



Legacies of Discourse

Special Drama and its History

Susan Seizer

Our father was then keeping afloat in the ocean of life by hanging onto that piece of driftwood known as Special Drama.

—T. K. Shanmugam

'Special Drama' means, as they please: without responsibility. They had no discipline (kaṭṭūppāṭu), no regularity or propriety (olukkam); they talked as they pleased in the dramas, they talked whatever they knew, which amounted to comedy and all that, because they had no murai.

—A.K. Kaleeswaran

PREFACE: WHAT IS SPECIAL DRAMA?

At my first Special Drama, this is what I saw—a homely man and a glittery woman playing bawdy comedy and dancing a scene that ended with what looked like an actual kiss—on the lips!—at which there was a collective gasp from the audience. After that, a big shift occurred—over half the audience left. During the remaining six hours of the drama, heavily costumed actors took turns to speak or sing into stationary mikes as they stood, virtually still, facing the audience. Understanding little of what was said, what struck me most was the performers' affectless and restricted style; like watching a film with the sound turned off, I was trying to read movement and form but saw only their absence. I was left wondering, why are these actors barely moving? And how did such an oddly still theatrical style develop?

Speshal Nācakam is a genre of popular Tamil theatre that began in the late nineteenth century. The name refers to the practice of hiring each artist 'specially' for each performance, thus making it a 'special' event. There are no troupes or companies in Special Drama. Each artist contracts individually for any given performance, often assisted in the booking process by drama 'agents'. Equally remarkable is the fact that there are no rehearsals or directors for Special Drama. Indeed, artists may meet for the first time onstage. All this is made possible by a system of familiar repertory roles—hero, heroine, buffoon, dancer, and so on—in a set repertory of plays.

Today, such events last all night. They are primarily performed in villages and small towns in conjunction with religious festivals. In such contexts they are considered entertainment that is simultaneously pleasing to mortal and immortal audiences. Such performances are generally held in the sponsor's hometown as part of a temple festival to honour a specific deity, usually Hindu but also Christian.

The presentational style of Special Drama is a syncretic mix of proscenium staging cribbed from nineteenth century Parsi and British theatre troupes, and the familiar phrasing and broad theatricality of indigenous genres of Tamil epic street theatre.¹ The costuming captures the uncanny mix of these two influences rather well—the actors' faces are powdered 'realistically' white as any beauty under the Raj, while their bodies are attired in the saturated colours of mythic Tamil gods and royalty. The plays generally retell familiar mythological or historical stories with national appeal.

The most popular Special Dramas, however, enact specifically Tamil stories, especially that of the wedding of Lord Murugan to his Dravidian wife Valli in the signature drama of the genre, *Valli's Wedding*.

The first two hours of a Special Drama are pure comedy, unscripted and improvised, danced, sung, and shouted by performers whose repertory roles are female 'dancer' and male 'buffoon'. The remaining six hours comprise the dramatic portion of the play, with performers enacting the more respected repertory roles of hero and heroine with the lack of extraneous movement understood as befitting higher class personages.

One of my goals in this paper is to unpack the cultural logics and socio-historical discourses that converge to make standing still to deliver lines more highly valued than is expressive acting on the contemporary Special Drama stage. This hierarchy of artistic values necessarily developed through assessments made in relation to other theatrical forms and styles, and it is by attending to the mutual dependency of such historical aesthetic assessments that this paper aims at making an intervention in Tamil drama historiography itself. The social standing of artists and patrons of the theatre, and the social attitudes that greet those who appear on the Tamil professional public stage, must be considered at the outset of this endeavour.

THE ARTISTS

Special Drama artists represent an unusually broad range of linguistic, ethnic, caste, regional, sexual, and religious identities and community affiliations. Some of them come from acting families that have been 'putting powder' for five generations, while others are the first in the family ever to go on stage.

Such a 'maximally inclusive' group identity² is generally negatively regarded as fostering *excessive social mixing*, seemingly throughout India.³ The positive potential for such a radically inclusive community to be disruptive of otherwise hurtful status quo exclusivities is at least theoretically exciting, as explored in the work of social theorists from diverse scholarly fields who are concerned with destabilizing prior assumptions regarding the nature of the community concept.⁴ I find particularly compelling the notion, suggested by much of this work, that communities such as this might raise 'the question of a *different* community, a community in and of difference, a community not founded in any autonomous essence.'⁵

The one variable that remains consistent across all the potential identity markers (ethnicity, caste, region, sexuality, religion) is that of class. Professional popular stage acting is considered low-class in Tamil Nadu, entered into almost exclusively out of economic need. Special Drama artists are invariably members of the urban poor. I understand the term urban poor to be 'a cultural as well as an economic formation,'⁶ denoting a class whose members share

three important features—‘poverty, a persistent sense of financial insecurity, and a lack of socio-political power’. Special Drama artists are actively engaged in attempting to improve their lives on all three of these levels but very few actually manage to hold onto money for various reasons.

Making a Living

Some artists began acting while still quite young, especially those who joined ‘Boys Companies’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such children, boys and girls alike were given over by their families to a life with the Company that fed, housed, and trained them to act. The money they earned went to the family. Such a decision might be based on fair complexion in a child, considered appealing to look at and thus likely to do well in an art of appearances. It might likewise be based on a child’s outgoing nature, or proclivity towards dance or song. Equally though, a dark-skinned girl in a large family (considered to be a liability) might be given to the Company.

Other artists join this life as adults, looking for work, ready for something different. Their situations and stories vary. Some find entrance into the drama world through familial connections. Knowing a neighbour, an aunt or an uncle, who is involved in the drama world makes it viable—if socially stigmatizing, as we shall see—way to earn a living. They are often able to find roles befitting their proclivity through early exposure to this life.

Working as a Special Drama artist pays quite well in relation to other kinds of work available to persons of this class. However, the drama season lasts only from February/March to July/August. During this six-month period, they must earn enough to carry them through the year. Also, an artist’s earnings depend entirely on his or her popularity that season. A ‘leading’ artist (the English word used for an artist doing well that season) will perform every night in the peak months of April and May, with impressive earnings even by middle-class standards. Other popular artists however perform only three or four nights a week during this season, and even less frequently in other months. Moreover, an artist’s fee must be negotiated for each performance and as demand lessens, so do earnings. Their income is thus at best unreliable.

The situation is even worse for female artists who, unlike their male counterparts (men in their late 60s and early 70s continue to play the young hero) are meant to remain a girl of sixteen onstage. Many of the plots staged in Special Drama turn on the pubescent ripeness of the female heroine. Actresses stop attempting to fill this role around the age of forty, switching over to repertory dramas and playing the roles of bereaved wives, mothers, and so on. Their incomes are often reduced at this stage and careers invariably shorter than those of male actors.

In addition, such high wages for half the year must compensate not only for the loss of social standing attendant on entering this profession but must also generally stretch to cover many mouths. The actresses, in particular, who may be disowned by their families for working in this profession, often live on their own as 'second wives' to men who are actors themselves. These women struggle to support children, and perhaps a widowed mother or other relatives in even worse situations, on an unreliable income.

Thus, the relatively high wages of Special Drama artists should not give the impression that they are well-off. While many do alter their economic situation through this work, they remain enmeshed in relations that substantially drain that benefit.

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL DRAMA?

At the most basic level, Special Drama may correctly mean a drama of specialties. Its distinction as a specific genre within a larger field known as *Isai Nāṭakam* (Music Drama) comes from the organizational practice of hiring each performer 'specially' for each performance. In this sense, the name *Speshal Nāṭakam* makes no real break with a standard appellative pattern for Tamil theatrical genres that are (pardon the tautology) quite generic. For example, other contemporary genres of Tamil theatre identify their domains as 'Mythological Drama,' 'Social Drama,' or 'Modern Drama.' And yet a theatre of specialties remains a tantalizingly vague and, potentially, an infinitely broad moniker. Indeed, every Special Drama contains mythological and social elements, songs and dances, outdoor ritual and modern urban attributes.

Special Drama continues to be active in Tamil Nadu, and its ongoing survival in the face of the hugely popular and prolific

Tamil cinema industry makes the question even more pointed—What is Special here? Certainly the appeal of live artists, their relationships with each other and with the audiences playing out in real time on local stages, are all key in creating the phenomenon of ‘special-ness.’ My focus, in this chapter however, is on the role that historiography has played and continues to play in framing the genre itself, and by extension its artists, as vulgar and shameful.

THE LEGACY AND LEGEND OF SANKARADAS SWAMIGAL

Recognized by historians as an important figure in the development of modern Tamil drama, playwright T. T. Sankaradas Swamigal (1867–1922) is much more than a historical figure to the contemporary Special Drama community. He is revered and honoured by Special Drama artists as a Guru and as the founder and first teacher of their art form. As such, he is actively remembered by artists in speech, song, and worship, as well as in annual collective, commemorative festivals.

Swamigal is an important historical figure primarily because of the disparity between the place he occupies for Tamil drama historians, and the position he holds for Special Drama artists. Historians, generally only briefly, mention his work as a bridge between tradition and modernity. Swamigal’s oeuvre of over 50 scripted plays includes Hindu mythologies, Indian histories, Christian devotional stories, and translations of several works of Shakespeare. The scripts alternate sung verse with spoken prose passages, and are generally celebrated as popularization of familiar stories rendered in pleasing prose accessible to the masses. A standard account, from the *Encyclopedia of Tamil Literature*, reads:

The significance of Cuvāmikaḷ [Swamigal] as a modern dramatist lies in the fact that he has brought about a creative blend of the old and the new in the Tamil dramatic tradition. He has fused into his plays the elements of the ancient folk dramatic forms, those of the musical plays of the pre-modern days, and the characteristics of the modern Tamil play that came into being under the impact of the West.⁷

Having read numerous such accounts, my sense is that the degree of syncretism in Swamigal’s oeuvre has rendered both his works and the artists who continue to enact them rather too uncategorizable

for historians. Again, both he and they mix too much; their art is messy, overly emotionally expressive, and anything but elite. This is what one reads over and over again in so many words in the historiographic record.⁸ To date, no written account of Swamigal's contributions reflects the kind of following he has inspired among practitioners of his art today.

And though it rarely takes written form, appreciation of Swamigal can indeed be found in a plethora of material forms, from framed colour prints of his portrait worshipped daily by artists to memorial statues of Swamigal erected in prominent public plazas and concert auditoriums bearing his name. So one must not be misled then by the limits of the written record in judging Swamigal's influence on Tamil popular drama. His importance stems from two related aspects of his achievement—his scripting of the majority of plays in the Special Drama repertory, and his pivotal role in the development of drama companies—the historical precedent to the current form of Special Drama. Many of the artists initially trained in drama companies under Swamigal's tutelage went on to teach their art to subsequent generations, establishing a lineage of teachers and students who trace their artistic heritage to him.

What I present here then is the beginnings of a history of Special Drama, or rather of a revision of the history of Tamil drama that would sufficiently recognize the contributions of the living art of Special Drama. By including artists' voices in this history, I am substantially augmenting the standard historiographic record on Tamil drama. My focus on Special Drama exposes lacunae in this record that has, to date, largely omitted this complex theatrical practice from the political and social life of the region. Its inclusion here offers new perspectives on the lived dimensions of the class, language, and regional political struggles that so define south India in the past century.

THE HISTORY OF SPECIAL DRAMA

As noted above, today Special Drama is primarily performed in villages. Such rural venues are not, however, where the genre began. Its roots are instead much more urban. Special Drama developed in the interstices between the travelling British and Parsi troupes of the nineteenth century, and the myriad large

Tamil drama companies that came to dominate Tamil stage in the initial decades of the twentieth century.⁹ During this period, actors of all ages who left companies after receiving training in their repertory plays, circulated on the margins of established troupes and were available for freelance work. Performances that engaged such independent 'special' artists were called 'Special Drama.'¹⁰ In certain instances, at least, the company system itself seems to have been fairly dependent on the frequent movement of artists between companies. 'Since almost all the companies were performing the same plays, it was easier for an actor to desert one and join another to his advantage.'¹¹

By the end of the 1940s, due to increasingly overwhelming financial constraints, the vast majority of drama companies had folded up. Instead, the appeal of dramas organized entirely through the already existent network of freelance artists grew. It was Special Drama so organized, rather than drama under the banner of a company that finally proved able to weather the invasion of the silver screen. By the end of the war, only a few drama companies remained;¹² cinema had effectively pushed popular drama off its urban pedestal and out into the village and 'rurban' platforms where it has continued to play ever since.

Rurban is a term coined by A.K. Ramanujan¹³ to describe what he perceives as a notion, emergent in both classical and modern Tamil literature, of 'a centre continuous with the country side.' Madurai, an ancient city frequently described as an overgrown village, is in many ways just such a rurban centre.

Note that this reverse trajectory of progress, this move from the urban based 'company drama' to the rurban 'special drama,' offers an important corrective to any unidirectional theories of the development of modernity in South Asia. Such theories appear repeatedly in the inescapably teleological accounts of theater in India that defined its historiography to date.

One way to understand the historiographic awkwardness surrounding the subject of Special Drama, so confusingly straddling urban and rural worlds as it does, is to recognize that it muddies the blueprint: this is a theatre born of modernity, that in the early twentieth century had both signs of modern theatre—proscenium stage and tickets—and yet became part of the ritual

economy of the regional countryside, an economy now largely based on the religious and agrarian calendars of village life. Such a reverse trajectory should spell decline, yet Special Drama continues to shine its sequins, lame, and glitter simply adding to the effect.

The hybrid sensibility captured by this genre thus complicates the straight, predetermined rise from rural to urban that characterizes the historiographic narrative of the modernization of Indian theater. Indeed, what plays onstage in many out-of-the-way places is a finer articulation of a history that tacks back and forth between 'the modern' and 'the folk.'

The history of the development of modern Tamil drama as written by drama historians normally has four stages. They culminate in the development of two distinct styles of drama, the elite amateur style of the *sabhas* private social organizations that sponsor theatre and music concerts, spurred by 'self-consciously modern elite sensibilities.'¹⁴ and the popular professional style of the commercial theatre companies who put on 'company dramas.'¹⁵ I now summarize these four canonical stages, adding a fifth that recognizes how the hybrid theatre tradition begun with company drama in the nineteenth century has continued through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries in Special Drama.

Tamil Drama History: Stage One (of Un-datable Roots)

An indigenous Tamil theatrical tradition is believed to have existed in Tamil Nadu 'from time immemorial'¹⁶ based on evidence found in stone inscriptions in temples as well as on allusions in poetic works and their commentaries. Though no ancient texts remain, whatever evidence there is points to a tradition of staging dramas in temples.¹⁷ A separate tradition of folklore plays in verse and song is documented in extant seventeenth and eighteenth century texts though it is unclear to what extent these are continuous with popular indigenous Tamil folk theatre as it appears today.

Indeed, 'little is known about the local forms of theatre that were in existence' prior to the nineteenth century.¹⁸ It is, nevertheless, accepted knowledge that folk theatre was traditionally performed by villagers for villagers.¹⁹ It is also frequently asserted that prior to the advent of Western influences on Tamil popular theatre 'dramatic performances had been the prerogative of a limited

number of (caste) lineages, whose members held locality-specific rights-cum-obligations to perform on particular occasions.²⁰ This system defined Tamil theatre until the mid-nineteenth century.

Tamil Drama History: Stage Two

An elite class of Tamil scholars take an interest in drama and begin, in the 1860s, to translate and adapt Western dramas and literature for a similarly elite audience.²¹ 'The elitist character of the plays stems from their [authors'] anxiety to raise Tamil drama to the level of the Sanskrit and the Western plays.'²² This was considered the beginning of 'modern' Tamil plays, defined as such precisely because they were based on Western models. At this stage, 'Involvement in the theatre came to be considered by the elite to be a fit engagement for persons with a Western education.'²³

Historians tend to write of this transition in exceedingly colourful terms, a stellar example of which I indulge at some length here:

The selfless services of erudite scholars have resurrected the Tamil drama from the pits of negligence and withering. In the hands of street dancers drama became worse and worse losing its artistic value. Throughout night they shouted and hooted in the name of singing and hopped and leaped instead of acting. In the morning they went from door to door with stretched arms to get something to fill their belly. Their action on the stage and their behavior in the streets were nothing but a great disgrace to the noble art. Respectable people looked at them with utter contempt. Something substantial had had to be done to restore the stage from the ugly hands of these street dancers. A few eminent men came forward with great determination. They modernized the Tamil stage with high aims and aspirations. Since their services were really meritorious and highly valuable they may well be termed the pioneers of modern Tamil drama.²⁴

Note here the marked contrast between the 'street dancers' so marked by their physicality (their ugly hands, their empty bellies) and 'the high aims and aspirations' of eminent men engaged in the modernizing process. However, the actual theatrical contributions of this 'new social class among the natives—the educated middle-class men who could neither identify themselves with their fellow men nor find an emotional oneness with the British rulers' were, however, of only 'academic interest.'²⁵ It was not until the next stage in this history that the average Tamilian was exposed to

new inventions in Tamil drama. The discursive tropes established in this phase—of elite men rescuing drama ‘from the pits of negligence and withering’—do however, continue to characterize the historiography of Tamil drama.

Tamil Drama History: Stage Three

Parsi drama troupes from Bombay travel to Tamil Nadu and perform plays ‘of puranic and court themes’ that incorporate stage conventions ‘adopted from the English.’²⁶ These companies charged admission fees from their audience, and are credited with the dubious distinction of beginning commercial theatre in India. In the Parsi companies, the ‘paid employees (including actors) were more disadvantaged with regard to education and family income than company owners,’²⁷ establishing what was to become a class pattern in the organization of commercial theatrical companies across the country.

Stylistically, Parsi theatre companies took from British touring companies a new material culture in ‘styles of advertisements, hand bills, printed tickets, and stage machinery,’ including backdrops of painted cloth scene settings and the proscenium arch,²⁸ thereby heralding a visual culture that attempted ‘to present mythic materials in realistic terms.’ Adding to the realism of these stage innovations was the advent, in the 1890s, of women playing women onstage, a new addition to the extant tradition of male actors’ expert in female impersonation. These two means of representing women onstage vied with each other well into the 1920s in the Parsi theatre, allowing the public a choice of images, a legacy that continues in Special Drama today.²⁹ A significant shift was set in motion; the impact of a theatre begun in elite, urban cosmopolitan circles quickly extended to working class audiences and other low-income groups from a range of communities.³⁰ ‘The Parsi entrepreneur had to ensure that the fare pleased all tastes and communities and developed a style that was essentially neutral with regard to communal differences and preferences.’³¹

Tamil Drama History: Stage Four

Tamil drama companies developed along the Parsi model, incorporating both indigenous Tamil material content and the

stylistic influences of Western theatre made familiar by Parsi troupes. Of the new Tamil drama companies, the two most influential were begun by Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, a member of the judicial service, in 1891, and Sankaradas Swamigal in 1910.³² These two companies also inaugurated the split of modern Tamil theatre into its two separate streams—the former the world of elite amateur drama sabhas, the latter of professional, commercial popular theatre.

Sambanda Mudaliyar's company represented the beginnings of the elite strain of 'social drama' based on contemporary social themes. It was begun 'by a band of bold and enterprising young men of good families with high literary accomplishments to their credit.'³³ The plays staged in their clubs were mostly Tamil translations of Sanskrit and English works, by Kalidasa and Shakespeare respectively.³⁴

The 'amateur' actors distinguished themselves by this appellation from those professional stage actors who must earn their living from theatrical performance. The values assigned in the West to rankings of theatrical professionals and amateurs are inverted in the world of Tamil theatre during this period. The primary determinant of rank is class; the elite amateur need not work, but is 'free' to act out of a higher sentiment. Tamil drama historians tend not to question the logic of this order, and one finds descriptions that lament how Tamil drama was 'entirely in the hands of professionals drawn from the lowest ranks of society'.³⁵

In this narrative of a degraded indigenous 'professional' drama in need of rescue by great men, Mudaliyar figures as the hero who began 'the Herculean task of cleaning the Augean stables' of 'the internal impurities in the practice of the art itself' with his company of amateur actors of high social standing.³⁶ And yet others note that Mudaliyar's plays were also compromised by his own elite position in society—'his ability to remain faithful to the contemporary social realities might be seen in the context of his social standing, professional status, and his having been conferred the "Rai Bahadur" title by the British government.'³⁷ Thus, Mudaliyar's contribution feeds that stream in Tamil drama of an elite, modern 'social' theatre by and for middle-class society.

In stark contrast is the other stream of theatre, as influenced by Sankaradas Swamigal. Here, theatre artists are 'in the life' full time. Even before he began his own adult company, from 1891 Swamigal worked with professional artists, holding the position of drama teacher in numerous adult drama companies.³⁸ He began a drama company of his own in 1910, the *Samarasa Sanmaarka Sabha*, about which one historian writes, 'its chief claim for fame rests on its having provided an appropriate forum for the shaping of the potential artistes... It was this Company that provided the infrastructure on which were built the [later] dramatic troupes.'³⁹

Shortly after starting his adult company, Swamigal began working with children in a Boys' Company. Swamigal's biographer gives the following explanation for Swamigal's switch to working with children:

Upon seeing that the adult actors whom he had trained were not speaking and acting as he had taught them, but instead *speaking and acting dialogues however they themselves pleased*, he became heartbroken. He tried to correct them, but they wouldn't be corrected; so he left off working with those who foiled his expectations, and formed a company of the best boy actors and began running that instead.⁴⁰

A perceived need to discipline artists who 'speak and act however they please' was a hallmark of the company era that is now part of the ideological legacy inherited by Special Drama artists. The disciplining of the artist's body played a critical role in the smooth functioning of the Tamil drama company.

Here, for a better understanding of the deviation from this model, I turn briefly to a more ethnographically informed look at life within and outside the drama companies before resuming my staged history.

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE OF THE DRAMA COMPANY

In his memoir of a celebrated life in the theatre (1972), T. K. Shanmugam, the well-known Tamil stage actor turned cinestar, stresses the centrality of 'discipline' in the experience of actors in Boys Companies in the early decades of the twentieth century. Along with his two older brothers, Shanmugam joined Swamigal's Boys Company as a child. As he tells it, discipline in this context was a matter of maintaining good matters and avoiding the bodily

vices of betel chewing, snuff snorting, *beedi* (a thin, flavoured Indian cigarette) smoking, and the drinking of alcohol.⁴¹

I interviewed many senior Special Drama actors who learned their art as members of drama companies. One is the renowned harmonist A.K. Kaleeswaran, born in 1917. His career began at a young age, performing child roles in Shanmugam's company which was modelled directly on Swamigal's company. Kaleeswaran attributes all that was best about drama in its heyday to the intervention of Swamigal and his disciplining of young actors. In Kaleeswaran's words, 'Swamigal was the one who gave regularity and propriety (*olukkam*) to drama, by scripting dialogues and organizing the dramas into scenes.'

Kaleeswaran overtly connects lack of discipline and order, and specifically lack of *murai*— a broad Tamil concept whose purview encompasses notions of social propriety as well as a sense of the social order—with the kind of loose pleasure that characterizes comedy.⁴² This dominant view of comedy, as inherently lacking in order and discipline, crops up repeatedly in drama criticism of the period. Drama was to be distinguished from this disordered world of extempore comedy primarily through its *scripting*. Progress in Tamil drama, for Kaleeswaran as for many others of his era, was born of the improvements wrought by the disciplining hand that wielded the pen.⁴³ Entextualization—the transformation of oral and bodily performance practices and traditions into written texts—has become a key feature of artists' attempts to classicize their art (and thereby enhance their social status) throughout South Asia.⁴⁴ Discipline, regularity, and regulation of actors' own inherently undisciplined impulses appear here as the only hope for attaining a higher—that is, a truly dramatic—art.

Another artist with whom I spoke was involved in company life during a later era but nevertheless held similar opinions of its virtues. Ramalingasivan was a member of the Nawab Rajamanikam's company from the time he joined at the age of twelve, in 1950, until the company folded in 1969, the last of its breed. He overtly preferred the company life and its strict work ethic to the freelance life of Special Drama. Unlike most Special Drama artists, Ramalingasivan stayed with the well-managed company until its end. He characterized the experience by saying—'It was more like

a university than a drama company. It was an ascetic life; actually it ran more like a Hindu propaganda society, teaching us all the classical dance forms, having us spin our own khadi cloth (the hand spun cotton fabric advocated by Gandhi). We were 250 people working there. All of us would work together as one machine and then sit together and eat, all in a group, with no differentiation on the basis of caste or creed.

In the larger picture that emerges from these and other similar interviews, company life as a world unto itself—there were cooks, tailors, scene painters, dance teachers, dialogue coaches, song writers, accountants, managers, the big proprietors of the commercial venture, and of course, the artists, beginning with children all of four years of age.⁴⁵ Companies moved from city to city, camping for months, sometimes even years at a time in one location before moving on to another. Moving such an enterprise was a massive organizational endeavour. In this bulky organizational undertaking that was a drama company, most reminiscent perhaps of the eighteenth century army caravans, everyone learned all the different kinds of work necessary and participated in the labour of setting up and striking down camp. One learned everything in the company life, from the ground up. And all this functioned on a strict schedule designed to regulate both body and mind.

LIFE ON THE MARGINS OF THE COMPANIES

In 1918, during the first year of Swamigal's Boys Company, T.K. Shanmugam and his two elder brothers were pulled from their elementary schools to join up. It was the boys' father, himself an actor, who with trepidation made this decision to entrust his boys' future to Swamigal. In recounting his father's weak protests in the face of Swamigal's eager persistence, Shanmugam paints both a larger and a more intimate picture of the drama world than do most of the standard written histories. We learn that his father was 'disaffected' with the whole drama business at the time and would have preferred to keep his boys out of it.

On the question as to why actors dropped out of companies or were kicked out, there was a notion that drink was the reason. The simplicity of this interpretation has its profound aspects and implications. It claims that to a certain extent, Special Drama

was born of a transgressive overflow from the companies, and it outlasted them by being better adapted to the vagaries of the alcoholic tide of an actor's life, with its feast or famine rhythms of a drama season that lasts only half the year. Alcohol was a topic that arose frequently in the disparagement of an actor's lack of discipline.

However, for all his reputation as a strict enforcer of the teetotaler company, Swamigal himself was no stranger to these waters. Based on the oral accounts of my informants, Swamigal was himself almost certainly an alcoholic. For all his prolific output, much of it written in night-long creative bursts of imagination, the master remained poor and unmarried to his death. Several artists mentioned to me the bitter irony of these most enduring aspects of the legacy Swamigal left to his successors—to die drunk, unmarried, and poor.

Nevertheless, life in a drama company might initially have had for young boys much the same appeal that running off with the circus held for kids in the West. Its thrill could fade as quickly too.

An expansive, relatively free-floating world of drama artists working outside the structure of companies has clearly existed since the late-nineteenth century. Testimonies to its existence can be found both in the reminscences of older Special Drama artists such as I have begun to trace here, as well as in examples of drama announcements dating to the 1890s that proudly announce 'special actors' in 'special dramas'.⁴⁶ Yet the history of Special Drama has never been centralized in the historiography of Tamil drama.

Tamil Drama History: Stage Five— A New Historical Trajectory

My real intervention, then, starts here. By focusing on the legacy of company drama in the practice of Special Drama, I add a fifth phase to the extant historiography of Tamil drama. I argue that the impressively malleable popular theatre genre of Music Drama (both in its current 'company drama' form in north Tamil Nadu as documented by de Bruin, and in its Special Drama form in south Tamil Nadu as I document here) inaugurates a reverse trajectory to the usual teleological story of the progress of modernity in South Asia. Music Drama continues to morph into regionally attuned

forms of 'hybrid theater' that are neither purely commercial nor ritual, neither urban or rural; they are, rather, both. Such new hybrid forms articulate with localized economic, political, and social formations as part of a process of 'vernacularising capitalism'⁴⁷ that links commercial and ritual models in India through a two-way process.

We need such a concept to do interpretive justice to the innovations of local practices like Special Drama. Recent scholarship on hybrid theatres in India has begun to map out a terrain where such concepts would be highly applicable. De Bruin advocates the term 'hybrid theatres' to characterize an historical phenomenon occurring across India during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in her attempt to rescue the reputation of these hybrid theatres from accusations of degeneracy and lack of refinement, de Bruin recognizes that they 'provided an interface between rural and urban cultures, and between local traditions and inter-regional and international, cultural, and political settings.'⁴⁸

In claiming that hybrid theatre forms are 'the first modern theatres of India', such welcome recent scholarship provides a corrective to previous works that presented modern Indian theatre as the exclusive purview of the urban middle class.

My contribution to these debates lies in demonstrating that the processes of innovation that resulted in regional hybrid theatres across India did not stop—at least not in south India—in the early decades of the twentieth century. Special Drama is not only alive and well, but kicking. Its energy, however, remains penned in by dismissive discourses that affect both its production and reception. It is Special Drama artists themselves who most consistently find creative ways to make the form responsive to its changing contexts.

THE LEGACY OF THE COMPANY MODEL IN SPECIAL DRAMA

The legacy of drama companies—which have left a considerable imprint on Special Drama—includes the current repertory of dramas as well as the style in which they are learned and performed. The role of the drama teacher is an important piece in this legacy. Companies employed drama teachers to train actors and teach

them the verse songs key to the repertory roles they would play. Teachers in the Special Drama network today do much the same, retrofitting new melodies—including those of hit cine songs—to key dramatic verses.

Sankaradas Swamigal, himself a Drama teacher, employed multiple and varied influences in his scripts. His style was intertextual, and his scripts consciously and consistently referenced other entertainment media and performative styles.⁴⁹ It is in the spirit of Swamigal, I suggest, that Drama teachers today should continue their work in this same spirit. They pass on formulaic techniques as well as specific new lyrics and lines: 'When the Hero says X, you say Y. If he says Z, you say A,' and so on, fuelling the hours of staged and sung debate that Characterize Special Drama today, and considerably padding out Swamigal's original play scripts to make them last all night.

During the company days of ticket dramas in city auditoriums, plays ran just three hours and adhered closely to Swamigal's scripts. Once Special Drama moved out into village venues, however, to fill the ritual slot at religious festivals the performances needed to expand to conform to a ritual schedule that requires them to carry on till dawn. Given this extended playing time, a great deal of what artists actually perform on the Special Drama stage today was never scripted by Swamigal. While the Special Drama repertory is said to consist primarily of Swamigal's plays, in fact, the majority of what takes place on the Special Drama stage has never been scripted at all. While drama teacher's songs and coached dialogues contribute to meeting the task of extending the playing time of contemporary Special Drama performances by five additional hours, the true bulk of the work is accomplished by the artists' abilities to improvise.

And yet it is this very ability, this 'specialty' of Special Drama, that has been so roundly and consistently criticized that it has now bequeathed to Special Drama a legacy of shame that dates from the company era. Shame now, profoundly impacts the organization of the artists' 'official' professional associations as well as their everyday offstage lives. Here, I want to offer the reader a taste of the discourses of vulgarity that are part of the legacy of the company era for Special Drama artists today.

DISCOURSE OF VULGARITY: LEGACY OF SHAME

In August 1911, a new magazine began publication in Madras entitled *The Stage Lover* in English, and *Nāṭakābimāni* in (a very Sanskritized) Tamil. Through editorial news and notes scattered throughout the magazine, the reader gets a sense of the extent of dramatic activity occurring across the state, and of proliferation of amateur drama sabhas. The second issue carries press clippings that sum up the magazine's mission:

Very often the actors on a native stage descend to a low level of morality and by their loose and lascivious expressions on the stage, bring contempt on the dramatic art itself. The regular publication of a journal of this kind is sure to produce healthy results in the progress of the dramatic art—from *The Desabimani*, Cuddalore.⁵⁰

This is clearly the voice of elite amateur drama. The editor makes his position crystal clear on the front page of the third issue—'Educated people' are right to see popular theatre as a real threat, since 'theatre has unlimited power of forming the minds and hearts of the people. It is therefore very necessary that, at the earliest possible opportunity, educated men should take to stage; else there is a great danger to the morale of the public.'

The inherent danger of theatre clearly lies in having its power in the wrong hands. The theatre that is popular among 'the labouring classes', the mutuality of representation and reflection between the audience and actors, which is so key to Special Drama as a theatre well-attuned to its audience, is what the middle-class critic finds most disturbing:

The professional theatre managers stage plays [...of] gross nonsense. One thing that is much to be regretted is the depravity of the stage, which is due to the undue vulgarity, that has crept in on account of the wrong understanding and desire on the part of the actors to please the groundling by descending very low, overacting their parts and talking vulgarisms at all times. It is a fact which ought not to be ignored that the public taste has in consequence deteriorated and what the public do is, not only that they do not dislike bad plays but like them most—nay adore them. It is a pity that bad plays draw crowded houses.⁵¹

In such contexts, artists and audiences who might actually enjoy the pleasures of the popular stage learn to do so furtively, and all

the more so because publications such as *The Stage Lover* have the stamp of approval of the educated and socially powerful urban elite.

How did such dismissive attitudes come to circulate so widely (far more widely than this single magazine), and for so long? How exactly is something as *emotional* as the shame of enjoyment in the face of a middle class dismissal taught, and learned; how is it inculcated among artists and audiences of popular theatre in Tamil Nadu today? The inheritance and inscription of these attitudes is much more complicated than their simple existence in any single media vehicle. Rather, the inheritance and re-inscription of these attitudes is, I believe, a matter of practice. Many of the practices of Special Drama today contribute to this re-inscription. One simple example—rather than refute the accusation that this popular theatre is vulgar, audiences claim that vulgar language (and cine songs) are all these artists have to offer, while artists reciprocally assert that this is all the audiences today want. Ultimately of course, professional actors must find ways to please their audience, and find in humour a reliable way to do so.

In comedy scenes all such attitudes may be conveyed, ridiculed, perpetuated, or avoided—all in the course of even one act. Special Drama is itself a complex site for the negotiation of the legacy of shame. One can only marvel at what artists actually do on stage in the face of inherited shame and dominant discourses of vulgarity. Standing before them, artists negotiate their audiences' surreptitious desires. Artists are the magnets that attract the stigma of the popular stage. They absorb some of it, and give some of it back. Their ability to do this professionally, for a living, in the context of the contemporary marketplace of Indian entertainment, impresses me and fuels my own desire to watch and understand their art.

CONTEXT: THE HISTORY OF MODERNITY IN TAMIL NADU

The discourses so far explored now need to be grounded within the larger political context of Tamil Nadu in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, this also being the formative period for Special Drama. The decades when Swamigal wrote the plays that

became its repertory were a time of intense intellectual foment and radical idealism across the South. The excitement generated during this period carries over into the reformist ideals that continue to shape artists' political goals today.

A central concern of south Indian politics at this time was the pursuit of an egalitarian society, envisioned simultaneously as a revival of a Tamil golden age and a leap forward into the modern world. Such a revivalist ideology⁵² made modernity palatable by allowing Tamilians to embrace egalitarian social reform without losing a sense of regional pride. In other words, revivalism presented modernity in the guise of a golden Dravidian past. That the pursuit of more egalitarian social relations was shaped very much within and through colonial relations is itself one of the central ironies of colonialism.⁵³

In South India, the development of a self-conscious Tamil historical consciousness is rife with such colonial paradoxes. The mobilization of an indigenous Dravidian identity for Tamilians was effected through a distinction between Brahmins (as Aryan invaders) and non-Brahmins (as indigenous natives), a distinction itself made possible by the studious intervention of European missionaries.

Likewise in the history of Tamil theatre, Western paradigms of theatrical representation—acts, scenes, dialogues, proscenium arches, and stories with contemporary social relevance—were conceived of as necessary props to a modernized Tamil theatre. Discourses of modernity prevalent around the turn of the century, replete with the ideals of egalitarianism, secularism, and progress, informed programmatic statements that sought to rearrange the Tamil theatre and simultaneously gave artists a way to think about themselves and their work in the context of larger social goals.

DRAMA ACTORS' SANGAMS

The Special Drama acting community continues to pursue goals first articulated during this period. Within a year of Sankaradas Swamigal's death, in 1923, drama artists founded the Tamil Nadu Drama Actors Sangam [*Tamilnāṭu Nāṭaka Naṭikar Caṅkam*], its primary goal being 'to encourage the progress' of members of the drama community. The use of the term Sangam advances modern

aims through evocation of an ancient concept; 'Sangam' is a Tamil term that calls up images of an 'early heroic age' of 'prelapsarian bliss' that brought together 'immortal gods, sages, and kings as member poets', working together to create 'the original Tamil civilization'.⁵⁴

Today, a network of sixteen Drama Actors' Sangams stretches across the central portion of the state, facilitating the functioning of Special Drama. These Sangams are ideological sites of considerable influence not only on the genre of Special Drama but also on its producers and consumers. One gains a sense of how the progress of the drama community is linked to concepts of modernist reform in the booklet entitled 'Rules according to the Sangam's founding laws of 1975 and 1978, detailing organization, the Sangam's goals, and the way it is structured'. Under the heading *Goals of this Sangam* are included the following—

1. To take the actions necessary to protect from destruction the Tamil Music Drama art, to reform it, and to encourage the progress of the actors and actresses who undertake it.
2. To protect old dramas filled with the values of patriotism, co-operation, love, non-violence, and chastity, and to help conduct the new dramas of the present time [according to such values].

The latter goal suggests that the content of the dramatic repertory itself contains values that can help situate the community in good stead. To unpack this claim, we must understand these values in the broader context of the political aspirations to social reform dominant in the period when Swamigal's dramas were penned.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, influential Tamil political reform movements such as the Justice Party, founded in 1916, allied with colonial rule against the ascendant forces of the Brahmin-dominated Indian National Congress. The conflict was pitched as one between 'an Aryan-Sanskritic-Brahmin Hinduism' and the other 97 per cent of Tamilians who were non-Brahmins.⁵⁵ Language was a determining factor in these political allegiances—the pro-Tamil movement allied with English as the lesser of two evils, against Sanskrit and Hindi. By 1926, the Justice

Party became the staging ground for the populist call for radical 'rationalist' social reform made by Periyar E. V. Ramasami Naicker and his Self-Respect Movement. This led to the rise of the series of official Dravidian political parties that have defined Tamil politics ever since—the DK, the DMK, and the ADMK which became the AIADMK.⁵⁶ All of these are divisively splintered factions of what began as the Dravidian movement in the early twentieth century, when 'Dravidianism's fundamental agenda, of course, was to establish the absolute preeminence of Tamil in all spheres of life and being.'⁵⁷ The British recognition of the strength of indigenous Tamil literary achievement served the Tamil non-Brahmin, Dravidian revivalist's cause well, giving birth to an unlikely alliance between Tamil revivalism and the evangelical West.⁵⁸

What were the 'modern' ideals upon which both sides agreed? They were essentially the values spread by the Victorian social reform movements of the nineteenth century, in which British missionaries, liberal feminists, and elite educated Indians alike participated. At their base was a set of oppositional discourses aimed at exposing oppressive 'communitarian' Hindu practices, such as child marriage, *sati* (widow immolation), and caste itself, as barbaric, unjust and oppressive; these were counter-posed by more egalitarian ideals. Thus, in Tamil Nadu, modernity in its guise as the alter of community and tradition became a cause uniting Dravidians and Englishmen, with Brahmanic 'custom' and 'tradition' their mutual enemies.

It is in this context then that Swamigal's dramas were, and continue to be celebrated by artists as conveying reformist ideals. According to many, Swamigal's *Kovalan Kannaki* exposes the perils of child-marriage; his *Sattiyavan Savitri* reinforces notions about the power of chastity; *Nandanar* of course, argues for the right of the *harijan* (untouchable) to enter temples; *Valli's Wedding* stages forceful arguments by a young woman against polygamy.

There is deep irony in the Actors Sangam aligning itself with such reformist discourses to raise the social status of stage artists, given that much of the early twentieth century reformers' zeal was focused on 'purifying' the polity by purging 'degraded' forms of theatrical entertainment. Particularly in debates associated with the Anti-Nautch legislation⁵⁹, reformers were interested in 'restoring'

(which actually meant, refashioning entirely) Indian arts to their 'pure' forms. Such cleansing of indigenous practices, like the temple dance of the *devadasis*⁶⁰, resulted in the utter displacement of the original artists⁶¹, often by Brahmins who transformed the practice through entextualization and classicization into sanitized 'classical' dance forms of *Bharatnatyam* and *Odissi*.⁶² Indeed, throughout India—'The reformist discourse that resulted from the colonial experience pushed the theatre to the margins of respectability.'⁶³

It is no coincidence that the theatrical practices targeted by such clean-up measures were often the purview of female performers, given the power of the symbolic place Indian women held in reformist ideology.⁶⁴ The Indian woman whom the new Indian middle-class male desired, modelled on British standards of ideal womanly conduct, was the good housewife, whose nemesis was the low-class female public performer.

How did progressive Tamil statesmen, steeped in revivalist visions as well as in a critique of the depraved state of the Tamil arts, resolve this conflict? In the reformist context of the early-twentieth century, revivalists made the renewal of the art of Tamil drama one of their noble goals by resurrecting and then deploying the concept of *Muttamiḷ* ('three-Tamil'). *Muttamiḷ* again uses an ancient precedent to link and rethink the arts of *Iyal* (prose), *Isai* (music), and *Natakam* (drama).

Reviving *muttamiḷ* allowed an already declared devotion to the Tamil language to function as a charter and injunction to replenish the three linked arts of classical Tamil culture. Behind the concept of *muttamiḷ* lies a powerful notion of the ability of the Tamil language to embody divinity. Hence, if drama were to take up its rightful place in this triumvirate, it could be a divine expression of classical grace; a chiseled gem of expert artisans.

In the opening passage of his autobiography, T. K. Shanmugam characterizes the drama world he entered in 1918 thus:

It was a time when people said of drama artists, derogatively, 'an actor is a man of no profession.' Actors were called names like '*kūttādi*' [street-drama player] and 'drunk'. People wouldn't even rent an actor a house to live in, such a good reputation actors had. People were afraid he would kidnap their young women, and there was even some truth to the fear.

Parents would not allow their children to watch the drama. It embarrassed the young children who did watch to hear what all was being

said in front of everyone. And just opposite the theater hall, there would be a liquor shop.

Yes; this shameful state existed in the very land whose own Tamil language engendered the tripartite concept of *lyal-Isai-Nātakam*. It was a separate Tamil for drama in our land, such was the wretched state of the drama field at the time I entered the drama world!⁶⁵

The stigma on actors is palpable here. Stage artists are so characterized by 'lack' that even their profession is 'no profession'. Their performances embarrass those who watch, and this shame adheres to the whole field. The social problems of stage artists and the shameful state of their dramas are inseparably connected; a shame that manifests in a bastard language that won't partake in muttamil, but rather is its own debased tongue, 'a separate Tamil'.

WHY ACTORS STAND STILL: ONSTAGE MOVEMENT AS THE EMBODIMENT OF VULGARITY

Understanding this discursive history helps us make sense of the questions posed early on in this chapter and thus far left unanswered—*Why are these actors barely moving? And how did such an oddly still theatrical style develop?*

The Special Drama convention of standing still to speak and sing is a literal embodiment of all the dominant discourses we have encountered that devalue and stigmatize what is recognized as a propensity to excess in the lower class, professional actor. In response to over a century of such dismissive discourse, and in an attempt to embody an ideal of prestigious and ordered social behaviour, Special Drama dramatic actors curtail all movement and fluidity in their performances. In scenes where artists play characters of high status, who are thought to be above the expressive bodily behaviors enacted in the comedy scenes, excessive movement would read as lack of control; to index higher status personages, actors barely move.

Indeed in onstage enactment of Special Drama today, different degrees, as well as kinds, of physical movement are deemed appropriate for different persons. Actors playing kings and queens (or gods and goddesses) are the heroes and heroines of Special Drama. They stand perfectly still before a central standing

microphone to deliver elegant prose and sing poetic songs. Moreover, they do so in measured cadences of formal Tamil. On the other hand, artists playing lowly characters in the story cavort, dance, gesticulate loudly, and express all manner of emotions, all in the colloquial idioms of spoken Tamil. Simply put, persons of higher class and caste remain relatively still, while those of lower class and caste move around to serve them. In Tamil Nadu, as in most societies, menial labour is demeaning. Class distinctions between those who expend much physical energy and those who expend less are quite pronounced and are abetted by caste divisions; the lowest menial jobs are still done by the 'lowest' people.

One can see similar effects of these same discourses on the musical arts. Onstage movement bears an inverse relation to prestige and to classicism for female singers on south Indian stage as 'ideals of chaste womanly behavior—not drawing attention to one's body or relying on physical charms—became a metaphor for a new kind of 'art' that they were encouraged to attain. And this new, softer style of 'feminine' singing was defined in opposition to what else but the vulgar 'shouting' of low-class actors and dancers.⁶⁶ In the early 1930s, appearing onstage at all was considered too damaging to a well-bred young woman's reputation, so Brahmin female singers first sang only on gramophone recordings. This practice inaugurated a split between the voices of the respectable singer who remains behind the scenes, and the disrespectable actress who appears onstage. It was the introduction of the microphone in the 1930s that allowed those with softer voices and a more reticent demeanour to shine. The standing microphone, in its very materiality as a fixed feature of the performance stage, 'provides a kind of physical ballast for a singer...a range within which he or she can physically move.'⁶⁷ Thus for those who must appear onstage, there is a way to curtail the attendant disgrace—by minimizing movement and concentrating instead on the voice.

Ideas about language itself then contribute powerfully to a split between higher and lower characters onstage. A hierarchy of onstage movement styles, which is dependent on the hierarchy of language use, continues to exist within Special Drama. Tamil is considered pure when it is uncontaminated by the foreign influences of past epochs of domination, whether by Aryan Brahmins or

colonial British. It is possible to read and speak such 'pure Tamil' aloud, and those who do so are highly praised, both as virtuosic and morally exemplary.⁶⁸ By contrast, Tamil speech that mixes together foreign terms and concepts is regarded as undignified, or worse—indicating laxity of discipline, looseness of character, and lack of serious purpose in life. Sumathi Ramaswamy's historical account of the years 1891–1970 demonstrates how during this period, the Tamil language grew to represent the land, the country, the life blood and soul, the mother, the ethnicity, and the identity of Tamilians. To 'mix up with it extraneous elements' was tantamount to defilement (Maraimalai Adigal [1925] 1980, as quoted in Ramaswamy [1997]).⁶⁷

During this period and thereafter, and always in a charged context of the need to redefine Tamil-ness against foreign-born modernity, Special Drama artists struggle for respectability. As people, who 'mix themselves up' by playing people they are not, actors are thought to lack discipline and be of loose character—the same accusatory terms we find used repeatedly to defame Special Drama artists by drama historians, and in turn by artists as well. These terms are used to condemn artists in their offstage lives as well, affecting everything from the ways they move through public space to kinship relations in their domestic lives, and from the codifications of the Sangam rules and regulations to the system of terms and idioms that make up their secret argot. Unsurprisingly, the same artists who physically move about most onstage use the most colloquial language—these are the comic actors and actresses.

So it is that condemnation of language mixing and a disdain for physical mobility comes together in an overall devaluation of the overly expressive, mobile, and mixed aspects of artists' onstage lives.

These same issues continue to stigmatize Special Drama artists today. Artists did gain some measure of increased respect during the national movement in 1910s and 20s, when popular drama artists lent support to the freedom struggle by singing Tamil songs whose political double meanings escaped Raj censorship. But the activism of popular drama artists in the nationalist freedom struggle, however proud it made them, did not end the stigma attached to their profession.

FROM URBAN TO RURBAN

Special Drama now means outdoor, all-night performances, largely unscripted, wherein freelance artists, each hired specially for the event, meet onstage to enact repertory roles. In dramatic scenes they sing and debate extemporaneously, using key verses from the scripts of Swamigal's plays. In the comic scenes they add dance and physical comedy to the mix. The degree to which they play up the one over the other style varies according to the taste of the particular audience at each venue. Special Dramas have thus become events finely attuned to audience attitudes; such malleability is what gives Special Drama its special spicy mix, unlike the fixed fare of celluloid.

Special Drama artists are people of roughly the same class as their audience. When they come onstage with their mix of everyday Tamil and their attempts at more formal verse—none of it particularly chiselled, or sanitized, but rather 'mixed up' with English, Sanskrit, and Hindi influences, all of which reflect the history of the genre itself—artists present a range of Tamil people and Tamil voices familiar to their audience. The Tamil myths they present offer modern ideals, traditional values, poignantly nostalgic aspirations, and occasionally tentatively resistant postures, all in a performative social context that itself puts on display realities of rurban life in Tamil Nadu.

Historians (and particularly film historians, it seems) often assume that rural venues and mythological subjects preclude the possibility of critical agency altogether.⁷⁰ This prompts one to ask, well why not? Why can't puranic presentations be subjected to criticism? Indeed, Special Drama audiences do it all the time. When they respond either with raucous laughter or shy giggles to a joke, when they call out appreciative responses to a performer during a contest of skills, when they selectively attend only portions of the drama, and even when they fall asleep during certain scenes, Special Drama audiences register their responses in ways performers can read loud and clear.

Similarly, many critics assume that mythological dramas are ahistorical and timeless. Certainly not, especially when we recognize the efforts of playwrights like Swamigal to modernize

them; add to that the extemporaneous ‘modernizations’ effected on these plays by the performers themselves.

It is nevertheless true that village audiences lack some of the cultural capital of urban audiences. The diminishing social status of their audience is one of the changes lamented by senior artists who remember the company era as an idealistic time when ‘highly respected people in the society—judges, and intellectuals—used to watch our plays.’

These elders in the field fear that the urban-to-rurban trajectory taken by Special Drama will mean the art form itself regresses to an inconsequential ‘street-play’, to ‘*mere kuttū*’. Shaped by the days when elite accusations of its vulgarity made kuttu a bad word, they lament the ‘village’ tenor in Special Drama, fearing that history will cycle backwards and drama will revert to a rough-hewn village art.

In the reminiscences of senior male artists, the golden era of drama appears as a time when the art was itself respectable—all-male, all company-educated and trained, and therefore highly disciplined, essentially on the brink of cosmopolitanism. Indeed the composite picture conjured is a timeline that looks something like this—first there was ‘street drama’ (*terukūttu*). Then drama teachers came and formed companies, and all was good. Then the companies split up and women and villagers increasingly entered the field. Their influence, and the influence of illiterate village audiences, is now causing the art form to degenerate into kuttu again.

Such a reconstructionist history is of course highly revisionist—women began performing in drama during the company era itself, not when it ended, for example—and apocalyptically overstated. But what cannot be easily dismissed in such a revisionist account is what it reflects of its tellers’ concerns—such accounts give us a good sense of the kinds of social markers about which senior male artists care. Steeped their whole lives in the field of popular Tamil drama and the discourses that surround it, elders have continued to pass such attitudes on to subsequent generations of Special Drama artists. In particular, their notions about artists’ need for increased discipline have largely come to define the terms in which

the Actors Sangam, as the 'official' arm of the community, organizes and critiques itself.

In practice, the hybrid, rurban theatrical form of Special Drama today is a mix of aesthetic and cultural influences that resists reduction into any single narrative characterization. Each and every performance exceeds the interpretive constraints applied to it, being more successful in its improvisational responsiveness to audiences than anyone had foretold. It succeeds in this, ironically, in good part because of the extent to which artists and audiences alike share dismissive, moralizing, hegemonic attitudes about the genre and its artists. Such attitudes were bred in the socio-historical narratives of exclusion traced here, and continue to live on in the utterances of artists and their critics today.

NOTES

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 6. Dickey, Sara. 1993. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 10.
 7. Institute of Asian Studies. 1990. 'Western Influences on Tamil Drama' In *Encyclopedia of Tamil Literature*, vol. 1. Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 491–505.
 8. In a footnote to the only message of Special Drama in his 1981 study *The Message Bearers: The Nationalists Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India, 1880–1945*, Madras: Cre-A, (p. 24), Baskaran acknowledges that Special Drama is still staged in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu. This, he gleaned from an interview he conducted with an actor in 1975. Nevertheless in the body of his text, as well as in a later essay where he mentions Special Drama, Baskaran continues to use the past tense.
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 12. Theodore. 2001. 'Persistence of conventions: 'company drama' and the Tamil cinema', p.78.
 13. Fox. 1970, p. 242.
 14. Hancock, Mary Elizabeth. 1999. *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 57–8.
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16. Vardarajan, Mu. 1988. *A History of Tamil Literature*, trans. E. Sa. Visswanathan. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 255.
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18. De Bruin, Hanne. 2001. 'The history of the rural natakam or "drama" in North Tamil Nadu,' *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, 31, pp.56–74.
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21. As an example of such elite writing for an elite class, Sundaram Pillai never intended his play *Manomaniyam* to be enacted. 'The play here submitted, it is needless to say, is meant for the study room and not the stage, and it is therefore written in the literary and not altogether the colloquial dialect.' The manuscript was conceived as a labour of love for the Tamil language—
Among the rich and varied forms of poetic composition extant in the Tamil language, the Dramatic type, so conspicuous in Sanskrit and English, does not seem to find a place. The play here submitted to the Public is a humble attempt to see whether the defect may not be easily removed. [...] No labour of love waits for demand or is hampered by considerations of its own fruitlessness, and perhaps, in this reflection will be found the best justification for the present publication.
Both citations from his 1948 English 'Preface' to *Manomaniyam*. Tinnevely: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society Ltd., p. 19.
22. Institute of Asian Studies. 1990, p. 496
23. Baskaran, 2001, p. 77.
24. Perumal, 1981, pp. 138–9.
25. Institute of Asian Studies. 1990, p. 497
26. Parsi names the religious community of Zoroastrian immigrants in India. The Parsis migrated from Iran in the eighth century to avoid Muslim persecution, settling in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, and especially in Bombay. The term 'Parsi theatre' however is now used to refer to 'a broadly based commercial theatre whose influence extended far beyond' the Parsi community between the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries (Hansen, 1998, p. 2292).
27. Hansen, 1998, p. 2292.
28. Kapur. 1993, p. 86.
29. Hansen, 1998, p. 2292; De Bruin, p. 69.
30. Hansen, 1998, p. 2292.
31. Karnad, 1989, p. 336.
32. Institute of Asian Studies, 1990, p. 497.
33. Gopalratnam, V.C. 1981. 'Tamil Drama,' in *Indian Drama*, Second revised edition. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, pp. 119–26.
34. Baskaran, 2001, p. 77.

35. Gopalratnam. 1981, p. 122.
36. Ibid.
37. Institute of Asian Studies. 1990, p. 498.
38. Shanmugam, T. K. 1972. *Enātu Nāṭaka Vāḷkkai* [My Life in Theatre]. Madras: Vāḷati Patippakam., p.34)
39. Institute of Asian Studies. 1990, p. 499
40. Ulakanatan. 1992. p. 18.
41. Shanmugam, T. K. 1972. p. 41.
42. For a fuller explanation of the Tamil concept of murai in relation to the stigma on Special Drama artists, see the Introduction to Seizer, Susan, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007, pp. 32–35
43. This emphasis on progress through entextualization bespeaks a larger, nation-wide phenomenon, consolidated after Independence, of the reinvention of tradition in a new semiotic of Indian appreciation of indigenous arts. One example is the well-documented case of *Bharata Natyam*, now known as the ‘classical dance’ of Tamil Nadu, but previously reviled as the ‘nautch’ dance of the devadasis, whose transformation largely occurred in the colonial era itself (Gaston, Anne-Marie. 1996. *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers. Marglin, Frederique Apffel. 1985. *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. Erdman, Joan. 1996 ‘Dance Discourses: Rethinking the History of the Oriental Dance’ in Gay Morris (ed.), *Moving Words: Rethinking Dance*. London: Routledge, 288–305; Peterson, Indira Viswanathan. 2000. ‘Reading the Temple-Dancer as Sati: From South Indian Legend to Goethe’s Poem Der Gott und die Bajadere.’ Paper presented at the meetings of the Association for Asian Studies, San Diego, California, 11 March; Parker Kunal. 1998. ‘A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes: Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800–1914’ *Modern Asian Studies*, 32[3]; Weidman; Amanda. 2003. ‘Gender and the Politics of Voice: Colonial Modernity and Classical Music in South India,’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 18[2]). Post-independence artists from a range of performance genres throughout South Asia remain intent on enhancing their status through attempts to ‘classicize’ their art. In Sri Lanka, where the classicization of Kandyan dance became a project of the state from the 1950s, in a restructuring that seems to resonate with that of Tamil drama ‘classicizing ritual dance was largely accomplished by structuring dance practices in accordance with ideas of orderliness, systematicity, and discipline’ (Reed, Susan. 2002. ‘Performing Respectability: The Berava, Middle-Class Nationalism, and the Classicization of Kandyan Dance in Sri Lanka,’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 17(2): 246–77, 250).

The pen is a critical tool in such revisions of the performative body. To claim ‘classical’ status in an Indian performance genre, Hansen notes that the first requirement is that there be ‘a textual authority ... that legitimates and governs the art form’ (ibid., 44). Entextualization as the encoding of bodily practices into written texts is a primary feature

- of attempts to enhance their status among artists engaged in regional performance traditions India-wide. Though these attempts now appear to be born of a vigorous national pride, the attempt to classicize through entextualization clearly began in the colonial era, when the influences of Western arts came to have such a great impact on how both practitioners and audiences reacted to what they saw.
44. Reed, 2000, pp. 246–77, 250.
 45. Seizer, Susan. 2005. *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 165–73.
 46. For more ethnographic detail see Seizer, 2005, (reprinted 2007 by Seagull Books, Calcutta).
 47. Jain, Kajri. 2007, 'Vernacularising Capitalism: Sivakasi and Its Circuits,' in Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 33–76.
 48. De Bruin 'Introduction,' p. 2.
 49. Navaneethan, 1985, pp. 7–38.
 50. Ishwar, M. V. 1911. *The Stage Lover*, 1 (2).
 51. Ishwar, M. V. (ed.). 1911. *The Stage Lover*, 1 (3): 19.
 52. Irschick, Eugene F. 1986. *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*. Madras: Cre-A.
 53. Comaroff, John L. and Jean Comaroff. 1995. *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. II. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 54. Institute of Asian Studies, 1990; Ramanujan, A. K. 1967. *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (Translated by A. K. Ramanujan). Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Ramaswamy, Sumathi. 1997. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 45.
 55. Ramaswamy, 1997, pp.28–9.
 56. In 1916, the Justice Party was founded and published their 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto'. The party changed its name to the Dravidar Kazhagam (Dravidian Movement) in 1944. C. N. Annadurai, playwright and disciple of Periyar, split off from the DK in 1949 to form the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or the Dravidian Progress Movement). Film superstar MGR split from the DMK in 1972 to form the ADMK (Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, using Annadurai's name as its banner of distinction) which subsequently changed its name to the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) in 1976. The AIADMK is currently in power under the leadership of J. Jayalalitha, who gained fame as a cinema actress—who was also MGR's lover and frequent leading lady. Her political party now refers to her as Mother, among other endearments; see Bate. 2002. 'Political Praise in Tamil Newspapers: The Poetry and Iconography of Democratic Power,' in Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb (eds), *Everyday Life in South Asia*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 308–25, for a fascinating examination of the excesses of iconographic idolatry practiced during the reign of Jayalalitha.

See Irschick 1969 for the foundational years of separatist Tamil politics, 1916–29.

57. Ramaswamy, 1997, p. 65.
58. Washbrook, E.A. 1989. 'Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu: Non-Brahmanism, Dravidianism and Tamil Nationalism,' in Francine R. Frankel and M. S. A. Rao (eds.), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 214; Irschick, Eugene F. 1986, *Tamil Revolution in the 1930s*. Madras: Cre-A, p.4.
59. Kannabiran, Kalpana. 1995. 'Judiciary, Social Reform, and Debate on "Religious Prostitution" in Colonial India,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (43); Parker, 1998; Gaston, 1997, pp. 288–305.
60. Devadasis were the female dancers whose lives were dedicated, often at an early age, as 'service to God' through the art of dance at a Hindu temple: devadasis were said to be married to God, but also considered by many to be prostitutes
61. De Bruin, 2001. pp. 2–6.; Weidman, 2003.
62. Hansen, Kathryn. 1992. *Grounds for Play: the Nautanki Theatre of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 255.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
64. Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. NJ: Princeton University Press. See also Satyajit Ray's two haunting films, *Devi* (1960) and *The Home and the World* (1992), that beautifully capture middle-class Indian women's dilemmas during this period when the lives of middle-class and working-class women were cleaved apart, as 'the struggle to represent ideal female behaviour indeed accompanied the struggle of an emergent middle class' (Chatterjee 1993).
65. Shanmugam, 1972. p. 33.
66. Weidman, 2003, pp. 214, 221, 209.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
68. Bate, J. Bernard. 2000, 'Meedaittamil: Oratory and Democratic Practice in Tamilnadu' Ph.D dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
69. Ramaswamy, 1997, p. 146.
70. Baskaran, S. Theodore. 1996, *Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*. Madras: EastWest Books, p. 12.