

Richard Tremblay

“Through its objectives, a stronger Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute would make a difference in the field. The potential for development is there as the work done in the kathakali studies, for example, has not gone to the bin. Our work, while consistently supported by the Institute, though limited in its scope by funding, was instrumental in the recognition in the 1990’s of the kathakali dance-theatre as a classical dance form by the Canada Council for the Arts, which opened the doors to the funding programs of the Canadian agency. “

Project: “The Kathakali Medea. Research, creation, and pre-production of a Kathakali dance-drama based on Greek Classical Tragedy, Medea”

Richard Tremblay entered choreographic theatre in Quebec in the 1970's before turning toward Kathakali and contemporary dance. Constantly seeking out new codes in dance, he attended the Indian university for the performing arts, Kerala Kalamandalam, where he received training in Kathakali, subsequently devoting several years to performing this dance-



theatre form. He founded Dance Theatre Kalashas in 1981 to do repertory and creation work in Kathakali. After his six-year Kathakali training, he created *The Iliad*, or *The Story of Achilles*, which goes down in the annals of Kathakali. It was created in India, at the Kerala Kalamandalam and Thrissur Regional Theatre, in January and February of 1988. Thus, Richard Tremblay became the first theatre artist from the West, to have made a contribution of this nature to the Kathakali repertoire. The work was revived in 1991, 1994, and 2000, in India and Singapore. *The Story of Achilles* is part of a series of Kathakali works authored by the choreographer, including *Ulysses* (from *The Odyssey*), which was created in India, in 1994.

In an essay he is in the process of completing, he has picked up practical and theoretical issues as to provide a different approach to known issues in the kathakali studies, i.e., beyond the orientalist perspective of earlier studies. By studying the discursive ideas and the values at work in fashioning perceptions on kathakali, in its native cultural setup and, taken globally, in the non native communities, the essay is grounded in the postcolonial studies. As a consequence, the analysis revolves around

familiar concepts such as: constructions, performativity, gender specificity, commodification, and related matters of theoretical significance. On the ground of synchrony, he has pointed out to the so far unacknowledged features of choreography as found in kathakali. About his findings, from the more quantitative aspect of his research, he has identified archives of the first Indian dancer who lived in Canada. Ananda Sivaraman, a kathakali dancer from Kerala, lived in Montreal in the 1950's, and interacted with the dance community all over Canada. The concept behind his very successful presentations in Canada shows the perspective which made him particularly successful in presenting the Indian dance outside its native culture. This documentation will be available for the first time to other researchers in India and Canada.

He has recently adapted a version of the Mahābhārata for the kathakali repertoire, with emphasis on the Bhagavadgītā and its characters, Krishna and Arjuna. The work takes the focus away from the dice game and the disrobing of Panchali in the traditional version of the Mahābhārata of the kathakali repertoire. Besides, he has researched on a design that could support the aesthetics of the classical system, and the kathakali dance-theatre in particular. This type of production contrasts with the “village square” setup, as it is meant to address the global stage and the expectations of audiences about light and sound requirements. A video is being edited, showing the production in full length for exposure on the Web, in order to target presenters, educators and professionals, and those interested in the concept and its implications in the dissemination of kathakali. The HD video was funded in part by the **Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute**. In this respect, Richard Tremblay points out, it is expected that the Institute had a funding structure better adapted to the requirements of dance professionals involved in major works in India, especially in helping them handle production expenses.

Practically speaking, the US has a diversified funding structure, private and public, allowing its researchers, writers and artists to engage globally in all fields of work. In my view, and on the basis of my experience, this is not the case in Canada where funding tends to be channelled through an ever reduced number of agencies made to comply with objectives confined to a particular model of development. The sources of funding are limited. The structure is put to a further strain by changes in policies evolving towards a corporate approach, a tendency that affects dramatically our social and cultural studies as long as it is not made to cohabit with the sociocultural component of the society. As a consequence, and in the case at point in this overview of the problems encountered in my field of practice and studies—namely, the performing arts, dance, and the kathakali dance-theatre of India—, the work is carried out mainly by US individuals whose projects are better supported.

Through its objectives, as Richard Tremblay concludes on his comments, a stronger Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute would make a difference in the field. The potential for development is there as the work done in the kathakali studies, for example, has not gone to the bin. Our work, while consistently supported by the Institute, though limited in its scope by funding, was instrumental in the recognition in the 1990's of the kathakali dance-theatre as a classical dance form by the Canada Council for the

Arts, which opened the doors to the funding programs of the Canadian agency—whose funding priorities are not however in the direction we had hoped it would be. In that sense, the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute is having much relevance in the funding landscape of the Indo-Canadian studies. As acknowledged earlier, he writes there are major works that could not have developed without the support of the Institute, in times when it was flourishing. Spending on stage productions could yield important returns and, if adequately put to work, that would benefit all partners in the cultural contact. Through its visuals, the stage work is still one of the favored ways in reaching out to folks and building consensus on policies. In fact, India has a long tradition of putting on shows on its official platforms.

For the diversification of sources in funding practices and the research work, he further writes, the resources made available for the Institute to fulfill its objectives should be expanded rather than streamlined, and its action and programs strengthened in order to support research aimed at exposing and reinventing practices in the culturally rich environment of India, in confluence with the Canadian pluriculturalism. That, in turn, should only but contribute to the overall research activities of the mainstream while diversity is the criteria for allowing the space required by the development of knowledge towards its full potential.

*“When I point out to the role played by the **Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute** in the funding environment, it is to acknowledge the support of the Institute in shaping my ideas and my practice in contemporary dance and kathakali through my contact with the diverse cultures of India.”*

For more information on the project, please contact Richard Tremblay at silentculture.org