

Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India. Susan Seizer. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 440 pp. \$89.95, cloth; \$24.95, paper.

At first sight, Susan Seizer's engrossing study of Special Drama actors in Tamil Nadu, India, is an ethnographically exhaustive exploration of the management of social stigma. On this level, the book is an invaluable documentary contribution to our understanding of performance and power in South India. Formally, the book is a triptych, with sections portraying, respectively, the historical origins, political economy, and shifting institutional structure of Special Drama; the productive antinomies of its performance, with a particular emphasis on its comedic segments; and the quotidian strategies that Special Drama actresses improvise in order to carve out spaces of dignity and support within a largely hostile world.

What gives Seizer's text its special ethical force, however, is the intimate view she grants the reader into her own struggles to make sense of the political implications of her informants' practices. Special Drama actors are shown here as stigmatized individuals who are constantly attempting to convert the performance of frequently scandalous spectacle into the currency of social respectability. In Seizer's words: "Special Drama artists rely on persons (for employment) who rely on them (as entertainers) to continue to be outsiders *who are aware of themselves as such*" (p. 300, original emphasis). As usual, women are made to bear the heaviest burden when it comes to the politics of reputation. In Special Drama, actresses are in the socially anomalous situation of exploring, in an intensely public (and therefore disreputable) way, the most intimate domains of social relationships.

Meta-conceptually, Seizer's text is an exercise in bringing two kinds of concerns into conversation. On the one hand, the book draws on a longstanding concern in the anthropology of ritual and performance with the ambiguous oscillation between structure and antistructure, social order and liminality. On the

other hand, Seizer's analysis of the structural ambiguity of Special Drama performance informs her attempt to interpret it as a political puzzle. Audiences may well dismiss the comedy scenes in a Special Drama performance as "mere" entertainment, and yet it is precisely here—in breaks between the solemnly ritualized recital of the "dramatic" material that makes up the lion's part of an all-night Special Drama show—that artists are allowed to "speak explicitly and colloquially" (p. 19) about the stigma that trails them *as* actors.

The elegance of Seizer's analysis here lies in its refusal to resolve either the ambiguities of comedy (where laughter can appear by turns generously tolerant and brutally sadistic) or of dramatic performance more generally (where actors come the closest to speaking frankly about their "real" lives precisely when they are most deeply in character). Quite obviously, as Seizer notes, this kind of ambiguity makes nonsense out of any simplistic attempt to recognize her informants' work as conformity or resistance, compliance or subversion. Her empathetic commitment to Special Drama artists' social predicaments leads her to insist that her informants' life-management tactics are subtly adaptive and slyly creative. Drawing on Judith Butler, Seizer suggests that actors' skilled mimicry of dominant social norms is both performative and, in its iteration, deformative—that it has the capacity not simply to reproduce hegemony but also to stretch or denature its categories. "When actresses manage to make their behavior indistinguishable from that of good women—in other words, when they appear to comply with dominant norms—they effectively stretch those norms, even alter them somewhat in the process" (p. 304).

And yet I think it is significant that it is at the tail end of a chapter exploring the brittle devices through which female Special Drama artists manage to cultivate privacy in the midst of their relentlessly public lives that Seizer herself appears to find something of a safe space for doubt. The immediate ethnographic context is a bleary Madurai morning scene in which the author steps off a bus bringing her and an actress friend back from a village engagement and the vulnerability of their anomalous position as women-out-of-bourgeois-place takes on all the experiential force of an epiphany. It is then that Seizer is able to articulate the full extent of her own ambivalence vis-à-vis the socially transformative potential of her informants' work—from sadness at actresses' social isolation at the end of lives spent attempting to enact what amounts to a fantasy of middle-class respectability to some faint hope that the space for frankness opened up in the guise of comedy will do its unsettling social work.

Ultimately, then, the great strength of *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* is classically anthropological: namely, its capacity to wrest dilemmas that are at once political and existential out of an extraordinarily fine-grained ethnographic immersion in the lives and work of a very particular class of performers.

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