

The Man who Beguiles Women : Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and the Art of Female Impersonation

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An evening on a dimly-lit improvised open stage during a festival of a village goddess, thousands of rural devotees looking at the performing deity with awe-some wonder. A late night performance in a small town, audience loudly appreciating the dancing damsel. A metropolis and a wonderfully elegant stage with elitist audiences glued to their seats. Alien audiences, without the knowledge of what is happening on the stage, but unbelievably wonderstruck at the "happen-ing" itself! Young and old, innocent and initiated, rural and urban - so wide and large is his clientele. Everyone is over-powered by the sheer empathy of experience and, later, by the haunting memories of aesthetic excellence.

This exceptional performance skill challenging all norms of credibility is the main stay of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma's virtuosity of impersonating women, a virtuosity that beguiles both men and women. For sixty years he has been trekking down places, up and down, in the length and breadth of India and wherever he performed he stole the hearts of the spectators and brought Kuchipudi a national honour and international recognition. Two Satyams - Vempati Chinna Satyam and Vedantam Satyam - were singularly responsible for projecting the Kuchipudi dance form far and wide on the national and international horizon in recent years; Vempati by widening and modifying the performance structure of the traditional format and Vedantam by chiseling each bit of the performance to its natural perfection and bringing each character he portrays closer to the day-to-day experience of the common people.

Born into a traditional family of performers in a renowned actors' village, Vedantam Satyam (as he is popularly called) had been both fortunate and also unfortunate at the same time. He had a long and rich tradition that conditioned him into dance; but it could not provide him with great opportunities. He had to strive against odds to become what he is today. Born on September 9, 1935 Satyam was initiated into dance at a young age. His parents - Venkataratnam and Subbamma naturally desired him to be a dancer, as was the custom among all Brahmin families in Kuchipudi at that time. Satyam did not have much of formal education, since he had to devote his time for dance and music. But a great tradition was behind him. The first known ancestor of the Vedantam family, one Chalamaiyah led a small troupe of performers to Kerala and presented Bhamakalapam before the King of Thiruvananthapuram. As the story goes, the king was so pleased by the performance that he shared his throne with Chalamayya and honoured him profusely.

Satyam started learning his alphabets in dance from his own elder brother, Prahlada Sarma, a well-known dancer and an efficient teacher. A strict disciplinarian and a hard taskmaster, Prahlada Sarma spared no rod in putting Satyam's learning in the right direction. Satyam's only solace was his mother's loving protection. Satyam now gratefully acknowledges that, but for his brother's exacting supervision, he would not have mastered the grammar of the art. He was also sent to learn music under the masterly care of Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjanyulu, a veteran teacher, Since the Kuchipudi art

Siva. The troupe could fortunately procure a Kailasa setting before which Siva and Parvati danced! He also performed a Siva stotram "Samba Sadasiva" on that occasion. The production, for the first time, brought the Kuchipudi tradition into limelight in the Country's capital and Satyam was recognized as a talented young dancer-actor.

On their return to the village with this initial success, two important incidents happened. On the basis of the experience at New Delhi, elders felt that Kuchipudi Yakshagana performances outside the state must hereafter be represented by the best performers of the village, irrespective of the troupe he belonged. So the two existing groups (called 'Melams')- the Chinta Vari Melam' and Pasumarti Vari Melam, got united. Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Pasumarti Kondalarayudu and Satyam of the Pasumarti Troupe and Chinta Rama Murthy, Chinta Krishna Murthy, Hari Chalapathi, Bokka Seetharamaiah, Darbha Venkataswarlu and others of the Chinta Troupe joined hands and since then was known as Chinta Troupe. The second occurrence in the life of Satyam at this time was his marriage. He married Pasumarti Kondalarayudu's daughter, which perhaps gave him a status in the troupe.

The turning point in his life came at this opportune time. The troupe was booked for a performance of 'Usha Parinayam' in a neighbouring village, Peda Muktevi, a village of landlords. With the success at Delhi haunting, Kondalarayudu wanted Satyam to do the role of Usha and it was accepted. Satyam was both happy and agitated. He was nervous and agitated but the play went off very well. The whole village stood in applause. Narra Venkata-ratnam, a rich landlord of the village and later a life-long friend and benefactor, honoured Satyam for his 'superb' portrayal of the role. Satyam never looked back. He was just twenty years old.

Satyam and the Venkatarama Natyamandali:

The controversy whether Kuchipudi was classical or not had just been solved with all the Kuchipudi stalwarts joining together to show how 'sastraic' it is. After the approval of the 'pundits', a National Dance Festival was conducted at Hyderabad in 1961. It was in a way a celebration of glory under the auspices of the State Sangeet Natak Akademi (and the director of the Festival was Vedantam Raghavaiah), with Bala Saraswathi, Shambhu Maharaj and the Jhaveri Sisters as participants. In par with them was Satyam whose performance of Usha was exemplary. He was now a pan-Indian celebrity.

Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, a respected stage actor and at that time a member of the Central Sangeet

Natak Akademi, fought vigorously to get recognition to Kuchipudi as a classical dance form. He also wanted that the Chinta Troupe must be rechristened as Venkatarama Natyamandali after the originator of the Yakshagana tradition in Kuchipudi, Chinta Venkataramaiah. His son, Chinta Rama Murthy took over Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao as the President and, on his early demise, Chinta Krishna Murthy was made the President and the Director of the troupe. Satyam was the chief actor. Satyam considered Krishna Murthy his Second Guru (the first one being his elder brother, Prahlada Sarma).

Chinta Krishna Murthy, a worthy actor and a worthier Sutradhari, consolidated

the gains already won by the individual members. He groomed Satyam as a heroine of this troupe, polishing the rough edges, which made Satyam more graceful and more lovable. He also made adjustments in the performance strategies. The music got better synchronized; humour more tolerable and he geared the performances as well-knit, disciplined exercises in creativity.. Satyam gained confidence over years and started getting recognition, with awards, prizes and honours pouring in.

Honours and Titles:

Satyam received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1961, when he was hardly twenty-six. He was one of the youngest, when he got the fl award. He was so widely popular for his unique perfection in the rare art of female impersonation, especially in the area of a classical art that he was selected a Fellow of the Akademi in 1968.

Satyam received the "Padma Sri" award in 1970. The entire nation paid him tributes for his excellence in abhinaya, especially while impersonating a woman. He was honoured with several state awards. Many Chief Ministers cancelled their pressing engagements to attend his performances. While they were honouring him, there was always a bashful smile, not on the face of the recipient Satyam, but on the faces of the dignitaries, reminding one of bridegrooms eager to marry but hesitant to touch the bride. Satyam received the prestigious Kalidas Samman award in 1988 and the other luminaries who received the same award along with him are M.F. Hussain, the celebrated painter and P.L.Deshpande, the doyen of contemporary Marathi Drama. He was awarded an honorary D.Litt. degree by the Telugu University in 1996. In 2005 Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him along with other stalwarts in their "Nritya Nidhi" programme. Well-respected journalists praised his art and the man equally eloquently, A.S Raman hailed him as "the Dancer's Dancer", while Subbudu praised, "his exalting artistic capacity" and said that VSS is "one of the few left from the old world, who showcase their acting prowess."

The Venkatarama Natyamandali, by now, has become synonymous with the best professional talent in Kuchipudi. In 1956, when Shanti Dev Ghosh of Shanti Niketan came to visit Kuchipudi, the Chinta troupe presented a memorable performance of Usha Parinayam - this time, Satyam as Usha, his brother Prahlada Sarma as Chitralekha and Pasumarti Rattaiah as Chandravadana! The entire village was at the Ranga Mantapa of Bala Tripura Sundari Temple. The performance revealed to the villagers, perhaps for the first time in recent years, how noble and breath-taking their art was. The dominant rasas of Sringara and Veera, in all their manifestations of alamkara, dhvani and abhinaya were evoked in the performance and Satyam was since that day identified with the role of 'Usha' so much that people in the village can easily recognize him if referred to as 'Usha Satyam'.

Other important Roles:

If 'Usha' brought him initial fame, it was with Satya Bhama in Bhama Kalapam that Satyam was often identified. It is interesting to hear from him that within the state people liked his Usha and outside the state it was "Bhama". But he says he likes both the characters and is comfortable in both.

The other roles that he performed with elan are Deva Devi in * Vipra Narayana', Mohini in 'Mohini Rukmangada', Sasirekha in 'Sasirekha Parinayam' and Gollabhama in 'Golla Kalapam'

These Yakshaganas and Kalapas are the hallmark of Kuchipudi artist's genius. Satyam did not do the roles of Sita in 'Ramanatakam' and Chahdramati in 'Harischandra'. He says that these two characters are too humble and subservient. But each of the other roles is a dominant one and reflects one specific aspect of feminine ethos. 'Bhama' is vain, envious, jealous and proud. However, she has been the darling heroine of the Telugu people, who replaced docile Radha with this authoritative, valorous and undaunting Satya Bhama. There are half a dozen epic narratives in the Kavya literature based on her story and has been immortalized in prabandhas like 'Parijathapaharanam'. Similarly, there is sizeable bulk of writings in the Yakshagana literature, the most important one being Narayana Teertha's Yakshagana with that name..In a way, the Telugu people took her as an idealization of female perfection and a representative of the strong, self-willed housewife. After all, which one would not like to see a wife pine for her husband, after she was rude to him?

The Kuchipudi artistes also fondly cherish the role of Bhama.. No other character in Kuchipudi repertoire stands as a challenge to the actor's multi- leveled efficiency as Bhama is. As is often pointed out, scope for exhibiting all facets of sringarabhinaya are aplenty in the role, especially of the ashta vidha nayikas. It is a classic role. Saiyam's physical stature (he was once slim) and his portly appearance do not come in the way of his portrayal of the character. When once he completes his make-up and comes into his character, his external appearance matters little! Indrani Rahman, a Kuchipudi dancer of high repute, ranks Satyam on the level of "the great Kabuki Specialists" and "Mei - Fan, the famed actor - dancer and scholar of China who died in 1943."

While Bhama is a swaadheena patika, Usha is a mugdha, an innocent girl on the threshold of youth, slowly getting knowledgeable about the tantrums of love. She sees a handsome young prince in her dreams and is lost to him. She pines for him and finally braves her father, who is against the young man, Aniruddha and her father Sri Krishna. Satyam loved this role when he was young, but later he preferred the role of Bhama, who is a proudha.

Satyam is popular for two other roles -"Deva Devi" in "Vipra Narayana" and Mohini in "Mohini Rukmangada". The characters are enticing; one is divine, the other is human; but their lives have the same kind of a curve; jealous and angry; wooing men so that they fall prey to their beauty, but in the end, repentant. Satyam's female roles, with their uncanny smiles and the angular looks won the hearts of every spectator and continues to do so, even after he put on a few more calories. He is absolutely fantastic and is a heart-throb to many a woman.

Foreign Tours :

Satyam toured France in 1985 and gave performances in Paris to packed audiences. The most memorable trip Abroad was to the US in 1986, when Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam accompanied him and did Nattuvangam. The Festival of India in the US invited Satyam who toured the country for 40 days giving performances at various

centres including New York, Washington, Chicago and California. American audiences were extremely recipient of Satyam's female impersonation as reviews of the day are an indication.

How did Satyam make these character portrayals so absorbing? And how did he make this unnatural female impersonation look so natural?

Satyam's answers to these questions look simple and straightforward, but are lessons that he learnt after long hours of involved deliberations within himself. He says that he internalizes the characters and approximates the externalities as near to reality as possible.

Internalization : Key to Impersonation

The internalization process which is common in theatre has wider implications in female impersonation.

As Satyam says it happens partly due to traditional orientation and partly to the artiste's own characterization process. There is a strong tradition of men taking up the roles of women in the Kuchipudi theatre. They are trained to don the role of Bhama. That is the custom which was said to have been based on a vow given by the village elders of 15th century to their legendary ancestor, Siddhendra Yogi, "the Bharatamuni of Kuchipudi". It was practised by generations of elders. Hari Chalamayya, Vempati Venkatanarayana, Vedantam Raghavaiah, Pahlada Sarma, Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma - the list runs into pages. That every-one born in the land must at least once dance in the role of Bhama has been in vogue till recently. And many of them gained fame as "Bhamas," which explains that female impersonation is a part of a strong tradition which the male Kuchipudi artiste imbibes.

Again, within the framework of this training, necessary theoretical inputs further strengthen the artiste's approach to impersonation. The Nayaka-Nayika adhyayas of Natya Sastra, of Rasamanjari, and of Abhinaya Darpana supplied them. The Nayaka-Nayika bhedas, the abhinaya aspects of srngara and their expressive modalities are part of the learner's early curriculum.. Simultaneously, they were also to learn the pancha kavyas which served as lakshyas to the lakshanas of the sastraic texts. Besides, elder actors donning the role became role models. So every household knew about the 'greats' in this art of female impersonation. Each practising lad was also told why they were great. This always stayed as an inspiration and a direction.

When Satyam took up the roles in fifties and started performing all over the country, the demands on him were formidable. He was to please the audiences who were not aware of the tradition. So he was made to go through a greater internalizing process to enable him to be more convincing. Chinta Krishna Murthy, who had excellent literary prowess, painstakingly explained the nuances in the characters, discussing with him the nature and functionality of each one of the srngara aspects of the text. Satyam practiced them at home painstakingly. Before every performance even today, Satyam would spend two and a half hours to three hours for the make up of a role. All this time he devotes to think of the role and to act it out mentally, detailing every stance, every movement, every smile!

Sattvikabhinaya - the soul of Internalization

Satyam's popularity as a performer was mainly due to his unparalleled 'sattvikabhinaya'. His interpretation of a role largely depends on carefully tracing out a graph of emotional vicissitudes that are found in the character and approximating them and relating them to common experience. By realistically interpreting the character's inner psyche he is touching at the roots of our sensibilities. The entire spectrum of srīngara, the eight 'hues' of love, amuse, tickle, taunt and over-power every human being - young or old and depicting these multiple manifestations in as realistically viable a way as possible is Satyam's contribution in familiarizing a mythical character to a modern audience. Further, Satyam infested each role with the whole gamut of emotions, each one quickly succeeding the other. Each part of his face responds to this quick emotional transference - the eyes, the cheeks, the frown, the lips. He is angry, playful, sorrowful, expectant, dreaming by turns - moving from one mood to the other almost in a split second. This exposition of a bundle of intricate psychic states, conflicting all the time, puts Satyam on a high tension point all through the performance and by constant practice achieved perfection. Bhama's letter to her Lord, Krishna, is a case in point. Squatting quietly on the floor, through sheer mudras and changing bhavas on her volatile face, delivering a churnika, she evokes karuna and srīngara, two interdependent rasas transforming the common spectator's experience from that of an identifiable individual reality to that of a universal generality.

External Identity

The externalizing process is equally creative. Aharya in the case of female impersonation is very vital. Satyam concentrated vigorously on two other counts as well; the angika and the vacika aspects of women. He says that even today he carefully observes how a woman walks, talks, shows anger, love, indifference, etc. And he tries to incorporate such movements in his character delineation. While all his heroine roles belong to royalty or to divinity or to a specified class of importance, he approximates the manners, mannerisms, voice rhythms and perfect intoning of the words that befit the required character. This needed great practice and, in the early years, each performance was like a practising session. Another important contributing factor in female impersonation is the way in which dialogue is enunciated. For female role, vacika must be soft and low and yet audible. Satyam consciously developed the female speech rhythms. So is the case with gestures. The female impersonator must first of all learn to use his hands delicately. Broad gestures have no place.

Satyam is also conscious of the process of female impersonation. The three-hour making-up each time he does a female role is like an operation, peeling out the external demeanour and grafting a new soul into it. The male actor donning a female role is like a "twice-born Brahmin". An actor takes up the role of another person and that is being born as another person. But in this case he is not only taking another role; he, being a man, takes up the role of a woman, thus re-born again.

The external process of female impersonation also helps the internalization process. It starts with Guru-vandana. He sits before a mirror and visualizes the female form he is going to put on. He slowly gets into the act of make-up. In order to feel the femininity, he puts on the bodice, applies facial make-up and the hair-do. Then wears

the jacket after which the necessary ornaments are properly adorned. There are ornaments not only around the neck, but to the hands, shoulders, fingers, etc. Then the braid. The braid has a long history in Kuchipudi dance; it is the very symbol of female pride. Did not Satyabhama chide her husband with it? Does not the actor throw it on the half-curtain to challenge any contenders in the mastery of the art? Then come the ornaments and decorations on the braid - the Surya, the Chandra, the Nakshatras and so on. Then he wears a sari and the ornaments that are worn on the sari, like the vaddanam and other worthy ornaments. All this while, he broods over the character and how each one of these external manifestations lead up to reveal character.

Satyam has been identified with the female roles of Kuchipudi repertoire but he had had an opportunity to play male roles as well - only on two occasions. The first one was in 'Kheerasagara Mathanam'. This was done at the instance of Banda. Satyam played the role of Vishnu and Yamini Krishna Murthy, the well-known Kuchipudi danseuse was Mohini. The second occasion was in a movie 'Rahasyam', directed by Vedantam Raghavaiah. The movie contained a Kuchipudi ballet, 'Girija Kalyanam'. Satyam played the role of Manmadha and Korada Narasimha Rao was Shiva.

As Satyam humbly says, he undertakes this internal journey every time he performs and wherever he performs. He never distinguishes between a major show before "big" people and an ordinary show in a remote village. For him a show is a show. Each time, he feels it is a fresh portrayal.

As a man Satyam is very unassuming, sometimes even cold. At 72, he is a satisfied individual. But the unsatiated artiste in him yet strives to continue his mission to teach youngsters the art of female impersonation and its intricacies. As art lovers sadly realize, 'male dancers' is a diminishing tribe. And the male dancer impersonating a woman is almost an extinct species.

How to retain this rare art and artistry and the old world marvel is the worry of Satyam as it is to all the art lovers.