

The Natyasastra
and the
Body in Performance

*Essays on Indian Theories
of Dance and Drama*

Edited by SREENATH NAIR

Foreword by M. KRZYSZTOF BYRSKI



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Foreword

M. Krzysztof Byrski

The Naryasastra, the ancient Indian treatise on theatre ascribed to Bharatamuni, can hardly be matched anywhere in the world. Neither the earlier Aristotle nor the much later Zeami, nor ancient Chinese sources, so far as I can judge, equal the precision or comprehensiveness of Bharatamuni's text on the art of theatre. Apart from highly methodical and detailed descriptions of all important component arts that, taken together, make theatre, the Naryasastra defines this art as the very nature of the human world (*loka*) made perceptible with the help of actors using four means of expression, literally termed the "leads" (*abhinayas*): body gestures, speech, power of expression and costumes together with stage props. Thus theatre, by extricating human reality from the shackles of time and space and transporting it onto the stage and by the same token "departicularizing" it (*sadharanikarana*), allows each spectator to experience such "reality." Thus theatre, by means of deparicularized emotions leads us unto the experience of *rasa*, tantamount to the experience of *ananda*, i.e., satisfaction, which stems equally from happiness (*sukha*) and from despair (*duhkha*). The only requirement on the part of the spectator is "to have a heart" (*sabridaya*)—that is, be capable of experiencing emotions.

Sreenath Nair has gathered in one collection essays penned by dedicated scholars of repute, thus making a lasting contribution to the debate on the value of India's fascinating contribution to the universal art of theatre. We may justifiably expect that the ideas found in these essays may reinvigorate the interest of the Western theatremakers in the classical Indian theatre. In his introduction Nair asks a series of questions, all of which basically boil down to one fundamental query: Is the content of the monumental work still relevant for us today, and also outside the strict perimeters of Indian civilization? Nair leaves no doubt in the exhaustive introduction that ancient Indian theatrical

Comedy, Consciousness and the Natyasastra

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe

In the eighteenth century, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) axiomatically declared that there could be no doubt about the purpose of human life, if there ever was one: bliss. The mind has to put in much effort by way of diligence to achieve bliss; we have to make many sacrifices to achieve approval for pleasure from reason, and we have to buy the pleasures of the senses through many deprivations or bear much suffering if we overdo sensory pleasure. In contrast, the arts create pleasure without prior payment through remorse and without sacrifice. This is the reason why Schiller argued further, society has mixed feelings about pleasure. The purpose of all art is to create pleasure. In everyday life we derive pleasure from many sources, accounting for individual differences. Other areas of life may bring pleasure as a side effect, but in art, pleasure is the central aim. Pleasure, enabled through art, is a way of fulfilling our highest purpose in nature. Anything that achieves our purpose in nature must be morally good. Art becomes a means towards moral behavior. Thus art itself must be morally good (1897). What precisely is it in the work of art that creates pleasure? Schiller maintains that it is the combination of form (comedy or tragedy, for example) and content (love, intrigue). Form is the ordering, structuring, enhancing or balancing of ordinary sensory impressions. The appreciation of the ordering process, and the result, give pleasure. This is pleasure of the imagination, whereas pleasure of the senses arises through direct sensual impressions. Orderliness, structure, enhancement and balance are perceived as beautiful. Art thus creates pleasure through beauty.

In the context of theater, both comedy and tragedy free the spirit, but through different means. Comedy leads to a state of indifference; if comedy

deals with a topic or event that would normally affect our moral feelings, then comedy has to neutralize the impact of that topic of event. For example, in Shakespeare's *King Lear* the daughters' ingratitude affects our moral feeling. In comedy, ingratitude has to come across as something natural. While tragedy makes us suffer with the person who suffers ingratitude, in comedy we must be led to find the person who expects gratitude ridiculous. Comedy leads its spectators to a state that is

calm, clear, free, cheerful. We feel neither active nor passive, we observe, and everything remains outside of ourselves; this is the state of the gods, who are not concerned with anything human, who are hovering freely above everything, who are not moved by any fate and not bound by any law [1792].¹

It is a state of happy balance. Schiller writes:

Imagine, however, the pleasure to see, in a poetic rendering, everything mortal extinguished, pure light, pure freedom—no shadow, no boundaries, nothing of all that [1855].²

Consciousness and the *Natyasastra*

A view from current, twenty-first century consciousness studies supports this view, and enables us to make more sense of the experiences that Schiller relates to comedy. According to the model of the mind in the Vedānta tradition of Indian philosophy, there are three basic states of consciousness, waking, dreaming and sleeping. During the waking state of consciousness, several *functions* of consciousness can be differentiated, including decision-making, thinking, emotions, and intuition. Vedānta postulates a fourth state of consciousness which serves as the basis of the states of waking, dreaming and sleeping, and their related functions. The fourth state, referred to as *pure consciousness*, or *samadhi* in Sanskrit, is without contents, but fully awake. It has been described, albeit in different terms, across cultures. W.T. Stace, for example, writes about *pure unitary consciousness* in the context of Christian mystic experiences (1960). If pure consciousness is experienced not only briefly, and “just” on its own, but together with waking or dreaming or sleeping, according to Vedānta higher states of consciousness have been achieved.

Pure consciousness is precisely, as Schiller argued, pure balance, pure enhancement, pure order, pure structure—abstract, containing expressed balance, enhancement, order, and structure within it in seed form. Pure consciousness on its own is indifferent to any sensory impression, to any feeling or thought, just as the cinema screen is indifferent to the projections of the images onto it. Pure consciousness is pure calmness, clarity, light, freedom,

and bliss. The relevance of pure consciousness for the understanding of comedy becomes even clearer with reference to the specific further development of Vedānta philosophy by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whose model of consciousness, based on Vedānta philosophy, is widely discussed in the growing interdisciplinary debate about consciousness (Shear and Jevning 1999). He argues that when “odd or sharply contrasting things are closely juxtaposed, the space between them is made lively” (Orme-Johnson and Anderson 2010: 152) Conventionally, comedy is considered to create laughter by breaking expectations through the means of juxtaposition of contrasting opposites. That space between the contrasting things, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi points out, is pure consciousness, the silent field of life that underlies all manifest existence just as the unmoving, silent levels of water at the very depths of an ocean underlie the ever-changing manifestations of the waves. “Our awareness of this underlying silent field of life thrills us and makes us laugh” (Orme-Johnson and Anderson 2010: 152) Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has cognized the importance of the space, or the gaps, between the sounds. The gaps, thus, are anything but simply empty, or insignificant. Maharishi’s cognition has been called *Apauruṣheya Bāsḥya*, uncreated commentary, indicating that the structure of the Veda provides its own commentary. The first word of *Rigveda* can illustrate the principles and processes involved.

The first word of the *Rigveda* is *Agnim*. The sound of *A* represents the fullness of the absolute. The next sound, *G*, represents the collapse of fullness in a point value. There is a gap between *A* and *G*, and between this first syllable and the next one, etc. Following the first syllable of *Rigveda*, *AG*, sound collapses into the gap, just as fullness (*A*) had collapsed into point value (*G*). The gap thus also represents a point value in the sequential development of *Rigveda*: it is characterized by non-fullness, absolute emptiness. The fullness of *A* or the previous sound/syllable is still latent, but no longer expressed (Volkamer 1983: 179). Without going into detail, the collapse from *A* to *G* can be shown to consist of eight distinct stages. The eight stages of collapse of *A* to *G* are elaborated in the eight syllables of the first phrase (*Pada*) of *Rigveda*.³ Those eight syllables correspond, in turn, to the eight *Apra Prariti*: *AG*—*Ahamkara*; *NI*—*Buddhi*; *MI*—*Manas*; *LE*—*Akasha*; *PU*—*Vayu*; *RO*—*Agni*; *HI*—*Jala*; *TAM*—*Prithivi*. In this structure, there are 8 gaps: the first within the first syllable, between *A* and *G*, and thereafter between the syllables, i.e., between *AG* and *NI*, between *NI* and *MI*, between *MI* and *LE*, and so on.

Three such *Padas* (phrases) of eight syllables each make up the first verse (*Richa*) of *Rigveda*. The first *Pada* expresses the eight *Praritis* with respect to the *Rishi* aspect of the absolute (the observer or experiencer). The second *Pada* with respect to *Devata* (the observed or experienced object), the third

Pada with respect to *Chhandas* (the process of observation or experience). Together, this first verse (*Richa*), constituted of three phrases (*Pada*) of eight syllables (*Akshara*) each, shows twenty-four gaps (*Sandhis*). Out of those gaps, twenty-four further *Padas* emerge, constituting *Richas* 2–9. *Richas* 2–9 together have 192 gaps and 192 syllables. They give rise to the 192 hymns (*Suktas*) that make up the first (circle, or book, of the *Rig Veda*). In turn, the 192 gaps between the 192 *Suktas* of the first *Mandala* give rise to the 192 *Suktas* of the tenth *Mandala*. Finally, all the gaps between the nine *Richas* of the first *Sukta* are elaborated in *Mandalas* Two to Nine, thus completing the entire *Rig Veda*. Comedy, enlivening the gap, thus arises from, and leads to an experience of pure consciousness. Pure consciousness is experienced as bliss, which, according to Schiller, is the purpose of life.

Pure consciousness, finally, provides a conceptual and experiential link between comedy as a literary and dramatic genre and as an experience in the theatre, within the context of the ancient Indian treatise on drama and theatre, the *Natyasastra*. All aspects of human life find their representation in *natya* (drama), and that includes laughter (NS 1: 107^a), and one of the impacts on the spectator of watching *natya* will be amusement (NS 1: 111–112). Thus, each performance has to begin with a clearly defined set of “preliminaries,” actions intended to prepare actors and spectators for the performance. Central to such preliminaries is the *trigata*, the *Three Men Talk*, a conversation between the director (*sutradhara*), and two assistants. One of the assistants takes on the role of a Jester, *vidushaka* (NS 5: 28–29). In its description of the *Three Men Talk*, the *Natyasastra* points out that the Jester “should come in and deliver a discourse consisting mostly of irrelevant words to excite the smile of the Director” (NS 5: 137–138). The comic nature of the discourse is explored further, suggesting that it is not entirely comical, and certainly not meaningless, but serves, in its comical and amusing way, the purpose of “leading to the plot of the play” in a way that does raise some controversy in relation to a topic explicitly qualified as “not unpleasant.” The dispute will be between the two assistants, one of whom is the Jester. The other assistant finds fault with the Jester’s words, but the Director supports the Jester (NS 5: 138–141).

Comedy as *Rasa*

Comedy is ingrained in *Natyasastra* not only through this introductory character, but at a much deeper level, indeed at the very core of the aesthetic conceptualization of the dramatic event in the theatre, *rasa*, defined as the aesthetic experience created within the spectator by the actor through the means of acting he employs. In specific situations in the play (determinants),

the actors employ means of histrionic representation (consequents) to achieve *rasa*. In this process, dominant states (*sthaiyi bhava*) combine with transitory states (*vyaibhicali bhava*) and temperamental states (*sattvika bhava*).

The *Natyasastra* describes eight, of which the second is the comic, *hasya*. Its dominant state is mirth, its transitory state joy. It arises from the erotic *rasa*: “A mimicry of the Erotic [sentiment] is called the comic ...” (NS 6: 39–41). Abhinavagupta provides further information in his commentary on the *Natyasastra* to the effect that

desire is common to all beings and the appeasement of it pleases. Therefore, *srīngara* [the erotic *rasa*] has been chosen as the first *rasa*. *Srīngara* carries a lighter vein of humour along with it. *Hasya* (humour) is conducive to *srīngara*. Therefore, *Hasya* (humour) is the second *rasa* [Rai 1992: 94].

According to Tarlekar, Abhinavagupta further comments that laughter is produced from impropriety (1991: 57). When *Hasya* relates to *Srīngara*, it does not weaken *srīngara*. “But when *Hasya* arises out of the impropriety of sentiments like the Pathetic etc., that sentiment is at once weakened, as it becomes ridiculous” (1991: 57). Rai refers to Sharadatanaya, a further commentator on the *Natyasastra*:

When Parvati entered into copulative act with the knotted-haired, the stave-wearing, the perpetually enjoying Shiva, a great laughter arose among the (women) friends of Parvati. Hence, *hasya rasa* took roots from *srīngara* [1992: 95].

According to the *Natyasastra*, the color associated with the comic *rasa* is white (NS 6: 42–43), and the presiding deity of the comic is *Pramathas*.

In its detailed description of the comic *rasa* (*hasya*), the *Natyasastra* explains that *laughter* is the dominant emotion at the basis of *hasya*. The Determinants (situations in the play when the creation of the *rasa* is appropriate) are “showing unseemly dress or ornament, impudence, greediness, quarrel, defective limb, use of irrelevant words, mentioning of different faults, and similar other things” (NS 6: 47–48). The Consequents (means of histrionic representation to present *hasya* on stage are “throbbing of the lips, the nose and the cheek, opening the eyes wide or contracting them, perspiration, colour of the face, and taking hold of the sides” (p.110). Transitory states in it are “indolence, dissimulation, drowsiness, sleep, dreaming, insomnia, envy and the like” (NS 6: 47–48). The comic *rasa* is described by the *Natyasastra* as being of two kinds: a person may laugh him/herself, or he/she makes others laugh. *Hasya* is therefore either self-centered or centered in others. This “sentiment is mostly to be seen in women and persons of the inferior type” (NS 6: 51).

The characteristics of the comic *rasa* are further differentiated with regard

to their intensity, and associated with the types of person for whom different intensities are associated. Thus there are the slight smile, and the smile for persons of the superior type, gentle laughter and laughter of ridicule for persons of middling type, and vulgar laughter and excessive or violent laughter for persons of the inferior type. Depending on the source, the slight smile is also referred to as gentle smile (Rai 1992: 78), the laughter of ridicule as ridiculous laughter (Rai 1992: 78) or satirical laughter (Rangacharya 1966: 54), the vulgar laughter as uproarious laughter (Rai 1992: 78) or silly laughter (Rangacharya 1966: 54), and the violent laughter as convulsive (Rai 1992: 78) or loud laughter (Rangacharya 1966: 54).

The slight smile, the Naryasastra explains further, "should be characterised by slightly blown cheeks and elegant glances, and in it the teeth should not be visible" (NS 6: 54), while the smile of superior people is portrayed by "blooming eyes, face and cheeks, and in it the teeth should be slightly visible" (NS 6: 55). Gentle laughter is expressed through "slight sound, and sweetness [...] and in it the eyes and the cheeks should be contracted and the face joyful" (NS 6: 56). During laughter of ridicule, "the nose should be expanded, the eyes should be squinting, and the shoulder and head should be bent" (NS 6: 57). Vulgar laughter is defined as laughter that comes at unsuitable moments, with tears in the eyes, or shoulders and head shaking violently (6: 58), while in excessive laughter, the "eyes are expanded and tearful sound is loud and excessive, and the sides are covered by hands" (NS 6: 59). The causes of the comic *rasa* are the same as for the terrible *rasa*: "of limbs, dress and words" (NS 6: 77).

The dominant state relating to *hasya rasa* is laughter, caused by Determinants such as "mimicry of others' actions, incoherent talk, obtrusiveness, foolishness and the like" (NS 7: 9). The transitory states related to the comic *rasa* are apprehension, envy, weariness, inconstancy, dreaming, sleeping, dissimulation (NS 7: 109). The Naryasastra provides a considerable amount of detailed description of the movements of different parts of the body in relation to achieving *rasa*. In the context of the comic *rasa*, the following stand out. With reference to the depiction of *glances*, the Naryasastra provides this guidance: "the two eyelids are by turns contracted and they open with the eyeballs moving and slightly visible" (8:46, p. 153); and "*Hrsta*: The Glance which is moving slightly bent, and in which eyeballs are not wholly visible, and there is winking, is called *Hrsta* (joyful); it is used in laughter" (NS 8: 54). There is further material with reference to the eyes, eyebrows, nose, cheeks, lower lips, chin, mouth, and color of the face.

Chapter 13 of the Naryasastra deals with the gaits that are appropriate to different characters in different situations, again with the aim of describing how the gait contribute to the creation of the appropriate *rasa*. Only middling

and inferior characters relate to the comic *rasa*. "In their astonishment and joy they are to take swift and short steps in all directions and in their laughter, too, they are to take to this and similar foot movements" (NS 13: 59–60). The Jester is described in the Naryasastra as having a gait consisting of "simple laughable steps with feet raised high [and put forward]" (NS 13: 137–140). This kind of gait is related to three kinds of laughter, in relation to the limbs, such as ugly and big teeth, a hunchback, lameness or a distorted face, in relation to words, such as talking incoherently, meaninglessly, unnaturally, or uttering obscene words, and in relation to costume, such as tattered clothes, or being covered in ink or lamp-black (NS 13: 137–146).

Suitable language is the topic at the center of Chapter 18, where the Naryasastra indicates that the appropriate language for the Jester is *pracya*, with "an abundance of pleonastic *Ka*" (NS 18: 18.50). The way the language is written needs to comply with specific rules in order to achieve the best impact on the development of *rasa*. These must be reflected in the recitation of the language, ranging from notes (the comic *rasa* is to be rendered in the *svaras* (notes) of *Madhyama* and *Pancama* (NS 19: 18–37), in the accent circumflex (*svarita*) (NS 19: 43); the intonation must be slow (NS 19: 58–59). The enunciation for the comic *rasa* "should include Presentation, Separation, Brilliance and Calming" (NS 19: 58–59). Presentation is further defined as "reciting something by filling up the auditorium with graceful modulation of voice," Separation "is due to pause," Brilliance "means the gradually augmented notes which proceed from the three voice registers, and Calming means lowering the notes of high pitch without making them discordant" (NS 19: 58–59). Finally, the tempo of the notes should be medium for the comic *rasa*.

Comedy, *Rasa* and Pure Consciousness

I have argued in detail that the experience of *rasa* combines the experience of pure consciousness and the theatre-specific contents of any given performance (2005). Pure consciousness is devoid of any contents, aware only of itself. Its coexistence, in experience, with waking or dreaming or sleeping, is characteristic of higher states of consciousness. The experience of *rasa*, then, is an experience of a higher state of consciousness. In a performance that complies fully with the multiple rules and suggestions contained in the Naryasastra, the actor experiences *rasa* and thus a higher state of consciousness. The actors' art and their experience of *rasa* have an impact on the experience of the spectator. Spectators observe the actors' movements, their costume and make up, and their language, and, on a more subtle level, spectators sense the actors' pure consciousness. This holistic reception process leads, in the spectator, to development

of consciousness in the sense that any physical, emotional, or mental obstacles to the experience of pure consciousness together with the contents of the performance, i.e., any obstacles to the experience of *rasa*, are removed. Such potential obstacles are related to the contents of plays, to the events depicted, to the characters featured—the Naryasastra depicts everyday situations, with everyday problems and issues, which mirror those of the audience, whether they are aware of it or not. All of those events and characters are presented in such a way that not only does the nature of the events and characters become very clear but all the means of histrionic representation, of acting that the actors employ to express those details of events and characters, serve to bring about the experience of pure consciousness, and with it the experience of higher states of consciousness. In the combination with pure consciousness, as *rasa* in the performance context, any events, characters, or character traits that could be considered undesirable under everyday circumstances, shed their undesirable nature and are elevated to contents of aesthetic experience. Thus elevated, they trigger the removal of obstacles to the experience of pure consciousness where they exist in actors and spectators. By further definition of a higher state of consciousness, because its experience is suffused with pure consciousness, its contents cannot be detrimental to anyone, neither the person who experiences the higher state of consciousness, nor anyone else.

Some essential characteristics of comedy as described in the Naryasastra are problematic from a contemporary perspective. In line with much comedy writing and theory of comedy in the West, there is, in the Naryasastra, an emphasis on more lowly characters, “middling” and “inferior,” and women come in the same category. Much fun is made of things that would be controversial today, such as people’s congenital issues, for example, lameness, facial distortion, problems with speaking, or a physical deformity like a hunchback. It is important to understand these potentially problematic implications of the Naryasastra in more depth, so as to do the text full justice.

It is possible, to start with, that the text of the Naryasastra itself is corrupt in the passages that appear problematic: there may be later additions that are based on misunderstandings or reflect a deterioration of taste and ethics characteristic of the time when the additions were composed and added. Further textual studies may provide evidence as to whether this is a viable argument.

Assuming, however, for the moment that the Sanskrit Naryasastra is not corrupt, there may be issues with the translation. The information about the comic *rasa* provided above is based on the 1950 translation of the Naryasastra by Ghosh. Cross-referencing to other translations does not reveal any differences. Assuming, further, that the translations are accurate, there is a possible clue for the problematic aspects of the Naryasastra in relation to the comic *rasa* in the Naryasastra’s own claim that drama (*natya*) presents everything

there is in life, good, bad and neutral, across all human castes and all lower and higher non-human beings, including animals and gods. The Naryasastra’s main purpose is to restore the Golden Age, which has just begun to deteriorate into the Silver Age. While the Golden Age was characterized by life at all levels in accordance with natural law, or divine law, and thus free from problems or difficulties of any kind, problems and illness and undesirable aspects have entered life with the onset of the Silver Age. These are being depicted in *natya*, rather than silenced or ignored; there are, in the world in the Silver Age, people who are stupid, who behave foolishly, who have speech defects on physical defects, and there are others who, in their ignorance, laugh about those characteristics of human appearance and behavior that deviate from the “norm.”

Conclusion

The Indian philosophical or religious context of reincarnation might provide further perspective for this discussion. This context assumes that people are reborn after they have died; the new life is the result of actions in previous lives. In consequence, someone’s birth with features or behavior that deviate from the norm, the way they cope with such deviation, and especially the amount of suffering resulting from the deviation, such as physical pain, and any suffering resulting from the way such people are treated by other people, can all be accounted for as things they received in immediate, direct, reaction to behavior in previous lives—not as a simplistic punishment, but as an expression of a natural law, which provides them with the opportunity to address the issues they were born to tackle. An awareness of these processes of reincarnation may make it easier for spectators to laugh at the outward signs of deviance from the norm, in particular in the context of a theatre performance, where there is at the same time an awareness that they are not in the presence of a person who is really mentally or physically disabled, but in the presence of an actor.

Expanding the discussion of the problematic aspects of the Naryasastra’s position on the comic *rasa* even further, and beyond the strictly Indian context, it is possible to contextualize particularly the apparently misogynistic attitude inherent in the suggestion that the comic *rasa* is predominantly to be found with inferior characters and women. According to St. Germain, one of the Ascended Masters in theosophy and other esoteric traditions, the purpose for souls to be incarnated as humans on the planet earth is for them to be able to develop the feminine side of their nature, irrespective of whether they are born as man or woman (2004: 87). It stands to reason that under such conditions, a high level of opposition against and unfairness towards women will represent

the starting point that needs to be recognized and acknowledged before change can be implemented.

NOTES

1. Ruhig, klar, frei, heiter, wir fühlen uns weder tätig noch leidend, wir schauen an, und alles bleibt außer uns; dies ist der Zustand der Götter, die sich um nichts Menschliches bekümmern, die über allem frei schweben, die kein Schicksal berührt, die kein Gesetz zwingt.
2. Denken Sie sich aber den Genuss, in einer poetischen Darstellung alles Sterbliche ausgelöscht, lauter Licht, lauter Freiheit, lauter Vermögen—keinen Schatten, keine Schranken, nichts von dem allen mehr zu sehen (1855).
3. The first verse of Rigveda is transliterated as Agnim ile purohitam/yagyasya devam ritwijam/hotram rauna dhatamam (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi 1997, 151–2). This is the conventional translation: Laud Agni, the chosen Priest, God, minister of sacrifice, the hotar, lavisher of wealth (Griffiths 1896).
4. All references are to the Ghosh translation of the Natyasastra.

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