

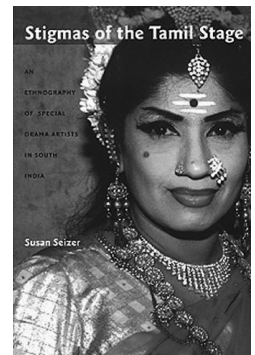
Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India. By Susan Seizer. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005; 464 pp.; 62 illustrations. \$89.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

This book is an ethnographic portrait of the lives of actors of Special Drama, a popular form of musical drama (*icai nāṭakam*) that developed at the turn of the 20th century in the state of Tamil Nadu, South India. Commencing with bawdy comedy and shifting to mythological scenes, the all-night performances feature freelance artists “specially” contracted for the event. The Indian middle class, as well as scholars of Indian theatre, have long ostracized this performance genre out of both belief in the inherent social inferiority of its participants and a contempt for the supposed vulgarity of popular cultural forms. Anthropologist Susan Seizer, on the other hand, takes the form and artists seriously, focusing on the onstage and offstage strategies that actors, particularly women, adopt to resist and deflect the stigma associated with their profession. Based on extensive fieldwork, Seizer’s well-written text, accompanied by photographs, gives a detailed sense of the history, performance modes, and social relations of production that shape this unique art form.

In looking at Special Drama, Seizer divides her subject into three parts: Part One, The History and Organization of Special Drama; Part Two, Comedy; and Part Three, Lives. Beginning with an examination of the history and organization of the art, Seizer complicates the “rural-to-urban” and “folk/traditional-to-modern” scenarios that have dominated scholarly narratives about Indian theatre. Building upon Hanne de Bruin’s work on “hybrid theatre” (2001), she traces how Tamil drama companies were inspired by touring Parsi companies that had borrowed stage conventions and production methods from British companies. By the late 1940s, financial constraints and competition from cinema caused popular drama to move out to rural areas and smaller towns, where it morphed into “regionally attuned” forms informed by ritual performance (62). Today, Special Drama is neither purely commercial nor strictly ritual, and is both urban and rural.

One of the great strengths of this book is the insightful way in which Seizer explores the social relations that shape the production of Special Drama. In looking at the paper notices that advertise shows (Chapter 2) and the organization of actor unions (Chapter 3), Seizer paints a portrait of the wider cultural world to which the art belongs. Her rich ethnographic focus truly gives the reader a sense of Special Drama in relation to the everyday lives of large numbers of people in Tamil Nadu. The productive union she forms between sociopolitical-economic and performance analysis is a model for the kind of work performance studies could do more often.

Equally skillful is Seizer’s analysis of the comedic portions of Special Drama. She is particularly interested in comedy since it draws audiences and also allows actors to address the



problems of stigma. In Part Two of the book, Seizer examines the content of humor, its staging, and the responses of both performers and audience members. Her creative and exhaustive modes of analysis demonstrate the kind of detailed examination a scholar must do in order to understand the appeal and contradictions of highly context-specific forms of comedy. Throughout this section, Seizer develops a sophisticated approach to the relationship between humor and resistance. For example, she sees the jokes and the slapstick of the two characters who typically appear in Special Drama—the raucous Buffoon and his lady friend the Dancer—as affirmations of gender conventions, even as they might seem to be transgressive.

The real “punch line” arises, however, when Seizer confronts her own feelings of horror at seeing people laugh about an abusive relationship between a man and a woman depicted in the dramas. In her fascinating analysis of the “*Atipiti*” scene, she raises the provocative question of why laughter is generally so hard to analyze. At this point, in thinking about what audiences find funny onstage, it might have been useful to offer some more observation of what is found funny at other times, as in films or everyday life.

To analyze stage material, as well as audience responses, Seizer ties together various theories regarding Western and Indian spectatorship. This move allows her to consider Special Drama from several angles. Seizer could, however, have problematized her application of the Indian concept of *rasa* a bit more. She emphasizes the collective nature of the Special Drama spectatorial experience, whereas *rasa* seems to be a highly individualized attainment. Moreover, it would seem debatable as to whether the “tasting” of aesthetic pleasure and the extra-daily consciousness it is intended to induce is similar to the “critical distance of moral judgment” that Seizer identifies in the Special Drama audience (267).

These small matters aside, one of the greatest strengths of this book is that the material will appeal to a much wider range of readers than those just interested in performance per se. This is particularly true of the final section of the book, *Lives*, which focuses on the everyday lives of Special Drama actors and the strategies they must adopt to work in and around their status as “orderless” Others. The material concerning the argot that actors use to create some sense of privacy for themselves when in the company of others will be of interest even to linguists and scholars of the Tamil language, while the examination of actor kinship and the public lives of women makes a strong contribution to ongoing conversations about gender in South India. Seizer gives an even broader relevance to her work by taking a strong theoretical stance throughout this section. She cautions against blindly celebrating “resistance” without an eye to its inherent contradictions, and points out how private places and selves are informed by public counterparts.

Through *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*, Seizer makes a substantial contribution to performance studies and South Asian studies. With respect to the former, the book offers methodological insights into ways of thinking about the wider world in which theatres operate, and the implications that performance and spectatorship have for everyday life. Moreover, many parts of the book are fine resources for teaching about Indian theatre, since Seizer’s descriptions are vivid and would make accessible reading for undergraduates.

—Shanti Pillai

Reference

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