

Notes and Queries

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When goddess turns spectator: on multiple audiences in *Tholpava Koothu* performance in Kerala

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Abstract

This article presents a unique performance practised in Kerala called Tholpava Koothu and discusses a highly enigmatic attribute of it – what Stuart Blackburn interestingly termed ‘the absent audience’. The article, whilst discussing the fascinating issue of the absent audience, takes forward Blackburn’s insightful perceptions and elaborates on the multiple audiences within the performance by dwelling at length upon the performer’s self as audience, co-performer as audience, narrative audience (sub-categorized into matrix-narrative audience and embedded-narrative audience), ritualistic audience and conventional audience. The article delineates how a notional audience can make theatre happen and bring it to a totality of being.

Keywords

*Tholpava Koothu
Pulavar
Koothu Madom
Ramayana
notional audience*

... the puppeteers stepped down from the drama-house and headed for home in the heatless air of early morning; and as we sat in the roadside tea stall waiting for a bus, I took stock of what I had witnessed. These five men, really three men and two teenagers, whom I barely knew and who appeared unremarkable in their slightly soiled vestis and rumpled shirts, had just completed an extraordinary exhibition of verbal art. Yet something was missing. Sipping the weak tea and looking around, I realized that they were alone—no one had congratulated them after they put down the puppets; no one had even greeted them. What had been invisible during the marathon inside the drama-house was inescapable in the daylight outside: these men had performed for themselves.

(Stuart Blackburn 1996)

So, there can be theatre without audience!

When *Tholpava Koothu* is performed night after night in the Bhadra Kali¹ temples in northern Kerala, a state in the south of India, there is hardly any audience to watch the show. Yet the drums play on, the bells jingle, the puppets dance and the *Pulavars* sing on and interpret hundreds

- 1 Bhadra Kali is the Hindu Mother Goddess, benign and terrible. The name Kali is derived from the word ‘kala’, which means both ‘black’ and ‘time’. Kali is black and transcends time. She creates and nourishes the good, kills and destroys evil. She has an awe-inspiring appearance – luxuriant dishevelled hair, protruding tongue and bulging eyes. She holds up a bloody sword in one hand and freshly severed head in another. She wears a girdle of human arms and a garland of skulls.

- 2 *Kamba Ramayana* is the Tamil poet Kambar's version of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, titled *Ramavataram*. Kambar lived in the twelfth century in the culturally rich Tanjavore district in Tamil Nadu.
- 3 Chapter 1 of Blackburn's *Inside the Drama-House* book is titled 'An Absent Audience'. In 'Searching for an Audience', a subsection of the chapter, Blackburn says, 'This realization was the starting point of my research on the puppet play – not the Rama story, not the puppets, not even Kampan's text, although it did intrigue me, but this curious aspect of the puppet-play performance, the absent audience, for which I was entirely unprepared.'
- 4 Bhagavathi means 'goddess' in Sanskrit. It is a common name used to refer to any of the Hindu goddesses like Durga, Parvati, Saraswati, Lakshmi or like Kali in Malayalam, the language of Kerala.

of verses from *Kamba Ramayana*,² from nightfall till daybreak. But who are the puppeteers playing for?

This article presents a unique performance practised in Kerala, and discusses a highly enigmatic attribute of it – what Stuart Blackburn interestingly termed 'the absent audience'.³ The article, while discussing the fascinating issue of absent audience, takes forward Blackburn's insightful perceptions by elaborating on the multiple audiences within the performance. The article delineates how a notional audience can make theatre happen and bring to it a totality of being.

Tholpava Koothu

Thol-pava-koothu or leather-puppet-play is shadow puppetry performed in the Bhagavathy⁴ temples in north Kerala during the festival season. The performance is held in the *Koothu Madom* – a permanent structure specially built for the purpose, about eleven and a half metres long. A milky white cloth-screen, three and a half feet wide, is stretched across the length of the structure and beneath the white screen is a black cloth-screen, also three and a half feet wide. On this white sky are projected beautiful, coloured shadows of puppets made of animal skin. Inside the screen, the puppeteers make the puppets swish and swirl and enact *Kamba Ramayana*, which tells the story of Rama's life until his coronation. A pair of puppeteers, one lead person and a respondent, recites and interprets the selected *Kamba Ramayana* verses – nearly 3000 in number, with the lead narrator reciting and interpreting and the respondent assenting with a drone sound or asking questions (see Image 1).

Though *Kamba Ramayana* was written only around the twelfth century A.D., *Tholpava Koothu* is supposed to have existed prior to this time. An older



Image 1: Photo taken at Trivandrum on 26 July 2008. Photo by Hari Shankar.

version of *Ramayana* must have existed before Kamban's text was borrowed for the performance. In most of the temples, the performance goes on for 21 days, but not many people watch the play. A few turn up to watch special events, but on most days the performance attracts no human eyes. However, the absence of audience in the conventional sense of the term is amply compensated by the presence of a multiplicity of audiences within the performance – implied or imagined. These multiple audiences include:

- Performer's self as audience
- Co-performer as audience
- Narrative audience
 - Matrix-narrative audience
 - Embedded-narrative audience
- Ritualistic audience
- Conventional audience

Performer's self as audience

Self-spectating in a rigorous way is demanded from the lead performer of *Tholpava Koothu*. He watches every line he utters, taking care not to repeat himself lest he loses the title *Pulavar*. The lead narrator of *Tholpava Koothu*, who recites verses from Kamban and interprets them, is respectfully called *Pulavar*. This title, which means 'scholar', requires the performer to answer any question put to him by the respondent who makes a pair with him during the narration. Another condition to be eligible for the title is that the performer must go on and on through the night, without repeating himself. If he repeats, he falls from the lofty pedestal and does not merit the title *Pulavar*. In an interview, Ramachandra Pulavar, one of the very few practising artists of *Tholpava Koothu* today, said,

The respondent can put any question to the *Pulavar* as he is expected to have a fairly good idea of everything under the sun. When *Pulavar* the lead narrator speaks of Rama's living in the forest in a small haven, the respondent may ask him about the ideal measurements for a hermitage. When he mentions Sita was with child when she was sent away to the forest, questions may be put to him about the care to be given to a pregnant lady. He may also have to answer queries relating to philosophy or astrology or Vedic rites. He is expected to be able to say something on every topic so that the story moves forward grippingly depicting new things. Another interesting stipulation is that the *Pulavar* should not repeat himself during a night's recital. If he does that, he is no *Pulavar* (scholar). (Interview, 26 July 2008)

The inimitable variety that is demanded from the *Tholpava Koothu* narrators is achieved by their deviating into digressions. The basic text, which is Kamban's *Ramayana*, is recited, but they nimbly slip into the narration of stories, episodes, explanations and instances, which provide scope for the display of their originality and scholarship. Gopal Venu explains:

During the performance, the artistes offer explanations and interpretations of the verses as demanded by the context. Sometimes, this commentary on a verse or a couplet lasts for hours. Furthermore, the puppeteer, when he relates a story, tends to digress though with a show of relevance and introduces topics of interest to common people. For instance, in the first day's play there is the description of the attention received by the queens of Dasaratha during the period of pregnancy. At this point, the puppeteer himself becomes an Ayurvedic practitioner, offering detailed instructions to be followed right from conception till confinement. Similarly, the sixth day's story describes Anasuya, the wife of Atri Maharshi, relating to Sita the qualities of a chaste wife. Here the puppeteer reaches poetic heights as he describes the ideals of Indian womanhood. Thus the story-teller is constantly looking for opportunities to digress into Ayurveda, astrology, architecture and allied topics.

(Venu 1990: 26)

Audiences in a conventional play-house communicate with the performer on stage through spoken messages or gestures. The audience's perceptions of the performer and his acting thus get transmitted to the actor, and that shapes and impacts on his performance on stage. The audience consequently produces a *Looking Glass Effect* on the actor: he experiences an effect akin to that of watching himself in a mirror. The impression of the actor's performance received by the audience and their responses to it boost or mar the actor's confidence and affect his performance. The same effect is produced when the narrator self-spectates in *Tholpava Koothu*. He watches his own self, assesses his performance and ascertains whether or not he measures up to the standard set for the title of *Pulavar*. The process keeps him awake through the night and compels him to vary his utterances dexterously. He thus goes on and on, competing with himself and making all possible efforts to please the spectator in him (see Image 2).

Co-performer as audience

Tell us, Indra, how did Ravana feel when he entered the palace?

He was disgraced. Having lost his chariot, he walked on foot, dragging his long arms along the ground, just as the sun set in the west.

He entered just as the sun set – Is there any special meaning to that?

(Richman 1992: 167)

A pair of puppeteers, the narrator and the respondent, sits behind the stretched cloth-screen on which the shadows are played and together they elaborate on the life of Rama in the form of questions and answers. The interaction and reciprocity between the narrator and the respondent elevates the respondent from the position of a passive listener. He turns into an active audience who leads the narrator on with his remarks and queries. The questions posed by the respondent make the recounting non-linear, and the story moves forward and backward in time and space as in



Image 2: Ramachandra Pulavar, just before a performance in Vylloppilli Samskriti Bhavan, Trivandrum on 26 July 2008. Photo by Hari Shankar.

a game. The verses from *Kamba Ramayana* are sung, but the actual performance is formed spontaneously as it happens. The questions of the respondent decide the course of narration by the lead performer who selects the narrative, foregrounds the requested information and builds a fascinating commentary, thus bringing into being a *Game Theatre* in which the moves of performance get determined by the strategic action and counter-action between the puppeteers. In the conventional theatre, too, the co-actor on stage functions as a live determinant whose actions, reactions and interaction significantly influence the performance of an actor. However, in the majority of conventional performances, the moves of actors are more or less pre-decided by the rules and dialogues of the show, whereas in *Tholpava Koothu* spontaneity is built into the scheme of the performance. In it, the lead narrator has to play and respond to the questions sung by the respondent, and this makes it virtually a verbal game.

Tholpava Koothu, then, is a game theatre in which the respondent acts as an external guide whose point of view orientates the narrative. At times, he even succeeds in shattering the facade of divinity which encompasses the entire narrative and makes the familiar holy story look unfamiliar and hilarious. For example, when Ravana's son Indrajith, who wielded the highly potent snake-weapon, is walking round the battlefield talking to the Standard Bearer, the Standard Bearer tells Indrajith that he would stab and kill those left half-dead by the snake-weapon.

Who's this lying here?

It's Nalan, the one who built the causeway to Lanka by carrying all those stones on his head.

A contractor, huh?

Yes. Give the 'boss' a good stab.

And this one?

That's Blue-Man (Nilan).

Oh, I need some of that.

Of what?

You see, my wife hasn't washed her sari for a week and . . .

Not blue-soap (nilam), stupid! Blue-Man. Besides, do you wash your wife's saris?

If you saw them, you'd understand why no one else would touch them.

Anyway, who is low enough to be my washerman?

(Richman 1992: 166)

In this way, the respondent listens to and leads the oral game, with the narrator playing to his tune. No one else may listen, but the respondent does, as he is bound by the rules of this unique game theatre to create conversations and to take the tale forward.

Narrative audience

Matrix-narrative audience

The narrative in *Tholpava Koothu* functions at two levels, with a *matrix narrative* and an *embedded narrative*. The main function of the matrix narrative is to introduce the preliminary rituals, such as singing the glory of the gods and propitiating them, as well as preparing the way for the embedded narrative, which tells the story of Rama's life, as in *Kamba Ramayana*. This task is carried out by a few Brahmin puppets after the initial rites of sanctifying the stage, invoking the blessings of Ganapathy, Saraswathy, Maha Vishnu and others, are over. The Brahmin puppets appear on the screen talking with the puppeteer and assuring him of their audienceship. They act as the relators of the matrix narrative as well as the audience of the embedded narrative. They enter the screen talking thus.

Puppeteer:

Oh, Mallika Pattar, won't you come?

Mallika Pattar:

Yes, I have come, I have come.

Puppeteer:

Oh, Somasu Pattar, haven't you come?

Somasu Pattar:

Yes, I am here, I have come.

Puppeteer:

Oh, Mootha Pattar, have you arrived?

Mootha Pattar:

Yes, I have come, I am here.

Puppeteer:

Has Gangayadi Pattar come?

Gangayadi Pattar:

I have arrived, I am present here.

All Brahmins together:

Hari Hari Govinda! May Sri Rama be victorious! If Sri Rama wins and prospers, we will also have happiness and prosperity!

(Venu 1990: 34)

This roll-call of Brahmins is explained by a legend. It says that, ages ago, Chinna Thampi Vadhyar, a great scholar of *Ramayana*, wanted to listen to a recital of *Kamba Ramayana* in one of his neighbouring Brahmin houses. Being a low-caste Vellala Chetti, he was not allowed to sit in the company of Brahmins. Thus humiliated in public, Chinna Thampi made it his mission to study *Kamba Ramayana*. When he had mastered the great text, he decided to present it for one and all through the medium of shadow puppetry. The ritualistic calling of the rolls of the Brahmin puppets is a sweet revenge as well as a demonstration that even the high caste Brahmins are impressed by his scholarship as well as his art, and that they too fall in attendance to watch *Tholpava Koothu*. The Brahmin puppets, the key characters in the matrix narrative, take up the role of the *Sutradhars*⁵ and operate as principal coordinators who hold the strings of dramatic performance. They function as narrators as well as spectators, sing praises of Maha Vishnu and extol the greatness of *yagas*⁶ which are performed for the good of mankind. However, when the puppeteers offer salutations to their predecessors, who were great masters of shadow puppetry, the Brahmin puppets disappear from the screen as they think it unbecoming to be present when the low-caste masters are praised. But when this ceremony is over, they re-appear soliciting the permission of the audience to start the performance, and their forbearance and support in case the show fails to live up to their expectations:

When the sun rises in the east, the stately peacock that struts the forest looks at him, rejoices, spreads his bright-coloured tail and dances. Seeing the peacock dancing gracefully, the wild cock too twists and turns a couple of times in imitation of the peacock. The peacock's dance is watched by thirty and three crores of gods, forty and eight thousand crores of sages and other learned people whereas the performance of the cock befits the eyes of his own self and his harem of hens. Our attempt at presenting the story of the life of Rama is akin to the wild cock's desire to emulate the peacock.

(Pulavar 1987: 25)

In this humble strain, the puppeteers request the esteemed audience to forgive them their shortcomings and limitations. The puppets then give a summary of the story that is going to be enacted that day. This is followed by thanksgiving to the host families who provided the puppeteers with sumptuous meals and other facilities. They pray to goddess Bhagavathy and Lord Sri Rama to bless them and their families. With this, the ritualistic preliminaries come to a close and the Brahmin puppets quit the screen, happy that they have completed their duties as performers and narrators. Then, when the embedded narrative is recounted, they further change roles and turn into spectators.

Embedded-narrative audience

The embedded narrative, which is the *Ramayana* story, forms the core of *Tholpava Koothu* performance. While telling the story of the lives of Rama

- 5 Sutradhar in traditional theatre is the title given to a person whose role is to create a link between the performer, the performance, and the audience. The term literally translates as 'one who holds the threads'. In classical Sanskrit theatre, the Sutradhar is a central figure who combines various generic elements to create a coherent narrative by acting as the producer, the narrator, the director, and even the manipulator of the performance.
- 6 Yaga, also known as Yajña, is a ritual of sacrifice derived from the practice of Vedic times. It is performed to please the gods. An essential element in Yaga is the sacrificial fire or the divine *Agni* into which oblations are poured. It is believed that anything that is offered to the fire reaches the gods.

and Sita, the puppeteer often mentions how the gods are spectators to what happens to the central characters. The gods do not take part in the action, but look on and delight in the triumph of the virtuous hero. An interesting instance of this occurs in *Balakanda*, the first section of the text of *Tholpava Koothu*, which narrates the childhood exploits of Rama. One of the events this section depicts in detail is the killing of demoness Thadaka. When Rama, obeying the command of Sage Viswamitra, kills the demoness with a single arrow, the narrator says, 'Look on, oh Gods, at the greatness and power of Rama, the all-potent Lord whose arrow has killed Thadaka, the destructive demoness' (Pulavar 1987: 83–84). Elaborating upon the nature of Rama's arrow, its path and the immaculate way it found its resting place in the chest of Thadaka, the narrator further says that the gods showered flowers on the blessed head of Rama. Thus, the puppeteers make the gods appear as audience, spectating and even blessing the actions of the hero, Rama. This is a feature Stuart Blackburn recognizes:

Rama and Ravana for their part are not unaware of their distant audience. Nowhere is this more evident than in the last scene of the great battle: Ravana tells Rama to spare no effort in offering the gods a good spectacle, and before he kills the demon raja, Rama addresses the gods: 'Gods, I, Rama, now kill Ravana.'

(Richman 1992: 167)

The gods themselves, the embedded-narrative audience, are thus an integral part of *Tholpava Koothu*. They stand apart, look on, empathize and admire the action, like their human counterparts who form the conventional audience for the performance. When the puppeteers invoke the gods, seek their viewership and speak of their approval of Rama's action, which is conveyed by their showering flowers on Rama's head, the narrators must be experiencing the virtual presence and appreciation of gods, the embedded-narrative audience.

Ritualistic audience: god as audience

In *Tholpava Koothu*, Holy Theatre or 'the theatre of the invisible-made-visible' (Brook 1971: 47) occurs in a very special sense. The goddess is the primary audience for the *Tholppava Koothu* performance. But though the *Koothu Madom* or play-house is positioned to face the *sanctum sanctorum*, wherein is seated the goddess, the doors of it are usually locked and safely sealed long before the play begins in the dead of night. Everyone including the head priest would have left the place when the drums sound to proclaim the beginning of the puppet show. The puppeteers, however, do not worry about the sealed door blocking the goddess's view. They know that 'The goddess is everywhere. She is *Sakthi* (energy). She does not reside in any one place or any one thing' (Singh 1999: 22). There are a couple of legends behind *Tholpava Koothu's* being played in the Bhagavathy temples. One story says that goddess Bhadra Kali used to guard the gates of Brahma's treasury. As

time passed, she grew arrogant and was cursed to stand guard over Ravana's treasury in the kingdom of Lanka. For thousands of years she protected Ravana's wealth. Prior to the Rama-Ravana battle, when Hanuman tried to break into the city of Lanka, the goddess blocked his way. Hanuman slapped her on the face with his tail and sent her flying to Lord Shiva's abode. There, she complained to Shiva, 'For years, I have been in the kingdom of Ravana. Now when the momentous Rama-Ravana battle is taking place, I am driven away and cannot witness the event'. Lord Shiva consoled her – 'You shall be born on earth as Bhagavathy and I will be born as the poet Kamban. I will write the story of Ravana's death and you may watch it every year in your temple' (Richman 1992: 170).

A slightly different version of the story says that there was, in days of yore, an evil demon called Darika. He became a perpetual danger to sages and others, but he was invincible and even the gods dared not encounter him. Lord Shiva, with the sole intention of killing Darika, created Goddess Bhadra Kali out of the *Kalakooda Poison*⁷ stored in his throat. Bhadra Kali encountered Darika in a prolonged battle, and killed him. While she was thus engaged in battle, Rama was fighting Ravana. Bhadra Kali, disappointed at missing the great spectacle, complained to Lord Shiva about it. He gave her his word that the event would be enacted in all the coming years in her temples during the festival season. The *Tholpava Koothu* is hence performed year after year in the Bhadra Kali temples to please the eyes of the goddess.

Inside the stage, behind the cloth-screen stretched across the playing area, the goddess is symbolized by 21 dehusked coconut halves, filled with oil and fitted with wicks. They are lit from the lamp hung in front of the play-house, which in turn is lit from the lamp placed before the goddess, inside the *sanctum sanctorum*. The lamps, burning with this borrowed fire, symbolize the goddess, and while the artists perform she looks on, invisible yet keenly perceived. Her presence is the crucial factor which encourages and spurs on the performers. In interview, when asked how the puppeteers managed to keep awake for 21 successive nights, even when there was hardly any external audience, Ramachandra Pulavar said:

We perform for the deity. As long as the lamps symbolising the goddess keep burning, the mother is looking on and we dare not close our eyes. Once in the dead of night, one of us took a short break. When that puppeteer walked to the front of the *Koothu Madom*, he had a glimpse of the goddess standing and watching the performance – dressed in red, her hair flying. . . . others too had similar visions. (Interview, 26 July 2008)

The 'darshan'⁸ of the Goddess may be the consequence of an ignited devout brain. But when belief makes believe, the Invisible functions as audience and make Her presence felt. The audience then turns all too powerful, much more than any human audience. Her viewing, imagined or perceived, spurs on the performance and ensures high standards.

7 *Kalakooda* is the disastrous poison discharged by the snake *Vasuki* during the churning of the *Palazhi* or the ocean of milk for the heavenly nectar. To protect the world from destruction, Lord Shiva drank this terrible poison.

8 *Darshan* in Sanskrit means 'sight' – seeing or beholding. It is commonly used for visions of the divine.

Conventional audience

Finally, the puppet play began . . . I realized with a rather unsettling awareness that with the departure of the sponsoring family, I now sat all alone in the middle of that rice field, and was consequently the sole spectator for the night's performance . . . Aside from the swaying palms above me and the rustling of leaves from the gigantic banyan tree sheltering the koothumadam, not a single sign of life remained outside. Inside the koothumadam, in the gentle flickering light of a row of oil lamps, the soft opening invocation chant was being sung by the puppeteers, paying homage to the god Ganapati and the long line of ancestral *Tholpava* artists and teachers who had preceded them in this enterprise. I remember standing up in a mixture of disbelief and alarm: it was a moment of true existential anguish.

(Salil Singh 1999)

Those who have watched *Tholpava Koothu* when it is actually performed in the temples of Kerala have time and again narrated the existential anguish they felt on realizing themselves to be the sole spectators, sitting in the middle of vast open grounds, surrounded by thick darkness on all sides. The sponsoring family remains when, just before the show begins, the puppeteers praise the virtues of their members, thank them for the sumptuous meals provided and beseech the deity to bless them and their families. Before leaving the screen to make place for the characters in *Kamba Ramayana*, the Brahmin puppets announce, 'We need to praise those who provided us delicious meals . . . it is a big sin not to thank those who feed us.' They then elaborate on every act of hospitality meted out to them and each and every food item served. After this lengthy narration, they beseech the Gods thus:

Oh, God, shower your blessings on this family named so and so which has served us so generously. Take good care of the old, women and children in this family. Let their fields and cultivation, their cattle and other animals flourish. Let them all prosper with the blessings of lord Ganapathy, the kindness of Lord Sri Ram and the mercy of our benign Goddess who is all powerful.

Until this ritual ends, the sponsoring family lingers. But soon afterwards they depart, leaving the performers to fend for themselves. The office bearers of the temple trust also listen long enough to form an impression of the performance. Their appraisal, direct or indirect, decides whether the team will be invited to perform in the coming year. Thus, human audience is not totally absent in the scheme of things of *Tholpava Koothu* performance, though it is hardly enough to warm up the performers. It is said that in days of yore, before the films, videos and televisions, the villagers walked miles and miles to sit in the temple courtyard and watch the performance. Today, people gather to watch the show on special days. It is believed that watching the marriage of Rama and Sita will bring about a harmonious marriage in the family. Likewise, the watching of the coronation of Rama is

supposed to bring in tremendous success and prosperity. On such special nights, people desirous of blessings turn up, and the knowledge of their presence invigorates the puppeteers. But this happens very rarely, and on most days hardly anyone watches the puppets perform.

However, several factors work to distance the audience in *Tholpava Koothu*. In the first place, the narrative – i.e. the text of *Kamba Ramayan* – is written in medieval Tamil, which cannot be easily followed by the Malayalam-speaking audience. Second, the performance centres on *Ramayana*, a tradition every Indian inherits as an heirloom. As such, the story holds no secrets which can captivate the attention of the audience. Third, unlike most other folk arts, in *Tholpava Koothu* there is practically no interaction between the performers and the audience. The fourth wall, physically present as the cloth-screen stretched across the *Koothu Madom*, makes theatre remain simply theatre. Fourth, the digressive nature of the performance also dampens the audience. The dialogue between the narrator and the respondent goes on and on, incorporating digressions and handing out advice. All this while, the puppets on screen remain static. The puppeteers being screened out from the audience, no visual entertainment is provided when long-winded conversations between the puppeteers take place. Finally, the characters on stage, being in the form of puppets and quite unlike life-figures, allow the audience no chance of identification with them. As such, although intellectual and detached appreciation results, no emotional affinity is developed between the characters on the screen and the members of the audience. All these factors contribute to distance the spectators from the *Tholpava Koothu* performance.

Tholpava Koothu is a unique performance, particularly in its stance towards an audience. Self-spectating of the lead-puppeteer as well as the *game theatre* that is brought into being during the performance accommodate an absent audience. The narrative audiences – both *matrix* and *embedded* – as well as the audience realized in the goddess, make available imaginary and ritualistic audiences. Consequently, though there is hardly any external audience for most *Tholpava Koothu* performances, there is an ever-present notion of audience which is materialized through internal audiences – perceived, constructed and ritualistic. This omnipresent notion of audience is what imparts meaning and grants totality to a performance which is played mostly for an absent audience.

A different experience

Does not the art of shadows, which has survived for over two thousand years, contain within it the seeds of tenacious adaptability which will allow it to rejuvenate itself from the ashes every time the lamps are lit again?

(Salil Singh 1999)

On the evening of 26 July 2008, the playhouse at Vylloppilli Samskriti Bhavan – the venue for cultural performances in the heart of the capital

city of Kerala, namely Trivandrum – was packed with people. Most of them were connoisseurs of art and artistic performances. As dusk slowly fogged up the playhouse, all eyes turned eagerly to the white cloth stretched across the stage. Within a few minutes, Ramachandra Pulavar appeared before the audience, bowed to them and gave a short introduction to *Tholpava Koothu*. He related the legend behind this performance form and explained how it came to be presented year after year in the Bhagavathy temples in Northern Kerala. He dedicated his performance on this day to all those who made possible the presentation of his art outside the temple precincts, in the capital city of Kerala, and to the goddess who is everywhere. He then introduced his team members, most of whom were closely related to him (Ramachandra Pulavar had inherited the narrator's role from his father, Krishnan Kutty Pulavar) – his own brothers Viswanatha Pulavar and Lakshma Pulavar; his sons Rajeev and Rahul; his nephew Vipin; his father's friend K.N. Somasundara Pulavar who was working as the Drummer and Stage Manager of the troupe; his long-time associates T.P. Ramachandran and N. Payaniyappan. When the team retreated and the lights in the hall dimmed, the 21 dehusked coconut lamps flickered from behind the cloth-screen. The preliminary rituals, like propitiating the gods, sanctifying the stage and offering salutations to the master-predecessors, were over in a few minutes and Ramachandra Pulavar and his co-performer started reciting verses from *Kamba Ramayana*. Within a span of 2 hours, all the main incidents in the life of Rama and Sita were recounted by the puppeteers. The puppets in their hands flitted elegantly across the screen and presented a spectacular show. Finally, when Rama killed Ravana and *dharma* (moral righteousness) was restored, the audience stood up and applauded, jubilant that they had witnessed a marvellous performance which stirred their minds and feasted their eyes.

The performance in Trivandrum proved that *Tholpava Koothu* need not necessarily be performed for an 'absent' audience if it can be adapted to suit the present times and changed life styles. The performance was unique, in that it retained the charm of tradition despite the fact that it succumbed to the demands of the modern audience. To a great extent, the performance succeeded in overcoming the limitations of its comparatively conventional production. In the first place, the interpretations of the *Kamba Ramayana* verses were carried out in a mixed language – a blend of Malayalam and Tamil – and so the audience had practically no difficulty in following the elucidation. Indeed, the use of this amalgamated language which combined the familiar Malayalam with the not-so-familiar Tamil, gave the audience a feeling of the exotic. Second, the most popular *Ramayana* in Malayalam is Ezhuthacchan's *Adhyatma Ramayana*. Most Malayalis are very well acquainted with this version of *Ramayana*. The 2-hour-long performance in Vylloppilli Samskriti Bhavan interestingly chose to present aspects which were absent in the *Adhyatma Ramayana*. This allowed the Malayali audience to relish the disparities between the known text *Adhyatma Ramayana* and the performed text *Kamba Ramayana*. The

boredom born out of too much familiarity was consequently avoided. Third, contact between the performers and the audience was not entirely absent in the Trivandrum performance. Before the show commenced, Ramachandra Pulavar addressed the audience and provided a short introduction to *Tholpava Koothu*. The performers were then introduced in such a personal manner that the audience immediately felt warmth for each one of them. Besides, the performance being an affair of only a couple of hours, the limited interaction between the performers and the audience did not much affect the audience. The problem of static puppets also did not arise during this show. The action of *Kamba Ramayana* was so tightly condensed to two hours that there was not a single moment when the puppets were left to idle. They laughed and raved on the cloth-screen; stamped their feet, jumped over the mountains and flew across the seas; they fought wars, killed their enemies and celebrated victory. All this while, the spectators looked on with rapt attention at the magic world which unfurled before their eyes. Finally, though identification with the puppets or the characters they stood for could not happen, the uniqueness of the performance and the unreal world it presented infused the audience with a feeling of profound fulfilment. The Trivandrum show was thus a terrific success.

Tholpava Koothu originated several centuries ago. In bygone days, crowds happily gathered to watch the ethereal puppets flit across the screen enacting the familiar *Ramayana* story. But such a time has long vanished, and in the recent past *Tholpava Koothu* has come to be staged generally for an 'absent audience'. However, the presentation in Trivandrum proved that there is scope for the restoration and revival of this performance.

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Studies in
Theatre & Performance

Volume 29 Number 2 – 2009

Editorial

- 117 Ashley Thorpe and Jerri Daboo
-

Articles

- 121-131 To learn through the body: teaching Asian forms of training and performance in higher education
Jerri Daboo
- 133-147 The long and the short of it: negotiating the right space for Asian theatre in the university drama curriculum
Ashley Thorpe
- 149-159 On the shoulders of tradition from East and West: a conversation between Paul Allain and Frances Barbe
Paul Allain and Frances Barbe
- 161-172 From movement to action: martial arts in the practice of devised physical theatre
Daniel Mroz
-

Notes and Queries

- 173-186 When goddess turns spectator: on multiple audiences in *Tholpava Koothu* performance in Kerala
Sreedevi K. Nair
- 187-192 *Ves nātuma*, a common dance type in Kandyan dance of Sri Lanka: a semiotic analysis of selected features with a brief introduction to the relevant approaches of Indian and Western semiotics
Sudesh Mantillake
- 193-197 Please ensure that your mobile phone is switched off: theatre etiquette in an age of outsourcing
Benjamin Halligan
- 199-211 Saluting Pickering & Chatto: a review article
Peter Thomson
-

Reviews

- 213-222 Reviews by Luke Beattie, Robin Nelson, Nita Schechet, Lorraine Sutherland and Peter Thomson

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29



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