

Understanding Cultural Perspectives through Greek and Hindu Theater

By Shirley Huston-Findley

As educators, we are constantly being asked to diversify our teaching to broaden students' knowledge about the world in which they live. But for many, teaching about other cultures can pose significant problems. Providing materials that students find accessible yet engaging—that helps them develop creative and critical thinking—is a challenge teachers must confront. One way to begin to overcome these struggles is to look to the primary sources available to us, connect them directly to the cultures from which they emerge, and investigate how the cultural and textual heritage compares and contrasts to other traditions and societies.

This essay begins by exploring the heritage of two very specific forms of dramatic theory—Bharata-muni's *Natyashastra* and Aristotle's *Poetics*—that serve as starting points to represent the emergence of the performing arts in two distinct cultures: Hindu India and ancient Greece. More specifically, by exploring these primary sources, we can gain a better understanding of how storytelling emerged in one Eastern and one Western region; how it was influenced by cultural heritage; and the ways in which those formulas continue to inspire the creation of the arts, both within and beyond the cultures today.

A Beginning: The Basic Understanding of Ancient Theory

Although it has been passed down to us as the “beginning” of Western drama, the *Poetics* (c. BCE 335) is a piece of dramatic theory regarding tragedy, written by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (BCE 384–322) that in all likelihood originally served as one of the teacher's many lectures on aesthetics. The *Poetics* provides significant yet somewhat generalized guidance regarding the construction of drama, using Sophocles's *Oedipus* as the ideal in tragic form

and structure. Aristotle defines tragedy as “the imitation of a good action.” He then goes on to discuss his definition, emphasizing the significance of plot (imitation of action) as enacted by actors who create characters. Beyond plot and character, however, Aristotle notes the four remaining elements of tragedy—thought, which “is present in all they say to prove a point or express an opinion”; diction, “the actual composition of the verse”; spectacle, “which stirs the emotions . . . [but] belongs to the craft of the property man rather than the poet”; and music, “which is most important among the features of tragedy which give pleasure.”¹

Returning to plot, Aristotle tells us that it must be “whole and complete, and also of a certain length.” By “whole” he means it must have “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” In addition, the plot “must have a length that can be easily remembered” and achieve unity, meaning that “if any part is displaced or deleted, the whole plot is disturbed and dislocated.”² Aristotle suggests that successful plots unfold in a particular way, including probable causation, complex action, a reversal of fortune for the tragic hero, and a recognition of having gone from “ignorance to knowledge,” ending in suffering.³ Finally, he notes that tragedy “relies in its various elements not on narrative but on acting; through pity and fear it achieves the purgation (*katharsis*) of such emotions.”⁴

The *Natyashastra* (BCE 100–CE 400), attributed to the mythical sage Bharata-muni, provides guidance in developing theatrical performance through a detailed overview of all things related to performance theory in the Hindu tradition. Unlike the *Poetics*, Bharata-muni's text comes to us in the form of combined mythical storytelling and narrative instruction, describing how the gods came to Brahma, the Indian god of creation, and informed him

of how the “people of this world of pain and pleasure, goaded by greed and avarice, and jealousy and anger, took to uncivilized . . . ways of life.” More specifically, the gods asked for “something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears.” In response, God Brahma created the *Natyashastra* by “incorporating all the arts and sciences, and enlightening too.”⁵ He then instructed Bharata-muni to begin the use of the *Natyashastra*, which he did.

The *Natyashastra* moves through thirty-five additional chapters, each focusing on a specific element of *natya* (drama, dance, and music), including sections covering everything from the distribution, types, and purposes of song to how characters should walk, from acting styles and musical instruments to the specifics of theater architecture. In essence, the work is an all-encompassing text revealing to us an in-depth theory of classical Indian performance.

Investigating the Relevance of Cultural Heritage

Although the cultural heritage of any text is surely broad, focusing on particularly significant elements provides access into establishing necessary foundational knowledge. For example, to gain a stronger awareness of the similarities and differences between our primary sources, let's look briefly at connections to religion, philosophical influence, time period, and, ultimately, purpose as jumping-off points.



Mosaic of Greek theater masks. Source: <http://tiny.cc/1fslly>.

First, it is critical to comprehend the significance of the natya's connection to the gods and the ways in which worship is integral to the performance. In fact, immediately following chapter two of the *Natyashastra*, which discusses three types of stages, the text focuses on the "Worship of the Stage and of the Gods," including the "Gods to Be Invoked," "Prayer to the Gods," "Lighting the Lamp," "Installation of the Deities," and "The Worship of the Various Deities."⁶ Moreover, while we know it is at the request of the gods that the *Natyashastra* is formed, the many ways that the gods contribute to its creation and production is equally relevant. For example, the god of destruction and restoration, Shiva, provides inspiration for the movement of dance and the gestures connected to emotion, and a variety of gods are assigned various positions around and within the performance space to protect it from demons.

In the *Poetics*, on the other hand, Aristotle virtually pays no attention to the gods, not even Dionysus, the patron god of the Greek stage, for whom, prior to the fifth century BCE, dithyrambs—Greek choral hymns—were sung and danced by a masked chorus to honor. Nor does he detail the ceremonial nature of the Greek festivals, which often included a ritual cleansing of the playing space. In fact, Professor of Theater Graham Ley argues that the closest Aristotle comes to connecting his theater and drama to the gods is in his discussion of katharsis, which involves the purgation of emotions (pity and fear) in the audience. Ley says,

*Katharsis has a remarkable resonance in Greek culture, because it combines connotations of medical purging with those of religious purification, allowing Aristotle to claim for tragedy a function that had the widest possible implications for personal and public good.*⁷

Absent of a divine origin (or even significant reference to the divine), the *Poetics*, unlike the *Natyashastra*, is purely an example of dramatic theory—a map for playwrights to follow.

In essence, Aristotle, through dramatic analysis, is providing the playwright—the creator of drama—with the guidelines necessary for articulating his philosophical treatise. As a text focused on the rules of performance, however, Ley tells us,

*The Natyashastra codifies procedure and possibility most explicitly to the director or supervisor of a company, at times shifting its address to the playwright, but its immediate addressees, the sages who question Bharata-muni, are part of a far more imposing fiction that is essential to the work.*⁸

It is worth mentioning here that the separation between philosophy and religion as practiced in the West does not translate to Hindu India, where they are united in thought and practice. Professor of Religion Susan Schwartz reminds us that

*It is more fruitful to state that the goal of the aestheticians, from Bharata-muni onward, has been to facilitate a transformation—of the artist, the audience, and ultimately the world—that may only be understandable from the perspective of religion. So central has the religious context been to understanding and achieving the goals of performance that it is possible to study the religions of India through her performing arts.*⁹

Equally relevant is the historical time in which each theory was written, revealing additional evidence regarding divergences in purpose. In his analysis of both dramatic theories, English Professor Bharat Gupt notes,

*The most important difference which has remained hitherto unnoticed is that the *Poetics* was written well after the best had been achieved in classical Greek theater, whereas the *Natyashastra* was known much before the extant plays came to be written.*¹⁰

Hence, while one looks back, the other looks forward. One reflects the ideal of the time, while the other proposes a path toward the creation of an ideal.



Nandini Ghosal performing an Indian classical dance. Source: <http://tiny.cc/mkwqf>.

Simultaneously, however, both treatises share one significant, albeit differing, common purpose—they are didactic in nature, providing both pleasure and education based on the heritage from which they emerge. Brahma clearly articulates his purpose. He tells us,

*I have created the *Natyaveda* to show good and bad actions and feelings of both the gods and yourselves . . . It gives you peace, entertainment and happiness, as well as beneficial advice based on the actions of high, low and middle people. It brings rest and peace to persons afflicted by sorrow or fatigue or grief or helplessness. There is no art, no knowledge, no yoga, no action that is not found in natya.*¹¹

At the same time, didacticism in the *Poetics* is best seen in Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between plot and its intended emotions. Aristotle says, "We should not require from tragedy every kind of pleasure, but only its own particular kind."¹² The "particular kind" of pleasure being promoted emerges out of the pity and fear aroused by the tragic hero who, experiencing the results of his *hamartia* (often defined as a tragic flaw or mistake), suffers and falls. As a result of the hero's suffering, we experience a katharsis, thereby gaining greater awareness of our own lives and circumstances, teaching us to refrain from making the same type of missteps.

While katharsis is the desired outcome of Aristotle's ideal drama, Hindu performance strives for *rasa* instead. Often associated with food, the aesthetic



A Kathakali performer in the virtuous pachcha (green) role. Source: <http://tiny.cc/rxnxs>.



Students training at Kerala Kalamandalam. (Photos courtesy of Shirley Huston-Findley, January 2011)

of *rasa* can be understood as the ideal blending of specific flavors (sweet and sour; spicy and bland) that create a balanced taste that is not only pleasurable but also life-giving and spiritually sustaining. The same is true for the essential elements of *natya*, which when combined through proper blending create an ideal performance. When asked for the meaning of *rasa*, Bharata-muni explains it this way:

*Because it is enjoyably tasted, it is called rasa. How does the enjoyment come? Persons who eat prepared food mixed with different condiments and sauces, etc., if they are sensitive, enjoy the different tastes and then feel pleasure (or satisfaction); likewise, sensitive spectators, after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words, gestures and feelings feel pleasure, etc. This [final] feeling by the spectators is here explained as [various] rasa-s of natya.*¹³

The *Natyashastra* discusses nine *rasas*: love, humor, sorrow, anger, heroism, fear, disgust, peace, and surprise. Often referred to as a response, each *rasa* is the reaction to a particular mood or *bhava*. Each reaction then generates specific hand gestures (*mudras*), facial expressions, and body positions that create the performance. For example, the emotions felt from the arrival of demons might insight the *rasa* of fear (*bhayanaka*), while the birth of a child might lead to the *rasa* of love (*shringara*).

Although the theory of *rasa* might appear rather simplistic and practical from this perspective, it should be clear that the aesthetic condition asks us to move beyond the emotional level required of Aristotle's *katharsis* toward ultimate spiritual enlightenment, known as *moksha*. Once again, we are reminded of the natural interplay between performance, religion, and philosophy throughout Hindu culture and the arts.

Moving from Theory to Practice

Throughout this essay, I have focused on a few of the specifics that shed light on the origins, purpose, and cultural heritage of two distinct forms of dramatic theory, specifically Greek antiquity and the classical Hindu tradition of India, to better understand how storytelling emerged in the two cultures. I conclude by exploring a few of the ramifications of approaching the arts from these somewhat divergent perspectives as they apply to the more practical aspects of the performing arts.

Most of our understanding of the architecture of ancient Greek theater is based on the stone remains, particularly the well-preserved Theater at Epidauros and the highly popular Theater of Dionysus in Athens. Archeologists have provided significant evidence that the space upon which the chorus performed (orchestra) was surrounded, like a modern-day amphitheater, by an enormous (in contemporary terms) seating area for the audience. Estimates of seating capacity range anywhere from 15,000 to 55,000 throughout the region, and the large audience area was called the *theatron*, which translates as "seeing place." Yet seeing was challenging given the scope of the space, which forced both playwrights and performers to adjust their craft to meet the needs of the spectators. For example, authors skillfully wove stage directions into their dialogue while actors wore large masks to communicate expressions, added thick-soled shoes (*cothurni*) to enhance their stature, and relied on rather bold gestures to reinforce the action of the plot. Ultimately, what we might imagine is a somewhat distant, stylized, declamatory style of acting, depending far more on the oral tradition than the visual, which results in a rather passive (not participatory) audience. As Professor of Theater Peter Arnott reminds us,

In the ancient world, oratory was a formal art demanding careful composition, long rehearsal, and histrionic presentation. For the Greeks, oratory and acting were different aspects of the same art; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, the same art before two different kinds of audience.¹⁴

It is not a far reach then to understand why Aristotle prefers plot (the *telling* of story made of words) over all other elements.

While the Greek *theatron* is a place for seeing the action as it is played out on the stage, seeing in classical Hindu drama, dance, and music is strongly influenced by the Hindu religious practice of *Darshan*, a reciprocal process involving both seeing and being seen. Highlighting the differences in the nature of storytelling from ancient Greece to ancient Hindu India, *Darshan* is a direct connection between the worshipper and the deity through sight, or as Professor of Religion and Indian Studies Diana L. Eck tells us,

The notion of Darshan calls our attention, as students of Hinduism, to the fact that India is a visual and visionary culture, one in which the eyes have a prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred.¹⁵

Ultimately, it is through the eyes that one connects and communicates with the gods, suggesting an intimacy lacking in ancient Greek performance. Unlike the passive position taken by the Greek audience, here spectators are actively occupied in the process of engagement not only with the gods but with the performance influenced by and reflective of the gods as well.

Philip Lutgendorf, in his article "Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?," provides a bridge for understanding how *Darshan* might be directly connected to the performing arts. Lutgendorf suggests that, like in religious practice and film, the eyes provide a "visual dialogue" or "visual communion" that translates well to the classical forms of dance and theater where emotion is communicated in a personal way between audience and actor. Rather than the distant, somewhat voyeuristic "gaze" necessary in the Greek theater and, according to Lutgendorf, Western film theory, classical Hindu performance relates directly to *Darshan*

a visual interaction between players, who, though not equal, are certainly both in the same theater of activity and capable of influencing each other, especially in the vital realm of emotion.¹⁶

Hence, the emphasis on eyes of and visual contact with the gods mimics the emphasis placed on the detailed visual aspects of performance emphasized in the *Natyashastra*.

Schwartz clarifies these divergent understandings of performance even further in her discussion of the *guru* (teacher) and *shishya* (student) relationship. She says that in the teaching/learning process

very little talking was done. Rather, the guru would provide, in measured doses, lessons by example, which the student would absorb, copy, and rehearse until the teacher was satisfied. The atmosphere in which teaching and learning took place was oral/aural/kinesthetic. It is difficult to appreciate the power of this form of transmission fully, particularly from the standpoint of a primarily literate culture. If we are to understand the performing arts in India, however, this is one aspect that must be grasped. A distancing occurs between the student and the knowledge to be gained when the mode of transmission is the written word.¹⁷

Unlike in the *Poetics*, where plot is primary, Bharata-muni waits until chapter twenty-one to discuss the story and instead focuses much of the beginnings of his treatise on the elements of performance, including *rasa*, *bhavas* (feelings or emotions), *abhinaya* (the art of expression), and *mudras*. Although Aristotle preferences text and oratory, classical Indian performance emphasizes image and movement as primary forms of communication.



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Students training at Kerala Kalamandalam. (Photos courtesy of Shirley Huston-Findley, January 2011)

The Role of Theory Today

Modern drama as it has emerged out of ancient Greece no longer relies merely on Aristotle's perspective. Theorists who followed the great philosopher explored alternate ways of knowing through divergent "aesthetic rules," creating a plethora of additional performance styles seen around the globe, including modern India. However, modern drama in India—primarily emerging out of the influence of Europe and America—does not represent a thriving industry. Instead, amateur groups fight to survive, particularly against the ever-growing and popular film industry. One wonders, however, how continual globalization, the growth of the middle class, and the advancement of technology might affect the struggling production of modern drama in India.

Alternately, classical modes of performance continue to hold a vital place in Hindu Indian performing arts where professional performers practice and teach in thriving schools of art. For instance, the classical traditions of Kathakali and Kutiyattam have been preserved and promoted at the Kerala Kalamandalam University of Art and Culture in the southeastern state of Kerala. Since 1930, Kerala Kalamandalam has been nurturing the teachers and teaching of these classical traditions through intensive and extensive training. Students attending the residential university spend years dedicating their lives to not only understanding but also perfecting the fine arts and crafts of acting, singing, dancing, mask-making, and playing of instruments, ultimately preparing themselves as performers and future teachers of the classical traditions.¹⁸

As this essay has suggested, the investigation of theoretical texts representing primary sources from two seminal but different cultures around the globe provides educators with an opportunity to globalize their curriculum. More specifically, the texts ask us to not only gain a more thorough perspective on the art forms they define, but they also encourage us to examine the cultures, religions, philosophies, and purposes of the arts within particular historical societies and the role that heritage plays in how we understand those art forms today. ■

NOTES

1. G.M.A. Grube, trans., *Aristotle: On Poetry and Style* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1958), 12–15.
2. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
3. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
4. *Ibid.*, 12.
5. Adya Rangacharya, trans., *The Natyashastra* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996), 1–2.
6. *Ibid.*, 16–18.
7. Graham Ley, "Aristotle's Poetics, Bharatamuni's *Natyashastra*, and Zeami's *Treatises: Theory as Discourse*," *Asian Theater Journal* 17, no. 2 (2000): 199.
8. *Ibid.*, 208.
9. Susan L. Schwartz, *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.
10. Bharat Gupt, *Dramatic Concepts Greek and Indian: A Study of Poetics and Natyashastra* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2006), 14.
11. Rangacharya, 4.
12. Grube, 27.
13. Rangacharya, 55.
14. Peter D. Arnott, *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 51.
15. Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 10.
16. Philip Lutgendorf, "Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?" *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (2006): 234.
17. Schwartz, 5.
18. For an overview of Kerala Kalamandalam University of Art and Culture, see two YouTube videos at <http://bit.ly/fmHsXe> and <http://bit.ly/xOFwMy>.

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