

Manikin Plays

Manikin Plays:
Two Contemporary Plays

By

Sreenath Nair

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

Manikin Plays: Two Contemporary Plays,
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To
Arya and Pia

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The Beauty Parlour

Scenes from *The Beauty Parlour*; Sajitha Madathil

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INTRODUCTION

RALPH YARROW

Sreenath Nair is from Kerala. Most people when they think of Kerala would first of all picture coconut trees, paddy fields, sea and inland waterways. If they know a bit more they would remember the high degree of literacy and the good proportion of women at all levels of education, including strong and articulate thinkers and writers. If they know a little about culture and politics, they will think of *Kathakali*, of frequent periods of state rule by the Communist Party, and perhaps of the tradition of touring educational, literacy and propagandist theatre operated by the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) in the post-war decades.

Most of these things are summoned up in Nair's two plays published here; but not perhaps in quite the ways one might expect, just as the plays themselves do not conform to models of theatre prevalent in Kerala when they were written.

India has an enormously long history of theatrical performance, articulated in its ancient 'manual' the *Natyasastra* - which offers precise instructions about acting and expressive technique, about theatre architecture and construction, and about the ways in which performance may affect its spectators - and exemplified in a few still extant plays by Bhasa, Kalidasa and others.

Kathakali, and even more the more ancient 'classical' form of *Kudiyattam*, are probably the closest indication of what this Sanskrit Drama from 2000 years ago may have looked like. One prestigious strand of 20th and 21st-century work in Kerala has been concerned mainly with conserving – and in some measure updating – these plays¹. There has also, as mentioned above, been a tradition of 'street' theatre using short,

1. E.g. the work of Kavalam Narayana Pannikar's Sopanam troupe from Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) and the festivals and productions of G. Venu from Trichur (Thrissur). Panikkar has directed all of Bhasa's work.

Brechtian 'learning plays'; and more recently some imaginative, technologically adventurous and artistically polished treatments of well-known European and Indian material².

However, there are large gaps in between the traditional, the educational and the avant-garde. There is very little work, which deals with the realities of the contemporary world in a relatively direct way, which acknowledges and utilises the complexity of what it means to be a Keralan, an Indian, a woman, in today's society. There is even less which brings to light things which India – even Kerala – has preferred to look away from whilst polishing its 'advanced' image; and even less than that which does these things through a form of theatre which quotes and interrogates past models by inventing its own sharp and questioning discourse and its own framing of the forms of representation.

Sreenath Nair's work challenges both tradition and practice in Keralan theatre. Although first performed in the 1990s, many of the issues it addresses are still relevant. Stereotyping and 'beautification' as a form of oppression and exploitation of women is still prevalent in Indian attitudes, and its effects have been increasingly widely recognised in recent times through public awareness of the extent of rape in Indian society. These and other forms of restriction and disempowerment signal the violence which the female protagonist of *The Beauty Parlour* can only meet with a mirror image: self-harming born of despair. In this play, the female body is objectified, 'othered', broken apart and reconstructed, graphically and physically; it has no 'identity' of its own, it migrates unsettlingly between 'Anita' and the Beautician and neither has a sense of ownership or control. In the *Stone Idols* the Actress consciously refuses the role assigned to her as the passive wife-in-waiting of the 'saintly' Siddhartha; though here too it is only violence – manifested in her voluntary dream as the figure of the bull – which seems to offer an alternative option. Yet she does choose: her aesthetic defiance acts as a kind of Boalian 'rehearsal for revolution', and in rejecting her role as subservient to a revered icon of male superiority (who has fulfilled 'tradition' by abandoning his family in order to achieve spiritual status) she is making a stand against another strand of hierarchy and oppression: 'I need to show them my face without the mask. I need to tell them my experience. That's it. Your play cannot give me what I need. You are frightened of my body. You control my every action all the time.'

2. Especially the work of Abhinaya (Trivandrum), e.g. *Macbeth*, *Siddhartha*.

In both plays dramaturgy signals this resistance powerfully. The Actress interrupts and 'rewrites' the traditional Keralan/Sanskrit formula penned by the male Playwright, and it is her dream, which takes over the stage. Nair's theatre thus embodies a contentious, deconstructive aesthetic of incongruous and awkward (rather than passive, beautiful, decorative) figures, of stubborn argument and resistant bodies. It refuses the decorous politeness of conventional forms of theatre – even in the case of the *Stone Idols* of contemporary political plays, which tended to use soap-opera stereotyping. It is spiky, uncomfortable, splintered: the female body scorns adornment, or enacts its distress, its distortion and its dismemberment. As the Actress says: 'Until my silent experiences find a voice, until the movement and the action are also mine... Until there is a stage that looks like a dream and has freedom beyond the grip of logic... this play will not end...'

This almost Artaudian quality produces a theatre which tears and excoriates; but not as masochistic guilt or self-indulgence, rather to pinpoint and materialise a condition which can only thus speak its resistance. There is still a powerful need for such a theatre.

Ralph Yarrow
Norwich, April 2013

PLAYS

STONE IDOLS

Characters

Playwright
Actress
Light/Sound Man
Group of actors
Yasodhara
Rahul
Chandan
Messenger
Buddha
Bull
Chorus

The Story....

Prince Siddhartha was raised in the palace in great luxury without much knowledge about the world. One day, out of curiosity, he went out of the palace for a ride through the countryside with his charioteer. On the journey, he saw four sights: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic. The prince, for the first time realized the realities of old age, disease, and death. He was impressed by the wandering ascetic who renounced the world and sought release from fear of death and sufferings. Siddhartha's life changed forever. The luxuries that once pleased him now seemed meaningless. Musicians and dancing girls become insignificant. He realized that he could no longer be content living the life of a prince. That very night he left the palace, shaved his head, and changed his prince's clothes for a beggar's robe. He wandered around, meditated, finally became enlightened and came to be known as Buddha. The Buddha devoted himself to teaching, travelled tirelessly, and taught until his death. The play begins with Buddha's arrival near the palace where Yashodhara, his wife, and Rahul, his son are waiting for his return.

Sthapana³

(A deserted stage. The man in charge of sound and light enters and is rapt in activities related to the production of the play. He announces the names of those working behind the stage. As he signals for the commencement of the theme music, an old song of the KPAC⁴ theatre troupe is played. The excited Sound/Light Man tries to suit action to the song. The Playwright enters in a towering rage.)

- Playwright:** Stop that... (*The song ends*) What's your job...?
- Light/Sound man:** Sound management. The sound system...
- Playwright:** Who asked you to do all that you're doing?
- Light/Sound man:** No one did. But sir, there are certain conventions when a play is staged. There must be theme music. The hero and the heroine must sing and act.
- Playwright:** (*Interrupting*) Then let there be a chorus too to have the backing of tradition.
- Light/Sound man:** That'd be nice. The hero must at least, be a Nair. He must fall in love with a woman of a lower caste. That must explode into a socio-political crisis. What do you know about that, Sir? Is there anything like that in this play? (*In a passion*) Is there love? Leprosy? Is there Revolution⁵ in the play...?
- Playwright:** No, nothing.
- Light/Sound man:** Then this is no play, Sir. We need a good play. What does that entail? You've to uproot the plant of life and replant it on the stage. The live roots should sprout blood...
- Playwright:** Let me decide whether I should uproot or plant. You go and do your work. Scoot... (*Pushes him off*)
- Light /Sound man:** Don't insult me in front of this crowd Sir. I too am a playwright. Have you seen my play *All Turned Out*

³ A sort of Prologue. *Sthapana* was used in traditional Sanskrit plays to announce the drama, to begin it and to introduce the first characters.

⁴ KPAC: Kerala Peoples Arts Club, a cultural wing of the Kerala Communist party formed in the 50s. Its plays combine radical communist ideas and sentimental love stories together.

⁵ Love, leprosy, revolution: these words represent one of KPAC's popular plays, which handle those issues at the centre of the plot along with a family story underpinned by a sentimental love story. This play rocked the audience at that time and becomes the model for social drama in theatre and film.

*to be Thieves, The Sky Horse and The Boy Made of Plastic?*⁶ No... you may not have seen them. Oh Sir, the fireworks that I and my plays launched in the theatres! Oh, hilarious!

Playwright: You fool. The stage has its own language-the language of the theatre.

Light/Sound man: Don't try to scare me by invoking terms like the language of the theatre. I can use language well on stage. Want to hear?

(Speaks a bit of conversation from the popular mainstream film aping the manner and voice of a star of the commercial film).

Sir, I am a playwright of the masses. The people are with me. Let me ask you something. Mark it down to my ignorance. Sir, can you pass off myths as plays?⁷

Playwright: Yes, if myths are presented in the right manner, myths can make a play. No use telling you though. Why don't you mind your business? Get lost... I need to begin my play *(The Playwright pushes the Sound/Light Man off the stage. He protests loudly as he goes out.)*

Playwright: See? He believes himself to be a great dramatist. The only claim he has to the title is his experience in managing the acoustics of old puranic melodramas *(To the audience)* I apologize... for having created a fracas like this. If the play is to begin, some people have to be shooed out. I am the writer of this play. I commence the play in expectation of your co-operation. A word about the play - this is a political play. A postmodern woman... *(Song of actors heard offstage)* Why is there such a commotion in the green room, which incidentally is the norm, while I'm trying to do things in a traditional manner?

⁶ Parody of the names that are quite common in the popular commercial theatre in Kerala.

⁷ It is a reference to playwrights in experimental theatre using myths and rituals in their plays in late 60s and 70s. There was a strong resistance from politically committed playwrights in Kerala theatre towards new playwrights experimenting with traditional performing arts form of Kerala.

(Peering in the direction of the green room)

Oh...All the fuss is to do with the entrance of the chorus and the Actress. I forgot. As usual, the *Sthapana* ends here. Let me withdraw to the green room for a while.

(The Playwright disappears into the green room. A group of actors push aside the curtain and enter with a cross like stand on which glitter the costume and the mask of the Actress. The Actress is led to the stage with ceremony. They carry costumes and adornments of a kathakali woman artist, set the stage and try to help the Actress with her make up. The Actress declines their proffered help. All the activities remind one of the stage conventions of classical Sanskrit theatre)

Actress: I don't want it. I don't want to put on the mask and the costumes.

One man: How can you say that? The play is about to begin... Don't dillydally and waste time. You have to act.

Actress: Damn it... .. I'm damned if I'm going to act this part.

Another man: You should have said that earlier.

Actress: I said so. Not once, many times over. To you and to the Playwright. Did any one listen?

One man: So... this is deliberate.

One Actor: You'd decided much earlier to create trouble in front of the audience, didn't you?

Actress: Yeah! I need to tell them a thing or two. *(To the audience, pointing at the mask and costume)* There ... do you see that? That's the costume I've to don. Lifeless face. Meaningless words. I've given everything to act the kind of roles you desire, very many times. I can't go on. I'm going to live. *(To the actor)* I don't give a damn whether you stage the play or not.

(As the Actress is about to step off the stage, a group of actors try to stop her. Commotion)

One Actor: Call him... Call him...Call the Playwright.

Actress: I don't care! I'm not going to act in this play under any circumstance, come who may.

(The Actress tries to escape from the stage. She is forcibly pulled back by the actors. A discordant atmosphere. The Playwright enters in a towering rage)

Playwright: Ugh... Stop it...Stop it, I say... Undisciplined hooligans. *(To the audience)* I beg your pardon. I never thought that they'd behave so rudely to you all. *(To the group)*. What's this? Why haven't you begun the play?

One man: How can we begin? Shouldn't the Actress agree to commence action?

Playwright: Why are you behaving like this, dear Actress? We've lost a lot of time. The spectators are getting bored. Don't waste your time in fruitless arguments. Begin the play now.

Actress: I don't give a damn if anyone is waiting. I'll not act with this mask and costume.

Playwright: Why...?

Actress: I need to show them my face without the mask. I need to tell them my experience. That's it. Your play cannot give me what I need. You are frightened of my body. You control my every action all the time. Aren't these reasons enough? Yasodhara waited and wept, it seems! damn you. *(Throws her costume at the Playwright's face. Commotion)*

Playwright: Stop it... First you've to be disciplined. *(To the audience)* O God! Of all the fools in the world, the actors take the cake! *(To the group)* Our most important goal is the staging of this play. *(The actors all nod in agreement)*. It's a dialogue that extends to all audience. *(The actors hoot)* All differences of opinion must give way to that. *(The actors hallo once more)* All problems... All questions... so be silent *(The actors hallo yet again)* for the super goal of the play ... what's to be done for that?

The Actors: *(Together)* Call the Actress.

Playwright: Here she stands. What's the delay now? *(In anger)* Fellows, make her act. *(The group tries forcibly to put the costume and the mask on the Actress.)*

Playwright: The stage is set. The characters are ready. Let the play begin. Let the striking chord of the exposition be struck with the harmonious blend of vivid colours and meaningful and beautiful dramatic images of traditional stagecraft.

(The Playwright disappears behind the scene. The actors help the Actress don her costume and set the stage. Some come forward and address the audience)

First Man: You are watching a divine ritual act. This is the creation of a character. We are in the process of building a suitable character as per the requirements of the play. A female character with a glittering costume and a mask. A female character with a perfect figure and the capacity for endurance.

The Second Man: This play is the dream of a woman...there... the character who is to experience the dream is ready.

The Third Man: Or, is she made ready...?

The Fourth Man: This is the interior of the palace of Sudhodhana the King of Kapilavastu.

(Some actors with small earthen lamps take their place in the background, as stone pillars. Some give direction to the Actress on her stage movement. The Actress tries to imitate them. Creating an atmosphere rich with tradition and ritual, the actors help the Actress to don the mask. A curtain and massive frame may be used according to discretion. The Actress may use the frame as a mirror in another scene.)

Fifth man: The woman who is sitting, fathoms deep in thought by the lighted earthen lamp is Yasodhara. It has been years since Siddhartha had left the palace. Yet ... this waiting is interminable.

Sixth man: Now... .. after years, he is somewhere near the palace.

(A muted roar offstage. The Budhasharana mantra⁸ wafts into the stage. The actors leave the stage. A Kathakali stanza set to music detailing the pangs of separated love is heard. The Actress acts out the section with dance steps and mudras.⁹ She performs inside the frame.)

Actress: *(To the spectators)* They've given me costumes and mask. The characters who are to act with me in this play are getting ready to come on stage. Neither written work nor the familiar dialogue has the power to touch me. My experience is not encoded in that. My tears ... my laughter... my sighs... all are hidden by this mask. We don't see each other. We don't know each other. You know only what others say about me.

(The Budhasaranamantra is heard offstage. the setting changes into a street of ancient India. The bustle, the clamour, the hawkers, the passers-by, the courtesans, Buddhist monks, and soldiers ... The street sounds fade out with the people. Yasodhara moves aimlessly through the inner courtyards and corridors with stylized movements and ritualistic signs. She hears the sound of the flapping wings of an arrow - struck swan. Yasodhara weeps with each piteous flutter of the swan's wings. The male character in the guise of the column makes stylistic conversation for Yasodhara)

Yashodhara: Frozen I waited and waited.
 Lived - lived in my memory and grew bored.
 I listened for one foot step
 In the inner corridors of the palace.
 I wander aimlessly for long
 Why haven't you come till now...? *(Cries)*
 At night
 My silken sheets
 Catch fire like the funeral pyre
 In my memory,
 I nestle close to you
 And burn to ashes.

⁸ Chanting of Buddha's verses.

⁹ Hand gesture. It is a common acting convention for most of the classical Indian performance by which the performers are able to enact a situation or narrate a story without using words.

Like a shadow, I wait
 Colourlessly interminably,
 Why haven't you come till now...?
 I've not had enough
 of seeing your face...

(A wounded swan flutters into the stages with blood pouring from its wounds. Yasodhara gathers it in her arms keening uncontrollably. Somebody speaks in a loud voice. Rahul, Chandan and some others enter.)

Rahul: *(In anger)* Who did this? Who dared to do this? Why are you all so inactive? Mother... See ... Some one dared to shoot an arrow at the swan. Poor thing... It's fluttering so. The blood is seeping out so fast. Why don't you say something, mother?

Yasodhara: My son, I remember an old tale. *(Lost in memory)*

Rahul: You are always like this. Living in ancient tales. This is a life and death struggle. *(To Chandan)* Chandan, why don't you say something?

Chandan: Please excuse me, your Majesty. I too was thinking of something else. I thought of another swan that was similarly wounded *(Lost in memory)*.

Rahul: Everyone seems to have a tale to remember! Wasn't bird hunting banned in Kapilavastu? Then...who did this? Mother! Don't you know that the wounded bird cannot fly? Because of the weight of the arrow it cannot fly even a single inch. If you all don't care, let me see if I can save it. Who's there? Call the court physician! Quick!

(Rahul hugs the swan to his breast and departs quickly with his retinue.)

Chandan: Devi!¹⁰ It's been an age since you've been sitting like this. The messenger will return anytime now.

Yasodhara: Chandan,
 It's been years
 since this waiting began.
 I know that there would be no return;
 still, I wait

¹⁰ The word literally means Goddess; the word used for salutation for lady of royal status.

Chandan: Ever since you heard of the return of Prince Siddhartha to the town, your Majesty has been restive.

Yasodhara: He is no longer Prince Siddhartha
He is the divine Buddha.
Those lotus eyes full of mercy
Still live in my mind
Those eyes

That always appears to be deep and moist.
Chandan: That's true. He is no longer of this palace or even of Kapilavastu... He is no longer ours. He belongs to the world. Yet, Devi, I can think of him only as a Prince-never ever in any other form.

Yasodhara: Chandan...! Will he not return?

(The swan flaps its wings and cries in the off stage area)

What portent is this...?
My mind misgives,
And my heartbeats grow heavy.

Chandan: For a second, I feel the past is still alive. Like a mist-shrouded scene, the sight clearly reflects in my memory- Prince Siddhartha clasping to his heart the swan that Devadatta had shot.¹¹ Since then, whenever I saw the Prince what I always recalled was the image of the hurt swan. Now...once more...Why is this being repeated?

(The sound of hoofs increasing in volume, as it nears).

Chandan: The messenger must have returned. There the doors of the fortress are opening.

(Within minutes, the messenger arrives.)

¹¹ Devadatta was the cousin of Prince Siddhartha. One day Prince Siddhartha was sitting in the garden. Suddenly, he saw a swan fell near him stuck by an arrow. The Prince removed the arrow and slowly nursed the bird back to life. Devadatta who shot the arrow claimed the swan back because he shot it. But, the prince refused to return the swan because he nursed it and brought it back to life. The two boys finally went to a wise man who said, the swan belongs to the boy who saved it, not the one who took its life away.

- Yasodhara:** Did you see him?
Messenger: Yes, your Highness.
Chandan: Narrate everything. Why is your face so gloomy?
Messenger: I saw him at the crossroad. With hair tied above the forehead, he was sitting on a raised seat of sand under the shade of a tree. A huge crowd had gathered around him. He spoke with the utmost calm. All that he owned was a begging bowl.
- Chandan:** Didn't you invite him to the palace? Didn't you tell him that Devi wanted to see him?
Messenger: Yes, I did. For a minute he was silent. Then he told me that he had given up everything and hadn't the slightest wish to retrace his steps.
- Yasodhara:** Didn't he say anything, about me, about his son?
Messenger: No.... He didn't ask anything.
Chandan: No... That will not do. The Prince should never have done that. I'll go meet him. If I invite him, I'm sure he'll come.
- Yasodhara:** *(keening- on an elegiac note)*
 I want one glimpse, one only
 I've waited so long
 for that minute.
- Chandan:** Devi! I'll tell him that all this has happened because of me. I will plead. Then... I'll persuade him to come back. With all my earlier passion, I'll drive the chariot. When we reach here after passing through the various pathways, his eyes will fill with tears too. I'll then show him the way to the inner rooms of the palace. Please, give me leave to depart, your Majesty!

(With a messenger, Chandan departs in haste. A commotion in the street. A crowd of Shiva monks attacks Buddhist monks. Many Thathagathans¹² are stripped and impaled. Courtesans are attacked. Wild and dark street sights, Yasodhara wanders along lamenting faintly. As the noise dies out and the people fade away, she is alone on stage. A cuckoo calls)

- Yasodhara:** The spring is arriving,
 the trees are in full bloom,

¹² The disciples of Buddha.

The mango tree and the ashoka
 lend colour to the valleys!
 How soon everything fades!
 Last winter
 It was the same valley that
 frightened me when the wind
 howled through the leafless trees
 and lay shivering under white covers.

(Dim light. She reclines on the swing cot)

The sound has died out
 this palace, nature itself
 has sunk into
 unplummeted depths of silence.
 And what a stillness!
 the breeze blows not....
 not even a leaf rustles...
 Like a dark, black sea
 the night lies frozen.
 Between the night and the day-
 A secret hour....
 A deep silence....
 A dreary plain of dreams...

(The swing cot oscillates rapidly. Yasodhara sinks slowly into sleep and awakes into a dream. In her dream, the breeze blows. There is thunder. People scatter in the streets with an uproar of keening. The terrible sound of the crumbling of the city gates. A huge bull descends from her dreams on to the stage and destroys everything in its path as it rushes in. The crowd shouts and with battle cries attempt to stop the bull)

Yasodhara: *(In a dream)* I saw portents then.
 There was darkness at noon
 Foxes looked at the palace
 And howled

(The bull charges and rocks the swing cot. Yasodhara is disturbed by the movements of the bull and wakes with a start. She looks at the stage with wonder. She runs to the mirror and eyes her glittering costume and mask,

which she discards in contempt. With a scream, the Actress frees herself from the character as if from a trap. She gets her voice back)

Actress: *(to the spectators)* That damned stifled feeling has left me. I can now see you as well as you do me. We no longer have a screen between us. *(In a low voice)* The Playwright has written here, that now Yasodhara dreams. I'll decide the language and the stage movements of that dream drawing on my experience.

(The Actress breaks the mirror and Yasodhara enters her dream world. Once more the breeze picks up. There is thunder. The violent bull and the scattering people repeat the previous action to build up the continuity of the dream, which got interrupted by the Actress's dialogue with the audience. With a roar, a crowd with the angry bull breaks opens the city gates and enters the stage and Yasodhara is attacked once again).

Yasodhara: *(In fear)* Yes! This is it... the same bull. This huge animal has opened the city gates effortlessly. It came straight to the palace. Isn't there anyone here who can tie him up? Somebody... Please go... There! It's coming straight to the inner courtyard.

(In a passion of sensual desire, Yasodhara is overwhelmed by the onslaught of the bull and the people who seem to crush her underfoot. Silence broods everywhere.)

Yasodhara: Where has it all disappeared? The scattering people, the crumbling gates of the fort, then... the huge bull... Everything...everything... Where has it all gone?

(The Budhasharnamantra is heard from afar. With ancient ghostly figures and with a scarecrow, Buddha and his group enter Yasodhara's dreams. In Yasodhara's dream Buddha and other male characters appear in masks)

Buddha: I have returned from endless journeys and painful flights. On a moonlit night like this, in the dim light of the oil lamp, the silk bed inflamed like a fire mattress. The joss sticks burnt. Death smells somewhere. In the distance... a deep sobbing! The