

## Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka

Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka. by Susan A. Reed. 2010. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. 328 pp., 10 b/w photos, map, index. \$29.95 paper and DVD. doi:10.1017/S0149767711000088

Translation is . . . not only necessary but unavoidable. And yet, as the text guards its secret, it is impossible. The ethical task is never quite performed.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Ethnography is inevitably an act of translation—from experience to page, insider to outsider, past to present. Dance writing shares with ethnography the compulsion to evoke the embodied through words. As such, dance ethnography is a doubled act of translation, a doubled act of impossibility. The question then becomes, what seams shall the dance ethnographer leave exposed? According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation of translation's urgency and inherent impossibility (2000,), to admit failure is perhaps the only fitting way to introduce one's ethnographic project. Nevertheless, anthropologist Susan A. Reed takes a different approach in *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka*. This is not the self-reflexive critical poetics of Barbara Browning's 1995 *Samba: Resistance in Motion* and Julie Taylor's 1998 *Paper Tangos*, both highly embodied explorations of the limits of dance's translation to text. Hardly a suggestive phrase lands on Reed's page. Clear in her determination to bridge ethnography and history, Reed's contribution to the anthropology of dance lies not in a poetics that attempts to mimic the form of dance it describes, nor in a commitment to the first-person singular's intimate yet ever-alienated subjectivity; rather, Reed's is a project that lingers in description and revision. Reed thoroughly details the changing tradition of the Kandyan dance of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), within—and decontextualized from—the village ritual of Kohoomba Kankariya, where the dance first developed. In doing so,

she offers a corrective to historical inaccuracies that have dominated writings on Sri Lankan performance. Indeed, for scholars interested in Sri Lankan history and culture, regardless of their discipline, Reed's text provides a wealth of knowledge. This book intrigues in unexpected ways, as the reader is left with a newfound understanding of the relationship between the state and the stage, the zoological and the ethnographic, virtuosity and endurance, and "traditional" Kandyan and American modern dance.

*Dance and the Nation* operates under three unusual premises. First of all, Reed conducted most of her fieldwork two decades ago; second, by researching an upper class art form, Reed upsets typical class relationships between ethnographer and informant; and finally, seemingly objective observations of the history of Kandyan dance create the opportunity for rich theorization, as the analytical impulse is shifted from writer to reader. As a book that resists freewheeling critical analysis, *Dance and the Nation* indeed offers the scholar of dance much to reflect upon, especially in its invitation to rethink certain assumptions of performance cross-culturally and trans-historically: here, endurance is not a trope reserved solely for avant-garde performance, and the transformation from ritual to stage does not necessarily incite a lament.

That the bulk of Reed's fieldwork took place between 1986 and 1989 (and continued sporadically until 1997) makes for an inherently historical project. Disallowing a preoccupation with the idea that fieldwork could have an expiration date, Reed notes the changing circumstances of Sri Lankan culture and politics:

The period from 1987 to 1989—often referred to as *bhisana kalaya*, "the time of terror"—was a particularly horrific one in Sri Lanka. Quite independent of the ongoing civil war between Tamil separatists and the state, there ensued a violent conflict in the southern and central regions of the island between the state's armed forces and the JVP, a Sinhala opposition movement. (18)

The change was such that dance-based rituals comprising Reed's research sites were sometimes interrupted by violence, and Reed explains, "The circumstances of my fieldwork changed dramatically" (18). Furthermore, Reed augments the historicization inevitable to any project with a deliberate use of historical methods, finding that "... ethnographic work in Sri Lanka requires that one must in some fashion engage with the past. The dancers I worked with constantly referred to famous dancers and dance events from earlier times, and I also came to learn that much that had been written about the history of dance was inaccurate or incomplete" (22). Thus, *Dance and the Nation* inadvertently "[synthesizes]" what Theresa Jill Buckland identifies as "synchronic and diachronic perspectives" (2006, 17). In her essay, "Dance, History, and Ethnography," Buckland draws from Paul Connerton's "distinction between incorporation and inscription," incorporation exemplifying transient embodied "modes of transmission" and inscription as "textual practices that use language or visual delineation to fix the moment" (2006, 15). Buckland cautions against a certain assumption of embodied research's authenticity. Similarly, postmodern ethnography has undone the idea of anthropological text's objectivity. For her part, Reed tends to adhere to a straightforward, seemingly objective tone as she contextualizes Sri Lankan ritual dance within a complex political history. Interestingly, many of Reed's most provocative observations come forth in her historical work, as opposed to passages on the dances themselves. Such passages—such as the commentary that appears in the accompanying DVD—tend to be quite methodical both in their descriptions of costumes and basic movement patterns, and in their attempt to fully disclose the ancestral, mythical narratives played out in the choreography. Reed provides an exhaustive list of dances of the Great Royal Kankariya Ceremony, which include "Auspicious Drums," "Ayile Yadima" ("Invocation to the Deities"), and "Hat Padaya" ("Dances of Seven Offerings").

For this reader, the most fascinating aspect of *Dance and the Nation* is Reed's discussion of Kandyan dance's shift from ritual to stage, a shift that comes at the hands of the state:

"Kandyan dance," or its Sinhala equivalent, *uda rata natum* (up-country dance), is a term with a range of meanings, depending on the context of usage. At its most expansive the term embraces all of the ritual, folk, and stage dances of the Kandyan region. However, the term is most often used to refer primarily to the dances of the *kankariya* and to stage dances derived from them, especially the *vannam* and *ves* dances. (85–86)

Kandyan dance has traditionally taken place within all-night ceremonies, partaking in the efficaciousness of ritual acts. Reed discloses a correlation between dance and healing in which repetitive communal choreography—as part of a larger spiritual-sensorial fabric of the sonic, olfactory, and visual—plays a role in appeasing gods for the sake of society. After elaborating on the *berava* (drumming, thus dancing) caste's marginalization in comparison with the dominant Sinhala nationalist agenda, Reed goes on to explain that

By examining the perspectives of the *berava* in relationship to the state and a bourgeois culture of "respectability" in Sri Lanka, I hope to demonstrate how subalterns engage in a variety of ways with the dominant culture of nationalism that permeates Sinhala and Sri Lankan society... Indeed, some of the Kandyan elites, the traditional patrons of the *berava*, became part of the state dance bureaucracy, thus directly aiding in the classicization process through their influence on the school curriculum and in choreographing items for the state dance troupes. (151, 153)

Along with the state-induced shift of Kandyan dance from ritual to stage (and its incorporation into school curricula) occurs a gendered shift, in which a predominantly male-centered

dance form is practiced increasingly by women and girls. Reed notes a problematic sexualization that has occurred with the newly feminine practice, suggesting that this sexualization mimics popular Western (or globally commodified) elements such as gyrating hips and revealing costumes. The feminization of Kandyan dance simultaneously gestures away from ritual as it tries to appeal to the institution of marriage, as Reed reveals the dance's recent use as a social grooming tool for young women. In its move away from ritual environments and onto the stage, Kandyan dance's sensorial elements (such as the scent of incense) give way to modernity's incessant emphasis on the visual, and with that comes the speed and succinctness of temporally bounded proscenium performance at the expense of the Kankariya's investment in the durational. Ultimately, Reed believes, "The arena of Kandyan dance has also given women opportunities to push the limits in defining what is considered properly feminine" (217). Nevertheless, the untrained eye finds little in the book's accompanying DVD to suggest that women in contemporary Kandyan dance are creating much scandal by way of their relatively uniform, minimal dances.

Reed characterizes the shift from Kandyan dance as village ritual to staged performance of nation through the interrelated paradigm of class, politics, and ethnicity:

From the mid-1930s to the early 1960s elite patrons were pivotal in helping to establish Kandyan dancing as a legitimate art. The motivations of these patrons were both cultural and political, related to regional and ethnic loyalties.... Equally important was the patronage of elites and the participation of elite dancers. (153)

Due to the contemporary link between elitism, nationalism, and education in the dissemination of Kandyan dance, much of Reed's experience learning the dance took place in a university environment. As dancing is elevated to the status of respectable profession through its housing in the educational system, Reed bemoans "the consequent marginalization of many of

the dance's most skilled traditional practitioners" (161).

In perhaps her most compelling chapter, "A History of Kandyan Dance, 1875–1948," Reed points to some of the precursory influences on Kandyan dance's contemporary iteration as a state-supported art form practiced by women. In this chapter, Reed discusses both the role of the Colombo elite in "adapting the dance for stage and introducing new elements," and exposes the way that colonial ethnological discourse framed the dance of Ceylon in racist terms (99). For example, a correspondent for *The Graphic* in 1876 found the dancers to be some of "the ugliest young men ... ever ... a strange race ... one degree removed from wild beasts" (101) and the dances "weird and strange" (103). Reed implicitly traces the correlative objectifying logic of ethnological display and the zoological impulse, which has haunting implications for modern staged performance. She explains that German animal trainer Carl Hagenbeck, "considered the father of the modern zoo," went from importing elephants from Ceylon in the 1880s to importing actual humans for his "ethnographic exhibitions," and "the Kandyan dancers were billed as the 'Wild Men of Ceylon'" (104 after Rothfels, 105).

Reed goes on to discuss Ted Shawn's involvement with Kandyan dance in 1926. The choice to include Shawn in a chapter that echoes the coalescent impulses of zoological, ethnological, and freak shows (as the Wild Men of Borneo bring to mind the Wild Men of Borneo, a central example of disability studies' examination of freak shows' relationships to the ethnological) implies a provocative link between the absolute othering and cultural violence of the ethnological show and the impulse behind American modern dance, since Ted Shawn was one of the founders (with his wife, Ruth St. Denis) of the Denishawn Dancers, known for training the likes of Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham. While numerous dance scholars have detailed St. Denis' Orientalism, less work has been done on Shawn's visit to Kandy. In researching this encounter, Reed uncovers the casual field notes of one of Shawn's dancers, Jane Sherman, who likens the Kandyan dancers' "leaps and turns" to "Nureyev circling the stage at Lincoln Center" (109).

Ultimately, Reed is attuned to the changing circumstances and execution of Kandyan dance, voicing both concern and hope in the concluding paragraphs of many chapters. For example, while noting the general waning concern for Kankariya's efficaciousness as the ritual is transferred from village contexts, Reed points to a small minority of practitioners who are interested in efficacy. Finally, a paradox central to the legitimization of Kandyan dance via university education mirrors a central debate of the field of dance studies itself, namely, to what degree do—or shall—we privilege theory over practice?

Debates among dancers about the relative value of theory and practice exemplify the ideological bases of certification, rationalization, and bureaucratization. . . . These debates hinge on classed ideological positions in which traditional dancers are associated with body, emotion, and instinct and the middle-class dancers with mind and reason. Many bevara dancers were marginalized by this emphasis on theory and the stress on a more academic approach. (163)

By raising the complicated issue of Kandyan dance's state-supported inclusion in the university system, Reed inadvertently brings to our attention our own complicity in relying on—and creating—discourse in an attempt to legitimize certain dance forms. We might ask ourselves, to what end are we, too, participating in secularizing, cementing, or evacuating the past and its choreographies?

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## Works Cited

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## Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession

*Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession*. by Margaret M. McGowan. 2008. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 352 pp., 82 illustrations, records of dance in the French Renaissance, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

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Margaret McGowan is the Ferdinand Magellan of Renaissance dance scholarship. Her prolific bibliography has uncovered early ballet performances through recreations of libretti, accompanying contemporary criticism, and rare scenographic imagery. Among her best-known contributions are her textual accompaniments to the reprinting of the libretto from *le Balet comique* (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1982) and the exhibition catalog for *The Court Ballet of Louis XIII* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986). Her published doctoral thesis from 1964, *L'art du Ballet de Cour en France, 1581–1643*, is widely regarded as the first important work in sixteenth century dance scholarship.

*L'art du Ballet de Cour en France* prioritized analysis onto the early dance performances that occurred in the sixteenth century courts of the Valois Dynasty, led by Francois I, Henri II, the Regency of Catherine de Medicis, Charles IX, and Henri III. Through investigation of these early dance pieces, McGowan identified the wealth of European performance practice models, scenographic methods, and the roles of the producing agent, performers, and spectators for this genre. *Dance in the Renaissance* is a revised, revamped, and reconfigured treatment of this work—an exclamation point at the end of McGowan's name as the expert on this field. Unlike *L'art du Ballet de Cour*, this text is written in English, making it instantly accessible to a wider audience. The primary topic in *Dance in the Renaissance* is McGowan's comfort zone—court ballet during the Valois dynasty—but also introduces coexisting popular and low art forms alongside the aristocratic models. McGowan's chapters on non-aristocratic performance are her most thrilling and further liberate scholarship about sixteenth century performance.