

## BOOK REVIEW

### Alice Boner On Kathakali

(ed.) G. Boner, L. Soni, J. Soni

Alice Boner Foundation,  
Varanasi, 1996

80 pages; Rs 120

What are the orientalist motivations when a Westerner in the early 1930s looks at Indian theatre? How did a sensitive art historian from Zürich react to the relatively little known (to the outside world, at that point of time) theatric form of Kathakali in Kerala at a time when an educated Indian (trained in the discipline of Western medicine) dismissed it as a "silly, primitive, pre-Shakespearean" kind of play? In the recently brought out book *Alice Boner on Kathakali* one can look for answers to these questions. It is a collection of essays, letters, diary extracts written between 1930 and 1935 by Alice Boner, the outstanding scholar of Indian art.

Alice Boner's essays articulate her fascination and deep appreciation for a hitherto unexplored performing art, rich in dramatic potential and epic grandeur. She recognizes the inherent worth of the art-form and its classical greatness, "which has not only the highest artistic qualifications, but which has a universal cosmic background" (p. 24). Her need to discover the mysterious energy inherent in this performing art is evident in the first sentence of G. Boner's foreword to the book: "How did the Swiss artist Alice Boner happen to discover the Kathakali drama in Kerala in the South on her first trip through India?" These lines, reflecting a typical Saidian indigenism, express a deep-felt wonder and an urge to articulate the 'other'

culture. However, Alice Boner's infinite fascination for the art-form is evident throughout the book, and her vivid account of actual performances that happened more than sixty years ago makes absorbing reading.

Among the eight articles written from 1930 to 1934 reproduced in the book, six are by Alice Boner herself, and the other two (including the foreword) by her sister Georgette Boner. Alice Boner's somewhat impressionistic first essay portrays Kerala as an Arcadian (as she calls it) stretch of land, like a fairy-tale book. However, more captivating to her is the Kathakali play itself, and what follows page after page is her appreciation for the art-form and her painstaking efforts to understand it. She graphically describes her first encounter with Kathakali and gives a scene-by-scene account of the performance. In the next article, titled 'Experience with Kathakali', she is more familiar with the intricacies of the art-form, having been initiated into the twenty-four root *mudras*, and the structure of words and sentences. There is a delightful description of her meeting with the poet Vallathol and Mukunda Raja at Kerala Kalamandalam. She marvels at the technique of Kathakali, by which "each actor has a command over a number of roles and the artists who have never met before can immediately act together" (p. 45), and ascribes it to the experience of several generations. However, in her observation that Kathakali offers only limited opportunity for the actor's "individual experience and individual awareness" (p. 46), she perhaps misses the basic



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point of the actor's freedom in many key roles and situations to creatively interpret character.

There are several descriptions of episodes from Kathakali plays. Among these, the account of Krishnan's (no doubt the great Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, who later dominated the Kathakali stage for several decades) depiction of Putana is evocative, and that of Kūnjun (Kunchu?) Kurup as the hunter in *Nalacharitam* is magnificent. Another perhaps no less important contribution is Georgette Boner's article, 'Theatrical Tradition and Elements of Style', in which she provides the theoretical framework to the art-form. The sketches by Alice Boner depict the mood of particular situations, for example, the scene from *Mahābhārata* ( p. 25) or that of Putana ( p. 54). The illustrations of hand-gestures and scenes from Kathakali are interesting; however, the photographs of *navarasas* by three different

actors seem to be more recent.

The book is important to the modern researcher as a faithful record of the training schedules, performance practices and even the costume patterns (as is evident from the illustrations) of Kathakali as it was enacted more than sixty years ago. Alice Boner's candid observation in her letter to Michael and Xenia Santch, that "this will still exist so long as it remains untouched by the western or, in fact, the modern civilisation, and it is therefore certainly good that it lives in this remote corner of the world" ( p. 61) is perhaps the most striking sentence in the book. Kathakali has had much attention and even overexposure to the outside world in recent times, and at least some of it has not been advantageous to the art; it is in this context that Alice Boner's prophetic observation quoted above seems valid.

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