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# Tamil Geographies

*Cultural Constructions of  
Space and Place in South India*

*Edited by*  
Martha Ann Selby  
Indira Viswanathan Peterson

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

*In memory of*  
*A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993)*  
*Poet, Scholar, Friend*

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Isabelle Clark-Decès' essay originally appeared under the title "Expel the Lover, Recover the Wife: Symbolic Analysis of a South Indian Exorcism" in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 3(2). Sections of it are included in her book, *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, copyright 2000 by Isabelle Nabokov. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.). Both were published under the name of Isabelle Nabokov. The first few sections of Martha Ann Selby's essay appear in the third chapter of her book, *Grow Long, Blessed Night: Love*



4. I am much more familiar with Hindu and Christian families' homes than with Muslims', but the Muslim houses I have visited are built along similar lines, though among lower-class and orthodox Muslims the principles have to do more with protecting women and family honor than with maintaining essential purity; in the homes of the wealthy, less conservative Muslims that I know, class considerations predominate. In both cases, house layouts are similar to those that I describe in this section.
5. This pattern differs from the house style in which all rooms open off of a central courtyard, an architectural pattern that is much less prevalent in Madurai than in much of the rest of India (for a description of such houses, see, e.g., Wadley 1994, p. 13). For other discussions of household space, see Moore (1990) and Prammar (1987).
6. All accounts were in English unless otherwise noted.
7. I provide information about individuals' caste in part to highlight the distinction between caste and class.
8. The English words "clean" and "neat" are also used by Tamil speakers. Terms used for their opposites include *aḷukku* (dirt, filth), *aciṅkam* (muck, filth, ugliness), and *acuttam* (uncleanliness).
9. Idlis are a steamed muffin-like food eaten in the mornings and evenings, made of ground rice and lentil batter.
10. Parvathi may have meant "brilliant like a mirror." The Tamil word *kaṇṇāṭi* is used for both glass and mirror (as well as for eyeglasses). Parvathi normally speaks in Tamil, but during this discussion she briefly switched into English—a language in which she is less comfortable—because her current servant had entered the room, and Parvathi did not want her to understand our conversation. In any event, the meaning of the phrase was clear: the men's clothing, and the men's clothing alone, had been brilliantly clean.
11. The housing provided for high-level Indian government employees often includes servants' quarters within the compounds. See Tolen (2000) for a discussion of the "knowledge transfers" that take place between employers' and servants' households in a Madras Railway Colony.
12. Servants' boundary negotiations involve putting forth a variety of their own symbolic claims (which are also intended to have material effects). Refusal to "take advantage" of the soap and used clothing that employers provide, as Mrs. Chinanadar reported, is one method of resisting attempts to make over servants' bodies; similarly, sneaking food or more significant items out of the household is a way of refuting control over their movements, while the spreading of unflattering information outside is often aimed at fighting employers' claims to a higher moral standing. Like employers, servants can try out different forms of address (or posture, or furniture usage) both to communicate a particular stance of respect, deference, or intimacy, and to make symbolic bids for the respect or intimacy that they wish to claim in return. Servants may also support employers' efforts to separate them from the family's most significant belongings and intimate spaces—such as by requesting employers to lock wardrobes or storage rooms—in order to protect themselves should food or jewelry suddenly disappear.

T E N

## Gender Plays

### *Socio-spatial Paradigms on the Tamil Popular Stage*

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Susan Seizer

In this essay I look at the geography of stage space in the popular Tamil theater genre known as *Special Drama*. My thesis is that consistent usage of stage space in Special Drama performances makes that stage a platform that resonates with the analogous relations between theatrical representation and real life. I focus here specifically on the use of stage space in the comedic duet that opens every night of Special Drama. This opening duet establishes spatial paradigms employed throughout an entire night of performance. Moreover, the comedy duet has a narrative structure that, curiously, fits so seamlessly into existing Tamil social and spatial paradigms that its very existence as a specific narrative tends to escape local notice. That is, the narrative structure of the comedy duet is so naturalized that it disappears. My ultimate aim, then, is to make visible the contours of the socio-spatial world that this enacted story otherwise assumes.

In this endeavor, I approach theatrical performance as a cultural system that is itself necessarily embedded in the cultural context in which it is staged and to which it speaks. My emphasis is on how a particular spatial organization establishes the particular local terms in which a resemblance between social reality and its theatrical representation may then exist. What intrigues me is how the organization and use of stage space in Special Drama enables what is enacted on stage to speak directly to dominant organizations of Tamil social relations offstage.



Specifically, every Special Drama scene staged is situated spatially in ways that index the more general gendered organization and use of space in everyday Tamil social life. I argue that the analogic relationships pertaining in special Drama between onstage and offstage socio-spatial paradigms provide the conditions of possibility for comedic flights of fantasy—such as those enacted in the comedy duet—that bear directly on the social reality of the Tamil sex/gender system. This play with gender relations on the Special Drama stage exists in dialogue with classical Tamil mythical models, while simultaneously enacting much that is never spoken aloud. Such stagings both capture and instantiate some of the more uncomfortable ambivalences structuring Tamil gender relations today.

During my ethnographic field research in Tamilnadu (1991–1993), I studied the lives and the social positions of the artists who make up the Special Drama acting community. A key focus of my subsequent work has been understanding how artists negotiate their stigmatized social position onstage and off. My interest in the actors' use of stage space is very much informed by an awareness that actors carry onto the stage with them a burden of social disrespect that they must somehow negotiate each time they present themselves to an audience. Borrowing the subtitle of Goffman's insightful study of stigma (1963), my analysis here might equally be characterized as "notes on the management of spoiled identity."

### Three Stigmas

There are three highly interconnected dimensions to the stigma that pertains to stage actors in Tamilnadu. I introduce these dimensions here only briefly. Overall, the stigma on actors stems from a notion that their social relations are disorderly and, consequently, overly mobile; in short, actors are perceived as unsettled and are thus unsettling.

The first dimension of the problem inheres in acting itself, and in the very fact of mimetic fluidity: acting arguably necessarily involves illusion and not reality, and actors make a profession of offering "false" selves in place of the "true," raising the possibility that social and personal identities are mobile rather than fixed. The second stigmatized dimension involves perceptions of actors' behavior in the offstage world, where again their behavior is seen as overly fluid: actors frequently

intermarry across established caste, class, religious, and ethnic boundaries, and are thus accused of not maintaining normal, orderly, sanctioned kin relations.

The third dimension concerns an India-wide stigma on actresses, who have long been the very definition of "bad" women. Unlike the chaste loyalty of the good wife who reveals herself to only one man, the actress's profession requires that she willingly expose herself to the gaze of many unfamiliar men. This blatant step into the limelight of "the public sphere" threatens to expose the fragility of the culturally naturalized division of gendered spheres into home and world, as actresses move onto public stages to enact what are meant to be the most private of relations. In their inescapable roles as public women, actresses are thought of as breaking a cardinal Tamil rule of female marital chasteness; the reputation of female performers as courtesans is now encoded into the Tamil language itself: several Tamil words whose etymological origins refer to actresses and dancers commonly mean "prostitute" (*kūttāṭi*, *tēvaṭiyāl*, *tāci*).

To understand the boundaries a woman oversteps by stepping onto a Tamil public stage, brazenly entering the gaze of male strangers, we must remember that the Tamil sex/gender system is structured primarily through a division of sex-segregated social spaces. Apart from the "home and the world" public sphere/private sphere distinctions so often noted throughout South Asia, in much of Tamilnadu sex segregation is meant to be observed even within these spheres, such that women and men eat separately in the home, ride on separate sides of the local bus, watch movies from different halves of the theater, and stand in different lines to pray to Hindu deities. Both common and scholarly self-representations of "Tamil culture" tend to invoke the strict social division of the sexes as a defining virtue, and questions of the deleterious effects of modernization on the strict maintenance of these foundational gendered binaries provide a staple of conversation and debate generally, as they do on the Tamil popular stage. On stage, an actor's ability to propound the importance of gender role maintenance and the social duties entailed therein—and to do so convincingly and creatively in both comedic and dramatic modes—is crucial to establishing his or her competence as a performer.<sup>1</sup> The successful female Special Drama performer thus lives a contradiction: she attains competence on stage by propounding a gendered morality that, by virtue of her profession as an actress, she has always already lost any chance of inhabiting offstage.



## A Stigmatized Genre

In addition to these three stigmas on actors qua actors, there is also a very particular stigma attendant on the actors who perform in Special Drama, which is itself widely considered a "vulgar" genre. This dismissive attitude originated with middle-class critics in the early decades of the twentieth century, when Special Drama first appeared as a bastard child of the move to modernize Tamil drama. In the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, actors and actresses who were not well-disciplined enough, or so it is said, to make it in the drama companies of the day came away from these companies and worked freelance as independent artistes. Drama events utilizing such freelance actors were called "Special Dramas" (*Special Nāṭakam*) as the performers were hired "specially" for each show. The name stuck, and today every performer in Special Drama is an independent "artiste": there are no troupes, no companies, and no directors in Special Drama. Instead, each artist is contracted individually for every performance, and actors and actresses who may be previously unknown to each other meet, onstage, for any given performance, having traveled from their homes in different towns and cities across the state.

This organizational structure has an important entailment for actresses, as the practice of hiring independent artists for every role relies on each individual performers' willingness to travel. Such public mobility raises particular problems for Special Drama actresses, who are necessarily sensitive to the stigma that accompanies the reputation of actresses as "public women" who move out into the world beyond the bounds of proper, modest feminine behavior. In Tamilnadu, as throughout much of South Asia, the ideology of properly separate spheres for women and men—the home and the world, respectively—continues to exert a good deal of pressure, particularly on poor urban women who do not have access to the kinds of ideological loopholes middle-class women regularly deploy to circumvent such strictures on their movements outside the home.<sup>2</sup> For actresses, the fact that their profession requires their public mobility clearly feeds into the larger stigma on the acting community, noted above, of a propensity to overly mobile, dissolute, and disreputable relations.

Special Drama performers do not rehearse prior to performing; instead, what enables this unusual theatrical organization to work is its adherence to a shared repertory canon. Special Drama relies both on a set repertory of plays (overwhelmingly "mythologicals," the most popular

of which is "Vallī's Wedding [*Vallī Tirumaṇam*]), and a set repertory of players' roles.<sup>3</sup> Such roles—Hero and Heroine, Buffoon and Dancer—are enacted within the context of a well-known repertory of scenes: these include a frolicsome Garden scene between the young Heroine and her *tōli*, or female companion; a melodramatic Forest scene between the Hero and Heroine as young lovers; and a broadly parodic Comedy scene that opens every Special Drama performance event, usually set on a public road between the Buffoon and Dancer. In this essay, I analyze the situated antics of this opening comedy scene, focusing on how this scene establishes patterns of spatial use on the Special Drama stage that carry over into all the succeeding dramatic scenes.

The dismissive, originally middle-class accusation of this genre's vulgarity, and the concomitant notion that Special Drama actors lack discipline, has since been adopted by Special Drama audiences and performers alike, none of whom are themselves middle-class people. Adopting this attitude, however, comprises a bid at social respectability, and the common dismissal of Special Drama in present times as vulgar partly hinges on a notion of comedy itself as spurious, corrupt, degraded, and lewd. Physical comedy in particular is a magnet that attracts a virtually Victorian censure of overly expressive, loose bodies (see Seizer, 1997). While its traffic in comedy is not the only reason for Special Drama's appraisal as a vulgar art—the other stigmas adhering to Special Drama actors, and particularly the disdain for the public mobility of actresses, clearly conspire here—the disavowed quality of the comedy in Special Drama makes the comic scene between Dancer and Buffoon a particularly good place to begin analyzing both the mundane and the fantastic in the organization of socio-spatial paradigms in Tamil society.

The discourse of vulgarity that has swirled around these performances since their appearance in the early twentieth century has succeeded in effectively precluding serious scholarly consideration of what I shall suggest here are actually quite masterful comedic negotiations of the mores of Tamil social life. These negotiations employ parody, irony, and verbal wit as well as the broad physical comedy of exaggerated gesture, mockery, and extreme characterization. Rather than shy away from the coarser elements of such theatrical display, I aim to look directly at the most highly disdained and vehemently dismissed comic scene of all in this already disavowed and disparaged theatrical genre, the opening scene of every Special Drama referred to simply as the Buffoon-Dance Duet.



## On Unspoken Stories

Special Drama performances last roughly eight hours, beginning at ten P.M. and concluding at dawn. As outdoor theatrical events, they are generally performed as the entertainment component of a Hindu temple festival in honor of a local deity.<sup>4</sup> The first two hours are a comic warm-up that takes the form of two standard scenes: the Buffoon's opening monologue, and next the Buffoon-Dance Duet that I examine here. Both of these comic scenes are ostensibly not connected in any way to the ensuing six hours of drama subsequently staged. The mythological narrative for which any given drama event is named takes place fully within these later hours; "Valli's Wedding," for example, is the story of the marriage of Valli and Murukan. The myths presented in the overtly narrative portions of Special Dramas dramatize the valor of male kings, heroes, and deities, as well as the beauty, chastity, and moral uprightness of female queens and goddesses. The dramatic portions of Special Drama are generally performed using formal (or written) Tamil, rather than the colloquial "spoken Tamil" of the comedy scenes.

By all local accounts the comic scenes and the dramatic scenes in Special Drama are completely unrelated. Comedy scenes are said to have no narrative value of any kind. Whenever I asked any question in which I tried to get a sense of what was narratively at stake in the comedy duet—beginning with such simple queries as "Why is she dancing in the middle of the road?" or "What is the story of this duet?"—I was invariably informed, in no uncertain terms, that there simply was no story (*katai*) there. This was "simply comedy" (*kāmaṭi tāṇ*), performers and audience members alike assured me, as though drama and comedy themselves were antithetical terms. "Pure comedy" was opposed to a story, which belonged to a realm of higher, better, more acceptable art—a realm to which comedy seemingly had no access.

A. K. Ramanujan has written of the difference between domestic tales and mythologies in South India as a difference between interior and exterior stylistic forms (*akam* and *puṛam*), respectively. Ramanujan recognizes a continuum of Indian folk genres, ranging from the interior domestic tale to the exterior public performance of theater (1986, pp. 46, 49). I would argue that certain theatrical genres employ the entire spectrum of such continua, since within the night-long theatrical event of Special Drama itself, presentational styles range widely between interior and exterior modes. Ramanujan's understanding of Tamil folktales as bespeaking a particular kind of interior space, and

partaking of a particular kind of "taleworld" and "taletime," strikes me as highly relevant to distinctions made within Special Drama between comedy and drama.

Like the folktale, comedy plays on assumed meanings. It offers potent and ambivalent messages and images that are often verbally slippery. Ramanujan writes:

Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs in this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfillments, and sometimes 'by indirection find direction out' (1989, p. 258).

Any inability to convert the meanings of such artfully indirect artistic forms into "other words" is itself telling.

My attempts to answer my own questions about the narrative burden of the Buffoon-Dance Duet eventually took the form of a videotape that I edited to highlight the highly directed moves that recurred repeatedly in an otherwise seemingly indirect genre. Having seen such comedy scenes performed many times by many different artists, I recognized a very clear and particular story in these duets, or at least, I saw that they were structured by story elements and by a progression of ideas that made the Buffoon-Dance Duet cohere in the first place. It is not that I was determined to find narrative linearity and plot everywhere I looked, but rather that there was here a narrative that somehow escaped recognition as such. It was indeed considered so common, so unremarkable, that no one had words to remark on what seemed to me its remarkable consistencies. Instead they were the given, assumed grounds of popular comedy. In splicing together the recurring story elements from nine different performances of the Buffoon-Dance Duet, I found myself using the very visual material that had prompted me to ask such questions in the first place to prove to myself that the structure I had perceived did indeed exist.

The fact that what gets performed in this scene is not elevated to the level of "story" is a silence that bespeaks its own cultural logic. The silence about comedy maintains it as allied with vulgarity, as well as with all things not publicly "told" but instead banished from the more high-minded domains of Tamil religious mythopoetics into which "stories" properly fit. Both, of course, are true: the story I recognize exists (especially for outsiders like me), and its general nonrecognition as a story



also exists. These occur simultaneously each time the narrative of the Buffoon-Dance Duet, in its enactment, appears to me but disappears into the common socio-spatial paradigms of a world into which it seamlessly fits. While the paradigms of that world continue to be foreign to me, the Buffoon-Dance Duet stands out as a foreign thing; but for those for whom the paradigms of this world are familiar, it disappears.

My assertion throughout this essay, then, that an analogic relationship pertains between the comic and dramatic scenes in Special Drama as well as between the comic scenes and everyday life, must be understood as growing out of my own attempt to answer a set of questions that grew and expanded over the course of my two years of fieldwork. These questions stemmed from my own perceptions, intimately bound up with the perceptions of those around me, and particularly with my confusion over how the local audience spoke—and specifically in this case, how they chose not to speak—about what was being staged in the comedy duet. Why were people (audience and performers alike) so reluctant to admit in conversation that they enjoyed these comedy scenes? As these scenes inevitably drew and held the largest crowds, why would no one ever speak of them as having any lasting value or meaning? Why did these same scenes “work” over and over again; indeed, what made them enduringly funny, and funny enough to inaugurate every drama?

The lack of any overt discussion of these matters eventually prompted me to pay close attention to the nonverbal covert features structuring the communicative arena of these staged duets. Such features include the organization and use of stage space, and in particular the very regular division of that space into areas coded by specific qualities of gendered interaction.

Once I recognized the systematicity of the use of stage space in the comic duet, I soon realized that patterns established here were maintained throughout the dramatic scenes to follow. Moreover, not only did common themes literally shape the use of space in both the comic and dramatic scenes, but the kinds of social spaces that were created and deployed in these scenes clearly had much in common with the organization and use of social space offstage, in everyday Tamil practice. Stage space in the comedic duet, I now saw, was an analogue of other socio-spatial paradigms that primarily went unnoticed in daily life. Particularly in relation to conventions of interaction with persons of the opposite sex, I began to understand what took place onstage as literally situating—(re)placing and (re)presenting—relations that otherwise

were difficult to articulate. In Ramanujan's terms, I saw that these duets “speak of what cannot usually be spoken.”

This insight was forcefully brought home by the one comedic moment in a Buffoon-Dance Duet I had recorded that had *not* worked. This performative failure was a moment of rupture, a moment where a female performer had to step out of the standard frame of the stage and stop the performance. The very possibility of such a rupture finally revealed best of all the extent to which the Buffoon-Dance Duet normally plays out taken-for-granted conventions of social engagement—or socio-spatial stories, if you will.

I hope here to show not simply that the comedy scene has a story so familiar it escapes remark, but that the plot of this story inscribes the entire stage with a spatial organization that is also socially familiar. The socio-spatial paradigms emplotted in the Buffoon-Dance Duet are analogous with those of the entire performative event. Throughout, the plight of actresses represents the potential plight of all women burdened by what is, I will suggest, a suspicious ideology of safely separate spheres. I will return to this question of women's safety after introducing and orienting the reader to the fields of play out of which it arises.

### The Buffoon-Dance Duet

What exactly occurs in the Buffoon-Dance Duet? Its conceit is this: a young girl of sixteen is dancing in the road. A young man (of no specific age) comes by and bumps into her. They argue about who bumped whom, and the meaning of a bump between a man and a woman (“bumping” here having definite sexual connotations). They decide to have a contest to see who is the more skilled at song and dance, ending in mutual appreciation. They find out each other's name and birthplace, and decide to “do love” (elope). Through all this, they sing hit cinema songs from the latest popular films, not replicating the choreography of the original cinema numbers so much as quoting filmic conventions of song, dance, and attitude, with all of which they and their audiences alike are already familiar.

In performance, the narrative progression of this Duet develops around five standard bits in a set sequence. These are essentially the five structuring moments in an otherwise improvised scene. They are: (1) the Dancer's entrance; (2) the bumpy meeting between Buffoon and Dancer; (3) their discussion of the meaning of a bump between



man and woman; (4) a contest of skills wherein the Buffoon and Dancer are representatives of their sex; and (5) mutual admiration and "love marriage."

In my video editing experiment, I juxtaposed clips of just these five segments as they were enacted by nine different pairs of performers in nine different performances. Immediately, the common use of stage space that all nine pairs of performers shared became apparent: certain actions occurred only in certain places on stage. These places thus resonate with a certain character and quality of their own, by virtue of the repeated practice of performers performing specific kinds of activities there. There are five primary stage areas where such different uses are articulated: the four corners and center stage. The more I watched, the more I saw how each of these areas is quality-encoded. Thus, what had originally seemed an empty stage now appears to me a highly articulated social space.

In lieu of sharing with the reader my compilation of performance clips, I trust here in the older, tried-but-true technology of thick written description to communicate how different qualities of interaction, in the course of the Buffoon-Dance Duet, occur in different areas of the stage. Before beginning such an account, however, it may be useful to the reader to have a preliminary visual diagram of the Special Drama stage (Fig. 1). Subsequent diagrams (Figs. 2 and 3) aim at charting the resultant patterns of spatial use on the stage, as discussed below.

#### Configuring the Stage

Special Drama is performed outdoors on a proscenium stage. The rectangular stage floor is either dirt, raised wood, or concrete. Thatched walls (made of braided palm fronds) provide a back, ceiling, and sides to the performance space. Special Drama stages are temporary structures erected by the townsfolk or villagers specifically for the event. The audience sits on the dirt ground in front of the stage. The sites of such events are generally public commons, a public road or thoroughfare, or temple grounds.

With a remarkable degree of consistency at each venue I attended, audiences for Special Drama arrange themselves in sex-segregated spheres. Young children and old men sit closest to the front of the stage. Other men and boys sit behind them to one side, and women and girls to the other. An aisle (or sometimes a rope) separates these two sex-segregated sides of

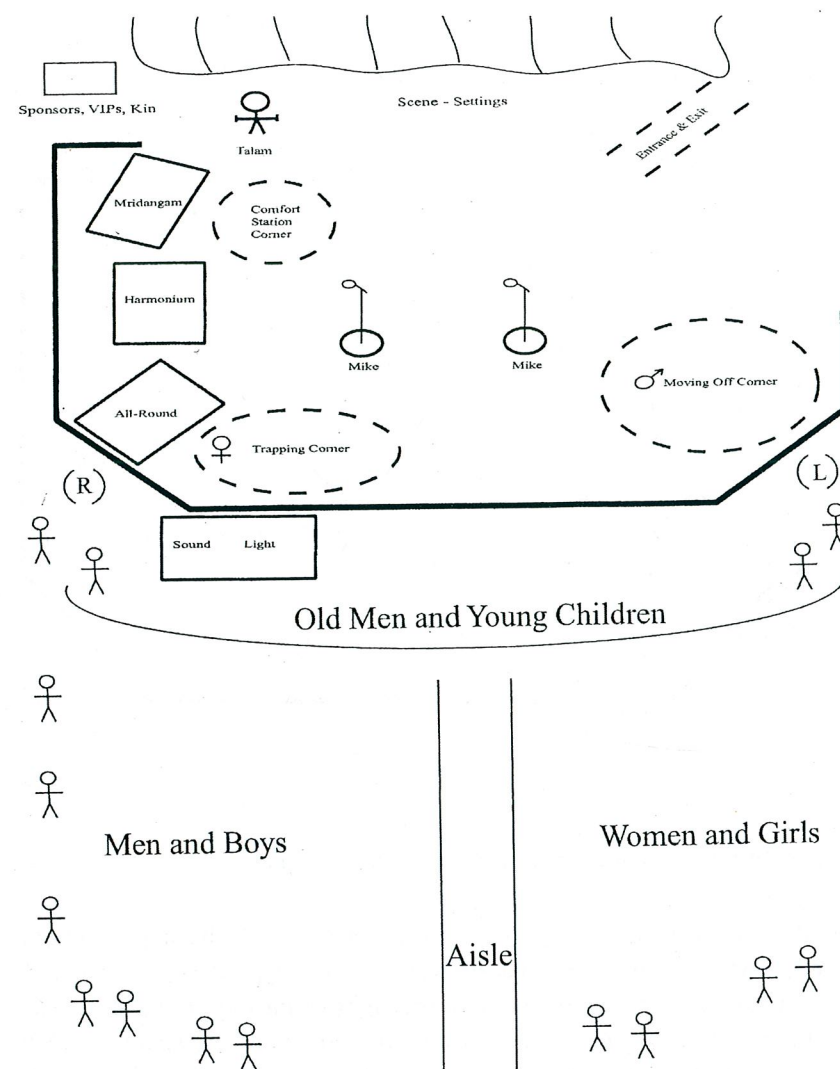


Figure 10.1 The Special Drama stage and its audience context.

the audience. Especially during the comic portions of the event, a wide ring of younger men (bachelors) encircles this entire audience viewing arrangement by standing along the perimeter of the audience on all sides and at the back (represented by stick figures in Fig. 1). During these portions, approximately three-quarters of the audience is male and one-quarter female, though this ratio does change throughout the night as many of the young bachelors leave after the opening comedy scenes



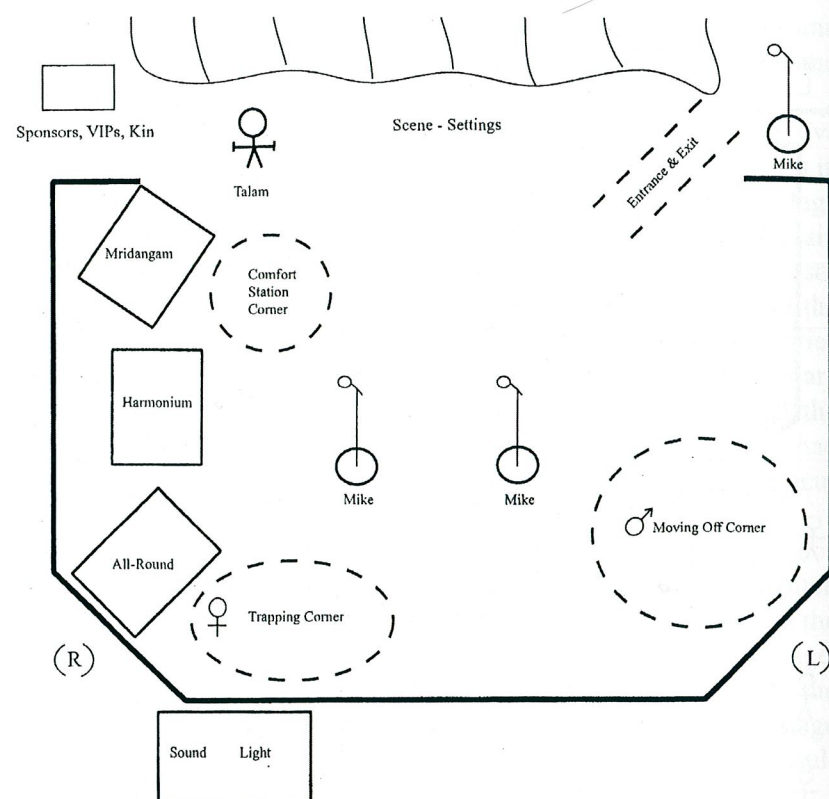


Figure 10.2 Spatial organization of the Special Drama stage.

while women tend to stay the entire night to watch the later dramatic scenes (which, being less lewd, are deemed more appropriate for women).

On stage, four musicians sit stage right: a harmonium player, two drummers (a *miruṭaṅkam* player and an “all-round” or special effects drummer), and a brass cymbal player who keeps rhythm (*tālam*). Both drummers sit atop tables with their instruments, while the harmonium player sits on a chair. The *tālam* player stands, furthest upstage.

A strict demarcation between backstage and onstage is noted through artists’ use of the terms “inside” (*uḷḷē*) and “outside” (*veḷiyē*), respectively. The demarcation is realized by ceiling-to-floor-length painted canvases—referred to with the English words “scene-settings”—that divide backstage from onstage throughout the night. This demarcation between inside as the artists’ space and outside as the audience’s space reverses the otherwise prevailing everyday identities for the participants

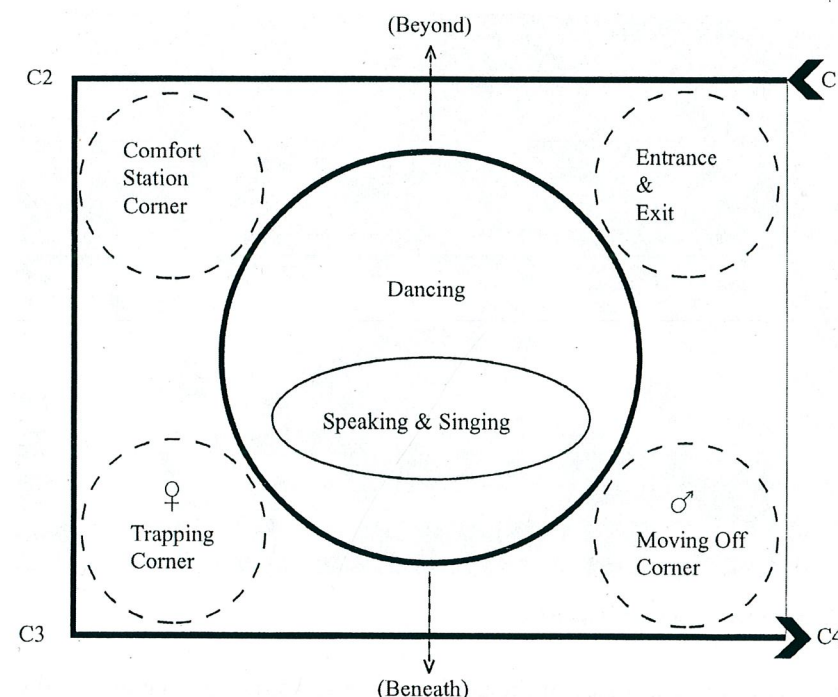


Figure 10.3 Schematic diagram of the use-areas on stage.

in a Special Drama event: it distinguishes *the performers* as inside and insiders (while they are otherwise quintessential outsiders) and utilizes the term “outside” to denote the sphere of the local audience (who are otherwise insiders). This represents a fleeting reversal of dominant relational dynamics between village locals and itinerant performers, and momentarily puts performers in control of a desirable space of controlled and limited access.

It is in this context that performers grant certain local men a partial “insider status” among them at drama events. A privileged position of trafficking between the two realms of inside and outside during the performance is afforded specifically to local VIPs, local drama sponsors, the drama agent (who facilitates the hiring process, acting as a mediary between sponsors and performers), and friends and relatives of performers, who sometimes accompany them to the venue. These men often watch the drama from the upstage right corner of the stage itself (Fig. 4). There they sit or stand beside the musicians, by the far right edge of the painted scene-settings. From this vantage point, they are afforded a





Figure 10.4 "Comfort Station Corner."

much closer experience of the performance and simultaneously they figure into that performance as a sort of paradigm audience, whose every reaction is visible to those on the ground. The contiguity of this privileged audience to the four musicians helps establish the effect of a representative, paradigmatic male audience, a role that the musicians themselves play throughout the night.

In their frequent instrumental and verbal responses to the actors in performance, the musicians serve as a sort of chorus of everymen. This relationship is definitively established in the scene preceding the Buffoon-Dance Duet, the Buffoon's monologue.<sup>5</sup> In these scenes, Buffoons frequently tell stories involving a young man's fantasies about meeting a young woman in public. In telling these stories, the Buffoon uses two different linguistic footings:<sup>6</sup> in the first, he addresses moralizing comments directly to the audience, while in the second, he turns to the musicians and addresses to them any more questionable or vulgar details of his story. It is thus into a space already rhetorically configured as a male domain for discussing women that the Dancer enters the Buffoon-Dance Duet. The Duet, however, is the first fully *enacted* scene of the night. It builds onto an already established use of stage right as a male space, modeling performer-audience relations and mapping larger patterns of stage use by both men and women across the entire onstage space.

Finally, some introduction is due the painted backdrops that mark scene changes throughout the night. These canvases stretch unbroken all the way across the rear of the stage. Special use of the upstage space behind or directly in front of the canvas backdrops themselves is occasionally made for brief and miraculous appearances from gods: visions, voices, and otherworldly advice emanate from just behind these backdrops, while, in "Vaḷḷi's Wedding," upstage center is where Lord Murugaṇ first appears, standing still as a temple icon, giving *darshan* to his audience. This is the "on high" position: directly upstage and behind all the mortal action unfolding onstage, the backdrops are both a touch of realist stage decor and a suggestive space of their own that intimates a "beyond" to the central antics of the drama.

The pictures painted on these canvases create the tone for each scene. The painted road that sets the scene for the Buffoon-Dance Duet bears an interesting relation to this established use of scene settings for otherworldly purposes. Through their exaggerated use of an infinitely receding depth of perspective, the road scene also communicates an atmosphere that suggests that the doings onstage extend past themselves to the point of awe. Further complicating this suggestion is the common knowledge that behind this canvas is a veritable other world, that of the artists and their community, a theatrical *demimonde* known as "the drama world" (*nāṭaka ulakam*). It is onto a stage thus configured that the actress, playing the role of Dancer, makes her first entrance.

#### The Duet in Performance

Figures 2 and 3 diagram the stage space, highlighting the direction and quality of its use in performance. Both diagrams present the stage's major use-areas and the qualities situated and displayed in each. In the ensuing discussion I begin, as do Special Drama performances, in the upstage left corner, and progress counterclockwise around the stage.

#### Story Element 1: The Dancer's Entrance

The upstage left corner is the entrance and exit corner for all actors throughout the night. It is the main channel of supply between inside and outside. This corner is strategically *opposite* the orchestra, so that actors can make eye contact with musicians prior to their stage



entrance, allowing unrehearsed entrances to be coordinated with the music. A microphone located in this corner, behind the wing, facilitates the singing entrance used primarily for dramatic scenes, in which actors begin singing to musical accompaniment prior to their visible entrance onto the stage (see Fig. 5).

The Duet begins energetically, the Dancer entering the stage to fast-paced instrumental accompaniment. She runs out from the upstage left corner and circles the entire stage counterclockwise. Some Dancers perform this opening entrance as a wide, embracing circle, while others contract the circling quality so narrowly that they essentially spin in place. Whatever its initial diameter, the flurry of the Dancers' opening movements always culminate in a spin, which itself finishes in a flourish and a formal greeting to the musicians: her palms meet before her sternum in the polite gesture of ritualized greeting that is both a common everyday gesture in Hindu Tamilnadu and a formalized tradition of classical South Indian dance (*Bhārata nāṭyam*). As a ritualized dance gesture opening classical dance performances, this greeting signals humility and respect for the instruments and the players with whom the performer shares the stage. Some Dancers touch their hands in greeting to each of the musical instruments in turn, formally acknowledging the musicians and marking the fact that their performance together is thereby begun.

Figure 3 indicates with an arrow the direction of the Dancer's defining introductory circuit around the stage space. This arrow simultaneously indicates the progression by which the various qualitative use-areas on stage will be introduced in the Duet as a whole. The Dancer's entrance has taken her from corner one, the entrance corner, around the stage in a counterclockwise direction ending at corner two, the comfort corner, where she greets the musicians.

I call this upstage right corner "the comfort corner," as it is often used as a kind of safe place for actors while they are working onstage. It is, as discussed above, the most populated place on the stage; actors join others (family, friends, and people with some degree of local prestige) here to take a break, using this corner as a kind of comfort station for "cooling off" during long stretches onstage. In the midst of a long scene, actors may repair here while another waxes poetic center-stage, and have sodas or drinks of water, wipe sweat off their faces with towels, or readjust slipping costumes. Unlike corner one, this corner is not so much an energized channel between outside and inside as it is a piece of the inside—a familiar community space in which to recharge—situated outside.



Figure 10.5 "Entrance and Exit."

Perhaps most important, this corner allows actors to drop momentarily out of character and into a net of real-life relations in which they can assume a different persona. These relations are both with members of their own *known* community ("drama people"), and with the set of locally prestigious people whose support makes any given performance possible. Dropping into this safety net while onstage thus provides actors a chance to stand apart for a moment from the characters they play, and perhaps enact here a rather idealized instantiation of



ease and belonging among a group comprising both local and acting community men—that is, of outsiders and insiders together—such as actors rarely encounter in real life.

As a whole, the right side of the stage that the musicians occupy provides a space for the familiar and known. In Special Drama, musicians and actors are often kin. The community comprises persons of many differing caste, regional, religious, and ethnic backgrounds who have built their own kin network through intermarriage. Even if they are meeting for the first time only that night, musicians and performers nevertheless generally think of themselves as members of the same stigmatized community and tend to address each other with fictive kin terms—older brother or sister, younger brother or sister, uncle, or aunt, as the case may be.

Returning to the Dancer's opening performance in the Duet, we see that she has inaugurated what will prove to be canonical usages of both upstage corners in her very first movements onstage, entering from the left, and respectfully greeting her community on the right upstage corners respectively. Next, she moves from upstage right into center stage, approaching one of the two microphones that stand there. She sings one or two popular film songs, dancing all the while in a style Special Drama performers call "Oriental dance" (the English phrase is used), a chameleon-like rubric under which a wide variety of dance styles have fallen over the course of remaking dance in colonial and postcolonial India (see Erdman, 1996). In Special Drama, Oriental dance is basically Bhārata nāṭyam with simpler hand gestures (*mudrās*) and dance steps, lots of added hip thrusts and shoulder shakes, and a constant megawatt cinema smile. Again, the Dancer in no way attempts to replicate the choreography that accompanied the song in its original film context; live staged performances that aim at reproducing cinema choreography as closely as possible belong to a separate genre of contemporary Tamil popular stage performance, known as "record dance." Rather, here the actress invents her own steps in a loosely interpretive cover of the popular song.

What the Dancer's singing and dancing inaugurates here, in terms of the valence of center stage that will carry over into subsequent acts and scenes, is a kind of "hotting up" of things generally. Center stage is where the fiery debates, impassioned speeches, and punny monologues that constitute the verbal core of Special Drama performances are situated. The many strategic forms of verbal, postural, and gestural address deployed center stage create a constant tension in their performance

between arousing the audience and holding them at bay. I think the metaphor that best captures the relations that center stage bears to its periphery is that of a centrifuge: activity heats up in the center, then spins off into a particular edge or corner, each of which is encoded with its own qualitatively different valence.

Over the course of her song and dance numbers centerstage, the Dancer literally warms up the crowd. In one performance I recorded on videotape, a Dancer's exaggerated, slow hip rotation, arms up and body rhythmically circling, received prolonged whistles and hoots from the male audience, one of whom stood at the very lip of the stage snapping still photographs, his intent body posture looming in my camera lens in silhouette before the brightly lit glittering figure of the curvaceous Dancer onstage.

For the Dancer's role in the Duet, actresses wear a glamorized version of a young girl's daily costume, the *tāvaṇi* (demi-shawl) and skirt set traditionally worn by unmarried but postpubescent Tamil women. Here, this consists of a short, tight blouse and matching long skirt decorated with sparkling detail (sometimes fully sequined) and three yards of a separate diaphanous fabric draped over one shoulder (the *tāvaṇi*) and across the chest, then tucked in at the waist. By wearing a *tāvaṇi* and skirt as opposed to a sari, the Dancer here signals that she is young and unmarried. In reality, the contrast between the actress and the young role she plays can be arresting: several of the Dancers I have seen perform in this role were in their late thirties and early forties. What makes the disjuncture arresting is that no women other than actresses in the line of work seem to dare to alter the strict one-to-one relation that pertains in Tamilnadu between code of dress and a woman's life stage. Thus, immediately upon her first appearance, the notion that actresses transgress a wide range of strict behavioral norms adhered to by the majority of Tamil women is visually reinscribed, as is the resultant stigma on actresses that they seem to invite wherever they go.

#### Story Element 2: The Bumpy Meeting

As the Dancer ends her final song, suddenly the Buffoon hurtles out of the upstage left corner and bumps right into her. Their hips collide. The drummers emphasize their collision with an instrumental thud and clang. Most actors play this opening hip-bump between Buffoon and Dancer as highly exaggerated physical comedy. No attempt is made to



hide the artifice of the meeting or to pretend that neither performers, musicians, or audience haven't fully expected just this "unexpected" occurrence. Such stagey timing finds its echo in the bump's spatial logic: it takes place just at the upstage pinnacle of center stage, simultaneously knocking the Dancer offcenter and out of center stage while bringing the Buffoon forward. Sometimes he passes right by her after dislodging her from center, continuing on his entrance trajectory across stage, pulling up to greet the musicians just short of hurtling into them. Other times the Buffoon allows the bump to change the direction of his course so that, while it pushes the Dancer upstage, the Buffoon winds up centerstage at the mike.

The Buffoon's costume communicates an entirely different message from that of the Dancer's; the clothes he wears may be worn by Tamil males of any age, married or unmarried. He wears for this scene the comfort clothes Tamil men wear around the house: an old sleeveless cotton undershirt or cotton T-shirt and a *lungi*, three yards of fabric wrapped around his waist, hanging down to his knees or calves. Over one shoulder he sports a small multipurpose towel, used equally by men to wrap their heads or swat away flies. These items of clothing are supremely ordinary, well-worn, and wrinkled. By his costume alone, the Buffoon embodies a Tamil Everyman.

In contrast to the Dancer's earlier ritualized dance greeting, the Buffoon's greeting to the musicians is casual and colloquial, verbal as well as gestural. It takes place either stage right or center stage at the mike. He banters easily with these men, a continuation of the repartee style established during his monologue scene. Greetings accomplished all around, the Buffoon turns his attention to the Dancer. Their first interchange is immediately argumentative: "Why did you bump me?" he asks, to which, offended, she counters, "Me bump you? You bumped me!" and the main action of the Duet is begun.

Often the Dancer volunteers a defense of her right to mind her own business: "I was simply dancing by myself here on the road, and you came crashing into me!" This defense is more damning, in context, than not saying anything at all: what would a good Tamil girl ever be doing dancing by herself on a public road? This is the second clue to the fact that the Dancer must be viewed as unusual and unusually transgressive.

Indeed, in Tamilnadu dancing itself is a rather extraordinary affair. Professional classical dancers or same-sex groups of male or female dancers at religious events (such as women dancing *kummi*, a folksong genre, in a circle on temple grounds) are the only persons for whom

dancing is not seen as degrading activity. Others who dance with impunity are those possessed by deities, including groups of men on religious pilgrimages who dance en route with religious fervor, where a perceived loss of control is excused by the presence of the divine. Otherwise, the norm in Tamilnadu is to strictly control all extraneous physical movement, and dancing without a formal reason is considered vulgar. The fact that she dances in public is perhaps the most stigmatizing aspect of the stage actress's profession, a point to which I shall return.

For now, note simply that the dancing girl's defense of her reputation is no rational defense at all. When I asked actors and non-actors alike about the unusual behavior of the girl in these Duets, the response I received by way of explanation for her highly nonnormative actions always included the word *cummā*, perhaps the best English gloss for which is "just because!" "Why is she dancing in the road?" "*Cummā*!" would come the reply, as though this were quite natural.

Such a response was part and parcel of an overarching attitude I encountered toward these Duets, as mentioned above: the notion that they simply could not be analyzed, since they were "merely comedy." The notion of a girl dancing in the road "just because" further inscribes the taken-for-grantedness of this whole *mise-en-scène* for its audience: it is the fantasy flipside to the normative reality that good Tamil girls don't do such things. The unspoken possibility, of course, is that some girls just might.

It is into this fantasy of a protected private space of autonomy for women in the very midst of the public sphere that the bump intrudes and explodes. The bump is a crash with reality; in one exchange I recorded, Padma, a Dancer from the town of Karaikkudi, and Udaiyappa, a Buffoon from the city of Pudukkottai, said it quite succinctly:

B: "Who are you?"

D: "Yo! I am a woman, and I am dancing here in this road, and now you've come along and spoiled it!"

### Story Element 3: The Meaning of a Bump between Men and Women

Such initial verbal exchanges quickly lead to more protracted discussions of the *meaning* of a bump between man and woman. These discussions take place between Buffoon and Dancer while standing at the mikes, center stage. The two Tamil words repeated over and over here



are *āṇpillai* (man) and *poṇpillai* (woman). The “bump” seems to have sprung open a highly productive space of interactive social anxiety necessitating fundamental reiterations of a distinction between genders. The bump jolts the Dancer out of what Lacan might term a pre-linguistic imaginary and propels her into the recognition of herself as a signifier in a symbolic, phallic world. Their bump propels Buffoon and Dancer headlong into the world of logos, carving out a new, specific space on stage in the process. Morals and mores tumble out with every utterance emitted from that oblong hot spot on stage containing the two microphones (Fig. 3). First and foremost, these children must establish the difference between them on which the impropriety of the bump rests:

B: Who are you?

D: I’m a woman.

B: And who am I?

D: You’re a man!

B: Right.

D: Right! You’re a man! I’m a woman! And for a man to bump a woman is wrong!

By reiterating such fundamental moral tenets of gendered interaction, the Dancer makes her onstage persona a mouthpiece for just the kind of social censure so often aimed at the actress herself offstage. The Dancer thus introduces a certain discursive reality into what was a purely imagistic fantasy thus far, and yet it seems to only up the ante of the scenario’s seductive social appeal: clearly she (the female character and, by extension, the actress who animates her) knows that what she is doing is wrong, but she (the actress herself now, as a real-life dancing girl) is doing it anyway. Introducing moral discourse by embedding it in an enactment of its transgression simultaneously cracks the primary fantasy of the imaginary and brings it to a heightened, linguistically self-conscious metalevel, as Buffoon and Dancer stand centerstage, flirting by yelling prohibitions at each other!

Once this flow of self-censuring words begins, it often quickly becomes contentious, as though argument might hammer some way out of the self-consciousness in which both players are now trapped, longing for a return to a less problematic imaginary.<sup>7</sup> Much banter already assumes a permanent state of challenge between men and women, as in this impish performance by a Madurai Dancer named Silk:

I’m a woman. If I want to, I can bear a child. You are a man. So you think I need you; you think that without you I can’t do it, isn’t that what you think? But I tell you, all that is just your fantasy. That’s all the past, man! History! These are modern times. Nowadays, for 4,000 rupees I can simply get an injection and give birth to a kid all on my own. There’s no need for you, so “get out!” (*in English*) [*Turns to look at audience*] At least, that’s what I learned from my foreign friend!  
[*points and smiles at me*]

Silk’s playful appropriation of modern science here proves that virtually anything can be cunningly harnessed to serve locally enduring purposes. The bump is productively overdetermined: clearly sexual and scandalously immoral in public, its public performance raises a tension between stated, repressive norms of proper gender behavior and the unstated, irrepressible figments of fantasy. The couple promptly determines to resolve this tension in a contest that pits man and woman against each other as adamantly gendered subjects with all the attendant verbal and nonverbal social skills.

#### Story Element 4: The Contest between Men and Women

The contest begins with a challenge. Meeting it dramatically expands the core logocentric focus of center stage, turning it into an active centrifuge of interacting desires, both conscious and unconscious. The conceit of the contest itself is fantastical: a woman dancing alone on the road agrees to engage in a contest of skills with an unknown man, attempting to outstrip him in everything he does. She is the perfect feisty mate, a woman magically undeterred by norms she has just made us quite aware that she knows.

Buffoon Kannan and Dancer Kasturi, both from Pudukkottai, make this representative player quality overt in their use of the Tamil exclusive first-person plural pronoun (*nāṅka!*) to challenge each other. The exclusive “we” used here gives a strong sense of two opposing teams of exclusively gendered subjects:

B: Can you<sup>8</sup> do anything we (*nāṅka!*) do?

D: We’ll do it!

B: We’ll drive cars.

D: We’ll also drive cars!



- B: We'll drive buses.  
 D: We'll also drive buses!  
 B: We'll drive lorries.  
 D: We'll also drive lorries!  
 B: We'll drive you who drive everything!  
 D: Only if we give it can you drive it; otherwise, there's nothing you can do!  
 B: No, that's not how it is, woman! All you've got is the "steering" [*gestures with both hands as if holding a steering wheel in front of his chest*], while we have the "gear box!" [*gestures with one arm in front of his hip*]

As the small children in the audience join in the howling laughter that greets this barely coded symbolic display of sexuality, the Dancer turns directly to address the audience closest to her, a group of young boys sitting among the children up front, and asks them pointedly, "Hey, what is it with you kids? You're laughing, are you? You think you know anything about all this?!" The Buffoon comes to the rescue of the boys, picking one out in particular, and saying, "Though he's just a little guy he is one of our sex (*varkkam*). Like a calf, it may be just a small calf but its horns are big!" The Buffoon has here made the two terms officially overt, both through his choice of image and of word: the term *varkkam* distinguishes everything from a class, a race, and a sex, to a species (here, little boys with big horns).

The feistiness of the Dancer's role here seems to have emboldened the actress herself, blurring the boundaries of self and role; who exactly is chastising the little boys, a character in a comedy? Or the actress who plays her? It is already hard to distinguish the actress from the role of the dancing girl she plays, for who in this society *but* an actress on an outdoor stage comes closest to the fantasy of a woman dancing in public? Tamil films specialize in encouraging fantasies of women dancing outdoors; no Tamil film seems complete without a song and dance sequence set amid waterfalls in rolling hills, temple ruins, or high Himalayan peaks and valleys. The antics of such celluloid dream maidens surely contribute to the audacity with which stage actresses now inhabit their roles as Dancers. Nevertheless, in the flesh, traveling from stage to stage on very real roads in the company of very real publics, this actress essentially *is* the dancing girl she plays—and the young children up front are learning all about it.<sup>9</sup>

Having established the nature of their play through such verbal sparring, Buffoon and Dancer now step back from the mikes to begin enacting the physical dimension of their contest. The musicians strike up a

common fast-paced folk tune in a musical genre named for its sing-song chorus, *taṇaṇaṇē*. The actors dive into a dance of thrusting hips, approaching each other and retreating, contracting and expanding the circle of center stage and defining it with strong, wide, voracious steps. In effect, the Buffoon has joined the circle the Dancer first traced with her entrance. Together, they spin in a heated whirl.

They mirror each other's steps in a highly attuned improvisation. In unison, they gradually draw together into a tense, close stance, only their hips moving, bumping together rhythmically. Thus what began with a hip-bump, then spread out, over loudspeakers, in words and songs only to eat up the entire stage in hungry dance, has finally come full circle back to the hips where it began, the bodily center (as Western dancers say) and center stage. For a moment Dancer and Buffoon move together like a single pulse. But this tension quickly proves too much for the man, and he overtakes her, overzealously thrusting his hips at her, practically jumping onto her in such a way that she starts to back away, trying to escape him. His excited over-eagerness ruins the moment.

This turn of events always ends with the Dancer backing up into the downstage right corner of the stage. The couple's deceleration out of their charged, whirling circle of big movement culminates with the Dancer positioned between the Buffoon and the musicians, caught between men both before and behind her. As she backs up to escape the Buffoon, there is nowhere to go but closer to the musicians (Fig. 6).

I have characterized this downstage right corner as the place on a Special Drama stage where women routinely find themselves, and are seen being trapped by men (Figs. 1–3). The corner is structurally walled off from egress into the audience by the musicians' tables, and particularly the table furthest downstage upon which the all-round drummer sits. His wooden table, his own body, and his array of drums effectively create a wall that separates this downstage corner from the offstage space beyond it. Just below and abutted to the lip of the stage in this same corner is another table where the electrical sound and light system and the men who run it sit (drawn into Figs. 1 and 2). These two tiers of men seated at their instruments create a vertical wall of enclosure that extends both above and below the actors. A woman who is backed into this space cannot go beyond it; it is a corner from which there is no escape. It is to this corner that male actors invariably head when they are trying to physically overpower a woman, maintaining eye contact with the musicians, while her back is to them.





Figure 10.6 "Woman-trapping Corner."

At this point in the Duet, the Buffoon corners the Dancer and she literally has to push him away, most often putting her two hands against his chest and giving him a shove. This in and of itself is somewhat humiliating to her, in that she has had to resort to physically touching a man onstage. Public touching itself taints a woman, as the following exchange between Dancer Jothi Stri and Buffoon Ravi Kanth, both of Madurai, overtly reveals:

D: Hey, don't touch me, man! There are lots of people watching. How am I going to get married, who's going to marry me, if they see me up here getting touched by you?

B: Oh, are there, are there people watching?

D: Yes, indeed, there are lots of them watching, and they care about that!

This exchange took place center stage, when the Buffoon tapped the Dancer on the shoulder while talking. Her overt comment here lays bare a normative condition that pertains throughout the Duet: a woman's reputation is negatively affected when a man touches her in public. She loses her reputation in the eyes of the larger society and can no longer be properly married off. Such commentary really constitutes a kind of metacommentary in that it exposes the subtext of danger infusing the

whole enterprise of the Buffoon-Dance Duet: a girl-woman dancing with a man, in public, has placed herself conspicuously in the path of all the potential taints on a woman that may be wrought through her sexualized presence in the male public sphere. Equally, when she must resort to physically defending herself in the downstage right corner, it should be clear that a woman is put in a no-win situation, forced to choose between being physically overpowered and having her reputation as a woman who touches men in public confirmed.

In contrast to the security and status provided actresses amid the mix of community in the upstage right corner, the downstage right corner is a site of women's humiliation. Whereas upstage right she may be seen to interact cordially with important and known men on an equal footing of respect, downstage right she is pushed as far as possible into the gaze of strangers: unknown men in the village audience.

Usually, her retreat into this downstage corner, coupled with her retaliating push on his chest, is enough to discourage the Buffoon from literally jumping the Dancer and the action folds back into another round of dancing or verbal sparring. I did, however, witness one particular Buffoon-Dance Duet in which a Buffoon's overzealousness at this point in the act definitively crossed an already blurred line between acting and real life, literally stopping the show. As the wide, hip-thrusting dance circle narrowed into a sexual pulse, instead of merely gesturing at overwhelming the Dancer and driving her into the downstage right corner, Buffoon Udaiyappa went particularly wild in aiming exceedingly high and hostile jumps at Dancer Padma. The first time this happened, she adroitly fended him off with her arms, and managed to steer them both back into the dance. But when it happened a second time, Padma took the radical step of literally stepping out of the normal playing space of the stage. Her step out taught me that there *is* a normal playing space, and that it does have definite boundaries. In this moment, Padma moved into a portion of the stage I had never seen before, and have never since seen any performer occupy. Physically, she moved onto the furthestmost downstage lip of the stage, downstage of the center-stage mikes. Symbolically, this downstage step broke the charmed circle of the act. Once there, Padma stood still, glaring at Udaiyappa, her back to the audience. She shook her head no; she put out her hand and shook it no, too. He immediately began chattering nervously, trying to cajole her back into the play; he tried coaxing words, such as "Come, *mā*, come back. What are you going to do out there? Come!" But Padma wasn't playing anymore. She held fast her



uncommon ground, making it perfectly clear that unless he stopped his overzealous and sexually aggressive behavior, she would not return to the circle of play.

The moment passed with Udaiyappa seemingly chastised, and they resumed their Duet. But each time he veered again toward an overzealous sexual display, she stepped back onto the dangerous front lip with a look that was a visibly conscious reminder of the precariousness of their agreement, at which point he quickly backed down.

There was a heightened edginess and danger to her standing between him and the actual audience instead of between him and the musicians, the fictive "stand-in" audience. Padma is a particularly bold performer, and the markedness of her unusual move away from the given confines of known men and toward the risks inherent in putting herself nearer to the unknown men in the audience stopped Udaiyappa cold. I felt as though she had broken out of a prevailing, complicit dynamic similar to that of domestic abuse, her own indignation leading her to forge into open unknown territory. While moral indignation is an all-too-common stance for women in India—women as the bearers of the nation's morality and all that this familiar trope implies<sup>10</sup>—in this case it was not simply part of the play but rather caused a frame break. The overwhelming duality of the Dancer's role struck me again: Padma the actress and the nameless Dancer character she plays in this Duet inseparably merged in performing this all-too-real act of moral indignation. Her move punctured the comic frame of the Buffoon-Dance Duet, revealing the ways in which their actions on stage chart very real gender relations under a very thin guise of comedy.

The final space on stage that the dance contest opens up is that of the downstage left corner. This corner, like the others, has recurring standard uses throughout the night. Whenever male actors look for an escape from the action on stage, they do so downstage left. In one Duet, Dancer Kasturi ducked under Buffoon Kannan's legs to escape his advances, only to find, when she stood up, that he had practically disappeared stage left. She had to run after him, grab his hand, and pull him back so as not to lose her partner. Similarly, when Dancer Amutha spunkily attempted to use a thrusting hip move to force her partner Mani to back up (as Buffoons often do in guiding Dancers to the downstage right corner), the ploy headed in the opposite direction, and Mani nearly fell off the stage on its open side, stage left. Here again the Dancer had to grab his hand and pull him back to center to continue their play.



Figure 10.7: "Man-moving-off Corner."

The openness of the downstage left corner is dramatically different, as well as spatially diametrically opposed, to the trapped quality of the downstage right (see Fig. 7). These two downstage corners reflect a strict gender division in use: downstage left is used exclusively by male actors, while, as we have seen, the right is where women are so often confined. In moving downstage left, the Buffoon straddles a kind of semi-on/semi-offstage position. It is here that he embodies the ever-present possibility that exists for Tamil men of moving easily off and out into the public sphere; such a possibility does not exist in the same way for women. The architectural openness of the left side of the stage supports this contrast. Sometimes, late in the night, a Buffoon will dismount the stage to venture out into a sleepy audience with a pail of water to splash, rouse, and startle sleepers; it is always from the downstage left corner that he descends with his pail.

Both downstage corners, then, house a certain threat to the continuity of the contest of skills between Buffoon and Dancer, and keep the tension of their play alive: the energy generated from their dancing center stage spikes out, now to one side, now to the other. Such energy spikes take separate directions for separate genders, as women end up trapped downstage right (fighting a losing battle not to lose face), while men escape any prospect of losing place or face downstage left. In the end,



both corners present gender separation, while center stage remains the locus of the push-me-pull-you dance that is the centerpiece of the contest phase of the Buffoon-Dance Duet.

#### Story Element 5: Mutual Admiration and "Love Marriage"

The contest segment ends when Buffoon and Dancer each seem to suddenly realize that the other has performed admirably. Back from the scare of either side of the stage, they turn to each other with an admiring gaze and renewed interest. Their tone of voice and comportment completely shifts. Sometimes the Dancer begins, in a high-pitched sing-song voice, to praise the Buffoon, exclaiming, "Oh! You sing so well! You dance so well! Stay right here, don't go anywhere! I want to bring you home." Equally often, the Buffoon begins by turning to the Dancer and saying, "You sing well. You dance well. What is your name?" followed promptly by the English phrase, "I love you."

This saccharine turn of the Duet is offset by the parodic flair with which it is performed. For example, my camera captured Dancer Jeeva enacting a send-up of the supposed sincerity of this shift by employing a Freudian pseudo-slip: she says, "I'll bite only you!" (*unnai tān nān kaṭikkirēn!*) instead of "I'll marry only you!" (*unnai tān nān kaṭikkirēn!*). Similarly, when Dancer Sundari flatters insincerely, saying, "Oh! Sir! You are so high up! You have gone, oh, so far somewhere!" her praise simultaneously comments precisely on that evasive prerogative men often exercise, as we have seen. Likewise, when Dancer Jothi exclaims, "I want to marry you right away; we are so well suited!" there is a hint of sarcasm in her choice of words, in their suggestion that the reality of that highly sought-after ideal of a suitable marriage could take the form of a courtship such as we just witnessed, filled with fear, anger, and aggression.

But perhaps the hardest hitting irony of all those couched in the "mutual admiration phase" of the Duet is that displayed by the Buffoon. In the very instant after professing his love for the Dancer, a Buffoon will often turn to a man in the audience and signal to him, through hand and head gestures, to meet the Buffoon backstage after the act if he is interested in the woman. He gestures like a classic pimp, "You want her? You'll pay? Meet me in the back as soon as this is over!" Here, at the expense of his partner's reputation, the Buffoon takes this opportunity to consolidate his same-sex bonds with the men in the audience. He distances himself from

her just at the height of the narrative moment in which they ostensibly come together "in love," thus undercutting any narrative realism with parodic cynicism.

His move also most certainly undercuts the moral ground his partner has attempted to stake out for herself as a woman on stage. The Buffoon's actions ensure that stage actresses will never entirely escape their reputation as prostitutes: even a man who has just publicly demonstrated his love for a Dancer and his willingness to view her as a marriageable woman will turn around and pimp her the next instant. With this gesture, the Buffoon reinscribes several extant stereotypes about drama people and the drama world, including the idea that actresses deserve their spoiled reputation. Actresses' own attempts to escape that reputation by enacting a shared moral stance with "good Tamil women" are foiled, then, by the very men with whom they must share the stage.

During such moments, the Dancer does not acknowledge the Buffoon's gesture. The two continue to exchange vows of love and sing a romantic song together, during which they clasp each other in an embrace centerstage. They smile and coo at each other, hold hands, and decide to elope and perform "love marriage." "Love marriage" is the English term used in Tamilnadu to refer to a decision on the part of bride and groom to marry out of love, rather than accept a marriage arranged by their families, the foreign-inflected, risqué ending to a scenario already traditionally tinged with scandal, that of strangers of the opposite sex meeting, mixing, and matching on a public road.

Their decision to "do love" notwithstanding, there remains a certain tension between the couple center stage. The tautly sprung quality at the center of this scene persists. From this point, there are two possible directions this energy may take in ending the Duet. First, the couple completes their song and runs together offstage, exiting through the upstage left corner. This ending was used in roughly half the Buffoon-Dance Duets I watched. The second possibility is that the Dancer does actually manage to give the guy the slip: at a certain point during the song, she spies her "uncle" coming toward them. She looks out in the distance and calls out, "Uncle!" While politely smiling and greeting this imaginary apparition, she extricates herself from the Buffoon's embrace, holds her hands together in formal farewell, and as the Buffoon turns to follow her gaze out into the audience, she quickly backs away and exits upstage left while his back is turned. The Buffoon is left standing alone to finish the song, and the scene, by himself.



While this second ending would seem to offer the Dancer the last laugh, the Buffoon doesn't always go quietly into his cuckolding. Rather, he may take the opportunity of being abandoned onstage to comment on the Dancer in much the same way his prior pimping suggested. I watched an older, well-regarded Buffoon, Arumukam of Ponamaravathy, speak the following lines after Dancer Padma left him in the lurch with just such a ruse, distancing himself definitively from all that he had just enacted in the Duet, drawing a sharp line between his real self and the character he played:

Blessed woman! She's someone's daughter . . . may you be well! Liking all this is wrong. It is said, "There is only one woman for one man." And who is that one woman? The one who submits herself to the measure of turmeric cord [i.e., the wife], she's the one. I am not alone in asserting this. The Christian Bible, the Muslim Koran, and the Hindu *Kural* all say this same thing: "There is only one woman for one man." All these others [*pointing after Padma*] will disappear.

In this moralizing footing of direct address to the audience at the end of the Duet, note that Arumukam makes his claim for a distinction between his real self (the actor) and his character (the Buffoon) at the Dancer's expense. His ability to rise above the character he played just seconds ago turns on his dismissal of *women such as her*, an attitude that continues to view actresses and their Dancer characters as collapsed into the single entity, "bad woman." It is she who is always worthy of disdain.<sup>11</sup>

Such a use of direct audience address in a moralizing footing at the culmination of the Duet also creates a tidy frame for the act as a whole. It returns to a footing employed throughout the Buffoon's monologue scene that precedes the Duet, so that Buffoons who choose to end the Duet as Arumukam did close this story in the same way it was begun: a Buffoon, alone onstage with his male cohort, offers a moralizing meta-commentary on modern relations between Tamil men and women that portrays moral antimony as their natural state.

#### Analogic Relations

In Special Drama, verbal debates, circumstantial encounters, and physical contests between men and women figure repeatedly in both the comedic and the dramatic scenes that unfold throughout the night. Two

separate sets of coupled artists play the lead roles in these scenes: the male Hero and female Heroine in the dramatic scenes, the male Buffoon and the female Dancer in the comedic scenes. For both couples, their interactions always center around marriage, and generally they are cast as unmarried men and women for whom the potential to be drawn, through mutual attraction, into "love marriage" is strong.

In "Valli's Wedding" (again, the most popular of all Special Dramas), the play turns on a plot wherein Lord Murukan (the Tamil god of youth and beauty) disguises himself as a hunter for the purpose of convincing the young, beautiful, and spunky Valli, daughter of the hunter tribe's chief, to marry him. He surprises her while she is busy guarding her father's millet fields (she is outside, just as the Dancer is in the Buffoon-Dance Duet). His divine identity unknown to her, the girl refuses Murukan's advances. Instead, she argues with him, questioning his propriety in addressing her at all (just as the Dancer did when the Buffoon bumped her). They proceed to debate the morality of arranged marriage versus love marriage in a contest of wits, and he finally uses a supernatural trick to frighten her into submission. Hero and Heroine eventually tie the knot and their "love marriage" ends the drama.

The similarity of this story's structure to that of the Buffoon-Dance Duet is obvious, with the latter essentially a comedic adumbration of the dramatic scenes to follow. "Valli's Wedding" and the Buffoon-Dance Duet are awash in the same design elements. As I see it, the opening comedy scene serves as an orienting figuration, a disavowed lesser half that nevertheless provides a diagram to the theatrics that follow. The parallelism between these two scenes is perhaps most vivid at the level of spatial blocking. Throughout, center stage and each of the four corners maintain continuous standard resonances and index the specific paradigms of gendered social relations in Tamilnadu that I have described above. But there is yet another level on which this same parallelism operates. Just as the narrative texts themselves are organized around interactions between unknown women and men, so too is the contextualizing event, that of the performance itself, for audience and performers alike.

First, actors and actresses are themselves often unknown to each other, coming from different towns to perform together for one night on a village stage; the "special nature" of the Special Drama genre, as we have seen, largely inheres in the uniqueness of each performance event: each artist comes to each performance "specially." Thus, the potential of the unknown meeting is scripted into the "real" lives of the actors and



actresses who play these roles, as they are, in reality, meeting each other as unknown persons on a public road.

Second, a primary intrigue for viewers lies in watching multiple, intertextual layers of meetings unfold between unknown men and women: (1) Buffoon and Dancer, (2) hunter-god Hero and hunted-girl Heroine, and (3) actor and actress as real people. The audience is offered the possibility of entering a common fantasy of "love" from any and all of these domains, all of which, conveniently, share the same stage.

Finally, at an event like Special Drama, the members of the audience are themselves interacting with people they have never met before, as well as others whom they know quite well, all in the heightened space of the outdoor village commons. On these simultaneous multiple levels, the spatial use of the Special Drama stage reflects and troubles a frequently invoked common-sense Tamil distinction between "known people" and "unknown people."

Known people (*terintavarkaḷ*) are preferable to unknown people (*teriyātavarkaḷ*) in almost every type of interaction, as markedly in affairs of the heart as of the purse. Any interaction with an unknown person is potentially the first step on a path toward increased connectedness with a foreign element, and could lead to who knows what. In Tamilnadu generally, new and unknown alliances are guarded against, and tremendous emphasis is put on strengthening the connectedness of kin networks. Women are enjoined to regard known men as their protectors. The idea is that even distant kin look out for each other, and that one's physical safety as well as moral reputation are ensured by limiting outside interaction.

The norm of endogamous marriage in Tamilnadu reinforces these connections. Here, the ideal-typical marriage is that of parallel cross-cousins. Such marriageable cousins—the sons and daughters of brothers and sisters—are in fact addressed from childhood by the terms "customary bride" and "customary groom" (*muṛaiṇṇu*, *muṛai māppiḷḷai*). The paradigm of cross-cousin marriage is encoded into the language itself, where the kin term *attāṇ* is used equally by a woman to refer to her marriageable male cousin (son of her maternal uncle) as to her husband. In short, the husband *should be* the parallel male cross-cousin (and if he is not, he is called that anyway, a good strategy for incorporating foreign difference).

By contrast, a girl who marries outside her kin network is considered to have moved outside of proper customary relations. Such a woman courts disorder. The word *muṛai* covers the English semantic fields of

"custom," "order," and "kin"; the acting community, notably, are proverbially known as "people without *muṛai* (*muṛai illātavarkaḷ*). This is because they so openly engage in interactions with a wide public and also because they are known to frequently marry across caste, both of which are seen as uncustomary and disorderly practices. Coupled with a general suspicion of mimesis as a potentially disordering endeavor, as noted above, the notion of a lack of *muṛai* is at the heart of the stigma encountered by the acting community.

Let us return to the picture of the stage as structured by differently encoded use areas to see how these distinctions between known and unknown persons play out there. I suggested earlier that the two stage-right corners, upstage and downstage, might be seen as complementary spaces, the former a place to enact in a real-life mode the prestige of the known, the latter to encounter in a fictive vein the fear of the unknown. However, the whole of stage right may also be seen as a continuum of known and semi-known men. Here any attempt to neatly separate the spheres of safe versus unsafe, or known versus unknown, is necessarily complicated by the very multidimensionality of the drama community itself. This community transgresses caste, religious, and regional boundaries by replacing them with a fictive kin network of "drama people."

Actors employ a strategy of fictive kin terms of address as they travel through the real world together, just as they do on stage. Everywhere they go, they call each other *aṇṇaṇ* and *taṅkaici*, big brother and little sister, or *tampi* and *akkā*, younger brother and older sister, or uncle, or aunt, or cousin. Though in many ways a brilliant strategy for fending off any outsiders' impressions that a lot of mixing with unknown people goes on in the drama world, the use of fictive kin terms among themselves onstage never quite manages to remove the taint on actresses: for an actress, even the "known" corner is widely recognized to be a broad collection of unrelated men and women moving freely together in ways that for most Tamilians are the definition of the deep unknown. Furthermore, this rather tenuous performance of the known (controlled, respectful) in the upstage right corner shares certain other, more unsettling features with the tense relations enacted in the downstage right corner.

Clearly, this corner is where men enact sexual aggression. But are these men entirely different from those who populate the upstage corner? If the upstage corner serves the drama community and its well-wishers as a source of protection, nevertheless, downstage we find a confusion of protection and danger within the drama community itself.



The mixed message of this continuous zone stage right resonates in disturbing ways with other Tamil social spaces. The men positioned behind the actress, the musicians, simultaneously keep her in and block her escape. They are her community. And yet, what is their role within the comedic performance, in which an unknown man is chasing an unknown woman? Suddenly the musicians are simply male bystanders: do they offer her any of the protection she might otherwise expect from kin? Instead they often ally themselves with the Buffoon, her adversary, greeting him jocularly, and laughing with him as he makes jokes at her expense.<sup>12</sup> Swept up in the performance, they too suddenly become an unknown quantity. The ease of their switch from known to unknown highlights the very fictive nature of their alliance with her in the first place, as we become increasingly aware of the fact that the musicians are equally his community and his kin, and that he too calls them big brother, little brother, uncle.

I wonder if it might not be that because the male actor (the Buffoon) manages to establish a distinction between his real self and his fictive character, he is more able, as his real self (a moral man), to establish same-sex bonds of rapport with the musicians that are inevitably stronger than those the Dancer is able to forge with them. After all, it is a war of the sexes being enacted here over and again. The Dancer never quite seems able to get either the audience or the musicians really on her side, as the overly intertwined figures of her real life as an actress and her fictive persona as a Dancer remain inseparable and as such leave her grappling with stigma, and the lower hand, from beginning to end.

It is often to shore up his moments of direct moralizing address to the audience that the Buffoon interpellates the musicians as his moral support and same-sex peer group, the latter a notoriously strong male bond in Tamilnadu. I find an unresolvable tension in the musicians' presence here: can they really simultaneously egg him on and protect the Dancer? Moreover, in their role as paradigm audience, modeling for the real audience a kind of engaged but distanced spectatorship, what does their ambivalent relation to the Dancer communicate to the men and women in the audience? What can any Tamil woman really expect of the men with whom she interacts, with whom she even shares her home?

Everyone present at an actual Special Drama event knows that being backed up into *this* group of men is safer for the actress than being backed up into an audience of males who are complete strangers. But an ambivalence remains: is this corner home, or street? This downstage right corner houses the predominantly unspoken but nevertheless always

underlying possibilities of domestic violence and incest that trouble any easy separation of "home and world" into truly separate domestic and public spheres.

Finally, it should come as no surprise that it is in this same corner that the turning point of "Valli's Wedding" is invariably staged: after hours of arguing in a contest of wits center stage, the hunter traps Valli downstage right. In this corner, he physically grabs her. She screams out for her brother to come running out to save her. But when her brother finally arrives, and she describes to him all the hunter's disrespectful actions toward her, instead of helping her get away from this lecherous old man (Murukan's guise in this scene), her brother concludes that such trickster-like behavior could only be the antics of a god, and that this hunter must surely therefore be Lord Murukan in disguise, and that, indeed, Valli must immediately submit to his will and desires, and marry him forthwith. The marriage of Valli to Murukan promptly follows: her brother "gives her away" by supplying the marriage garlands.

### Conclusion

My goal in this essay has been to highlight the analogic relations between staged spatial paradigms and everyday offstage social landscapes. The spatial, narrative, and structural continuities between the Buffoon-Dance Duet and the dramatic scenes that follow it in a night of Special Drama are one set of analogous relations. Another broader analogic relation also exists, I have suggested, between the socio-spatial paradigms embodied onstage and those lived in the daily gendered world of Tamil social life. It is in establishing these continuities that theater creates itself as a space for social commentary. My premise has been that spatial use onstage indexes the organization of spatial domains offstage, both on the ground and in the social imagination. As microcosms of Tamil cultural production, the recreations of the drama world address some of the largely unstated organizing principles of Tamil social life.

I have suggested that standardization of the structuring elements in Special Drama—the ordering of scenes, the use of repertory characters and of established musical and rhetorical styles, and the constancy of spatial blocking—makes the unique organization of this genre possible. On any stage, with any combination of known or unknown performers, Special Drama actors rely, in place of rehearsal or direction, on the continuity of these socio-spatial features, all of which are established to



quite a remarkable extent in the Duet. Further, I have argued that the staging of the Buffoon-Dance duet, in both its verbal and nonverbal dimensions, not only anticipates and foreshadows the dramatic Valli story, but also reflects ongoing tensions in the everyday conventional use and organization of Tamil social space. These offstage analogies bear repeating.

Specifically, what I have termed the performers' "entrance and exit corner" recalls the frequent traffic in Tamil social life between a known community and an unknown public other. What I have termed the "comfort station corner" captures the quality of what is accepted as a dominant pleasure in Tamil life, the existence of a safe space among kin, which then extends protection out into the larger, public world. Center stage provides the analog for the sparring quality attendant on the relations between the sexes in Tamilnadu. And finally, in the two downstage corners, what I have called the "men's moving-off corner" refers to an assumed male freedom that leads men to wander and disappear, while the "women's trapping corner" downstage right speaks to the ambivalent qualities of the domestic sphere for women: Is it desirable and safe? Is it desirable and unsafe? Or is it a trap one would rather escape?

The humor apparent in these performances reveals and questions, but also potentially reinscribes, all these existing tensions in offstage life. It exposes a series of hinges between the staged world and life offstage. The spatial blocking hammered out in these performances is simultaneously a theatrical stage convention and a map of certain broader conventions of socio-spatial life in Tamilnadu. While often cast in a comedic mode on stage, the relations between bodies on the ground and bodies on stage play into locally familiar shaping of *space* into highly codified, qualified, and gendered social *place*.

## Notes

All photos by Susan Seizer. Film clips of Special Drama performances can be viewed at <http://www.stigmasofthe.tamilstage.com>.

1. Dell Hymes usefully defines competence in performance as "the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate and interpretable ways" (1971, p. 58).
2. For an extended discussion of actress' strategies for securing a modicum of respect as "good women," see Seizer, 2000.
3. Performances of "Valli's Wedding" comprised 65% of all Special Drama plays performed during the 1991–1993 drama seasons in Tamilnadu's Madurai District.

4. Special Dramas are also performed for Christian festivals, though the sheer number of these is far fewer than the number of Hindu festivals celebrated in Tamilnadu.
5. For a fuller explanation of how the everyman chorus is established during the Buffoon's monologue, see Seizer 1997.
6. I have taken this term from Goffman, who uses the term "footing" to refer to the alignment of speaker to hearers. Shifts in footing frequently involve code switching and changes in tone and pitch, as well as literal changes in stance that include postural repositionings of the speaker's "projected self" (1979, pp. 4–5). The Buffoon makes use of all these shifts during his monologue.
7. The Duet lends itself to Lacanian psychological interpretations in interesting ways, as it seems to enact the whole range of dynamics that Lacan's writings on the mirror stage suggest: that it is a state of longing for the lost world of the imaginary, such that these two seem to hold on to some primary dreams, like cranky children stuck in an adult world of logos. A bit later in the Duet, when Buffoon and Dancer exchange love vows, they use baby-talk voices.
8. This is the only singular usage of the second person in this exchange. After use of the exclusive "we" is established, all other uses of "you" also switch to the matching plural, e.g., "only if we give it can you [*plural*] drive it."
9. I witnessed another Buffoon-Dance Duet where a similar lesson was pointedly addressed to the kids sitting in the audience up front. Shridhar, a Buffoon from Madurai, prepared to embark on the contest segment of his Duet with Dancer Silk by first establishing that this young audience knew all that was at stake by asking them:  
Who are we? We are men! We are heroes! Yes! And in what does the heroism of men consist? *This [physically erecting the head of the microphone]* is the heroism of men!  
The Duet is a crash course in iconicity as well as sex ed.
10. For a full account of the history of this role for women in India, see Partha Chatterjee's influential essay, "Women and the Nation," in *The Nation and its Fragments*, 1993.
11. Arumukam enacts this philosophy in real life in ways that have painful repercussions for actresses interacting with him there, too. Now in his sixties, Arumukam married a non-actress. Their son Kannan is now also a popular Special Drama Buffoon. Kannan wants to marry Kasturi, the Dancer with whom he has been working for several years (Kannan and Kasturi are one of the few Buffoon-Dance teams in Special Drama—that is, they are hired as a team—and they are by far the most popular of these). Arumukam is adamantly opposed to his son's plan to marry an actress. He told me that he does not think that a Dancer makes an appropriate wife, and has blocked his son's marriage for years.
12. In a separate comedic duet between the Buffoon and Dancer that occurs much later in a night of Special Drama, known as the *Aṭipiti* Scene [the thrashing scene], during an act of overt domestic abuse the musicians clearly side with the husband/Buffoon, egging him on as he kicks and pummels his wife, played by the Dancer (Seizer, 2001).