Toward a “life” Well Lived between...

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I have led two closely inter-related lives since 1976 when I first traveled to Kerala, India to begin ethnographic field research. One of those lives is that part of my academic work that is focused on and inspired by, but not limited to, my work in Kerala. Between 1976 and 1993 I lived in Kerala for a total of seven years, immersing myself in kathakali dance-drama and via kathakali in the closely related martial art, kalarippayattu. While much of my focus during my seven years in Kerala was on issues of embodiment and experience in kalarippayattu and kathakali (Zarrilli 1984, 1998, 2000), I also spent time attempting to understand and write about numerous other genres of traditional and contemporary Kerala performance—from folk dances (pariamuttumkal) to ritual performances (tayyam) to contemporary theatre such as the work of SOPANAM (Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, Artistic Director) and the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC, subsidized by CPI [M]), resulting in a co-translation with Jose George and introduction to Toopil Bhaasi’s final play, Memories in Hiding.

Ethnography for me is about my innate curiosity and sense of exploring relationships and assumptions wherever I am living or working. Ethnography never stops; it is a state of mind/being/doing. Therefore, my fieldwork has not been in some “other” location which happens to be India; rather, it has taken place in India, as well as in the small town of New Glarus, Wisconsin, where I lived for three years and undertook research on the role of performance in the life of this American community, and equally in the training and rehearsal studios where I currently live the “other” part of my professional life.

This, my second life, is lived as a professional theatre director, actor, and teacher of actors and dancers. This life is lived in the global network of contemporary, cosmopolitan culture, and literally takes place throughout the world. One major project has been working focused on a psychophysical approach to the plays of Samuel Beckett. The Beckett Project was first produced in 1999 at the Grove Theatre, Los Angeles, and then toured the UK in 2001 with an expanded set of performances at the Granary Theatre, Cork, Ireland in 2004. Other recent projects have included directing contemporary Japanese playwright/director Ota Shogo’s The Water Station with a cast of nineteen actors (seventeen Asian actors from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, India, and Philippines, with two Europeans) at the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay in Singapore, produced by TTPF; a semi-devised original piece of theatre, Speaking Stones, created with internationally-known UK playwright Kaite O’Reilly as a commission with Theatre Asou in Graz, Austria with performances in a massive underground quarry used by the Nazi’s in World War II; or my collaborations on new dance-theatre work with bharatanatyam dancer/choreographer, Gitanjali Kolanal—Walking Naked based on the ecstatic poetry of the twelfth century saint, Mahadeviakka which premiered in Chennai in 1999 and has been on international tour since.

All of this professional work — training actors/dancers, rehearsing, and directing — is directly informed by my years of fieldwork in Kerala. There is an intimate, symbiotic relationship between them. The reason is simple—I immersed myself as a performance practitioner directly in what I was researching in Kerala, undertaking a kind of research that could only result from participating completely in the training itself. At first, this was eight hours of intensive kathakali training daily undertaken at the Kerala Kalamandalam in 1976-77 under the guidance of M.P. Sankaran Namboodiri along with boys aged nine to eleven. Later in 1977, I began six hours of intensive daily training in kalarippayattu under the guidance of Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar of the CVN Kalari, Thrivananthapuram.

From my perspective as a theatre director, it was my encounter with Govindankutty Nayar’s version of kalarippayattu that led to my total dedication in pursuing this practice for the remainder of my life. Kalarippayattu has “re-made” me as a person, and as a professional theatre practitioner. Kalarippayattu and kathakali together revolutionized the way I perceived, and practice theatre as an art form—both as a theatre director, and as an actor and trainer of actors and dancers. Why? My in-depth, intensive immersion in daily practice of these yoga-based psychophysical disciplines shifted my awareness so radically that I experience my body-mind and their relationship in a completely new way. All my previous assumptions about my culture, the body, emotions, and self shifted. Trying to understand how Malayalees understood their experience of embodied practice, helped me to conceptualize “the body” and experience as multiple rather than singular. It led me away from psychology and behavior to alternative notions
of experience and interiority. It has helped me conceptualize an entirely alternative paradigm of attempting to understand contemporary acting as an inter-subjective sensuality. This experience led me to reevaluate Western acting and approaches to teaching acting and to conceptualize a new paradigm for articulating the practice of the contemporary actor (Zarrilli 2002, and forthcoming).

I am writing this brief reflection at my now permanent home on the far west coast of Wales with distant views of the Irish Sea. The home is an old stone farm house. On the property, the old milking parlor has been converted into the first “traditional” earth-floor kalari (place of training for Kerala’s martial art) located outside of Kerala—the Tyn-y-parc C.V.N. Kalari. In 1987-88 Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar gifted me the traditional pitham (seat/stool of knowledge) representing mastery in kalarippayattu. For me, this was a momentous and unexpected occasion. I did not feel that I had reached a level of mastery deserving receipt of the pitham, yet I knew that receiving it was both a recognition and a (welcome) obligation to share my knowledge of kalarippayattu. In 2004, when the CVN Kerala Kalari Sangam was established, the Tyn-y-parc CVN Kalari in Llanarth, Wales, was officially sanctioned, as was I as Phillip B. Zarrilli Gurukkal. I now serve as one of two international advisors for the CVN Kalari Sangam—an important function given the increasing number of people going to Kerala to study kalarippayattu. During periods when I am able to be “home”, traditional kalarippayattu training, massage and physical therapy treatments go on here as they do in a Kerala kalari. Kalarippayattu is part of my daily life. Both home and kalari were “blessed” in 2000 when my dear friend, translator, and collaborator Kunju Vasudevan Namboodiripad was visiting me with two Kerala Sama Veda chanters in Wales as part of the Centre for Performance Research’s bi-annual GIVING VOICE festival focused that year on “Divinity of the Voice”. Being their first time traveling outside of India, this was also the first occasion in which the Vedic chanters shared their tradition in a public forum.

There has clearly been “two-way traffic” between Kerala and wherever I am living/working. One form of this traffic is my professional theatre work. My kathakali teacher, M.P. Sankaran Namboodiri came to the US to help realize three collaborations with me—a production of Sakuntala at UCLA in 1979, and later productions of adaptations of India folktales at the University of Wisconsin. Artistic Director of SOPANAM, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, was in residence in Madison to collaborate with me on producing two Sanskrit dramas as part of the 1985 Festival of India in the U.S. Such collaborations have continued, such as my recent work with SANGALPAM—a professional UK-based bharatanatyam dance company on an adaptation and performance of the seventh century Sanskrit farce (The Farce of Drunken Sport) performed at the Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall and on national UK tour in 2003.

A second form of “traffic” has been that of Westerners going to Kerala in increasing numbers. Because very little had been written about kalarippayattu prior to my research and writing on the tradition, my publications have led to international recognition of kalarippayattu and a massive influx of foreign students from around the world often searching for the “mother of all martial arts”. As is usual, this global, cosmopolitan flow of information and people has, of course, been a doubled-edged sword in relation to the traditional practice of kalarippayattu.

A third form of “traffic” has been my experience of sharing non-Indian disciplines and practices with martial artists and theatre practitioners in India. Many of these practitioners are curious about unfamiliar practices. While living in Kannur in 1988-9, I shared my knowledge of Chinese taiquiquan with kalarippayattu practitioners with whom I was working. And on a number of occasions I conducted workshops with actors at the Calicut School of Drama, Trissur, the National School of Drama in New Delhi, and at the first international “Asian Martial Arts and Performance Conference” sponsored by Padatik in Calcutta.

As a professional actor, director, and trainer of performers, I am in the somewhat unusual position of focusing both my academic work and my practical work around the shift in my own experience that resulted from my fieldwork in Kerala. When teaching at University or professional actor training programmes, students around the world are exposed to kalarippayattu both as a mode of traditional Kerala embodied practice, but also as a useful, pragmatic “tool” for gaining an entirely new experience of one’s body-mind relationship in order to potentially become a better, more “aware” actor. The training “heightens” and “deepens” one’s ability to use awareness so that—according to the Malayalam folk expression—meyyu kanakkuka, that is, “the body is (or becomes) all eyes”.

In terms of the more academic side of my work, I recently co-authored a new theatre history textbook, Theatre Histories: An Introduction (2006) that could never have been written without my extensive fieldwork in Kerala. This book for the first time brings to students of world theatre history a truly “global” perspective on histories of theatre that integrates the study of non-western performance—both traditional and contemporary—into the study of what has too often been a dominant Euro-American history. But perhaps even more important is that my original mentors in my studies of kathakali, Vasudevan Namboodiripad and M.P. Sankaran Namboodiri, have just authored their own book on kathakali, and I will be assisting them in attempting to place an eventual English translation of their own book with an English-language publisher.

I have not conducted lengthy fieldwork in Kerala since 1993. In this “post field” phase of my life, transactions and contacts are sustained in all the usual ways with friends, collaborators, and teachers—from email and telephone calls to visits—and perhaps, more importantly,
the inhabitation of a “mental/personal space” that encompasses my constant immersion in Kerala culture. One can never pretend that inequalities do not exist in a fieldwork setting, but working with as much integrity and respect as possible for individuals as well as traditions can lead to interactions that are sustained for a life-time. The warp and weft of friendships, modes of embodied knowledge, and reflections, analysis and insight can lead to relationships that transcend the well-rehearsed and often limited means we have of “representing” what is ultimately un-representable—a life and world-view as they continue to be lived in relation to and between….

This reflection is dedicated to the memory of Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar—March 22, 1930 – January 22, 2006.

References

The theme of October 2006 issue of Indian Folklife is On Memory: Processes and Supports

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In order to observe and detect techniques and practices related to memory, we shall focus on various forms of interaction and interlocution as rituals and/or narratives take place. We favor an ethnographic approach and the use of miscellaneous supports: gestures and movements; rhythms and melodies; multimedia recordings audio, audio-video, CD-Rom, DVD-video, photos; objects and books; graphism on cloth, shell, wood, bamboo, lontara; face paintings and costumes; theatres of actors, shadow plays and puppetry. During performances, these actions and multimodal experiences develop and we shall try to bring to surface memorizing processes, transmissions of know how and the mastery of miscellaneous verbal musical, kinesic, plastic and literary expressions.

As the analysis develops, we might focus on a relationship to History of the respective groups.

Lists of contributors and papers
Nicole Revel: On Memory.
Denis Matringe: The Cultural Referents of a Punjabi Lay.
Laurent Maheux: The Meaningfulness of Recentering: Case Study of a Thar Narrative.
Catherine Servan-Schreiber: Singing Tales and Reading chapbooks: The Bhojpuri Tradition.
Christine Guillebaud: Variation and Interaction of visual and musical components in a Kerala Ritual for the Snake Deities.
List of PURU SARTHA relevant issues by Marie Fourcade.