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## Farley Richmond: The Pioneer in Indian Theatre Studies.

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# Farley Richmond

*Arnab Banerji*

*Farley Richmond is the pioneering figure in Indian theatre scholarship in the United States. He has taught and headed departments at University of Michigan and SUNY Stony Brook and is presently teaching at the University of Georgia. He is trained in Kutiyattam, one of India's oldest classical theatre forms, and is a key figure in bringing it to world attention.*

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Following Sir William Jones's 1789 translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, the West came to regard Sanskrit theatre as the highest achievement in Indian drama—now long lost and beyond retrieval. Sylvan Levi in his *Le Theatre Indien* explicitly states that for him Indian theatre meant Sanskrit drama. He dismissed all other forms of performance in India as “‘unsophisticated,’ ‘indifferent to literary qualities,’ and offering ‘very little originality’” (Levi [1890] 1978: 4–5). Indian theatre historians adopted the same bias as Wilson, Levi, and another early historian of Indian theatre, Ernest Philip Horowitz. For example, R. K. Yajnik, in his book *The Indian Theatre: Its Origins and Its Later Developments under European Influence*, was primarily interested in theatre as literature and judged theatre solely on its literary merit: “Gradually, the dignity of drama as literature and as a fine art is being generally recognized” (Yajnik [1934] 1970: 238). Such a bias was largely prevalent in

the West up until the 1960s. This created a huge lacuna in not only theatre studies but also in the assessment of Asian cultures. The inauguration of area studies and the availability of funds for research in India and Asia were instrumental in changing this scenario. The pioneers of Asian theatre studies laid the initial groundwork and inspired generations of scholars to rigorously study Asian theatre. Inspired by one such pioneer, James R. Brandon (see Jortner and Foley 2011), Farley Richmond became a founding figure for Indian theatre scholarship in the United States. Although his initial foray into Indian theatre began with classical Sanskrit drama, his interest soon expanded to folk, traditional, and even urban contemporary theatre.

Farley Poe Richmond (Fig. 1) was born on 16 February 1938 in Ardmore, Oklahoma. His father was a civil engineer by training and

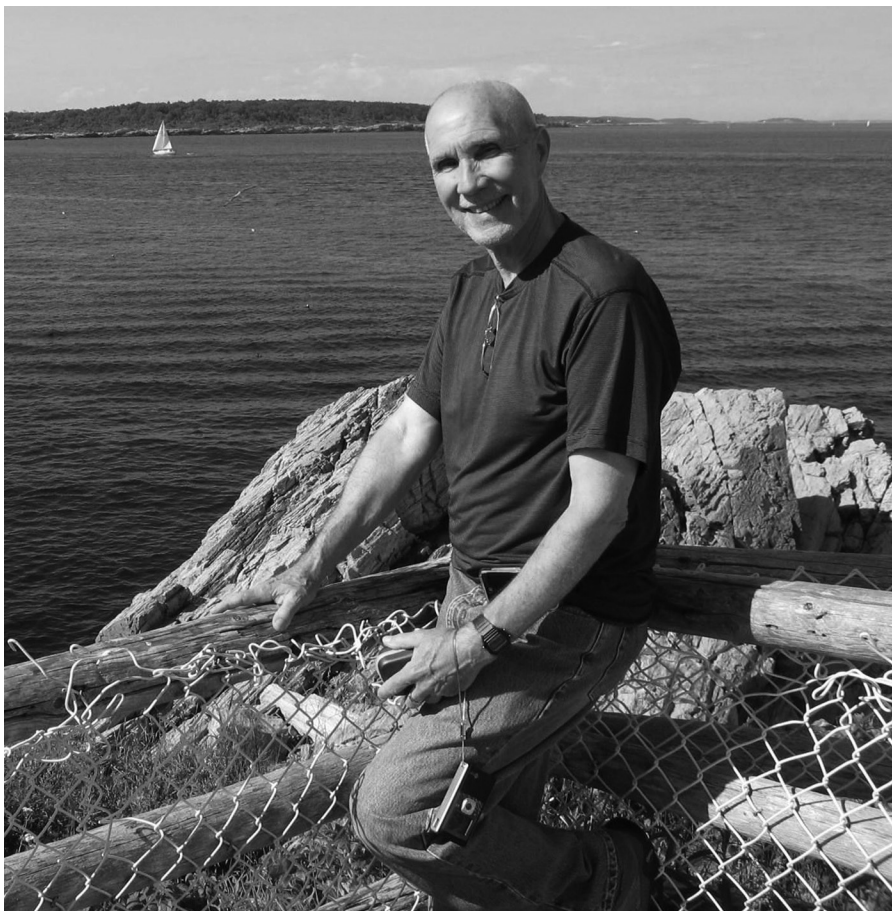


FIGURE 1. Farley Richmond. (Photo: Courtesy of Farley Richmond)

profession. During the Great Depression Richmond's father worked for the WPA, building bridges in southern Oklahoma. The young Farley moved with his family to wherever work took them before finally settling down in Liberal, Kansas, where Richmond encountered theatre for the first time in high school. Before long he was asked to direct one of his high school productions. Recalling that experience, Richmond writes, "In the early 1950s my high school drama coach in Liberal, Kansas, assigned me to direct the school play without having the slightest bit of education or training qualifying me to do so. I don't recall how it was received, but I suppose it served its purpose to appeal to some students who didn't have a creative outlet in sports, music, or art" (Richmond 2012).

After high school, Richmond attended the University of Oklahoma. He wanted to study theatre, but his civil engineer father advised against it and encouraged him to prepare for law school instead. Nonetheless, the young Richmond signed up for several theatre classes, and under the mentorship of Rupel Jones he graduated with a BFA in theatre in 1960. By now, he was seriously considering a professional career as a director and joined the MFA in directing program offered by the University of Oklahoma. Carl Cass motivated him to continue with his education and encouraged him to pursue a PhD in directing. In 1962 Farley joined the PhD program at Michigan State University to "sharpen those skills in the hope of turning what I had learned into a career. I still harbored a desire to become a professional director, never realizing that I was destined for a life in academics" (Richmond 2012).

During Richmond's second year in East Lansing, James Brandon joined the MSU faculty. Brandon had just returned from Japan after a six-year stint in Southeast Asia working for the American Foreign Service. During this trip he studied several Southeast Asian theatre forms and wanted to talk about them to other "farm boys" back home in the United States. Brandon's seminar exposed the students to a panorama of performance forms from Asia. Looking back on that class, Richmond notes,

His [Brandon's] first ever seminar on Asian theatre and drama attracted a large number of graduate students studying for their PhDs. Most of us taking the seminar were amazed and bewildered by the extraordinary range of genres of performance to which Jim exposed us. For some it was perhaps the first time they had been exposed to theatre performance outside the western world . . . Jim articulated a simple educational philosophy: Asian theatre and drama and Asian performance deserve to be placed on the same footing as western theatre at American institutions of higher education. (quoted in Jortner and Foley 2011: 345)

Bhasa, the supposed author of fourteen classical Sanskrit play texts, was of special appeal to Richmond, and he wrote an extended paper on this sage-playwright. Brandon became his major professor and advised Richmond to study Indian theatre for his dissertation instead of restoration drama. Brandon also influenced Richmond to apply for a Fulbright and a John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund (now the Asian Cultural Council) fellowship to travel to India.

Since language would have been a major barrier for the study of any regional theatre in India, Richmond decided to study the burgeoning English-language theatre scene in India. He received the Fulbright-Hays Student Research Fellowship in 1965 and set out for India. While there, Richmond was assigned to Ebrahim Alkazi (b. 1925), the RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art)-trained founding director of the National School of Drama in New Delhi, which he led from 1962 to 1977, and one of the foremost directors in the dynamic theatre scene of the period. Farley traveled extensively around the country during this trip, meeting directors and other fellow thespians in regional theatre centers such as Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, and New Delhi. Alongside his research of English-language theatre, Farley also directed and acted in New Delhi. During the trip Richmond met prominent Indian directors and actors such as Utpal Dutt, K. N. Panikker, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Alyque Padamsee, and Asif Currimbhoy. These stalwarts of the Indian stage introduced Richmond to the idiosyncrasy of each regional theatre center in India. Richmond was made aware of the vastness of India and its performance heritage during this trip.

Back in the United States after a year in India, Richmond finished his dissertation, titled *Contemporary English-Language Theatre in India: 1965*, based on the findings from his trip. He received his doctoral degree from Michigan State University in 1966 and joined the university as an assistant professor. Richmond wanted to visit India again and continue his study of its varied performance heritage. He wanted to learn more about classical theatre and the various folk and traditional performance genres that he had learned about during his first visit to the subcontinent. Between 1967 and 1969 he was awarded summer grants by the Michigan State University to study the Sanskrit language at the University of Michigan.

In 1969 he was awarded the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund award to go to India. Although Mumbai served as his base, Richmond traveled extensively in rural India, collecting data on folk and traditional performance forms.

This was my chance to experience a great deal of non-western theatre first hand. Owing to the encouragement of Dr. Suresh Awasthi,

then director of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and the generous support and encouragement of Dr. Theodore M. Vestal of the Educational Research Center in New Delhi, I traveled widely throughout India and saw many rural productions. Most notable for aspects of their performance techniques close to that practiced in ancient India is the *kutiyattam* of Kerala and to a somewhat lesser degree the *ankiya nat* of Assam, and *kuchipudi* of Andhra Pradesh. During that visit I also had the opportunity to see performances of *bhavai*, *yakshagana*, *bhagavada mela*, *kathakali*, *ottan tullul*, *tamasha*, *Ramlila*, *raslila*, *jatra*, *purulia chhau*, and *seraikella chhau*. (Richmond 2012)

This trip sealed Richmond's lifelong relationship with India and its theatre. A follow-up grant from Michigan State University took him back to the subcontinent in 1971 and another eighteen-month grant from MSU in 1974–1975 gave him further opportunities to study Indian performance, particularly *kutiyattam*. During this second stint he spent time in Kerala Kalamandalam to study *kutiyattam* performance techniques and hand gestures under Raman Cakyar, a senior teacher at the Cheruthuruthy training facility. Richmond learned the complicated gesture alphabet used in *kutiyattam*. However, he felt that he could never reach the level of artistic expertise required to become a performer-dancer. He chose not to have his *arangetram* (ritual ceremony marking the first public performance of a performer following an extensive period of training) and focused instead on extensively documenting *kutiyattam*.

This training period also led to some of his most significant publications on Sanskrit theatre, namely “Sanskrit Plays Abroad,” and “Suggestions for Directors of Sanskrit Plays,” published in *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*, which was edited by Rachel Van M. Baumer and James R. Brandon (Baumer and Brandon 1981). Other publications on *purulia chhau*, the Vhaisnava drama of Assam, religious aspects of Indian drama, and techniques of Sanskrit drama followed this research experience.

Richmond started teaching introductory classes on Indian theatre at Michigan State University in addition to directing Indian plays for an American audience. Richmond, it would seem, adhered to the Brandon model of “performance research and translation leading to actual production” (Jortner and Foley 2011). He used the material that he had documented in India to direct student productions of Indian plays at the MSU campus. Subsequent grants each year between 1976 and 1980 from the Kansas City Council and Michigan State University took him back to the subcontinent, where he continued his video archiving work on *kutiyattam* in particular and his study of Indian theatre forms from across the country in general.



The culmination of these research trips and arduous study of Indian theatre was the publication of *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* with Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli in 1990. Reflecting on the publication, Richmond recalls that at the time they conceived this project they knew this was going to be an uphill task. Zarrilli says, “Nothing like it existed at the time. That is why the attempt was made to provide a survey. Not in an encyclopedic way but attempting to make sense for English readers. I look back with great pride at what was attempted and what was achieved. Given the sources available, it was a creditable job” (Zarrilli 2012). The book was primarily meant to introduce Western students to Indian theatre for the first time. Although there were books on Indian theatre before this work, most of them presumed that readers would at least have a preliminary knowledge of India and its performance traditions. This book, on the other hand, did not have any such presumptions. Its publication is a major achievement in English and American scholarship on Indian theatre, but it certainly was not as expansive or did not cover as much ground as its title would lead one to think.

Richmond has also produced a significant number of audio-visual materials on not only Indian theatre but also other Asian theatre forms. Between 1979 and 1981, Richmond conceived and created documentary videos on various genres of Asian theatre such as kabuki, *nō*, *topeng kalarippayattu*, and *kutiyattam*. They were designed as lecture-demonstrations by American scholars of Asian theatre, such as A. C. Scott, Leonard Pronko, John Emigh, and Phillip Zarrilli, on actor training and acting techniques used in the art forms in which each of these scholars specialized. Richmond also published the CD-ROM *Kutiyattam: Sanskrit Theatre of India* in 2002, thus ushering the digital age into Asian theatre scholarship.

When he started studying *kutiyattam* in the 1970s, it was an endangered art form. Artists and teachers were worried that it would not survive into the next century. However, following *kutiyattam*’s 2001 recognition by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, the fate of the art form has changed for the better. Richmond’s studious study of the art form has also made its contribution toward the sustenance and increased popularity of *kutiyattam* in the West. During the initial years of his study, he felt that there was a need to visually document the art form. With this objective in mind, he started photographing his teacher Raman Cakyar as he demonstrated various *mudras* (hand gestures) from the *Hastalakshanadipika*, an anonymous and undated Sanskrit text on the *kutiyattam* actor’s vocabulary of hand gestures. With the advance in technology he had also started video recording Margi Madhu’s rendition of the *Hastalakshanadipika mudras*.

This was part of the *Hastalakshanadipika* (classical Indian manual on hand gestures) project. However, publishers refused to accommodate so many photographs into a publication, for fear of unusual publishing costs.

David Z. Saltz joined SUNY–Stony Brook in the early 1990s with an active interest in interactive technologies. Richmond was the department chair at the time. The two decided to collaborate, and Saltz suggested that the archive be digitized and published in a digital format. He also suggested that Richmond include a more general survey on *kutiyattam* without merely focusing on the gesture alphabet. Saltz programmed and supervised the technicalities of the project while Richmond supplied the archival material to be included in the CD-ROM. While the project was still under way, Richmond and Saltz both moved to the University of Georgia, where they eventually finished the CD-ROM and published it through the University of Michigan Press.

In her review of the work in the *Asian Theatre Journal*, Diane Daugherty writes, “This is the first presentation I have seen that would allow someone to begin to teach him or herself the gesture language that is essential to reading a *kutiyattam* (or *kathakali*) performance” (Daugherty 2004: 224). Richmond acknowledges that although the CD-ROM can boast of many firsts in the field of Asian theatre studies, it also had major shortcomings. The CD had problems running across different platforms. Daugherty tells us that the program did not fill up the entire screen, and video clips ran in an even tinier window (225). Richmond rues the fact that the material has not lived up to its potential. However, it was a significant first step toward the digital archiving of Asian theatre.

With the intention of widely sharing the material that he had recorded painstakingly over several decades of research trips to India, Richmond has designed a Wikispaces site exclusively on *kutiyattam* (Richmond 2009). Today, an interested researcher or scholar can easily visit this website, which includes a detailed section on the *Hastalakshanadipika*, and find valuable information on the art form. The *Hastalakshanadipika* section includes a translation of the Sanskrit text, filmed examples of performances, and an elaborate sequence of gesture alphabets and words. On being questioned about why he puts his life’s work on a platform like this instead of the more conventional ways of publishing, Richmond responded that he wants the interest in *kutiyattam* to grow and spread beyond its limited audience. The only way that he thinks this is possible is free and easy sharing of all the information that he has collected.

As an instructor, Richmond has been a pioneer at University of Georgia when it comes to using web-based teaching tools. He intro-



duced Wikispaces and the online lecturing application Wimba in his classes on Asian theatre and Indian films. These tools allow him to teach virtually and also create an archive of the delivered lectures. These can then be easily downloaded and used later for revisions or simply for archival purposes. This also enables students to learn together about a topic and share the results of their individual research on a common platform where the material is available for easy access. This is essential for a topic like Asian theatre, in which the students are being introduced, probably for the first time, to performance traditions and cultures outside of their own. In 1999 he assumed the role of director of the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Georgia. In 2003 the center was awarded a grant through the Freeman Foundation as part of the National Consortium for the Teaching of Asia program. This grant is designed to see that selected Georgia teachers have the opportunity to take a thirty-hour seminar on teaching East Asia. As part of the program Richmond also leads groups of teachers as they undertake summer tours to East Asia. The program has been instrumental in bringing Asia to Georgian classrooms and school teachers across the state eagerly participate in this initiative.

Directing was Richmond's first love, and he has used his extensive knowledge and study of Indian and other Asian art forms to create a unique directing vocabulary. His approach to directing combines Asian styles with a Western sensibility and creates productions that can bridge the East-West divide (Plate 3 and Fig. 2 and 3). Along with his research, scholarship, and teaching, his unique way of directing Asian plays has been one of his important contributions to Asian theatre studies as well.



FIGURE 2. A scene from *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad, 1973, Michigan State University, directed by Farley Richmond. (Photo: Courtesy of Farley Richmond)

The first of these was the 1971 adaptation of two *bhavai* (folk theatre of Rajasthan) plays, Asaita Thakar's *Vanio* and *Zanda Zulan*, and a *purulia chhau* dance drama for an outdoor performance at Michigan State.<sup>1</sup> Both the *bhavai* and *chhau* pieces relied heavily on live music. Richmond had brought back the *bhungal* (long thin copper pipes) from India, which was used for the performance. In addition, *dholaks* (traditional north Indian drums), bell metal cymbals, and conch shells were also used for the performance. For the *purulia chhau* piece, Richmond used masks made in rural Bengal. This show was titled *Village Plays of India*.

Under the advice and guidance of Raman Cakyar, his teacher at Kerala Kalamandalam, and L. S. Rajagopalan, the noted Tamil scholar of Kerala music and art, Richmond adapted and re-created, in 1976 at MSU, an English production of the *kutiyattam* play *Surpanakha* (The Amorous Demoness), act 2 of the Sanskrit classic *Ascharyachudamani* (The Wondrous Crest-Jewel) by Saktibhadra. Describing the experience of working on this production, Richmond writes,

This production of *Surpanakha* was unique for me. Never before had I attempted to re-create the authentic look and feel of a traditional



FIGURE 3. A scene in Sudraka's Sanskrit classic *The Little Clay Cart*, directed by Farley Richmond for Michigan State University, 1977. (Photo: Courtesy of Farley Richmond)

genre of performance using western actors and artisans. My entire team of student actors and designers were challenged to capture the essence of a *kutiyattam* production in Kerala without the benefit of a trained Indian artist as their guide. This work was a breakthrough for me as a director. By following as closely as possible the execution of the *kutiyattam*, I learned to value carefully crafting productions along lines found in the non-western world. It was to serve me well in future endeavors. (Richmond 2012)

In 1988 Richmond received a grant from the Asian Cultural Council that allowed him to invite two trained *kutiyattam* artists to be in residence at the SUNY campus. Kalamandalam Raman Cakyar and Kalamandalam Iswaran Unni traveled to the United States, and together they directed a production titled *Kutiyattam Ramayana* in 1989. This was a unique opportunity for both the artists and the student performers:

This was the first time that both artists had an opportunity to “audition” and “direct” foreign students speaking and reciting in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Malayalam, and English. It was also a unique experience for them in that the show was designed to be seen by the public in eight consecutive performances over a two-week period. This approach is ordinarily not taken in Kerala, where only one scene is usually performed only once and it may be weeks, months, or even years before it is ever repeated again. Some of the needed headdresses, costume pieces and ornaments, and a large copper *mizhavu* drum were transported to Stony Brook for the occasion. A trained artist in *kathakali* and *kutiyattam* makeup was employed from New York to assist in the preparations. This production was also unique in other ways. It was the first time that women were cast to play roles only performed by men in *kutiyattam*. (Richmond 2012)

Sri Cakyar cast a woman to play the role of Rama, and Iswaran Unni trained a woman to play the *mizhavu* drum. It is difficult to ascertain if these gender-blind castings in an American university campus had any impact on bettering the role of women in traditional performance. However, it is noteworthy that artists trained in the traditional style in Kerala were compelled to accommodate a different sociocultural environment. It is difficult to imagine that working with women did not have any impact on Kalamandalam Cakyar and Kalamandalam Unni. Apart from casting and performance, scene designer Richard Finkelstein recreated the look of a temple theatre and the lighting design resembled a temple performance, which is lit only by oil lamps.

At the University of Georgia, Richmond staged Sudraka's *The Little Clay Cart* in 2004 and again in 2010 (Fig. 4). Richmond had also



FIGURE 4. A scene from the Epic Actors' Workshop performance of Sudraka's *The Little Clay Cart*. Richmond directed the show with expatriate actors of Indian origin for the South India Festival (November 2010). The production fused Balinese and Indian performance traditions and costumes. (Photo: Courtesy of Farley Richmond)



FIGURE 5. A scene from Epic Actors' Workshop production of Tagore's *Bisarjan* (The Sacrifice) in summer 2011. Richmond fused Balinese, Indian, and New Orleans features. (Photo: Courtesy of Farley Richmond)

directed this play in 1977 at Michigan State University. However, the production at the University of Georgia was an aesthetic milestone for Richmond. The production featured Balinese masks, live music, costumes inspired by traditional Indian and Balinese design, and the use of *kutiyattam* hand gestures. This was a unique blend of various Asian traditions, which were brought together beautifully to create a performance piece that appealed to a Western audience while retaining its Asian essence, something he has continued to explore (Fig. 5).

Richmond continues to serve Asian theatre studies as a researcher and teacher. Asian theatre scholar and Richmond's mentor James Brandon recalls how Richmond started studying Indian theatre at a time when there were very little archival or financial resources available for such an endeavor (Brandon 2012). Unlike his predecessors in the Western academic world, Richmond studied contemporary performance in India and looked to learn about theatre forms that were hardly the matter of scholarly discourse. This was unusual at the time for a Western academic. Richmond's one-time collaborator and



fellow Indian theatre scholar Phillip Zarrilli credits him as one of the most important figures in the early phase of Indian theatre studies: “The important thing about Farley is the depth and the expanse of his knowledge about Indian theatre, not only traditional but also contemporary performance. This was important because otherwise we get a skewed picture of what constitutes Indian theatre” (Zarrilli 2012). During a career of nearly five decades, Richmond has made significant impacts on the lives of his graduate students. I Nyoman Sedana, one of Richmond’s first graduate students at the University of Georgia, writes: “Without the support and encouragement of Dr. Richmond, it would have been impossible for me to go through the rigors of a Ph.D. program” (Sedana, 2012). As a pioneering scholar, researcher, and teacher of Indian theatre in the American academy, Farley Richmond has had a significant impact on the field that he helped inaugurate. We hope that he continues to serve the field for many more years and that the scores of scholars that he has trained will carry his rich legacy forward.

#### NOTES

I would like to thank Farley Richmond, Phillip Zarrilli, I Nyoman Sedana, James R. Brandon, and Dipan Ray for their generous help for my research during this project.

1. *Bhavai*—Gujarati folk theatre, staged open-air in front of temples as a community ritual honoring the goddess Amba. *Chhau*—generic name for over a dozen different dance-drama styles from northern and western Orissa, southern Jharkhand, and western West Bengal. The Saraikela (Jharkhand) and Puruliya (West Bengal) varieties use masks for *chhau*, whereas they are not used in the Mayurbhanj (Orissa) style.

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