Nostrils, Harmony with the Universe, and Ancient Sanskrit Theater: Crash Course Theater #7

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=b3mj4QQH8TM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/b3mj4QQH8TM

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*. And as much as we may all adore the violence and raunch of Roman performance, it's time to move on. Aww, Yorick, are you disappointed? I know it well. You're a fan of the rope-dancing maidens, aren't you? So bawdy, this one.

The theater of Greece and Rome is only one tradition, and today we're going to survey another, Sanskrit theater. We could devote several episodes to classical Indian theater, but because we have two and a half millennia of opening nights from around the world to cover in this series, today is more of a highlights reel. And those highlights include happy endings, rectangular theaters, and fish bellies.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

We don't really know when Sanskrit theater started or how it evolved. But likely, it followed a process similar to Greek drama and, spoiler alert, the future reemergence of theater in the medieval period. Basically, people create religious rituals to honor their gods, someone gets the bright idea that instead of just singing praises it might be cool to act out some devotion, and before you know it you have characters and plots and sometimes a chorus a frogs. Theater!

Sanskrit literature starts at around 1500 BCE, and, like Greek literature, it was originally an oral tradition. Its great works, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* weren't written down until much, much later.

The *Mahabharata* is an epic tale of a battle between two groups of cousins. The *Ramayana* is a more intimate family narrative that also involves a monkey king. Yeah, it is as dope as it sounds. Most Sanskrit dramas are based on excerpts from these epics.

There's no solid date for the first Sanskrit dramas, either, though we do have a bunch of surviving plays from the 1st century CE, suggesting this tradition had already been around for a while. The golden age for Sanskrit drama comes a little bit later, around the 4th and 5th centuries, during the Gupta dynasty, which was a good time if you were into science, math, or theater. That's us!

All told, about two dozen dramas survive. We're going to look at one later in this episode. The plays were typically written in a mix of Sanskrit, the fancy literary dialect, and Prakrit, the more common dialect.

If the Greeks have taught us anything, it's that if you want to have a great age of drama, you need someone to come along and lecture you on how to do it right. In Sanskrit theater, instead of Plato and Aristotle we have Bharata Muni. Speaking historically, he may not actually have been a real person but more of a literary construct, like Homer. Except, he was also semi-devine. Sorry, Homer, we still think you're fabulous.

Sometime early in the common era, Bharata Muni wrote the *Natya Shastra*, which is basically an all-purpose guide to theater: how to write it, how to stage it, how to watch it, all the different ways an actor can move her nose, and much more. So, so much more. It's like Aristotle's *Poetics* if, after writing about tragedy, Aristotle decided to write about everything else. Oh, and the *Natya Shastra* is also structured as a 6,000-verse poem.

Obviously, we're not going to have time to summarize all of the *Natya Shastra*. It turns out there are lots of nose movements. I'm partial to this one. But we will look at the philosophies that underlie the composition of plays.

We'll also look at how plays should be performed, at least according to Bharata Muni. But first, let's check out the *Natya Shastra*'s theory of the origins of drama. Theater, it says, was created by Brahma, because Brahma's job is creating stuff. See *CC World Mythology* with this handsome half-bird sir. Don't worry, Thoth and I still hang out on the weekends.

Brahma and some other gods are worried that the scriptures are just too literary, so he comes up with drama as a religious teaching tool. Brahma teaches it to the god Bharata, who teaches it to his 100 sons. They prepare a play about that awesome time the god Indra defeated some demons.

The gods in the audience loved the play. The demons not so much. They start wilding out, and Indra has to defeat them again. The demons are still pretty upset, but they are reassured that some plays will make fun of the gods, so agree to stop their attack. Man, and you thought your preview audiences were tough. Yeesh.

After that exciting origin story, the *Natya Shatra* introduces the idea of "rasas". Greek and Roman plays were divided by genre– comedy, tragedy, satyr plays. Sanskrit theater is different. Instead of genre, plays are defined by the kinds of moods they evoke. These moods are called rasas. There are initially eight of them: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, and marvelous. Eventually, a ninth rasa is added: peace. A very nice mood to evoke. Not terrible or odious in the least.

How do you evoke these rasas, you might ask? A playwright does it by drawing on eight major human emotions, which are called "bhavas". There are eight of those: pleasure, mirth, sorrow, wrath, vigor, fear, disgust, and wonder. You put the bhavas together in the right combination and you evoke the appropriate rasa.

Hold the odious phone, though. Not only are there nine rasa moods and eight bhava emotions, there are also ten categories of play, somewhat based on length. Because a Sanskit drama can have between one and ten acts. These categories don't have precise English translations, but most surviving plays belong to two main categories: nataka plays and prakarana plays.

Nataka plays are five to ten acts long. They usually borrow stories from the classic Sanskrit epics and deal with gods and heroes and demons. These plays are a little like tragedies, except, like most Sanskrit plays, they end happily. This helps the audience live in harmony with the universe, which, I mean, hey, not a terrible aim for the arts, right?

Prakarana plays are also five to ten acts long. These are closer in spirit to Roman comedies in that they often have urban settings and deal with everyday human characters.

Other kinds include dima plays, which have 16 heroes, and anka, one-act plays in which women lament.

Very exciting things happen in these plays, like kidnappings and battles and berserk elephants, but those things mostly happen off stage. On stage, we get messengers" reports and dialogue about how people are dealing with invading monkey forces but not usually the monkey forces themselves. Which, I mean, makes sense. What director wants to manage the blocking for an army of monkeys?

Besides what types of plays there are, the *Natya Shastra* also has a lot of ideas about how plays should be staged. Like Greek and Roman theater, Sanskrit theater was often staged in conjunction with religious festivals and preceded by elaborate religious rituals. But unlike Greek and Roman theater, players weren't exclusively men. Troupes were male, female, and mixed gender.

Plays were also sometimes commissioned as court performances.

Bharata Muni says, "Although the best spectators are noble, theater is for all classes." Members of the four castes – priests, warriors, merchants, and peasants – all seem to have gone to the theater. Though they didn't get to sit together.

No classical Sanskrit theaters survive, and, sadly, we know nothing about their concession snacks. But Bharata Muni does have some pointers on architecture. Theaters could be rectangular, square, or triangular, and small, medium, or large. The medium-sized rectangle was the most popular design.

And in case you're thinking, hey, isn't bigger better? It turns out you are more right than you think, because large rectangles are reserved for the gods. Half of the theater was for the audience and the other for the stage and the backstage. There were also four color-coded pillars. And the whole thing was meant to symbolize the entire universe. No pressure.

And if you think that seems precise, wait until you hear about acting. Acting in the classical Indian theater is incredibly specific and highly stylized. The way a performer stands and blinks and crooks a finger and flares her nostrils, all of that is conveying vital information about her character and the circumstances of the play.

The *Natya Shastra* lists six ways you can move your nose, nine ways you can move your neck. There are seven ways you can move your eyebrows, each with its own distinct meaning, from lowering (in envy, disgust, and smelling) to contracted (in manifestation of affection). And don't even get Bharata Muni started on the eyes or the fingers or the feet.

That said, it's communicating through emotion that matters most. Rhythm and music, costume, and makeup are also crucially important. Props too, but not scenery. Sanskrit drama doesn't do scenery.

To get a feel for how these plays played out, let's take a look at one of the most beloved Sanskrit dramas, Kalidasa's *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. No solid date for this one but, best guess, early in the common era.

Thought Bubble, you'd better recognize.

In the first act, King Dushyanta is out hunting deer near a bunch of hermitages when he decides to hide behind a tree, perving on some beautiful hermit maidens, especially Shakuntala. The king falls in love, but, oh dip, she's in the wrong caste. The king mopes, because he's so in love with the hermit girl and is trying to find an excuse to see her. But then two youths come and ask him to protect the hermitage. Score! Before long, the king and Shakuntala confess their love.

By the next act, their wedding has taken place and also, presumably, sex. Then the king has to leave to do king stuff. Daydreaming, Shakuntala accidentally offends the touchy poet Durvasa. So he curses her, telling her that King Dushyanta will forget all about her until she presents him with a token, like the ring he conveniently left.

Shakuntala, who is pregnant, brings the king his kingly ring to bring to mind their forbidden fling. But alas, the king fails to recognize her, and she's like, "But wait, I have this ring, which... fell into the Ganges. Oops." Shakuntala leaves the palace, dejected. And after a long while, a fisherman finds what is clearly a kingly ring in the belly of a fish. When the king sees it, he remembers Shakuntala, but is busy fighting demons. After the king defeats them, Indra rewards him with a ride through the heavens.

In the final act of the play, Act 7, the chariot lets the king off at a hermitage. And even after all the years, he recognizes Shakuntala and his son.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

Reunited! And it feels so good. Yay. A happy ending. Harmony with the universe achieved.

As you can see, a Nataka is very different from its Greco-Roman counterparts– seven acts, a lot of events, a multi-year span, a ton of locations, and a distinct mix of tragedy and comedy and prayer and sex and hermits... it sort of has it all, and then some. There was even a rampaging elephant. Somehow it all comes together to help the audience achieve that harmony with the universe. Nice work, Kalidasa.

Sanskrit drama thrived for hundreds of years, but in the next episode we're going to go back to Rome to talk about the decline of drama. There's going to be a whole mess of trouble from the Goths and the Visigoths, and then for a bunch of centuries no Western theater at all. Unless you count mimes. It turns out the Dark Ages means dark nights for theater, too. Get it, Yorrick? Because a dark night is night where there isn't a performance in a theater? And it's closed? Tough customer, this guy.

All right. Until next time, curtain.

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