

contrary, they have attempted to uncover several of them, and this will in turn facilitate comparison with other societies.

***Dancing the Self: Personhood and performance in the Pāṇḍav Līlā of Garhwal* by William S. Sax. New York: Oxford University Press 2002, ISBN 0-19-513815-1, pp. 224, 12 b&w plates, ink-drawings, bibl., index.**

Reviewed by Stuart Blackburn, London

Anyone who attempts a book about performance faces an uphill task, for writing about performance is a little like showing home movies to friends: what was so captivating when you first experienced it, is not so vivid when recycled to others. Ever since fieldworkers wrote up their descriptions of shamanic seances in Siberian cultures in the late nineteenth century, we have struggled to capture performances in print. But how can you reproduce the shimmering vitality of music and song, the dynamic motion of bodies and emotions on the cold page? Performance theory has always been bedevilled by this methodological problem. Some have tried to inject a sense of the live experience by using a special orthography for translations; some have used the “personal diary” approach. Some now include a CD of the event and/or a website link.

William Sax has not attempted any of these. Instead he has gritted his teeth and written a (more or less) conventional monograph, relying mainly on description, plus a good bit of translation and the occasional personal anecdote. But he too has attempted to close the gap between performance and its second-hand articulation, although not by any stylistic techniques. Rather he has done something more original and long overdue: he has tried to resolve the dichotomy by arguments within the book itself. And this is what distinguishes this book – an intellectual energy, which flows alongside the rich veins of ethnographic data. At times the energy is perhaps too free-flowing and runs away with itself; for one thing, the thesis of the book – that performance creates selves – is not entirely convincing. But when the writing is guided more closely by the author's deep knowledge of the performance tradition and its context, the observations ring true. Those insights are many and varied, so that, in the end, through this combination of explanatory ardour and local knowledge, the writing of the performance has been brought closer to the performance itself.

The performance at the centre of this book is the *pāṇḍav līlā*, a folk theatre tradition in the central Himalayas, in the Garhwal region in the newly-created Indian state of Uttaranchal. In this region of steep ravines and snowy peaks, villagers perform this drama of a war between two sets of brothers, best known from textual versions of the Mahabharata story (a useful summary of which is provided in a prologue); continuing for as many as nine days, it is the most prominent performance tradition of the region – indeed it is not found outside its borders. Sax knows this tradition and region well, and he takes the reader deep into its context, the landscape, the enormous expenditure of resources required to put on the plays, the rituals surrounding them, the inevitable conflicts and controversies, and also the personalities on display. Through him, and despite the gap between experience and page, we can feel something of the emotions, the pride, the joy as well as sorrow, that accompany the long nights of dancing and drumming, of recitation and possession. In one village, at the end of the 9-day event, which occurs only once in about thirty years in a village, the author comments that the people were sad. Asked why, they said, “We haven't performed a *līlā* for years. Just now we're all together... But who knows who will survive, and who will die before the next performance?” (p. 37). Similar anecdotes throughout the book bring the experience of performance to the reader.

We learn that the *pāṇḍav līlā* is locally perceived and enacted as a “sacrifice” (which fits the traditional role of the Rajput caste that sponsors the performance); in fact, it is understood as a kind of ancestor worship, since the heroes who die in the drama are thought to be the forefathers of the Rajputs in the region. We also enter into the experience of the drama through the many sections of translation and narrative summaries provided; these are readable, and sometimes striking, although the prose reads more smoothly than the verses (nothing new there). Key details are also highlighted: Bhima's club, for example, is made from a cherry tree used only for rituals and never for domestic purposes. The author brings out inconsistencies, as well: for instance, in one remote, northern valley, Karna, the anti-hero of the epic, rules as a divine king. And the tradition is not timeless: a special kind of maze (with saris draped on stakes), representing a battle formation used in a critical episode of the folk theatre, is not only a recent innovation, but one which uses printed scripts and is popular because of this association with literacy.

Almost as a sidelight, we also discover a good deal about the Mahabharata story, which by itself is worth the price of admission. Many of us who (like this reviewer) are “familiar” with the story will find out just how much we did not understand. Sax has not set out to study the relation between epic text and folk performance, but he has provided a wealth of detail for anyone interested in this topic: we can no longer doubt that there

really is no “the” Mahabharata, and yet, the dancers high in the Himalayas do not radically depart from the textual mainstream of the epic.

I found two kinds of weaknesses in this otherwise excellent book. First, there are presentational problems. Although the photos help the reader to understand this performance (one or two in colour would also have been nice), there is no map showing Garhwal in its larger context of South Asia and the Himalayas. The chapters are also uneven, in length and in their relation to the central argument about the construction of the self in performance; for instance, chapters 5 and 6 (both revisions of previously published essays) are interesting but do not really advance the author’s key arguments. This imbalance also throws up a few unnecessary repetitions, for example, the comment that in the far north people do not open the book of Karna without a goat sacrifice. Similarly, the concluding chapter is a wonderful essay (clever, provocative and humorous) on that “hall of mirrors” known as Other and Self; but it does not round off the book by driving home the arguments about performance and personhood.

A second misgiving is that whereas the author states his arguments forcefully, he does not always fully demonstrate them. The principal claims are set forth clearly in the fine Introduction. After a brisk summary of performance theory, drawing mainly on Austin and Tambiah, the author claims (with others) that performance not only reproduces social meanings but produces them as well. In order to grasp this power of performance, Sax argues, it is necessary to abandon the conventional emphasis on the truth of rituals and move toward a more fruitful emphasis on their efficacy. Too many analyses, in his view, are pole-axed on the false distinction between expressive (inner, psychological) and instrumental (external, pragmatic) acts; again, expressive acts, including ritual performances, are too often seen as merely reflective of the social world whereas Sax wants to show that they are actually generative of it.

Although I am entirely sympathetic with this position, I do not think he actually manages to demonstrate it. How in fact is this proposition demonstrable? A performance might, as Sax amply shows, be very closely tied to a region, to a caste’s image of itself, to the values of performers and audience. But how can we know that a performance creates social relations?

We are persuaded by the author’s reasoning that performance does not merely represent meaning but actually embodies it (e.g., the martial quality of the Pandavas’ weapons). And Sax makes a good case that performance of the *pāṇḍav līlā* operates on two levels, invoking cognitive realms while underpinning social relations. But underpinning or representing is different than “creating”.

Similar questions can be raised when Sax turns to the book’s central question: “How is the self constructed in and through performance?” (p. 6). He states that the book “will show how *pāṇḍav līlā* constructs a regional

self, a gendered self, a caste self, a generational self, and so on” (p. 15). Again, how can this be demonstrated? The author provides a good discussion of anthropological and Hindu discourses on the “self”, but problems of definition remain. “Self”, “identity” and “individual” are not properly distinguished; and another distinction, between a “small self” and a “big Self” in Hindu thought, is mentioned in the Introduction but never referred to again. And what is a “regional self”? Or a “generational self”? Pandora's box of psychology and selfhood has been opened but, one feels, not fully explored. Until we can describe “self” and “identity” more precisely, perhaps the most we can say about performance and society is what Geertz said about the cockfight in Bali many years ago: it is a story they tell themselves about themselves.

Whatever kind of self *pāṇḍav līlā* might construct, it is certainly not a Freudian one. In the book's big set-piece, the author refutes psychoanalytic interpretations of culture in favour of a socio-cultural one. A central episode in this Himalayan drama, and in the epic text, involves a parricide, which Robert Goldman has taken to be a (very rare) example of a positive Oedipal complex in Hindu literature. Against this interpretation, Sax juxtaposes his own knowledge of the full performance of *pāṇḍav līlā*, in which filial piety is constantly rewarded and its neglect punished; moreover, after the son kills his father, the latter is revived and the play ends in reconciliation. The author also draws on local child-rearing practices, making the telling observation that although filial piety is highly valued, in fact, “relations between fathers and sons [in Garhwal] are characterized by distance and formality” (p. 82).

Armed with this arsenal of evidence, Sax argues that the parricide episode does not reveal a repressed desire of a son to kill his father, but rather the opposite: the valorisation of filial piety (when a father's support and love is absent, boys feel a deep need for a senior male figure). The episode is also said to represent the importance of martial honour (challenged to fight by his father, the son must fight) and the continuity between male relatives (the ancestor worship at the base of the tradition). This full contextual interpretation is convincing, and yet not entirely satisfactory. It seems clear that filial piety, masculine cohesion and martial values shape local society, but we still want to know why parricide stands at the centre of the performance. Yes, there is reconciliation, but why should a son's killing of his father be so prominent?

Sax himself partially answers this question when he writes that examples of fratricide and parricide are important precisely because they “violate the values of filial piety and fraternal solidarity” (p. 90). In other words, we transgress what we value, and thereby underscore those ideals. This ambivalence, that we enact not only what we desire but also what we fear, might be one reason for the parricide episode; such an explanation, however, is lost if we completely dismiss the psychoanalytical position. If

we consider performance only in terms of its capacity to reproduce/produce the social world (relations, identities, religious concepts), we run the risk of stripping it of its ability to create imaginary worlds. Performance is, of course, a set of behaviours enacted within a material world, but it can also angle itself against that world or invent a parallel one.

Whatever its weaknesses, there is no doubt that this book should be read by anyone interested in performance or India. It is a serious meditation on a wide range of fundamental issues – individual and collective identity, the efficacy of ritual, the universality of the Oedipal complex, the agency of Hindu gods, text and performance, to name a few. One can also read this book as an attempt to resolve a series of dichotomies: normative concepts of self and lived experience; symbolic and functional approaches to ritual; culture and power; self and Other. Since most of these are versions of the mind-body split, or idealism versus materialism, their resolutions, as Sax shows us, lie in the embodied meanings of performance, which is as raw as it is regulated. I would also commend this book for its lucid prose, which strikes that rare balance between specialist language and common sense.

Finally, the book is a success in that it achieves a more far-reaching aim of reinvigorating performance theory. The basic tenets of the theory, worked out in the 1970s and 1980s, have by now largely passed into the mainstream of scholarship, but this success has bred a certain complacency; having won the war against the textualism, performance theory sleeps silently. Beating his drum high in the Himalayas, Sax has injected new intellectual vigour into the received wisdom about performance. He not only reworks old favourites (such as Austin and Tambiah) but also enhances the theory with readings outside the canon (such as Gramsci and Bourdieu). Sax has written a concise book, just under 200 (closely-printed) pages but has flung out many arguments, and in the end, his reach may exceed his grasp. Perhaps this is the curse of the Mahabharata, that sprawling epic about which it is confidently said, “If it's not in the Mahabharata it doesn't exist.” Sax's book has pushed performance theory out of its cosy niche and into current debates about gender, agency and life-history, and now it is for others to tell us what its limits may be.