All Night Demon Dance Party - Kathakali: Crash Course Theater #24

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=5lp-HBv-3bA
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/5lp-HBv-3bA

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Heya, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today, I'm gonna move my hands in very intricate and meaningful ways as we discuss Kathakali, the Indian dance drama that followed Sanskrit drama and is still being performed today.

Kathakali performances would last all night, and climax at dawn with the killing of a demon, because after eight hours, you need a big finish. Do you like colorful and frightening stage makeup? Then you have come to the right place. Eughh. Nice.

(Crash Course intro)

By the 13th century, Sanskrit drama wasn't performed much anymore, but some plays had been adapted for a form of dance worship called Kutiyatam. Another form that absorbed Sanskrit drama is the Krishnattam, a cycle of eight dance dramas created around 1650 and dedicated to the God Krishna, with one drama performed every night for eight consecutive nights.

As religious works, Kutiyatam and Krishnattam were mostly performed in temples in the state of Kerala, for any gods who happened to be watching, though high caste people were also allowed to attend. That's a pretty small audience, so enter Kathakali. As with most ancient and early modern forms of drama, everyone say it with me, we don't know exactly when it began, but it was fully developed by the 17th century.

Historically, Kathakali was performed in the outer courtyards of temples, so anyone could attend evening performances, winter to spring. Thousands showed up for popular works. Like Kutiyatam and Krishnattam, Kathakali, whose name literally means 'story play', is a fusion of music, dance, and acting, plus some awesome martial arts. Most Kathakali, like Sanskrit drama, borrows stories from the great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, but some Kathakali borrow from other sacred texts, especially the Paranas. More recently, there have been Kathakali adaptations of Shakespeare and other Western dramas too. There's a repertoire of 60 plays still performed today, most written in Malayalam, the most widely spoken language in Kerala.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

But there are portions in Sanskrit. The plays typically were, and still are, performed by men, but some contemporary troupes include women and honestly, underneath all that makeup and those fake demon breasts, how can you even tell?

The Kathakali stage is a square of ground in the temple courtyard with a satin curtain at the front, which represents worldly illusions and a brass lamp, which welcomes divine presence. At dusk, a drum invites the Gods to take their seats and then two to three hours of preliminaries begin. Prayers, warm up acts, and drum solos before the eight hour performance. There are no set pieces except for a wooden stool and there are no props except for weapons. The play usually ends at dawn, with the slaying of a demon or a demon-king, followed by a dance thanking the Gods and asking for blessings on the audience. Then, the lamp is extinguished.

Contemporary audiences may not have the stamina for an all-night dance theater extravaganza that culminate in demon killing, so these days, performances last about three hours and usually include scenes from three different plays. In Kathakali there are three kinds of performers: actor-dancers, percussionists, and singers. Actors were once drawn from the ranks of martial artists and would pledge to their patrons that they would perform until their dying day. Now things are a little less strict. Still, you have to apprentice for 20 years to be considered a fully-trained Kathakali performer.

Characters are typically based on archetypes: kings, heroines, demons, demonesses, Gods, animals, priests, though some seem drawn from life. Actor-dancers create their roles by learning highly-regimented choreography and I was not kidding, 500 distinct hand gestures called mudras.

As (?~3:51) says, "For wherever the hand moves, there the glances flows. Where the glances go, the mind follows. Where the mind goes, the mood follows, and where the mood goes, there is the flavor."

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

These gestures and a huge range of facial expressions allow them to tell the stories with just their bodies and reflect the inner state or bhava of each character.

As we mentioned, in the Sanskrit drama, there are nine bhavas: the erotic, the comic, the pathetic, the angry, the heroic, the fearful, the repulsive, the wondrous, and peace. Here is how to perform the erotic bhava. Open the upper lids as wide as possible. Keep the lower lids slightly closed. With the lips, make a soft relaxed smile, but do not show the teeth. Keep the gaze focused straight ahead. Having assumed this position, begin to flutter the eyebrows. Keeping the shoulders still, using the neck, move the head first to the right, and then to the left, back and forth. Move the head to a 45 degree angle to the right, continuing to flutter the eyebrows. Repeat to the left.

Meanwhile, a three drum percussion orchestra is keeping time while two on-stage vocalists clank brass cymbals and sing the text, both the third person narration and the first person dialogue, because trying to perform any bhava and sing throughout an entire all night show would be exhausting.

Scripts for the Kathakali dramas typically run 30 or 40 pages, and if you're thinking, um, that sounds really short for an all night performance, you're right! That's because the scripted words are only one component and not even the most important one. The music and the singing and the dancing matter just as much. Once an actor has become an expert in a role, he's encouraged to add some passages of dance and dialogue that he has created. This dialogue is always spoken and never sung. Audiences expect to see these improvisations and it's one of the ways that they judge a performance's success. Lots of stuff makes Kathakali awesome, but the stage makeup is really something to behold, so hold on to your blending sponges, people, we're gonna go to the Thought Bubble.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

There are seven types of characters in Kathakali, and every type gets his or her or its own makeup, which takes two to four hours to apply. Green, or pacca, is for Gods and epic heroes like Arjuna, the upright, moral, and full of calm, inner poise. Ripe, or payuppo, is an orange-red shade that's used for the Gods (?~6:31), Brahma, Shiva, and Surya. Knife, aka katti, refers to the sinister mustache that evil king characters wear. Their faces are green, just like a hero's, but the red mustache lets us know that this green person is up to no good. Beard, or tatti, is pretty self-explanatory. White beards are for divine types, like the monkey king Hanuman, black beards are for evil schemers, red beards are for evil characters who aren't schemers. Black stage makeup, called kari, is for demonesses. Radiant or shining makeup, called minukko, is used for heroines and spiritually woke heroes. Special, or teppu, is for

the other characters in the repertoire, about 18 of them, who don't fit any of the above types.

After actors are made up and dressed, they place the crushed seed, called (?~7:22), under each eyelid. Supposedly, the seed doesn't hurt. It irritates the eye just enough that the eyes turn red, which is considered more expressive. Evil beard characters insert fangs. Black demoness characters strap on fake breasts. Elaborate headdresses are affixed and just before going on stage, actors apply long, silver nails to their left hand, which helps accentuate those hand gestures. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

While Kathakali is a more secular form than its predecessors and intended for a larger audience, it still draws from both sacred and secular traditions, and its stories often show the Gods engaged in a form of divine play, because even Gods need a break from all that God stuff to enjoy some amateur dramatics.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Let's look at an example from a popular Kathakali drama, one still performed today, with a story drawn from the Mahabharata. Ladies and gentlemen, it's Kiratam. Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers and pretty much the greatest archer the world has ever known, discovers that he's gonna need an incredible weapon to defeat his mean (?~8:24) cousins. The (?~8:25) should do. It's the most destructive weapon in the universe, kind of like an arrow with a nucelar warhead on the tip. In order to convince the God Shiva to give it to him, he goes to the Himalayas and does a bunch of penance in advance, because Shiva likes austerity. Shiva i impressed, but he still wants to test Arjuna, so Shiva disguises himself as a hunter named Kirata. In disguise, he starts giving Arjuna a hard time about which of them killed a wild boar, and they fight, so here's some advice: don't go up against a God. Because Shiva wins easily, but luckily, Arjuna has the good sense to realize he's been subdued by a God. Instead of getting mad, he humbles himself and goes back to penance. This self-discipline impresses Shiva, who gives him the arrow. Arjuna thanks him, and praises his play-acting and disguise by saying, "By means of your play, you protect the whole universe," which is a pretty good review.

Kiratam isn't the most dramatic of Kathakali plays. There's no demon to kill at the end, but it's a play that shows how the form dances between the secular and the sacred and honors values dear to Hinduism like bravery and humility and it argues that playing around with make up and costumes and fancy dialogue can also be a holy act.

Most theories of theater have the art form beginning with song and dance and while in Western theater, the written word has gained primacy, in many Asian and South-East Asian countries, highly communicative forms of music and dance remain essential components of performance.

===== (10:00) to (10:59) =====

So join us next time as we look at Beijing Opera, a form with even more elaborate headdresses. Until then, worldly illusion--I mean, curtain.

PBS Digital Studios is conducting its annual audience survey. 35,000 responses last year helped us make decisions on what experiments to try and even what shows to make. If you have a few minutes, please click the link. 25 random participants will receive an awesome PBS Digital Studios t-shirt.

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