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pedagogic methods of the west were intimidating. Yet this period gave me huge clarity. I knew then that to merely adopt and assimilate the western practices into my own would be of no use. I also knew that for my own personal reasons of usefulness, that several things I knew had to be unlearned in order to open up possibilities for myself in terms of form and vocabulary. This was the starting point of a four-year research period with Krishna Devanandan that led to *Fragility* in 2000.

*What aspect of 'physicality' is primary for the animalism of your rigour?*

I've always wondered about the 'need' to move. In this context I've always found it necessary to clarify constantly this need within my own dance space. In order to find this clarity, I define and specify as many parameters as possible. So in other words, the body moving is defined as precisely as a scientific experiment. The starting and ending point, the line drawn, the qualities and most importantly the visual space that movement displaces attempt to be precise. This search is also limitless, for the body has perhaps a thousand possibilities of performing any action. So, in this context the rigour has partly to do with choosing and knowing the mechanics rather than relying on a mechanical virtuosity or habitual patterns.

I've also always felt that the body can only express its own 'bodiness'. This is the animalism of body quality as well as the animalistic logic that is often commented on in my work. A sense of moving without trying to express. The anatomical research together with a more unscientific thinking of what the body actually is. These potentialities of the body in movement, unmoving even, are what propel me to work. This is perhaps far more urgent than the making of dance performances.

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**Kapila Venu** is a practitioner of Koodiaattam – traditional Sanskrit theatre, and a disciple of Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar. She is also the Director of Natanakairali – Research, Training and Performing Centre for traditional arts founded by G. Venu in

*Notes:* Koodiaattam has now become a general name ascribed to a theatre tradition that was practiced by the Chakyar and Nangiyar communities in the *Kuthambalams* (temple theatres) of Kerala. However, the word Koodiaattam is actually a technical term in traditional ritual-theatre language of Kerala to denote more than one actor performing together on stage and is used in several other ritual art forms like Mudiyyettu and Theyyam. The theatre form has two components Kuthu, solo performance, and Koodiaattam, acting together and the art of the Chakyars until recently was locally known as '*Kuthum Kutiyattavum*' (Koothu and Koodiaattam) in Malayalam.



Kapila Venu.

1975. Kapila Venu is interviewed by **T. Sasitharan**, co-founder and Director, Intercultural Training Institute, Singapore, a unique training ground for contemporary artists. He is a noted actor, director, teacher and writer and commentator, with more than thirty years experience in theatre and the related arts.

*We know that all tradition, no matter how ancient or venerated, is constructed. Tradition is always made, built up over time by the accretions of history, personal practice and the prevailing conventions of culture, aesthetics and society. Any particular conception of the construct of tradition, the way we think about it or value it, its shape, specific contours, colours, textures and characteristics, can vary widely from time to time and from one practitioner to another. What do you see as the construct of the Koodiaattam tradition? How would you describe it as it is enjoined in the practice of Natanakairali and how has it influenced, affected and formed your practice as an artist?*

When I try to understand the construct of Koodiaattam as we know it today, three things come to my mind. One, the significantly long unbroken lineage of practitioners who for over two thousand years have brought about a certain distillation, sophistication and complexity in the theatre language, craft and technique; two, that this is an amalgam of the best of two worlds, the *margi* – the mainstream Sanskrit theatre tradition and the *desi* – the regional culture and aesthetics; and three, that unlike most of its contemporaries in other parts of the world, we see in Koodiaattam the presence of the female performer together with her male counterpart.

The ancient Tamil epic poem '*Silappathikaram*', talks about the performance of a Koothachakkaiyan, a performer known as Chakkaiyan (Chakyar) from Parayur (a village in Kerala) enacting the Kottichetam, a choreography in which he delineates with one half of his body the masculine energy of Shiva and with the other half the feminine energy of Uma, his consort. It is considered to be one of the earliest references in literature to a theatre form akin to what we know under the general term Koodiaattam<sup>1</sup> today. Interestingly, to this day, the episode of Parvativraham, the love quarrel between Shiva and Parvati where an actor shifts between the two characters in succession is considered an important sequence in our repertoire that only a highly skilled actor can convincingly perform. This shifting of the actor's body between the male and female energies with ease and grace is considered the hallmark of greatness in a performer.

It is challenging to put down a very precise story about the evolution of Koodiaattam. We do know for sure that the southern region of India in which lies Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu, is known to have a very strong tradition of highly skilled actors/performers, both female and male, and that their skill was held in high regard and theatre practice was taken very seriously. We also know that the communities of male and female performers were already established in their art before the advent of the Sanskrit dramas to Kerala. When the presentation of Sanskrit dramas came into vogue in several parts of the Indian subcontinent, it happened here too. We know that later Kulashekhara Perumal, a king, playwright and theatre enthusiast was responsible for reviving and modifying the Sanskrit theatre into the format that we know today as Koodiaattam.

As young students of the art form we grew up hearing legends that describe actors and actresses with extraordinary acting capabilities such as Ammannur Parameswara Chakyar who once pretended to throw a stone at an Englishman's dog. The action was so con-



Kapila Venu.

vincing that the dog felt he was hit and started whining. To prove his innocence to the angry Englishman, the Chakyar enacted the sequence of the lifting of a mountain. Towards the end of the performance the Chakyar suddenly allowed the mountain to slip from his hand and the Englishman who was totally engrossed in the performance fell from his chair because he felt the mountain was falling on him.

As a woman it is of utmost importance to me to know that my predecessors, female performers, were highly skilled in the art of *abhinaya*. There is a word in Tamil from the Sangam era, *viralī*, for danseuse. The word literally translates as 'one who can transform her entire body into eyes'. Eyes are considered to be the most expressive part of the actors' body. This term signifies that the actress was so skilled that she could transform her entire body to resonate with the same expressive quality as her eyes. We also hear of female performers who could balance on one foot on top of a walking elephant while performing the sequence of Karthiyayinipurappad in Subhadradhananjayam Koodiaattam.

Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, our master was a legendary presence among the performers of Koodiaattam. Apart from his training in traditional method he was one of the last performers who benefited from the Kodungallore Kalari, an actor-training centre at the Kodungallore royal family where three generations of scholars researched and trained in various techniques of acting with special emphasis on breath.

At Natanakairali, G. Venu's main effort was directed towards making known to the world the unmatched talent of the legendary Kutiyattam performer Ammannur Madhava Chakyar and to ensure that his art was passed on to a new generation. Together with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, he co-founded Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam, a training centre for Koodiaattam. Once a new generation's

training had considerably progressed, G. Venu then established Abhinayakkalari actors' laboratory at Natanakairali with an aim to supplement the training at the *gurukulam* with advanced training in abhinaya and for making a space for creative experimentation and new productions. Several new productions in Koodiaattam took shape here, some of which were very bold deviations from the restrictive rigidity in the tradition. One of the main contributions of Abhinayakkalari was to make equal space for the female performer by reinterpreting female characters from texts like Kalidasa's 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' and 'Vikramorvasheeyam' with a very feminist approach.

As a performer of Koodiaattam, the work at Natanakairali has been of immense importance to me. As a woman being a part of productions like Sakunthalam, Vikramorvasheeyam and 'Urubhangam' gave me the chance to share equal space onstage with my male co-actors which would otherwise be unthinkable. The research studies and training on various aspects of Koodiaattam like *hasta* and *netraabhinaya*, *swaravayu* and *navarasa saadhana* form the strong foundation of my performance work.

*In your understanding and by your own practice, would you say that Koodiaattam and Nangiar Koothu have crossed some discernible threshold/s to be considered 'modern' performing arts practices? If so, what would these thresholds be, what would this modernity consist of and how are the practice, teaching and transmission of these performing art forms different now from their 'premodern' state?*

*You may choose to reflect on this question as a course of change and continuities, a river as it were, that flows from the art, practice and teachings of Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, through your father Gopal Venu's art, practice, teaching and scholarship to find a sea in your own body as artist and teacher. How and where do you see it flowing on from you?*

Yes, I do think Koodiaattam and Nangiar Koothu have crossed certain discernible thresholds to be considered modern performing arts practices.

In the 1960s for the first time Koodiaattam was performed outside the temple precincts. This was the first threshold that Koodiaattam crossed from being a part of the temple ritual to being presented purely for the sake of performance. A few years later, due to the dwindling number of students within the community, the masters opened their doors to students from other communities. This was the next threshold to cross.

The last three or four decades have seen drastic changes in the evolution of Koodiaattam. A new generation of trained artistes, from backgrounds both traditional and non-traditional, equipped with modern education and exposure to other cultures, has brought about several changes in the culture, practice, aesthetics, repertoire and presentation of performances. Whether the effect of each of these changes was favourable towards the art or not is a debatable topic but the changes are real.

I do not belong to the Nangiar community but I had the opportunity to train for several years in a gurukula system under the greatest exponent of Koodiaattam, Guru Ammanur Madhava Chakyar, who belongs to a very orthodox community. My master never showed any difference in affection or dedication to students based on whether they were from within the community or not. Previously it would have been strictly prohibited to share their knowledge outside the community.

My father, after having studied the traditional knowledge thoroughly paved the way for new thinking and innovation. He encouraged us to broaden our perspectives, to learn about other cultures so that we have a more dynamic understanding about our own tradition, to read and to have our own ideals. There are several aspects in the tradition that need to evolve with the times. One important example is the attitude towards of female characters and female performers.

Thinking of my own life as a practitioner of a traditional art, I constantly attempt to make sure that my art practice remains meaningful in the lives of people in the modern world. I do not want to be looked upon as someone from the past that people cannot relate to. Everyday I think about my connection to the people around me, sensitizing them to the intricacies of this art form.

*Reflecting on your own practice as an international (or transnational) artist and performer, what would it mean to 'contemporize' (to make or read as 'contemporary') Koodiaattam and Nangiar Koothu? I refer here to a specific meaning of 'contemporary' in Arthur Danto's sense: 'Contemporary art, manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward. [It] speaks as well of the relatively recent loss of faith in a great and compelling narrative, in the way things must be seen. It is in part the sense of no longer belonging to a great narrative, registering itself on our consciousness somewhere between uneasiness and exhilaration that*

*marks the historical sensibility of the present, and helps define the acute difference between modern and contemporary art. It is characteristic of contemporaneity – but not of modernity – that it should have begun insidiously, without slogan or logo, without anyone being greatly aware that it had happened.'*

*Do you think Koodiaattam and Nangiar Koothu practices and performances, 'manifest[s] an awareness of a history of art [forms] but no longer [carry] it forward'? Has there been a 'recent loss of faith' or are these performing art forms still practiced, performed and seen as belonging to 'a great narrative'? If so, what is this narrative?*

We always use the word contemporary in the sense of 'belonging to the present', which I think Koodiaattam, Nangiar Koothu and all other 'living' traditions do. In connection to this particular description of contemporaneity, Koodiaattam and Nangiar Koothu most certainly manifest an awareness of a history of art, but also carry this awareness forward in its practice. There has been a considerable and recent 'loss of faith' in the religious significance of the art, maybe more for practitioners who were initiated from outside the community, but yes it is still practiced, performed and seen as belonging to a great narrative. This narrative is the long unbroken flow of the tradition which includes rigorous training and strict adherence to the technique and conventions of the form and the spirit of the art form from the master to disciple.

*Turning to your own practice as a performer, could you describe the process/es of work (or rehearsals) leading up to the recent creations of new and original adaptations of Kalidasa's and Bhasa's plays for the Koodiaattam repertoire by Natanakairali? By 'process' I mean the inclusive totality of deeds, tasks and strategies employed, e.g. the training exercises, textual analyses, directorial treatments and dramaturgical considerations that are part of the work, commitments and discipline regimes of the performers (like you and your compatriots in Natanakairali) seeking to bring to fruition a new works/adaptations like Abhijnana Sakuntalam, Vikramorvasheeyam and Urubhangam?*

For a new work like *Sakuntalam*, one starts with the seed – the text. The first step usually is to gather all available textual and other material like films, documentations etc related to the chosen text. This includes different versions, interpretations, reviews and studies. All members of the group including the direc-

tor G. Venu, actors, musicians, make-up artistes and stage managers sit together and read the texts. This usually continues over several weeks or months. Slowly the different possibilities for performance begin to take shape in each one's mind. We then choose, after a lot of discussion, from the main text, portions that we really like and make an edited version of the text for performance, which is sent to a scholar for checking. Then we start by improvising each line together. Every actor does his/her homework before coming to the workspace.

By now most actors have also been assigned the roles they are going to play. This process again takes several months. We make notes for each scene and then an *attaprakaram* (acting manual) is put together for the whole performance. This manual is flexible and subject to change after each repetition or performance. After several such repetitions we usually invite scholars, masters, special guests to watch our rehearsals and invite comments. Some of their opinions are very valuable. For the first performance again we usually have an invited public who stay on for long discussions afterwards.

During the work of *Sakuntalam*, which took three years, a lot research, documentation and training was done in various aspects of *netra* (eye) and *hasta* (hand gesture) abhinaya. All the actors also had annual ayurvedic massage treatments and training in Kalari and Yoga apart from our personal daily training in Koodiaattam. What makes this process different from the traditional routine is that traditionally a master would first study a text and write an acting manual and then teach it to his disciples. During the making of *Sakuntalam* we for the first time in Koodiaattam reversed this process, making it an inclusive one. We listened to each other and worked together and the acting manual was the last thing to be finalized.

*All performers, particularly dancers and actors, strive to achieve a certain quality of 'being' on stage, which is extraordinary. This existential mode may extend across various dramatic, theatrical or choreographic moments and has variously been described as a heightened consciousness or activation. Alternatively it has been called a state of stimulation, awareness or availability to specific contexts or circumstances. It is a state wherein the inner world (thought, emotion, psychology associative mental image) of the performer is in direct, immediate and instantaneous connection with the outer, physical expressivity of her body. The per-*

former is perceived as 'activated body-mind'. Some call this state of being 'presence'. It is that which captivates and holds the attention of the spectator; what Zeami dubbed the 'flower'.

How would you describe your body-mind consciousness when you are fully present on stage during a performance? You may choose to reflect on the content and constitution of your mental state (consciousness), the muscular-skeletal alignment and tension/ease of your body (for instance the state of your spine, the alignment of your hips, position of your legs and feet, the posture of your arms and hands) when you are fully present on stage.

Also, you may consider the state (or flow) of the 'energy' or breadth while you are in this extraordinary state of 'presence'. What elements of your practice (daily exercises, studio routines and processes) enable you to produce and sustain 'presence' at will during a performance?

This reminds me of another old legend I've often heard from my master about a *nangiar* (an actress) from the village Moozhikulamin Kerala, who suffered from a severe hunchback. However, the moment she stepped on stage to perform, her back would straighten and stay so until the performance was over. This is really the magic of an altered existence.

As a performer I do experience an activated body-mind state while on stage and I have been strongly discouraged by my master every time I have tried to analyze the content, constitution or process of my mental state during a performance. I will follow his advice for as long as I can because I believe that too much analyses and information could steal the natural flow of my body's process. To achieve this state we go through several years of intense and concentrated training. Every actor then formulates his/her own daily *sadhana* – daily practice combined with daily prayers or yoga or meditation or farming or all or some of the above or something else completely.

In Koodiaattam we also follow a strict convention of minimal talking in the green room. As soon as the actor gets ready for make-up, he/she ties a red ribbon on his/her forehead, which grants him/her detachment from all external attachments and happenings until the end of the performance.

Over time, the act of performing becomes a ritual and a habit. We would have done it enough times that this transformation becomes natural the moment we make a turn in front of the Mizhavu drums and take three steps towards the oil lamp on the stage.