main drama education at the KYTS is Kattaikkuttu. This traditional theatre form consists of singing, learning stories and text, steps and acting. The Kuttu education itself is more or less taught by the 'copy system'. Teacher Rajagopal shows his students how they should act, students try to copy. I noticed more freedom here than in the Bharata Natyam lessons I followed. In Kuttu it is normal that a junior-actor just goes on stage without much rehearsal. He joins the other actors and tries to learn his role by doing it.

Also in the structure of traditional Kuttu we find space for new ideas. The role of the Buffoon (Kattiyakkaran) is mainly based on improvisation. A Buffoon is free in his acting. He can experiment with creative and playful acts. The Buffoon can make jokes during long Kuttu performances and can mingle with the main actors and the audience. The other actors can improvise, too. They have to. If you perform for eight hours it needs creativity to go through the night. Because you can't expect everything to be rehearsed and fixed. Though there is space for improvisation, the system itself is based on copying.

Can I say that copying a teacher or senior actor is not creative? That's not true. Nobody is the same. You need creativity to copy your teacher within your own possibilities. For instance, your teacher is tall and has furious eyes. If the student is small and has small eyes how can he produce the same effect as the teacher? He needs creativity to find his own way to act 'impressive'. So in both the ways of education creativity is needed. And for creativity we need self-confidence and fantasy. Some actors are talented and free in mind, others need some training and stimulation to use their freedom and open mind.



Doctor, aliens, monkey and school children in 'The Magic Horse' performed by the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam



'Veriyattam' by the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurkulam

Kuttu teacher Rajagopal has been abroad. He is inspired by modern theatre. I see the influence in some of his lessons. He uses exercises like running, sudden stops and freezes. He lets the whole class support in developing a difficult part of a role. They have to try it all together. These are bits and pieces extracted from Western drama-exercises. He also invites contemporary artists to give workshops to the students to introduce them to other theatre styles and bring them new inspiration. Students learn and develop themselves through the workshops, and their teachers, too.

Rajagopal tries to make his students aware of their progress and abilities. I guess this is part of the Western influence as well. As far as I have seen, most Indian education does not encourage individual thinking. Rajagopal does, also with the youngest student of the KYTS—a girl of six. He organises regular meetings with all of them to discuss their views of the plays they are working on, the workshops and the classes. He tries to develop critical thinking through these meetings. He wants the students to judge their own practice. Experiencing all these new influences, students will improve their creative abilities. They get ideas about the possibilities in the world and in theatre. Their mind gets bigger.

As far as I could see, the blend of teaching methods at the KYTS provided a range of opportunities to the students and a lot of power. Teaching is an ongoing process of balancing and finding out the right way of education within the practical options given by a teacher's possibilities.

There is one more feature that attracted my attention. Talks and lectures are important, not only at the KYTS, but also in other Indian teaching settings.

Rajagopal stands for his class and holds a speech. I don't know Tamil, but I get the meaning of his talk. It is about finding your own way in life, acting with confidence. The talk is about being alert and creative. Many Indian teachers try to stimulate creativity by small lectures as I noticed in lessons I followed. They give their ideas and

knowledge to the students in the form of talks in the hope that it will bring their students further. They try to improve acting by mental knowledge.

In Western creativity training, the focus seems to be more on exploring than on lecturing. Knowledge seems of less importance. Students explore several ways of acting. The teachers ask them questions about their experiences and make them aware of their discoveries. We can say that contemporary training tries to open the mind and intuition. It pays more attention to the process than traditional training, because there is no fixed goal to reach. In creative processes, we don't know where we end. There is no teacher to copy. The teacher is the coach of the process instead of the model. So, not the goal, but the process is most important and within that process the individual steps a student takes. As I mentioned before, every human being is different. Every human being has a different background. So, every student will take different steps.

The values transmitted in most contemporary art training are about being yourself, being individual and being open to intuition and new inspiration. In most traditional art training the values that are transmitted are about being good in the skills, being open to the knowledge of the tradition and to the attainment of spiritual power.

Again I would like to mention Kuttu teacher Rajagopal to give an example of development and mixture of traditional and modern. Rajagopal tries to reach new audience and to transmit a message through the plays he makes. Traditionally Kattaikkuttu tells the *Mahabharata* epic. Village audiences know the stories well and they get relief by listening to the old narratives again and again. But city audiences need fresh, catchy characters, new costumes and actual themes. Rajagopal feels it is necessary to make Kuttu for the city-people, too. He wants to explore his own artistic borders and to reach a broader audience.

In *The Magic Horse*, a play written for children, he introduces two aliens. These two are fantasy characters that come to Earth in search of *sakti*. By using these



'Veriyattam' by the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurkulam

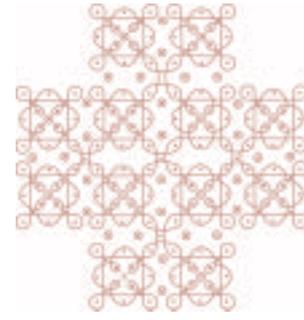
innocent characters he makes it very clear what *sakti* is and also that we need it to achieve something in life. The aliens meet a lot of different characters in their search for help. They don't speak Tamil, but they express themselves in a fantasy language. The creative lines of the songs are put to Kuttu music. The strength of Kuttu songs is maintained, even when the words are humorous jibberish language. The combination of tradition and fantasy works strongly and meaningfully well together. Not only the music and the text, also the costume design has a mixture of both styles. It makes the play attractive and understandable for children from different backgrounds.

Rajagopal's play *Veriyattam* or *Possession* uses another creative way to express a message to an audience through Kattaikkuttu. Costumes and characters in *Veriyattam* are close to traditional Kuttu costumes and Kuttu heroes, but the story is new. What is interesting about *Veriyattam* is the inclusion within the play of different aspects of Tamil village culture, such as a religious procession in which a traditional Terukkuttu is being performed and possession occurs. The play also contains 'Tiger dance' or Puliattam and vigorous drumming. In addition to a novel story, city audiences have the chance to witness cultural elements they don't know anymore. In a creative and artistic way the audience is educated about its heritage.

I felt and experienced that different methods of education can inspire each other in many ways: knowledge and experience, disciplined skill training and chaotic brainstorming, copying the teacher and following your own inspiration in mind and body, ritual power and creativity. But why should we mix methods of education and look beyond our own way of teaching? What is there in creativity without knowledge? It's an empty shell. Acting without skill-training, stories without meaning and appearance without inner power are boring to watch. What do we find in traditional plays without creativity? They fail to connect to our actual life. We experience them as old fashioned. We don't understand them.

The world today is a mixed world. All kinds of global influences become part of the society. We cannot speak anymore of a traditional society where the religious power is the only truth. Modernity has taken over. But awareness of religion and heritage still exists. And in those parts of the cities where it has been lost, there exists a desire for these ancient values.

Art tries to reflect on the actual situation. It has to! People are changing and searching. So art has to change and search, too. It has to be meaningful for the artist and for the audience. So, art needs to look for a blend of expressions, traditional ways of acting and contemporary forms. Old stories with actual influence. All around India you find interesting and beautiful performances where creative and traditional aspects are mixed in several ways. An artistic quest is going on in learning, in searching, in discovering, exploring and balancing. With different outcomes. I believe that knowledge of both worlds will enrich students of the arts. \*



## ROAD WITH NO END

~~~ Pritham K. Chakravarthy ~~~

*Pritham Chakravarthy* is a contemporary theatre actress and playwright. She performs in Tamil and English.

Growing up in a Brahmin ghetto, studying in a high-walled convent school, with no men but my own kith and kin, I began in cloistered surroundings. Though training in dance and music was a part of it, performance was never thought of as an option. So when I faltered into Sabha drama at the behest of my maternal uncle, it was only seen as a child's play. For some time, they thought, and then she would let it go. But I did not. Never thought of it.

Though I have been involved with Tamil theatre for over twenty years, developing my performing style into a specific form came about in 1996 by default when Gnani, a senior amongst Chennai theatre activists, was making a television serial on fifty years of India's independence. The script involved a dramatic performance of about four minutes. Gnani had done the script based on the recordings of Rathnabai, set in the early part of the last century and revolving around the stigma faced by middle class widows. When he called me to do it, time was limited and I had no clue about how I was going to do it. It evolved during the shooting, as a kind of 'sit-down-and-I-shall-tell-you-my-story.' Even then it did not have a definite form and was still in its maiden stage.

In 1998, my involvement with Voicing Silence (gender wing of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation) took this form to yet another level of maturity. A. Mangai, a theatre director based in Chennai, had returned full of ideas after her Fulbright scholarship. She had three interviews with women, which fascinated the two of us from the word 'go'. But reading out one of the scripts to friends did pall our energy to take it up as a performance script initially. 'The narration is linear; there is nothing dramatic or dynamic. What is fascinating about an old Dhobi woman talking about her life and donkeys? How do you term this theatre?'

The doubts raised were so loud that Mangai decided at the last moment to add a song, a chorus and possession dance, for the premier at Dalit Kalai Vizha (Dalit Arts Festival). I went on stage at 11.30. The piece was preceded by an Oppari (traditional lamentation) performance and to be followed with a Thappattam (a folk drum dance).