

Prahlada Nataka

A Window on a Syncretic Performative Tradition

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In Orissa, largely due to historical reasons, there is a remarkable continuity between classical, folk and tribal art-forms. It was one of the last regions to come under British rule. This led to the late introduction of English education and other modernising influences and subsequently, in a large measure, to Orissa's economic and industrial backwardness when independence came in 1947. But this also had the beneficial effect of allowing the various rich forms of folk-art and folk-culture to survive in their original, and relatively pure, forms. Orissa is also an almost open ethnographic museum with a large variety of tribal communities at various stages of acculturation and primitiveness. These communities have been endowed with rich autonomous cultures which have acted and reacted on the classical and folk art-forms of the neighbouring non-tribal world. The result is a rare evidence of classical-folk-tribal continuum which is hardly seen in such profusion and intensity elsewhere in the country. This is true of Orissi as a classical dance, of the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj, of the Pata painting originating from the Jagannath temple, of the Sahi Yatra of Puri and of a number other plastic, performing and literary traditions. *Prahlada Nataka*, a play composed around 1860 in Oriya and attributed to Raja Ramakrishna Deva Chhotray of Jalantara, amply reveals this rich continuum in its literary and performative aspects.

Jalantara is now a part of Andhra Pradesh. The former palace of the king of Jalantara lies in ruins but there are about thirty-five distinct amateur, village-theatre companies in the Ganjam district of Orissa adjoining Andhra Pradesh who perform the play. How this performing tradition traversed from the court to the villages and the present form of the play took shape should be a matter for elaborate and detailed study. In fact, the performance deserves to be placed in the larger context of the literary, ritual-religious and performative traditions of Eastern India and more particularly, Orissa.

The Play: its Authorship & Composition

The story narrates the emergence of Narasimha (the man-lion *avatar* of Vishnu), from a stone pillar of the royal court to mangle and kill Hiranyakashipu, the demon-king. Tortured by his father Hiranyakashipu, who demands that he abandon uttering even the name of Hari or God, Prahlada does not relent and insists, instead, that Hari is present in all objects in the Universe, animate or inanimate. At this, the demon-king points to the stone pillar of the court and asks Prahlada whether Vishnu or Hari is present in it. When Prahlada's reply is a firm affirmative, he kicks the pillar in anger at which point Narasimha emerges from inside it, tears Hiranyakashipu apart and blesses Prahlada. Narasimha is one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu.

The play has been edited by the Orissa Cultural Affairs Department in 1973 (Oriya Manuscript No. 46 in the Orissa Museum). The manuscript travelled from the

Madras Oriental Manuscript Library (No. 1984) to the Provincial Museum located in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack on 3rd August 1938 and later to the State Museum at Bhubaneswar. The copy of the manuscript appears to have been prepared in 1921-22.

While the play is attributed to Ramakrishna Deva Chhotray of Jalantara, it is possible that Gourhari Parichha, the well-known poet who was a contemporary of the king and a friend of the Jalantara court, composed part or maybe even a bulk of the play. It is said that Gourhari had dedicated this play to the king of Jalantara and that during his lifetime the play had not been well publicised or staged. After Gourhari's death, the king is supposed to have claimed credit for its authorship and sent copies in his own name to the different royal courts of Ganjam. It is a historical fact that the kings in Ganjam district were not only lovers of art, literature, music and dance but also personally practised these arts. More particularly, they actively encouraged the performing arts. The dedication of literary works to kings or Zamindars, in return for patronage received, was a common enough practice in 19th century feudal Orissa.

A comparison of *Prahlada Nataka* with other poetic works of Gourhari Parichha for internal evidences of similarity of idiom, emotive flavour, style and language etc., is yet to be made but even a broad analysis shows that *Prahlada Nataka* could be a syncretic work of more than one author including Gourhari, King Ramakrishna and other minor authors. The play incorporates diverse styles and idioms and also reveals a deep knowledge and understanding of Sanskrit poetics and dramaturgy, Puranic lore, astrology, politics, economics, medicine, traditional religion and philosophy and above all of classical music. Gourhari's other compositions like *Vastrapaharana (The Stealing of the Garments)*, *Gita Govinda* and the numerous *chaupadi-s* (included in *Gourhari Granthabali*, or *The Collected Works of Gourhari* edited by Aparna Panda and published in 1926) reveal a vein of lyricism and romanticism so it is difficult to regard him as the author of many of the terse, academic and dry pages of the play.

The *Ganjam District Manual* refers to the founding of the small kingdom of Jalantara in South Orissa by the Sun-king Gajapati Purushottama Deva (1466—1497) on his victorious return from Kanchi. He is supposed to have defeated the Chief of Savaras (a primitive tribe who inhabit the Ganjam hill tracts even to this day), founded the kingdom of Jalantara and installed his son Govind Chhotray Deva on the throne as the first ruler. Historical evidences prove this and also place Ramakrishna Deva Chhotray's reign between 1857 to 1905. At the end of his rule, the Estate was sold to the Raja of Vizinagram by the British Government for arrears of *peishkush* (royal dues).

Prahlada Nataka is a very unusual play. Unusual in its combination of Oriya and Sanskrit *shlokas-s*, of colloquial, light and occasionally boisterous dramatic statements with songs based on classical *raga-s* and well-defined *tala-s*, of using both the *Sutradhara* in the pattern of Sanskrit plays and a *Gahaka* as in traditional folk-opera. It also incorporates certain contemporaneous Oriya poetic conventions, and traditions of both *Danda nata* of Ganjam and *Desia nata* of Koraput districts. Like the former, it uses techniques of trance, visitation, ritual worship of images, exorcism and masks, reminding one of the Tantric *Shakti* cult and the performances associated with it. On the other hand, like *Desia nata*, it also uses lyrical folk tunes and stories. Some scholars also point to the influence of *Yakshagana* literature.

The play contains as many as forty-two Sanskrit *shloka*-s and eleven Oriya *shloka*-s or invocations. There are 126 songs which use thirty-five *raga*-s¹ and six *tala*-s². There are twenty male and five female characters in the play. The *Sutradhara* appears on several occasions in the play. This and the traditional *Nandipath* and the *Vaitalik* musical interlude are elements of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition even though it would be wrong to categorise it as a full-fledged play in that tradition. There is no systematic emphasis on presentation of the different *rasa*-s as in Sanskrit plays. The pattern of dialogues, the movement of the main theme, the mechanism of presentation, the sustaining spirit of the main ideas, the categorisation of Acts and Scenes, the types of *nayaka*-s and *nayika*-s and the general sense of conventional propriety and decorum which are the hallmarks of the traditional Sanskrit play cannot be discerned in *Prahlada Nataka*.

The role of the *Gahaka* in the play is indeed very interesting. He announces dramatic incidents, makes possible the appropriate pace of the play's development and is, in fact, the prime director of this movement. He determines the entry of characters to the stage, the events and the modulation of emotive sequences and serves as the vital lifeline between the characters and the audience.

The presentation and the management of the stage have certain special characteristics. Speaking of dramatic performances in rural India, J.C. Mathur commented :

"Places of performance are, therefore, so arranged as to reveal the beauty and colour of the costume and the intricacies of the dances to everybody and to enable the audience to share intimately the pleasures of poetry, the rhythm and melody of the songs While in the Ramalila large audiences sit on both sides of the performing arena and stage, the spectators of the *Prahlada Nataka* of Ganjam district of Orissa, occupy the space between the two parties of performers (*Drama in Rural India*, page 13)." This seems to be based upon wrong premises. From this description, it would appear that he is referring to the performance of *Vadi pala* or *Jatra* where the rival performers face each other.

The Stage & Presentation

In *Prahlada Nataka*, the major requirement is a medium-sized, flat wooden stage, with steps or stairs forming an essential part and leading on to it. The flat portion just above the highest stair is used as the throne for the demon-king Hiranyakashipu. The audience can, therefore, sit mostly in front of this wooden platform and on the three sides. The ground immediately in front of the last step is the second element of the stage and is used for a number of scenes in the play. The audience naturally has to sit a little distance away in keeping with the requirements of proper viewing since some of the events take place at a considerable height and at different levels on the wooden staircase. The stage and presentation arrangements normally have the following features :

1. In the final act, a pillar is erected opposite the main stage (open area in front of the wooden stairs) and it is from this pillar that Narasimha, the man-lion *avatar* of Vishnu emerges.
2. Narasimha is brought from the green room to the pillar in such

a manner that the audience cannot see him. He is kept hidden behind the pillar until the king rushes down the stairs in a rage and kicks or hits the pillar.

3. As the Narasimha mask is very huge, the actor has to wear a fairly massive turban to which the mask can be securely fitted.
4. The mask of Narasimha is not an ordinary decorative mask. It is treated as sacred and to ensure that it commands proper respect from the wearer and audience, it is ritually worshipped both at the beginning of the performance in the green-room and throughout the year in a nearby temple.
5. Formerly, the scene where Narasimha tears away the demon-king until his entrails emerge was mimetically presented on the stage. Legend has it that one such presentation led to the real killing of Hiranyakashipu by Narasimha who was 'possessed' beyond control. Since then a different practice is followed. In the final act, Hiranyakashipu now flees to the green-room and Narasimha chases him with a wild roar to the deafening applause of the audience. In some performances, Narasimha is also restrained by several persons who pull at a rope tied to his waist.
6. The orchestra, the *Gahaka*, the *Sutradhara* and their helpers take their place on one side of the stage and the performers enter from the opposite side through a pathway carved out among the audience.
7. Besides the *Gahaka* and the *Sutradhara*, there are two more lead singers and three to four subsidiary singers participating in the enactment.
8. Ritual purity is imposed on the performers, extending to certain restrictions on food and dress. In one village, the author was told that convention demands abstaining from sex (at least a day prior to the performance), from eating meat and from dressing gaudily outside the area of the stage.

The acting area thus comprises three distinct parts: a wooden stage with a large flight of stairs serving as the throne and the court of the king with ministers, commanders and other courtiers sitting in descending order of importance on the stairs; the open flat ground just in front; and a pillar facing the main stage. This gives the entire presentation a panoramic and spectacular appearance and helps in creating a sense of dramatic realism.

Sahitya Darpana, the celebrated text on aesthetics, lays down the parameters of the different *rasa*-s. In fact, the soul of Sanskrit drama was *rasa*—*Rasashrayam Natyam* (the play rests on the *rasa*-s). In *Prahlada Nataka*, four *rasa*-s predominate: *Hasya*, *Karuna*, *Bhaya* and *Raudra*.

Raudra rasa characterises the speeches of Hiranyakashipu when he prides himself on his own powers as the conqueror of the three worlds, when he



Hiranyakashipu, Prahlada and Queen Lilavati. (Courtesy Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi).

admonishes his son Prahlada to give up uttering the name of Hari, when he orders his ministers and others to penalise Prahlada and when Narasimha emerges from the stone pillar. The element of fright is evident on the face of Hiranyakashipu when Narasimha finally emerges from the pillar and advances menacingly towards him. The face, which was bursting with bravado and grandeur minutes ago, is now deadly pale, and stricken with panic. *Karuna rasa* is embodied in the utterances of the queen Lilavati, wife of the demon-king. There are strong elements of humour and hilarity in the dialogue between the gatekeeper at Hiranyakashipu's palace and the sage Narada, between the *Dasi* and the *Dhaima*, in the dress and dialogue of *kela-keluni*, Shukracharya and Chandamarka. Besides these four dominant *rasa*-s, there are also traces of *Shringara rasa* (in the dialogue between the king and the queen) and *Vatsalya* (in the queen's concern for her son Prahlada) at different points in the play.

Viswanath Kaviraj's *Sahitya Darpana* defines not only the various *rasa*-s on which Sanskrit drama depended but also the types of *nayaka*-s and *nayika*-s. The *nayaka* is supposed to possess eight *sattvik* qualities :

शोभाविलासो माधुर्यं गाम्भीर्यं घैर्यतेजसी ।
ललितौढर्यमित्यष्टौ सत्त्वजाः पौरुष गुणाः ॥

In the play, Prahlada, the hero, symbolises the quality of *dhirodatta* while Hiranyakashipu, the anti-hero, represents the *dhirodhatta*. Similarly, Lilavati can be characterised as a *sviya nayika*.

Nowhere in the play is there any definitive mention of acts or scenes. There is only a mention of "the end of the first day and night" after the birth of Prahlada. The play used to be performed either for three nights or seven nights on the pattern of Ramalila. Historical evidence indicates that initially the normal period during which the play was performed was seven nights. Gradually it was considered too long, both by the performers and the audience and, therefore, reduced to a three-night performance for modern audiences. There is also a one-night performance which skips over what is considered inessential, retaining only the basic core of the theme. The general pattern of dividing the play into three or seven parts is as below:

Three nights' break-up: (a) From the invocation to Ganesha to the birth of Prahlada; (b) From Prahlada's visit to the house of his Guru to the sacrificial offering to Chandi; (c) From the threats administered to Prahlada by the demons on the king's orders to Hiranyakashipu's death at the hands of Narasimha.

Seven nights' break-up: (1) The penance of Hiranyakashipu; (2) The birth of Prahlada; (3) His education and upbringing; (4) The punishment meted out to Prahlada through Gajakarnavira and the wild elephant; (5) The chastising of Prahlada through his being thrown from the top of a mountain, sacrificially offered to Bhudevi and cast away in a cave; (6) Prahlada's ordeal by fire, his abandonment to snakes and incarceration in prison; (7) The killing of Hiranyakashipu.

The theme of Prahlada has been very widely used in Indian Puranic literature and performing arts throughout the centuries. In the words of J. C. Mathur, "like a spring with a common source, these stories well up in Bhagavat Mela of Madras State, Kuchipudi of Andhra Pradesh, the Lilas of Uttar Pradesh, the Ankiya Nata of Assam and the Yatra of Orissa and Bengal. The story of Hiranyakashipu, the demon-king and Narasimha, the lion-incarnation of Vishnu is a theme with an all-India appeal" (*Drama in Rural India*, p. 77).

In Puranic literature, there are four major references to this theme of Hiranyakashipu, Prahlada and Narasimha: (1) The Fifth Chapter of the Bhumi Cantos of the *Padma Purana*; (2) The Sixteenth to Twentieth Chapters of the 1st canto of *Vishnu Purana*; (3) The Ninth Chapter of the 4th canto of *Devi Bhagavata*; and (4) The first ten Chapters of the 7th canto of *Srimad Bhagavata*.

The description of events and situations in these works as also in the Sanskrit *Narasimha Purana* agrees in broad details. The essence of the theme is, in fact, identical. After learning of the death of his brother Hiranyaksha at the hands of Lord Vishnu in his Varaha incarnation, Hiranyakashipu pleases Brahma through deep penance. Brahma blesses him and grants him a boon: Neither man, god or animal can kill him; he cannot be destroyed on earth, in the sky or on the oceans or by any weapon; he cannot be annihilated during day or night. In fact, what actually happens is that Hiranyakashipu is killed by a hybrid of man and beast, Narasimha. He is torn apart on Narasimha's lap with the man-lion using his hands and fingers to destroy him during the hour of gathering dusk. Narasimha emerges from the pillar in the final act, kills Hiranyakashipu and his anger is not quenched even by the invocations of Indra and other gods. Only Prahlada's prayers finally succeed in calming him down and he becomes his former self.

While the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have Rama and Krishna as *avatar-s* and the *Bhagavadgita* has only Krishna, later *Purana-s* (such as the *Agni Purana* and the *Varaha Purana*) and Jayadev's *Gita Govinda*, refer to the ten incarnations of Vishnu including Narasimha. In fact, the *Narasimha Purana* refers to eleven incarnations, one of them being Krishna.

Orissa has a tradition of using the Prahlada theme in *Yatra*, *Leela* and plays. Of the literary works produced on the theme, mention may be particularly made of the following :

- 1) *Prahlada Nataka* of Kishore Chandra Harichandan Jagadev, the king of Surangi in Ganjam district;
- 2) *Sangita Prahlada Nataka* of Padmanav Narayan Dev, the king of Paralakhemundi;
- 3) *Prahlada Nataka* of Ramachandra Sur Deo, the king of Tarala;
- 4) *Prahlada Charita* of the popular dramatist, Vaishnav Pani; and
- 5) *Prahlada Nataka* now under discussion.



Hridayakshipu.
(Courtesy: Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi).

All of them use the theme to illustrate the supreme value of unflinching devotion to Vishnu and the importance of the incarnation of Vishnu as Narasimha or man-lion. The thematic treatment as also the storyline is more or less the same. While Vaishnav Pani uses more of colloquial Oriya, the other four authors, all of whom were kings in southern Orissa in the nineteenth century, use a mixture of the Sanskritised and colloquial idiom. It is difficult to explain why the theme had a special appeal to the royal authors. All of them incidentally were worshippers of Vishnu. Of these four plays, *Prahlada Nataka* is, indisputably, the most impressive in terms of literary and theatrical achievement.

The play begins with an invocation to the guru, a customary practice in all the performing arts in India. This is followed by invocations to Lord Ganesha (also called Gananatha), and to Bhagwati Sharada or Saraswati.

Ganesha is invoked both in a Sanskrit *shloka* and an Oriya song. While the Sanskrit *shloka* is well-known, the Oriya song is quite interesting in its own way and sung in *raga* Bhairavi set to Athatala:

"We bow at the feet of Lord Gananatha. Oh son of Parvati, who rides a mouse, has four hands and an elephant's head, grant us your blessings. He, who carries an elephant prod and is obese. Lord Gananatha, whose ears flap like fans, and who is charming. Carrying six types of offerings to you with incense, lighted candles, betelnut, and fragrant flowers, Shri Nrupakeshara Ramakrishna Vira hastens to kneel before Lord Shankar's son."

The story is then introduced by the *Gahaka*.

Gahaka: Invoked in so many ways, Lord Gananatha appeared and spoke thus.

Ganesha: Oh, Leader of the *Nataka*, why do you invoke my name?

Gahaka: Oh, Remover of Obstacles, I pray to you, let our play proceed without hindrances.

Ganesha: So be it.

Later, after invocations have been sung to Saraswati and Narasimha, the *Gahaka* further says: "I now invoke the great poets to bless the efforts of humble men who would narrate the story of the appearance of the fourth incarnation of Vishnu. Listen to how the tale begins. Oh, learned pundits, listen with pleasure to the style of this *nataka*. Do not find fault if it fails to have the right elegance of poetry for I am unlettered by nature. Even in my dreams I have kept poor company. Yet I make bold to appear before you bearing in mind the feats of Hari."

Thereafter, the *Sutradhara* reels out a long list of *swara-s*, *raga-s*, *nayaka* types etc. The *Gahaka* intervenes once again to begin the real play, indicating its context.

"Then the great king Parikshita looked at Sukadeva and asked him how it was that Sesanka Vihari was born out of a pillar in the form of Narasimha, and what it was that Prahlada said to his father, what were the punishments inflicted on him and how Kamala's Lord, enraged, killed Hiranyakashipu.

Relate the full story and, in so doing, take away the burden of sin. Hearing this, Sukadeva began the tale."

This is how the *Gahaka*, the lead singer, begins the play. In effect, he is the most important link in the chain of dramatic events.

In *Prahlada Nataka*, the divine presence of Narasimha is brought onto the stage by the technique of trance or spirit possession, by magic and ritual which plays such an important role in most primitive cultures. An individual, a family or even the entire community may face a calamity or a tragedy in the form of an epidemic or death at the hands of man-eating tigers or the depredation of wild animals, or devastation by floods or earthquakes. Unable to discern the proximate or remote cause of such tragedies through reasoning and logic, the primitive mind attributes these afflictions to the wrath of malevolent gods or spirits, who are sought to be placated by suitable offerings. Often, such propitiation may not be for the negative purpose of warding off disasters but for invoking their blessings for peace and prosperity.

This propitiation assumes many forms and a vast complex of ritual-religious ceremonies may be associated with it as a sort of attempt to appease and thereby gain control over unspecified and unknown forces of nature. The forms of propitiation are often a combination of (a) ritual chantings, invocations or incantations, (b) certain purificatory rites involving the person or persons offering worship and the physical space where it is being sanctified, (c) physical objects such as food or drink, flowers, incense etc. and (d) accompanying plastic or performing arts such as specially designed paintings, icons or murals and song and dance numbers. All such magical activities invoking the spirits or "powers" involve three major aspects. Bronislaw Malinowski characterised them as — things said, things done, and a person officiating. Hence, the spell, the rite and the condition of the performer are the basic ingredients of the ritual performance. The *bejuni* (the woman who is possessed) in Kondh tribal society, the *ojha* in Santal or the *kudan* (the priest) in Saora society, is literally possessed by the spirit he or she invokes and ultimately represents, and then utters certain clue statements leading to the understanding of the specific causes of disease or death. In *Prahlada Nataka*, the same technique is followed in a performative context. The ritual initiation is parallel to primitive trance-possession. In this case, the actor-priest who is to wear the Narasimha mask is required to perform a fairly elaborate *puja* propitiating and invoking the spirit of the mask. The ritual worship includes sacred water, flowers, coconut, sandalwood paste, incense, lighted lamp, and prescribed *mudra*-s of the hand. The worship is conducted off-stage, and prior to the performance while the orchestra play. All the performers gather around the mask and sing prescribed invocations to Vishnu. This ritual is, in fact, only a continuation of the worship of the mask in a nearby temple throughout the year. At the time of the performance, the worship shifts from the temple to the dressing room. John Emigh, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts at Brown University, U.S.A., is now working on a translation of *Prahlada Nataka*. He quotes some villagers in the Ganjam district: "The performer who wore the mask received a dream in which the spirit of the mask stated that he would no longer enter into the performance because he was not being properly worshipped. The mask then became so heavy that no one could lift it".*



*The killing of Hiranyakashipu at the hands of Narasimha.
(Courtesy: Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi).*

In contrast, the person playing the role of Ganesha wears only a papier-mache elephant mask and jumps off a floorboard to do a vigorous dance before blessing the performance in response to the invocation to him. Saraswati also blesses the performance. Female roles in *Prahlada Nataka* are performed by males even to this day. One must note, however, that, unlike Narasimha, neither Ganesha nor Saraswati are supposed to possess the respective performers. The Ganesha mask is only a part of the costume; it is never worshipped in a temple nor at the site before the performance begins. The pattern of representation is mime and not direct *becoming*.

The orchestra is very important in the play. There are a large number of *raga*-based songs. Appropriate instrumental accompaniment is, therefore, crucial. Normally, the orchestra consists of two *mridangam*-s five or six sets of cymbals, a harmonium, two or three long trumpets, a small *mahuri* and a conch shell. The shell is generally used to herald Narasimha's entrance onto the stage in the final

act of the drama. The dramatic actions are paralleled by appropriate musical scores and flourishes. The *Prahlada Nataka* thus has elements of the classical Sanskrit play, folk opera or *jatra*, *Desia nata* and *Danda nata* even while its theme is admittedly classical. The presentation, however, borrows liberally from the folk and tribal motifs of adjoining areas. Only recently, scholars have begun recognising this linkage of classical, folk and tribal patterns, not only in this particular play and its performance, but in Indian performative art-tradition in general. Secondly, this tradition also has an intimate relationship with the religious and ritual traditions of society. John Emigh, I understand, is likely to take up a detailed research project on this "inter-play" and I entirely agree with his view that "the assimilation and syncretic use of several performance traditions by the poets, musicians, and royal patrons of Jalantara, and the later diffusion of the work into the villages of Ganjam through the court of Chikiti present a fascinating example of the dynamic interplay between classical, folk and tribal traditions" (Unpublished text).

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Notes:

1. Arup, Aravi, Asabari, Ahari, Kalyan, Kalyani, Kamodi, Kedargouda, Khamaj, Chantaraba, Jhinjoti, Todi Punnaga, Desh, Desi Khamaj, Desiya Todi, Nabaraju, Nabaraj, Nata, Nadaramakriya, Panta, Barali, Punnaga Marua, Puri Kalyani, Bihag, Bhairavi, Marua, Mukhari, Yamuna Kalyani, Regupta, Shankaravaranã, Shree, Shrota, Saberi Sindhukhamai, Sahana, Hindustani Todi.
2. At Tal, Atha Tal, Adi Tal, Ek Tal, Jhula, Rupak.

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* ("Dealing with the Demonic: Strategies for Containment in Hindu Iconography and Performance" — *Asian Theatre Journal* — Vol-I No. 1, Spring 1984, p. 26)