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RAMLEELA AT FELICITY VILLAGE

Laura Gardner Salazar

My host from the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, Dani Lyndersay, and I take off from Port of Spain at 4:00 in the afternoon on Thursday. She is determined to show me every kind of theatre on the island during the four months of my Fulbright research. It is October 9, 1994, and we are on our way to find a field near the hamlet of Felicity in rural Trinidad. There, twenty-five boys aged ten through twenty join in a ‘club’ to present the annual week-long production of the classic drama, Ramleela.

The Story of Rama is one of two epics of ancient India. In this great adventure Rama, who is the god Vishnu come back to earth, wins his wife, Sita, by bending the bow that had belonged to a god. One of the jealous wives of his father has him banished for 14 years. Sita is captured and taken to Ceylon by Ravana, its demon-god king. Much of the story is about Rama's struggle to bring Sita back to the mainland. He builds a bridge to Ceylon, and, even after Sita is recaptured, they struggle in reconciling.

The production I am to attend takes place annually in a small village in the part of Trinidad called "Central," ten miles south of the capital city on Trinidad's rich agricultural plain. Cane fields extend in every direction—to the great swamp to the north, the sea to the west, the beautiful green Northern Range to the east, and then to the south—cane fields for what seems forever.

The production has been going on since Sunday. There are no signs showing the way to the performance site, but everyone knows where the performance takes place and why two such European-looking women would be out in the country. We only have to slow down for the locals holler directions to us.

I grab the camcorder from the back seat and begin filming the countryside as we drive through the neighborhood to kill time. At the end of a road we see a country tavern where four men are playing a lively game of cards. I see one guy jump high in the air and slam down his winning card. I ask for a replay to get it on my video. He is happy to oblige. Farmers' homes line the narrow country roads. Deep ditches yawn on either side, full of water now in the rainy season. Each flat one-story home sits up on stilts. Under the stilts the family has its informal living quarters: the father's hammock, chairs, children's toys, laundry drying, the family car, and the ever essential pickup truck. A farmer slowly walking his very pregnant holstein cow reminds me of my bucolic Wisconsin childhood.

Next to the road but within fenced yards, bouquets of colored pendants fly high on bamboo poles. In yard corners sit cement block buildings painted white, with tiny accents of deep contrasting color, looking like "play houses." These are family shrines, lighted in the evenings. I peek in to see the statues of the gods. The ten-acre performance field lies at a central crossroad. The great green hills rise in the distance, and planes fly low on their approach to Piarco Airport.
VILLAGE

...versay, and I take off from there determined to show me the hamlet of Felicity in my Fulbright research. It is a small village in the part of city on Trinidad's rich south, the great swamp to the west, the mountains to the east, and then the hills.

...The boys take us across a ditch and some boards over deep mud to see the performance. Outside the building, a space about 4 feet wide, a bamboo framework, with paper mache and cloth of the organizers, comes up to us and begins asking some questions. He is happy to see visitors and tells us that he works for the United Nations in New York, but he also is in Trinidad much of the time. We ask if it is acceptable to video the event. Delighted and flattered, he says to video it all and invites me to enter the ring and move about to get the shots I need and want.

...There is mud and the distinct smell of pigs as we slosh about the field. A bamboo corral encloses a space about 50 by 30 yards. It has a very convenient rail for audience leaning. Who would think that I would have such an extraordinary theatre experience in such an ordinary setting.

...On each of the four sides of the corral are open covered areas, little shelters. The one on the west seems to represent the garden where Siva is held captive; to the south, the land and throne of Lanka with its demons; to the north, the home territory and throne of Rama; and to the East, a large raised area where there are loud speakers and room for five to seven adults to oversee the performance. Outside the rail, three tents have been set up to sell candy, fried dough and sweet drinks. The Good Humor man arrives on his bike. The drums have been warmed up, literally. In order to make a proper sound, the drums must be stretched with heat—always over
an open fire.

It is time to begin, and we walk over to the reviewing stand, where the Pundits will sing, read from the holy books and stage manage the event. The performers line up along the field, facing East, where tonight's featured Pundit gives a long prayer. The Pundit chants "Ooom!" A thrill runs through me. The prayer, both in Hindi and English, goes on and on as boys wiggle. I see another person with a camera (who doesn't look like a missionary, but one of the organizing committee) getting shots of the opening prayer, so I try to get my camera in a position where it can see more than the dirt at my feet.

The story begins, and Dani and I search for the perfect spot to capture the action. I overhear a little girl explain to her friend: "That is a Syrian lady, who is fliming [sic.] so she can show her friends." Okay, so far. Nobody thinks I'm some theatre professor who will go back and make some secular "study" that looks down on Trinidadians.

The Pundit tells, chants, orders the actors. The boys don't seem totally in control of the plot, and occasionally orders have to be repeated. At one point the Pundit yells at certain characters, "Monkeys, where are you? Raise your hands." Grown men on the field coach the boys to move hither and yon.

The drums continue. The boys dance in a kind of athletic skip, with arms making wide swings. Those in major roles are costumed in bright colors, and gold and silver makeup sparkles on their skin. Heavy grease paint accentuates their fine features. Three to five adult male "clowns" disguised as vagrants move about the arena doing every pratfall and bit of slapstick known to the theatre. They climb a tree, sink a row boat, chase and hit each other with their purses. Even I become a part of the action when the clowns pretend to attack me with a hypodermic needle. In tight groups, girls aged five through seven giggle incessantly.

The action of the plot consists of travel, conflict, and the triumph of good over evil. Hunaman, the monkey god, saves Rama from several foolish mistakes. This is the night Rama must travel to Ceylon and asks Hunaman to dry up the sea. The monkey king is shocked that Rama would disturb the fishes and plants. It is far better to build a bridge with Hunaman floating rocks. The "rocks" are made of feed sacks stuffed with grass and set at random over the north playing area. The good army dance across the field with the bags in their hands, lay down their burden with care, and skip off for more. The monkey god and Rama cross the water on their way to rescue Sita.

I comment to Dani that this is like a Christmas pageant, which the children in my own church put on each Christmas: rough theatre, but sincere, given and received in love, and fun for the children.

At the end of the two hours the Pundit invites us to come again on Sunday. That night we are late, and the program has already begun. The giant Rama figure towers over the tiny participants by 40 feet, overwhelming even to one who is familiar with technical special effects. The actor playing Rama sparkles in his gold body paint. A much larger crowd has appeared for the finale. Elderly women dressed in their best, lace scarfs over their heads, stand erect at the rail. Teenagers and young adults—some of Dani and I's "lime" in Trinidad talk—

"How wonderful it is to be young, and to have his bull horn. The crowd has already numbered number of suicides of the seemingly the most the most

The red costume performer sets the fire careful. The fire is with case, village fire truck, one foot and moving up the the crowd gasps. The fire dies on the ground. We stand for a certain have been the ceremony.

Far from India we these young people called Felicity.
where the Pundits will line up as a long prayer. The Pundits, both in Hindi and English, with a camera (who is not permitted) getting shots of where it can see more.

The cremation of Rama is about to begin. There have been an unusual number of suicides of young people in Trinidad this season, and the Pundit does not want to glamorize death. Set Maharaj, General Secretary of the Sabha and seemingly the most influential Hindi in the island, is introduced. He greets everyone and welcomes them to the Ramleela grounds, saying, “This is a great folk religious theatre. And with the cremation of Rama we must leave it clean and pure and free.”

The red costumed players do a victory dance. The boys in black join in. One performer sets the figure of Rama on fire, with many warnings to the audience to be careful. The fire is why Ramleela must be played in the rainy season, and just in case, village fire trucks wait in the background. The fire is spectacular, starting at one foot and moving up the figure. In one glorious moment, the eye holes blaze, and the crowd gasps. The whole figure burns madly, and then, in slow motion, floats to the ground. We stand mesmerized.

As the fire dies down, Mr. Ragh, now in his demon costume, and Robin, who played Rama, all smiles and hand shakes, thank Dani and me for coming. Slowly the crowd wanders off—surely more clean and pure and free. Returning to the parking lot in silence, Dani and I feel connected to those from ancient times who must certainly have been astonished at this amazingly entertaining and beautiful ceremony.

Far from India we have succumbed to the charm and honesty of Ramleela and these young people whose lives seem so tightly woven into the fabric of a community called Felicity.