John Russell Brown

Shakespeare, the *Natyasastra*, and Discovering *Rasa* for Performance

Recognizing analogies between the assumptions about theatricality found in the classic Sanskrit treatise on acting, the *Natyasastra*, and those of the Elizabethan theatre, John Russell Brown suggests that the concept of *rasa* as the determining emotion of a performance is similar to that of the Elizabethan 'humour', or prevailing passion, as defined by Ben Jonson. Here he describes his work exploring what happens when actors draw on their own life experiences to imagine and assume the basic *rasa* of the character they are going to present, based on experiments in London with New Fortune Theatre; in Bremen with actors of the Bremer Shakespeare Company; and in New Delhi with actors of the National School of Drama. Using actors both young and experienced, familiar and unfamiliar with ensemble playing, and well or poorly acquainted with the concepts involved, he suggests that the results merit further exploration of a technique which could empower actors to bring Shakespeare's plays to new kinds of life. John Russell Brown founded the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at Birmingham University, and for fifteen years was an Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre. His *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience, and Asia* was published by Routledge in 1999, and his *Shakespeare Dancing: a Theatrical Study of the Plays* by Palgrave Macmillan in 2004. He edited and contributed to *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* (1995), and for Routledge has been General Editor of the 'Theatre Production Studies', 'Theatre Concepts', and forthcoming 'Theatres of the World' series.

ASIA offers a great variety of theatre events that are not available elsewhere and yet have proved to be widely accessible to visitors from Europe and North America. The cultural differences are huge and full appreciation is, obviously, not possible; much will be missed, and what is seen will be to varying degrees misunderstood. But these performances inhabit parts of the spectrum of theatre that are not on view elsewhere – possibilities that are inherent in the nature of the art, always available but not drawn upon in many present-day productions.

It is not as surprising as it at first seems that when watching some Asian performances theatre scholars feel strangely at home; and Shakespeare scholars, in particular, can get the impression that they are closer than usual to the kind of experience that his plays gave to audiences when they were first performed. Features of staging and production are often what might be called Elizabethan, although the performances are far less familiar, the plays and languages entirely so.

In traditional Asian theatres, as in Shakespeare's day, actors are frequently the sole focus of the spectators' attention. Although very different from their audience in appearance, action, specialized skills, and speech, no stage lighting or physical barrier is likely to separate these two participants in a theatrical event. While some Asian theatres, such as the Noh in Japan and Kutiyattam and Kathakali in India, are played for small, well-informed, and closely attentive audiences, the formal characteristics of others, such as the Japanese Kabuki and the Jatra theatres of Bengal, Orissa, and Bangladesh, were developed for large popular audiences able to interact with the actors in ways that are documented in Elizabethan times but seldom possible in contemporary performances of Shakespeare.

While in European theatres today plays are extensively rehearsed so that a production can be repeated for many months and in many different places, in Asia each performance of a traditional form of theatre is

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likely to be a separate event with its own occasion and unlikely to be repeated in the same manner. This means that their highly skilled actors are responsive to the moment and hold improvisation to be a necessary and prized accomplishment in much the same manner as appears to have been common in Elizabethan theatre companies.

Changes of location without changes of scenery, explanatory and informative soliloquies, 'fool' characters who introduce topical matters and their own jokes and opinions are other dramaturgical features of traditional Asian plays which Shakespearean scholars will find familiar and more freely used than is customary at home.

Theatre professionals who work in very different circumstances have felt the attraction of traditional Asian performances. Despite the inherent difficulties, some European and North American directors – Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine probably best known among them – have chosen certain elements to imitate in their own practice, often in productions of Shakespeare and Greek tragedies. Others, such as Robert Lepage and Robert Wilson, have made occasional and more limited use of Asian sources. Recently the repertoires of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Canadian Shakespeare Festival have included a *Coriolanus* indebted to ancient Japanese theatre, and a *Pericles* and *Tempest* using a number of Southeast Asian styles of performance and of visual presentation.

Wider dissemination of Asian practice is provided by workshops that teach actors how to reproduce the physical characteristics of specific acting styles. Asian theatre is now studied in universities, while books such as *The Way of Acting* by Tadashi Suzuki (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986) and *Kathakali Dance Drama* by Phillip Zarrilli (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) give detailed descriptions of actor training.

Productions that use the rituals, ceremonies, costumes, masks, make-up, music, and dances that directors have encountered far from home become ever more common in Europe and North America, and have been greatly admired by reviewers and critics. But theirs will be a sophisticated, not a popular, success because performances that take pains to reflect practices originating in alien cultures of long ago are, by that very process, cut off from the instincts, memories, and day-to-day concerns of the audiences for whom they are performed. Even the most thorough imitation is liable to be less than satisfying because European and American actors will never bring the same sensibilities to their task or, in a few years, possess the same physical capabilities as those who were born into significantly different cultures and have, from childhood, practised and developed their very special and complex arts. Inevitably, imitation will always be close to mimicry, and any consequent production can seem faked or presumptuous.

Going Back to Basics

However, another way of responding to what amazes and moves us in Asian performances is to avoid imitation and go back to the basics that are outlined in the *Natyasastra*, the Sanskrit treatise on acting and the staging of plays that is more than two thousand years old. This is not an exciting read, because its instructions are forbiddingly detailed and at times impenetrable in translation, but it does provide an entrance to the principles that gave rise to many modes of Asian performance. A reader, with patience (and the use of two English translations) is able to grasp some major facts about the kind of acting and the nature of an audience's experience that arose from its teaching.[1]

If the theories and processes to be found in the *Natyasastra* were freely followed by English-speaking actors, their performances might be able to reflect their own, non-Asian lives and speak directly to their own audiences. When theatre professionals wish to benefit from the awakening that comes from seeing performances that belong to an alien culture, a manual setting out the basis for performance is a better guide than theatrical events that are incompletely, imperfectly, or, for all they know, wrongly appreciated.

When telling an actor what to do, the *Natyasastra* refers constantly to events and behaviour in real life. For example:

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Downcast face and the sitting posture with the two knees on the ground is to be assumed in adoring a deity, pacifying the angry [superiors], bitterly crying for sorrow, seeing a dead body, the fear of persons of low spirits, the begging something by lowly persons and servants, and attendance during the Homa[2] and the sacrificial work.

Natyasastra, trans. Manomohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Manisha, 1995), I, 191

Elsewhere actors are told to keep in mind a variety of real-life events and sensations – for example, the despondency caused by:

being reduced to poverty, getting insulted, abusive language, anger, beating, loss of beloved persons, and the knowledge of the ultimate [*lit., essential*] truth.

Ibid., I, 98

This diverse actuality is to be so altered by careful control and by association with ceremony, music, and dance that what happens on stage will no longer be an ordinary event but one that is clearer, more purposeful, and more remarkable than any encountered in life. A performance produced by these processes should be refined, complete, and spectacular: not a copy of life but a sensational re-creation of life.

The practical examples found in the *Natyasastra* were taken from the culture in which it was written, a world that has long been lost: a feudal society divided by caste, restricted in personal freedom, and dependent on warfare for self-esteem and, often, for existence, its people recognizing supernatural powers in daily and seasonal rituals. Acting that derives from these observations will have almost no relevance to our times and society but the basic method of working could be followed by contemporary English-speaking actors if they were to observe their own daily lives and those of their audiences with great care.

From this basis, working together and accepting leadership from the most experienced, a small group of actors should be able to develop an expressive physical language that would be a controlled and amazing reflection of their varied existences. Performances would then be Asian in genus, while being European in species. Nothing would look Asian because neither traditional nor contemporary Asian acting would have been imitated. But the actors would follow a process that might seem revolutionary elsewhere. They would not start by studying and speaking a text or by imitating a character's distinguishing traits and physical actions, or by seeking to understand the biographical, social, and political situation of the characters they are about to play.

Rather, as the *Natyasastra* requires, each performance would be founded on a *rasa*. This word has been translated in several ways: literally and in many contexts, as 'a thing capable of being tasted' and, in theatrical contexts, as 'sentiment', 'flavour', 'aesthetic emotion', or 'pleasure'. The *Natyasastra* instructs actors to consider a *rasa* as the consequence of one of the nine dominant emotions or 'durable states of being', namely: love, laughter, sorrow, anger, energy (or ardour), fear, disgust, astonishment (or wonder), and peace (or devotion).

'Sensation' is probably the most useful translation of *rasa* for present-day use, both with regard to the actor being a person in a play and also – equally important in this acting manual – when speaking of an audience's reaction to an entire performance. In practice, this word has provided a way of communicating the precepts of the *Natyasastra* when working with English-speaking actors towards theatrical performances that, in an Asian manner, are sensuous and sensational. By starting with *rasa*, understood as the sensation or predominant feeling of the person to be played, performances become able to reflect and re-create the lives of both actors and audiences.

Working through Rasa

For an example of what might be possible in this way of working, I can only refer to my own experiments in London with New Fortune Theatre; in Bremen with actors of the Bremer Shakespeare Company; and in New Delhi with actors of the National School of Drama.[3] I set about seeing what would happen if actors started by drawing on their

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own life experiences to imagine and assume the basic *rasa* of the person they were going to present – the sensation of being that person – and only then speaking the words set down in a text and fulfilling the actions required by the narrative, dialogue, and stage directions. They were to enter their roles through their senses and *not* by following any intention derived from intellectual questioning of the text and subsequent decision-making. They would be free to respond to the text as they performed it, improvising as the interests, impulses, and accidents of each occasion suggested, and so of reacting to the current responses of each audience.

Because I did not want the actors to be puzzled by what they had to say, I started with unremarkable contemporary texts taken from newspaper reports of actual speech. They chose and then edited the extracts for themselves so that they had a feeling for the persons they were to become. After spending as much time on this as the company could afford, we moved to Shakespeare's texts so that the demands were greater and the texts more suggestive and supportive. I was also intent on moving closer to some of the qualities that I thought had been Elizabethan and would still be best suited to Shakespeare's texts. We would have worked more slowly if that had been affordable because previous habits had to be changed and a new process established; and at the same time we were trying to be both uninhibited and careful.

As I adapted what I had read in the *Natyasastra*, I found myself wondering if Asian actors with their traditional training and consummate skills could find their own contemporary way of acting Shakespeare – and do so more swiftly and effectively than us – if they were to follow the same course, drawing on their own daily lives and inborn sensibilities. This would mean freeing themselves from any need to replicate ancient performances and, equally, from any tendency to imitate Euro-American actors and their conventions. The small and hesitant steps I was able to take in this direction when working in New Delhi have led me to believe that this might be so.

In England I proceeded as slowly and simply as I could by recruiting a group of young professional actors in whom other ways of working had not become deeply ingrained and fixed. At first, I asked them to sit unstressed and receptive on chairs and then imagine themselves possessed by one of the *Natyasastra*'s dominant feelings. They were to start by envisaging themselves in a very particular and real-life situation in which they had experienced the chosen sensation at first hand. This was to be recalled through their senses, not by any conscious thought process, and using as many of the five senses as they could. By contrast with Stanislavsky's use of emotional memory, the actual physical and mental details of the past event became unimportant; actors were asked to let them slip out of mind as the sensation of being involved in the moment continued to be recalled. The unique situation being forgotten, the flavour, taste, or *rasa* was to remain.

Finding a Physical Language

Then I asked the actors to become conscious of the various movements of which the body is capable and to introduce the sensation of the chosen situation, by degrees, into movements of spine, neck, and head, one after another in that order, varying the resultant actions until they found those that seemed the most satisfactory and complete response. The actors sat facing each other in pairs so that one could watch and tell the other what *rasa* had been expressed and how fully, and what had seemed vague or unfinished. The same slow procedure followed with the other parts of the body, and then with other *rasa*s. In this way actors would experiment until they had identified and memorized the gestures, postures, and movements best suited to themselves and most expressive of their chosen *rasa*.

Over the course of days and invoking different *rasa*s, the actors were asked to stand and walk, and to interact with each other and with the space they inhabited, while still saying nothing. With movements chosen and developed as if for a dance, they were

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evolving their own simple but expressive physical language, by turns strong, delicate, direct, swift, slow, or uncertain, according to the *rasa* involved.

I asked them to vary their chosen *rasa* and, eventually, to overlay the chosen sensation of being with another, temporary one. (In the *Natyasastra* what is presented as the result of a basic or stable *rasa* is called *sthayi bhava*, whereas an expression arising from a temporary or transient *rasa* is called *vyabhichari* or *sanchari bhava*.) The actors were now ready to chose a basic *rasa* for the contemporary texts they had memorized and then, having established this in their bodies and movements, to start responding to the text, improvising both speech and action. They were to call on transient *rasa*s as need arose. After a time, we were able to move on to Shakespeare's dialogue.

We had been studying the text of *Hamlet* during the other preparations, choosing certain passages, learning them, and getting to know the various meanings of words, but not making any decision about which of those were dominant, or right or wrong. We studied syntax to understand the shape of underlying thoughts and metre, to see where major stresses might fall and how to phrase and point speech. So far the actors had not acted their chosen speeches or settled on any meaning or intention, but now each actor chose a basic *rasa* for the person they were to enact and, without further study of the text, started to speak and respond while remaining physically possessed by that sensation. Since both the content and the sound of the speeches were already held in the mind, the *rasa* was free to dictate how the words would be said and to what effect.

This work and its progress varied greatly from actor to actor, taking a good deal of time because they had no tradition to follow and were using their own, newly discovered expressive means. And yet, on reflection, we seemed to be doing what came very naturally, because in our lives all speech, whatever its intended purpose or meaning, derives from the speaker's state of being and the sensations that lie beneath conscious thought – that is, from what the *Natyasastra* calls *rasa*. In this respect Shakespeare's dialogue is no different from what we say every day, although it is hugely different in verbal artistry, varied associations and resonances, frequent change of intention, lively intercourse, and the music inherent in syntax, metre, and sound. When speech and action derive from the sensation of being – that is from a *rasa* – an entire person will be presented on stage and Shakespeare's language becomes a contemporary idiom.

Working with Experienced Actors

When they prepare to perform Shakespeare in this way, actors will meet many difficulties. Unless they have worked together before, considerable time will have to be spent on group improvisations to learn how to respond swiftly to each individual's physical language. The basic work is bound to be slow, and actors can be sceptical and awkward until sensation begins to flow freely into action, and the conscious mind becomes capable of shaping and defining expressive means.

Although young actors can readily take to these tasks, a mature experience and confidence in performance are needed to discover and retain the most expressive means for presenting the changing *rasa* of a role. The main difficulty for all actors in English-speaking theatres is the lack of a pre-existing physical idiom in which to perform and the absence also of a daily regime of training to achieve performances that are both sensational and truthful. Without these advantages, actors are less able to improvise freely and respond swiftly and fluently to the varying impulses of Shakespeare's dialogue. When the young actors came to present a play, much that had been remarkable during training slipped away, their attention being distracted by all the usual concerns of an actor facing an audience.

My next and still recent move was to recruit actors with more experience. I had feared that they would resist new ways of working, but none of them hesitated and, knowing what performance before an audience entails, they did not lose so much of

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what they had recently found when rehearsal was followed by performance, but they began to trust their *rasa* more and took more risks. At some level of consciousness, they could share with an audience a moment of discovery and the pleasure of achievement.

Now the problem became that of being able to afford sufficient time for actors to work together and develop the means of expression so recently rediscovered. A long-term engagement in both training and performance is among the very first principles of theatre practice set down in the *Natyasastra*. It tells how Brahma was commanded by Indra, chief of all the gods, to produce a fifth art of theatre that would draw on the four existing arts. When that was done and written down, the maintenance and practice of the new-born theatre was entrusted into the hands of the learned Bharata and his family of one hundred sons.

Its first performance was given at a festival to celebrate Indra's victory over the enemies of the gods after which, in 'token' of the joy that had filled the minds of the gods (ibid., I, 1–7), Bharata and his sons received many gifts and were confirmed in their new profession. In this way theatre was the creation of a cohesive family group, and so it was to continue.

Working with an Established Company

An invitation to work with members of the Bremer Shakespeare Company introduced me to a group of actors who, by working together over a period of years, had satisfied some of the basic expectations and precepts of the *Natyasastra*. It was a doubly fortunate opportunity for me to develop my experiments since the BSC is a permanent resident company that presents a mixed repertoire of Shakespeare and newly written pieces produced in a very open manner. The actors welcome members of an audience to the theatre and show them to their seats. They often perform with house-lights up, and will occasionally come onto the stage through the auditorium or perform standing among the spectators. The plays are often directed by one of the actors, and some of the new scripts are written by a member or former member of the company.

Actors can expect to stay working together for years at a time, learning to know their audience as well as one another and the non-acting members of the company. They are at home in their theatre but also perform in the local park, neighbouring towns, and other venues throughout Germany and beyond. Of all the companies I have known in Europe or North America, this one runs on more Shakespearean lines than any other, not excepting that of the new Globe in London.

A two-week workshop was sufficient time in which to lay the basis for the performances I sought, and the experience quickly disabused me of the notion that I should work exclusively with young actors, since none of the Bremen actors took more willingly to the elementary stages of the work than the most experienced among them.

Because I know almost as little German as Hindi, I was strengthened in the belief that actors who work on the basis of *rasa* do not need to be told how to speak a text, any more than they need to be told what to do. The actor is a creator and not dependent on the guidance of a director, who always remains external to the enacted drama. In Bremen and Delhi the actors had a good or at least usable knowledge of English, so that I was able to help them understand what the content, shape, and structure of Shakespeare's speeches in the original language could tell them about the thoughts and sensations that underlie the words; but whatever use they made of this information was entirely their own.

We could also discuss with close reference to the English text which *rasa* was basic to each character and which *rasa*s had passing effect. About phrasing, intonation, pitch, and response to metre in German or Hindi I could say nothing, and left all that to the actors' experience and innate understanding. Because I am trained to 'read' physical presence and movement, I could tell them what had appeared to be insecure or confused in a rehearsal, or what seemed contrary to the *rasa*s we had identified.

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That was the limit of my direction, and yet when the actors repeated a scene responding to what I had noted, they would change both physical performance and speech. In so far as our initial preparation had connected every aspect of performance with basic states of being, altering any one part of what an actor did would also bring changes to other parts, including the timing, sound, and expressiveness of speech and all that is usually called textual interpretation.

I have found that starting to work on *rasa* breaks down many barriers to communication, frees an actor's imagination, and acts as a spur to invention in every aspect of performance. Even with English-speaking actors, I have no need to direct how a text should be spoken or ask for any particular movement or gesture. My task is to help an actor maintain contact with the appropriate sensations and develop his or her means of expression.

Back in London

Back in London, four new recruits joined the young actors who had worked with me previously. They had all been members of the RSC or the National Theatre, and had also worked for the English Stage Company and small touring companies. They have brought greater assurance to the explorations of New Fortune Theatre and, in due time, further full-scale work should be ready to be seen and judged.

At present I can report, as one small example, that the Closet Scene in *Hamlet* (III, iv) has been played by a Hamlet with the basic *rasa* of peace, whose deepest and most durable feelings are engaged at moments when conflict is resolved, however briefly, or when a peaceful 'consummation' is in prospect. The Gertrude adopted the basic *rasa* of love and her deepest feelings could displace all temporary *rasa*s of fear, shame, and anger, removing all uncertainty and customary reserve. The two actors played with an expressiveness that left ordinary behaviour far behind and used the full space of the stage. Rarely did their basic *rasa* fully inform both performances because so many temporary and contrary ones intervened. As the scene drew to a close Hamlet was torn away from peace by the energy needed to dispose of the man he has killed; and Gertrude, with no words in response to his repeated 'Goodnight, Mother!' showed, by every action and in her very presence, a struggle between love and fear.

Yet, well before the end of the scene, they had gained a painfully delayed intimacy that was based on a mutual access of peace and love, the strength of which held those who watched spellbound. I do not report this as director of the scene, because the scene was not directed in any usual sense of that word: the actors themselves had created it freely, finding what these two persons do at each changing moment, words and actions coalescing by force of deep-seated sensations.

We have not developed an elaborate and established means of expression that can be shared between all members of the company and I do not think we should try to do so, even if we had sufficient time. A number of long-established Asian theatres have developed and maintained a common physical language, but such uniformity does not seem appropriate for a contemporary society that privileges personal and cultural differences between individuals, or for texts such as Shakespeare's that reflect that diversity.

An early obstacle for actors has been the need to decide on the basic *rasa* for a character. Sometimes, no direct help can be found in the text and choice has to be made between several possibilities, the actor having to postpone a decision until a late stage in rehearsal. At other times, however, choice of a *rasa* can prove almost too easy and the actor has to find ways of animating a character that lacks obvious variety.

The concept of *rasa* fits some Shakespeare plays very well, since it is quite similar to the 'humour' which in his day could be used to describe or pigeonhole a person in real life or on stage. In the Induction to *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599) Ben Jonson's Asper defines humour as a 'general disposition' that is very similar to a *rasa*:

> As when some one peculiar quality
> Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw

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All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluxions, all to run one way. . . .

Humours became a passing fashion in the theatre. In Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598–9) both Benedick and Beatrice speak of the inflexibility of his 'humour' (V, iv, 100–1; I, i. 110) and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Henry the Fourth*, and *Henry the Fifth* humours are identified a number of times, sometimes jokingly.

In Shakespeare's plays, a predominant feeling or state of being impels a character forward more often than might be expected in view of the complexity of the dialogue and the subtlety of many performances and commentaries. This is not to say that these are simplistic 'types' of human nature. A basic *rasa* identified in rehearsal and presented on stage will seldom be unmixed with other transient ones of greater or lesser effect. Sensations, both in acting and in audience-response, are usually multiple, changing frequently during the course of a play, and only towards its end does the single and permanent feeling dominate all other impressions.

If such a basic *rasa* is made the continuous and underlying basis of a performance from the start, but overlaid with other more fleeting ones and only occasionally makes a full appearance before the end of the action, performance will grow progressively stronger in effect and, seemingly, more truthful and inevitable. While the play's story holds attention, the inner nature of each principal character is progressively revealed until it reaches fulfilment in the very last scene. This gradual unveiling of a character's basic nature became a major dramatic and structural device in Shakespeare's mature plays, a source and focus for the actors' performances, and a means of awakening and, ultimately, satisfying an audience's expectation.

The Director and the *Sutradhara*

The *Natyasastra* also contains much that I can well understand but do not know how to relate to the theatre for which Shakespeare wrote or to any present-day theatre in a European tradition. All performances, we are told, should be approached reverently, using prescribed rituals and making offerings to the gods. A theatre is a consecrated place, a shrine at which flames must be kept burning throughout a performance. Here a great gap opens between the theatrical practices handed down from ancient Asia and those of Elizabethan times or the present day. It is encountered again with the confident assumption that:

Of all duties of the king, [the staging of plays] has been proclaimed as possessing the best result. Of all kinds of charities, allowing people to enjoy a dramatic show without payment has been praised most.

Gods are never so pleased on being worshipped with scents and garlands as they are delighted with the performance of dramas. II, 204

To work in Europe or North America as if theatrical performance honoured the gods would be mere mimicry or affectation; to expect government to pay for free performances, wishful thinking.

The *Natyasastra*, in English translation, speaks of a 'director' but the word is not used as it would be today. This key person is not expected to set his distinctive mark on the performance of a play or tell actors what they should do. As I understand what I have been told, a more literal translation of *Sutradhara* is 'he who holds the strings', or 'he who measures the ground'. These strings are not those of a puppet-master, but rather comprise a thread that holds the drama together, in the same manner as a thread (implying rules or principles) is said to give form to all arts and sciences, and to the created world itself. As the *Natyasastra* makes clear, the task of the *Sutradhara* is to ensure that the theatre company functions properly and to be both its teacher and leader.

To this end, besides being expert in theatrical practice, this 'director' is:

proficient in all the *Sastras*, the science of stars and planets, and the working of the human body, knows the extent of the earth, its continents, divisions, and mountains, and people inhabiting them, and the customs these have, and the names of descendants of royal lines; and [is one] who listens about acts prescribed in *Sastras*, can under-

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stand the same, and puts them into practice after understanding them, and gives instructions in the same. . . .

It follows that he needs also to be:

> possessed of memory and intelligence, and should be patient, liberal, firm in his words, poetical, free from any disease, sweet [in his manners], forbearing, self-possessed, sweet-tongued, free from anger, truthful, impartial, honest, and free from greed for praise.
>
> II, 191

'Being himself clean', clad in white and supported by two assistants, he will 'perform ablution again on the stage', offering white flowers to the deity, and then, making an initial statement as he will make a final one, he commands the play to begin (II, 198; I, 65–6). The duties of a director, as envisaged in the *Natyasastra*, combine those of the coach, trainer, and manager of a football team, to which are added the functions of a priest and the authority of the scholar. But he does *not* shape the performance of a play or dictate its outcome; each individual actor has the responsibility to 'produce a play according to the meaning of the *Sastra* as well as his own reasoning' (II, 195).

Shakespeare's theatre had no person with such a responsibility; what authority lay behind a performance derived from the author and was mediated through the words of a playscript. Today in Europe and most other places, the director of a play is not a behind-scenes influence but the instigator and animator of its production, in charge of all that the actors do and say. Over recent decades, the director has tended to become less of an autocratic dictator, but still exercises overall and final control. Actors may be given their heads in rehearsal and encouraged to improvise, explore, and take risks, using their own instincts and imaginations, but then the time comes, a week or so before 'first night', when the director steps in to create the 'show', making choices out of the actors' discoveries, emphasizing at will, controlling the pace and placement, and adding an overarching and distinctive input.

An early and well-documented example of this is Peter Brook's preparation of *US* for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in 1966. After long months of rehearsals, as Albert Hunt records:

> He virtually put together the first half of *US* in a morning. And there was no nonsense about the actors looking inside themselves and finding the way: he told them where to stand, where to move, which gestures to make. One actor, for example, had spent many hours studying what the Buddhist monks who burned themselves looked like as they died. He sat in contemplation, as he rehearsed, then practised falling over, slowly. But when it came to putting the show together, Brook strode forward, arranged the actor's arms and legs as he wanted them, and told the actor to remember the position. And Brook was, of course, right. What mattered was what the audience would *see*, not what was going on inside the actor's mind.

Having recorded this, Albert Hunt added his own comment:

> To watch Brook create stage images was to watch a master at work. Yet all the working processes had suggested that the actors must discover some deeper, inner quality which wasn't, to me at any rate, at all evident in the final performance.[4]

Empowering the Actors

Those directors who train their casts to reproduce the techniques of traditionally trained Asian actors will stop short of entrusting a play to its performers. The influence of Asian models was evident in a series of ancient Greek plays directed by Ariane Mnouchkine as *Les Atrides* (1990–93) but the staging was scenically spacious and highly organized in a contemporary and European manner. Strange make-up was painted on faces, physical performance had the precision and the detailed effectiveness of classic Asian dances, and the material and cut of the costumes were almost entirely in various Indian fashions.

The music, played on Asian instruments, was continuously supportive of the actors and yet, in order to create a impressive and powerful show, the dancing Chorus had been trained for well-drilled precision and, in place of choral singing or chanting, all its words were entrusted to a single actor. Instead of taking place in a temple or other unvarying holy place, the production toured

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and used whatever warehouse or temporary accommodation was large enough to contain a huge stage and capacious auditorium. And, still further from any Asian model, the production's effects were tested and assured, capable of almost exact reproduction for any audience and over many months. Dramatic climaxes built up irresistibly and the narrative held attention throughout as it moved through prearranged moments of clarity. The director was manifestly in charge and, rightly, took most of the praise.

In so far as Mnouchkine's productions had benefited from Asian borrowings and her actors possessed the expressive grace and fluidity of dancers, the appropriation of alien techniques brought rare and eye-catching advantages. The most serious disadvantage was that the performance had very few moments when the life experiences of its audiences were reflected on stage. Any feelings evoked were transmitted as if from a distance or through a filter because so much had been translated into an unfamiliar and archaic theatrical language. The movement of actors on stage had been constrained by a superimposed discipline. Imitation is a hard road to travel in the complex art of theatre, and the effort of achieving it will tend to isolate the onstage experience from the life experiences of spectators and performers: everyone, including the director, is in thrall to an alien mechanism.

Contemporary directors are expected to be the masters of their productions, whether working in an assumed Asian style or in a fresh encounter with a play that imitates and reflects contemporary experience. In consequence, actors and audiences accept whatever the director decrees. This is neither the way envisaged by the *Natyasastra* nor the practice of the company for whom Shakespeare wrote. In both those theatres, actors and audiences were more fully empowered, free to make what they could of the play according to their present concerns and the workings of their own imaginations.

This is an unreliable way in which to fashion a performance and yet, if followed by a company trained in ways derived from the *Natyasastra* but using its own observations and imaginations, this process might bring Shakespeare's plays to new and constantly changing life. His dialogue provides countless opportunities for actors to vary their performance from moment to moment and from one occasion to another. With talented and skilled actors, audiences might pay to see a succession of performances of a single play, as many crowd to watch team sports and become closely involved with the players and the outcome of every match.

Notes and References

1. I have been fortunate in also having the advice of Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, both in conversation in New Delhi and in correspondence when this article was in its first draft. I am, of course, entirely responsible for any errors of description or deduction that are present here.
2. That is, offering of oblations to the gods.
3. For the practical work on which this article is based I am greatly indebted to the National School of Drama in New Delhi, the Bremer Shakespeare Company, and New Fortune Theatre, and especially to the actors who took part in workshops and productions. To Middlesex University I am indebted for two grants of research funding, and I am grateful for the continuing support of colleagues and students. Thanks are also due to the Nehru Centre and the Bloomsbury UCL Theatre in London for use of their facilities for rehearsal and performance.

While preparing this article for publication, I have taken advantage of the helpful comments of Dennis Kennedy, who first suggested the topic. I am most grateful to him and the article has been much improved.

4. Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, *Peter Brook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 119.

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