

SEIZER, SUSAN. *Stigmas of the Tamil stage: an ethnography of Special Drama artists in South India*. xxii, 440 pp., maps, illus., plates, bibliogr. London, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2005. £73.00 (cloth), £17.95 (paper)

Susan Seizer's book about the stigmatization of Special Drama artists in South India is a landmark in the writing of the history of the Tamil stage. It provides for the first time an in-depth study of the Special Drama genre, a hybrid form of theatre that developed under the influence of Parsi and British travelling theatre troupes at the end of the nineteenth century. The genre combines Indian and Western (British Victorian) stage practices to act all-night Hindu mythological plays combined with social elements. Today the Special Drama knows no theatrical troupes: individual artists are contracted 'specially' for every event. To make this possible a complex organizational network has been built around the form. This rural network stretches across provincial towns where the principal association of Special Drama artists, the Tamilnadu Drama Actors Sangam, and its branches are based and where Drama agents, printers of Drama notices, people who rent out 'backdrop scenes', costumes, and stage lights carry on their business, and villages where the majority of the Special Drama performances take place.

Seizer's analysis of the Special Drama helps us to understand how this genre reacted and continues to react to the cultural practices, norms, and prescriptions of an upcoming middle class and to the project of 'modernity' in general. Theatre historians looked down upon the popular theatre as vulgar and as a direct attack on the (imaginary) ideals of high-status

Tamil culture. They put the blame for the real or perceived deterioration of the Tamil stage on the exponents of the popular stage, who lacked, according to these scholars, education, culture (*murai*), and discipline (*kattupatu*).

Using Erving Goffman's famous work on 'spoiled identities' (*Stigma*, 1963), Seizer describes the stigma that attaches to women performers, more so than to male artists, and actresses' strategies of counteracting or mitigating stigma. Hereto she uses her own experiences while travelling with actresses, actresses' life histories, and voluntary and/or overheard comments of spectators. Also today female Special Drama artists are perceived as 'public women' (prostitutes) because they violate, through their professional mobility, their visibility on stage and their unconventional, mixed-marriage relationships, the most basic tenets of what middle-class society perceives as the 'good Tamil woman'.

Seizer starts with the history and organization of the Special Drama, devoting rather a lot of attention to the text and photographic style and layout of drama notices, which she interprets as reflecting the prestige hierarchies at work among artists, and to the 'disciplinary role' of the Tamilnadu Actors Sangam based in Madurai. I would have preferred to see these chapters at the end of the book to illustrate the principal issues of stigma and the actresses' ways of dealing with it. The author's insightful treatment of the 'low comedy' between the Buffoon and the Dancer as one of the most important ingredients that make Special Drama performances work for local audiences, and her description of what she terms the 'roadwork of actresses', unquestionably are the most convincing, well-written, and analytically interesting chapters of the book. Here Seizer shows vividly the workings of actual performances and the gender relationships 'at work', for instance through the Buffoon and Dancer's spatial use of the stage, the effects of (acted) domestic violence and laughter that involve and implicate both the spectators and the performers' self.

She proceeds to map the public and private roads travelled by actresses going to and coming back home from performances. These subjective accounts illustrate how women artists deal with situations of unequal power. They help us visualize the complex reality encountered by the female Special Drama performers and introduce us to their strategies to alleviate stigma while negotiating the complexities of their daily lives. These coping strategies are largely internalized

and embodied. One of the strategies used by actresses is to conform as much as possible, at least at surface level, to the dominant views held by society of 'good women' while carrying on their business, thus subtly expanding and redefining the concept of 'good women' to include themselves. Hereto they try to limit their professional and personal mobility in several different ways: by having a Drama agent negotiate potential performance engagements instead of doing so themselves; travelling by private van rather than public transport to and from the performance venues; avoiding or limiting general social interaction with people outside the domestic sphere of the house; creating small safe havens of domesticity *en route* to and during the performances (e.g. in the green room); using a secret argot (referred to as *Nataka Basha*); and, finally, when performing the leading female role of the Heroine, by keeping their movement on stage limited to a bare minimum, resulting in surprisingly static performances.

Whether or not actresses' strategies at counteracting and mitigating the effects of their stigmatized identities could be seen as an act of subversiveness or feminist resistance remains a moot point. Seizer invokes and thoughtfully seems to reject a number of theoretical views of the effectiveness of inchoate adaptive strategies such as used by Special Drama actresses to cope with stigma and offset dominant views regarding gender on the grounds that they are too optimistic and celebratory. Actresses themselves appear even more pessimistic about a possible subversive element in their 'roadwork' and its potential positive impact leading to social change. Like the actresses of the Drama genre in the northern parts of Tamilnadu (e.g. Hanne M. de Bruin & P. Rajagopal, *In their own words: the unheard history of the rural Tamil stage as told by four of its professional exponents*, video documentary, 2001), the Special Drama actresses expressed the wish that the (in)roads of women into the Drama profession should end with them and that none of their daughters should follow them in the acting profession.

Seizer could have linked up her analysis more to the broader field of the performing arts in the region and in India in general, in particular because a number of case studies of different forms of (popular) theatre have been published now and a debate has been opened up about the history of 'hybrid theatres' similar to the Special Drama and of the position of women in the popular theatre. A discussion about stigma

and *murai* (freely translated by Seizer as 'culture', but implying a range of other meanings) cannot proceed without a comparison with other groups of professional female performers, including the Devadasis, whose ambiguous status in rural and urban parts of Tamilnadu continues to colour popular opinion, Tamil politics, and scholarly debates about gender and the position of professional women performers. Here the reader remains unaware of the larger implications of the rise of the Special Drama, its popularity and its hybrid nature, and the enormity of what it means to opt as a Tamil woman for the profession of actress, either by force of (economic and/or hereditary) circumstances or by choice. Another, minor, point of criticism concerns Seizer's analysis of the secret argot of performers (signalled also for the Kattaikkuttu tradition, see Hanne M. de Bruin, *Kattaikkuttu*, 1999): I am not convinced by her assignment of meaning to the constituting parts of argot words (e.g. taking *kali* in *matti-kali* as referring to the goddess Kali; a slightly different version of this argot word, *mettikal*, is used in the secret argot of Kattaikkuttu), as there is no evidence to do so, either on linguistic grounds or on the basis of the information of her informants.

This book is a must for all those interested in the development of the Tamil stage and in Tamil culture and the politics of gender in general. What we need now is the (collective) writing of a more comprehensive and sensitive history of the Tamil theatre that includes the pivotal contribution of women to the shaping of the contemporary stage.

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