

Rasaesthetics

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Where in the body is theatricality located? What is its place? Traditionally in Western theatre, the eyes and to some degree the ears are where theatricality is experienced. By etymology and by practice a theatre is a “place of/for seeing.” Seeing requires distance; engenders focus or differentiation; encourages analysis or breaking apart into logical strings; privileges meaning, theme, narration. Modern science depends on instruments of observation, of ocularity: telescopes and microscopes. Theories derived from observations made by means of ocular instruments define the time-space continuum. From super-galactic strings on the one hand to molecular and subatomic wave particles on the other, we “know” the universe by “seeing” it. See = know; know = see; speed = space; distance = time; diachronicity = story.

But in other cultural traditions there are other locations for theatricality. One of these, the mouth, or better said, the snout-to-belly-to-bowel—the route through the body managed by the enteric nervous system—is the topic of this essay. The snout-to-belly-to-bowel is the “where” of taste, digestion, and excretion. The performance of the snout-to-belly-to-bowel is an ongoing interlinked muscular, cellular, and neurological process of testing-tasting, separating nourishment from waste, distributing nourishment throughout the body, and eliminating waste. The snout-to-belly-to-bowel is the where of intimacy, sharing of bodily substances, mixing the inside and the outside, emotional experiences, and gut feelings. A good meal with good company is a pleasure; so is foreplay and lovemaking; so is a good shit.

The Poetics and the Natyasastra

Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Bharata-muni’s *Natyasastra*, a Sanskrit manual of performance and performance theory, occupy parallel positions in European and Indian performance theory (and by extension, throughout the many areas and cultures where European-derived or Indian-derived performing arts are practiced). Both ancient texts continue to be actively interpreted and debated, theoretically and in practice. Both are at or near the “origins” of their respective performance traditions, both have evoked “after-texts” or “counter-texts” aimed at enhancing, revising, or refuting their basic principals.

But similar as they are in some ways, the two texts differ profoundly. Aristotle was an historical figure (384–322 B.C.E.), the author of many key philosophical texts affecting, even determining, Western thought in various fields as far-ranging as the physical sciences, politics, social thought, aesthetics,

and theology. The Macedonian-Greek philosopher's writings have been actively debated for nearly two-and-a-half millennia. He specialized in dividing knowledge into knowable portions; he formulated the syllogism. Bharata-muni is a mythic-historical figure, the name of the author or compiler of a very detailed compendium concerning the religious-mythic origins and practices of *natya*, a Sanskrit word not easily translatable, but reducible to dance-theatre-music. The precise date of the *NS* remains in question—scholars have placed it anywhere from the sixth century B.C.E. to the second century C.E. Exactly how much of the *NS* was the work of one person and how much the lore of many will probably never be known. Bharata-muni, whoever he was, if he was at all, wrote only the *NS*.

Furthermore, the *NS* is a *sastra*, a sacred text authorized by the gods, full of narration, myth, and detailed instructions for performers. The *Poetics* is secular, focused on the structure of drama, and dependant on the logical thinking its author helped invent. The *Poetics* is so laconic, running in English translation about 30 pages, that some believe it to be lecture notes compiled by Aristotle's students after his death rather than the philosopher's own finished work. The *NS* takes the form of an extended disquisition (345 pages in the Rangacharya translation) by Bharata in answer to sages who asked him to explain *natya*. Bharata begins with the story of how *natya* came about, what its proper subjects are, and for whom it was made.¹ Then he goes on to detail everything from theatre architecture to how to perform the various emotions to the structure of dramas, and more.

Some centuries after it was completed, the *NS* was “lost”—fragmented, submerged, misplaced, and unread. The *NS* comes to modern Indians not directly and not as a single text. The *NS* comes down in performance practice and as a series of interpretations. The most important interpreter is the 10th-century Kashmiri Saivite (worshiper of Shiva), Abhinavagupta. Through Abhinavagupta, scholars discern earlier interpreters such as Bhatta Lollata, Srisankuka, Bhatta Nayaka, and Bhatta Tauta. As for the *NS* “itself,” according to Kapila Vatsyayan, “not many texts have been systematically collated and edited and published. Hundreds [...] lie as manuscripts in public or private collections, in India and abroad, and an equal or larger number are in fragments” (1996:115).

But this fragmentation ought not to be read as “neglect.” The *NS* tradition is active, oral, and corporeal. It is present in performers, their teachers, and their performances. We must distinguish the absence of the *NS* as a text (a book brought to light in modern times mostly by Western orientalisists)² from its presence in actual performances where it has been absorbed into, and forms the core of, a multiplicity of genres such as *kathak*, *kathakali*, *odissi*, and *bharatanatyam* which, taken together, comprise Indian classic theatre-dance. The *NS* is much more powerful as an embodied set of ideas and practices than as a written text. Unlike the *Poetics*, the *NS* is more danced than read.

Thus the *NS* and the *Poetics* are different in style, intent, and historical circumstance. The *Poetics*, written nearly a century after Greek tragedy's heyday, constitutes only a small portion of Aristotle's enormous output. The *Poetics* lacks descriptions of actual performances; it is mostly about drama, not theatre, focusing on one play, *Oedipus*, which Aristotle offers as a model for the right way to write plays. Framed as “rational” and “historical,” the *Poetics* is not regarded as sacred, although it has been, and remains, remarkably influential. On the other hand, the *NS* is a hybrid of myth and down-to-earth performance knowledge, far-ranging and detailed. Its author and protagonist, the semi-divine Bharata-muni, is almost certainly a pseudonym for a collective oral tradition.

But the greatest difference between the *Poetics* and the *NS* is that the Indian book deals in detail with performance: emotional expression as conveyed by specific gestures and movements, role and character types, theatre architec-

ture, music. The *NS* considers drama (chapters 20–21), but that analysis is not the core of the *sastra*. Many Indian artists subscribe to the ideal of a theatre that integrates drama, dance, and music. Traditional genres accomplish this integration in ways that do not privilege plot (as Aristotle advised) over dance, gesture, and music. And then there is *rasa*.

Rasa, First Take

Of *rasa*, the *NS* says:

There is no *natya* without *rasa*. *Rasa* is the cumulative result of *vibhava* [stimulus], *anubhava* [involuntary reaction], and *vyabhicari bhava* [voluntary reaction]. For example, just as when various condiments and sauces and herbs and other materials are mixed, a taste is experienced, or when the mixing of materials like molasses with other materials produces six kinds of taste, so also along with the different *bhavas* [emotions] the *sthayi bhava* [permanent emotions experienced “inside”] becomes a *rasa*.

But what is this thing called *rasa*? Here is the reply. Because it is enjoyably tasted, it is called *rasa*. How does the enjoyment come? Persons who eat prepared food mixed with different condiments and sauces, if they are sensitive, enjoy the different tastes and then feel pleasure; likewise, sensitive spectators, after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words, gestures, and feelings feel pleasure. This feeling by the spectators is here explained as the *rasas* of *natya*. (Bharatamuni 1996:54–55)

There is a lot going on here, and I do not intend at this time to go into a detailed explication of *rasa* theory. I want here to outline an overall theory of flavor as it pertains to performance, what I call “*rasaesthetics*.”

Rasa is sensuous, proximate, experiential. *Rasa* is aromatic. *Rasa* fills space, joining the outside to the inside.

Rasa is flavor, taste, the sensation one gets when food is perceived, brought within reach, touched, taken into the mouth, chewed, mixed, savored, and swallowed. The eyes and ears perceive the food on its way—the presentation of the dishes, the sizzling. At the same time, or very shortly after, the nose gets involved. The mouth waters in anticipation. Smell and taste dissolve into each other. The hands convey the food to the mouth—either directly as in the traditional Indian way of eating with the fingers or somewhat indirectly by means of utensils (a latecomer everywhere). The whole snout is engaged. In the snout all the senses are well-represented. The lower part of the face contains the mouth, in the center is the nose, above are the eyes. The ears are side-center, but focused forward.

Rasa also means “juice,” the stuff that conveys the flavor, the medium of tasting. The juices of eating originate both in the food and from the body. Saliva not only moistens food, it distributes flavors. *Rasa* is sensuous, proximate, experiential. *Rasa* is aromatic. *Rasa* fills space, joining the outside to the inside. Food is actively taken into the body, becomes part of the body, works from the inside. What was outside is transformed into what is inside. An aesthetic founded on *rasa* is fundamentally different than one founded on the “*theatron*,” the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic.

Etymologies and Distanced Knowing

Before more on rasaesthetics, something on Western notions of theatre. The word “theatre” is cognate with “theorem,” “theory,” “theorist,” and such, all from the Greek *theatron*, itself from *thea*, “a sight”; and from *theasthai*, “to view”; related to *thauma*, “a thing compelling the gaze, a wonder”; and *theorein*, “to look at” (Partridge 1966:710). *Theorein* is related to *theorema*, “spectacle” and/or “speculation” (Shipley 1984:69). These words are thought to be related to the Indo-European root *dheu* or *dhau*, “to look at” (Partridge 1966:710). The Indo-European root of “Thespis”—the legendary founder of Greek theatre—is *seku*, a “remark” or “saying,” but with the implication of a divine vision; and from *seku* derive such English words as “see,” “sight,” and “say” (Shipley 1984:353). Greek theatre, then, and all European types of theatre derived from it, are places of/for seeing and saying. What marks this kind of theatre (and after it, film, TV, and possibly the Internet) is its specularity, its strategies of “gazing.”

These etymologies reveal the tight bond linking Greek theatre, European epistemology, and seeing. This binding of “knowing” to “seeing” is the root metaphor/master narrative of Western thought. If the humans in Plato’s cave were ignorant, it was because all they saw of “truth” were shadows cast on the wall. True reality was so much brighter even than the sun that no human viewer could look at it directly. What Plato said could be known through dialectics, scientists since the Renaissance have tried to do by devising finer and finer instruments of observation. A single net holds Plato’s allegory, Galileo’s observations, the Hubble Space Telescope, electron microscopes, and the super-colliding super-conductor particle accelerator.

Where does seeing take place? Only at a distance from what is being seen. There is both a logical and a practical difference keeping what is observed separate from the observing instrument (and/or observer). “Objectivity” can be understood as the desire to keep things at enough distance from the eyes to allow whatever it is to “take shape” perceptually: to see things “in perspective,” to “focus on” them. The “indeterminacy principle” linking the instrument of observation to what is observed does not dissolve the distance between observer and observed so much as it asserts that what is observed is indissolubly linked to the means of observing. What “moves” the particle is the light needed to observe it.

At a more everyday level, as an object is brought close to the face, one loses focus and finally the object blurs, loses its visual shape. And, of course, one mustn’t put things into one’s eyes. Poking out the eyes is a terrible thing both legendarily (Oedipus, Gloucester, et al.) and actually. But a child learns early on to see something, focus on it, reach for it, grasp it, and bring it to the mouth. The mouth replaces the eyes as the end point of exploring the “outer” world and relating it to the “inner” world. The “transitional object” (see Winnicott 1971) is how the infant first experiences the sameness/difference between the world outside herself and the world inside herself: from the breast, to the fingers, to the grasped-tasted-chewed whatever, to the security blanket, to the favorite object. Even before birth, as in-utero photographs show, the pre-born suck their fingers and toes. Can we doubt that the pre-born enjoy this activity? Nor is the mouth a singular conduit connected solely to the brain (as the eye is via the optic nerve). The mouth opens to the nasal cavity and the whole digestive system; the mouth—including lips and tongue—intimately engages the senses of touch, taste, and smell. The ocular system is extraordinarily focused, while the snout system is wide open, combining rather than separating.

The Greek theatre that Aristotle based his theories on was fundamentally a seeing place. Architecturally—as is evident from what is left of the Theatre of Dionysus on the hillside of the Akropolis, the almost wholly intact theatre at Epidaurus, and from other sites and restorations—the Greek theatre was im-

mense. Most scholars place the number in the audience at the ancient festivals between 14,000 and 17,000. And although Aristotle favored the drama over the theatre, the actual experience of being in a classical Greek theatre is full of spectacle—dancing, singing, and reciting. The Greek theatre was also, and perhaps mostly, a focus of competition. The Athenians were an intensely competitive people. The *agon* was for them the motor, source, and energy of creation, a model of becoming.³ Whatever Aristotle may have wanted, the living heart of Greek tragedy was not plot as such, but a particular kind of storytelling, the *agon*. To sort winners from losers, the judges (and those judging the judges—the spectators) had to see clearly and base their opinions on “objective” values. Of course, there may have been all kinds of politicking and pressures. Maybe even bribes and cheating. But, as in today’s spectator sports (with or without instant replays), clarity in presentation and reception was absolutely essential. The goal of the shows was to determine winners and losers—both in the dramas and in the competitions among actors and poets.

The Pleasures of Rasic Performance

Rasic performance has as its goal not separating winners from losers, but extending pleasure—as in an endless banquet or an always-deferred “almost” sexual orgasm. It accomplishes this in a way comparable to cooking: the combination/transformation of distinct elements into a something that offers new and/or intense and/or favorite flavors or tastes. Rasic performance values immediacy over distance, savoring over judgment. Its paradigmatic activity is a sharing between performers and partakers (a more accurate term than “audiences” or “spectators,” words that privilege ear or eye). The rasic performance event is more a banquet than a day in court. The NS puts it this way:

Those who are connoisseurs of tastes enjoy the taste of food prepared from (or containing) different stuff; likewise, intelligent, healthy persons enjoy various sthayi bhavas related to the acting of emotions. (Bharatamuni 1996:55)

The Sanskrit word translated as “connoisseur” is *bhakta*, which can also mean a person ecstatically devoted to a god, particularly Krishna who is celebrated by means of singing, dancing, and feasting. The sthayi bhavas are the “permanent” or “abiding” or indwelling emotions that are accessed and evoked by good acting, called *abhinaya*. Rasa is experiencing the sthayi bhavas. To put it another way, the sweetness “in” a ripe plum is its sthayi bhava, the experience of “tasting the sweet” is rasa. The means of getting the taste across—preparing it, presenting it—is *abhinaya*. Every emotion is a sthayi bhava. Acting is the art of presenting the sthayi bhavas so that *both* the performer and the partaker can “taste” the emotion, the rasa.

In chapters six and seven, the NS gives the eight rasas and their corresponding sthayi bhavas:

Rasa	Sthayi Bhava	English
sringara	rati	desire, love
hasya	hasa	humor, laughter
karuna	soka	pity, grief
raudra	krodha	anger
vira	utsaha	energy, vigor
bhayanaka	bhaya	fear, shame
bibhasta	jugupsra	disgust
adbhuta	vismaya	surprise, wonder

Abhinavagupta added a ninth rasa, *shanta*, “bliss.” From Abhinavagupta’s time onward, many Indians speak of the “nine rasas.” But *shanta* does not correspond to any particular *sthayi bhava*. Rather, like white light, *shanta* is the perfect balance/mix of them all; or *shanta* may be regarded as the transcendent rasa which, when accomplished, absorbs and eliminates all the others. A perfect performance, should one occur, would not transmit or express *shanta* (as it could transmit or express any of the other rasas), but allow *shanta* to be experienced simultaneously and absolutely by performers and partakers.

It is not my aim in this essay to investigate the many connections between the *sthayi bhavas* and the rasas. It is enough to note that “emotions” in the Indian aesthetic performance system, far from being personal—based on individual experience, or locked up and only accessible by means of an “emotional memory” exercise or a “private moment” (Stanislavsky and his disciples)—are to some degree objective, residing in the public or social sphere.

In the rasic system, there are “artistically performed emotions” which comprise a distinct kind of behavior (different, perhaps, for each performance genre). These performed emotions are separate from the “feelings”—the interior, subjective experience of any given performer during a particular performance. There is no necessary and ineluctable chain linking these “performed emotions” with the “emotions of everyday life.” In the rasic system, the emotions *in the arts, not in ordinary life* are knowable, manageable, and transmittable in roughly the same way that the flavors and presentation of a meal are manageable by following recipes and the conventions of presenting the meal.

In order for rasas to be shared, performers must enact the *abhinaya* of a particular emotion or concatenation of emotions according to the traditions of a specific genre of performance. The feelings aroused may be personal, intimate, and indescribable; but the emotions enacted be are consciously constructed and objectively managed.

When I spoke to kathakali actors, for example, some told me they felt the emotions they performed, others did not feel the emotions. There is no yes or no answer to Diderot’s question, “Do actors feel the emotions they communicate?” Feeling the emotions is not necessary though it is not a bad thing either. Whether it happens or not to any particular performer does not necessarily make the performance better or worse. What is relevant is making certain that each “partaker” receives the emotions, and that these emotions are specific and controlled. The emotions, the *sthayi bhava*, are objective; the feelings (what an individual performer or partaker experiences) are subjective. What is shared are the rasas of a single emotion or combination of emotions.

It is not easy to clearly differentiate “emotions” from “feelings.” Basically, emotions are communicated by means of *abhinaya*; feelings are experienced. So the rasas themselves (as flavors of moods) are feelings, but what is communicated or transmitted by means of rasas are emotions. One “has” emotions even if one is not feeling them; one “experiences” feelings even if sometimes disconnected to emotions (“I don’t know why I am feeling the way I feel”). The links between emotions and feelings are usually manifest, but not always. When an actor’s *abhinaya* is strong, the emotions are communicated and audience members feel feelings—whether or not the actor is feeling something.

In expressing the emotions by means of abhinaya one may or may not create feelings in oneself, but a good actor always creates feelings in the partakers (audience). In order for rasas to be shared, performers must enact the abhinaya of a particular emotion or concatenation of emotions according to the traditions of a specific genre of performance. The feelings aroused may be personal, intimate, and indescribable; but the emotions enacted are consciously constructed and objectively managed.

According to Stanislavsky-based Euro-American acting, one does not “play an emotion.” One plays the “given circumstances,” the “objectives,” the “through-line of action,” the “magic if.” If this is done right, “real” feelings will be experienced and “natural” emotions will be displayed. But according to my interpretation of the NS rasic system, one can work *directly* on the emotions, mixing them according to “recipes” known to the great acting *gurus* (which means, simply, “teachers”)—or even by devising new recipes. From a Stanislavskian vantage, such direct work on the emotions will result in false or mechanical acting. But anyone who has seen performers thoroughly trained in the NS rasic system knows these performers are every bit as effective as performers trained in the Stanislavsky system.

If performing rasically is to offer emotions to partakers in the same way that a chef offers a meal to diners, then the effectiveness of the performance depends very much on an active response from the partakers. The NS is very emphatic in its insistence that natya appeal to people of all stations in life, affecting different people differently.⁴ The more knowledgeable the partakers, the better the experience. To respond to the fullest, partakers need to be connoisseurs of whatever performance genre they are taking in—as wine tasters need to know vintages, bottling procedures, and ways of sampling in order to fully appreciate a wine. There is a sliding scale of how much one needs to know. In the rasic system, each person enjoys according to her abilities; the higher the level of knowledge, the greater the enjoyment (or disappointment, if the performance is not up to standards). Japanese *noh* actors study the audience immediately before entering the stage and then adjust their performances to the particular partakers on hand. All performers know this. The best performers save their best performances for the most discerning partakers and those who know the most expect the best. In India, at least, the active response of the partakers is expected. At dance or music concerts people quietly beat out the *tal*, or rhythm, sing under their breath, and sometimes move their hands in harmony with the *mudras*, or hand-gesture system. At the *Ramlila* of Ramnagar, many persons carry texts of Tulsidas’s *Ramcaritmanas*, following along, even singing, as the Ramayanis chant. The same is true of sports or pop music connoisseurs. The “home team advantage” is a direct measurement of how the active participation of the crowd can impact the level of performance.

Oral Pleasures, Rasically

Fundamentally, the attainment of pleasure and satisfaction in a rasic performance is oral—through the snout, by combining various flavors and tastes; and the satisfaction is visceral, in the belly. How can this be since the Indian theatre, like the Western theatre, is presented visually and sonically? First, the Indian theatre, both in earlier times and today, is not based on the agon, on formally determining winners and losers, either within the dramas (in classic Indian plays often everyone wins) or in terms of competitions among dramatists and actors. There were no judges formally ensconced on front marble benches as in the Theatre of Dionysus. Thus there is no attempt to quantify the performing experience, to bring it under the theatron’s aegis of visibility.

Second, many performances were part of the feasts of the rich or royal, and continue to be offered at weddings or other happy celebrations. Religion itself has a feasting quality that interweaves performing, worshiping, and eating. Separating work from play, and the sacred from the profane, has always been more a Western than an Indian phenomenon. Third, until the Mughal conquest and then the English, there was no anti-theatrical prejudice or Puritanism in India. Far from it—the arts, infused with intense sexual pleasure, were often part of the religious experience.

India today is less open to the basic mix of art, sensuousness, and feasting than before the advent of the Mughals and the British. But imagining performances from the period of Sanskrit drama (4th–11th centuries C.E.) as indicated by sculptings and paintings at such sites as Khajuraho, the shore temple of Mamallapuram, or the “theatre caves” of Ajanta can get us closer to the kind of experience I am talking about.

The Ajanta style approaches as near as it is likely for an artist to get to a felicitous rendering of tactile sensations normally experienced subconsciously. These are felt rather than seen when the eye is subordinate to a total receptivity of all the senses. [...] The seated queen with the floating hand is drawn so that we obtain information which cannot be had by looking at her from a single, fixed viewpoint. [...] The logic of this style demands that movements and gestures can only be described in terms of the area or space in which they occur; we cannot identify a figure except by comparing its position with others around it. [...] It could be said that the Ajanta artist is concerned with the order of sensuousness, as distinct from the order of reason. (Lannoy 1971:48–49)

Richard Lannoy argues that Sanskrit drama—some form of which is described and theorized in the *NS*—is like the Ajanta paintings:

The structure and ornamentation of the caves were deliberately designed to induce total participation during ritual circumambulation. The acoustics of one Ajanta *vihara*, or assembly hall (Cave VI), are such that any sound long continues to echo round the walls. This whole structure seems to have been tuned like a drum. (43)

This tuning was not fortuitous. The Ajanta caves are human-made, excavated and carved out of solid rock. Lannoy continues:

In both cases [the caves, the theatre] total participation of the viewer was ensured by a skillful combination of sensory experience. The “wrap-around” effect [of] the caves was conveyed on the stage by adapting the technically brilliant virtuosity of Vedic incantation and phonetic science to the needs of the world’s most richly textured style of poetic drama. (54)

What the *NS* supplies are the concrete details of that style, which at its core is not literary but theatrical, not plot-dominated or driven. Indian classical theatre and dance does not emphasize clear beginnings, middles, and ends but favors a more “open narration,” a menu of many delectables—offshoots, side-tracks, pleasurable digressions—not all of which can be savored at a sitting. The performances the *NS* refers to took place over periods of days or weeks. They were festivals, part of multifaceted celebrations that also featured feasting and audience participation integral to the whole performance complex. Some of this continues today, as experienced in such popular religious festive forms

as Ramlila, Raslila, and bhajan-singing/dancing, with their circumambulations, hymn-singing, trance-dancing, food-sharing, and wraparound or environmental theatre staging.

It's not all one way or the other. There is a lot of movement—actual and conceptual—from one kind of action to another. There are phases of these festive performances where partakers stand back and watch or listen and other phases where they participate. This blending of theatre, dance, music, food, and religious devotion is to many participants a full, satisfying, and pleasurable experience that cannot be reduced to any single category—religious, aesthetic, personal, or gustatory. This kind of an event yields experiences that dissolve differences, if only for a little while. This kind of experience is hard to measure from the inside or observe from the outside. Western aesthetics are derived from the Greek theatre as reinterpreted in the Renaissance. The outcomes are variations of the drama-based proscenium or frontal-stage theatre still prevalent today. Rasaesthetics is very different. It is not something that happens in front of the spectator, a vision for the eyes, but “in the gut,” an experience that takes place inside the body specifically engaging the enteric nervous system.

The gut—esophagus, stomach, intestines, and bowels—has its own nervous system. This system does not replace or preempt the brain. Rather it operates alongside the brain, or—evolutionarily speaking—“before” or “underneath” the brain.

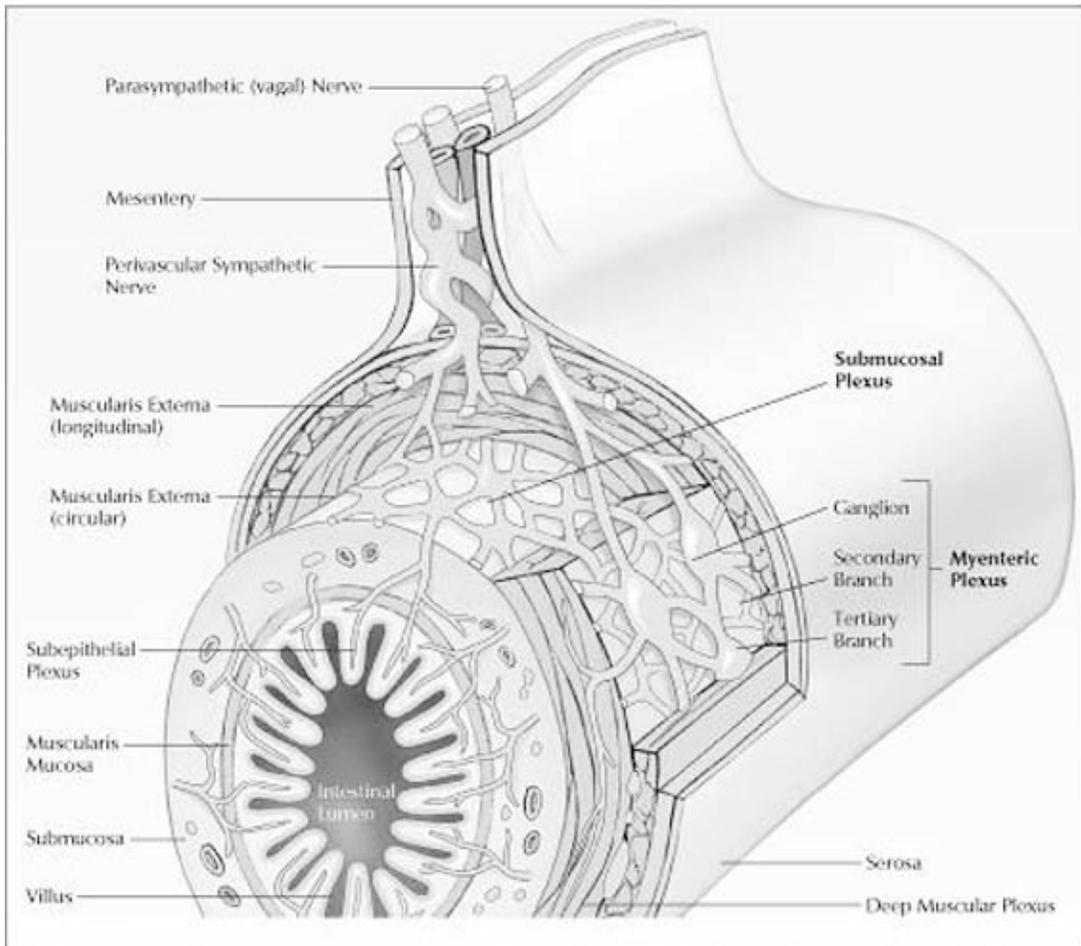
The Enteric Nervous System

Take a step into neurobiology. According to recent studies, there is a brain in the belly, literally. The basic research in this area has been conducted by Michael D. Gershon (see his *The Second Brain* 1998) whose work was summarized in the *New York Times* by Sandra Blakeslee:

The gut's brain, known as the enteric nervous system [ENS], is located in sheaths of tissue lining the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, and colon. Considered a single entity, it is a network of neurons, neurotransmitters, and proteins that zap messages between neurons, support cells like those found in the brain proper and a complex circuitry that enables it to act independently, learn, remember, and, as the saying goes, produce gut feelings. (1996:C1)

The ENS derives from the “neural crest,” a bunch of related cells that forms in mammals and birds early in embryo genesis: “One section turns into the central nervous system. Another piece migrates to become the enteric nervous system. Only later are the two nervous systems connected via a cable called the vagus nerve” (Blakeslee 1996:C3). According to Gershon:

The ENS resembles the brain and differs both physiologically and structurally from any other region of the PNS [peripheral nervous system].⁵ [...B]oth the avian and mammalian bowel are colonized by émigrés from the sacral as well as the vigil level of the neural crest. [...] The PNS contains more neurons than the spinal cord and, in contrast to other regions of the PNS, the ENS is capable of mediating reflex activity in the ab-



1. The enteric nervous system is composed of two ganglionated plexuses, or networks of gray masses of nerve tissue, that surround the intestines. The larger myenteric plexus is located between the circular and the longitudinal layers of the “muscularis externa,” or outer muscles of the intestines. This plexus contains neurons responsible for movement and for mediating the enzyme output of adjacent organs. The smaller “submucosal” plexus contains sensory cells that “talk” to the motor neurons of the myenteric plexus as well as to the motor fibers that stimulate intestinal secretions. Note the vagus nerve in the upper center of the diagram. (Drawing by Michael D. Gershon and caption adapted from Gershon and Erde; courtesy of Michael Gershon)

sence of central neural input. In fact, most of the neurons of the ENS are not directly innervated by a preganglionic input from the brain or spinal cord. The functional independence of the ENS is mirrored in its chemistry and structure. (Gershon et al 1993:199)

And again, as summarized by Blakeslee:

Until relatively recently, people thought that the gut’s muscles and sensory nerves were wired directly to the brain and that the brain controlled the gut through two pathways that increased or decreased rates of activity [...]. The gut was simply a tube with simple reflexes. Trouble is, no one bothered to count the nerve fibers in the gut. When they did [...], they

were surprised to find that the gut contains 100 million neurons—more than the spinal cord has. Yet the vagus nerve only sends a couple of thousand nerve fibers to the gut. (Blakeslee 1993:C3)

What this means is that the gut—esophagus, stomach, intestines, and bowels—has its own nervous system. This system does not replace or preempt the brain. Rather it operates alongside the brain, or—evolutionarily speaking—“before” or “underneath” the brain:

The enteric nervous system is [...] a remnant of our evolutionary past that has been retained. [It] has been present in each of our predecessors through the millions of years of evolutionary history that separate us from the first animal with a backbone. [...] The enteric nervous system is a vibrant, modern data-processing center that enables us to accomplish some very important and unpleasant tasks with no mental effort. When the gut rises to the level of conscious perception, in the form of, for example, heartburn, cramps, diarrhea, or constipation, no one is enthused. Few things are more distressing than an inefficient gut with feelings. (Gershon 1999:xiv)

But what about emotional feelings? In December 2000, I emailed Gershon about “rasaesthetics” and the ENS. He replied:

Thank you for your letter. You touch a bit of raw nerve. You are certainly correct in that we in the West who consider ourselves “hard” scientists have not taken Eastern thought very seriously. The problem with a great deal of Eastern thought is that it is not based on documentable observation. You cannot quantify ideas about strong feelings or deep power. We therefore, either ignore Eastern ideas about the navel, or take them as metaphors, which are not very different from our own metaphors about “gut feelings.” On the other hand, I have recently become aware of quantifiable research that establishes, without question, that vagus nerve stimulation can be used to treat epilepsy and depression. Vagus nerve stimulation also improves learning and memory. Vagus nerve stimulation is something physicians do and is not natural, but 90% of the vagus carries ascending information from the gut to the brain. It is thus possible that vagus nerve stimulation mimics natural stimulation of the vagus nerve by the “second brain.” This relationship is particularly important in relation to the human condition of autism. Autism affects the gut as well as the brain. It is thus conceivable that autism could be the result in whole or in part of a disturbed communication between the two brains.

In short, I now take the possibility that the gut affects emotions very seriously. This seems much more likely to me now than it did when I wrote my book. A dialogue between us might be of mutual interest.

The dialogue has not yet progressed beyond the email quoted, but it is destined.

Let us suppose, in light of ENS research, that when someone says, “I have a gut feeling,” she actually is experiencing a feeling, a neural response, but not one that is head-brain centered. Let us suppose that her feeling is located in, or emanating from, the “second brain,” the brain in the belly. When expressed, this feeling is an emotion. Can such feelings be trained? That is, what are the systems converting “gut feelings” into expressible emotions? Gershon is interested primarily in the therapeutic value of vagus nerve stimulation, of causing or evoking feelings in autistics who suffer from lack of affect or lack of range of affect.

The presence and location of the ENS confirms a basic principal of Asian medicine, meditation, and martial arts: that the region in the gut between the navel and the pubic bone is the center/source of readiness, balance, and reception, the place where action and meditation originate and are centered. A related place is the base of the spine, the resting spot of *kundalini*, an energy system that can be aroused and transmitted up the spinal column. Gaining an awareness of and control over the gut and lower spine is crucial to anyone learning various Asian performances, martial arts, or meditations.

Phillip Zarrilli has for many years researched both in a scholarly and in a practical way the relationship between what in the Keralan martial art *kalaripayattu* is called the *nabhi mula* (root of the navel) and performance art training, psychophysical centering, and ayurvedic medicine. According to Zarrilli:

When impulses originate from the *nabhi mula* [...they] are “grounded,” “centered,” “integrated,” “filled out,” “dynamic.” The *nabhi mula* of *kalaripayattu* is identical to the *svadhithanam* of classical yoga. Its location is two finger widths above the anus and two finger widths below the root of the navel. It is at this center that both breath and impetus for movement into and out of forms originate. (1990:136)

Zarrilli emphasizes that the *nabhi mula* is important “psychophysically,” as the source of feeling-and-movement, a kind of “gripping” (*piduttam*) or firmness of body, spirit, and feelings that affect the whole human being. The Chinese notion of *ch’i* and the Japanese “activating force” *ki* are closely related to the *nabhi mula* and the sense of *piduttam*. In *noh* theatre, the *tanden*, located “in the belly two inches below the navel” (Nearman 1982:346) is the energy center. The point is that this “center” is a radiating spot:

The actor is engaged in his total being in a psychophysical process where his internal energy, aroused in his vital center below the navel, then directed into and through the embodied forms of external gesture (body and voice) is of course fundamentally the same [in *noh*] as the interior process of the *kathakali* actor. This despite the fact that the exterior manifestation of the interior process is different. (Zarrilli 1990:143)

I could cite many more examples. But it all comes down to what Zarrilli so nicely summarizes:

In all such precise psychophysical moments, the “character” is being created—not in the personality of the actor but as an embodied and projected/energized/living form between actor and audience. These Asian forms assume no “suspension of disbelief,” rather the actor and spectator co-create the figure embodied in the actor as “other.” The “power of presence” manifest in this stage other, while embodied in this particular actor in this particular moment, is not limited to that ego. That dynamic figure exists between audience and actor, transcending both, pointing beyond itself. (1990:144)

The rasic system of response does not preclude the eye and ear during actual performance, but during training especially, it works *directly and strongly* on the ENS which, under different names, has been very important and well-theorized in various Asian systems of performance, medicine, and the martial arts—all of which are tightly related in Asian cultures. Thus, when I say the rasic aesthetic experience is fundamentally different than the eye-dominant system prevalent in the West, I am not talking metaphorically.

The Rasabox Exercise

But if not metaphorically, how? Let me answer first in terms of training, then in terms of public performances. Over the past five years I and several of my colleagues at East Coast Artists,⁶ especially Michele Minnick and Paula Murray Cole, have been developing the Rasabox exercise. This exercise is an application of some of the ideas in this essay, a kind of ENS training for artistic use.⁷ It is based on the assumption that emotions are socially constructed while feelings are individually experienced.

The Rasabox exercise takes many hours to complete; in fact it is open-ended. It can't be done in one session. It continues from one day to the next. The exercise proceeds as an orderly progression of steps:

1. Draw or tape a grid of nine rectangular boxes on the floor. All rectangles are the same and each ought to be about 6' × 3'.
2. Very roughly "define" each rasa. For example, *raudra* means anger, rage, roaring; *bibhasta* means disgust, spitting up/out, vomiting.
3. In variously colored chalk, write the name of one rasa inside each rectangle. Use chance methods to determine which rasa goes where. Write the names in Roman alphabetized Sanskrit. Leave the center or ninth box empty or clear.
4. Have participants draw and/or describe each rasa inside its box. That is, ask each person to interpret the Sanskrit word, to associate feelings and ideas to it. Emphasize that these "definitions" and associations are not for all time, but just "for now." Emphasize also that drawings, abstract configurations, or words can be used. In moving from one box to another, participants must either "walk the line" at the edge of the boxes or step outside the Rasabox area entirely and walk around to the new box. There is no order of progression from box to box. A person may return to a box as often as she likes, being careful not to overwrite someone else's contribution. Take as much time as necessary until everyone has drawn her fill. When a participant is finished, she steps to the outside of the Rasabox area. This phase of the exercise is over when everyone is outside the Rasabox area. Sometimes this takes several hours.
5. When everyone is standing at the edge of the Rasabox area, time is allowed for all to "take in" what has been drawn/written. Participants walk around the edge of the Rasaboxes. They read to themselves and out loud what is written. They describe what is drawn. But they can't ask questions; nor can anything be explained.
6. Pause. Silence.

RAUDRA	BIBHASTA	BHAYANAKA
KARUNA	SHANTA (empty)	SRINGARA
HASYA	VIRA	ADBHUTA

2. The Rasabox grid with one rasa written in each box. (Figure by Richard Schechner)

Rasaboxes Performer Training

Michele Minnick

Whether one accepts the idea of “rasa” as a literally gustatory experience, or simply understands food-rasa as a metaphor for the process of theatre-rasa, the practical question still remains as to how one can achieve this shared experience between actor and spectator in the time-space of performance. What of *abhinaya* (the actual behaviors of a performance), the very concrete art of the actor? What are the “ingredients” at her disposal? How does she know when to add one thing, how much to add, how fast to stir it, how long to let it cook? And how does this idea of rasa as the space *between* serve the Western performer? These questions can be partially answered by the Rasaboxes.

Fascinated with the idea of rasa, and challenged by Antonin Artaud’s demand that the actor be an “athlete of the emotions,” my teacher, colleague, and co-artistic director of East Coast Artists, Richard Schechner, designed the Rasaboxes exercise, in which the performer’s emotional/physical/vocal expressivity and agility are trained. As we perform, direct, and teach workshops with East Coast Artists, Paula Murray Cole and I continue to develop this work, using it as a tool not only for training, but for performance composition.¹

How do the Rasaboxes work? The key to their design is the spatialization of emotions. What makes our use of rasa “Western” is that rather than codifying the expression of emotion through particular gestures and facial expressions that are always performed in the same way (as in classical Indian dance), we use space to delineate each rasa, and allow the individual performer to find her own expression of the emotion/s contained within it.

The first step toward movement improvisation involves getting into one box at a time and creating a “statue” or fixed pose for each rasa. We then establish the rule that a participant cannot be in a Rasabox without expressing it dynamically. Participants then move among the rasas, embodying each rasa by means of the pose they have chosen. The idea is to move from one box to another with no “daylight”—no period of transition—between them. This develops an emotional/physical agility the actor can use to transform instantly from expressing rage to love to sadness to disgust, etc. Once participants are comfortable with being statues, we introduce breath and then sound and finally movement and sound together. What starts as a fairly controlled exercise develops into a very free improvisation, involving a wide range of interactions or “scenes” between different people in different boxes.

Since being introduced to the Rasaboxes in 1996, I have been fascinated by their power to free performers (myself included) to experience ranges of physical and emotional expression that might have otherwise seemed unavailable to them. Through this training it is possible to develop an incredible range of expressiveness—from the filmic to the operatic or grotesque—without sacrificing the element of greatest concern to Western performers: “sincerity” or “truth.” I have found, in fact, that because of its focus on physical embodiment/expression, Rasaboxes training can serve to deepen a performer’s ability to find authentic emotional connections.

The Rasaboxes externalize what is often considered an “internal” process, proving that “real” emotion does not have to be kept inside, but is actually a physical as well as a psychological process. In this way, rasa training serves as a bridge for the actor between his psycho-physiology and his expressiveness. Because it acts as a link between the actor’s individual, physical body and emotions, and his emotional/physical relationship to the environment and other performers, rasa technique can serve as a multidirectional training ground where old habits and patterns can be brought to light and new ones can emerge. Unlike many other forms of actor training—in which the actor is encouraged to lose himself, to act on impulse, to give way to inspiration—the Rasaboxes encourage the actor to approach his craft as a conscious, body-oriented process to which he holds the keys and the tools for his own development. In drama therapy terms, she is the “observing ego,” experiencing the process and observing the process at the same time. In Somatic Fitness terms, she develops “a body that knows itself.”²

When they first experience the Rasaboxes, people often comment on the “therapeutic” aspect of the exercises. Indeed, they are therapeutic; in my experience, many forms of actor training are therapeutic insofar as they promote health and balance, developing the body’s energy-giving functions as well as its expressiveness. The Rasaboxes have, in fact, been adapted by some practitioners of drama therapy to provide their clients with a safe space in which to explore emotions. But in the context of performer training, the ultimate point of the exercises is to go beyond, rather than to indulge in, the personal side of emotion. When I am engaged in the work, I do feel the sense of being connected to a deep well—a kind of universal emotional source—which allows emotion to move me, and move through me and beyond me to an audience who can mutually share the experience. It is no longer “my” emotion. A paradox emerges: By going deeply into the intimate details of a particular body, we can go beyond that particular body, past the mundane personal/psychological realm to a transpersonal realm, even a mythic realm.

Ultimately, a performer experienced in Rasabox training can internalize the grid structure, and is able to transform from one rasic state to another without the physical map. It is possible for such a performer to change the emotional quality of a moment, a speech, or a scene at any point without necessarily changing her place in space. “Emotion,” like space, time, and other elements of staging, becomes simply another tool to be used in the process of exploring and developing performance work. The Rasaboxes can free performers from questions about “motivation,” allowing them to think of and use emotion in a more playful adventurous way. Finally, emotion—which is so often blocked, or internalized in Western acting—moves into the body, where it can energize the space *between* one performer and another, and between performer and spectator.

The Rasaboxes are not meant to supplant other forms of actor training. Objectives, through-lines, creative improvisations, and other widely used Western approaches can still be used to answer the “what” questions of acting, while the Rasaboxes can be used, in combination with them, to answer the “how” questions. Qualitative changes can be made by applying the idea of *rasa* to a character, a scene, even an entire play. At times it is useful to think of *rasa* as a kind of tonality, or rhythm of performance, which can be modulated as the pitch/key or the tempo/rhythm of a piece of music can be modulated.

One of the things I have discovered in working with the Rasaboxes is that, contrary to the training we have inherited from Stanislavsky, emotion, when fully played out through the body, can become action. Also, I have learned from this process that onstage, as in life, emotion is not necessarily psycho-“logical” in the simplistic sense that we often associate with realistic acting. In working on a scene or a monologue in the Rasaboxes, one discovers that often the least “logical” emotion is the one that makes the scene the most interesting. Sometimes, one discovers new layers of emotion; a scene played with laughter on the surface may have rage lurking beneath. The *rasas* can also serve as a kind of emotional baseline for character. A Blanche Dubois played with *karuna* (grief and compassion) as her baseline would be very different than a Blanche played with *raudra* (rage) or *bhayanaka* (fear) as the baseline. She would have a different breath, a different voice, a different body, and these details of her characterization would affect the tone of the entire character interpretation.

Now we are beginning to explore new material in the Rasaboxes. Composer/choreographer and East Coast Artists associate Liz Claire is working with music for a piece we are making about Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. The rich sounds and rhythms of Claire’s violin sounding *bhayanaka* or *karuna* expand my work as a performer in those emotional spaces—pushing my body and voice into new territory, and multiplying the textural layers of the piece. Here, *rasa* becomes a terrain for dialogue between actor and musician, blurring the boundaries of our roles and the techniques available to us.

In my work as a movement analyst, I have also begun to explore the application of Laban ideas about movement to performers’ work in the Rasaboxes. This detailed physical work can refine the body’s work of emotional expression, challenging the performer to find Light, Quick rage, for example, or Bound, Strong fear. With its categories of Body, Space, Shape, Effort, and Relationship, Laban Movement Analysis provides the tools to take the performer beyond her “patterns,” expanding the field of expressive possibility. The possibilities are endless. As Bharata says in the *Natyasastra*: “It is impossible [...] to know all about natya since there is no limit to bhava-s (emotions) and no

(continued)

end to the arts involved [in natya]. It is not possible to have a thorough knowledge of even one of them, leave alone so many of them” (Bharata-muni 1996:53). It is with this spirit that I enter, and ask others to enter and re-enter the Rasaboxes, always knowing there are new worlds to be discovered there.

Notes

1. Rebecca Ortese worked with me for six months on developing the Rasaboxes as a rehearsal tool during the 1999 Mabou Mines Resident Artist Program.
2. This idea was introduced to me by Martha Eddy, a Body-Mind Centering practitioner and teacher. *Somatic* refers to *soma*, or cell, which, according to this way of thinking, contains its own wisdom. This approach to the body’s wisdom or knowledge is a wonderful way to approach the Rasaboxes, where the different parts of our bodies are in constant dialogue with one another as we search for ways to physically contain and express emotion.

Reference

- Bharata-muni
1996 *The Nāṭyaśāstra*. Translated and edited by Adya Rangacharya. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

7. Self-selecting, someone enters a box. The person takes/makes a pose of that rasa: for example, the pose of *sringara* or *karuna*...or whatever. The person can do as few as a single rasa or as many as all eight named rasas. (Remember the ninth or center box is “clear.”) A person can move from box to box either along the edge or on the lines—in which case the movement is “neutral.” But if a person steps into a box, he must take/make a rasic pose. This phase continues until everyone has had at least one chance to enter and pose within the Rasaboxes.
8. Same as 7, but now the pose is supplemented by a sound.

In steps 7 and 8, there is no “thinking.” Just take/make a pose and/or a sound. Whatever is “there” in association to the rasa. Move rather quickly from one Rasabox to the next. Don’t worry how “pretty,” “true,” or “original” the pose/sound is. Just do it. But once outside the boxes, reflect on how you composed your rasa and what it felt like to be in a composed rasa. In other words, begin the exploration of the distinction between feelings (experience) and emotion (public expression of feelings). Don’t worry which came first. It is a chicken-and-egg question with no correct answer.

In fact, the first poses/sounds often have the quality of social clichés—of the “already known” that fit the rasas as casually understood. Big laughs for *hasya*, clenched fists for *raudra*, weeping for *karuna*, and so on. The distance between stereotype and archetype is not great. Sooner or later, the social stereotype/archetype will be augmented by gestures and sounds that are more intimate, personal, quirky, unexpected. Practice leads one toward these. The road from outer to inner = the road from inner to outer.

9. Move more rapidly from one box to the next. Quick changes, no time for thinking it out in advance.



3. Paula Murray Cole (left) and Michele Minnick exchange an extreme facial gesture during the Rasabox exercise. (Photo by Richard Schechner)

Here we are beginning to grapple with Antonin Artaud’s call for actors who are “athletes of the emotions.” Actual athletic competitions come to mind. A basketball player sits on the sidelines, quiet, a towel draped over his shoulder. But when called on to enter the game, he explodes with energy, performs at a high level of skill, and is entirely focused on his task. A whistle blows, and the athlete relaxes. The time-out is over, he jumps back into the game. One of the goals of the Rasabox exercise is to prepare actors to move with the same mastery from one emotion to another, in a random or almost random sequence, with no preparation between emotional displays, and with full commitment to each emotion. What happens at the feelings level is left indeterminate—as with the performers in India: some doers of the Rasabox exercise will “feel” it, others will not. See the sidebars for what Cole and Minnick write concerning their experiences with the Rasabox exercise.

10. Two persons enter, each one in his or her own box. At first, they simply make the rasas without paying attention to each other. But then they begin to “dialogue” with the rasas—and shift rapidly from one box to another. So, *sringara* confronts *vira* and then *vira* moves to *adbhuta*; after a moment *sringara* rushes along the line to *bibhasta* and *adbhuta* jumps to *bhayanaka*.

At step 10, many new combinations appear. Participants begin to find things that are far from the social clichés. Those on the outside are often amused, sometimes frightened, or moved. “Something” is happening, though it can’t be reduced to words. A few people are hesitant about going into the boxes at all. The exercise is both expressive and a scalpel that cuts very deeply into people. Paradoxically, in performing different emotional masks, the participants discover aspects of their beings that had remained hidden—sometimes even from themselves.

11. Participants bring in texts—that is, monologues from known plays or stuff written just for the exercise. Scenes from dramas are enacted by two or even three people. The text remains fixed, but the rasas shift—with no

preplanning. So, for example, Romeo is all *sringara* but Juliet is *karuna*; then suddenly Juliet springs to *bibhasta* and Romeo to *adbhuta*. And so on—the possible combinations are nearly endless. Occasionally, Romeo and Juliet are in the same box.

At this stage, actors test out the many different possibilities of any given text. Or rather, the texts are revealed as not being fundamental, but permeable, open, wildly interpretable.

12. Scenes are enacted with one underlying *rasa*, on top of which are bits played in different *rasas*.

Here one begins to see how a whole production could be mapped as a progression of *rasas*. The progression could be scored or improvised each performance.

There are even more possibilities. The Rasabox exercise is designed to be unfinishable. It is not intended to be a “true example” of a *NS*-based performance. Indeed, what comes from the Rasabox exercise is not at all like what one sees at any traditional Indian performance. The exercise actually points to the creative possibilities suggested by the underlying theory of the *NS*. It “comes from” rather than “is an example of” that theory.

The Empty Box

What about the empty box at the center? Historically, there was no “*shanta rasa*” until Abhinavagupta added it some centuries after the *NS* was compiled. In the exercise, as in the historical development of *rasa* theory, the “ninth Rasabox” is special. What happens there? In the exercise, a person can enter that box—the *shanta* space—only when the person is “clear.” What that means is not for the one directing the exercise to say. Each person will have her own criteria for total, whole clarity. In the years that I’ve directed the Rasabox exercise, “*shanta*” has been occupied very rarely, one or two times. There can be no challenge to such a position. So what if it is “not really so” that the person is “clear”? How can another person tell? And maybe it is so, maybe the participant has surpassed all *samsara*, all the clutter of feelings, the confusion of mixed emotions, the noise of change. I will not judge.

Abhinaya literally means to lead the performance to the spectators—and the first spectator is the performer herself. If the self-who-is-observing is moved by the self-who-is-performing the performance will be a success.

Rasaesthetics in Performance

Now let me turn from training to performance. Indian theatre, dance, and music are not banquets. In *odissi*, *bharatanatyam*, *kathakali*, *kathak*, and so on, performers dance, gesture, impersonate, and sometimes speak and sing. Occasionally, burning incense thickens the air with odor. But for the most part, the data of the performance is transmitted from performer to partaker in the same way as in the West (and elsewhere): through the eyes and ears. How is this *rasic*?

Experience Rasaboxes

Paula Murray Cole

I'd like to describe what it feels like to experience the rasas as we explore them in the Rasaboxes exercise and apply them in our rehearsals and performances. First, however, let me help you to understand what a rasa experience feels like by relating something that recently happened to me.

Not long ago, I spent a week and a half studying the therapeutic uses of essential oils. As part of an introductory exercise, our class was asked to experience and respond to the smell and effects of various oils; to notice what parts of our bodies were most affected by each oil; what memories, images, or associations were evoked; and to guess each oil's therapeutic uses. During the exercise, I observed the expressions on the faces and bodies of my classmates as they related to each oil. I noticed that their responses were immediate and extremely physical. Robert took a whiff of German chamomile, a heavy dark blue oil, and was instantly, violently repulsed. His body jolted and jumped backward, his face contorted with disgust. "Auggghhhkk," he exhaled as he spat. He quickly replaced the cap on the bottle and put it far from his body. Steve uncapped the rosemary and his body and face widened, his spine lengthened, his breathing became large and even. "Wow," he said, and he reported that he felt stimulated, powerful, energized. We took turns smelling the substances. After about five minutes, the oils' essences were not only contained inside each bottle, but had diffused throughout the room, transfusing into our bodies and affecting our psychophysiology.

So it is with rasa. Rasa means "essence," and that essence has the power to move us, to transform and shape our responses. It comes from outside our bodies, is smelled, tasted, ingested. Its particular properties change us, transform our chemistry and shape our psychophysical expressive behavior.

In 1999, I played Ofelia in the East Coast Artists' production of *Hamlet*, directed by Richard Schechner at the Performing Garage in New York. I often used the rasa *karuna* (grief/anguish/compassion). Here's a description from my rehearsal notes about what it felt like to experience *karuna*:

I breathe in karuna, taste it, smell it. [...] My body folds on the first long exhale as my knees sink to the ground, my belly tightens and rounds my spine/my throat tightens/my breath heaves/my head bows [...]. One hand reaches up to cover my eyes while the other supports the rest of my weight as it drops further into the floor. I breathe in the karuna that is all around me. I sink into the feeling, my eyes well up with tears. I want to surrender my breath to the openness and expanding relief that sounding this pain would bring. [...] I tighten and fight against that feeling of vulnerability and exposure. The sound squeezes out anyway, a high keening noise. I breathe again and my mind rifles through the baggage of remembered and created associations I have with this feeling: A muscle memory? An emotional imprint? I can see the image of myself here on the floor. Then I see myself set out on the ice floe. [...] Then mourning the death of my father.

Now I am playing a bit of Ofelia's "mad scene":

The tears stream, I seek relief by crouching closer to the floor, squeezing my guts trying to support an insupportable sorrow. [...] The experience is as if it were happening to me, karuna is moving me according to its demands. I am not taking myself on an intellectual journey through my own personal psychology, to remember a time when I felt a similar feeling, though those memories may surface while I am working. I am simply and completely connecting with the rasa, working in relationship to the rasa, from the outside until it is the inside and back again.

Watching traditional Indian genres, one sees the performer looking at her own hands as they form different *hastas* or *mudras*—precise gestures with very specific meanings. This self-regarding is not narcissism in the Western sense. *Abhinaya* literally means to lead the performance to the spectators—and the first spectator is the performer herself. If the self-who-is-observing is moved by the self-who-is-performing the performance will be a success. This splitting is not exactly a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, but neither is it altogether different. Brecht wanted to open a space between performer and performance in order to insert a social commentary. The rasic performer opens a liminal space to allow further play—improvisation, variation, and self-enjoyment.

The performer becomes a partaker herself. When she is moved by her own performance, she is affected not as the character, but as a partaker. Like the other partakers, she can appreciate the dramatic situation, the crisis, the feelings of the character she is performing. She will both express the emotions of that character and be moved to her own feelings about those emotions. Where does she experience these feelings? In the ENS, in the gut—inside the body that is dancing, that is hearing music, that is enacting a dramatic situation. The other partakers—the audience—are doubly affected: by the performance and by the performer's reaction to her own performance. An empathetic feedback takes place. The experience can be remarkable.

In orthodox Western theatre, the spectators respond sympathetically to the “as if” of characters living out a narrative. In rasic theatre, the partakers empathize with the experience of the performers playing. This empathy with the performer rather than with the plot is what permits Indian theatre to “wander,” to explore detours and hidden pathways, unexpected turns in the performance. Here *rasa* and *raga* (the classical Indian musical form) are analogous. The partakers' interest is not tied to the story, but to the enacting of the story; the partakers do not want to “see what happens next” but to “experience how the performer performs whatever is happening.” There is no narrational imperative insisting on development, climax, recognition, and resolution. Instead, as in kundalini sexual meditation, there is as much deferral as one can bear—a delicious delay of resolution.

I am here expounding a theory of reception—even to the extent that the performer's self-regarding is a reception of her own performance. This needs further elaboration. One treatise on *abhinaya* instructs the dancer to sing with her throat, express the meaning of that song with her hand gestures, show how she feels with her eyes, and keep time with her feet. And every performer knows the traditional adage: Where the hands go, the eyes follow; where the eyes go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, the emotions follow; and when the emotions are expressed, there will be *rasa*. Such a logically linked performance of emotions points to the “self.” Not the self as personal ego, but the *atman* or profound absolute self, the self that is identical to the universal absolute, the *Brahman*.

Eating in a traditional manner in India means conveying the food directly to the mouth with the right hand. There is no intermediary instrument such as fork or spoon. Sometimes a flat bread is used to mop up or hold the food; sometimes rice is used to sop up a curry. But in all cases, the food on the index and third finger is swept into the mouth by an inward motion of the thumb. Along with the food, the eater tastes his own fingers. The performer regarding her *mudras* is engaging in a kind of “theatre feeding.” As with self-feeding, the emotions of a performance are first conveyed to the performer and the partakers by means of the hands.

Orthodox Western performing arts remain invested in keeping performers separated from receivers. Stages are elevated; curtains mark a boundary; spec-

tators are fixed in their seats. Mainstream artists, scholars, and critics do not look on synchronicity and synaesthesia with favor. Eating, digestion, and excretion are not thought of as proper sites of aesthetic pleasure. These sites—aside from rock concerts, raves, and sports matches—are more in the domain of performance art. In early performance art there were Carolee Schneemann, Allan Kaprow, Shiraga Kazuo, Hermann Nitsch, Chris Burden, Stelarc, Paul McCarthy, and others. Later came Mike Kelley, Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle, Ron Athey, and Franko B.—all of whom insisted on making “the body” explicit (see Schneider 1997 and Jones 1998). Their work began to elide differences between the interior and the exterior; to emphasize permeability and porosity; to explore the sexual, the diseased, the excretory, the wet, and the smelly. Performances used blood, semen, spit, shit, urine—as well as food, paint, plastics, and other stuff drawn from the “literal” rather than the “make believe.” On the surface, this work is not very Asian, but at an underlying theoretical level, it is extremely rasic.

These kinds of performances need to be studied in terms of rasaesthetics. That means paying attention to the increasing appetite for arts that engage visceral arousal and experience; performances that insist on sharing experiences with partakers and participants; works that try to evoke both terror and celebration. Such performances are often very personal even as they are no longer private.

What I’m asking for goes beyond performance art. Rasaesthetics opens questions regarding how the whole sensorium is, or can be, used in making performances. Smell, taste, and touch are demanding their place at the table.⁸ Thus I am making a much larger claim—and sending out a more general invitation. I am inviting an investigation into theatricality as orality, digestion, and excretion rather than, or in addition to, theatricality as something only or mostly for the eyes and ears. I am saying that performance practice has already moved strongly into this place and now is the time for theory to follow.

Notes

1. At the very start of the text, Bharata claims for the *NS* the status of a *veda*—the most sacred of ancient Indian texts. This is not all that unusual. Such claims to being the “fifth veda” were used to validate and strengthen a text. Of course tradition finally assigned the rank of *sastra* to the *NS*, a position well down the hierarchical ladder of sacred writings. As for the framing origin myth itself, which is told in chapter one—the story of Brahma’s composition of the “fifth veda,” its transmission to Bharata and his sons, and their performance of the “first natya” on the occasion of the Mahendra’s flag festival (the victory celebration of Indra’s triumph over *asuras* and *danavas* [demons])—much can be made of it. The demons are enraged by the performance of their defeat; they rush the stage and magically freeze “the speeches, movements, and even the memory of the performers” (Bharata-muni 1996:3). Indra intervenes, thrashing the demons with a flagpole that is then installed as a protective totem. Brahma instructs the gods’ architect Visvakarman to construct an impregnable theatre, well-guarded by the most powerful gods. This having been done, the gods say it is better to negotiate with the demons than to forcibly exclude them. Brahma agrees, approaches the demons, and inquires why they want to destroy natya. They reply, “You are as much the creator of us as of the gods, So you should not have done it [omitted them from *natya*]” (4). “If that is all there is to it,” Brahma says, “then there is no reason for you to feel angry or aggrieved. I have created the *Natyaveda* to show good and bad actions and feelings of both gods and yourselves. It is the representation of the entire three worlds and not only of the gods or of yourselves” (4). Thus natya is of divine origin, all-encompassing, and consisting of actions both good and bad. For an extended and highly sophisticated interpretation of the *NS* framing myth, see Byrski (1974).
2. According to Kapila Vatsyayan (1996:32–36) and Adya Rangacharya, whose recent English translation of the *NS* is the most readable, the American Fitz Edward Hall un-

earthed and published several chapters in 1865. In 1874, the German Wilhelm Heymann (or Haymann, as Vatsyayan spells it) wrote an influential essay that stimulated further translations of several chapters by the French scholar, Paul Reynaud (or Regnaud as Vatsyayan spells it). But it was only in 1926 that the Baroda critical edition was commenced. The whole text—in Sanskrit—was not in print until 1954.

In spite of all these results, the final text is contradictory, repetitive and incongruent; there are lacunae too, but, what is worse, there are words and passages that are almost impossible to understand. [...] It is not only modern scholars who suffer this inability to understand; even almost a thousand years ago [...] Abhinavagupta [...] displayed this tendency. (Vatsyayan 1996:xviii)

Vatsyayan (180ff) provides a “Database of the *Natyasastra*” locating and listing all 112 known extant texts and fragments. All the texts are in Sanskrit but are transcribed in a variety of scripts: Newari, Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil, Kanarese. Thus we know that from an early time the NS was widely distributed across the sub-continent.

3. “In Presocratic thought the prerational notion of agon is used to describe the natural world as a ceaseless play of forces or Becoming” (Spariosu 1989:13).
4. According to the first chapter of the NS Brahma created the natyaveda:

to show good and bad actions and feelings of both gods and yourselves [humans]. It is the representation of the entire three worlds [divine, human, demonic] and not only of the gods or of yourselves. Now dharma [correct living], now artha [warring], now kama [loving], humor or fights, greed or killing. Natya teaches the right way to those who go against dharma, erotic enjoyment to those who seek pleasure, restraint to those who are unruly, moderation to those who are self-disciplined, courage to cowards, energy to the brave, knowledge to the uneducated, wisdom to the learned, enjoyment to the rich, solace to those in grief, money to business-people, a calm mind to the disturbed. Natya is the representation of the ways of the worlds using various emotions and diverse circumstances. It gives you peace, entertainment, and happiness, as well as beneficial advice based on the actions of high, low, and middle people. (Bharata-muni 1996, chapt. 1; English adapted from Ghosh and Rangacharya translations)

5. The peripheral nervous system (PNS) consists of the many nerve cells throughout the body connected to the brain via the spinal cord. The PNS receives sensory input which is then transmitted to the brain where it is “interpreted” as various kinds of touch—heat/cold, pain, tickling, etc. Signals sent back from the brain result in bodily movements and so on. The ENS is part of the PNS, but is both structurally and operationally very different than the rest of the PNS. The ENS, for the most part, operates independently of the brain though it is connected to the brain via the vagus nerve.
6. East Coast Artists is a company I formed in New York in the early 1990s. Productions I’ve directed with ECA are *Faust/gastronome* (1992), *Three Sisters* (1997), and *Hamlet* (1999). The Rasabox exercise was developed both during ECA rehearsal workshops and at workshops I ran at NYU in the 1990s. In the late ’90s, I worked very closely with Michele Minnick and Paula Murray Cole in relation to Rasaboxes. Minnick and Cole have led several Rasabox workshops in New York and elsewhere. The exercise is dynamic. It continues to change.
7. The exercise is not based on the theory, exactly; nor does the theory result from the exercise, exactly. Rather, there is a convergence and an interplay between what I am thinking and what I am doing. This interplay is open—that is why both the exercise and the theory are “in development” and not “finished.”
8. The work of Constance Classen and David Howes and the group of scholars associated with them is well worth noting. They are developing an anthropology of and an aesthetics of the senses. See *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991) edited by Howes, and Classen’s *The Color of Angels* (1998). In April 2000, Classen, Howes, Jim Drobnick, and Jennifer Fisher convened “Uncommon Senses: An International Conference On the Senses in Art and Culture” at Concordia University in Montreal with 180 presenters. For papers adapted from this conference see Auslander (2001), Banes (2001), and Borsato (2001).

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