

## Stanislavsky, *Smarana*, and *Bhâv*: Acting Method as Religious Practice in Vrindavan, India

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### Stanislavsky and *Râs Lila* Theatre

It was one of those performances that troubles a person for days, tainting every mundane experience and thought with a flavor of misery. Even removed from it by years, a slightly sickening aura lingers. *Trojan Women* never was a play to inspire glee, but the suffering in this performance was particularly bald, or, rather, the suffering of the actress playing Andromache was particularly bald. This actress's raging grief, employed in the portrayal of Andromache's lament over her son's death, made my skin shrink, even at a time before I had children of my own, when I may have become better equipped to personally identify with the tragedy of it all. It was a horrifically physical performance, exhibiting a violence of body and mind that stabs itself at the hearts of feeling people, and demands pity.

On another stage, for another audience, a twelve-year-old actor playing Krishna in a *râs lila* performance was standing on a rickety platform behind a painted curtain drawn up waste-high to show he was on a boat in the middle of the Yamuna River. Other boys, dressed in gleaming costume saris and gaudy plastic jewelry as Krishna's girlfriends—no women or girls play parts in the *râs lila*—stood downstage a short distance, nearly in the laps of the audience seated on the floor, which served as the playing space. The young players, all younger than twelve, shifted back and forth, nudging each other and snickering as, in turn, they shouted insults at Krishna in a stylized falsetto vaguely reminiscent of the voice given to the muppet Prairie Dawn. And when an elderly woman (who was not part of the play) collided with an upstage pillar while trying to cross behind the set to reach the temple shrine on the other side of the room, the boys on stage laughed hysterically, some of them doubling over, as Krishna returned their insults from his curtain boat, and the old woman wailed plaintively for rescue from a collapsed curtain.

The actress's performance in *Trojan Women* struck me as a terrifically "real" performance. Which is to say, the emotional investment the performance derived or compelled from me had a perceptible physical presence resembling what I have

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felt in my encounters with similar, but unscripted, scenarios outside the theatre. Perhaps I am suggesting that I measure the reality of this performance by its plausibility. And to the extent that “real” means “plausible” in the unscripted, physical world we live in, my evaluation of this actress’s behavior as “real” was borne out in the “real” world when I later saw television news footage of a woman behaving similarly and who had to be forcibly removed from the trial of a relative’s murderer. On the other hand, *râs lila* performances, of which the garish costumes, cartoon scenery, and haphazard acting of the boat episode described above are typical, have never seemed to me very “realistic,” to say nothing of the fluidity with which the *râs lila* actors switch between the world of their characters and their own, as evident in their readiness to ridicule the poor, befuddled old woman caught in their scenery. Nevertheless, while I fail to perceive *râs lila* stage dressing as the boats, trees, and waterways of the world outside the *râs lila* theatre, and I fail to recognize the actors’ sing-song verse as plausible human interaction in the streets of daily living, the patrons of the *râs lila* plays, who are also Krishna devotees, regard the performances as quintessentially “real,” the manifestation of what does actually happen. These theatrical performances serve an essential function in the religious lives of Krishna devotees, providing for patrons a vision of the transcendent Krishna engaged in his transcendent activity—activity every bit as real as physical experience.

My goal here is twofold. First, I hope to communicate my experience of Vrindavan, the north Indian town, which is the contemporary center of Krishna worship, as a site for performance to a reader who may be more familiar with Western acting theory than with South Asian aesthetics. Towards this end, I propose to reference Western theory as a potential analogy for what may occur beneath the obvious in Vrindavan with respect to theatre. Secondly, I think Vrindavan may be able to tell us something about relationships between audiences and performances, especially about the way in which audience members are trained in acting (even if indirectly) as much as *râs lila* actors themselves. To some extent, the temptation to make these kinds of connections between so apparently distinct theatrical traditions is irresistible. Those of us who approach the conundrum of *râs lila* acting from an inescapably Western point of view might better understand *râs lila* acting by acknowledging certain tantalizing likenesses, even if only for the sake of argument. Ultimately, I hope to show that elements of Vrindavan life do correspond to elements of Western acting methods (small “m”), principally Stanislavsky’s System (big “S”), so as to render less opaque the way in which the *râs lila* achieves its profound emotional and spiritual effect.

In short, *râs lila* actors are sort-of-System-atic actors. They are invariably born and raised in or very near Vrindavan, and Vrindavan itself is a great and infinitely complicated acting exercise that churns up a communal memory and associates that memory with every seemingly insignificant activity of living, such

that the feelings associated with that memory become part of the actors'—and other Vrindavan residents'—everyday lives. In fact, the sort-of-System-atic actor training Vrindavan gives to *râs lila* audience members, as opposed to the actors, may be more significant to the realism of a given performance than any onstage technique employed (or not) by the actors themselves. And this may tell us something about dramatic performance in general. Having compared and contrasted the ways in which the techniques of Stanislavsky's System and *râs lila* acting conventions work to similar effects with respect to particular audiences, we are likely to find that the effectiveness of an acting technique may depend more on audience than on actors and on the degree to which the audience members invest themselves in a particular technique.

A few days after seeing *Trojan Women*, I learned from friends involved in the performance, that the actress playing Andromache had herself lost a son—her only at the time—when he was very young. After discharging her onstage role each night, she spent long periods of time backstage in a state of incapacitating grief. Apparently, the action of the stage mythology so intensely invoked the memory of her own experience, and her memory so invoked the mythology of the stage action, that the line between her role's onstage grief and her own offstage grief—her real grief—blurred considerably during the play. I do not know what technique she may have used to join her own emotional experience with her character's, if any. Perhaps her own experience was so acute and fresh and so similar to her character's that she needed no means of attaching it to her stage action. But, even if the specific process in this case is unclear, this association of offstage experience with the requirements of a stage role provides a convenient model (common in Western acting traditions of the twentieth century) of the product of a means for making a stage role “real,” or “plausible,” for an audience, with respect to the role's physical expression of emotion and other elements of character. The acting “System” of Stanislavsky is the flagship technique by which actors (particularly, though not exclusively, Western actors) use their own experience—principally their memory of emotional experience—as a means of developing the representation of dramatic characters that is credible when measured against the experience of their audiences. To whatever degree the technique accomplishes its aims, this kind of acting, in one form or another, has come to dominate performance in the West.<sup>1</sup>

*Râs lila* actors seem to be far removed from any such technique. Indeed, to the degree that *râs lila* actors employ any acting technique at all, the rote imitation of troupe directors, who demonstrate for their actors piece-by-piece the physical and vocal style accepted as appropriate for the representation of Krishna, Radha, and the gopis, seems to characterize it. The *râs lila*'s acting style, consequently, can seem very wooden, and not only to the Western eye. In his book *Folk Theater of India*, Balwant Gargi refers to *râs lila* performance as *poor*, and not in the sense with which the term is used to describe an intentionally unfinished theatrical

aesthetic. “Theatrically, Raslila is poor,” he writes. “It offers the actor very little scope. . . . There is no opportunity for training in a system of acting. Even the Kathak style dance and the classical melodies, essential elements in the performance, are flatly executed.”<sup>2</sup> A similar sentiment informs the evaluation of *râs lila* by Daya Prakash Sinha: “It might be wrong to classify *RaasLila* as drama because one cannot expect boys of 12 to 14 years of age to emote and do effective *abhinaya* (acting).”<sup>3</sup> As is evident in the performance scenario briefly described above, the emotional investment in a character on the part of *râs lila* actors is extremely limited. Nor do the actors make any apparent attempt to draw on their own emotional experience in order to invest their characters with an increased emotional plausibility. As one might expect, the identification of the audience with the stage illusion (that is, with the action of the drama as distinct from the action of life) is also limited. The audience members at Sudama Kutir on the afternoon of this boat *lila* laughed as readily as the actors at the poor woman trapped by the set and just as readily redirected their amusement back to the stage action in which Krishna humorously taunted his friends, as though it were all part of the same funny play. Every immediate element of a *râs lila* performance suggests that aesthetic rules here are far different from that which underpins the success of System acting in the West.

However, the degree to which the *râs lila* audience identifies the stage action as “real” is similar to the desired effect of System acting. Depending on the type of story being dramatized in a given *râs lila* performance, audience members will shed real tears or bristle and shout with real anger, fully revealing that, in spite of the ostensibly unrealistic manner of *râs lila* presentation, they regard the stage action as just as real (plausible) as any play staged under System auspices—even more so. Any given audience member chosen at random at a *râs lila* performance is bound to affirm that the characters on stage are not representations, but incarnated beings, and will bear this out at the conclusion of the performance—just as they did shortly after they rescued the old woman caught in the set—by worshipping at the feet of the actors on the stage.

Which is not to say that the effect the *râs lila* has on its audiences indicates the *râs lila* has come to understand something that System acting, *et al.*, have failed to grasp—quite the opposite. The superficial differences between *râs lila*’s manner of staging and Western theories of acting mask some curious affinities. Consequently, Western systems of training may be useful models for an explanation of the theological and aesthetic elements that combine in the *râs lila*’s expression of *reality*. In drawing such a comparison, of course, we must be careful to avoid mis-characterizing both the acting theories introduced and the unfamiliar aspects of Krishna devotion that we hope better to understand by way of comparison with the familiar. Nevertheless, as the present discussion concerns a theory of acting in

the context of *râs lila* performances, a comparison with Western theories of acting should not be considered inappropriate, *per se*.

David L. Haberman has already proposed a connection between Vaisnava life in Vrindavan and Stanislavsky's actor training in his 1988 book *Acting as a Way of Salvation*. Haberman was not here concerned with the *râs lila* theatre of Vrindavan, but with particularly formal meditative disciplines of Krishna devotees (*sâdhana*), especially those associated with the Bengali schools of devotion. Explaining *râgânugâ bhakti sâdhana* as a devotional practice whereby a devotee seeks to transform his inner self into a self coinciding with a character of Vrindavan's mythic history—Krishna's mother or father, a cowherd acquaintance, or, especially, one of Krishna's bucolic girlfriends—Haberman made a serious attempt to identify *râgânugâ bhakti sâdhana* with the philosophical and practical substance of Stanislavsky's System. The attempt makes some sense, on account of what appears to be similarities of motivation and product between the two practices. Both are concerned with role-playing and propose to offer a means of more effectively inhabiting a role. Likewise, both practices profess to offer to practitioners a special relationship with reality (though this relationship is variably understood by Haberman and others: a means of transforming an inner reality, a means of accessing an external but imperceptible reality, a means of making a convincing reality of fiction, and so forth). Haberman made much of these apparent similarities, likening the psychological theories that informed Stanislavsky's physical exercises to the theological reasoning of *bhakti* saints interested in role-playing as religious activity and proposing ways in which the apparent effects of Stanislavskian practice illuminate the effects of meditation in the context of *bhakti*. "Stanislavsky's insights," writes Haberman, "lend themselves to an understanding of how dramatics might be used in an intentional process of identity transformation."<sup>4</sup> In this way, Haberman makes Stanislavsky a touchstone for the analysis of practices that have to do with role-playing in the context of *bhakti*.

Haberman's connection between Stanislavsky and *bhakti* meditation is strained, however, not because there is nothing to learn by comparing the two practices, but by fundamental misunderstandings of Stanislavsky that put into question the conclusions Haberman reaches with regard to the way in which Stanislavskian acting illuminates our understanding of *bhakti* meditation. The limitations of this paper prevent a lengthy critique of Haberman's argument as it relies on Stanislavsky, but the central problem with Haberman's correlation of System acting and *bhakti* meditation lies in his insistence that Stanislavsky expected that an actor's plain imitation of a character would produce a psychological transformation of the actor on the order of a thorough transmutation of the actor's inherent personality. Stanislavsky, however, resisted the notion that effective acting proceeds purely from the outside (physical imitation of action) to the inside (natural emotion and feeling) and strongly rejected the idea that an actor should work towards a total

transformation of his or her inward self.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the degree to which we should identify actors with meditators is greatly limited, regardless of the natural affinities of role-playing. The devotee involved in meditation, such as *râgânugâ bhakti sâdhana*, must fully identify with his character, even to the point, if we follow Haberman, of *becoming* the character. Furthermore, the meditative role exists in and for the meditator himself. For this reason, *bhakti* meditation is irremediably distinct from theatre (and irremediably distinct from Stanislavsky).<sup>6</sup>

The same gap does not stand between System acting and *râs lila* acting. Both theatrical practices exist for the sympathy of and consumption by an audience. *Râs lila* is a theatrical activity that may exhibit some of the characteristics of meditation, not a meditative practice, that exhibits some affinities with acting. *Râs lila* audience members laugh, cry, shout, and cheer and are, in every way, emotionally wrapped up in a performance as a performance, while nevertheless regarding that performance as the expression of something ultimately “real”—more real, in fact, than they themselves. Moreover, it seems that *râs lila* performances succeed in generating a stage reality to a degree that matches (or even outdoes) the best efforts of Stanislavskian methods, in spite of their complete disregard for psychological plausibility. Consequently, a comparison of the *râs lila* with Western theatrical traditions such as Stanislavsky’s System not only makes sense, but also, considering the way they both strive to manifest some “reality” on stage and employ the methods to this end, the comparison asserts itself.

#### ***Smarana*: Actor Training and Technique in the *Râs Lila***

There is no established program of training common to *râs lila* troupes, in the way that System Acting is a proper noun—a coherent program whose elements are more-or-less consistent and that identify each other by way of their cooperation as characteristics of an orthodox scheme. *Râs lila* actors are much less trained in acting than they are taught what to do on stage. Nevertheless, there are some vaguely consistent training practices.<sup>7</sup> In the first place, a *râs lila* actor learns the matter of his role—the lines, the songs, the dances, the physical gestures that correspond with emotional states—by rote. In the beginning of a child actor’s career, he must meet daily with his troupe’s director for instruction in his part. These training sessions for actors as young as four years old can begin as early as four in the morning and may extend for a few hours at a time. A purely mechanical imitation of the director’s speech and movement characterize the sessions, in the way that artistic training, particularly in music performance, is commonly done throughout India. Apart from these training sessions with a director, an actor’s means of rehearsal are performances themselves. A troupe director, sitting with the musicians to the side of the stage, commonly becomes a part of the stage action by feeding lines to young actors or to older actors who have assumed new roles (most often the director knows the lines by heart, but can sometimes be seen using a prompt

book). With respect to functioning in stage dances, a young actor reinforces the rote training he has received from a director by following his older companions on stage. In fact, nervous glances from actor to actor, sheepish grins at wrong turns, and even an actor or two dropping out of a dance momentarily (until they can again pick up their part in it) are features of typical *râs lilas*.

The *râs lila* actor's training does not have much to do with learning *characterization*, as such, and does not coincide with Stanislavskian acting in this respect. The *râs lila* training regimen, as it is, exhibits little or no interest in plumbing the psychological depths either of the actor or of the *râs lila*'s characters. A psychological investigation of the *râs lila* character would be pointless, anyway, even if the actors were to approach the matter from the point of view of Stanislavskian training. Because it concerns divine characters, the *râs lila* does not rest on the humanistic foundation that underlies the theory of internal identification in Stanislavskian acting. The transcendent characters of the *râs lila* are far beyond the reach of any psychological or emotional affinity.<sup>8</sup>

The intersection of the two acting traditions appears to be through a similarly genetic dependence on *memory*. Although, of course, the concept of memory does not necessarily cross cultural boundaries in one piece, we can identify a sufficiently wide overlap of ideas on this subject between these two otherwise culturally distinct situations.

Emotion memory is a concept that was characteristic of the psychology of the subconscious that took root in Europe as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. Posited by psychologist Théodule Ribot, whose work Stanislavsky read, the term "emotion memory" refers to an individual's capacity and inclination to stow away physical and emotional experience in the subconscious such that the same sensations might express themselves later in their original character, given the appropriate circumstances. Stanislavsky found in this idea the mechanism actors could exploit to reproduce emotion that would be essentially real, having been derived in the first place from common human experience. Stanislavsky charged his actors to draw upon the material available in their own emotion memory to generate an "internal state" appropriate to a given character. A suitable "physical state," or the manifestation of the character an audience must see and hear, Stanislavsky asserted, would naturally follow such an adjustment of the actor's inner self.

Stanislavsky, following the Russian Behaviorists, such as Pavlov, accordingly devised, as part of the System, a physical discipline designed to suture psychologically the valuable emotional states identified in an actor's emotion memory to physical stimuli, so as to assist actors in accessing these authentic states under artificial circumstances. Through specific repetitive, physical exercises, an actor could be conditioned, Stanislavsky reasoned from his familiarity with Pavlov, to associate a particular physical stimuli with a particular emotional state—even if

the stimuli itself had apparently little or nothing to do with the emotional state with which it was joined. In fact, it was better if the relationship between stimulus and state was not, in fact, natural, in order to facilitate a more mechanical connection between the two. An actor could then effectively employ such superimposed stimuli in reproducing an inner state with a greater degree of spontaneity.

The *memory* with which *râs lila* performances have to do is *smarana*, from the Sanskrit root *smr* meaning “to remember, recollect, bear in mind, call to mind, think of, be mindful of.”<sup>9</sup> A preferred translation for the term among some Western scholars is *remembrance*. Vaisnava scholars in Vrindavan aver that *smarana* is the very thing without which there is no Vaisnavism. The saint Ramanuja, whose eleventh-century writings on *bhakti* provided the philosophical basis for the *bhakti* revival in Braj in the sixteenth century, regarded *smarana* as the essence of *bhakti*. “Râmânuja declares that *smarana*, this constant remembrance . . . is what is meant by the term *bhakti*.”<sup>10</sup> In popular *bhakti* ideology, the Sanskrit term indicates a kind of memory through which factual knowledge renews itself—a “recollection” or “re-assemblage” of pieces of the past, or of knowledge hidden away for a time. On the one hand, this seems to indicate a process by which knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next. On the other hand, it appears to indicate the self-recovery of an individual’s own latent knowledge.

The content of *smarana* in the context of Vrindavan is the historical reality of Krishna’s manifestation as a child in Vrindavan thousands of years ago. The memory of Krishna’s historical presence in Vrindavan has traversed the millennia from the first-hand observation of Krishna’s own associates to the present day through the process of *smarana*. Srivatsa Goswami, a Vaisnava scholar whose family ashram commonly plays host to Western visitors to Vrindavan, compares this aspect of *smarana* with an individual’s concept of personal heritage. How do you come to have a knowledge of your great-great grandfather?—he asks. Through the first-hand experience of him as passed on to you from the recollection of succeeding generations of your family is the answer. “His reality comes to you by way of memory.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, *smarana* indicates the preservation of knowledge through time, the movement of knowledge from past to present, which reinforces a tradition of scriptural texts and the lineage of gurus.

In another way, *smarana* is an individual’s revivification of a reality with the elements inherited from history. This kind of *re-membrance* inherent in the meaning of *smarana* presupposes the sense of the word just noted and further accounts for the potential of a devotee to muster and polish the elements descended to him or her through history to make the past a living present. Your imaginative faculties, continues Srivatsa Goswami, make living pictures of the stories you hear (or read) of your great-great grandfather, such that he becomes a living person on the stage of your mind; not that you have *imagined* him in the sense of *inventing* him, but that your creative capacity has fused the pieces of history handed to you and infused



them with a vivid life. Accordingly, David Shulman considers a range of meanings of the root *smr* as “. . . connected to modes of making someone or something present.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, *smarana* is a “memory” that is both a repository for and a conjurer of reality.

In Vrindavan, the efforts to take advantage of the power of *smarana* in recollecting Krishna are elaborate. The day is organized in eight successive periods during each of which Krishna engages in distinct pastimes upon which devotees can focus their attention (sleeping and eating, of course, but also bathing, tending cows, frolicking with the village girls, preparing to frolic with the village girls, and so forth). The schedule governs ritual activity in Vrindavan’s many temples: when to feed Krishna, what to feed him, when to put him down for a nap, whom to ask over after school to play with him, and so on. The fixed schedule, as the temples follow it, spills over into Vrindavan streets and homes, whose residents and pilgrims determine their schedules according to the temples’. “The devotee not only participates in Krishna’s activities,” writes A. Whitney Sanford, “but also patterns his or her daily life on this model.”<sup>13</sup> David Haberman gives us a glimpse of the complexity and inclusiveness of Krishna’s schedule in the lives of *bhakti* meditators:

The daily cycle commences with the beginning of night’s end, a point which coincides with a moment called *brahma-muhūrta*. *Brahma-muhūrta* occurs three *muhūrtas* before sunrise (a *muhūrta* is a period of forty-eight minutes). . . . The meditative cycle follows each of the eight periods in order, until the cycle is completed and the day begins again. Each period has a particular *līlā*-event associated with it, and the practitioner is to visualize the appropriate event in the proper period.<sup>14</sup>

With minute detail, the cycle accounts for every minute of Krishna’s day. This fact, and the way in which Krishna’s ritual schedule penetrates Vrindavan’s “secular” life, makes of the schedule something similar to a ready-made “running score,” such as Stanislavsky charged his actors to imagine. The details, which are a part of the cycle, work to call from the memory of those minding it the mythic world of Vrindavan in which Krishna is eternally at play. “By replicating elements of Krishna’s existence,” Sanford adds while analyzing the influence on devotees of living in accordance with Krishna’s eight-period day, “the devotee can physically experience many of the sensations described in the poetry; for example, the aroma of Krishna’s meals, the dust of Vraja under one’s bare feet, the shade of the Kadamba tree, and so forth.”<sup>15</sup> In this way practicing devotees—even non-practicing devotees, by virtue of all that occurs around him—access, in a very Stanislavskian way, the physical stimuli of the world they wish to inhabit. Krishna’s daily cycle, as it has become codified in scripture and ritual, also provides a dramatic script already

divided into discrete “units,” as Stanislavsky employed the term, which clearly delineates the beginnings and endings of actions.

Haberman shows us that *smarana* can become a disciplined practice as employed in the meditative system of *râgânugâ bhakti sâdhana*. Devotees engaged in this method, in accordance with the codified directions Rupa Goswami wrote in the sixteenth century, make *smarana* the sum and substance of their daily activity, following elaborate and complex descriptions of Krishna’s remembered schedule as a sort of “daily planner” of their own. Thus ritualized, *smarana* occupies each minute of the devotee’s waking day with an imagined stream of references to Krishna’s divine world, governed by a daily cycle that is at the same time both mythic and temporal.

However, not everyone in Vrindavan enjoys the economic circumstances that permit such single-minded devotion nor, in any case, is everyone inclined to it, and yet, *smarana* pervades Vrindavan culture. Considering the significance given *smarana* in *bhakti* theology from the time of Ramanuja to the present day, and considering the relatively few number of people formally engaged in *râgânugâ bhakti sâdhana*, we should expect to find evidence of *smarana* in more mundane Vrindavan circumstances.

We do, in fact, see an active recollection of Krishna at every level of activity in Vrindavan. And the fact that we do suggests that the actors who live there engage daily in a kind of Stanislavskian acting exercise through which they make more vivid for themselves the spiritual world of Krishna that the *râs lila* aspires to express. Since Vrindavan was “identified” as Krishna’s home in the sixteenth century, it has existed as a town only in response to the increasing number of pilgrims visiting the area in order to find experience of Krishna’s divine play. Consequently, day-to-day life in Vrindavan has to do almost exclusively with imagining the presence of Krishna and the favorite of his girlfriends Radha (who also enjoys her own divine status), and efforts to call their memory to mind permeate every activity from formal worship in the town’s many temples to shopping in the bazaar to morning chores.

Residents customarily number the temples now standing in Vrindavan at four thousand. In a town of forty or fifty thousand, this means there could be a temple for every ten people. This estimate may be a little high, but temples of some grandeur and shrines no larger than a suitcase are all over Vrindavan, and even if the local estimate is an exaggeration, what appears to the eye as one walks through Vrindavan suggests that more temples *per capita* are there than in any other Indian city. With a few exceptions, each of the temples offers daily programs of worship, interrupted periodically to accommodate Krishna’s patterns of eating and napping (even the breaks call Krishna to mind). In addition to the seasonal ritual celebrations that emphasize Krishna’s connection with temporal conditions in Braj, temples also often sponsor special events, such as recitations of the entire *Bhagavata Purana* or

*katha* performances, which combine recitations of portions of the *Bhagavata Purana* that especially concern Krishna's childhood with devotional song and doctrinal commentary. Something big—something that imposes a recollection of Krishna in a highly sensory way—is always happening in one temple or another. One temple even sponsors a daily *râs lila* performance.

One also sees in Vrindavan an unending stream of pilgrims, rich and poor, who take temporary residence in Vrindavan's many ashrams and guest houses. The pilgrims spend their few days in Braj following a vaguely programmatic itinerary from temple to temple, from sacred site to sacred site, and from spiritual event to spiritual event, singing and chanting much of the way, pausing perhaps only to take food at any of the "pure veg" food stalls (the consumption of meat is summarily forbidden in Vrindavan) or briefly in the bazaar to purchase devotional items—books, clothing, ritual objects, and such—that provide the material base of Vrindavan's economy. The pilgrimage program even includes the circumambulation of Vrindavan itself. The walk takes around three hours, which pilgrims and residents alike fill with songs of Krishna's pastimes, beauty, and love for Radha. On festival occasions—which occur so frequently that while living there I often thought to myself, "Every day's a holiday in Vrindavan"—pilgrims join in very loud processions through Vrindavan's narrow lanes, chanting, singing, and dancing with gusto while following after an elaborately decorated wagon bearing a local temple image or the picture of a popular saint and accompanied by a cart toting electronic equipment to amplify pre-recorded devotional music to seriously dangerous levels.

Other sounds of worship in Vrindavan are incessant. Chanting is omnipresent, both on a macro and a micro level, as the names of god are recited by groups and individuals in all situations and at all times of the day. Even when the sound of chanting is not immediately present, Vrindavan residents and visitors use phrases made of certain of god's names, especially "Radhe-Radhe," in almost every personal encounter to mean everything from "Hello, how are you" to "Get out of the way!" Standard doctrine holds that the sound of god's name manifests god himself, which means god is ever-present in Vrindavan. The persistent echoing of the names of god, and the regard given to the sound of god's name in Vaisnava theology, makes for an environment in which—according to one Vrindavan pilgrim—"it is impossible not to worship" (which is to say, *re-member*). To be certain that this worship is indeed continuous, some ashrams have arranged twenty-four-hour-a-day schedules of chanting carried out in shifts by local devotees, the maintenance of which can be verified by a three a.m. walk through Vrindavan's otherwise dark lanes. Additionally, temple bells ring at all hours of the day and night, drawing one's attention to god's own daily routine (I was regularly roused at four in the morning—the most auspicious time of day—by the bell of the temple next door). The markets, also, are filled with the sound of devotion, as shops blast snippets of the latest devotional cassettes loudly enough to be heard above the sound of scooters

and bicycle bells, hawking and bartering, dogs barking, cows mooing, and the other miscellaneous noises of semi-rural India.

In addition to the sights and sounds of Vrindavan, we might further discuss the expression of devotion in Vrindavan with respect to smell, taste, and touch. But it may be sufficient at this point to say that Krishna-*smarana* hangs suspended in the air of Vrindavan. No particular of Vrindavan, material or immaterial, evades its touch, so that the most mundane element unavoidably alludes to Krishna. The principal event inspiring Margaret Case's discussion of spiritual sight in Vrindavan Vaisnavism in her book *Seeing Krishna* involves the chance passing of a beetle near *bhramar ghat*—the “bee steps,” which devotees seized upon as the appearance of Krishna in the form of a bee, for which there is scriptural precedent.<sup>16</sup> Neither the happenstance of the event, nor the fact that a beetle is not a bee, are relevant objections. *Smarana* makes reality from the simplest of referents. In the introduction to her translation of Kalidasa's play *Abhijnanasakuntala*, which has memory as its central concern, Barbara Stoller Miller writes:

In Mammata's *Kāvya prakāśa* (10.199), *smarana* is an *alamkāra*, defined as the recollection of an object as it was experienced, when a similar object is seen . . . Vi'svanātha modified the definition, replacing Mammata's restricted relation between visual perception (*dr̥ṣṭa*) and recollection with a more general concept of perception (*anubhāva*) as the source of recollection, so that a recollection of an object arising from the perception of something like it is termed *smarana* . . .<sup>17</sup>

The piercing insight of Vrindavan-*smarana* saw the spiritual nature in the passing of a beetle—a revelation of Krishna's infinite life in Vrindavan. *Smarana* creates from the least august things the world of Krishna's *lila*.

This environment, in which every stimulus is somehow connected to recollecting and re-imagining the presence of god, from worship at a variety of temples, to passing twelve shrines and hearing seventy widows chanting the name of god on your way to get pure veg food from the local *bhojanalaya*, to telling someone to move out of the way, is one thing for pilgrims who choose to make Vrindavan a temporary place of worship apart from their lives in the real world, and who may well appreciate the intense concentration of attention on Krishna and Radha for the short time they are able to devote exclusively to such things. But imagine a boy born and raised in Vrindavan, whose access to elsewhere—including cities like Delhi, even though it is relatively close—is limited to travel as part of a *ras lila* troupe. Even satellite television, which is ubiquitous throughout India, is only a small window on what are, for the most part, lands so distant and unattainable as to be the stuff of fantasy. An eight-year-old boy in this environment may very

well perceive life itself as uninterrupted *smarana*, a persistent revelation of Krishna in all daily activities—at least in all he does in his waking hours and, perhaps, in everything that happens around him while he sleeps.

In addition, the actor in Vrindavan finds his own existence to be the site of Krishna *smarana*. In the first place, the boy grows up as a child of India, the religious significance of which is magnified under the lens of Krishna devotion. Hawley notes that, “the ‘worship’ of children . . . is a general feature of Indian life.”<sup>18</sup> Children in general enjoy a much-favored place in Indian society, being allowed an unusual freedom and receiving unusual regard. Considering a number of sociological studies on the phenomenon, Norvin Hein writes:

The child is waited upon with devotion and patience. Toilet training, which is effected without reproaches, comes very late. Children go to bed when they are ready, they play in any state of dress or undress, they are seldom coerced or thwarted. The mother’s protection and support are unconditional. The child’s grandparents and adult maternal relatives make its indulgence complete.<sup>19</sup>

My experience with children of my own in India bears out the extraordinary adoration they receive. My own children are treated regally in India and with much more sincere delight by people from all walks of life than one encounters under day-to-day circumstances in the United States. When the old *sadhus* living along the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh would see my wife and I coming with our six-month-old daughter strapped to one or the other of us, they would clap their hands and call out with laughter, “Mother Ganges!” As we ate in restaurants from time to time, elsewhere in India, waiters would customarily take our daughter to meet the entire staff. Often she would disappear for the length of our meals, and we would finally discover her playing with the cooks in the kitchen. Customarily, most of the other restaurant patrons would also insist on holding her before we could leave.<sup>20</sup> When we visited the Taj Mahal with her—and this was typical when we visited tourist sites—thirty or forty times, Indian nationals asked us to pose her for photographs (when I had occasion to visit the Taj without my children I wasn’t asked to stand for a single photograph).

In this special regard India gives its children, boys typically have a higher place, and in Vrindavan the place boys hold takes on religious significance. Sociologist David Mandelbaum has noted the exceptional degree of deference afforded the young boy in India. “Even when a woman has several sons, she cherishes and protects and indulges them all to a degree not usually known in the western world.”<sup>21</sup> In Vrindavan, this regard, which comes from more than familial affection, conflates boy children with Krishna, the premier child. More than once,

Vrindavan residents flatly told me that boy children are god (*bhagwan*). An adult *ras lila* actor made it clear to me that this was not an empty statement when I saw him touch his forehead to his baby son's feet, an act normally reserved for the ritual worship of a temple image or a guru (who also holds a divine status for his adherents). The boy actor receives a special dose of this regard, as *ras lila* directors try to drum into their actors (more often than not, their sons) from the beginning of their training the thought, "I am Krishna."<sup>22</sup> Seven years after parading my infant daughter through a variety of Indian restaurants' kitchens, residents of Vrindavan generally referred to my two-year-old son as "Gopal," one of Krishna's names with special reference to his toddler years. Some suggested with full sincerity that I really should change his name.<sup>23</sup> The association of children with Krishna makes living sites of *smarana* in small boys themselves.

Considering the pervasive religious environment in which an eight-year-old Vrindavan boy is enveloped on a daily basis and the way in which, from minute to minute, a boy finds himself to be one of Vrindavan's limitless mementos of Krishna, I would suggest that, by default, *ras lila* actors are well-trained in the principal psychological aspects of Stanislavskian acting. They know what it means to "live" through a part, how to imagine themselves as if they were someone else, how to regard their environmental circumstances as manifestations of another time and place, and they know how to transform those circumstances imaginatively into a tangible reality. Although Krishna and Radha do not have "objectives" and "motivation" in the way mundane characters do, *ras lila* actors know, through the simultaneously single-minded and aimless life of Vrindavan, the essential nature of their roles, and by daily exposure to the ritual program governing Vrindavan's motion, based on the regularity of Krishna's minutely timed pastimes, they know the "units" or discrete activities that comprise Krishna's eternal play. It is no wonder that Krishna actors profess to feel a very Stanislavskian identification with their characters in spite of what seems a sound disconnection on stage. Swami Amicand Sharma's son, who played Krishna in his father's troupe for ten years, told me that at every moment during a performance his mind was occupied with the thought, "I am Krishna."<sup>24</sup>

#### **Aesthetics, "Reality," and Audience Perspective**

So why, then, do *ras lila* performances lack the "through line" that Stanislavsky considered fundamental? If these actors so follow Stanislavsky's system, albeit without consciousness of it, why do they represent their characters so unevenly? Why are there such obvious and frequent breaks in the concentration and expression of *ras lila* actors while on stage? After all, Stanislavsky insisted that in order to be effective on stage, actors "must make every effort to maintain an uninterrupted exchange of feelings, thoughts, and actions among themselves."<sup>25</sup> The fact that *ras lila* actors generally fail to follow this counsel seems a stark contradiction of the

contention that *râs lila* acting very much resembles System acting. I would suggest a simple explanation for the discontinuity: there are no such breaks. *Râs lila* performances are a function of the uninterrupted life of devotion in Vrindavan, the essential nature of which is itself dramatic. The “real” play going on in Vrindavan is Vrindavan itself, framed as such from real life outside Vrindavan by the peculiarities of Vrindavan devotion, exhibiting a wholly congruous internal consistency, of which the *râs lila*, with all its fits and starts, is a part. The lapses in focus on the part of the *râs lila* child actors appear as such only to those whose consciousness is not tuned to the eternal play of Krishna that Vrindavan manifests.

As an example of this consistency in inconsistency, consider Bottom in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In this play, Bottom assumes the role of an actor himself taking a role in a play. During the performance of the meta-play in *Midsummer*’s fifth act, Bottom proves himself a comically undisciplined actor by insistently breaking from his adopted performance role to explain the action of his play to his play’s audience, composed of characters in *Midsummer* like himself. Bottom’s micro-audience of *Midsummer* characters, the nobility of Athens, points out his failings as an actor, mercilessly. And yet, Bottom’s lack of Stanislavskian concentration in his role, his apparent inability to keep his own identity as Bottom channeled into a plausible and unbroken representation of Pyramus, which causes such consternation among the Athenian nobles, is not regarded by the audience of *Midsummer* as any such thing. The macro-audience for whom Bottom and the Athenian spectators alike are “characters” of an order similar to Pyramus do not perceive in Bottom’s haphazard performance as Pyramus any break in the consistency of the *Midsummer* world itself. *Midsummer*’s macro-audience understands Bottom’s thespian shortcomings to be a coherent piece of *Midsummer*’s internal action, the play’s *play*. If Theseus, Lysander, Hermea, and the remaining members of *Pyramus and Thisbe*’s Athenian micro-audience were to re-orient their perception of Bottom’s performance so that they appreciated it from the point of view of George, Herbert, Susan, and other members of the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s macro-audience, they would find themselves much less disturbed by the inconsistencies of Bottom’s behavior.

In fact, so re-oriented, Theseus and his retinue might find Bottom’s performance particularly effective. In a high school production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* I once attended, a pillar, which detached from the upper floor of one of the set’s Roman houses, nearly smashed Marcus Lycus, alone on stage, and in full view of the audience. The actor elicited an uproarious response by looking at the cardboard pillar at his feet, looking up at the balcony from which it fell, and looking to his audience in deadpan and shrugging his shoulders. In this case, the audience took delight in seeing the real actor cracking through the fake persona of Marcus Lycus. In this case, what the audience seemed to appreciate was an orientation towards the stage action that the actor and audience held in

common. So well for comedy, in which such breaks of character are at least excusable, if not laudable. But even ponderous drama, when effective, exhibits the same cracking through which an audience connects with itself. In the case of the actress playing Andromache mentioned earlier, the real actress apparently cracked her performance. Since what showed through those cracks fit the tenor of the performance, the cracking did not reveal itself to the audience as the real actress; however, the cracks nevertheless provided the avenue by which the actress's real emotion could inform the performance and directly engage the audience. In all these cases, what appears to be effective is the "cracking," when the real actor shows through the veneer of the stage character.

If we re-orient our own audience-perspective, we can regard the apparently undisciplined performances of *râs lila* actors in the same way. When viewed from the macro-viewpoint of Krishna's eternal play, rather than from the micro-viewpoint of individuals at a show, the missed cues, the clumsy dancing, the giggling and fidgeting, even the old woman trapped in the upstage scenery, are all of one piece, not at all inconsistent with Stanislavsky's demands for an "unbroken line" of concentration intended to maintain an illusion of plausible reality on stage. Consequently, the audience experiences and interacts with *râs lila* dramatic action as categorically real. And so we see the audience members who laugh, cry, shout, swoon, and tremble while actors re-pin their costumes, clean their fingernails, trip, and crack-up. In fact, *bhakti*, through highly disciplined practices such as Haberman identifies and otherwise, seeks to re-orient the perspective of devotees in just this way, such that all action is stage action—the *râs lila* actor is truly Krishna and the passing beetle is too.

The fact that the *râs lila* actors do not have to do much more than show up, while the performance goes on as an expression of absolute reality indicates that the audience here has openly assumed much of the Stanislavskian responsibility for generating the realistic plausibility of the performance—a responsibility that a Western audience believes is almost entirely borne by the actor. The devotional life of Vrindavan orients the audience's relative point of view by revealing the comprehensive and pervasive quality of Krishna's play. This conceptual calibration contextualizes audience and actors, life and play, alike as functions of the same dramatic action. Furthermore, the Stanislavskian schooling inherent in Vrindavan devotion, which audience members receive in common with actors, makes audience members into actors of equal participation in the *râs lila* performance. Patrons of the *râs lila*, as well as the actors, know how to live through a part and actively engage themselves accordingly in performances.



***Bhāv*: Actor Identity and Stage Reality**

One of the stories in the *rās lila* repertoire concerns Siva's interest in Krishna. At one time, Siva, the divine manifestation of destructive cosmic energy, developed a consuming interest in seeing Krishna's late-night carousing with his girlfriends, but could not transgress the cosmic law that grants access to Krishna's roistering to women alone. So Siva turned himself into a woman. In one dramatization of this story at Jaipur Mandir in November 2001, a slightly heavysset actor as Siva strode onstage sporting a full, black beard holding a rather menacing trident and wrapped in a sari. In myth, Siva's transformation goes much deeper. Emerging from the river Yamuna, Siva became, in fact, a woman; and only on account of this literal transformation did he gain direct vision of Krishna's nighttime rowdydow.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the lengths to which Siva had to go in order to see Krishna and the *gopis* dancing together, how is it that a crowd of ordinary mortals, particularly the men, gain such easy access to the same exclusive revelation through a *rās lila* performance? Only through an inner transformation on the order of Siva's physical one can this occur. The orientation of a devotee's consciousness that allows for the perception of the stage action as a manifestation of Krishna's divine *lila* depends upon his identification with a character approved in tradition as a witness, the *gopis* chief among them. Only by way of the adoption of the spiritual nature—*bhāv*—of such characters does a patron perceive in truth Krishna's transcendent life. By way of *bhāv*, a devotee gains the perspective of the macro-audience, to see *rās lila* acting in the context of Krishna's own drama. "Through *bhāv*," says Vasant Yamadagni, "you change the unattractive into attractive."<sup>27</sup> Which is to say, through *bhāv*, the clumsiness of *rās lila* acting is not clumsy, nor its roughness rough, but the supernally beautiful activity of Krishna himself. Such experience of mundane stage action as an expression of transcendental beauty may be precisely what Bharata and Abhinavagupta refer to as *rasa*—a spiritually aesthetic and aesthetically spiritual apprehension of the divine through an encounter with art.

An adaptation of the *āstāyama lila* ("Play of Eight Periods") makes clear just how much a *rās lila* audience contributes to a performance. In October 2001, a prominent Vrindavan ashram, Jai Singh Ghera, staged an eight-day dramatization of the eight periods of Krishna's typical day, presenting in roughly three-hour blocks—one per day—Krishna's ritual cycle of waking, eating, washing, bathing, etc. Each of the eight periods coincided on stage with its corresponding time of day, one each day, until after eight days the twenty-four hour cycle was complete. The first installment, then, concerned the period of sleep until morning, and the curtain rose around two a.m. Swami Fateh Krishna and his *rās lila* troupe's musicians provided the musical accompaniment for the performance, which displayed extravagant sets of flowers and greenery designed especially by Srivatsa Goswami, one of the ashram's principal authorities. In these respects, there was nothing particularly unusual about this *āstāyama lila*.<sup>28</sup>

But there were no actors. While Fateh Krishna musically narrated the scene, describing through a combination of devotional poetry and classical music the transcendent qualities of Krishna and the world around him, Krishna and Radha became evident among the flora of the set. Fateh Krishna narrated the action between Krishna and Radha, but both remained stock still. Fateh Krishna provided dialogue between the two, but the characters themselves were mute. In this eight-day celebration of Krishna's daily cycle, Krishna and Radha assumed the lead roles themselves: the images from Srivatsa Goswami's household shrine. As their movement from one part of the stage to another was necessary, male members of the Goswami family—acting in their capacity as temple priests—moved them and fulfilled other functions essential to each individual daily period, such as providing food. Altogether, the cyclic performance took on the character of an elaborate ritual. The significant thing in this manner of performing the *lila* was the emphasis it placed on the audience to perceive the reality of Krishna and Radha's presence on stage. Without the slightest "acting" cue on the part of the lead characters, the audience of the *âstâyama lila* nevertheless saw in them the actual presence of Krishna and Radha, no less real for not moving nor speaking for themselves.

Thus, we see in this *âstâyama lila* the way a *râs lila* audience assumes its own role in a *lila* performance. Perhaps a few audience members formally engage in some form of *râgânugâ bhakti sâdhana* and take advantage of a *râs lila* performance like this *âstâyama lila* in the course of their meditation, but the majority of *râs lila* patrons are simply devotees, who, nevertheless, become actors for the course of a *râs lila* on account of the *bhâv* they have developed in devotional living. Whatever gaps exist in a *râs lila* actor's characterization will be filled by the audience's spiritual identities to complete the transformation of stage action to transcendent action. The audience must themselves be characters in the drama in order to perceive the divine drama through the staged scene.

*Bhâv* functions similarly in the actors themselves. In the same way that a Stanislavskian actor relies upon access to his own, real feelings as the basis for a character, the *râs lila* actor relies on the *bhâv* he finds alive in himself. A devotee actor, one whose devotional living has nurtured and refined his own *bhâv*, has no need to develop in rehearsal the means of plausibly expressing the nature of his character since his own feelings in the devotional stage situation are more than adequate. *Bhâv* thus understood provides the current justification for the continuing use of very young actors. *Bhâv*, Vrindavan residents say, is most pure in children. In fact, the younger the child, the purer his *bhâv* is. Vasant Yamadagni suggested to me that "pure *bhâv*" (*shudh bhâv*) exists in the child in the absence of worldly passions and vices, such as greed, jealousy, cruelty, and so forth, and he provided this example: You buy a toy for RS 1000 and give it to your child. He breaks it. You go through the roof because of your attachment to the monetary value of that toy, disturbed that you may as well have dropped the money in the trashcan. But

the child has no sense of this value. The younger the child is, the less the monetary loss disturbs him—and the more likely he would just as happily drop that money in the trashcan in the first place as break the expensive toy (or flush the car keys down the toilet).<sup>29</sup> The child's concerns are not worldly, but are entirely consumed in play, and this absorption is the evidence of the purity of his *bhâv*, which exists naturally in him in the beginning, but wanes with age, making necessary the adoption of devotional life as a means of preserving and intensifying *bhâv*.

Swami Fateh Krishna tells a story of a *râs lila* performance in Jaipur in which, as an adult, he played the role of a cowherd distraught by Krishna's absence. Following the performance, Swami-ji was called out by a man identifying himself as a Bollywood filmmaker.<sup>30</sup> This director offered his appreciation for Swami-ji's performance and added that he could pay crores of rupees to his film actors and not get the kind of convincing emotion out of them that Swami-ji had just expressed. Swami-ji is quick to attribute his acting ability to *bhâv*, bestowed on him as a "blessing" (*krpa*).<sup>31</sup> In this case, as in the other common cases of performances in which a character's sincere attachment and devotion to Krishna is evident, the actor essentially expresses his own attachment and devotion, which, as the Hindi film director perceived, money cannot buy. In fact, in such cases the degree to which actors *act* is in question. In Jaipur, Swami-ji did not express the sadness of a distant, perhaps fictional, cowherd for whom Krishna's departure from Vrindavan caused sorrow, but expressed his own deep sadness in the gulf estranging him from Krishna, the object of his own, exquisite yearning. Hence, his stage tears were his own tears as much as his cowherd character's. In some ways, this scenario resembles the plight of the actress playing Andromache I saw years ago. And it may not be unreasonable to suggest that that actress was not acting, either. In these situations, where an actor is much more himself or herself than a character, he or she comes to resemble much more an audience member, who also remains apart from the dramatic scenario, than an actor.

That is, when stage action inspires an actor's own feelings, in the same way that it may inspire an audience member's own feelings, the actor finds himself an observer of the dramatic action of the same order as the audience member. And this distance, when it allows the aesthetic experience of the play to inspire the actor's *bhâv*, provides an avenue through which an actor, too, may come to perceive the action of the play transcendently, experiencing the stage action as categorically real, not as a consequence of deeply identifying himself with a character in the play (and so, "losing" himself in the performance), but by objectively invigorating the action of the play with his own spiritual sensitivity. In this case, the individual on the stage does taste *rasa*, not as an actor, but as an audience observer.

In this way, a *râs lila* audience assumes the bulk of the responsibility for the effectiveness of a performance, which distinguishes the *râs lila*'s interaction of play and audience from the interaction in typical Western theatre. Generally

speaking, Western dramatic performance, at least of the last century, expects the actor to generate (by skill, training, talent, inspiration, or whatever means at his or her disposal) the world of the play and to dynamically draw the audience into that world.<sup>32</sup> The degree to which Olivier *is* Hamlet is a function of the deportment of Olivier. The Stanislavskian System developed precisely to better equip actors to assume this responsibility. And not only the so-called realistic forms of Western theatre rely on the actor as their means of cogency. Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, and Bogart all put actors at the center of their theories of performance. The degree to which Weigel's scream directs our attention to the crime of human inconstancy is a function of Weigel's own asserted aspect. The dependency of theatrical performance on actors is not unreasonable. Since the actor is the medium by which dramatic narrative generally occurs, he seems the natural instrument to vivify that narrative.

However, as we have seen, the development of character in Stanislavskian acting depends upon the actor's self. In performance, the basis of an actor's characterization—the substance of her *acting*—must reveal itself ultimately as an authentic part of what her audience regards as their own, audience-perspective existence. Consequently, the “truest” performances (or, perhaps better said, the most “effective” according to the terms set by Stanislavskian acting itself) are those in which the acting, as such, is most deftly cracked so as to reveal that no acting is taking place.

Given this understanding of Stanislavskian acting in practice, acting in the *râs lila* theatre is not so different, drawing as it does the System's dependence on an actor's self to its logical conclusion. The stage actors who convey the dramatic narrative of the performance do not also bear the responsibility to quicken that narrative. The degree to which Uma-ji *is* Krishna is not a function of Uma-ji's acting, but of the audience's. Which is not to say that *râs lila* actors do not *perform* to any degree. As I have shown, *râs lila* actors do perform and do train for their performing in ways similar to adherents of Stanislavskian programs, albeit somewhat inadvertently. But the actors' training is of the same sort as that of any *râs lila* audience member, as is the actors' acting during the moments of performance of the same order as the audience's. Thus, the actor and the audience member at a *râs lila* performance are of one sort, oriented at the same angle with respect to the action of the play. Both actor and patron observe the divine *lila* that the stage action expresses, and both aspire to become participants in the divine *lila*, by assuming roles involved in the stage action. Because both actors and patrons rely on their own spiritual nature, their own *bhâv*, in building their characters, the process through which actors and patrons go to facilitate their acting resembles Stanislavskian discipline, which similarly recognizes that that inherent feeling cannot be artificially generated or manufactured by any system, only nurtured and channeled into service. In fact, it is precisely this understanding of *bhâv* that justifies

the contemporary use of sometimes undisciplined children as actors in the *râs lila*. Without *bhâv*, any transformation of *râs lila* participants—actors and audience alike—is impossible. Indeed, the nurture of that unmade quality makes transcendent experience in the *râs lila* theatre possible.

### Notes

1. My simplification of Stanislavsky here is not meant to assert that “emotion memory” is the sum and substance of Stanislavskian practice (in the way emotion memory dominates Stanislavsky’s step-son, the American Method). Indeed, there is ample evidence that Stanislavsky’s understanding and use of emotion memory changed over time, in conjunction with the expanding scope of his theories of actor training. However, what appears to remain constant and, therefore, essential to Stanislavsky is the humanistic notion of the concord of human feeling, that what I feel when I am sad is qualitatively the same as what you feel when you are sad. On account of the mechanism Stanislavsky identified as the way we acknowledge our emotional affinity, rather than because of a confusion of Stanislavsky and the American Method, I regard emotion memory as a concept sufficiently fundamental to Stanislavskian theory as to be conveniently representative of Stanislavskian practice.

2. Balwant Gargi, *Folk Theater of India* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1991) 131.

3. Daya Prakash Sinha, *Lokrang: Uttar Pradesh* (Lucknow: UP Hindi Sansthan, 1990) 80.

4. David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Râgânugâ Bhakti Sâdhana* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988) 68.

5. For a fuller critique of Haberman’s argument, see my unpublished dissertation, “Playing in the Lord’s Playground: God, Salvation, and Play-Acting in the Braj *Râs Lîlâ*.” Diss. U of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002.

6. Phillip Zarrilli offers an additional critique of Haberman’s comparison in his review of Haberman’s book published in *Asian Theatre Journal*. Zarrilli objects that Haberman “reads Stanislavsky as if his acting theory were self-evident rather than contested” (*Asian Theatre Journal* 8: 186). That is, Zarrilli asserts, Haberman’s uncritical acceptance of the basic functionality of Stanislavsky’s System undermines an otherwise convincing argument concerning role-playing in *bhakti* meditation, since Stanislavsky is irrelevant to the discussion if his understanding of human psychology is wrong. I share Zarrilli’s reservations about Haberman’s work, but would suggest that the soundness of Stanislavsky’s reasoning is beside the point. For the same reasons that we need not here concern ourselves with the question of Krishna’s existence, we need not worry whether Stanislavsky’s system “works.” Stanislavsky’s “rightness” is not nearly so important here as his adherents’ belief in his “rightness.” The basis of my comparison is that life in Vrindavan constructs a reality which “works” for devotees, similar to the way actors’ adoption of Stanislavskian practice creates the reality in which Stanislavskian principles “work.”

7. In the not too distant past—at least as recently as the 1950s according to accounts by Vrindavan residents—*râs lila* actors underwent some rigorous acrobatic training. There is a living memory of children actors practicing acrobatic maneuvers on the sandy banks of the Yamuna River. This feature of *râs lila* training and performance has disappeared. It may be that an increasing interest in north Indian

*kathak* dance as the physical inspiration for performance movement has supplanted the use of acrobatics. In noting current *rās lila* practices, which living directors themselves decry as responsible for a decline in the quality of the *rās lila*, Ram Narayan Agrawal writes, “With respect to *rās* dance, directors have noted the significance of *kathak*, and have injected bits of *kathak* into both dance and dramatic action. Some important troupes have begun to emphasize *kathak* dance over traditional dance.” (*Braj ka Rās Ranmanc* [New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1981] 379).

8. Furthermore, seeking to understand Krishna’s “motivation”—another central concept in the Stanislavskian System—is an exercise in futility since Krishna’s actions, as asserted countless times in Vaisnava theological texts and repeatedly emphasized by Vaisnava scholars and saints, are essentially motive-less. Krishna is engaged eternally in *play*, which, by theological definition and otherwise, has no motive. As a consequence, a *rās lila* actor playing Krishna does not have an avenue of psychological character study open to him, even if he happened to be of a mind to pursue it.

9. Monier Monier-Williams, ed. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899).

10. Haberman 125.

11. Srivatsa Goswami, conversation with the author, Vrindavan, India, 7 Dec. 2001.

12. David Shulman, “The Prospects of Memory,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26 (1998): 316.

13. A. Whitney Sanford, “The Emotive Body in the *Astayâmalilâ* Festival,” *Arc* 25: 110.

14. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation* 127-28.

15. Sanford, “The Emotive Body” 110.

16. Margaret Case, *Seeing Krishna: The Religious World of a Brahman Family in Vrindaban* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000).

17. Barbara Stoller Miller, “Kâlidâsa’s World and His Plays,” *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kâlidâsa*, ed. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 323-24.

18. John Stratton Hawley and Shrivatsa Goswami, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Drama from Vrindaban* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992) 20.

19. Norvin Hein, “A Revolution in Krsnaism,” *History of Religions* 25.1: 314. I would object, however, based only on personal experience, that toilet training “comes late” to an Indian child. Relative to the United States, toilet training comes surprisingly early to the child in India, where until very recently disposable diapers were unheard of, and where, in any case, for most people diapers of any sort are an insignificant element of hygiene. As a result, parents make efforts very early to train infants to recognize the appropriate places for relief and are remarkably successful (though, admittedly, the places for such things in India are more common and accessible than in the U. S.).

20. One such patron, an expensively dressed businessman, discovered while playing with my daughter that bouncing a baby on one’s knee while giving the baby sips of Pepsi is not a good idea.

21. David G. Mandelbaum, “The Family in India,” *The Family, Its Function and Destiny*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945) 104-5.

22. Swami Fateh Krishna Sharma, conversation with the author, Vrindavan, India, 6 January 2002.

23. Vrindavan-wallas never found my insistence that my son was not god (*bhagwan*) but a demon (*rakshasa*) as humorous as I did.

24. Conversation with the author, Vrindavan, India, 21 December 2001.
25. Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts, 1936) 186.
26. With this myth in mind, at the temple of Siva Gopeswar ("Lord of Gopis"), priests daily dress the monolithic representation of Siva (*linga*) in a sari.
27. Vasant Yamadagni, conversation with the author, Vrindavan, India, 15 March 2002.
28. Margaret Case describes another *âstâyama lila* in her book *Seeing Krishna* (111-50; chaps. 7 and 8).
29. Yamadagni, conversation, 15 Mar. 2002.
30. "Bollywood" is the common term for the Hindi film industry based in Bombay, which is far more productive than its namesake in California.
31. Sharma, conversation, 6 Jan. 2002.
32. Euro-American theatre is not alone in this regard. Various performance forms in Japan, China, Africa, South America, and many other forms in India itself equally depend upon the actor's asserted stage presence. But because the present argument has to this point been specifically concerned with Stanislavskian theory, it will not stray too far from Stanislavskian territory.

