Common aspects of scenography in outdoor ritual performances: an exploratory study

Aspectos comuns da cenografia em apresentações de rituais ao ar livre: um estudo exploratório

Aspectos comunes de la escenografía en los espectáculos rituales al aire libre: un estudio exploratorio

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Karalasingam Atputhan
Master in Performing Arts
Institution: Eastern University
Address: Vantharumoolai, Chenkalady, Sri Lanka
E-mail: atputhan1092@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This paper explores common aspects of scenography in outdoor Ritual performances. Rural, ceremonial, Rituals and festive events present the performance environments or atmospheres and engage people making a platform on which their views, experience, lifestyle, and beliefs system are shared. These rituals contain the origins of theatre and scenography as type of art. Mostly, these platforms are structured and built on religious, spiritual, and devotional grounds. It is the composition of space, text, research, performance, performers, spectators (devotee) sound, lighting, and colour and composition. People of Batticaloa, in general, are involved themselves creating rituals, fairs, and festivals. This study focuses on the Maariyamman ritual in Kalumunthanvely, Batticaloa district to examine scenography aspects of ritual and investigate the practice, creation and presentation. This study analyzes how participants organize scenery in nature, how scenography aspects function in the Maariyamman ritual, and how the materials are identified and executed in outdoor performance. The study examines the space, text, colour, composition, performers, and spectators. Moreover, the study explores the disclosure of its character type, determination of the space of action. Further, the study ensures the understanding of scenography aspects and the process of the ritual performance. The study uses both primary and secondary data to understand common aspects of the scenography in ritual performance. In this study i) the researcher’s observation during the rituals and ii) interviews with participants and devotees are primary tools of data collection. And secondary data are obtained from the source materials in libraries, online, which include both published and unpublished works that are related to scenography and rituals.

Keywords: scenography aspects, ritual performance, practice, space, participants, structure, Maariyamman ritual.
RESUMO
Este artigo explora aspectos comuns da cenografia em performances de rituais ao ar livre. Eventos rurais, ceremoniais, rituais e festivos apresentam ambientes ou atmosferas de performance e envolvem as pessoas criando uma plataforma na qual seus pontos de vista, experiências, estilo de vida e sistema de crenças são compartilhados. Esses rituais contêm as origens do teatro e da cenografia como tipo de arte. Na maioria das vezes, essas plataformas são estruturadas e construídas em bases religiosas, espirituais e devocionais. É a composição de espaço, texto, pesquisa, desempenho, artistas, espectadores (devotos), som, iluminação, cor e composição. O povo de Batticaloa, em geral, está envolvido na criação de rituais, feiras e festivais. Este estudo enfoca o ritual Maariyamman em Kalumunthanvely, distrito de Batticaloa, para examinar os aspectos cenográficos do ritual e investigar a prática, a criação e a apresentação. Este estudo analisa como os participantes organizam o cenário na natureza, como os aspectos da cenografia funcionam no ritual Maariyamman e como os materiais são identificados e executados na performance ao ar livre. O estudo examina o espaço, o texto, a cor, a composição, os artistas e os espectadores. Além disso, o estudo explora a revelação de seu tipo de personagem e a determinação do espaço de ação. Além disso, o estudo garante a compreensão dos aspectos cenográficos e do processo da performance ritual. O estudo usa dados primários e secundários para entender os aspectos comuns da cenografia na performance ritual. Neste estudo, i) a observação do pesquisador durante os rituais e ii) entrevistas com participantes e devotos são as principais ferramentas de coleta de dados. E os dados secundários são obtidos a partir dos materiais de origem em bibliotecas e on-line, que incluem trabalhos publicados e não publicados relacionados à cenografia e aos rituais.

Palavras-chave: aspectos cenográficos, performance ritual, prática, espaço, participantes, estrutura, ritual Maariyamman.

RESUMEN
Este artículo explora los aspectos comunes de la escenografía en las representaciones rituales al aire libre. Los eventos rurales, ceremoniales, rituales y festivos presentan los entornos o atmósferas de las representaciones y atraen a la gente creando una plataforma en la que se comparten sus puntos de vista, experiencias, estilo de vida y sistema de creencias. Estos rituales contienen los orígenes del teatro y la escenografía como tipo de arte. En su mayoría, estas plataformas se estructuran y construyen sobre bases religiosas, espirituales y devocionales. Se trata de la composición de espacio, texto, investigación, actuación, intérpretes, espectadores (devotos) sonido, iluminación y color y composición. Los habitantes de Batticaloa, en general, se implican en la creación de rituales, ferias y festivales. Este estudio se centra en el ritual Maariyamman de Kalumunthanvely, en el distrito de Batticaloa, para examinar los aspectos escenográficos del ritual e investigar su práctica, creación y presentación. Este estudio analiza cómo los participantes organizan la escenografía en la naturaleza, cómo funcionan los aspectos escenográficos en el ritual Maariyamman y cómo se identifican y ejecutan los materiales en la representación al aire libre. El estudio examina el espacio, el texto, el color, la composición, los intérpretes y los espectadores. Además, el estudio explora la revelación de su tipo de carácter, la determinación del espacio de acción. Además, el estudio garantiza la comprensión de los aspectos escenográficos y el proceso de la representación ritual. El estudio utiliza datos primarios y secundarios para comprender aspectos comunes de la escenografía en la representación ritual. En este estudio i) la observación del investigador durante los rituales y ii) las entrevistas con participantes y devotos son las herramientas primarias de recogida de datos. Los datos secundarios se han obtenido de fuentes bibliográficas y en línea, que incluyen trabajos publicados e inéditos relacionados con la escenografía y los rituales.
INTRODUCTION

Outdoor performances in Maariyamman ritual are probably not meant for entertainment, but seemingly emphasized for devotion. It is performed in temple courtyard, streets and farm fields. These performances are the combination of rituals. These performances are purely connected to Mariyamman’s stories. The aim of this research is to study common aspects of the scenography in outdoor performance of Maariyamman ritual. It is presented the examination of common scenographic aspects of these performances. The reason to present the common scenographic aspects separately is to avoid repetition. The first and foremost apparent interrogation that rises is: if scenography is observed in outdoor theatrical spaces using visual presence, how is it thinkable to ignore uninvited visuals that are as part of the public space? The second question that arises is: how do they organize temple courtyards and farm fields to present these performances? And, the final question is: how does performance space demonstrate location for a performance in outdoor theatrical performances?

Ritual is a term used to describe an action or a series of action that are fixed and symbolically loaded according to a given context with particular community (Bernd Brabec de mori, 2014, p.3). In general, the Sri Lankans are associated themselves with making rituals and fairs as a platform that share the experience of their life and belief system. These platforms are created on the religious, spiritual and devotional ground wherein people involve themselves in the related rituals, festivals, and fairs through enactments. These enactments find the space/context in achieving a communication of shared and lived experience. Space is vital ingredient of scenography and dramaturgy (Pamela Howard, 2002, p.9).

The function of a shared group ritual is to allow an individual to participate fully in the social world by affiliating with fellow group members, reaffirming one’s position in the group, and sharing in important social conventions and cultural knowledge (Boldykov.Z, Zhaxylykova.M, Khalykov.k, 2019, p.521).
2 SCENOGRAPHY

The term Scenography is always referred to the performance of the space and design that include all the visual elements of theatre: sets, lights, props, performance space, etc. It emphasizes on the actor’s physical behavior in the space and their eventual interactions with these elements. Finally, it accentuates the experience of the audience through these interactions by guiding the viewers to ‘see’ the performance in order to achieve the desired experience. In scenography, a story is written visually on the performance space, it organizes and manages the visual elements for suitable interactions with the actors while, the scenographer sculpts the space and passionately makes it alive during the performance. In a nutshell, Scenography is the visual lexicon of the space. Scenography is the seamless synthesis of space, text, research art, action, director and spectator that contribute to an original creation (Joslin McKinney, Philip, 2017, p.3). The concept of scenography is widely used in practical performance across the world.

Scenography with all the expressions of visual arts remains functional. It provides environment for the actors to live in an apt space suitable for their character and interact with the spatial objects during the show. It balances the space, creates visual rhythm, blends with the performance with harmony, projects the characters at the time of need, brings the desired object into focus, behaves as complementary character, creates area of interest, and finally orient the viewers for the performance experience by bringing visual movements into the production during the show. Its functionality is also felt through its relative proportion with the actors, space and audience. Unlike any other visual arts: realistic, non-realistic, re-presentational, non-representational or abstract, visual design in theatre cannot exist independently without a fair consideration of text, space and actors irrespective of its genre. Therefore, before creating any visual order on the space, the scenographers plunder the text following the interpretation of the director to realize its practicality and functional behavior on the space apart from the concept and idea. They workout the entry and exit of the actors in various locals as provided in the text and identify inter relationships of different spatial units for different scenes.

They proportionately distribute the space to accelerate the action thus bringing coherency between the design elements and the performers. They also work on spatial energy, generated by different aspects of design- sets, props, masks, costumes, lights, etc. to highlight the actors who use them; spatial energy every time depends upon the functionality and intensity of the visual units. Apart from these technicalities, the
scenographers bring psychological atmosphere and irony into the work to break the monotony of the compositions and twist the actions and interpretations.

3 WHAT IS MAARIYAMMAN RITUAL?

Maariyamman ritual is to pray Maariyamman; she is worshiped as a goddess in many areas in Batticaloa district. This Mariyamman ritual is celebrated at the Maariyamman’s temples in June. The village community shows a significant role in organizing rituals and people from other villages also participate in the rituals. This annual ritual is performed with the belief that these rituals are protecting people from the mishap. Its protective function is twofold: it keeps the local community secure from intruding enemies, and free of disease and illness. The area they are invoked to protect indicates the local nature of their power. The above ritual took place at the Muttumaariyamman temple, which protects the residents of Kalumunthanvely, in Batticaloa district, who live within half a square mile radius of the temple.

The ritual which is performed day and night for five days, sacred installation is organized by the local community sponsors for the ritual which has a long and unique way of process in worshiping goddess Maariyamman. A specific organization community is selected for organizing the ritual. They collect the funds from particular village. Before, the ritual is initiated temple organization committee arrange the meeting with the head of the priest and village community for organizing the ritual. Further, ritual meeting decisions are announced to the public. After the announcement, ritual processes gradually begin. First, the community gathers in the temple yard to clean the temple yard and village. This process is held for three or four days continuously. After some days, fetching banana (vaalaippalam varuthal) is the most important event in this ritual. Before one day evening of this event, some laundry workers announce vocally in every street of the village about this event.

The five-day ritual has different activities they are: idol pooja (kumpam vaithal); wreathe ritual (thoraana sadanku); climbing the pole (thavanilai sadanku); procession (Urvalam varuthal); bringing wood (thee kaddai elutharulal); working on fire (thee mithithal); bathing into river (theeththamadal); and auctioning offering things (Elavitpanai) by the community.

The ritual includes the temple yard, ritual performance, improvisation, exhibition, decoration which are based on the Mariyamman story and others. To study scenography
in Maariyamman ritual, the ritual is divided into five parts: ritual; performing spaces of ritual within open fields; procession; installation; and decoration of the radius of the temple. Maariyamman ritual is performed in four types of spaces: in the temple yard; in village streets; in front of every villager’s gate of the house; and at the bank of the river. These five types of Maariyamman performances are different in many ways. To make the distinction between these five types of performances, to make it clear for the reader, the five types of outdoor theatrical performances are referred to with five names.

4 COMMON ASPECTS OF SCENOGRAPHY

4.1 SPACE

Pamela Howard addresses “what is scenography” in his book. Understanding scenography starts with understanding the potential of the empty performance space. A space is dead until the performers inhabited space is shaped and altered by the actors as the performers. Scenography is used to shape a particular spatial relationship, a certain kind of encounter between audience and performance.

The outdoor Maariyamman ritual performances take the devotees, performers and spectators to outdoors such as temple courtyards, paddy fields and streets. The performance spaces for this outdoors performance are temporarily created. With the installations done by the community, these spaces represent just a ritual performance space, and its function is to accompany large number of crowded. It stimulates memories of performers, devotees and spectators and strongly associated to the installation art in these circumstances.

It arises that the visuals of a performance space at the Maariyamman ritual, as a complete image, activates emotions of the performers, the spectators and the devotees. These outdoor spaces demonstrate purely religious significance. Most of these performance spaces are not designed for amusement, and these performances spaces are organized with divine material to bring the divine atmosphere. For instance, wreathe ritual (thoraana sadanku) and procession (Urvalam varuthal) which offers divine atmospheres. Diviners, priests, some of the devotees and instrumentalist visit the outdoor spaces to fulfill the vows or to give a boon to village people from the respective goddess which are central to the performance.
Some of the outdoor performances of *Maariyamman* ritual demand devotees to move one place to another to watch the performance. For instance, bringing wood (*theek kaddai elutharulal*) from one place to the temple, between in these two places, performers’ action happen various places. In this way, three are various outdoor theatrical spaces of Maariyamman are intended to have devotional engagement.

### 4.2 TEXT

*Maariyamman* ritual text is not similar as it appears in stage-based performance, it does not give much opportunity for humor. When compare to stage-based theatre, ritual texts allows for many improvisations. It is possible to think that the ritual text is strictly attached to devotion in the outdoor performances. The text also used to communicate visual information such as fictional location and props.

*Maariyamman* ritual is to be devotional celebration of the local community. The stage space of *Mariyamman* ritual uses the scenic elements that demonstrate a locale. As there are realistic and non-realistic sceneries are used in the performance of outdoor *Maariyamman* ritual performance, it is necessary to observe how the locale is communicated with the text. The text also plays significant role to engage priests, devotees, performers and spectators for long duration.

In general, Maariyamman ritual text is divided into some categories; they are based on stories of Goddess Maari. *Maariyamman* ritual text is combined with poetry, songs and dialogues, which are added with lot of devotion. When it is analyzed the performance text of outdoor theatre, some of the ritual text seemingly fits in the atmosphere in the outdoor. Fictional locations of these performances are symbolically reflects in these atmosphere. Example for the performances that fit fictional location in the environments of the outdoors are *thorana sadanku* and *theekādi eruntharulal pannal*.

### 4.3 COLOUR AND COMPOSITION

Maariyamman ritual uses the costumes and make-up which are not same as it is visible in stage based performances. The performers use make-up, decorated props, and costumes. Costumes, props and makeup communicate character directly, as well as visually lure the devotees. All the material in these performance spaces, including costumes, make-up, props and sacred material have an instant impact on devotees and
spectators. In this performance, many signs can produce a sense of the character of the performance. The most important dramaturgic aspects are spectators’ preconceived knowledge of the characters, scene, costume, make-up and props. It suggests that the preconceived knowledge drive devotees to interpret the performance.

Along with installations of outdoor theatre, performers’ costumes and props assist as scenery for outdoor ritual performance. As both performers and devotees are on the same ground in most of the outdoor performances,

4.4 LIGHTING

Outdoor Maariyamman ritual performances are performed during daylight and electrical light. During this time, the weather shade probably gives pleasant experience for the devotees and spectators. Long shadows of the actors and priests, trees decorated materials are the part of the visuals: outdoor Maariyamman’s procession gives pleasant experience for most of the devotees because it is performed between 5 p.m. to 8.30 pm. The outdoor performances create theatrical effects because presence of daylight and electrical light suggest to experiences the location as an environment which is open to regular life.

4.5 SPECTATOR

In Maariyamman ritual, outdoor performances invite wider range of devotees as participants/spectators. The outdoor theatrical performances held every day with a procession from various places to the temple. From there, they go the performance space as a procession. Here, most of the characters: Maariyamman, kaaththan, kaali, nagakanni characters, both protagonists and antagonists, follow the procession together. And, some of the devotees follow the procession from the temple to performance space to witness the performance. For all outdoor theatrical performances, temple committee announces date, time and place of the performances in microphones. The devotional songs are played until the performance is commenced.

Performers express great physical and vocal strength to charge the space. They also demonstrate their physical strength in taking lengthy moves in the performance space. For instance, performer takes such kind of lengthy moves around the village in the
Maariyamman ritual. Performers and priests’ body movements and gestures enhance the dramatic essence of the performance.

In Maariyamman ritual, around all village residents are as participants. These participants play various roles in various situations. For instance, performers, devotees and spectators they have most important role in this Maariyamman ritual process. Thus, in this study, the participants are referred as performers, devotees and spectators, who worship indoor and outdoor in the ritual.

5 CONCLUSION

Theatre artists need to invite new theatre concepts and recognize it through their indigenous roots. Theatre practitioners need to notice the scenography elements in Sri lankan Tamils’ rituals. In conclusion, Maariyamman ritual has aspects of scenography in its all process. Scenography’s aspects has relationship with religion, ritual and other forms of representation created by human beings and common aspects of scenography can be signed in different Srilankan tamil rituals.
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