

Kalamandalam  
Krishnan Nair,  
the Mozart of  
Kathakali



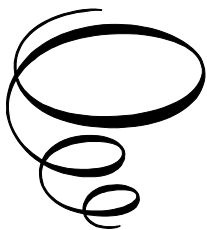
# Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, the Mozart of Kathakali

By Mohan Gopinath

Edited by Sabina Zacharias

With a Foreword by Smt. Sreedevi Rajan,  
daughter of Shri. Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair  
and a Prologue by Smt. Smitha Rajan,  
his granddaughter

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Edited by Sabina Zacharias

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***For Chinnam***

*This book is also for my parents, my aunt Padmavathy  
Balachandran for the interest shown and her encouragement,  
Shanta Menon, my Panangat thraravad (ancestral residence in  
Kerala), Professor Edwin Castelino who came to the aid of the  
party, Vel Murugan, and all people on this planet who love  
Kathakali and the theatre and are a willing prey to their mesmerism*

**—MG**

## WHAT READERS SAY...

‘This welcome work makes one conscious of the changed conceptions and preoccupations that are now acceptable in the dance world. The passages about Shakespeare, Aristotle and Kabuki provide a different perspective and present a three-dimensional vision.’

—**Reginald Massey, author and poet from the review of the first edition of this book.**

‘This is a useful and well thought out contribution about a great actor. I strongly recommend the book. I particularly liked the links to Shakespeare and Aristotle.’

—**Dr. Dolphy Abraham Ph.D., Educationist and Former Dean, St. Joseph’s Institute of Management, Bangalore.**

‘This is a book that every lover of the performing arts should read. It has given me a new perspective into the world of Kathakali.’

—**Professor Asha Prabhakaran, Educationist, Bangalore.**

‘One of the most significant books to come out relating to Krishnan Nair and Kathakali. Should be ranked amongst the best of its genre.’

—**Kalamandalam Unnikrishnan, Kathakali Percussionist (*chenda*)**

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*Acta est fabula, plaudite.*  
*The drama has been acted out, applaud.*  
**Emperor Augustus Caesar**

---

*As in a theatre, the eyes of men,  
After a well-grac'd actor leaves the stage,  
Are idly bent on him that enters next,  
Thinking his prattle to be tedious.*  
**Richard II (c. 1595), Act V, Scene 2, 23**

---

**Gloucester:**  
*The trick of that voice I do well remember;  
Is't not the King?*  
**Lear:**  
*Ay, every inch a king!*  
**King Lear Act 4, Scene 6, 106–107**

— — —

*Non est ad astra mollis e terris via – There is no easy way from the earth  
to the stars.*

*“You put together two people who have not been put together before.  
Sometimes it is like that first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a  
fire balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash?*

*But sometimes it works, and something new is made, and the world is  
changed. Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one  
of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of  
what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is  
emotionally possible.”*

(Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life*, 2013)

— — —

*“I certainly believe we all suffer damage, one way or another. How could we not, except in a world of perfect parents, siblings, neighbours, companions? And then there is the question on which so much depends, of how we react to the damage: whether we admit it or repress it, and how this affects our dealings with others. Some admit the damage, and try to mitigate it; some spend their lives trying to help others who are damaged; and there are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And those are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of.”*

(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 2011)

## REVIEW OF THE FIRST EDITION OF THIS BOOK

### REGINALD MASSEY – POET AND NOVELIST

*(This book was selected by the American Library of Congress for inclusion in their database and exhibited at the Paris International Book Fair in 2016)*

This welcome work makes one conscious of the changed conceptions and preconceptions that are now acceptable in the dance world. Krishnan Nair (1914 – 1990) was an actor-dancer of the Kathakali style of Kerala in southwest India. He used “Kalamandalam” to proclaim that he was trained at the Kalamandalam academy of drama and dance that was founded in 1930 by the poet Vallathol.

In fact, Vallathol treated Nair like a son and put him to train under the leading gurus. This is a fascinating account of how Nair – because of his rare ability to connect with his audiences and the sheer charisma of his personality – was able to achieve two of his burning ambitions. First, Kathakali performers – since they were not Brahmins – were equated with serfs. Like the strolling players of Shakespeare’s time, they were despised. Nair invested them with status. Second, he insisted they were paid a decent wage and not the pittance that was thrown at them.

Dr. Gopinath is an academic based in Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) who writes on a wide variety of subjects. He co-authored *Business Drama: How Shakespearean Insights Help Leaders Manage Volatile Contexts* and has immense respect for Laurence Olivier, the first British thespian to be raised to the peerage. The passages about Aristotle, Shakespeare and Kabuki are meant to provide a different perspective and to present a three-dimensional vision to all who tread the boards.

*(Review by Reginald Massey, in Dancing-Times Co. U.K., June 2016)*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### **Dr. Mohan Gopinath Ph.D.**

Mohan Gopinath holds a BA (Hons.) degree and a Master's degree in English Literature from St. Stephen's College at Delhi University, where he later joined as a member of the faculty. In between, he joined the Indian Police Service which he quit after one week. After the two-year stint in the college, he joined the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and worked as a senior-level banker for almost 21 years in India, the UK and Hong Kong, after initially completing a two-year training attachment in the London branch of the bank. Subsequently, he left the industry and worked for a doctoral degree which he obtained from Osmania University on the topic, Organizational Learning (in the banking industry). His career in HSBC also included an attachment to the all-India HR function.

After obtaining his doctoral degree, Mohan worked as a management consultant in India and the Middle East. He has also worked as a lead consultant for a World Bank-funded Institutional Development Study conducted for the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department.

He reverted to academia after working as a consultant for more than one decade and joined as the Dean of St. Joseph's College of Business Administration, Bangalore. He later shifted to the Alliance University's School of Business, Bangalore, where he worked as a Professor in the Department of Organizational Behaviour and Human Resource till September 2019. His areas of interest are leadership, management of change, conflict resolution, banking, and protection of the environment. He has written and published papers and case studies across a range of subjects (Banking, Organizational Behaviour, Human Resource, Finance, the Environment, and the Performing Arts). He is also a keen tennis enthusiast and the author of books covering areas of interest to him.

Mohan has conducted Management Development Programs for senior managers in his areas of specialization in the organizational development area in India and the Middle East. His first book was co-authored and titled *Business Drama: How Shakespearean Insights Help Leaders Manage Volatile Contexts*. His interest in Kathakali (he has trained in

Kathakali music and sung for many performances) led him to write (in 2015) an earlier version of this book. This book was selected by the American Library of Congress for inclusion in their database and also exhibited at the Paris World Book Fair in March 2019. He has also written a James Bond novel, which because of copyright restrictions, is for private circulation only.

## **Editor**

### **Dr. Sabina Zacharias Ph.D.**

Dr. Sabina Zacharias has been teaching English Language and Literature, Cultural Studies and Business Communication to multicultural/multilingual groups at different levels in India and abroad for the last 20 years. In her thesis titled *Rereading the legends of Kerala: the politics of legend-making*, she attempted a rereading of the legends of Kerala (from a caste and gender perspective) and also analysed its representations in film adaptations and fictional narratives. She undertakes academic content writing for online Universities and EdTech companies. Currently, she is an Adjunct Faculty, teaching Communication and coordinating training courses in English Language and Communication Skills at various colleges in Bangalore. Her other interests include reading, volunteering for community service and working on education projects for social change.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My primary thanks for the support/ inspiration in writing this book are to the following, some of whom I have known since I was four years old. They are – Kalamandalam Neelakantan Nambisan, Kottakal Vasu Nedungadi, Vellinezhi Nanu Nair, Kalamandalam Ramakrishnan, Kalamandalam Unnikrishna Kurup, Sadanam Sethu Madhavan, Kalamandalam Mohan Krishnan, Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair and Kalamandalam Unnikrishnan. As is evident, they are all from the field of Kathakali and are my gurus if not in fact, at least in spirit.

Smt. Sreedevi Rajan, Krishnan Nair's daughter provided unstinted encouragement and gave me valuable inputs about the actor, along with her daughter Smt. Smitha Rajan who was there in Ernakulam on a visit. My deepest thanks to them for spending a considerable amount of time with Murugan and myself on our field visit to Ernakulam in Kerala during the course of writing this book and for patiently answering my questions. This book is also dedicated to all of Krishnan Nair's family and I trust they will find it of value that I have tried to capture the essence of a very complex and intriguing actor in these pages.

My profound thanks are also there to the following - firstly there is Professor Dr. Brijraj Singh who first planted the idea in me of writing about Shakespeare and Kathakali and to whom I owe my everlasting love for English literature, and Shakespeare in particular; his classes at St. Stephen's college were truly memorable. This book, therefore, has its genesis in him. The Reverend Dr. Daniel O'Connor (who has written the Introduction to this book) was another person who influenced me greatly and he taught us Chaucer. Colonel Stephen Pierson of the British Indian Army and later a member of the faculty in the Department of English in St. Stephen's College, had a powerful impact on me and taught me the nuances and the beauties of the language. So it was in Stephen's that the seeds were sown of my love for Shakespeare. I also wish to place on record my indebtedness towards Mr. W.S. Rajpal, the Dean and who later became the Principal of St. Stephen's college for giving me my first ever job as a member of the faculty in the Department of English in the college. The two years I spent there were amongst the best I remember and I think

of those days with unadulterated nostalgia and a love for my *alma mater* which is the one permanent thing in my life.

Smt. Smitha Rajan, the granddaughter of Krishnan Nair, a student of English Literature and artistic director of *Nrithyakshetra* based in St. Louis, Missouri, specializes in Mohiniyattam, a dance form traditional to Kerala. Her kind words gave me the confidence to write this book and she also commented favourably on the interplay in the book between the two disciplines of Kathakali and literature. She is a gifted, good and talented person and has done a lot for Mohiniyattam, a love inherited from her grandmother and mother (the latter was also her guru). She is also an accomplished Bharatha Natyam and Kuchipudi dancer and her website is <https://smitharajan.com>. Her website indicates, “She is the granddaughter of one of India’s finest classical dance performers, (Late) Guru Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and the mother of Mohiniyattam, (Late) Guru Kalamandalam Kalyanikutty Amma. Recipient of numerous accolades which includes the Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar, Smitha has been performing for the past four decades with utmost adherence to the puritan classical tradition of Mohiniyattam which is well documented by her legendary grandmother. The natural learning opportunity Smitha received under her legendary grandparents, her mother, Guru Sreedevi Rajan and her aunt, Guru Kala Vijayan had laid in her the unique blend of *lasya* (grace) and *abhinaya* (facial expression). Smitha got the rare opportunity to extensively travel along with her grandmother, assisting her during her lecture demonstrations and master classes conducted for Mohiniyattam. Her abhinaya and gestures were fine-tuned by the great Krishnan Nair himself which has tuned in her the ability to transform and enact multiple characters in this *Eka aharya* (single costume) dance style as a solo performer. Well-versed in Kathakali, Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi as well, since her early teens, her primary focus has been Mohiniyattam and commitment to the rich heritage handed over to her by her legendary grandmother.”

Dr. Sabina Zacharias has edited this book and painstakingly given it the final touches without which it would never have seen the light of day or come up to this level of formatting. Her contribution to this book is invaluable and for the record, this is the second book she is editing on this subject after *Vignettes Relating to Kathakali and Shakespeare: the Thirasheela versus the Curtain* (also published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing).

Mr. Z.K. Peter and Uday Pillay have always been by our side during the course of writing these books on the performing arts. They have given guidance and support of a kind which is rarely seen and given their time willingly, usefully and generously. Our deepest thanks to both of them for the encouragement given and for pulling us along when the going was difficult.

Professor Edwin Castelino, the former Dean of St. Joseph's Institute of Management, was kind enough to take the trouble of going through the manuscript and checking it for errors; our profound thanks to him for stepping in at a crucial time in the life of this book and contributing his skills to making it cross the finishing line.

My close friends Dr. Dolphy Abraham and Dr. Aswathi Nair encouraged me continuously during the tenure of this venture. My pleasure in having them as my friends cannot be expressed sufficiently.

This book is the second of a trilogy in which Sabina and I have collaborated. The first book was 'Vignettes Relating to Kathakali and Shakespeare: the Thirasheela versus the Curtain' brought out by the same publishers, and the last one is in the making and is a comparison of the broad themes in Shakespeare and the dance drama, such as the role of the Messenger, the types of audience, use of disguise etc.

*(Note - the abbreviation 'Smt.' stands for Shrimathi/ Srimati and is used as a title of respect for a lady, especially a married lady. The abbreviation 'Shri.' is used for men.)*



## FOREWORD

SMT. SREEDEVI RAJAN

DAUGHTER OF SHRI. KALAMANDALAM KRISHNAN NAIR

Kathakali is an art form of India that has attained worldwide acclaim and unprecedented growth within a few centuries. It revolves around the mythological themes from the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* (ancient history/mythologies) which are unique treasure troves of Indian culture. This book written by Dr. Mohan Gopinath is a detailed study about a personality who has become a household name for Kathakali, Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, my father. There is also a reference in the book about another great actor, Vellinezhi Nanu Nair. Dr. Gopinath has compared Kathakali with Shakespeare's dramas and Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair has been compared with Sir Laurence Olivier. It is also a detailed study of the unparalleled talent and unique reservoir of facial expressions of Shri Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair. I appreciate this initiative and the sincerity of the approach taken by a true scholar, Dr. Gopinath, and I congratulate him for doing this.

There is an opinion that Kathakali cannot be understood by the layman due to its elaborate mask-like make-up, larger-than-life costumes, hand gestures, movements and expressions that are extremely technical. Shri Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair has given legendary performances of this art form to audiences consisting of people from the scholarly world and the common man alike and won laurels consistently for his captivating stage presence. This resulted in his being called *Abhinaya Samrat* (an epitome of acting). This work of Dr. Mohan Gopinath is an analysis of his life on stage.

I am one among the die-hard fans of this gifted artist. The captivating ability to mesmerise the audience with astounding facial expressions while all the while understanding the different tastes (of people in the audience) of the learned, ignorant, aged or young, his innate skills of articulation, a body crafted for the performance of Kathakali, intense training received with great attention from uncompromising masters, and beyond all, a sense

of complete surrender to Kathakali, transformed Krishnan Nair to Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair.

Shri Rabindranath Tagore, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Maharaja Parikshit Thampuran, central and state music drama academies, diverse art and cultural associations throughout India, famous temples, fans associations in metros and villages have all honoured him with numerous awards and titles, which he accepted with extreme humility. He also received the Padma Shri award in 1969-70.

The inaugural event of 'The Festival of India' organized in different countries was held in Washington. According to the wishes of the then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi, Kathakali got a place in the list of the performing arts to be demonstrated there. The story was *Kalyana Sougandhikam*. Kalamandalam Ramankutty Nair played the role of Hanuman and my father, the role of Bheemasenan. The show was a great delight for the spectators and after the show, his friends and fans were pouring in to meet my father to show their appreciation. Once the crowd dispersed and when I was alone with him, and I asked his opinion about the great international event, he answered with a broad smile, "It was good. However, I like performing in front of a like-minded audience in Kottayam's Tirunakkara Ground."

My brother Srikumar who sometimes travelled along with my father then turned to me and said, "I agree. Whenever Kathakali is staged in the Tirunakkara Ground, it's a sight to see. Even the vendors across the big ground enquire, 'Has Kalamandalam come on stage'? When my father came on stage, they would immediately down their shutters and join the enthusiastic audience."

While my father was performing the role of Vishwamitran from *Harishchandra Charitham* in a temple in south Travancore, he transformed himself into the furious Vishwamitran which created a tremendous visual and emotional impact on the audience. Unable to bear the sight of the cruelties of Vishwamitran, a lady from the audience threw a stone that struck his forehead. The show stopped for a while and then continued.

When I was around five or six years of age, I used to watch Kathakali all through the night and admire the dance form. My father's roles as Bahukan, Rukmangadan, and the Brahmanan from *Santhana Gopalam* made me cry a lot because of the sensitive way he rendered the characters. I took great delight watching his portrayals of Nalan, Arjunan and

Bheemasenan. Though I was scared of the furious Roudra Bheeman, I enjoyed watching the portrayal and never took my eyes off him. I noticed that not just me, but people around me were crying, excited and scared watching his exemplary theatrical skills as Roudra Bheeman.

Once there was a Kathakali performance of the story *Karna Shapatham* in TDM Hall organized by the Ernakulam Kathakali Club. This was the first time *Karna Shapatham* was staged in Ernakulam. My father had the role of Kunthi and Kalamandalam Gopi was playing the role of Karnan. The hall was jam-packed. After his *sandhyavandan* (evening prayers), Karnan was on stage deeply immersed in depressing thoughts. Kunthi then entered the stage from the extreme side and walked through the pathway through the audience. Seeing Kunthi chanting mantras and holding a *Rudraksha Mala* (necklace of beads with a religious significance), I felt that the form had a divine presence. When the audience saw the proud Kunthi, without realizing it, they stood up. A few of them even prostrated before him. Even now, that unforgettable scene from *Karna Shapatham* gives me goose bumps.

Many people say that though they have watched the characters my father played innumerable times, it was not enough and they wished to see more of him on stage in different roles. Krishnan Nair hypnotised the audience with an astounding expression of emotions of myriad hues and articulations story after story and playing the same character in each and every story. Bheeman's description of the forest in *Kalyana Sougandhikam* is a famous example.

In the 1980s, my father gave a few lecture-demonstrations organized by SPIC MACAY (a society for propagating art and culture among young people). This gave the youngsters, especially the college students, an opportunity to see and admire his artistic performances. I have accompanied him to Calcutta, Bombay, Imphal, etc., for these. In most of the places, he gave a detailed narrative of the *navarasas* (nine moods) with examples and enacted a portion of the scene *Kailasodharanam* from *Bali Vijayam* (this is where Ravana physically lifts up the mountain Kailasam and as it happens reunites Sivan and his wife who were quarrelling at the time).

If I recall correctly, in 1990, SPIC MACAY had organised a program at the Maurya Sheraton Hotel, Delhi. My father had to walk through the lawns after the Bharatha Natyam performance of the famous dancer Alarmel Valli which had just concluded. Since his eyesight was poor, he found it difficult to walk. He had applied minimal makeup on his face and

had a rudrakshamala on his neck and was wearing a gold embroidered mundu and veshti. When I realized that the audience kept chatting without noticing him, I panicked. My father was quiet. He was then introduced to the audience by the master of ceremonies, a lady. Sitting on a stool, he started the lecture demonstration by explaining the *navarasas* (nine moods) with examples. The lady had briefed the audience about the significance of Kailasodharanam which then followed.

My father transferred himself into Sivan almost immediately. The narrative of this incident is as follows: Ravanaan was performing a *tapasya* (penance) to get a boon from Sivan but the latter did not come to him for some time. At this time, while Sivan was sitting alone, he felt like talking to Ganga. Using his mental powers, he visualized the nymphs in heaven and the stage got transformed into heaven.

A few celestial ladies were playing musical instruments, a few were dancing, and a few others were engrossed in some other work. Suddenly everyone realized Sivan's desire and assembled in Kailasam. They then invited Parvathi to take a bath in the Ganga. She took her husband's permission and left with them. Alone, at last, Sivan takes Ganga down from his head and starts talking to her behind closed doors. At this time, Naradan comes to see Sivan, but leaves when he hears the voice of a lady, thinking that he should not disturb Parvathi and Parameshwaran's conversation. But, on the way, he sees Parvathi, her friends, Ganapathi, Subramanian and everyone else on the shores of the Ganga. His typical curiosity and unique flair for instigating people now came to the surface and he revealed what he had just heard to Parvathi. Without completing the bath, and carrying her children with her, Parvathi rushed to Kailas and opened the door. Her anger, her pain, her irritation, Sivan's shame, Ganga's discomfort ...all these were explained by Ravanaan. As can be imagined Sivan was in an extremely vulnerable spot.

This is the time when Ravanaan takes Kailasam in his anger (because Sivan had not appeared) with his hands and shakes it vigorously. When the mountain starts shaking everyone panics. Parvathi too rushes into Sivan's arms forgetting her anger. Sivan comforts her and calls Ravanaan and gifts him his beloved sword Chandrahasam with great pleasure. "And that's how I got Chandrahasam as a gift from Sivan," concluded Ravanaan. Ravanaan's description of the Kailasodharanam to Naradan ends here and this is what my father depicted. For one and half hours, the audience was spellbound and travelled to Kailasam, the heavens and the shores of the river Ganga simultaneously.

My father then bowed down to the audience with great humility. I noticed the difference in the attitude of the audience. There was continuous applause and many were acknowledging him by doing a namaskar to him. A few even prostrated themselves before him and some sought his blessings. I was amazed but also very happy and proud of the magical world he created. The visual impact of holding the audience spellbound like that can be done only by a veteran and legendary artist. Such events happened on many stages and in different places involving my father. I have seen, heard and read about his fan following consisting of world-famous eminent dancers, theatre personalities, musicians, instrumentalists, political heads, literary geniuses and people from all other walks of life.

My father's last stage performance was in Bangalore organized by SPIC MACAY for students. While he was giving the visual demonstration, I gave brief descriptions in between. After 10 minutes into the session, Shri Kiran Seth whispered to me, "Sreedeviji, I don't think you need to explain. Look at the students. They are completely immersed in asan's *abhinayam* (acting)." I noticed the quiet students completely immersed in the myriad expressions of his performance.

Krishnan Nair has earned an unconquerable place among the esteemed, learned and common audiences alike. His own life was a role model about how an artiste should earn respect and dignity from any section of society. He set an example throughout his life on how an artiste can achieve financial security and dignity just by pursuing the art form.

When I was asked to write a Foreword for this book, I was delighted to do that for two reasons. Firstly, Dr. Mohan Gopinath is from the ancestral family of my grandfather. Secondly, this request was from a scholar who enjoys Shakespeare's drama and Kathakali alike. I've tried to do justice to his intention. I wish him ultimate prosperity and success for his book.

I will conclude by stating that though not active in the field, Guru Kalamandalam Kalyani Kutty Amma devoted her life to the renaissance of the beautiful art form called Mohiniyattam. She is my mother; the invaluable aesthetic contributions of both icons can never be forgotten in the artistic world. To take birth as the daughter of these two gifted individuals is my good fortune.

**Sreedevi Rajan  
Ernakulam**

# PROLOGUE

SMT. SMITHA RAJAN

GRANDDAUGHTER OF SHRI KALAMANDALAM KRISHNAN NAIR

*The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.*

—Chinese proverb

I had no expectation about what I was getting into when I had my first interaction with Dr. Mohan Gopinath and his unassuming account of a book he was working on. To my surprise he wanted me to read his work on a comparative study of two exceptional stage performers of Kathakali and Shakespearean drama, Shri. Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and Sir Laurence Olivier. It was an opportunity and a blessing from both professional and personal standpoints; being the granddaughter of his book's subject and as an Indian classical dance performer. I wonder why me and why now, then to my comfort '...The second best time is now.' But the question about why me... I guess every day is a gift and a great blessing.

This is a book detailing a comparative study of two diverse art forms with two distinct cultural backdrops. This is an era where most Indian classical performing art forms are being subjected to experimentation to popularise these regional art forms to a wider audience. Here the ancient South Indian traditional dance drama, Kathakali, too is exposed to experimentation with Shakespearean dramas. Dr. Gopinath an ardent lover of Kathakali and follower of the legendary actor, Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, has given his readers amazing comparisons that only he could make while understanding these two disciplines within their formats. His professional engagement with Shakespearean theatre and his lifelong passion for Kathakali opened a new window of comparison and has created an unexpectedly crisp study taking his readers deep into the characters and its plots and the artists who represent each form.

As an admirer of these two disciplines, Dr. Gopinath has very effectively compared and contrasted these two art forms with selected scenes from both Kathakali and the English theatre. And to establish his point about the

mastery of the legendary actor Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, he chose to compare him with the British actor Sir Laurence Olivier. Dr. Gopinath's narration about Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair's ability to mesmerise the Kathakali stage for over six decades clarifies the uniqueness and involvement of his enactments on stage; at the same time when Sir Laurence Olivier charmed the English theatre. Dr. Gopinath has written about the genius of Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and how on each stage the same character or a scene manifested themselves in different ways; so that to a person who had watched him many times the same character or incident will have had some new flair or dimension each time. I can testify to this point from many of my personal experiences. There is an eagerness, commitment and practice behind these enactments. As a teenager I observed my grandfather immersed in reading and one day out of curiosity I asked him what he was reading. This person who was at the height of his profession answered that he was still a student and learning even then. I was amazed and was totally taken aback by his answer. I realized that this mental journey through the literature of this art form was the homework he was doing to immerse himself to interpret any character and scene in a unique way which enabled him to transform himself into any character entralling his audience and giving them an unforgettable experience. With this type of commitment and rigour he could also re-enact any character or scene in myriad ways, which made his presentations always engaging.

Each of these theatre forms has a strong affiliation to its own literature with its deep rich cultural legacy. Literature plays a critical role in the identity and character of both of these art forms. It will be a misfit if we try to mix and match Kathakali and the English theatre with the sole purpose of popularising these art forms as this will alienate the art form from its tradition and character and it will thereby lose its integrity. I was very pleased to read this statement and the conclusion to which Dr. Gopinath has reached. A detailed study of pioneering representatives who have made their footprints in their respective fields and an in-depth look into the art form with an overall understanding of the traits, its characters, its music and the current situation is an asset for general art observers and especially people in the performing art world. As I read through the pages, I was grateful to Dr. Gopinath for taking up such a commitment, and for articulating his message with pinpoint accuracy and ease. One of my takeaways from this work is to be very mindful of the fact that the integrity and defining character of an art form should not be sacrificed while considering the scope and expansion which go with experiments.

I was indeed very happy to read through the book and I take great pleasure in writing the Prologue. I am sure this book will be a valuable addition to studies related to the world of performing arts and it will open a new window of appreciation to the world with its regional exclusivity. It is full of meticulous detail and great observations by an ardent art lover.

In short, I enjoyed and appreciate it as a very sound and serious study of this distinct theatre art form through its legendary performers. I hope you will also share my enjoyment.

**Smitha Rajan  
Artistic Director  
Nrithyakshetra  
St Louis, Missouri  
USA**



## INTRODUCTION

### THE REVEREND DR. DANIEL O'CONNOR

My wife and I lived and taught in Delhi for a short decade. In those days we had no opportunity to visit Kerala, and so the great Kathakali tradition was beyond our reach, a thousand miles to the south. We might occasionally get glimpses of India's cultural achievement and diversity, but I do not recall any opportunity to witness Kathakali in the city in those days – nor were there those universal YouTube videos to hand! When Mohan Gopinath came to study in our English Department, I recall that he was already embarked on a training in the Kathakali vocal practice and tradition. I do not recall any other student with this background at that time, and it all seemed to us a remote and exotic art. Rooted in distinctive South Indian temple culture, it was as remote to us as if it might have taken place on the moon. We are fortunate, then, that Mohan has brought his lifelong absorption in Kathakali to a wide readership in this interesting book.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, was thoroughly rooted in our College and in Delhi – that memorable indigenising represented by *The Shakespeare Wallah* had strong links to the College, and our annual production of a play by the College's Shakespeare Society was regularly given global recognition in the *Shakespeare Survey*, published in Stratford-upon-Avon. We were fortunate then, that Mohan brought his Kathakali 'life' into his college life, and fortunate now that, with Sabina, he has brought these two rich cultural realities into conversation and written about a great actor, Krishnan Nair.

When we speak of a great artist – a painter, say, or a poet or an actor – as "gifted", we are saying that she or he is blessed with a unique, divine gift displayed in their work. Discipline, of course, and attention to the tradition, are important, but it is the 'something special', the 'gift' that we applaud and wish to see properly acknowledged. So, it is with my old friend and former student, Mohan Gopinath's perceptive celebration of the gifts displayed in the artistry of Krishnan Nair, a product not of class or

wealth or race or nation, but simply of a gifted human being, and it is good to see this recognised and acclaimed.

It is a bold and imaginative achievement, to ‘compare and contrast’ the treatment of the character in these two seemingly profoundly diverse traditions. i.e., Shakespeare and Kathakali which have been touched on in the book. I am not qualified to say how successful this process is, only full of admiration for the bold and imaginative exercise that this book represents. Let the reader read and enjoy!

**Chaplain and Lecturer, St Stephen’s College, Delhi (1963 -72)**

**Balmullo  
St. Andrews  
Scotland**

## FROM THE EDITOR

*“O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?”*  
—W. B. Yeats, *Among School Children*

In the poem’s famous final line, the speaker asks, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Often the art and the artist become so magically intertwined that they are inseparable.

For Dr. Mohan Gopinath, Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair on stage will always remain a legend who transforms himself so magically into the character that the art and the artist become one. He writes: *“Ever since I saw the great actor Krishnan Nair on stage for the first time when I was probably less than four years old, he has held a fascination for me. It was much later in life that I realised that this fascination came from his unique ability of making characters come to life on stage and interpreting them in an unusual way. His incredible confidence on stage and the way he brought out nuances in interpreting characters was something that I have not seen in others.”*

Be it Nalan, Bhiman, Arjunan or characters with dark shades like Keechakan and Rugmangadan, Krishnan Nair asan could emote any role effortlessly. Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair (1914-1990) was one of the most renowned Kathakali artists and perhaps the greatest in the history of the four-century-old classical dance drama of Kerala.

Dr. Mohan Gopinath’s book *Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, the Mozart of Kathakali* goes beyond a mere biography or chronicle of the actor. The focus of the book is on examining the dance drama (*Kathakali*) from different perspectives, and by doing so it is expected that the reader will get a sharper insight into the complexities of this dance form and the difficulties involved in producing a mature actor. The author examines the changes and interpretations that Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair brought to the genre which are relevant even to this day.

The book aims to promote an interest in the dance drama (*Kathakali*) and performing arts for a global audience. It will be of interest to academicians, practitioners of the theatre, students of performing arts and

aficionados of Kathakali and the world of the theatre. The pairing of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair in the title of the book shows not only how the East and West can meet but it beautifully twines two legends who connected with the people and their popularity over the ages stands testimony to that.

What makes this book unique is that it is the first time a book has been written about a single Kathakali actor in English which also brings in elements of the western theatre. In an unusual ‘syncretic approach’, he brings in another legend from the Shakespearean theatre – Sir Laurence Olivier and juxtaposes the acting patterns of these masters of theatrical art and also the stories in both these art forms. The author has used ‘cognitive contradiction’ (a term coined by him) for in-depth character analysis. It will be a rare delight for a student of theatre to see the surprising patterns of similarity in the two seemingly diverse worlds of Kathakali and Shakespearean theatre. The comparison pairs the likes of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Bali Vijayam* or *Othello* and *Duryodhana Vadham* illustrate these similarities. There are also references to Kabuki, the Japanese dance drama which shows how art forms that are separated geographically and linguistically can have interesting parallels.

Dr. Gopinath has lived with Kathakali in his life for many decades. He has recorded fascinating anecdotes in the book - his nostalgic memory about his childhood days in Kerala accompanying his father (from whom he inherited the passion for the art), watching the overnight Kathakali performances and even going to the *aniyara* (green room) with his father and talking to the actors. He is trained in Kathakali singing and his *arangetram* (first appearance on stage) was when he was studying at St. Stephen’s College, Delhi. He had the privilege of singing many times for various performances. His wife Chinnam also had immense love for the dance form and she used to enjoy going to the performances along with him. He studied Shakespeare under some wonderful teachers at St. Stephen’s College, Delhi and he owes his love for literature to them. So, surely the comparisons in the book came naturally. In his own words, “*They were there – only waiting to be uncovered.*”

The author had the unique fortune to see Sir Laurence Olivier on stage in London in the role of Shylock and he was captivated by his performance and presence. He mentions in the book that it was the same way that he felt while watching Krishnan Nair asan across the large oil lamp in front of the stage in which the dance drama was being enacted. To borrow the words of the American actress, Shirley MacLaine: “*Then come the lights*

*shining on you from above. You are a performer. You forget all you learned, the process of technique, the fear, the pain, you even forget who you are you, become one with the music, the lights, indeed one with the dance."*

Dr. Mohan Gopinath's sharp observations, keen insights, wide scholarship across diverse domains and, above all, the unalloyed passion for both Kathakali and Shakespeare have helped in shaping the flow of the book and the author's unique perspective on character interpretation. It has been an honour and pleasure to associate with this project. The journey has been personally and academically enriching.

The book has been immensely blessed with a Foreword written by Smt. Sreedevi Rajan, daughter of Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and a Prologue by the grand daughter, Smt. Smitha Rajan. We acknowledge with deep reverence the Introduction by The Reverend Dr. Daniel O'Connor. The book is a humble tribute to the late Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and his performances and we hope that it will be a rare and befitting document of his life and art.

**Dr. Sabina Zacharias Ph.D.**

## WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART: THE CONNECTIONS WITH KRISHNAN NAIR

Mozart's music, like Haydn's, stands as an archetypal example of the Classical style. His works spanned the period during which that style transformed from one exemplified by the style galant to one that began to incorporate some of the contrapuntal complexities of the late Baroque, complexities against which the galant style had been a reaction. Mozart's own stylistic development closely paralleled the development of the classical style as a whole. In addition, he was a versatile composer and wrote in almost every major genre, including symphony, opera, the solo concerto, chamber music including string quartet and string quintet and the piano sonata. While none of these genres were new, the piano concerto was almost single-handedly developed and popularized by Mozart. He also wrote a great deal of religious music, including masses; and he composed many dances, divertimenti, serenades, and other forms of light entertainment.

The central traits of the classical style can all be identified in Mozart's music. Clarity, balance, and transparency are hallmarks, though a simplistic notion of the delicacy of his music obscures for us the exceptional and even demonic power of some of his finest masterpieces, such as the Piano Concerto No. 24 (Mozart) in C minor, K. 491, the Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550, and the opera Don Giovanni. The famed writer of music, Charles Rosen has written (1997): "It is only through recognizing the violence and sensuality at the centre of Mozart's work that we can make a start towards a comprehension of his structures and an insight into his magnificence. Paradoxically, Schumann's superficial characterization of the G minor Symphony can help us to see Mozart's daemon more steadily. In all of Mozart's supreme expressions of suffering and terror, there is something shockingly voluptuous." Especially during his last decade, Mozart explored chromatic harmony to a degree rare at the time. The slow introduction to the 'Dissonant' Quartet, K. 465, a work that Haydn greatly admired rapidly explodes a shallow understanding of Mozart's style as light and pleasant.

From his earliest years, Mozart had a gift for imitating the music he heard; since he travelled widely, he acquired a rare collection of experiences from