

ARCHAIC HERITAGE OF THEATRE PRACTICE

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Abstract: The treatises on drama and performance, *Poetics* by Aristotle and *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata Muni reveal archaic elements, valid even today, offering two different perspectives on relating to artistic experience and understanding the body - mind binomial. Whether the steps of a theatrical method are described, or the rules of a technique are postulated, the practice behind any performance or performative action will, however, remain constant. Artistic practice is linked to a working philosophy and an awareness of the ideological structure on which an artistic product is built. This is one of the most important elements that a performer can use, because knowing what and why you act in a certain specific way is the very path to a self-definition and an articulation of the new languages of performing art, encountered more frequently in performative spaces.

Keywords: *Poetics*, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, creator, creation, aesthetic pleasure.

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Introduction

The attempt to find a place on the map of the ancient history or philosophy of the two treatises written by Aristotle and Bharata Muni often leads far from applied theatrical studies to a constantly changing theatrical universe. Between studies of history, archaeology or literary aesthetics written over a long and complicated history, the *praxis* of the ancient Greek or Indian artists may lose its outline and voice.

However, we start from the hypothesis that there is a practice of *making* and not *being*, a practice of *being conscious of being in the body, of thinking with the body*, a cognitive body practice, psycho-somatic, based on transcultural principles, which transcends time and linguistic boundaries. Ancient Greek and Indian perceptions of creation offer complementary perspectives, different but perfectly valid in the understanding of the theatrical art of today. Viewed from the perspective of the phenomenology of the actor's art, these can help us imagine different types of theatrical practice.

We do not know what type of practice or method the ancient Greeks used, for all that has survived history are *the main themes* of the plays, *the lines* and types of *dramaturgical structures*, not fragments that describe the way of interpreting them. History has preserved the *mythos* but erased from our consciousness the ancient *praxis*.

The study of ancient theories of theatre and performative art generates new valences and languages of work in the practices of contemporary theatre. The comparative analysis of the *Poetics* by Aristotle (published in the IV century B.C. in Athens) and *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata Muni (appeared between the VI-II centuries B.C. in India), reveals archaic practices and millenary legacies deeply permeated into the theatrical collective subconscious, while today the Indo-European contrasts give shape and enrich the multitudes of theatrical languages

and hybrid performative forms.

The working system called *rasa boxes* implemented in the 90s by Richard Schechner is just one of the examples that proves that the approach of archaic theatre notions, “external” to the social context in which they are used, reveals new work methods. Schechner uses *rasa* theory in order to train the actors’ ability to access an emotional field without the use of logical reasoning for argumentation.

The Choreographer of Indian origin, Akram Khan, who specializes in classical Kathak dance, is another example in which archaic knowledge is reinvented and transformed into a new performative language. Throughout the history of theatre, the clashes between “Western” and “Eastern” practices have been numerous and most of the time with serious implications at a political level. Sergei Tcherkasski’s latest book, *Stanislavsky and Yoga* (2016), demonstrates Indian influences on the Stanislavskian system.

The *mélange* between East and West may seem exotic and difficult to penetrate at an ideological level, therefore, the return to the first theories of performing art appeared on the two continents represents an additional step in unravelling some elements often understood only at mystical or religious level, without concrete applications in the theatrical practice.

Jerzy Grotowski¹ said that “One cannot work on oneself ... if one is not inside something which is structured and can be repeated, which has a beginning a middle and an end, something in which every element has its logical place, technically necessary” (Grotowski, 1995, p. 130, apud. Zarrilli, 2020, p. 21). This perspective shows, on the one hand, that the Aristotelian rule of the three units continued to exist in grotowskian thinking and, on the other, emphasizes the imperative need for awareness and distancing from the creative Self in the process of artistic creation.

The past stands above us, never behind us, and the future can only be built consciously, only by integrating history and accepting the idea that nothing that is written in history is indistinguishable, and the only valid truth will remain the subjective one. The great thinkers of the history of philosophy analysed the sign of the body in relation to that of the corpus, postulating adjacent theories of perception and cognition, in a field they called *phenomenology*. Phillip Zarrilli’s latest work², entitled *(towards) a phenomenology of acting*, reveals, however, answers

1 Jerzy Marian Grotowski (1933-1999) was a Polish theatre director and theorist whose innovative approaches to acting, training and theatrical production have significantly influenced today’s world theatre. He traveled 6 times to India in 1969, 1970, 1977, 1980 and 1981. Influenced by Ramana Maharshi and Krishnamurti, by the Baul performances in Bengal, the Odissi dance in Bubhaneswar and Calcutta, fascinated by kathakali dance, he staged in Poland revolutionary performances for his time, the effect of his travels to India and Central Asia being profound and transformative both on himself and on his work.

2 Philip Zarrilli (1947-2020) – researcher and theatre practitioner, director, Professor Emeritus in performance studies at the Exeter University and member of the *International Interweaving Performance*

to questions raised decades ago, such as that of Jerzy Grotowski—*How can the actor touch the untouchable?*—giving us the opportunity to reflect on the idea of *the incarnation* of a rational process, as well as on *the working language* used in a theatre workshop.

Reflecting on the working language can often push towards linguistic research, but behind the words used in theatre there are untold fragments of memory, pieces of a working structure embroidered on the body of the performer, which define it and give it colour.

Ancient Greek and Indian artists differentiate themselves from each other, just as they differentiate actors from the North Pole from those of the South Pole, in the interpretation of Eugenio Barba. The difference appears in terms of practice and time, being generated along a long line of events and different perspectives of looking at art, creation and aesthetic pleasure by the creator.

In essence, the actor/performer/interpreter does nothing but activate physiological processes on stage, constantly swinging between *thought* and *action*, and his art has to do, since ancient times, with two main senses: sight and hearing. The art of performing involves the direct perception of a narrative and, most of the time, represents the reaction to a reality in which *the truth*, *the possible* and *the probable* are constantly questioned.

Each culture has its own perspectives and relations to the world and its reality, and so there are different ways of relating to the body. If Aristotle brings up the Creator of a higher reality (xxv), in which creation is different from the creator, Bharata Muni says that art reveals another truth, that in which the creator becomes creation itself. The body is *Brahma* and also the servant of *Brahma*. Although the Aristotelian *mimesis* sheds light on a supreme universe, nourished by the same impulse as philosophy—to know—, *Nāṭya* transforms reality through an *imitation of behaviour*, revealing a source of wisdom that transcends theatre.

The eternal question—whether *art is a form of entertainment or teaching*—has its roots deeply embedded in the global theatrical consciousness, being explained in antiquity either by *logic* and *syllogism*, or by *religion* and sacred *norms*.

Below follows a comparative exposition of the main elements debated in the two treatises of ancient Greek and Indian theatre.

Poetics by Aristotle

The work of the great ancient philosopher was first of all understood (since the Renaissance) from a literary perspective, emphasizing the dramaturgical

structures postulated by Stagirit. Because of its eclectic, segmented and cryptic character, *Poetics* was studied and interpreted in comparison with the works of Plato. The major difference between the two authors was related to the type of *mimēsis* “considered to be useful (or not)” to the Athenian community of which they were part of.

The cases in which Aristotle’s *Poetics* is analysed only from the Aristotelian perspective are few because the materials we have at our disposal today are unpublished works, intended to be “taught” to his students in *Lykeion*. Also, the case of the *Poetics* is special, the work being, at first glance, completely isolated from his other writings. The last study dedicated to him, coordinated by Pierre Destrée, Malcolm Heath and Dana L. Munteanu—*The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context*, published in 2020—demonstrates, however, the validity of the *Poetics*’ integration into the Aristotelian philosophical system, bringing a plus of understanding of the anatomy of materialistic thinking that has governed (and continues to govern) much of the theatrical and performative thinking of today.

By placing the concepts of *mimēsis*, *ethos*, *mythos* within his political or related to *rhetoric* and *biology* thinking, artistic notions receive new meanings. With these meanings, research methodologies change.

In short, the fundamental elements debated in the Greek treaty are as follows:

- Tragedy* and its components;
- Katharsis* or the function of liberation through feelings of fear and pity;
- Hamartia* or tragic guilt, without which a tragedy cannot take place;
- Acknowledgement and Reversal of Circumstances* as essential elements of the structure of the plot;
- The 3 Units* (Time, Space, Action);
- The 6 elements of a tragedy:
- 3 related to the written text:
 - Mythos* = intrigue (sequence of dramatic situations),
 - Ethos* = characters,
 - Dianoia* = thought (the quality of intelligently transmitting a speech);
- 3 related to the performance:
 - Opsis* = visual, stage set,
 - Melos* = music,
 - Lexis* = loud speech.

Aristotle states that sight is secondary to hearing, and the performance is secondary to text, the end of a tragedy always assuming *Katharsis*. Because action prevails, the *plot* is the soul of the situation, and the most important part of the plot is *peripeteia* (or turning point).

We will probably never be able to fully understand *the meaning of* Aristotle's *Poetics*. The unknown elements are numerous: we do not know what the theatrical situation was in 330 B.C. in Elada (we barely know what was happening in Athens), we do not know how the Macedonian philosopher was perceived in Athens, nor how much power in the Greek space had the hegemony of Alexander the Great, as he was already far away from these places (the military campaigns against Persia had already begun). We do not know which tradition and type of naturalism Aristotle was positioned against when developing his *Poetics*, but we do know that his positioning towards the existing theatrical forms must have been revolutionary and totally innovative at the time.

***Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata Muni**

In chapter VI of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata Muni summarizes the fundamental theoretical elements exposed in this compendium by stating that *Nāṭya* is a mix of:

Rasa, the central doctrine of Indian aesthetic theory; synonymous with the pleasure felt when watching a performance, with the savour of taste.

Bhava, does not include only the concept of emotion, but the entire psychosomatic theory of the nature of emotions (dominant or subsidiary). Staybhava, Anubhava, Vibaycharya bhava.

Abhinaya, not only means acting, but encompasses the entire semiotic visual and auditory universe, postulated in detail.

Dharmi, the theory about the nature of transformation in theatre – practice, which can be simple or enriched.

Vrtti, designates the division of dramatic acts based on four emotional modes: erotic, robust, argumentative, and heroic.

Pravvrtti, the input brought to a production of regional styles.

Svara, instrument and song – covers all the literary and musical content of a performative text.

Ranga is the home of theatre.

Siddhi, the success of a piece that satisfies gods and people alike. (Bharata Muni, 2016, p. 109).

Nāṭyaśāstra is not a philosophy, but a tradition. It does not contain a logically reasoned structure and does not reveal the psychological profile of its author. Although there is a type of literary unity, researchers claim that there are also interspersed passages, which denote a different style of writing. This is not an error or a lack of interest in the whole treaty, but underlines once again the distinct character of a community-based, never on the individual, culture.

Bharata Muni was unbeknown, as were (for us in the South Pole) all the

ancient Indian sages. We do not know the ancient Indian educational systems in the same way as we know the Greek ones. The reasons are numerous and are always tied to politics, power and money. However,

there has been an astounding number of universities spread all over India. The oldest university excavated so far is *Takshashila*, which is dated to the VI century B.C., but could be much older. It is located in the Rawalpindi District of Punjab in present-day Pakistan. Other universities were *Nalanda* (Bihar), *Valabhi* (Gujarat), *Vikramshila* (Bihar), *Pushpagiri* (Odisha), *Jagaddala* (Bangladesh), *Odantapuri* (Bihar), *Somapura* (Bangladesh), *Bikrampur* (Bangladesh), *Varanasi* (Uttar Pradesh), *Sharada Peeth* (Kashmir), *Ratnagiri* (Odisha), *Mithila* (Bihar), *Ujjani* (Madhya Pradesh) and *Kancipuram* (Tamil Nadu), although this is only a partial list. (Singh, 2017, p. 17)

We can imagine, then, that the ancient sage Bharata, along with all his 100 disciples, was part of an extremely well-organized educational system, of which history speaks too little today.

We can list dozens (perhaps hundreds) of religious, devotional, classical, modern, or popular forms of theatre and dance in India that claim to be rooted in *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The goal is not to categorize, but to understand the magnitude of this nation and the vast body of information that we can only reach through the Sanskrit language.

The attempt to find the place of the two treatises written by Aristotle and Bharata Muni on the map of the ancient history or philosophy, often pushes us very far from the results of applied theatrical research, inside an ever-changing theatrical universe.

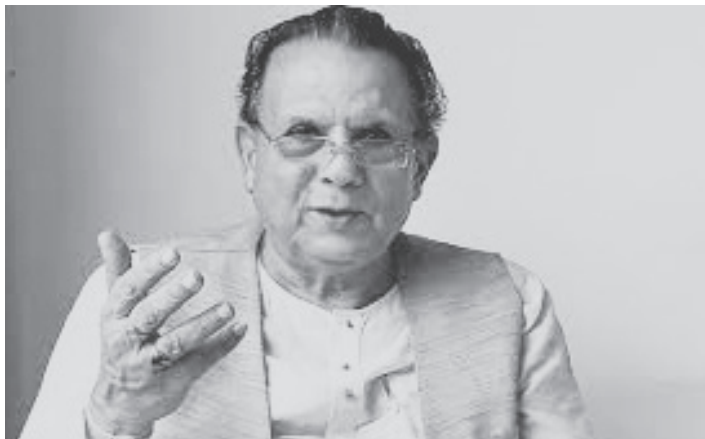
The answers found have always provided more questions, several new avenues of research, and distancing from one's own theatrical culture, used to understand other cultures, brings to light very personal truths. We research, document, and understand within the parameters of thought received and practiced over time. Although "we know that we know nothing", the philosophy of dialectics always shows us, faced with other types of thinking and relating to emotion, that we are left without the logical tools of argumentation.

The same thing happens with the comparison of the two ancient treaties.

At the end of 2019 I spent two months on the Indian subcontinent to get closer to one of the most important treatises on performing arts, Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. My research path is a rather complicated one, but these last four years have opened new horizons for me to understand what might be called "an ancient

legacy in contemporary theatrical practices.”

<u>Historiographies</u> (WHO) ARISTOTLE (WHEN) 330 B.C. (WHERE) in ATHENS (WHY) Lesson at school (WHAT) a work on the author and types of creation of dramatic poetry	(WHAT) Fifth VEDA, Tradition (HOW, WHEN) by word of mouth and memorization, in the Vedic period (WHERE) throughout the Indian subcontinent (WHO) Bharata Muni, unknown (WHY) for preservation, for the education of all social strata	*Aristotle and Bharata Muni. Public person and Indian sage. *330 B.C. – The period coincides with the Macedonian invasion of India *The Greek theatre was already spread as far as India. Indian theatre was spread throughout India, Sri Lanka, Bali, and so on. *Lesson strictly for young Athenian boys vs. both Indian men and women. *A philosophy of the method of creation vs. A sacred text that marks a tradition of creation.
CREATOR *Goes against tradition *Think in terms of “why I represent”	CREATOR *Must follow Veda *Reveals another truth *The body is also Brahma	Differences arise at the level of the philosophy of the Self
*Situated between a good poem and a bad one	*The Creator and Creation are the same thing	
ART *Teatron, drama *Theatrical illusion based on the rule of the verisimilar and the necessary *Arises from the impulse to know	ART *Nāṭya *Theatrical illusion based on faith *Source of wisdom	If the Aristotelian plot has 3 segments, the Indian one has 5, symbolizing a circle without beginning and end.
PLEASURE *Release *Purification	PLEASURE *Illumination *Moksha *Rasa	Theatrical art seen at <i>hieropraxis</i>



Bharat Gupta _

photo and coloring belong to the source:

<https://bharatgupt.com/index.html>

The first person I contacted, when I decided to go on my Indian trip, was Professor **Bharat Gupta**, whose doctoral study, ***Dramatic Concepts. Greek and Indian. A study of Poetics & Nāṭyaśāstra***, was one of the main pillars in my doctoral research. In the following I intend to talk about the work of Professor Gupta and to present the main aspects of this work, which I consider extremely valuable for the endeavour of any researcher or artist passionate about Indian theatrical culture.

The work was first published in India in 1994 and then reprinted in 1996, 2006 and 2016 and is today one of the most important comparative studies of the concepts of ancient Greek and Indian theatre. In 1997, Richard Schechner published in TDR (*The Drama Review*) a review of Gupta's work concluding that this book should be introduced into the curricula of performance theory and comparative studies courses in ancient Greek and Indian theatre.³

³ *Dramatic Concepts Greek and Indian* ought to be assigned text – along with Stephen Halliwell's edition of the *Poetics* (1984), Manomohan Ghosh's translation of the *Nṣ* (1967), Barbara Stoler Miller's *Theatre of Memory* (1984), a rendition of Sanskrit dramas, and the David Grene-Richmond Lattimore *Complete Greek Tragedies* (1959-60) – for courses, some existing, most waiting to be taught, comparing ancient Indian and Greek theatres and performance theories. (Schechner, 1997, pp. 153-156)

Richard Schechner is one of the most important performative and theatrical artists and theorists of Western culture, constantly interested in the knowledge of the antiquity of Indian arts and especially in *the Nāṭyaśāstra*. Over time, theatre researchers such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and all those who followed or were influenced by Grotowski, including Eugenio Barba and the entire team of researchers at Odin Teatret, continued to investigate Indian concepts and apply them in their practice or in the theoretical studies of theatrical anthropology.

Nāṭyaśāstra is still the main starting point of these researchers, but they did not necessarily open a comparative perspective between what was happening in about the same period in ancient Greece, regarding Aristotle's treatise, *Poetics*, to the same extent that they constantly and analytically analysed and applied *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Throughout history, at least on a theoretical level, the two ancient cultures have been studied comparatively in different fields, but the two ancient theatres have attracted a limited number of comparative studies (and most of them were focused mainly on ancient dramaturgy), compared to other fields such as philosophy or the exact sciences, where the research corpus is much larger. In recent decades, comparative analyses have been made from the perspective of one of the playwrights, the purpose being to find either correspondences of Greek concepts in Indian theatre or the reverse variant, depending on how much predominant the study of each in a particular theatrical culture was.

Professor Bharat Gupt's study, however, is different for two main reasons, which make it very valuable today. On the one hand, it focuses from the very beginning on indo-European theatre, analysing the two bygone theatrical cultures from the perspective of a mixed culture, with many common aspects, which today we no longer find in contemporary theatrical culture in a variant unaltered in either of the two cultures.



With Bharat Gupt during the presentation of the Source panel *Significance of Comparative Research in Dramaturgy*, IGNCA, New Delhi, 2019. Photo source and coloring: Yukti Gupt. (personal archive)

The second reason relates to Mr. Gupta's ability to read and analyse Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* in their original language, that is, in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit. Therefore, during his entire study, he uses the original terms, avoiding, for example, using terms such as "representation" or "imitation" in the case of *mimēsis* or *anukarana*.

From the outset, we note that we are not dealing with an analysis of the concepts of Bharata Muni's treatise in correspondence with the Aristotelian ones, nor with a deepening of the concepts in *Poetics* from the perspective of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* norms, but rather with an elaboration of the ancient Indo-European drama, explained by the language of Aristotle and Bharata Muni and viewed primarily from the point of view of an ancient practice, which today we can no longer see in a pure, traditional form.

Using a new and proper concept called ***hieropraxis***, Bharat Gupta manages to create a connection between the two theatrical cultures and to look at the two treatises written by Aristotle and Bharata Muni from the perspective of two performance systems.

The contemporary concept of *performance* is very important in this case, precisely because we are dealing with an ancient language, difficult to translate and understand in our secular era, in which the clear compartmentalization of what means theatre, dance, music, fine art, etc., is very deeply grounded in our collective subconscious. Aristotle's *Poetics* has historically been regarded primarily as a textbook of dramatic writing. Hence the interest in how to write poetry, how to write theatre.

Conclusions

The word "theatre" refers both to a physical space delimited by a construction, and to the activity itself, which the artists gathered in this space perform. Cartesian dualism, theoretically inherited from the ancients and resumed in the Renaissance, may give rise to radical concepts. The reinvention of theatre, its re-questioning and the eternal search for a new type of theatre, is more than a permanent constant in the history of universal theatre, which has inspired many creative minds over time; this constant need for novelty developed from a mandatory requirement for the creation of a successful performance. The limits of creation are always challenged and developed in an authentic, new, personal form.

What kind of creation, however, are we talking about today, in a world that consumes less and less fiction and is increasingly attracted to real stories, to concrete cases of life, to science and history, rather than fiction literature? The role of theatre in this virtual landscape, in which all the stories seem to have already been exhibited much better in digital format, comes down to the vivid contact it has with the viewer.

We live in one of the most complicated periods in recent theatrical history.

The impact of the media continues to generate a kind of self-centeredness taken to the extreme in all possible areas: political, religious, social extremism is more present than ever. The constant self-definition, the public self-sharing, the constant work of constructing a complex and all-present self-image has a double and paradoxical result. On the one hand, we experience the depersonalization of the self, a death of hearing at the expense of sight and the other senses, and, on the other hand, we experience new ways of curing ourselves of this disease that is spreading so rapidly.

In parallel, the experience of a social distance related to the COVID19 pandemic, brings to the fore, technology - as the only saving tool for communication and the creation of an active, present community, reactive to the problems of the 21st century. The informational impact is manifested both by the action of the mass-media and by the abundance of audiovisual content through which we communicate today. In this context, theatre, along with the performing arts, is going through one of the most important changes in recent history, and the return to the first forms of theatre may represent a way out through which the art of performing will remain alive.

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