The Otherness through *Le rêve d'Urmila (Urmila's Dream),* an interdisciplinary and intercultural research creation doctoral project through *Natyashastra*

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Abstract: This communication will present how research creation based doctoral project can be an opportunity to explore the Otherness and *other* disciplines, to open to new realms of research as well as to question the artist's posture in his journey between the culture of origin and the culture of the discipline in which he trains. As an apprentice, I studied kathakali in South India in my early twenties and it influenced all my theatre practice. The dance-theatre of Kerala has been part of my creative tools since the beginning of my creative life as a professional stage artist. My doctoral research was a way to question the footprint of the kathakali training in a creation project, to deepen my knowledge of Indian theatre and to explore the connections between kathakali, *Natyasastra*, the classical Indian treaty of dramaturgy, and my doctoral creation, *Le rêve d'Urmila*, which has been presented in September 2018 at Université Laval, in Quebec City. As part of my doctoral research on cultural hybridity, I had to train a group of western artists to dance and play with the codes of Indian dance to reach the level of cultural and disciplinary competence needed to produce the doctoral creation. I will thus present the specificities of the training process and expose the ways in which we explored various elements of the kathakali performance: the four *abhinaya*, rhythmic and musical elements, etc.

Keywords: Natyashastra; kathakali; *Le rêve d'Urmila*.

Research creation project in academic field can open new realms for researchers, offering a unique opportunity to explore the Otherness, and to question the posture of the artist through his journey between his culture of origin and the culture of the discipline under which he trains. I had the privilege to do my master and my PhD projects as creations. In both cases, it was an opportunity to explore new realms of research and to develop a creative process in an academic context. In Montreal, research master's degrees in dance, theatre and visual arts started at *Université du Québec à Montreal* (UQAM) in the early eighties. These new realms of research soon raised questions on how to develop a scientific approach to the creative

process. In 1988, I started a Master degree in Dramatic Art at UQAM. Soon in my research, I decided to explore a dance form opposite to kathakali under which I trained during the early eighties at Kerala Kalamandalam, the Art Academy of Kerala. I was drawn to Japanese Noh theatre, which at first seemed so different from the exuberant dance theatre form of Kerala, but which revealed to have much more in common than I could imagine. The master degree was an occasion to study *The tradition of Noh*, the dramatic treaty by Zeami, written in the early 15th century, to adapt one of his masterpiece *Hagoromo, or The feather coat*, to a North American context, to explore dramatic and dance technics and to apply new knowledge of Noh elements to the needs of my *mémoire-création*. Japanese Noh artists were none in Montreal, videos were essential to learn the movements and dance figures. The ones created by Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell in the context of a PhD project at Cornell University were very helpful. Finally, *La dame du cap Tourmente,* my adaptation of *Hagoromo* from Zeami, was presented at UQAM in 1991, in collaboration with the co-creator, Gerardo Sanchez, under the supervision of our director Larry Tremblay.

In 2001, I went back to Kerala Kalamandalam to refresh my kathakali training. In the following years, the presence of Kala Bharati, a centre for Bharata Natya directed by Dr Mamata Niyogi-Nakra, was essential to keep me in contact with Indian dance. My participation to their numerous activities triggered my desire to deepen my knowledge of *Natyashastra*, the dramatic treaty from ancient India written two thousand years ago. I joined Laval University in 2014 to start a PhD project with Dr Liviu Dospinescu as supervisor. A research creation based approach appeared the best way to question the footprint of kathakali in my theatre practice, and in the practice of other western artists trained in the same form. As my first dance training, kathakali has impacted all my theatre practice. The PhD also enabled me to discover *Natyashastra*, to pair it with my kathakali practice and to apply its precepts to a creative work while reflecting on cultural hybridity through my posture as a western artist trained in Indian dance.

Over the years, academic literature on research creation process has emerged from the academic field forcing me to identify my approach as a creator and a researcher. As Pierre Gosselin from UQAM mentions in *La recherche-création: pour une compréhension de la recherche en pratique artistique,* it was important for me "to specify the point of view from which [I] approache[s] the object of [my] study."[1] In the article *Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances'*, by Owen Chapman et

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[1] Pierre Gosselin: nécessité pour "le chercheur de préciser le point de vue à partir duquel il aborde l'objet de son étude." Pierre Gosselin et Éric Le Coguiec, *La recherche-création création: pour une compréhension de la recherche en pratique artistique*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2006, p. 28.

Kim Sawchuck (2012), from Concordia University, gave four models to define research creation. In order to deepen my understanding of kathakali and to study *Natyashastra*, a ***Research-for-creation*** approach was adopted. This first part included the full study of the thirty-six chapters of *Natyashastra* with a special attention to *Rasa* theory, the study of Hindu mythology, mainly the epic *Ramayana*, as well as a comparative study between the Greek myth of *Odyssey* and different versions of *Ramayana.* A special attention was given to the characters of Urmila and Penelope both waiting for their beloved to return. This reflects upon the writing of the libretto for the play *Le rêve d'Urmila* [*Urmila's dream*]. A bank of movements from personal archives resulting from my training in kathakali in 1980, 1981 and 2001 and my fieldtrip in India in 2016 (kathakali classes, conferences, workshop, shows) was created. This bank includes embodied knowledge through practice, notes, books, videos, mudras, photos, dance figures as kalasham, rhythms, choreographic patterns, as well as numerous live and virtual Kathakali performances.

The ***Research-from-creation***[2] approach intervened later in my projects development and consists of all the documentation and analysis results gathered through the creative process. It includes aspects of training the actors from my distribution to shape their bodies in kathakali movements (of which they didn't have any experience), initiating the musician and the singer to Indian classical and kathakali music, teaching them a different approach to rhythms and melodies, selecting *talas* (rhythmic patterns) and *ragas* (melodic modes), supervising the creation of the music to accompany the dancers, choreographing dance movements and gestural sentences of mudras, etc. The creation process soon raised multiple questions: the actors wanted to know more about the story, the characters, the meaning of certain aspects of the dance-actor practice they needed to develop; about ways to approach the interpretation of a character; as for myself I was interrogating different methods for transmitting the dance technique… everything kept me in constant research.

Research and creation results have been shared with the audience through the presentation of three public laboratories. The feedback from the audience, the exchange with artists, fed my reflection on cultural hybridization and cross-fertilization in the performing arts throughout the creation process and were essential for the research to emerge. All the different steps of creative process and the presentations and experimental performances have been documented through videos recording. The final text, musical scores, partitions, gestural sentences, choreographies, and

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[2] Owen B. Chapman, Kim Sawchuk, *Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances"*, "Canadian Journal of Communication", Vol. 37 (1), 12 April 2012, retrieved from https://cjc.utpjournals.press/doi/10.22230/cjc.2012v37n1a2489, consulted July 16 2019.

lighting plans are also part of the results. To compare my posture with other Western artists (from France, Mexico and Quebec) trained extensively in kathakali in India, I conducted a series of seven interviews about training and integration of kathakali in creative approaches within a western context, which helped me to precise my concept of hybridization. I will define my understanding and sense of the notion later.

With the importance of the material compiled during the four years of the research, a need to name and organise the materials has aroused. In *Méthodologie de la recherche creation,* Louis-Claude Paquin, from UQAM, proposes a way to name, organise and select documentations. Paquin defines three types of documentation: distanced, experiential and 'artefactual'. Spontaneous testimony can constitute a fourth type of documentation. Distant documentation consists of photos, videos, sound recordings, production activities, etc. The experiential documentation consists of notes and reflections surrounding the experiment, that is, factual and reflective elements such as what worked, what did not work as planned, how to readjust, etc. The 'artefactual' documentation consists of the produced material: plays, choreographies, music, sketches, scores, etc. Spontaneous testimonies reflecting the first degree of reception of a work can complete the documentation, but in Quebec the rules of "research ethics on human beings[3]" make these unsolicited testimonies difficult to integrate in a PhD project.

To define hybridity, I chose the definitions by scholars like Peter Burke, François Laplantine and Alexis Nouss, as well as Sherry Simon from Montreal. The hybrid has often been a solitary place to stand as it is bound with time, space and experience. In her article *Hybridity and translation*, Simon reminds us that it has "a long history of negativity. Consider the words mongrel or half-breed, which share the same semantic field. During the 18th and 19th centuries hybridity was regularly associated with the abnormal, the monstrous or the grotesque"[4]. By opposition *métissage*, translated in English by interbreeding or melting pot, and creolization, both produce a being, or a language, that will spread and live long after the disappearance of its genitors. However,

> [w]hen two different things are brought together – when plants or
> animals are 'crossed', when two identities are fused, when literary

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[3] Ethics Committees for Research Involving Human Subjects protect the rights, the physical and psychological integrity of those who participate to research projects. Project with interviews needs to be approve by a committee.

[4] Sherry Simon, *Hybridity and translation*, in Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer, *Handbook of Translation Studies*, vol. 2, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011, p. 52.

genres are mixed, when a building combines the features of different architectural styles – something new results. This new thing is a hybrid.[5]

If it is still nowadays considered as contamination of the pure by some, Simon points out that hybridity is part of human culture since the beginning of civilisation, as individuals and groups have been travelling through countries and continents, merging with the local population, and carrying part of their cultural identity. Migratory movements belong to human history and have enriched civilisations as new cultures are been absorbed by the ancient one or transformed it. Simons underlines that "all cultures are interwoven, and there are aspects of hybridization in the cultural life of practically any identity or object that is put into circulation"[6].

In the artistic field, if hybridity often refers to the use of two different mediums like dance and theatre, or electronic devices and acting, it can also be applied to the artist himself. The artistic journey of Eugenio Barba from Italy to Denmark brought him to reflect on expressivity. The discovery of Asian performing arts brought him a new understanding of the evolution of European theatre through its various encounters with the East resulting in Eurasian theatre. The contemporary dancer Akram Khan, trained both in classical kathak and contemporary dance, born and raised in England in a Bangladeshi family, is a perfect example of the Hybrid artist.

> I am not British nor even Bangladeshi, my condition is that of a stranger everywhere. (…) I am searching for a voice that is the combination of my motherland roots and the culture of the place where I was born. It is about a third road, a new path in between the East and the West[7]

says Khan. In her interview with him, Annalisa Piccirillo points out that:

> Khan locates himself as a hybrid, transitional dancer and body, moving between the traditional (the past, the sacred and the spiritual) and the modern (the present, the human and the material), between an original physical language and the Western system.[8]

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[5] Sherry Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

[6] *Idem*, p. 52.

[7]Annalisa Piccirillo, *Hybrid Bodies in Transit: The 'Third Language' of Contemporary Kathak*, "Anglistica", vol. 12, n° 2, 2008, p. 30-32, retrieved from http://www.anglistica.unior.it/sites/anglistica/files/04%20Piccirillo.pdf [Consulted July 12 2016].

[8] *Ibidem*.

To explore the Otherness, research creation process offers infinite opportunities. For my thesis, encountering the Other took many paths: deepening my knowledge of Indian culture and arts, training non-Indian artists in kathakali dance, sharing Indian music theory with Western musicians, supervising the creation crew in search for homogeneity and harmony, interviewing artists, and finally sharing an adaptation of an Indian myth in French in front of a francophone audience in Quebec city. For the artists and the audience, discovering the Other, not to also say *the Otherness*, was experimented through the intercultural performance in which artists of different backgrounds and origins worked together but also who gathered multiple practices and cultural flavours.

Deepening my knowledge of kathakali and linking it with *Natyashastra* was very revealing. For example, space and rituals descriptions from *Natyashastra* reflected directly in kathakali practice. For example, the opening ritual of kathakali, the *Namaskaram*[9], the Salute, is transposed in the opening dance.

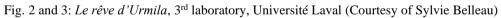Fig. 1 Le rêve d'Urmila, 3rd laboratory, Université Laval (Courtesy of Sylvie Belleau)

To stage *Le rêve d'Urmila*, we designed a square space with top lights evoking the traditional theatre. The performance started with the fade in of a spot on the ritual lamp standing at the front of the performing space, representing symbolically the lighting of fire. The show opened with a choreography based on the *Namaskaram* creating a ritualistic atmosphere. The whole process of teaching dance and music, sharing embodied

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[9] Namaskaram: in kathakali, a series of salutation movements done before starting the performance.

knowledge to the artistic team was another way to share the Otherness in me as the kathakali artist. Deepening my knowledge of dance, I felt more confortable to transpose kathakali elements to my creative work. As the dancer Prabal Gupta explains: "One can't push boundaries unless s/he is thoroughly aware of the tradition."[10]

For the creation of the text, I followed the model of kathakali plays where the liberation of the soul is the ultimate achievement of the character. In many ways, the work was transgressed and broke rules but always with respect to the form and spirit. The play was written as a triptych with a long narrative introduction setting the story of Urmila retold by the storyteller and commented by the choir. Then the play started with Urmila as a widow facing mixed emotions after the departure of her beloved. Women and goddesses embodying her different feelings visit Urmila in her sleep. As she woke up, she freed herself of the weight of sorrow by dancing to break the chains of her souvenirs and to celebrate being alive.

Fig. 2 and 3: *Le rêve d'Urmila*, 3rd laboratory, Université Laval (Courtesy of Sylvie Belleau)

The artists participating to the project were exposed to Otherness in three different ways: by learning a new art form and by their different backgrounds, the team being composed of individuals from different origins (Brazil, Central Africa, and Quebec) and from different art backgrounds (theatre, storytelling, contemporary dance, clown, martial art, jazz music, and classical singing). Most of them had a very limited knowledge of Indian arts and culture before starting the project.

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[10] Yogesh Pavar, *This artist performs Cleopatra in Kathakali - Artist Prabal Gupta speaks to Yogesh Pawar about his performance as the Shakespearean Queen of the Nile*, "DNA" Newspaper, 02 September, retrieved from https://www.dnaindia.com/just-before-monday/report-this-artist-performs-cleopatra-in-kathakali-2658021, consulted July 16 2019.

For the audience, *Le rêve d'Urmila* exposed them to a non-realistic form of theatre integrating dance, poetry, acting, music and singing through the usage of the four *Abhinaya* as described in *Natyashastra*. *Abhinaya* literary means, "leading the spectators towards" and allow them to experience *Bhava*, the emotions, and to taste *rasa,* the flavour of the play, which is linked to the aesthetic pleasure. The *abhinaya*, or mode of expressions, refers to *Āṅgika*, the body in movement; *Vācika*, to the speech; *Āhāria*, to the ornamentation (make up, costumes and props); and finally, *Sāttva*, to the emotion. Each *abhinaya* described in *Natyashastra*, has been linked with its equivalent in kathakali and transformed through the creative process using the two modes of representation, *Lokadharmi*, the realistic one, and *Natyadharmi*, the evocative and poetic one. Exploring the Otherness came also with discovering other forms of Indian dance and theatre such as *kutiyattam*, *chau* and *terakuttu*, as well as with discovering the impact of *Natyashastra* in all of them.

Le rêve d'Urmila may be understood also as an attempt to make the Otherness accessible to the spectators through the contact that the performance facilitated with a variety of cultural figures and with a wider than usual spectrum of presences of the Other. Though it is not kathakali, the play shares the flavour of the art form and Indian aesthetic. The Otherness is present through a variety of disciplines involved in the production: the various ways to perform the text (storytelling, singing, acting, mudras) and the variety of musical instruments (double bass, accordion, various percussions and drums and digitalised musical loops) used to blend Indian musical concepts to Western based music, not to forget the variety of accents that have sculpted the French language of the performance.

This reflection on Otherness gave a new dimension to my definition of hybridity. In the past years, the academic studies have been an occasion to deepen my knowledge of Otherness within me. It gave me a deeper understanding of the *Natyashastra*, enriched my understanding of kathakali and other Indian dance forms, enabling me to share this knowledge with my peers, putting them in touch with the Otherness through dance and allow them to experiment it within themselves. Interviewing Western kathakali artists carrying the Otherness within them helped me to precise my reflection on hybridity, which has been central to my project. My training in kathakali and my experience in India have forged me both as an artist and an individual. For most western artists, theatre is a play written by a dramaturge and performed more or less naturally by actors. From my perspective, as in kathakali, theatre blends acting, poetry, dance, music and singing, but also

the spirit of the *Other*. Taking its roots in classical Indian theatre, *Le Rêve d'Urmila* is not hybrid work only on a disciplinary level, but also by the diversity of the artists with a variety of cultural backgrounds and theatre experiences, thus bringing the project's hybridity to a superior level of complexity.

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