

# CREATIVITY IN CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DANCE

by Richard Tremblay

**Danse Kalashas Contemporary Dance Company, and Ensemble Mahapooram**

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Distinguished guests, dear friends, fellow artists,

I wish to thank the Kerala Kalamandalam, its management and artistic direction, that have agreed to this talk on Kathakali and Contemporary Dance. This is an opportunity for me to pay a long due tribute to the Kerala Kalamandalam. It is equally an opportunity to bring forward some general ideas about dance, its practice and appreciation.

I came to this institution in the mid-1970's, by the time the institution shone of its entire gleam with performers such as Raman Kutty Nair, Gopi Asan, and Krishan Kutty Poduwal standing at the peak of their glory. Overlooking the office and the needs of the artistic team was the brilliant and witty Vasudevan Namboodiripad, the then Superintendent, who was assisted by

Leela Namboodiripad, the two of them relating quite beautifully with the Western culture.

I knew Kerala Kalamandalam of the 1970's had other matters to look after than caring for a Canadian, though it did with time and as much as it could.

I would like to acknowledge the support of successive managements, in particular under the direction of Iyemkkode Sridharan whose enthusiasm, and principled vision of creativity and values in arts and society, was a great deal of inspiration not only for me, but, as I understand, for all artists I knew in this reputed institution.

At the same time, I acknowledge the friendship and help of my fellow artists from Kerala Kalamandalam, many of them now on retirement. I would like to acknowledge the artistic mastery of Kalamandalam Gopy who, with Kalamandalam Unnikrishnan, took and brought to its actual significance the role of Achilles in *The Iliad /The Anger of Achilles*. Other contributors to the work were Kalamandalam Gangadharan, and Kalanilayam Unnikrishnan. *The Iliad* would not have been possible without them, and without the support of Vazhenkada Vijayan, and his assistant at the time, K. Gopalakrishnan, who provided advice

and encouragement at all time, M. P. Sankaran, and the last but not the least, the support and friendship of those who are still part of the teaching staff here, Rajashekar, Rama Das and others.

On the whole, I found Kalamandalam of the time was opened to artistic challenge, and there were free and honest discussions about it, with the resulting outcome that Kerala Kalamandalam commissioned works from Greek Epics, Shakespeare, and other contemporary authors, with the support of the Central Sangeeth Natak Akademy.

Among other funding bodies, the research work on which this talk is based, was funded by the Government of India through the India Studies Programme of the Shastri Canadian Institute. [Quote:] Neither the Government of India nor the Shastri Institute necessarily endorse the views expressed therein. [End Quote.]

The debate on Classical Dance versus Contemporary Dance, CLASSICAL and CONTEMPORARY as we used to call it in the profession, is a proposal of the modern world. It bears the idea of tradition versus creation. In this talk I will attempt to set the CLASSICAL and the CONTEMPORARY in contrast, hoping this will make us better understand what makes so

complementary these two completely different approaches to dance. In the process, I will show a few video excerpts for the first part of the lecture. The excerpts will be from my work. For the second part, I will relate to general ideas at issue in the field of dance and theatre.

First of all: the Kathakali work, which is pertaining to CLASSICAL. Let me take a look at *The Anger of Achilles* or The Kathakali Iliad, which we first staged in this very place, the Kuttambalam, in 1988.

The Iliad is an epic ( ഇതിഹാസം ). This is the first statement about The Iliad.

It is epic, and relates to Kathakali much the same way the Indian epics do. This is the second statement. In fact, my assumption is that the main function of the Kathakali dance theatre lies in its intrinsic ability to convey the epic narrative. This, in my view, pertains to the Kathakali underlying function.

Attributed to Homer, *The Iliad* was written by 6,000 BC. As one knows, the epic is about the war at Troy (Asia Minor, in the actual Turkish state.) A war between two clans: the Achaeans or Greeks on one side, and the Trojans who defended their fortress

at Troy. Achaeans came overseas, and besieged the fortress. It is mainly the story of Achilles (son of goddess Thetis, and of human father Peleus). Recall: Bhiman is the son of God Vayu and of human mother Kunti. Technically, they are all heroes in the epic sense.

Before we go to the video excerpts, let me introduce the characters and the scenes I selected to illustrate my views on epic values, in relation to the Kathakali Dance Drama.

Four-part excerpt:

1. **The Trojans.** Hector, the Trojan prince, and his wife Andromache are concerned about the war, and Andromache fears for her son's life if Hector is killed. Hector reassures her. Husband and wife meet at the Scean gate when Hector is about to leave for the battlefield. Here performed by M .P. Sankaran and Rajashekharan. (EXCERPT AND PAUSE)
2. **The Greeks. Patroclus – a key role in the plot, and Achilles' friend.** Here Patroclus is killed. First, we see him as he pushes away the Trojans from the ships. He boasts over his deeds and success, even defying god Apollo. Nor for long. Euphorbus (Chuvanna Tadi) comes in and cowardly strikes Patroclus in the back, who is finished by Hector who joins Euphorbus in

triumph. The last scene, where Hector strips Patroclus of his armour – which is Achilles' one – is very important: it will bring Achilles back to the war to avenge his friend's death and to recover his armour. Here is Patroclus performed by Krishna Kumar, Euphorbus by Rama Das, and Hector by M. P. Sankaran, for the Trichur revival, 1993. (EXCERPT AND PAUSE)

3. **In the next excerpt: Achilles' inconsolable grieve. In Karuna.** With Thetis who first enquires about the cause for her son's grieve. (When she saw him, he was rolling in pain on the seashore.) Here, we have a very peculiar moment that illustrates the Indian aesthetics, with complex mix of emotion of a mother full of love before her son who is in utter despair. Then, the difficult decision to give her son the permission to fight because she knows that the moment he will kill the enemy, he is going to be killed by fate. But Achilles replies: “Let me kill the enemy and die. Though in her final decision, Thetis gives her son the permission to fight and even goes as far as to bring him a new set of armour from heavens – to replace the one stolen by Hector from Patroclus’ body. With such wonderful weapons Achilles will return to war in all glory. Here, Thetis is performed by Margi Vijayan, and

Achilles by Krishan Kutty. At the Singapore revival, in year 2000. (EXCERPT AND PAUSE)

4. As one knows well, besides its elaborate hand gestures, Kathakali has many choreographic patterns, stage devices – such as curtain looks –, and a large variety of Kalashas and movements. It is important that a Kathakali new work do justice to the system by a fine assemblage of these elements. The next excerpt will show some of them through the description of Achilles' shield – the piece was crafted by the god Hephaestus. On his wonderful shield, Achilles sees a marriage scene, a concert of Veena and drum, soldiers at the gate of a castle. And from a war scene, the crucial one, he gets the idea of how he is going to kill Hector, and drag his body around the fortress of Troy. Here, a Parapurappadu, or the preparation of weapons, usually performed by a Katti, here it is performed by a Paccha. I was told it was never done before... We will not go beyond that final scene: the rest is implicit, with the Yuddha Vattam, etc. Here is Achilles, performed by Kalamandalam Gopi, for the 1993 revival, in Thrissur. (EXCERPT AND PAUSE)

And this ends the first part of my presentation.

Let us now switch to CONTEMPORARY DANCE, and see how different the approach is in terms of the creative process.

Kathakali and Contemporary Dance appear to be two worlds apart. To me, they are not because they are locked up complementarily at a higher level. Let me explain this.

Classical Dance /Theatre allows conservation and transmission of cultural tradition. This is a major function which bears a great deal of constraint on its Form. On the other hand, the contemporary choreography is closer in sensibility to young generations, which makes it more likely to draw on broader audiences, in post-industrialised world. It is more fluid in terms of its Form. Generally speaking, this is because it addresses issues closer to the concerns of our times, and the changing world. (I am talking here of “art dance” as opposed to film dancing. Also, *broader audiences* does not necessarily mean either better or worst, in terms of artistic content.)

Performers trained in Classical generally make good dancers of Contemporary. Classical is always a good school of training and stage mastership. Conversely, and on the appreciation side, the more people seeing dance in all its forms and styles, the more

likely they are to appreciate Classical. While thus presented as a contrasting pair in the dynamics of their development, Contemporary & Classical are two related aspects of the dance world, and operate as powerful allies in their respective growth and practice.

Contemporary work and Classical are different in their approach to dealing with forms. Here, I will not deal with the creative Classical differently from the work corpus of the established repertoire. These two categories basically do entail the same practice as far as Form is concerned. What matters is the fact that there definitely exist a set of expectations about contemporary choreography, and another one altogether about Classical. Kathakali, for instance, has a recognizable and predictable form. Here, as in Classical, one can say **THE WORK IS THE FORM** whereas, to the exact opposite, **THE FORM IS THE WORK** in contemporary choreography. [Develop and illustrate.]

Please remember this key idea. It might be useful to understand dance cross culturally, and in order to provide one with clues as to what a viewer should look for, depending on whether he finds himself before a classical work or a contemporary choreography.

This being said, let us now turn to the new excerpts I now want to show as an example of how contemporary choreography deals with Form.

One of the many features of contemporary dance is that it uses floor work as a component. This is done in order to investigate the potential of movement. Body goes to floor to explore horizontal forms, most of time through transposition and variation of what it does vertically.

To illustrate this and other aspects, I have chosen to concentrate on a recent choreography titled: *In Himalayas, Prayer for a Rope, a Pope, And a Rogue*. Through a short sequence on video, let me introduce a duet excerpted from the 80 min. choreography. I am showing this in contrast to the Kathakali work, and to illustrate the difference in approach while dealing with Form.

This choreography titles *Prayer for a Rope, a Pope, And a Rogue*. It does not have the external aspect of Kathakali i.e. does not include a recognizable Kathakali set of movements or choreographic patterns, nor does it have a title which the Kathakali repertoire has made you familiar with.

Contemporary Dance is said to be “contemporary” because it creates its own form and language, and does not rely on a pre-existing and recognizable form. Contemporary might or might not blend and /or intermingle with styles. It might or might not have the Kathakali sensibility, and whether the choreographer was trained in Kathakali or not is not relevant to its contents and form. However, in this particular work, which is NOT FUSION, you will certainly notice a distinct sensibility and ambiance, which owes a lot to the music, a composition to orchestral percussion and the Kathakali percussion instruments, by composer Bruno Paquet – A colleague of mine who studied Kathakali percussion here.

To generate a work is to generate forms or even generate forms without structure, like the quartet of American composer Morton Feldman or Merce Cunningham's forms that evolve from movement principles like curves, isolation of one body part from another, rapid reversals of direction, etc. One thing is certain, in Contemporary you no longer evolve in the forms you were trained in. That's where Contemporary, or authored dance, comes into play.

To illustrate my point, here is the *Duet for the Himalayas*, loosely related to a theme underlying the movement score i.e. not explicitly. You know the Indian mythology: The Mother of Birds was made captive by the Nagas, and then she was freed by Garuda (who brought Amrit to the Nagas, and which he placed on the *kusha* grass) ... You will notice the narration is not explicit, always understated and certainly not as central as in Classical or at least not functioning at the same level. This is another important difference, which we might have to develop at another time.

*Duet for the Himalayas* is the result of a residency I directed at the *Centre Chorégraphique National de Franche-Comté*, in France, with the participation of Guillaume Lemasson from Paris, and Anil Kumar, a graduate of Kerala Kalamandalam (here today). He was one of the selected participants in my workshops on Contemporary Dance. As a regular Kathakali performer, he was a member of a recent production of *The Anger of Achilles*, *The Kathakali Iliad*.

Let me conclude with a few more observations on how creativity works distinctively in Classical and Contemporary.

In Classical, like in Kathakali, it is the dancer who is expected to take on the dance potential. The choreographer, if at all, is there to support this process. At least in Kathakali, there is no such training of young choreographers who are encouraged to show their work at a young age, like in the West. Instead, there are outstanding artistic personalities who are well established in the art form, and widely recognized for their creativity and contribution as performers and teachers through life long practice. Their choreography is the result of what they have put into practice in their own career, and through the recognition they won from fellow artists and audiences. From that point, their creativity enters the repertoire with their works, which are being taught and transmitted as set choreographies to generations of artists, as part of the art form. Such was the central contribution of those responsible for the Kathakali reinterpretation during the last century, which in my view has founded the Kalamandalam lineage of masters from 1935 onwards. (Dance Reinterpretation is

a concept pertaining to dance anthropology, and does not necessarily concord with the views of traditional dance historians.)

Creation in Contemporary has quite different an approach. It does not mean that there is no cultural background for it, in as much as it does not refer to the cultural heritage as a precept and a set of protected forms; it rather creates forms of its own, as we have said earlier in this presentation.

Here again, **THE FORM IS THE WORK**. Consequently, for the form to be a function of the work, one needs get rid of the culturally bound stock, i.e. the canons of a particular aesthetics or the sets of protected forms, which deny the work complete access to its form as part of the creation process. In contemporary choreography, existing forms are deconstructed, and sequences that remind predefined forms (apart from actual and fashionable styles in Contemporary) are excluded, deleted, or perverted.

On the other hand, Kathakali, for example, as a form of its own, needs creative inputs only in order to exemplify its system, reinforce its universality, or maybe go into the process of another reinterpretation. (See above.) As I said, creativity in Kathakali is in the dancer's realm, a part of the performer's role, not generally

relying explicitly on the choreographer. Within this very framework, it is a noble mission in itself for a choreographer to contribute to such an art form, which is at the very source of theatre and dance.

Thrissur, Kerala

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