

Process in Creating a Kathakali*

***The Anger of Achilles*[†]**

The ten years that made it happen

By Richard Tremblay, Choreographer

There is no predefined methodology for creating a Kathakali. That is probably because creation is, at least in Kathakali, a particular venture. Or is it culturally conditioned in order to preserve the tradition? Why then all the interest and support for new works? Be that as it may, I had to rely on my experience and, with the invaluable help and the support from a group of major artists, I went my way through the creation of *The Anger of Achilles*. This article sums up the knowledge I drew from that experience, while outlining the main phases of the process, which led the work to its Indian premiere, in 1991.

At the outset, and that seems to be a contradiction, most of the Kathakalis have been done by 'non-practitioners of Kathakali', as one might call them. Probably, those works were remade in rehearsals by dancers and some achieved performers. Though things have changed, we know there are instances of new works done by scholars, writers or non-practitioners of dance. And there are numerous drawbacks to that, one of them being the constraints sometimes imposed to the dance, in the name of theories about anything.

From the creativity viewpoint, choreography is, in my opinion, what matters most. And as in any choreography, the making a new Kathakali relies very much on teamwork. Even the viewpoint of the scholar should be useful, if this one role in the process is understood as something similar to what the *Dramaturg* does in the theatre and the dance, for instance. The author of a Kathakali draws a lot from the culture of dance and theatre – In terms of universality in his outlook, and part of his contribution to the particular field where he works. So, the rule of thumb would be: Get associated with as many creative collaborators as possible. Important thing is to make sure everyone is at the right place.

Next, one has to make a decision on the theme. From my point of view, the themes most relevant to Kathakali, and those which are most effective, have a direct link with

* Based on earlier lecture demonstration by Richard Tremblay, *Creativity in Classical and Contemporary*, Kerala Kalamandalam, 2005. See other conferences given in India, 2006.

URL: http://www.silentculture.org/pdfs/conference_KKM.pdf

Or see documentation page: <http://www.silentculture.org/creation/english.asp?page=onglets/DocuE.asp>

[†] A genuine piece of Kathakali, whose narrative is based on Homer's Iliad, *The Anger of Achilles* was first danced in India, at Kerala Kalamandalam (1988). It was presented in Mumbai (1991), Thrissur (1993), Singapore (2000), and is currently under consideration for international dissemination. The work belongs to the new Kathakali repertoire.

epics in some way or another. If such is the case, that's mainly because the main function in Kathakali, is to convey epic contents: ethics, relationships, and values of life¹. So, any epic will do. The rest depends on the dramatic potential of the theme the author has chosen, and how he intends to use it. And all the better for him if he has an idea of the kind of contribution that he aims to bring in the field of Kathakali in particular, or in creation in general – At least, knowing what direction the work is going to take? In the present case, I just wanted to create a good Kathakali while emphasizing its dance component – without necessarily neglecting the dramatic content. The dance field offers many instances where creativity has handled the same themes in different fashions. *Le sacre du printemps /The Rite of Spring*, for example, was approached from different viewpoints by a number of choreographers, in quite different times.

One has to read a lot about the particular mythology one has chosen, and, as a matter of fact, rather to know about any mythology. All Kathakali is about mythology. The dance, music, and dramaturgy, all comes out from mythology. So, a lot of research is necessary in this respect. Naturally, one has to reference to existing Kathakali works, in particular, those dealing with similar themes – and that is exactly what makes the difference at the level of the artistic achievement, for any art work. For instance, looking at Greenaway's films, references to Bosch, Shakespeare or so many others, is a level of second degree in the art work, which puts one's own vision in the perspective of a broader frame of reference.

The other singular thing not to forget is that the Kathakali work will first appear in the shape of a piece of poetry. Because there is a story, the narration will be defined and will expand in a certain way as to correspond with the set of Kathakali conventions. The speech is in verses, which are grouped into strophes, or *slokas* and *padas* (with a variety of forms for the metrics). The story is conveyed by the singing (in particular modes, or *ragas*, and particular rhythms, or *talas*, and elocution speeds or *layas*), and then interpreted by the dancer (in *abhinayas* or techniques of expression in body movement, postures, facial movement and hand gestures) accompanied to the percussion instruments (two drums, *chenda* and *maddalam*, cymbals or *ellatalam*, and gong or *chengalam*). The rest of the writing resides in detailed directions, in order to guide dancers through a complex construction, given that dancers contribute of their own development to the story (in those creative parts of their own invention, called *manodharamam*). This complete piece of writing is, more or less in its final form, the set of songs and directions for the story or *Atta Katha*.

The Anger of Achilles was first written, staged and performed in the English language (including singing, etc.). That was never done before. However, after the presentation of the work in progress, it was decided to have *The Anger of Achilles* translated in the Malayalam language, in which Kathakali songs are usually written and performed. This is unlike Opera. Kathakali artists do not train in various languages – As opera artists do with languages like, for example, Italian, French, German or English. If Kathakali is not directly written in Malayalam, and if it happens that the author has not a command of the language to match the one his has of the dance, translation

¹ Op. Cit.

therefore comes in the process as an important phase. In fact, this additional phase could be one more opportunity at the benefit of the work, offering a further chance for revision.

The translator ought to be a specialist in the Kathakali versification – Either, as scholar or Kathakali artist, or the two at the same time. What if one had straight away worked with the translator's close collaboration, in order to directly write the whole thing in Malayalam? Things could have been done in this way. It is a matter of methodology. I have chosen to give the piece its shape prior to going to the translator, in the same way that a playwright goes to the translator once he has given its form to the play. It is a matter for the translator of getting confronted with a vision, and not only with the lines that he has to translate. The whole translation exercise is a demanding job. As it has been the case with *The Anger of Achilles*, I wanted to oversee the translation and discuss everything, from the style of the translator to the minute details and subtleties of the work. And I carried on to the point of reworking parts of the creation. Apart from the structural differences in the languages, English and Malayalam have two different cultural backgrounds. For example, “Lady of the white arms” is not translatable in Kathakali. As a task in itself, this translation business is quite complex. That took me more than a year just to have it finished[§].

Thence, the creation will finally reach at its rehearsal stage. There, again, artistic questions prevail. Narrative sections will alternate with those of dance (*kalashas*). There are hundreds of those *kalashas*. Should new ones get added to have more of those pieces of dance, and of a more varied sort? Should they be expanded, or reorganized? Or, if need be, what would be the variants in a particular context? Or yet, how to fix up technical aspects of the dance in relation to space or the story in particular? There is constraint on creativeness. That cannot take all directions. How will that be managed, so as to play its role alongside with the classical way of organizing space or in relation to characterization? Lots of those things. For instance, what will be the hand gesture here or there? What is the *mudra* for Achilles? Kathakali consists of several descriptions and dance sections, and of various rhythms (take for example the *padiññu'*, a very slow rhythm associated with the depiction of the love scenes). With all intricacies, the whole night is most commonly the running time for a Kathakali show. To make a 120-150 minutes Kathakali, one has to carefully edit the material, or reshape it in order to keep the dramatic and visual impact while emphasizing the dance component (like I have chosen to do that). Then one might opt for a work in progress, as exactly I did that, or for dividing the work into solo parts to have them danced separately, prior to the final stage of the production^{**}.

And there the production comes in turn. Rehearsals will refine, and make the dancers more comfortable with the choreography and the narrative, in order for them to contribute in the *manodharamam* (part of the Indian aesthetics, which allows the dancer to develop in his/her own interpretation, expand, enliven, and embellish the form and contents). Lots of discussions and meetings. Special design in costumes, and

[§] See Appendix: Timetable for the research and creation of *The Anger of Achilles*.

^{**} *The Iliad of Homer* (1988) is a solo of about 30 minutes, which I danced about a dozen times in Canada. The piece (Hector in a dialogue with Andromache) is an excerpt from *The Anger of Achilles*.

oops! There is a dancer who does not want to wear one headdress that has one extra feather on it, and which you thought should be fixed on that as to be reminding of the Greek helmet. That must be changed. In theory, we are arrived at the end of the process after the last rehearsal. If fortunately enough, there is a big designer to work at the light and the space, a nevertheless exhausted choreographer could afford to sit with the audience, at last, looking at the dance, as never he would have seen it before. That happens now and then in a choreographer's lifetime.

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APPENDIX

Timetable for the research and creation of *The Anger of Achilles*

1981-1991

The Anger of Achilles is a typical Kathakali. Here is, for example, an idea of the time framework and the process I went through, and which divides into several phases.

I. Research and preliminary preparation

1981-84. Research on the Greek Epics, and phonetics of languages such as English, and the Malayalam.

The Anger of Achilles draws its narrative from *The Iliad*, mainly. (There are a great number of translations of that epic. I used Smith and Miller's). Homer's *Iliad* consists of 24 chapters, and revolves around the ethics of war in ancient Greece. Besides, the epic contains an incredible amount of information in relation to mythology. But Homer is not the only one who wrote on those myths (other authors did that, and thus they complement Homer's version). My research had to sort those things out, and see, out of the considerable amount of that mythological material, what was to be retained? But what was most important was the creative potential, that is to say when a whole section could be developed of its own course, into something which barely existed before, apart from two or three lines in the original text. That is exactly at this point that creativity comes into play, that the choreographer will fill up the gaps left by *The Iliad* (all what the written language cannot say), to fill those gaps and discover one's own space with the language peculiar to Kathakali. All this is identified in advance by the research.

On the other hand, Kathakali counts several works with lots of war scenes – they will be looked at again and again, taking into consideration how the new work will contribute to the repertoire. With *The Anger of Achilles*, it is its inner rhythm and the dance that matters, while keeping the dramatic weaving tight and strong. (See above.)

II. Written work in the Kathakali format (or Atta Katha)

1984-87: Writing of the complete work, with testing the lyrics in rehearsals with a dancer.

I also wrote the English phonetics in the Malayalam script, so that the singers could read at least the correct phonetics in order to translate the

verses in the *raga-tala* system of Kathakali. All of that was done for the first time.

III. Creation as such of the stage-work with all dancers (Kalamandalam, 1988)

A four hours work in progress was presented at the Kerala Kalamandalam (1988)

Creation of a solo work performed by the choreographer in several places in Canada.

IV. Translation into the language which is used in Kathakali (Malayalam) (1989-90)

With Marumakan Raja and Prof. Aravindarsan, two specialists in Malayalam poetry, and of the Kathakali, in particular. (See problematic in prior description.)

V. Indian Premiere of the final version (Mumbai, 1991)

Following the translation, there has been intense work in rehearsals with dancers. Stage work came out of it. *The Anger of Achilles* is now part of the Kathakali new repertoire. It was last danced in Singapour (2000), and a tour is currently under discussion. Dissemination remains one of the objectives of the "Iliad Project", as it is called.

P.S.

Note that, in this particular case, translation comes after the first presentation. This is because the work was first presented in an English version. In subsequent works, I made the translation prior to entering the creation process with dancers.