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INTERVIEW

‘When you hold your eyes wide open, you actually don’t see fully’: on translation processes in the solo performance *Ravanama* (2011)

Maya Krishna Rao in conversation with Sruti Bala*

Maya Krishna Rao is a well-known name in contemporary Indian theatre, most widely known for her solo shows and for her performances in protest events in support of women’s rights and social justice. Each of her performances has a distinctive vocabulary and form, ranging from dance theatre, multimedia performance, to rock concerts and stand-up comedy. Rao’s performances are inspired by her training in Kathakali, allowing her to straddle the worlds of dance and theatre in the search for a contemporary language of performance. The themes respond acutely to issues in contemporary India and offer sharp glimpses of urban life. She has been commissioned by prestigious international theatre festivals and has travelled widely with her shows. She is a recipient of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for acting in 2010, which she returned in 2015 in protest against what she described as the government’s indifference to the growing intolerance in India. Maya Rao was Professor at the Shiv Nadar University till 2017, where she taught Theatre for Education and Social Transformation.

This conversation took place in the framework of the research project on translation and performance (in collaboration with the University of Cape Town and the University of Amsterdam, 2016–19). Rao shared her reflections on the artistic processes of translation in the solo performance ‘Ravanama’. The conversation took place in July 2017 at Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research in Pondicherry, India.

From the programme notes of *Ravanama*¹

There are several stories about Ravana, the mythological character, that have crossed each other in the making of this piece. The performance begins with an ‘actor’ on stage in search of Ravana. Why is she so attracted to him while all the world considers him evil? Is it the appeal of the Kathakali theatre form, which depicts Ravana in high scale and grandeur? This takes her to all the stories around him. With every plunge into a fresh story and the world of Kathakali, there emerges a further revelation of Ravana.

What happened after the Ramayana ended? What remained after the story was over? According to one version of the story, Ravana never died, instead he took the form of a bird and made the forest his home. In another version, Sita, the woman he desired, was actually his long-forgotten daughter, given away at birth, because she came with a curse, that one day she would be the cause of her father, Ravana’s death. A performance about love, longing, the quest for a character, of a form.

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How did you come to work on this performance?

Rustom Bharucha, who was director of two seasons of the Ramayana Festival, encouraged me to develop a performance around a character drawn from the Ramayana. Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research commissioned the production to be performed on the occasion of the Ramayana seminar in Pondicherry in 2011. I initially hesitated, because I had no particular affinity to the main figures of Rama or Sita. Also, in those days, Ramayana had become politically charged in India in the wake of the Ayodhya² controversy. It took a while to realize that one of my favourite characters, Ravana, was also a driving force of the Ramayana. I had for long been fascinated by the complexity of this character and had wanted to explore him in my own idiom and performance vocabulary. Ravana features prominently in Kathakali, the dance form I have extensively studied with my Kathakali *guru* (teacher), Sadanam Balakrishnan. In the Kathakali repertoire, Ravana is not in any way simply 'evil' as he is depicted in popular art forms. He is much more. I had often thought there was something contemporary about his predicament and he needed to be 'searched for' on the floor of a rehearsal space. In conceptualizing the performance, I also found inspiration in the scholarship of A. K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman and David Shulman, through the many little-known stories they brought to light and their insightful essays on the Ramayana.

Explain your choice of the title *Ravanama*

The title of the performance references *Baburnama* ('The Memoirs of Babur'), which is the title of the autobiography or travelogue of the Mughal Emperor Babur (1483–1530). I suppose it was my way of commenting on the mobilization of religious sentiment towards political violence in present-day India. In the title, I hint at the correlations between Ravana and Babur. To me there is a simplistic reduction in the labelling of the Mughal emperor Babur as barbarous, comparable to that of Ravana as evil. The *Baburnama* is in fact a rich historical source, full of details of the flora and fauna of the places that Babur travelled to in West and Central Asia. What might a memoir of Ravana look like?

How did you go about translating the myth of Ravana into performance?

Mythology is like a river that generates tributaries, it has side stories and minor stories that disseminate and propagate their own stories in their own ways, over time. In fact, a myth stops being a myth when it is fixed or loses its potential to be spun into new stories. Unlike other genres of stories, the myth to me has a highly generative potential, it is constantly unfolding. It also carries a different aesthetic than other stories, in the way one can find inspiration in its fragments, it provides clues, it is not restricted to its main plot.

I approached the mythical figure of Ravana through the form of Kathakali, which itself is a dynamic, living form, and, besides this, through my own particular way of devising performance. There is, therefore, no one-to-one translation process in the way one speaks of translating from one recognizable original to another clearly outlined language. The myth, a classical form, and my own performance style, all of these are intertwined and conversing with each other in *Ravanama*.

I started practicing Kathakali as a child of around seven years, and gave it up as a teenager, then wanting to do what I called 'modern' theatre. I was ready to go back to

Kathakali only at 28. There are, of course, the obvious challenges of ‘returning’ to the form when the body is older and different, but it was through this return that I was able to discover for myself the richness of Kathakali. That insight comes through practice. My question in creating the performance was not how to perform a Kathakali version of Ravana. Rather it was how can I approach Ravana, in the here and now, using my own improvisational practice to re-enter the form of Kathakali.



You begin the performance with a few sequences of how you, Maya, might start the play. Is this trope of the ‘actor in search of a character’ what you mean by ‘approaching Ravana’?

The choice of ‘I could start like this ...’ was a dramaturgical one, as a device to enter fresh stories. But there is more to it than the ‘actor in search of character’ idea.

Kathakali approaches character in a fundamentally different way. There is an ongoing play between hand and facial gestures (*mudra*), breath, actor and character, all set to a certain rhythmic cycle. In a celebrated Kathakali play, *Ravanothbhavam* (Rise of Ravana), Ravana is on stage alone reminiscing to a slow ten-beat cycle. This is one of my favourite pieces in Kathakali. For me to approach Ravana is to dwell in the ten-beat cycle, to have Ravana approach me, if you like. The slow drums and cymbals beating out the ten beats in complex patterns slows down and intensifies one's breathing and you find yourself gradually entering an atmosphere that holds the enormity and complexity of this man.

When you start a Kathakali class, you are not told by the *guru* which scenic sequence (*padam*) you are doing. With each new *mudra*, you gradually start to recognize what situation or character you are playing. For me, when I hear the ten-beat cycle I feel I can enter his body and see the world through Ravana's eyes – not just through the Kathakali form but through an altogether new language.

In a Kathakali performance, the audience approaches Ravana from the section called the 'curtain look' (*tera nokka*) in Kathakali. The actor too prepares herself to enter the scene from behind a curtain held by two people on stage. The singer chants a shloka in verse form, which outlines the situation, the character's state of mind at the moment. The character is revealed bit by bit from behind the curtain. First the top of the crown is revealed, then the eyes, the face and finally the whole body. It is as if the character, in the presence of the audience, transforms into character and finally meets with the audience. There is an enticement in the way the character is approached: now you see him, now you don't, behind and around the curtain, before he eventually tugs at the curtain and brings it fully down. For me the structure of *Ravanama* is similar – we discover him slowly through navigating and reinterpreting different stories.

'Evil', as you know, is too limited a word to describe some of our mythological characters. Ravana's face is painted green (for noble) but because he is arrogant and has a streak of evil in him, he wears the white nose. *Ravanothbhavam* opens with Ravana immersed in himself, deep in thought. You are witness to that moment of him being with himself. To begin with he does not talk, he fans himself. His first *mudra* is 'I'. It is a large, inner-oriented 'I', as in: 'Why am I so satisfied today?' It is not about conveying any message, in the sense that he is not immediately talking to you or any other character. I so love it, because in that opening question we are taken straight away into the arrogance and essential character of the man. We know all these background stories about Ravana, about his ten heads, that he was a lover of the arts and created the musical scale of the *Sankarabharanam Ragam*. You are aware of what will be played out in performing Ravana. But the whole scene in Kathakali may just end up being about that one moment – the scale of his 'satisfaction' that is made up of his heads and his range of facets. This is like a soliloquy. And not quite. The question comes from an arrogant man who wants the world to know the answer. This liminal space was another attraction point for me. He is with you, yet with himself. There's something contemporary about that. In a single moment we may face ourselves, step out to meet the world and then shut ourselves off from ourselves. So, whether it's the curtain look or his in-and-out stance, these became the dramaturgical devices in creating *Ravanama*. They also gave me clues to how to approach the man himself.



Another instance of how I approached Ravana was the newspaper scene. I wanted something that would place me very firmly in the here and now. One of my daily rituals is reading the newspaper. In improvising, I used the teacup, the newspaper, and put on the ten-beat *chenda* music and waited to see what happens. I turned the pages slowly, waiting. I had to find a way to slowly encounter Ravana, but that route of latching onto him, of getting my teeth into him, needed to come through the tension of the *chenda* from Kathakali on the one hand, and turning the pages of the newspaper, on the other.³ Here, without planning it, I also translated elements from the martial art form, Kalaripayattu, where the performer describe their moves even as they do it, 'I now place the foot, I bend over, I turn around, I fold my hands to the goddess' and so on. In this case, I say 'a woman wakes up in the morning ... turns the pages ...'. I suppose I was interested in how I might use this as a device, both as an actor as well as a character to meet Ravana in the here and now.

What does it imply for you as a woman to perform Ravana? And what about Sita, the woman Ravana desires? How do you translate that configuration?

Ravana was attracted to Sita in the Ramayana. But I wasn't attracted to Sita at all. All this re-evaluation of Sita that has been attempted in various interpretations of Sita has never appealed to me, her splitting open and entering into the earth, her acquiring agency and becoming independent of her husband, and so on. So that's one difference between me and Ravana. I am not drawn to Sita, but Ravana is. Yet that's how I meet him. Attraction is what is common to both of us. But I don't have to become Sita or be drawn to Sita to meet him. Interestingly, in Kathakali I don't think there is a single story that deals with Ravana's attraction to Sita. You find it in Kudiyaattam, not in Kathakali. But even in Kudiyaattam, it is something very tentative and fragile. I have seen the renowned Kudiyaattam master, Ammanur Madhava Chakyar, playing

Ravana in the scene of the garden of Ashoka. The way the old man performed it! He approaches Sita, knowing she will be repulsed by him. He tries to appease her with gifts. One after another. And with each he fails. All this came alive to me and inspired me as I was improvising. So Ravana came to me via all these other stories, which I dipped into in improvisations. And that is the substance of the performance. Much like a deck of cards the actor improvises her way through a selection of stories about Ravana in an effort to find him and make a show about him! Sometimes different stories ‘clashed’ on the floor and a new story would emerge.



There are certain formal elements of Kathakali I wanted to hold on to regardless of whether the audience understood it or not. The Kathakali *mudra* for woman (*stri*), for instance, is one such element. I needed its presence because that’s the way I get to Ravana, i.e. Ravana in search of the woman, Sita. In the initial instant of playing out the act of ‘looking for Ravana’, I thought it would be me, Maya, looking for Ravana. However, the form allowed me to retain the tension in that quest without resolving it in a linear manner. In playing out Ravana’s attraction to Sita, the actor discovers him. That’s one of the routes. The *mudra* sustains the oscillation between the self, the actor and the character. In holding the mudra of ‘woman’ there is a bit of Sita and a bit of me. Or it could evoke my attraction to Ravana as the man who is attracted to Sita.

In the ‘Thigh’ sequence, I also translated the amorous attraction of Ravana to Sita by pushing it into the realm of contemporary popular imagination and cinema. This is not necessarily ‘my’ Ravana or Kathakali’s Ravana. In Kathakali, there is a famous scene describing Mandodari (Ravana’s wife) sitting on Ravana’s lap, and his description of her beauty and his attraction for her. Of course, he is dressed in full Kathakali regalia. In my quest for him, I bare my thigh to see if it will help me realize his desire of Sita. The lap of Kathakali versus the thigh of today. However, the repeated action of

calling, wooing, cajoling, ordering Sita to come sit on his bare thigh took me smack into another story, where Sita is actually Ravana's long lost daughter. The lecherous or lover's thigh turned into the pathos of the father's lap.



Talk a bit more about your use of pop culture as translational tool in the performance

I often use items in the newspaper as point of departure. A lot of my comedy work has come out of reading newspapers. Or watching the news on television. Once, a single line from the home minister's address in parliament on terrorism became the take-off point for a comedy episode. In another instance, the shock and the many explanations that followed of an Indian female film star caught on camera kissing a Hollywood star (off the sets), proved to be excellent stuff for another episode.

I also love dancing. I often put on different kinds of music and dance. This serves as a prompt and offers material for improvisation. In fact, that's the story behind the use of the Michael Jackson track 'Bad' in *Ravanama*. I happened to be dancing to Michael Jackson one day, and it triggered my imagination. I took the song in to the rehearsal space and started playing with it. In popular imagination, Ravana fits in with this description, it is as if he speaks in Jackson's voice, something like, 'you think I'm bad, you burn giant effigies of me, you rejoice watching me burn to cinders, if you think I'm bad, I will be bad!'. With this 'Bad' sequence, however, I just followed a kernel of an idea. I wasn't sure at all how it would go down with audiences. I wasn't trying to convey a message. My own approach to it was a bit like the 'curtain look' in Kathakali I mentioned earlier. One presents the character rather than playing it out. One is simultaneously observing oneself and the audience, as well as observing the audience observe itself. In this case, what it thinks of Ravana. That offers much material to play around with. Then cinema comes in. Many of the villains of Indian cinema, certainly of the '60's and '70's, seemed to say, 'I'll go beyond your imagination of what you think is bad. I'll be worse than bad'. I must

say that cinema has impacted so much on me and forms an important part of my creative impulse.

It's very tricky to think one can just use a Kathakali *mudra* or *tala* as a device and slap it onto a contemporary performance. Will it remain static and forced? Or will it be a device for further discovery? If you have a fixed preconceived idea of what it should convey, then I think it will be a bind, it won't be a discovery. However, I think I have spent many hours soaking in both Kathakali and specifically Ravana in Kathakali, to not let an odd *mudra* or a stance hold me in within the form, but rather to let it be the diving board to take me into uncharted spaces. The work with both popular elements and Kathakali was an attempt to use them as devices for further discovery.



You spoke of myths in terms of the tributaries of a river and of their potential to generate stories. In *Ravanama* you introduce several fragments of stories, often stories that don't belong to the mainstream canon. How did you weave these together in performance?

I don't trust myself with the method of sitting down and conceiving a sequence on paper. I need to first prepare the body in a way so that it can receive a fragment of an idea or story with an imagination quite different from the one that's at play when you sit at a desk and write. Listening to and taking in sound and rhythm plays a big part in this preparation. Finding a new way of breathing within this rhythm is the next step. And then you let the mind drop single fragments of different stories into this landscape of breath and rhythm. Sometimes I put an object in the space hoping it may work as a trigger. You're all set for a creative journey. Of course, it's not as simple as how I describe it. Sometimes nothing happens for long.

To give you some examples:

I sometimes play with flour in improvisation. It concretizes my imagination and it creates special powerful spaces which I can investigate. At one point I drew a line with

flour between my feet. It became the forces of earth and air coming together. From here I made the associative connection with a story, in which Ravana asks the gods for a boon to become a bird. I still get goose bumps when I recall that moment. This large man on earth who is the king of Lanka and lord of a huge army with an imposing power over the land transforms into a bird, to not tread on the earth so his heavy footfalls would not disturb Sita lying under the covers of the earth. When this story of Ravana turning into a bird and flying away came to me in a flash, I pursued it hoping it would take me further into Ravana's world.

Sometimes these stories collide, different perspectives are placed adjacent to each other. For instance, I came across a story of a meeting between Ravana, Sita and Surpanakha (Ravana's sister), many years after the Ramayana has ended. All three of them have now chosen to live in the forest. Neither one knows that the other is there. Surpanakha, once maimed by Rama in response to an act that ultimately led to Sita's kidnapping, tends an exquisite garden of her own. Sita lives in another corner of the forest with her twin sons. Ravana is playing the *veena* (string instrument) in a cave somewhere. I don't know if this is also in the story, but in my head, this is when the *Raga San-karabharanam* gets created. Sita hears the strains of the sound of the *veena*, is drawn to the cave, bends low and enters it. These moments are the tiny meeting points between me and Sita, where we both enter together, attracted to this man in very different ways. According to the story, she sees Ravana and asks, 'what are you doing here? I thought my husband had killed you?'. He replies, 'Before I died, I asked the gods for a boon to become a bird and fly away'. She sits down and says she is unable to remember anymore what happened. Then he tells her the story of Ramayana in the way that he experienced it. What fascinates me is that in a story such as this, Sita is freed from the strings of the mainstream story of the Ramayana. By freed, I mean that having once spent 14 years roaming this forest with her husband Rama, today she is on her own. She will discover another forest, another self. And in this version, it is Ravana who takes hold of the reins of the story. It is no more Ramayana.

I linked this to another story wherein Sita is Ravana's daughter, but is discarded as a baby because she is cursed at birth that she will be the cause of her father's death. I revisited this story by dwelling in the moment when Sita and Ravana are sitting face to face in the cave and because his instrument, the *veena*, lies between him and her – the artist, not the king, Ravana – he suddenly realizes that she is his daughter. The moment is immersed in beauty, of multiple mirrors reflecting back at each other. The strings of the *veena* lie waiting to be plucked, the realization of Ravana that the beauty of Sita he was attracted to is actually his daughter – a reflection of his own inner beauty that flows through the strings of the *veena*. Sita's inexplicable request that her husband's sworn enemy, Ravana, should be the one to retell her the Ramayana. Why him? What is that attraction about? And it goes on. These are the kind of packed moments that are waiting to be unpacked through improvisation – and in this case, the performer too is part of this web of attraction.

How does one translate beauty? As I sat there, motionless, as Ravana, it came to me bit by bit. Beauty is about presence. It resides in you. Time is now of no consequence to both of them, in the forest, far away from the court. It was a special moment when that moment happened for me. And the words that came to me were, 'They sat, facing each other for days on end. Neither spoke a word ... Finally one morning Sita said, "Will you teach me to play the *veena*, father"'. The stuff of realization is born out of time, of space. No words, no explanation. She does not need him to

tell her he is father, she knows. It's a truly epic moment. This is only possible in epic. It was as if the invisible presence of Kathakali, sitting around the *veena* made this realization possible. It allowed for me to dwell in the encounter of *veena*, sound, man, woman, beauty, for them to jostle and give birth to the next moment in the story, a completely new story, never told before.

What is your method of working with your body? How do you prepare yourself to be responsive to the reservoir of stories?

I never start an improvisation without a long session of yoga and pranayama. So there is a sense of 'openness' and cultivated it over the years. I take in air. I don't call it breathing. '*Vayu kudukku*' – 'give air' is the literal instruction that my *guru* would give. It is a way of pushing air to widen the eyes, a way of letting breath fill oneself with emptiness. It is an image that I have sustained and find very exciting, a sense that there is only this thin film of skin that holds this whole body, this machinery, together. This body, full of the elements will become the carrier of something new. I don't know how and what it will generate and how the world outside will impact on it. I simply must make myself available to receive it. In fact, this is an important principle on which I based my teaching practice – how to train the body to be open.

To me, when my gaze is steady, resting on a point, breathing, looking both outwards and inwards simultaneously, then the breathing slows down and I'm ready to travel, it's the start of a creative journey, I keep myself ready to be surprised by what the next moment holds and how it will unfold. I wait. I listen, stay, ride along with my breath that flows in and out to the point where the gaze rests. It takes in shapes, colours. It weaves in randomly selected elements from the story or stories. These elements seem to lie scattered both inside and outside of the body. And then you start playing, juggling with these elements: a fragment of Sita's sari lying there that collides with a dark cave that resides within the body. Meaning starts to get constructed. Sometimes fragments of sound or text may slip out. Each successive moment gets built from the last one. The space gets more and more imbued with the meaning you create. You may slip in and out of characters, or you may simply be a container of elements that are speaking to each other. Everything is possible. Sometimes I keep one or two objects in space to create a tension.

You see, in Kathakali, when you hold your eyes wide open, you actually don't see fully. When the Kathakali guru would say 'look at the flower', I somehow never actually visualized any flower. For me the eyes became big, it was like the 'floweriness' was being created in the body, not out there. It's rather a sense that by 'giving the body and eyes air', one is filled with a sense of 'floweriness'. The blood flows differently when the breathing changes. I am not saying that I have a rehearsal technique for holding my eyes in a particular manner. Over the years of Kathakali practice, I have gradually gained a sense of locking in the gaze with breathing. That sets off the imagination. I have adapted this in my teaching practice – change the way your gaze moves in space and you may get the first signals of how your character thinks, sees the world.

The gaze (*nottam*) is critical for preparing the ground on which the hand and the body is going to start moving and creating action. It is the gaze that actually goes out and covers space. One can hold it in a certain way and give it one's own air (*vayu*). It colours the objects and space around oneself. What is now a notebook with eyes wide open becomes something else with a gaze that is prepared, changed, extraordinary – it is no

more a particular ‘notebook’ but a mass that has shape and colour that is a ‘holder’ of memories, that could trigger more memories, associations, images. You wait as your body gives you the next signal, One thus cultivates a sense of trust in the body – it will tell you what happens next. The imagination seems to reside in the bits and pieces of the body. One just has to prepare the body and wait. I like to imagine that the body is mostly air, the windows and doors are all open, and the moment the imagination coursing through the veins creates the first action, you must be ready to stay with it, in readiness to allow the next moment to unfold. Nothing is known beforehand.

Someone told me a story of an indigenous man who started weeping when he entered a library and saw books for the very first time – books lined up wall to wall. He pulled out one, ran his eyes along the black markings and the tears flowed. For him they were insects trapped and dead. That upset him. Now that is another imagination altogether. How do you get the eyes to see something altogether different from what the brain is signalling? How can not just the eyes but the whole body ‘see’? That’s the challenge.

Having said all this, I must add that Kathakali is not the only source or spring board for me. After all, I had a break of about fifteen years from it when I was doing other kinds of theatre. I had also become an improviser in those intervening years. However, when I did return to the practice of Kathakali after I had experimented with many other forms of performance making, it provided me with endless possibilities of generating the imagination and creating expression. The form re-entered, met my energy and started a fresh journey.

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Notes

1. *Ravanama* premiered in 2011 at Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research, Pondicherry. The performance was created and performed by Maya Krishna Rao; music and sound design: Samar Grewal; lights: Rajesh Singh. Credits for all images: S. Thyagarajan.
2. Ayodhya here refers both to the destruction of the Babri Mosque in the North Indian city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh in December 1992, on the grounds that the mosque was purportedly built by the Mughal ruler Babur on the site of the birthplace of the God Rama; as well as to the agitations and political mobilisations since 1990 around the construction of a temple at the disputed site.
3. *Chenda* refers to a cylindrical drum particular to Kerala, used in accompanying Kathakali.

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