

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

BRAKEL, CLARA, editor. *Performing Arts of Asia: The Performer as (Inter) Cultural Transmitter*. Working Papers Series 4. Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, 1996. 107 pages. Illustrations. Paper Fl.30.—; ISBN 90-74917-15-1.

This book contains edited versions of the papers presented by renowned scholars at the International Congress on Asian and African Performing Arts, held in May 1995, in Leiden. The volume highlights many aspects of cultural heritage that have been neglected. The focal theme of the articles is the performer as (inter)cultural transmitter. This theme has particular relevance for contemporary society, which is in greater contact with other cultures and also more susceptible to media attacks and information overflow. As is pointed out by Paul Van Dervelde, the series editor, the articles deal with aspects of the performer as (inter)cultural transmitter in Asian and African contexts ranging from the portrayal of women in Yakshagana to a Wayang performance which Sukarno sponsored. The volume also includes audio visual documents as an added feature.

Clara Brakel clearly expresses in the introduction the need for more interest in Asian and African performing arts. Wilt L. Idema in his paper emphasizes the central role of the performer as a transmitter and creator of culture. His view, in short, is that performers can only effectively play the part of cultural transmitters if they have their own say in the message. This view is universally shared by performers, as it gives them greater autonomy.

Martha Ashton-Sikora's paper on the Yakshagana of Karnataka records interesting and thought-provoking observations on the portrayal of women in Yakshagana. The status enjoyed by women during the Vedic period gradually deteriorated to the point where they were treated as property that could be pawned, abandoned, or given away to anyone. The plight of women has not changed even during the modern period: male chauvinism prevails irrespective of the changes in culture and values. Yet the recent improvement in the status of women has had some impact on the attire and attitude of Shrivesha in Yakshagana, which portrayed the female characters according to the prescribed behavior of the female characters in epics and puranas. It is also worth noting that today Yakshagana is performed by members of different caste groups and that Yakshagana artists are financially much better off now than in the past.

A brilliant attempt to recapture in words the popular shadow puppetry in Kerala is made in Stuart Blackburn's article. It interestingly narrates how the show is performed without an audience. What is important about the text, *Kamparamayanam*, a popular epic in Tamilnadu, is that it crossed the border to be enacted in another language with requisite additions, omissions, commentaries, and contextual references. Blackburn's classification of audiences into four types—interactive and immediate, overhearing, internal, and performers as

audience—deserves special mention.

Audiences are culturally specific. The ability to see a performance is as culturally rooted as the performance itself. Shadow puppetry is performed for sixty consecutive nights, even when there is no audience. This makes one raise one's brow in wonder. But as Blackburn remarks, the lack of an external audience in turn makes the performers themselves act as the audience. Shadow puppetry is compared and contrasted with that of Wayang Lemah. While Wayang Lemah is performed during the day without a screen, or light, or even full narrative exposition, shadow puppetry is performed during the night at temple festivals. Regrettably, however, the movements are slow and the presentation less visual because of the lengthy dialogues. Blackburn concludes his article with these memorable words: "Just as teachers are sometimes their best students, performers are sometimes their best audience."

Clara Brakel and Shmuel Morch discuss the meaning of the word *Bāba* in the traditional Arab and Javanese masked theater with a view to enlighten the obscurities in the performance practice of traditional Arab theater. It is pointed out that the term *Bāba* is used with reference to live theater and shadow plays. The authors conclude that not only material objects like cloth and spices, but also beliefs, customs, and artistic practices were, and still are, exchanged between peoples living in places as far apart as the Middle East and the Far East. Consequently the medieval Middle East served as a mediator between the different cultures.

The article "Bridging Cultures: 101 years of Kabuki in Hawaii" by James R. Brandon is about the connections between two Kabuki traditions, and how the changing social and economic conditions have influenced the movement from the Japanese language to the English language tradition. The points that the performer becomes a transmitter across cultures, and that the theater art becomes a bridge that powerfully connects the original Japanese culture and the contemporary American culture, are of much value. The idea that Kabuki's influence is multifarious is supported by the author's survey of students of past Kabuki productions.

Shmuel Morch's paper entitled "Central Asian Influences on Medieval Arabic Theatre" attempts to "survey the research needed on medieval Arabic theater and to establish its connections with Central Asian cultures." The six different types of medieval Arabic theatrical performance, like Kurraj, Amiral-Nayruz, Samaja, and Khayālazzill tazīya ritual performances by Sufis, bring new information to readers concerning Arabic theatrical traditions. Morch's paper has particular relevance at present for understanding how Indian culture may have influenced Islamic culture, including literary works like the *Thousand and One Nights* or *Kalīla Wa-Dimna*, through Persian translation.

The article about Wayang performance describes the circumstances under which the play was performed. The author, Peter Pink, who witnessed the play, points out that it was an attempt by Sukarno to communicate his interpretations of the political state of affairs through puppeteers (*dhalang*). The authorities controlled not only the performance but also the visitors, indicating that the performance was regarded as more than just entertainment. The performance was allusive in nature. The message is to return to the old order, in which Sukarno will be the guide and protector of virtue by his authority.

Phillip B. Zarilli presents in his article an impressive account of the history and impact of Kerala's martial art Kaḷarippayattu. It was not only used to resolve local feuds but was also thought to be beneficial for one's health and was used for training circus and Kathakali performers. The author states that Kaḷarippayattu has been the symbol of Malayali manhood and shows the role it has played, for example, in establishing the Kerala state as a distinct socio-political formation. The origin and development of this art in Kerala is narrated with precision. Within the context of the Onam celebrations, Kaḷarippayattu is one of the primary symbols through which a strong unified Malayali identity is represented. Kaḷarippayattu

serves as a unifying force. It links the warlike past with the present. It crosses borders and it fights for justice. It rejuvenates tradition and disciplines the mind and body. The author has given an excellent account of this martial art with due interpretations. It is well known that art of any kind, if properly propagated and performed, will work wonders especially in regards to cultural transmission and unity, the requisites of the world at large.

The video versions also available by Martha Ashton-Sikora, Robert P. Sikora, Tsuchi Jihir, and Erik de Maaker add more weight to this book. The photographs accompanying the articles and appended at the end of this volume are useful and of high quality.

In general, the papers in this series are highly informative and interesting. Though many of them are introductory and written in a narrative style, they will help readers to understand different cultural heritages. The editor has taken much care in achieving this end.

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DÉGH, LINDA. *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration*.

FF Communications CXI, No. 255. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1995. 401 pages. Notes, bibliography. Cloth n.p., ISBN 951-41-0748-9.

Narratives in Society is “a narrator-centered approach to narrative performance” (7). The emphasis in the book is on the importance of the narrator-centered approach of Gyula Ortutay and the Budapest School in the study of folklore. In the twenty essays in this four-part book, the author tries to “test his [Ortutay’s] assumptions, and to answer some of the questions he had raised” (16), as well as call “attention to the performer in the act of performance” in order to help reorientate folklore (29).

The first part “makes the case for narrator-orientation” (7). Storytellers, especially the prominent ones, “are the most reliable custodians of tradition and represent public opinion and taste” (35). They “can best express ‘forbidden’ ideas while avoiding social censorship by performing under the protection of the socially acceptable rite of storytelling” (37), and can exhibit “factual knowledge, creative imagination, the gift of formulating and structuring the intricate webs of episodes into an enrapturing story, and sensitivity to adapt to audience expectation” (38). As storytellers they enjoy the freedom “to express personality within the rigid limits the genre imposes and society enforces” (39). They also have the freedom to “make an aesthetic decision in choosing the pieces, building the structure of the tale with the approval of the community and connect the tale world with the real world” (40-41). In the process the storyteller becomes “not only a personality but the condensed community” (45).

By way of implication the author says that the genesis and function of the tale can be approximated by the study of storytellers (46); examining the storyteller helps us generate ideas for the study of transmission, modification, and restoration of the tale (137), and therefore a systematic field recording of tales in the natural setting of storytellers during a prolonged period of time is a precondition (36).

Storytelling as such consists of the life history of the tale, the transmission process such as “which powers are at work to create, maintain, and vary tales; and what do tales mean to those who create, maintain, and listen to them” (55), and so forth. Citing various methods for the study of tales in Europe and North America, the author chooses the “Märchenbiologie”