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Rasa: Performing the Divine in India (review)

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57: 1 (2004): 119–173, a must read for anyone interested in the “musical vocabulary of race,” as Moon terms it.)

The book concludes with two appendices: one listing American pop tunes circa 1800–1929 that feature Chinese references and one listing musical revues and plays with Chinese themes. Unfortunately, the first is listed chronologically, and the second is listed alphabetically, which makes comparison difficult, and the second omits a notable number of relevant scripts.

Despite its shortcomings *Yellowface* is a useful and accessible study for students and teachers, and at \$23.95 a reasonable buy. Musicologists and theatre historians will also find *Yellowface* to be an interesting incentive to investigate further an area of American performance history that continues to affect popular stereotypes of the Chinese in the United States.

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RASA: PERFORMING THE DIVINE IN INDIA. By Susan L. Schwartz. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 160 pp. 32 illus. Cloth \$59.50; paper \$22.50.

The purpose of the book is to introduce readers to the basic concepts of India’s cultural tradition and the aesthetic principle of *rasa*. To do this Susan Schwartz has focused on the tradition of classical dance in India. This book is clear and accessible for the introductory reader, It gives an understanding of the Indian student-teacher relationship and *rasa*’s application in dance, and shows how art is part of the contemporary Indian diaspora. To make the material accessible to beginners, words in original Sanskrit and other Indian languages are rarely used. Several important verses with reference to the dance and *rasa* are also quoted. The first preface on transliteration, which explains some of the common ways of writing the words, irrespective of the actual pronunciation, will help the reader if he/she encounters these terms in the context of an Indian dance or music performance.

In chapter 1, the author fittingly uses the term *Sanathana Dharma* (the eternal order of the universe) to refer to the religion now known as Hinduism and states that the religion of India has infused every aspect of its performing arts, so religious ideas can be studied through close examination of performance. The *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student relationship), where the disciple lives with the *guru* or master and the arts are imbibed through an oral tradition is described. This tradition internalizes the learning experience for the student, making it an active process that also paves the way for the performance goal of *rasa* to be achieved. This tradition of study is described with relation to the different styles of classical dance later in the book. Schwartz states in this introductory chapter, “Where taste, sound, image, movement, rhythm and transformation meet, therefore the experience of *rasa* is possible.” (p. 5) The objective of the book is thus clearly stated by Schwartz,

and the rest of the chapters discuss how this experience of *rasa* can be realized with an insight into the background, transmission and evolution of the performing arts in India.

In chapter 2, the author gives a detailed description of the term *rasa* and its association with food, ayurvedic medicine, and the performing arts. The word *rasa* is traced from simple usage to its employment as a religious term to express gnosis. In every context, *rasa* connotes the perfect combination of differing substances. Schwartz lists the eight basic *rasas* of the performing arts, with the ninth of *shanta* (peace) added later. She draws from the ancient *Natya Shastra* and commentaries following it.

In chapter three, *rasa* in practice of dance, drama, and music is described. From ancient times acting, dancing, and instrumental and vocal music were intertwined. Schwartz tells how the expression of emotion (*bhava*) when refined leads to *rasa*. We learn the role of Indian dramatists such as Kalidasa in dealing with the usual themes of human weakness being overcome by might. The themes conclude with conflicts resolved, thus reestablishing emotional harmony. This balance provides the intense experience of *rasa*. The reader will be fascinated, as this reviewer was, to learn about this theory of emotional harmony and balance, which comes from ancient Indian drama, and its relation to the experience of *rasa*.

Many deities are dancers and others are musicians; pictures of these deities are seen in the book. A discussion of Shiva as the dancing Nataraja (God of Dance) includes good quotes from various sources on his dancing in relation to his cosmic acts of creation, illusion, and destruction. The styles and technique of Indian dance with its various classifications such as *nritta* (abstract dance), *nriya* (movement with *bhava*), *natya* (dramatic dance), *tandava* (strong, male), *lasya* (soft, female), *abhinaya* (dramatic representation), etc. are presented. The author details the evolution of the dance from the *devadasi* (temple dancer) system, talks about the *guru-kula* system of training, and the depiction of *sringara* (erotic love) in poetry (such as in Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (Love Song of the Dark Lord) as it is portrayed in the dance. In later chapters, the author describes the twentieth century "sanitizing" of the dance by decreasing sensuality in lyrical content and depiction. Very detailed notes on *bharata natyam* and *kathakali* dance are followed by shorter ones on *kathak*. The reader will also be introduced to the music systems of India and their relationship to creating *rasa* by the perfect combination of sense, sight, and sound. The reader will find interesting the Indian concept of "Nada Brahman" (Sound is God).

Chapter 4 deals specifically with the transmission of the art forms in far flung parts of the world and whether such a distance from its place of origin changes the *rasa* goal of Indian performing art. The process that a student undergoes to get proficiency not only in dance, but also in related arts is described; training culminates in a solo recital attended by family and friends. The diasporic Indian communities have extended the radical changes in the traditional temple dances begun in India in the early twentieth century. The author cites the world wide web as a resource to find out about the innumer-

able institutes of training all over the world that sustain the temple dance tradition. A dancer, presenting her *arangetram*, or debut recital, “Stands and bears witness to both continuity and change,” according to Schwartz (p. 87). The author has to be credited for this detailed and very accurate analysis of the *arangetram* process with respect to its social and religious implications. This chapter alone will explain to the layperson and the introductory student the current performance practice of Indian dance in many parts of the world. I need to note one correction: *arangetram*, referred to as a Sanskrit term, is a Tamil word, *etram* (Tamil for ascending), combined with *arangam* (from Tamil or Sanskrit *ranga*, meaning stage). In some parts of South India, other than Tamil Nadu, the Sanskrit word *ranga pravesham* is preferred for this rite of passage whereby a dancer marks formal graduation from learner to full-fledged performer.

Schwartz describes the *arangetram*, which has progressed from a private affair demonstrating the dancer’s training and honoring the *guru* into an elaborate ceremony including gifts, diplomas, and, inevitably, a “showcase for affluence” (p. 89) with ornate invitations and programs. This endeavor serves primarily “to combat assimilation and secularization” in the second generation of immigrants. The “*rasa*” created in such a performance is discussed with reference to the religious nature of the themes presented, and the complex attitudes and associations of the mixed audience for which it is presented. The author’s conclusion is that the concept of *rasa* that pervades the Indian performing arts is capable of transcending traditional boundaries of geography, gender, religion, and ideology.

For those who seek a taste of *rasa* and for those who wish to trace some of its deeper implications in religion and social practice, this book will be of interest. By detailing the origins of the Indian performing arts, their evolution in modern India, and their transplantation to foreign lands, Schwartz aptly describes the complex manner in which *rasa* is realized.

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