

The Distance Traveled: *Little Clay Cart* in Athens, Georgia

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The drama *Little Clay Cart*, or *Mrcchakatika* as it is known in Sanskrit, was written during the Gupta Period (c. 320-550 CE) in India also known as the Golden Age of Sanskrit Drama. The plays of this period, performed in a mixture of Sanskrit and Prakrit (a vernacular dialect), incorporated a ceremonial style with intricate systems of movement and gesture. Written in approximately 5th century C.E., not much is known of early performances of *Little Clay Cart*; however these plays were typically reserved for coronations, weddings, and festivals. In his essay on the 1989 Bhasa Festival held in Trivandium, India, Farley Richmond posits that kutiyattam could be the original method of presenting classical Sanskrit plays. He goes on to describe that kutiyattam in the region of Kerala preserves portions of some of Bhasa's plays in their repertoire (1989:68).¹

The 2004 production of *Little Clay Cart* at the University of Georgia, directed by Richmond, incorporated masks of Balinese, Javanese and western origins as well as musical instruments from a variety of eastern traditions. The 2004 production of *Little Clay Cart* in Athens, Georgia, as an amalgam of traditional Asian performance styles, functioned as a multicultural educational experience, a training ground for actors and, of particular importance for this essay, a localized cross-cultural phenomenon.

In his 1971 article, "Sanskrit Plays Abroad," Farley Richmond poses the question, "How should classical Indian Plays be produced?"(39). This study takes up Richmond's question and more specifically, addresses how should, or how might, classical Indian plays be performed in light of theories of cultural identity, cultural tourism, and multicultural education which remain a focal point in modern theatrical scholarship.

In order to attempt to develop an answer to these questions I looked at both past productions of *Little Clay Cart* as well as a recent production in the 2004 season at UGA directed by Farley Richmond. *Little Clay Cart* is attributed to King Sudraka and is a prakarana play – one of the ten types of plays described in the *Natyasastra*. According to the *Natyasastra*, within each play a complex system of responses is created by the changing *Bhavas* or emotions

¹ Bhasa was the earliest known Sanskrit dramatist, believed to have lived during the 3rd century A.D. Some characters from his plays serve as the basis for *Little Clay Cart*

displayed by typed characters, which in combination produce contemplative moods or Rasas. As a prakarana play, the central character is a Brahmin, a member of the caste of priests and scholars; secondly, the story is based upon the theme of love. In the journey towards the fulfillment of this love, the noble Brahmin, Charudatta, falls victim to the wheel of cosmic justice and in doing so also reveals the political and public world of a bustling Indian city.

As cross-cultural theatre scholar Ruston Bharucha states, “different conceptions of Indian theatre promote different interpretations of Indian cultural life” (2). According to Richmond “in general most Sanskrit plays are idealizations for what behavior people should have not mirrors of what the society has within it” (interview). There is not a wide history of productions of *Little Clay Cart* abroad. The more fantastic tale *Shakuntala* (fifth century) by Kalidasa has had a greater number of productions in the west. In its country of origin, according to Richmond, *Little Clay Cart* is primarily used to teach Sanskrit in universities and colleges. As Richmond describes in his 1971 article, productions by Indian directors show clear stylistic differences from those directed by American or European artists. Primarily, the past productions of *Little Clay Cart* can be further divided into productions directed by persons seeking to create an Indian aesthetic and those which neglect these cultural influences.

Most culturally influenced productions of classical Sanskrit drama are informed by the *Natyasastra*, an Indian treatise on theatre written between 200 BC and 200 AD attributed to the playwright Bharata. As Jatinder Verma, director of the immigrant-founded Tara Arts Theatre of London explains, “Bharata posits four constituent elements of theatre: Abhinaya - Gesture (which includes movement), Vacikam - Speech (which includes music), Aharayam - Costume (which includes make-up) and Sattvikam - the Mind (which includes emotion)” (3). Directors that seek to maintain the Indian aesthetic of their pieces – or perhaps to create Indian versions of Western classics such as *Tartuffe* – find in these elements a good starting point.

Richmond’s article presented various examples of what we now call cross-cultural productions of Sanskrit theatre, many directed by Indian nationals. These examples present a traditional, stylistic form of Indian theatre, influenced by dance drama, as a suitable mode of cross-cultural production. According to this article, the 1966 *Little Clay Cart* production at Michigan State University by visiting director C.C. Mehta “captured the flavor of Indian Classical theatre through the use of gestures, movements, and speech” (1971: 42). The play was initially chosen by the particular *rasas* they conveyed. Mehta’s work often required

“compromising based on the abilities of the young American students and local stage facilities” (1971: 43). The University of Washington and University of Minnesota, both under the direction of Balwant Gangi, also produced versions of *Little Clay Cart* in the 1960’s which used masks, dance, music and a neutral acting area. Gangi’s productions used P. Lal’s translation as “an abbreviated prose adaptation designed for western readers” in order to focus on the struggle of opposites within the play (1971:45).

Of course, many productions of *Little Clay Cart* have been performed with little or no influence from traditional Indian theatrical forms or theories. According to Richmond, it was common for Sanskrit plays when earlier performed in the West to be, “remodeled and adapted to conform to [by director’s] prevailing tastes and attitudes” (1971: 42). Lugne Poe produced *Little Clay Cart* in 1898 before closing the Theatre Art L’Ouvre in 1899 in efforts to familiarize the public “with the great foreign drama” (Turney).

Other performances capitalized on the spectacle of India without any pretence of presenting a cultural, social or religious context. In the 1930’s, The Neighborhood Playhouse produced *The Little Clay Cart* on Broadway. The production used Arthur William Ryder’s translation and was directed by Agnes Morgan and Irene Lewisohn. In this production, all religious rituals, dances, and songs were eliminated. The piece was sold as a “blend of theatrical and realistic elements creating a fairy-tale atmosphere” (Richmond 1971: 43). The set was fairly realistic, including two houses, a shrine in the center, and a cyclorama to chart the changing moods. Although it eliminated the opening chant evoking the gods, the production did include the *sutradhara*, or stage manager, who examined the stage, with traditional greetings, and parted the stage curtain. This introduction most certainly created an exotic effect among the 1930’s Broadway audience. Essentially, the Broadway production commodified and romanticized Indian culture, reinforcing Asian caricatures through the fantastic, exotic imagery of the Other.

Other modern productions such as the 1995 production of *Little Clay Cart* at Pomona College (California) presented the piece in relation to modern Indian entertainment genres. Betty Barnhard directed the Pomona production using the Van Buitenen translation with the assistance of a professor from the Gujarat region of India. The production utilized recordings of Hindi music in the chant sequence at the opening of the play (as well as throughout most of the production) quickly immersing the audience in another world. A series of dance numbers in an almost Bollywood style were included as well, often replacing larger elements of the text.

Instances of gesture language were included in the acting style, but were not entirely assimilated into the characters performed by the American actors. Traditional costuming, consisting of saris, cholis, and dhotis, exposed the actors' bodies in ways many westerners are unaccustomed, often inspiring awkward body postures from many of the actors. Clearly, the challenges and pitfalls evident in the Pomona performance could easily become problems for the UGA performance without proper guidance.

Division among directors' styles can also be found in the goals of the productions. As previously noted, *Little Clay Cart* was performed by a variety of visiting Indian artists at university theatre departments in efforts to open their students and their audiences to a new theatrical culture. The University of Toledo December 2003 production, directed by visiting professor, Suman Mukherjee seems a typical example of this multicultural educational effort. This production, which incorporated Indian dancing and physical comedy, was performed as part of the University of Toledo's department of theatre and film's 2003-04 season entitled "A Global Celebration of the Arts." Mukherjee stated in a press release that although the production is "different from what American audiences are used to seeing" in its poetic, metaphoric language and use of asides, *Little Clay Cart* is "closer to Shakespeare than modern theatre" (Lytle). Due to multicultural efforts in modern education, university performances of *Little Clay Cart* typically attempt to create "authentic" models, as informed by other traditional Indian theatre forms, despite the lack of documented knowledge of that original model.

However, the same *prakarana* play (full of humor and highlighting themes of love and cosmic justice) has also been used to question cultural aesthetic caricatures, where one sound or image (such as a turban or an accent) is used to represent an entire culture or national identity. This use of Sanskrit drama was exemplified by the Tara Arts 1986 production at the West End in London. Directed by Jatinder Verma, the production served as part of a mission "to reflect genuine Asian experience away from imposed caricatures" (Frost par. 5).

According to Farley Richmond, his production of *Little Clay Cart* sought to create "a world on stage that was informed by both my past activities in India in 1969 and my more recent studies of production techniques in Bali" (Interview). One cannot ignore, however, the context of a performance – that is – each theatre's unique audience and resources. These contextual parameters determine the depth of the cultural exchange and how the other culture is

interpreted and presented. Essentially, the production of *Little Clay Cart* at the UGA in Athens, GA had three primary purposes:

- 1) To expose Athens to non-western theatre,
- 2) To serve as a teaching tool for drama appreciation students,
- 3) To acquaint our actors with the ways mask work can inform character study.

As Richmond stated in our recent interview, the theatre community of Athens, Georgia has no history of Asian theatre productions. In essence it can be called a “deprived theatrical zone” though it is probably not unlike many theatres in the country that plan their seasons around a mix of western European canonical texts, profit-making musicals, and the occasional risky art piece.

A recent UGA drama departmental planning meeting defined its target audience as a mix of college students, faculty from other departments, members of the music/art scene, the “culturally elite,” retirees, families, children, national audience for experimental work and graduate and undergraduate students from the drama department. Obviously, this description presents an opportunity for ethnically and economically diverse audience.

For this particular production, one of the primary audiences was the Drama Appreciation class (with about 500 students enrolled each semester) who were required to attend. Prior to the performance, students were provided with preliminary lectures on Indian theatre. The students were also required to write a response to what was for many a unique experience. The production was also well publicized through the UGA Center for Asian Studies. Overall, the performance of classical Indian theatre with its mixture of Asian performance styles provided a new cultural experience for the local community, which includes an active Indian-American community. It is clear, however, that a cross-cultural or intercultural statement was not a primary goal of the performance.

It is necessary, however, to define this term cross-cultural. Cross-cultural theory challenges notions of culture and its relationship to the individual. Practitioners of cross-cultural theory dismiss modernist notions of universal themes, origin, and authenticity. Most interestingly, cross-cultural theories put into question our concept of identity. Is identity a unified whole – a singular representation of the self – or is it rather a layered, complex construct which includes other concepts such as religion or post-colonialism? To focus this definition as it applies to our

study, however, we only need to know that within the term “cross cultural” there is an inherent element of exchange. An analysis of cross-cultural theory in performance then would examine the nature of this exchange between cultures.

As an approach to theatrical production, Jatinder Verma defines cross-cultural theatre in practice as “those [productions] which overtly draw upon the encounters between different cultural sensibilities” moreover that “the intention here is invariably to re-imagine the world, with the conventions of the English or European stage largely ignored, or seriously questioned”(1). Essentially, productions in this vein are designed to reveal the “hidden texts” through substitution of the “other” for the “norm” – or as Verma states “to stimulate other ways of seeing” (Verma 1). These encounters and negotiations between cultures – often differentiated by the terms “target culture” and “source culture” – can be seen in a production through the manipulation of “cultural resources” whether they are “symbolic, material languages, myth, rituals, techniques, training methods [or] visual practices”(Gilbert and Lo 31). The “hidden texts” which Verma alludes to are those socio-political contexts lost in aesthetic translation from the source culture. Whereas multicultural efforts in academia – exemplified in early western productions of Sanskrit plays – often reduce the various readings of eastern texts into one cultural image, other forms of cross cultural theatre, such as post-colonial, migrant, and activist community theatre, engage the audiences in these cultural differences. In *Little Clay Cart*, however, these hidden texts present an idealized worldview influenced by caste systems, religious philosophy, and the understanding that material items - indeed, that the living world – is one of Maya or illusion.

Richmond, when pressed to define cross-cultural theatre in our interview, defined it as taking one or two cultures and exposing them to another. That is essentially what our production of *Little Clay Cart* did in using Indian performance techniques with Balinese masks. In Athens Georgia, this classical Sanskrit play, *Little Clay Cart*, became “an Asian play of an Asian culture done with American actors with Indian costume techniques and music” but somehow not a statement of Indian Identity (interview).

Cross cultural theory entered into the University of Georgia in a number of ways, but is best illustrated in language, comic acting techniques, and audience reception. Language in a cross-cultural theatre production requires close attention. One can choose to force collisions between a source culture and target culture by mixing languages. This highlights language’s

power to alienate and comfort while also exploring pre-cultural, pre-language forms of communication. One can also choose to cater to the target culture, as most western productions of *Little Clay Cart* have done. As dramaturg for Richmond's production, it became my primary job to create a compiled script; one which would be engaging for the actors while limiting the distancing, colonialist, or exotic elements found in the language of many translations. Most problematic was the length of the script, which could have easily fostered a three-hour performance. Productions such as the one at Pomona College chose to cut entire scenes which were more symbolic, focused more on the caste-related humor, or that featured secondary characters, in order to have time for dance sequences. Other productions cut secondary character introductions entirely. Our production was performed from a composite script, adapted primarily from the translations of Oliver and P. Lal. Original Sanskrit texts – used in India primarily to teach Sanskrit – were also consulted when the poetry of language seemed lost. The balance between humor, poetry, and timing was vital in creating the performance script.

In our performances, despite efforts at adaptation, distancing effects remained; the mix of music and spoken word, along with gesture language, created combinations quite different from typical musical theatre. Live music served primarily as percussive and thematic accents paralleling the play's changing *rasas* and *bhavas*. The hardest work, however, came in training western musicians in eastern musical patterns on a variety of Asian instruments. For many productions, the language of *Little Clay Cart*, both poetic and wonderfully humorous, becomes secondary to the visual spectacle of the piece.

The exchange of cultures in our production was most successful through the variety of comic acting techniques. The cast, which featured undergraduate actors with a variety of backgrounds, began with masks, which in turn informed their characters. As Richmond states however, “These masks as seen by Balinese audience would definitely have a different role to play in the production. In other words, there was a disconnect in the way the mask is normally played [in Bali] and the way we played it” (Interview). Richmond admits that the universal comic elements of the play are what drew him to *Little Clay Cart* instead of another Sanskrit drama; “I like *Little Clay Cart* because it has humor in it that becomes more accessible to the Western audience, and that humor is more like our kind of humor” (Interview). The mixture of physical humor and comic asides in combination with the actors' interpretations of the masks

allowed for a fusion of Western and Indian cultures while simultaneously retaining their individual aesthetics (Pavis 83).

According to Gilbert and Lo's proposed model for Interculturalism, each cross-cultural performance assumes multiple, complex layers of semiotic readings (45). Layers of meaning are provided by numerous production elements including acting, design, and the performance space. The most memorable aspect of the UGA performance of *Little Clay Cart* was the acting style, which incorporated gesture language, masks and dance. This stylistic approach to acting was enhanced by a set design, representative of the kutiyattam temples, in thematic colors that corresponded with the vibrant costumes. Traditional curtains were also used for initial character entrances. In the UGA production of *Little Clay Cart* the spoken language was combined with music, masks, dance, and gesture to create in essence our own exotic language – what Verma calls “non-European stage vocabulary”(4). The town of Ujjain sat in our imaginations, in a representation of a temple stage, on a stage, within a former chapel. Overall, the white and black bodies wrapped in Indian dress, faces hidden behind masks, negotiated the spaces and levels of meaning with little hesitation. What this new language produced in the mind of individual audience members was harder to discern.

Analysis of audience reception has always been problematic. Prior to performance, however, certain questions can be posed to directors and designers that may point to possibilities of reception and are of special interest to Asian theatre practitioners. Addressing questions of the audience's prior knowledge of the source culture or experience with the subject matter can also help to determine how the culture may be interpreted and presented – whether as a portrayal of cultural identity (or in our case “Indian-ness”) or as an authentic model.

In its beginning popularity in the west, according to Rustom Bharucha, cross-cultural theatre often seems to be at two extremes; either as an exploitation of another culture (combined with feelings of superiority, reductive attitudes and sensational effect) or put in a reverential or mythologizing context that views the source culture as a symbol of rustic perfection which must be exonerated, not questioned (9). According to Marvin Carlson, however, these extremes seem to be situated between productions that feature culture as an “artistic creation” and those “driven by an ethnological respect for an authenticity of reproductions”(Pavis 80). Many directors in early attempts at cross cultural – or what Gilbert and Lo would call “Intercultural” – theatre frequently share “ambivalent ethics” on cross-cultural borrowing as exemplified in Richard

Schechner's quote, "You go to another country to see your own more clearly" (in Bharucha 13). This division can be seen in scholarly writing as well; where Bharucha paints the picture of cultural tourism victimizing the east, other scholars describe the same interaction as the cultural give and take resulting from a global economy. Modern cross-cultural theory attempts to explore these differences perhaps to the extent of doing away with the "crossing" of cultures resulting instead in analysis of culture-specific texts.

According to Gilbert and Lo, all theatre necessitates "the negotiation of cultural differences both temporally and spatially" (32). Many directors, according to Bharucha, search for universal structures in disparate cultural experiences (7). The scholar Revilo Pendleton Oliver, whose translation we consulted for our production, comments "Although always explicitly Indian, [*Little Clay Cart*] is to a remarkable degree implicitly universal"(40). Richmond recognizes the problems of universalizing a text like *Little Clay Cart*. As Richmond stated in our recent interview, "Any play done outside of its home theatre/country takes on a new life" and although there are "certain values [in the play] you can see as Indian... We use the play as the example of the ideal" rather than as a true representation of contemporary, or even ancient, Indian identity. (Interview).

There is an intricate blending of sacred and secular in the Indian performance tradition. The spiritual/social link that formed a basis for ancient Indian society, as well as the idealized Indian world of *Little Clay Cart*, collides with the socio-political (a-spiritual) mindset of a contemporary western audience. This is only one of many cross-cultural negotiations which must be made in producing classical Sanskrit drama in contemporary theatre. The statement that *Little Clay Cart* presents merely an idealized world, positions it within its culture but also glosses over notions of ideology that may be present. Here again, we return to the question: how should classical Indian plays be produced? Concepts of origin, authenticity, and intention are debunked within contemporary theater scholarship. In production, however, many directing and acting styles have yet to incorporate these ideas. Though the UGA production provided one possible answer to Richmond's question, it also spawned other larger questions of cross-cultural performance. How can cross-cultural theatre be anything more than educational in the face of so many "deprived theatre zones"? What purposes are served in conforming classical texts to contemporary mindsets?

In essence, cross-cultural theory in performance forces the director to openly evaluate his/her opinion or perspective towards the source culture as well as the target culture – or, more simply, his/her presentation of the culturally familiar in relation to the culturally foreign (Pavis 83). What elements will define the target culture and what do we hope to gain from using it? In each performance one must reevaluate how the cultural exchange should be organized – as a merger, a cleansing ritual, or a hostile takeover – and whether the performance’s presentation of culture essentializes, universalizes or complicates notions of identity.

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