

Pavel Drábek

Hastābhinaja: gesta rukou v tradičním divadelním umění Indie

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová. *Hastābhinaja: gesta rukou v tradičním divadelním umění Indie*

[Hastabhinaya: hand gestures in the traditional Indian theatre]. Brno: Muni press, 2013. 237 pp.

In 2013 Šárka Havlíčková Kysová's highly original monograph on the language of hand gestures of traditional Indian theatres was published. Originating in her 2010 doctoral thesis (written in the Department of Theatre Studies, Masaryk University), this book's importance and potential for impact transcends the national borders. It is among the first truly scholarly studies focusing on the *mudras* (or *hastas*) as used in several traditional narrative dance theatre forms, the Bharatanatyam, the Kathakali, the Mohiniyattam, the Krishnanattam, and the Thullal. The book avoids introductions to the genre, focusing on the language of hand gestures, and is structured strictly according to the theme – a reader with no background knowledge of traditional Indian theatre and dance forms might experience difficulties in getting the bigger picture – which is not the purpose of the book. In analysing *mudras* (or *hastas*) hand gestures as a sign language of sorts, it brings an innovative perspective on the kinaesthetics of the genre: the sequence of *mudras* in combination with the body posture, rhythm and dance become an independent semantic layer, with a storyline and a poetic function that seem to be dominating the overall narrative, even to the point that they are dominant to the words spoken onstage.

The core of the linguistic analysis comes in chapters 3 and 4. It is these passages that bring the most original contributions to the understanding of the traditional theatre forms – by applying occidental theories of language (namely the meticulous Czech linguistics) and analysing the hand gestures as a semiotic system. In these passages and in the final chapter on “Possibilities of Theoretical Conclusions”, which is truly the culmination of the monograph, Havlíčková Kysová is in line with the twentieth-century theorists Karel Brušák or Jiří Veltruský, who applied the functional-structuralist method to the study of oriental theatres. The new book takes the problematic a step further, and it is truly the first step towards a large project of analysing and theorising the kinaesthetics of these traditional forms. It would be highly interesting to study the *hastabhinaya* side by side other oriental pictogrammatic languages, such as literary Chinese (*wenyan*), which operate on a strikingly analogical level of aesthetised and indeterminate series of abstract signs.

This volume is useful both for scholars of traditional performative forms, as well as for practitioners, who can have recourse to the enviably rich visual documentation and tables of *mudras* (there are some 700 illustrations, many of which are in colour) with the meanings they convey. It is for this

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and other reasons that an English mutation of the monograph is desirable. With an elementary introduction into traditional Indian theatre forms and their current status and audiences, and with a selection from historic treatises (the *Natyashastra*, the *Abhinaya* and the *Hastalakshanadipika*), Šárka Havlíčková Kysová's book could become an indispensable guide, alongside Julia Hollander's *Indian Folk Theatres* (Routledge, 2007) and Farley P. Richmond *et alii*'s collection *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Delhi, 2007).

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