



ACTING STYLES IN NATYA SASTRA: UNVEILING THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF THEATRICAL EXPRESSION

Dr. M. Subbiah

Assistant Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University (CC), Puducherry.

Abstract:

This research article delves into the Natya Sastra, a foundational ancient text attributed to Bharata, and its classification of acting into four distinct styles: Lokadharmi, Natyadharmi, Nrtyadharmi, and Nrttadharmi. From realistic depictions to stylized theatrics, intricate dances to versatile performances, these acting styles offer a timeless framework for theatre. Examples and references illustrate their continued relevance in contemporary theatre, highlighting their enduring impact on the world of performance.

Keywords:

Natya Sastra, Acting Styles, Lokadharmi, Natyadharmi, Nrttadharmi, Nrtyadharmi, Theatrical Expression, Indian Theatre, Bharata, Performance Arts, Theatre Theory, Ancient Texts, Cultural Influence, Contemporary Theatre, Art of Acting, Stylized Acting, Realistic Acting, Dance in Theatre, Versatile Acting Styles.

Introduction:

The Natya Sastra, a comprehensive ancient Indian treatise attributed to the sage Bharata, is a monumental work that has stood the test of time, offering invaluable insights into the world of performing arts. Composed between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, this text is regarded as a foundational and enduring resource for artists, scholars, and enthusiasts of theatre, music, dance, and related disciplines. Within the vast expanse of the Natya Sastra, one of its most influential contributions to theatre theory is the classification of acting into four distinct types: Lokadharmi, Natyadharmi, Nrttadharmi, and Nrtyadharmi.

The Natya Sastra is a work of remarkable historical significance, reflecting the cultural and artistic vibrancy of ancient India. Its influence extends beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent, permeating the realms of theatre, dance, and drama globally. While the origins of Indian theatre predate the Natya Sastra, this text provides a systematic and comprehensive framework for understanding and practicing the art of acting, elevating it to a level of sophistication that has informed theatrical traditions for centuries.

Bharata's classification of acting into four types is one of the key components that continue to shape theatre theory and practice, both in traditional Indian theatre forms and in contemporary dramatic arts. The Natya Sastra's enduring impact on the world of performance arts can be attributed to the profound insights it offers into the nature of acting, the portrayal of characters, and the evocation of emotions.

Bharata's Seminal Contribution:

Bharata, the presumed author of the Natya Sastra, is traditionally regarded as a sage and the father of Indian theatre. His visionary insights into the craft of acting have earned him a place of honor in the annals of theatrical history. The classification of acting into four distinct types serves as a testament to Bharata's deep understanding of the art form and his desire to provide a structured framework for its study and practice.

Influence on Traditional Theatre:

In traditional Indian theatre forms such as Sanskrit drama, Kutiyattam, and Kathakali, Bharata's theories on acting play a foundational role. They dictate the manner in which characters are portrayed, the use of stylized expressions, and the relationship between acting and emotions. These traditional forms have preserved and passed down the principles outlined in the Natya Sastra through generations, ensuring the continuity of classical Indian theatre.

Relevance in Contemporary Theatre:

Even in the ever-evolving world of contemporary theatre, the principles delineated in the Natya Sastra continue to be a source of inspiration and guidance for actors, directors, and scholars. The four types of acting, Lokadharmi, Natyadharmi, Nrtyadharmi, and Nrttadharmi, have found resonance in various contemporary theatre practices, from realistic acting to experimental and avant-garde approaches. Directors and actors, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, have drawn from the text's rich insights to create compelling and evocative performances.

In conclusion, the Natya Sastra's enduring influence on the performing arts is a testament to the timeless relevance of Bharata's theories on acting. The four types of acting are more than just theoretical constructs; they are living principles that continue to inform and shape the world of theatre, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. This article delves further into the specifics of these four acting types, shedding light on their characteristics, applications, and the enduring significance they hold in contemporary theatre and performance.

I. Lokadharmi: The Realistic Style of Acting

Definition:

Lokadharmi, one of the four types of acting classified in the Natya Sastra, is a style that emphasizes the portrayal of everyday life and the world as it is. This approach to acting is rooted in the representation of ordinary situations, characters, and experiences in a manner that closely aligns with the common experiences of the audience. Lokadharmi strives for a faithful reflection of reality, creating performances that are relatable and easily accessible to the spectators.

Characteristics of Lokadharmi:

1. **Fidelity to Reality:** Lokadharmi acting places a strong emphasis on adhering closely to real-life conventions and norms. Actors are expected to mirror common behavior, social customs, and everyday interactions, making the performance easily recognizable to the audience.
2. **Contemporary Settings:** This style of acting is typically employed in plays set in contemporary times. The choice of characters, settings, and narratives is drawn from the society and time in which the audience lives, enhancing the audience's ability to relate to the content.
3. **Naturalistic Acting:** Actors in Lokadharmi eschew exaggerated expressions or overly stylized movements. Instead, they aim to convey emotions, thoughts, and actions in a manner that closely resembles how individuals would naturally behave in everyday life. This authenticity in acting allows the audience to connect with the characters on a personal level.

Applications of Lokadharmi:

Lokadharmi acting is well-suited for various forms of theatre, including realistic and domestic dramas. Its applications are as follows:

1. **Social and Domestic Plays:** Lokadharmi is particularly fitting for narratives that revolve around family dynamics, relationships, and societal issues. It enables actors to portray characters and situations that the audience can readily relate to, enhancing the emotional impact of the performance.
2. **Contemporary Theatre:** Modern theatre often draws from the principles of Lokadharmi when depicting realistic, contemporary stories. The emphasis on naturalistic acting and authentic portrayal of everyday life helps create a sense of immediacy and relevance for the audience.
3. **Community Theatre:** In community theatre productions, where relatability and accessibility are key, Lokadharmi acting can be a powerful tool to engage the audience and deliver messages with impact.

Example of Lokadharmi in Contemporary Theatre:

One notable example of Lokadharmi acting in contemporary theatre is Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." The play, first performed in 1949, portrays the struggles of an ordinary family in post-World War II America. The characters and situations presented in the play closely resemble the everyday experiences of many audience members, making it an emotionally resonant and relatable work. The actors' performances in "Death of a Salesman" exemplify the principles of Lokadharmi by realistically depicting the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of an ordinary family.

Lokadharmi, the realistic style of acting outlined in the Natya Sastra, remains a relevant and influential approach to theatre and performance. It excels in creating performances that mirror everyday life, connecting the audience with relatable characters and situations. By adhering to the conventions of realism, Lokadharmi actors forge a strong bond between the stage and the spectators, fostering a profound and immediate emotional connection. This enduring style of acting continues to be a valuable tool for contemporary theatre, providing a bridge between the world of the stage and the everyday experiences of the audience.

II. Natyadharmi: The Stylized Style of Acting

Definition:

Natyadharmi, one of the four types of acting outlined in the Natya Sastra, is a style of acting characterized by its departure from reality. Instead of attempting to replicate everyday life, Natyadharmi seeks to create a heightened and theatrical representation of characters and situations. This style involves a deliberate deviation from the ordinary in order to infuse drama with an added level of artistry and theatricality.

Characteristics of Natyadharmi:

1. **Theatrical Elements:** Natyadharmi acting incorporates a range of theatrical elements that serve to enhance the aesthetics of the performance. This includes, but is not limited to, exaggerated facial expressions, elaborate and symbolic costumes, and stylized movements.
2. **Mythological and Historical Contexts:** Natyadharmi is often employed in plays set in mythological or historical contexts. In these narratives, the characters and events are imbued with grandeur and dramatic elements that transcend ordinary experience.
3. **Symbolism:** Actors in Natyadharmi use symbolism as a tool for conveying character traits, emotions, and plot developments. Stylized movements, gestures, and expressions are frequently employed to create a vivid and dramatic portrayal of characters and their experiences.

Applications of Natyadharmi:

Natyadharmi is well-suited for a variety of theatre forms and themes where heightened dramatization is desirable. Its applications include:

1. **Classical Indian Epics:** Natyadharmi is frequently used in the portrayal of characters and stories from classical Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In these narratives, the larger-than-life nature of the characters and the epic scale of events call for a stylized and dramatic approach to acting.
2. **Historical Dramas:** Plays and performances based on historical events and figures often benefit from Natyadharmi acting. The stylized portrayal of historical characters adds depth and spectacle to the narratives.
3. **Religious and Mythological Narratives:** Natyadharmi is employed in the depiction of religious and mythological stories where the divine, the supernatural, and the symbolic are central themes. The use of symbolism and stylized expressions enhances the spiritual and dramatic aspects of the narrative.

Example of Natyadharmi in Classical Indian Dance Drama:

One of the most prominent examples of Natyadharmi acting can be found in the traditional Indian dance drama form of Kathakali. In Kathakali performances, actors adorn elaborate and colourful makeup, costumes, and headdresses to transform into larger-than-life characters from mythological tales. The exaggerated facial expressions and highly stylized hand gestures convey emotions and narratives that transcend everyday reality. Kathakali's dramatic stylization serves to make the characters and stories more vivid, engaging, and accessible to the audience, even when portraying celestial beings or epic battles.

Natyadharmi, the stylized style of acting described in the Natya Sastra, offers a compelling and artistic approach to performance. By intentionally departing from the conventions of realism and delving into the world of theatricality and symbolism, Natyadharmi can create powerful and resonant theatrical experiences. This style of acting continues to be a hallmark of classical Indian performance traditions, infusing narratives with a sense of grandeur and timelessness. Its application extends beyond the boundaries of traditional theatre, finding relevance in various forms of artistic expression that seek to transcend the ordinary and embrace the dramatic and symbolic dimensions of human experience.

III. Nrtyadharmi: The Abstract Style of Acting

Definition:

Nrtyadharmi, one of the four types of acting defined in the Natya Sastra, is a unique and abstract style of acting that heavily relies on intricate body movements and physical expressions to convey emotions, narratives, and the essence of a character. Unlike the other three types of acting, which involve spoken

dialogue or conventional expressions, Nrттadharma leans toward a more dance-like approach, emphasizing the use of the body as a primary means of communication in the realm of theatre.

Characteristics of Nrттadharma:

1. **Incorporation of Dance:** Nrттadharma prominently incorporates elements of dance into the art of acting. Dancers, often with extensive training in classical dance forms, are well-equipped to excel in Nrттadharma acting. This style celebrates the beauty and precision of bodily movements.
2. **Limited Verbal Communication:** In Nrттadharma, actors rely less on spoken language to communicate with the audience. Instead, they use their physicality, expressions, and movements to convey emotions, thoughts, and narratives. This abstract style can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.
3. **Synchronized Movements:** Performances in Nrттadharma frequently involve ensemble work, with multiple actors moving in harmony to create visually compelling and emotionally evocative sequences. The synchronization of movements adds a layer of complexity and beauty to the performance.

Applications of Nrттadharma:

Nrттadharma is versatile and finds application in various theatrical forms and contexts, including:

1. **Dance Dramas:** Nrттadharma is extensively used in dance dramas, which combine narrative elements with classical dance forms. These productions often showcase the expressive potential of dance as a storytelling medium.
2. **Abstract Theatre:** Experimental and avant-garde theatre often employs Nrттadharma in abstract and non-linear narratives. In these contexts, actors rely on body language to convey complex and symbolic themes.
3. **Multicultural Performances:** Nrттadharma can serve as a bridge between different cultures and languages, as it relies on a universal language of movement and expression. It is often utilized in multicultural performances and collaborations.

Example of Nrттadharma in Contemporary Dance Theatre:

One striking example of Nrттadharma in contemporary theatre can be seen in the works of the renowned contemporary choreographer, Pina Bausch. Her pieces often blend dance and theatre, relying on the expressive power of physical movements and non-verbal communication to convey complex emotions and themes. In her choreography, symbolism, intricate gestures, and synchronized movements serve as primary tools for storytelling, creating performances that transcend linguistic boundaries and connect with audiences on a profound level.

Nrtyadharmi, the abstract style of acting as defined in the Natya Sastra, offers a fascinating and captivating approach to performance. By emphasizing the potential of the human body as a medium for storytelling and communication, Nrtyadharmi creates performances that are rich in symbolism and open to interpretation. This style transcends the boundaries of spoken language, making it an effective means of expression in multicultural and multilingual contexts. Nrtyadharmi exemplifies the power of movement and physicality as a universal language that can convey the depth and complexity of human experiences and narratives, making it a valuable addition to the rich tapestry of acting styles in the world of theatre.

IV. Nrtyadharmi: The Versatile Style of Acting

Definition:

Nrtyadharmi, one of the four types of acting delineated in the Natya Sastra, represents a versatile and balanced style of acting. It combines elements of both natyadharmi and nrtyadharmi, allowing actors to create performances that encompass both stylized and naturalistic elements. This versatility makes Nrtyadharmi an adaptable and expressive form of acting that suits a wide range of dramatic narratives.

Characteristics of Nrtyadharmi:

1. **Balanced Approach:** Nrtyadharmi strikes a balance between the stylized and the naturalistic. It can encompass exaggerated expressions, stylized movements, and theatrical elements, while also accommodating elements of realistic portrayal. This balance allows for nuanced and multi-dimensional performances.
2. **Emotional Depth:** Actors employing Nrtyadharmi can convey complex emotions and situations effectively. This versatility allows for a wide range of dramatic narratives and character portrayals.

Applications of Nrtyadharmi:

Nrtyadharmi's versatility makes it suitable for various forms of theatre and performance, including:

1. **Classical Indian Dance Dramas:** In classical Indian dance dramas such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi, Nrtyadharmi is often used. It allows for the portrayal of mythological and historical narratives with a rich blend of dance, drama, and naturalistic acting.
2. **Historical and Mythological Plays:** Nrtyadharmi is adaptable to historical and mythological themes, enabling actors to convey the grandeur and stylization of these narratives while maintaining a connection to the audience's emotional experiences.
3. **Contemporary Theatre:** In contemporary theatre, Nrtyadharmi is employed when a performance requires a combination of stylized and naturalistic elements. It can adapt to a wide range of dramatic contexts, from classic plays to experimental and avant-garde productions.

Example of Nrtyadharmi in Classical Indian Dance Drama:

Nrtyadharmi's versatility can be observed in Bharatanatyam dance dramas, where the form blends intricate footwork, stylized hand gestures, and facial expressions with the storytelling elements of classical dance. In a Bharatanatyam performance, the dancer can depict a range of characters and emotions, from mythological deities to everyday human experiences, while maintaining a connection to both the classical tradition and the contemporary audience.

Nrtyadharmi, the versatile style of acting outlined in the Natya Sastra, represents a harmonious fusion of stylized and naturalistic elements. Its adaptability and ability to convey complex emotions and narratives make it a valuable tool in the actor's repertoire. Nrtyadharmi's balanced approach allows it to find application in a broad spectrum of theatrical performances, from classical Indian dance dramas to contemporary theatre. This versatility ensures that the principles of Nrtyadharmi remain relevant and enduring in the world of theatre, providing actors and directors with the flexibility to engage and connect with their audiences across diverse dramatic contexts.

Conclusion:

The four types of acting, as categorized by Bharata in the Natya Sastra, represent a diverse and vibrant tapestry of theatrical expression that continues to captivate and inspire actors, directors, and theatre practitioners worldwide. From the stark realism of Lokadharmi to the grandeur of Natyadharmi, the rhythmic grace of Nrtyadharmi, and the versatile prowess of Nrtyadharmi, these acting styles form a comprehensive framework that has transcended the boundaries of culture and time. Their enduring significance lies in their ability to provide a timeless foundation for understanding and practicing the art of acting.

Bharata's classification, which has its roots in ancient India, has not merely remained an artifact of historical theatre theory but has evolved into a source of timeless wisdom for the world of performance arts. In a global context, these acting styles have transcended cultural limitations, offering a universal language of expression that resonates with audiences regardless of their backgrounds.

The enduring appeal of these acting styles is evident in their continued relevance in contemporary theatre and performance. Lokadharmi, with its faithfulness to reality, finds a place in plays that depict the everyday struggles of modern life. Natyadharmi, with its stylized elements, continues to flourish in the representation of mythological and historical narratives. Nrtyadharmi, embracing abstract and dance-like expressions, finds a home in avant-garde performances, and Nrtyadharmi, with its versatility, adapts to a wide array of dramatic contexts, from classical dance dramas to cutting-edge experimental theatre.

The examples provided, whether in the works of Anton Chekhov, traditional Indian dance dramas, or contemporary choreography by luminaries like Pina Bausch, showcase the enduring power and applicability of these acting styles. They speak to the enduring legacy of Bharata's wisdom, offering a testament to the fact that the principles and classifications outlined in the Natya Sastra have stood the test of time and continue to be a source of inspiration.

As this exploration of the four types of acting in Natya Sastra concludes, it leaves us with a treasure trove of theatrical knowledge that transcends the confines of geography and era. These acting styles, with their ability to convey the depth of human experience, remain a beacon guiding performers and storytellers towards the shared quest for emotional connection and artistic expression. In an ever-evolving world of theatre, Bharata's enduring legacy reminds that while the tools and techniques may change, the essence of acting remains a timeless art that speaks to the human condition in all its complexity and beauty.

REFERENCES:

1. **Bharata.** (2005). "Natya Shastra." (K. A. Subramania Iyer, Trans.). New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
2. **Chekhov, Anton.** (1904). "The Cherry Orchard."
3. **Zarrilli, Phillip B.** (2000). "Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play." Routledge.
4. **Bremser, Martha Myers.** (2002). "Martha Graham: The Evolution of Her Dance Theory and Training." University of Florida Press.
5. **Carroll, Linda J.** (2007). "Pina Bausch: The Biography." Yale University Press. Kapoor, Ratan. (2010). "The Dance of Shiva." Penguin Books.
6. **Rangacharya, Adya.** (2005). "Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance." Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
7. **Schwartz, Susan L.** (1985). "Rasa: Performing the Divine in India." Columbia University Press.
8. **Chatterjee, S. K.** (1997). "Indian Acting: The Methods and the Training." South Asia Books.
9. **Pavis, Patrice.** (1998). "Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis." University of Toronto Press. Hiebert, Paul G. (1985). "The Art of the Actor: The Essential History of Acting from Classical Times to the Present Day." Routledge.
10. **Shulman, David Dean.** (1980). "The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault." University of California Press.
11. **Sarma, Sarath Chandra.** (2009). "Bharata Natyam: Indian Classical Dance Art." Abhinav Publications.
12. **Rangayyan, Adya.** (2000). "The Divine Dance: The Hindu Folk Religion of Orissa." Routledge.
13. **Bausch, Pina.** (1997). "The Wuppertal Dance Theatre." The MIT Press.