

REMEMBERING PHILLIP ZARRILLI

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CONTRIBUTOR

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When one loses a good friend, who is also a renowned and accomplished researcher, scholar, director, writer, teacher and actor trainer, it's difficult to know on which of his many stellar qualities to focus the reader's attention. In the case of Phillip Zarrilli, the man and his work are so closely and completely interwoven it becomes doubly hard. I'm not the right person to address all the aspects of his remarkable and acclaimed career. Moreover, his books and essays stand on their own as testaments to the clarity, rigour and precision of his intercultural scholarship. So, I will write only of the one facet that I know best from experience: of the influence he has had on the practice, teaching and understanding of kalaripayattu.

Kalaripayattu has some name recognition now as a martial art form in many parts of the world, but thirty years ago, when Phillip Zarrilli and I met, it wasn't very well known outside its communities of practice even in its home state of Kerala. As we sat on the grass outside a conference venue in Brisbane and talked about the trials and tribulations of practice in a mud floor kalari, it was as if we'd exchanged a secret handshake. I had just begun my practice, he was already a renowned practitioner, scholar and teacher of the form, so that chance meeting was very lucky for me. The friendship and collaboration sparked that day shaped my understanding of not only kalaripayattu, but what it means to be a performer and the possibilities for transformation within embodied practice.

Phillip began his training in 1976 under Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar, at a time when he was (usually) the only white person in the kalari, and continued to train intensively on extended visits to India. In 1988 he was awarded the pitham, or seat of knowledge, by his guru to mark his mastery of the form. He taught kalaripayattu in the context of theatre and actor training at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and then at the University of Exeter as well as in non-institutional settings, especially at the annual summer 'intensives' held at his own Tyn-y-parc Kalari in Wales.

In taking an art form out of one culture and allowing it to inhabit bodies within an entirely different context, with a different understanding and assumptions about even what a body is, Phillip was careful, meticulous even, in giving and demanding respect for the unique qualities of kalaripayattu. He even made a heated dirt floor in his kalari, with great difficulty and expense. But neither did he fetishize the practice by making or defending claims of authenticity, antiquity, superiority. Having gained the respect of gurus in Kerala, he was quick to call out bad practices in teaching and performing, especially the chauvinistic and communal uses to which Muslim, Hindu and Christian kalaris could lend themselves.

At around the same time I was studying, and then performing, bharata natyam. I had somehow, in the superstitious way that many practitioners of physical disciplines may recognize, internalized the idea that one could only do one or the other well: dance, or write about dance. That had been my experience – bad dancers wrote about dance, and good dancers danced and were silent on the subject. Phillip demonstrated by his own example that needn't be the case. He was both; an excellent and skilled practitioner of kalarippayattu, and equally able to observe, research and write intelligently and with useful insights about the practice.

His study of kalarippayattu, *When the Body Becomes All Eyes: paradigms and practices of power in kalarippayattu* published by Oxford University Press [1998/2000] remains the authoritative text in English on the subject to this day. In that book, he wrote 'Because practices are not things, but an active, embodied doing, they are intersections where personal, social and cosmological experiences and realities are negotiated', and reading those words, I began to look at my practice of both kalarippayattu and bharata natyam through the theoretical lens he made available.

By the time I took my first summer intensive at Tyn-y-parc, in the kalari he'd built in Wales, I'd advanced to wooden weapons, but I knew that I was missing something essential in my practice in Kerala, even though I was coming closer and closer to meeting the demands of the outer form; kicking higher, lunging lower, responding faster to attacks from my master. Phillip had had experience with that paradox. In his book *Psychophysical Acting*, he narrates his feelings when his teacher shouted at him to use his whole body: 'I thought I *was* using my entire body. How could I *not* be when on the outside a river of sweat was pouring from my body onto the earth floor and on the inside I was making such an effort!'

I was stuck in the stage that Phillip describes here, of mistaking effort and intention for masterful embodied doing. He insisted that I start from the beginning again with him, and so I did, learning to do the leg practice and the basic movements of the first attack-defense sequence, or meipayattu all over again. As he made me go through that most basic of kalari positions, Phillip's way of entering into the forms took me beyond any outward manifestation, into a state of attentive open engagement with the practice itself, my awareness 'so fully open that one is totally focused within a specific action'.

This is not to say that my kalarippayattu master in Kerala didn't have access to this knowledge; of course he did. But it was not articulated, it was something the student was left to discover through a daily early morning physical practice that started at the age of six. For someone

like me, who came to kalarippayattu in my thirties, it was unlikely that I would ever attain the kind of transformative bodily knowing that I observed in my master, pervading his movements and never needing to be brought to conscious attention.

The gurus of kalarippayattu are often considered to possess secret techniques, locks, holds, points on the body that can be pressed, which are given as a precious gift to only the most advanced, devoted and sincere students. What Phillip did was open the door to a whole treasure house on the first day. Once he allowed access to that attentional space, I could enter into any practice through it. Other students benefitted in similar ways. Dancer and choreographer Brandy Leary applies his insights to her own training and performance: 'It's not magic, it's practice, every time doing the same movement, with the same attention – expansive attention, keeping the connection between the internal world of the body and the external shape the body holds in space. The way of working I learned from Phillip changed my understanding of time, and of the performer's relationship to the audience'.

While Phillip used the kalarippayattu forms as a means for performers to access and utilize 'in-depth bodymind awareness' he avoided grandiose claims about the form itself: this was the strategy he'd come to, and there were many other possible strategies as well. He also remained a consummate teacher of kalarippayattu at the highest level. His students who practice kalarippayattu not as performer-training, but as a martial art, like P. S. Gowtham and Hans Wolfgramm, found practice of weapons with him to be enriching even when his age and health made him less agile; he could, for example, accurately pinpoint loss of integration of the weapon with the body. Whenever he returned to the CVN Kalari in Trivandrum where he began his training, he taught advanced students, who touched his feet, a gesture of respect to the guru that he never asked for but accepted with grace and understanding. When P. S. Gowtham went to meet him and document his training in Lithuania, on the other hand, Phillip hugged him like an old friend.

Qualities of rigour and precision, careful thought and profound insights that mark his scholarly writing, equally entered into casual conversations over coffee and while washing dishes after dinner. Hans Wolfgramm speaks of his influence as extending beyond the formal training sessions: 'Under his guidance kalaripayat transformed from a series of movements into a way of inhabiting those movements that reaches out towards all parts of life. At any impasse I sense through the soles of my feet and open my awareness to the space behind me and the situation improves, even if slightly, even if just through acceptance.'

Since Phillip wrote about kalaripayattu that 'ideally, the practitioner's "self" is reconstituted through long-term practice to achieve agency, power and a type of behavior which can be deployed personally, socially, even cosmologically', it is not surprising that his practice had made him wise and wonderful in myriad ways.

Phillip died on 28th April 2020. Playwright Kaite O'Reilly, his life partner and collaborator on many creative projects, wrote of his death that 'He rode out on a breath – like so many times in his teaching he spoke of riding the breath to that moment of completion at the end of exhalation – the space in-between at the end of one cycle before the impulse of the next inhalation begins. This time came no inhalation'.

The word 'guru' conveys something more than 'teacher'. But the stories from the mythology about gurus read like cautionary tales: Drona demanded, and got, the thumb of his student the great archer Ekalavya, so that his other student Arjuna would have no rival. Phillip embodied another kind of relationship between student and teacher, making no unreasonable demands, holding back no secrets, and always generous with his time, knowledge and insights.

In a tradition where one traces one's training lineage, Phillip has created a lineage of kalaripayattu practitioners all over the world who remember him in the most important way, through the body-in-practice.

Phillip Zarrilli was the first Westerner to seriously study kalaripayattu. In addition to his primary long-term training under Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar starting in 1976, Zarrilli also studied under C. Mohammed Sherif (Kerala Kalaripayattu Academy, Kannur) and Raju Asan (adi-murai). In 2000, he inaugurated the Tyn-y-arc CVN Kalari, the first traditional earthen-floor kalari outside of Kerala. Zarrilli authored the first authoritative study of kalaripayattu, When the Body Becomes All Eyes: paradigms and practices of power in kalaripayattu published by Oxford University Press [1998/2000].

Zarrilli also received beginning training in kathakali dance-drama in 1976-77 under the guidance of M.P. Sankaran Namboodiri at the Kerala Kalamandalam. It was his study of kathakali that led Zarrilli to kalaripayattu – the source of kathakali's preliminary training exercises and massage.

In 2000, he started the Lanarth Group, based at the Tyn-y-parc Kalari/Studio in Wales and under his direction. It brought together a variety of international artists to collaborate on particular production projects. The work was always informed by the application of a psychophysical approach through Asian martial/ meditation arts as the basis for developing a common language and process of performance. Phillip Zarrilli's production work includes: Almond and the Seahorse; The Beckett Project; Speaking Stones; The Maids; The Waterstation; Told by the Wind; Orestes; Walking Naked; The Flowering Tree; The Dance of The Drunken Monk; And Suddenly I Disappear; The Beauty Parade.

Zarrilli maintained a relationship with the Drama Department at Exeter University (UK) where he taught between 2000-2010.

His numerous books include (editor) Acting (Re)Considered (2nd ed 2002), When the Body Becomes All Eyes (1998), Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Comes to Play (2000), and (editor) Martial Arts in Actor Training (1993). Psychophysical Acting: an intercultural approach after Stanislavski, Zarrilli's long-awaited book on the process of training actors through a psychophysical approach based on Asian martial arts and yoga was published in 2009 by Routledge Press (London). The book includes a DVD-ROM by Peter Hulton. It was awarded the ATHE 2010 Outstanding Book of the Year Award at the ATHE convention in Los Angeles.

His final book, (toward) a phenomenology of acting was published in 2019 by Routledge Press (London).

phillipzarrilli.co.uk

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