

Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), xxii + 440 pp., \$US24.95, pbk.

This is a very special book and I may be forgiven for the pun. It is much more than an ethnography of artists belonging to the Special *Natakam* (Drama) genre, a theatrical form still pursued in many parts of South India. What it does in fact, is to raise and address a range of important issues dealing with identities of a sub-culture, how this was constituted historically and how members of this sub-culture adopted and deployed performative strategies on-stage and off-stage to deal with the politics of stigma attending the drama profession. It is a veritable *tour de force* and even if it seems occasionally dense and repetitive, it constitutes a critical addition to the growing scholarship on performance and politics in South Asia and, in the process, significantly expands the theoretical apparatus for dealing with performance genres and practices in contemporary South Asia.

The book may be read and understood at several levels. At the simplest it is a straightforward ethnography of stage artists in South India practicing Special Drama—their lives and training, their aspirations and anxieties. This is combined with a deeper understanding of the form itself as it evolved from about the 1890s and diverged from the more mainstream repertoire which remained more urban in its location, appeal and intentionality. At a second and more complex level, the book locates the Special Drama form and practice within the larger issue of Tamil identity, and how this played out certain notions of honour, chastity and propriety (*murai*) that were envisaged as central to Tamil culture. At a third level, the book complicates the understanding of the women's question in modern India and suggests that the middle-class resolution of the women's question was refracted by the experiences of their poor urban counterparts who recreated domesticity in the very spaces that middle-class women left behind.

Special Drama is an unusual performance genre. It is a loosely scripted, eight-hour-long, all-night performance assembled by actors and musicians who are hired separately. It is entirely impromptu. There are no rehearsals or directors and oftentimes actors meet for the first time when they appear together on stage. The first two hours of a Special Drama are taken up by a bawdy comedy, where in fact the gender discourse is re-inscribed by the Buffoon protagonist who, in the author's words, 'manages to tell dirty jokes to a mixed audience and get away with it'.

The introductory chapters set out the larger theatrical landscape in which Special *Natakam* emerged in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In tracing the antecedents of this form, Seizer explains why this has remained obscure in the discursive history of theatre in Tamilnadu. Originating as an extempore performance amalgamating proscenium theatre and indigenous genres of Tamil epic street theatre, with artists recruited for special roles, the form was considered deficient in structure and discipline, reinforcing the impression that it fostered a loose morality among its artists, especially women. In fact, even the state government in Tamilnadu, whose official line has remained the promotion of indigenous Tamil culture and devotion (*tamilparru*), has chosen never to recognise the work of a Special Drama artist, and instead clubs him under the larger and more respectable genre of *Isai Natakam* or Music Drama. Also, even while functioning as an urban form of entertainment and anchored within the ritual calendar, Special *Natakam* artists, very much along the lines of the *nautanki* traditions of northern India, have carried within their bodies signs of stigma and have had to continually devise strategies to deal with

their marginal status. The implicit explanation for this seems to be embedded in the fact that artists themselves internalised the normative discourse of Tamil identity, which was constituted relationally and in terms of the reckless, orderless, other. Admittedly, there are exceptions to this—the sketch of Sivakami who flaunts her ambitions and aspirations openly and seeks money and success more than any honour is a case in point. But what stands out from the author's study is the continuous deployment of strategies by women artists at a quotidian level to articulate their internalised sense of entitlement. Again the author comments on the performative style of Special Drama where the actors adopt a stance of stillness when delivering their lines, almost to disavow and distance themselves from the idea of excess associated with lower classes. There is only one moment where this breaks and that is in the *atti pitti* (Hit and Grab) segment of the drama when the protagonists participate in physical violence to the accompaniment of spontaneous laughter from the audience and the accompaniment of the percussion. This, for the author, is the stage of liminality and transition when the cracks are exposed for everyone to see and also the very moment when the author herself could not participate in the collective spectacle or identify with the humour on display. And yet this was the most visible space where artists, through language and play, deal with stigma.

The final chapter, 'The Roadwork of Actresses', takes up the issue of the problematic mobility of women who do not properly internalise gender constraints. Stigmatised as public women, and unable to move in public like their middle-class counterparts whose strength is forged indoors, the Special Drama woman is forced to navigate and transact a complex road. For the most part, according to the author, artists prefer not to perform in venues that fall within a radius of their homes, and in individual ways carve out spaces of self-respect within their off-stage lives. This is a moving section and brings out the complexities of a sub-culture and its practices in an age and society directed by the pressures of bourgeois modernity and morality.

The book is a must read for all those interested in popular performance practices in South Asia and the complexities of modernity lived out locally. Drawing from rich fieldwork and sensitive ethnography, Seizer balances the anthropologist's romance with the rigour of a social historian as she reads a range of archival material to plot and document the processes of cultural change in modern Tamilnadu through the lens of the special artists.

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