

Kathakali Dance

Many traditions in Hinduism include the use of dance as a form storytelling. Bharat Natyam (one of the more popular forms of Indian dance) (Courtney), Kuchipudi (from South-East India, composed of “graceful movements and [a] strong narrative”) (Courtney), and Manipuri (from North-East India, performed on religious occasions) (Courtney) are just a few of many dances that are found in India. Kathakali Dance is one such form that conveys a story to its audience through theatrical display. Kathakali Dance is thought to have originated in the seventeenth century and is defined by Caldwell in *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence, and Worship of the Goddess Kali* as “an operatic form of ritual theatre in Kerala” (Caldwell 286). The literal translation of the word Kathakali means “Story-Play” and has become a popular form of story-telling in India. As one source tells it, Kathakali came about when the Raja of the time had a dream where the Gods paid a visit and taught him a new type of dramatic dance (Barba 37). Over time the performances of Kathakali have changed slightly from their original form. In the beginning, masks were used on the actors, but later this changed to the use of makeup. The actors originally would carry out the two elements of the performance which was reciting the texts and acting them out. Now the actors take on a mime type role and are solely responsible for the acting portion of the performance and there are two accompanying singers with musicians that are responsible for the verbal telling of the story (Barba 37). It is expressed in one source that the alterations that Kathakali underwent (from the time it came to be, to the form that exists today) stopped its changes with the coming of the eighteenth century and it has remained the same from that time up until now (Barba 37).

The performance of Kathakali usual begins in the evening and lasts long into the night (Caldwell 72). It is themed around the Puranas (group of texts about ancient myths), the

Ramayana (epic tales about the Prince Rama) and the *Mahabharata* (The Great [Story of the] Descendants of Bharata) (Courtney). Kathakali uses a lot of different forms of communication in order to convey the story being told. These forms are seen in costume use, elaborate makeup, music, song, dance and verbal noises that are not in any language but are used to project an emotion. The common themes in Kathakali are the interactions between good and evil gods; they are always an interpretation of grand events that took place with the gods (Barba 38).

The costumes used are very pronounced and designed with the inclusion of bright colours and intricate patterns, where the makeup is very striking with colours that are just as rich as those on the costume. The costumes are thought by some scholars to have a borrowed element from another type of Indian dance called *mutiyettu* [which, unlike Kathakali, is more of a ritual act involving becoming possessed by the gods (Caldwell 252)] (Caldwell 77). But some scholars also think that *mutiyettu* borrowed ideas in the ways of makeup from Kathakali (Caldwell 77). Both costumes and makeup are very important elements within Kathakali, they help in inform the audience of which character is which, especially since the actors do not talk.

In order for recognition to take place, colours are given a general designation to a particular character for representation. For instance, green is the colour used on “Satvik characters – gods, heroes, and noble kings.” (Devi 95). A white beard is designated to a higher class monkey being, while a black beard represents “forest hunters” such as Lord Siva (Devi 95). A red beard on a character is the symbol for the main Kathakali demon, and all characters have their face painted in a way that accentuates the facial features (i.e. the eyes, eyebrows, and mouth) so that facial movements that are an important part of the dance are easily viewed (Devi 95).

The roles of women are traditionally played by men. What informs the audience of gender is the use of a smooth non-blemishing base makeup colour (usually white) that helps enhance such feminine characteristics as the eyes, eyebrows and the lips (Devi 87). Another type of female that is portrayed is the demon goddess, who is much more radical, including fangs and protruding wooden breasts (Devi 96). Good and evil is a major factor in Kathakali performances and so it is crucial for the audience to be able to recognize the nature of the characters. Such an example is the meanings behind the colours in makeup used on a characters face, with green usually meaning good, red meaning anger and black meaning evil (Devi 90). The costumes worn also help in determining the type of character being portrayed. The male gods tend to have a wide circumference to the base of their outfits which are quite similar to dresses but do not go down to the floor allowing for the feet to still be seen (Courtney). The female characters tend to have more slimming dresses that reach closer to the floor, and the demon goddess character has a wider dress that looks a lot like the males outfits but involves more black and dark colours to convey the presence of evil (Courtney).

The story is narrated by individuals that do not take part in the acting. The story is told in a language called *manipravalam*, which is “an artificial courtly literary language combining Malayalam and Sanskrit” (Caldwell 17). The singers are also accompanied by a variety of instruments which largely consist of different percussion instruments. There are four main instruments, three being different styles of drums and the fourth being cymbals (Courtney). The other instruments include a conch shell, gong, and trumpet. (Devi 87) The actors add to the suspense of the story through the use of the beat, adding emphasis for a dramatic scene, and a build up of energy for a climatic rise.

Due to the fact that the actors have no vocal roles in Kathakali, they must convey the story through dance, hand gestures and facial expressions. Certain hand movements or swaying of the body or placing of the feet convey specific meanings. It could mean such things as a river, a cave or the growing of a lotus flower (Devi 104-105). The hands, and more particularly the fingers positions and movements are a type of sign language (*mudras*) used to express the alphabet in a type of Sanskrit language (Barba 38). The story is told not only in the movement of the limbs but also what is expressed on the face. The eyes have a very active role in the Kathakali and it is something that the actors have to be trained in, to be able to perform properly, for the eyes are to move with the arms and hands, with a lot of eye rolling and shaking, they are almost always moving (*Nritta Drishti* which means ‘dancing of the eyes’) (Devi 106). An example of the silent communication that takes place through the movement of the face can be seen in the expression of fear where the actor “raises one eyebrow, then the other, opens his eyes wide, moves his eyeballs laterally and rapidly, his nostrils flare out, his cheeks tremble and his head revolves in jerky motions.” (Barba 39-40). Although the actors have no lines to speak, they do include yells, screams, and cries to emphasize the events taking place in certain parts of the performance (Devi 106).

Kathakali dance has survived up to present day and are still performed. The stories told through the form of dance have the power to reach out and touch its audience without them having to be able to understand the language. With the aid of costumes and the actions of the interpretive actors, even if no means is conveyed the performance is still able to captivate.

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Article written by: Christina Erickson (April 2010) who is solely responsible for its content