

## **David Medalla, « From Kathakali to Biokinetic Theatre ».**

**An interview with Hermine Demoriane, *International Times (it)*, 46, December 13, 1968, p. 8**

*HERMINE* talked with David Medalla shortly before he left for India earlier this month with poet Michael Chapman, American sculptor John Dugger and American film director Peter Goldman. David Medalla, painter, poet, sculptor and dancer, was born in Manila, Philippines, in 1942. He translated Shakespeare into Filipino at the age of 7. Went to Columbia University, New York, at the age of 12. Participated in surreal activities with Yves Klein and Duchamp in Paris. Together with Paul Keeler founded Signals Experimental Gallery in London about 1963 where his 'bubble machines' were first shown. In 1967 he started *THE EXPLODING GALAXY*, an experimental dance drama group who live as a community in Balls Pond Road, North London.

### **HERMINE DEMORIANE — Why are you going to India?**

DAVID MEDALLA — To study Kathakali in Kerala, to seize its relevance as an artform to the growing consciousness.

### **Isn't Kathakali part of India's past, a dead India?**

Kathakali may be archaic, but it is still performed in Kerala, and is as popular there as 'Coronation Street' is here. I am interested in modern India too, though. When I was lecturing in the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, for instance, I wrote a poem in which there may be an answer to the drought in Bihar. I say the soil has been neutralised and so no longer attracts the clouds, which drift away from it. I propose recharging the earth with magnetic power to recreate the attraction. Two scientists have actually told me it might be feasible.

**You have been performing the BUDDHA BALLET each Sunday on Parliament Hill, and I have often noticed Kathakali gestures. Surely, Kathakali is Hindu and deals not with the story of Buddha but the puranas, the old Hindu legends. Aren't you embracing the East rather naively?**

India has many religions, which have survived happily together.



An exploration of the Buddha Ballet Sunday afternoon on Parliament Hill, Hampstead Heath.  
From left to right: Pete, David Medalla, Paul Keeler, John Dugger, Martin Bessemer and Annabel Drower.  
(Photo Jeff Davies)

**You are a sculptor. How did you become involved in dance?**

I am sculptor in the sense that most of my ideas deal with time, space and dimensions. But I have always been dissatisfied with making art-objects for galleries, so in '67 I envisaged the Exploding Galaxy which I meant to be a dance-drama company. Since then however it has evolved and proliferated on its own, involving 250 people altogether, 25 of whom have been constantly working on new forms of expression. The summer before last we saw the KERALA KALAM MANDALAM company of Kathakali dancers in London. It exploded my life as the Balinese Theatre exploded Artaud's life. It is a pity Artaud did not go to Bali, he would have written dance-dramas there instead of being declared insane at home. So I refuse to gloat on the memory of Kathakali for the rest of my life. I want to immerse myself in its sources and possibly I shall evolve from this a new art, relevant to people now.

**Do you intend to involve the people of India in new dance-dramas as you did on Parliament Hill?**

The Buddha Ballet would go well in a warm climate; cold inhibits people's movement here. But no, I want to explore India.

**Are you conscious of running away from the 20th century?**

No, because I am always trying to utilise new scientific discoveries. My bubble machines make use of simple scientific principles to produce an effect which is organic, endless, and reveals mysteries in nature that can't be verbalised, only experienced directly. I am going to Kerala not to reform Kathakali Theatre, but as a simple devotee, and yet from it I hope to gain a knowledge which I could apply to the theatre I have in mind, the BIODYNAMIC THEATRE.

**Why Biodynamic?**

It is both biological and kinetic. It is adaptable to every contingency and uses every modern technique. It can be easily destroyed and recreated. What goes into it won't have a linear structure as most western plays do, it will come and look at each other, a 4-dimensional mirror. Everybody can participate from the instant it is made.

**Why don't you do it now?**

It is too expensive. It would entail the cooperation of actual communities of people. Actually it is more a temple than a theatre, a temple where the only religion would be the spiritual man. It will mean that people will have to contribute to the making of it, both in terms of energy and physical resources, and consequently it is a theatre which can only occur when people are ready for it.

**Is it a place where one could stay for a few days?**

Yes, it could be a plot of land where people can go and construct a biodynamic theatre, or it could be unlocalised. The construction is not haphazard because the theatre should be constructed in terms of cosmic symbolism. In the old days when people constructed cathedrals, temples and shrines, they selected certain harmonies or geometrical patterns. They had certain orientations — for instance, the altar in the east, or the custom of circling the Buddhist shrine with the right hand nearest the stupa. Everything in Biodynamic Theatre would be symbolical, depending on many elements, all tied up with the cosmos. With ancient materials, like wood, stone, water, one already has a language. Suppose one had a sophisticated community, in Florida, for example, with missiles going up over the place... they could also use computers, plastic and synthetic materials, but finding in them a new symbolism, a more cosmic one than the plain utilitarian association people have toward these materials.

For the unlocalised Biokinetic Theatre I wrote a play that could occur in the streets, markets or squares. I actually set it in Amsterdam. It involves a young virgin all dressed in white, with a very handsome young man, foreign looking, wearing an expensive fur coat, and ten thousand demons on barges on fire on the canals. They would appear for one minute, synchronically, all over Amsterdam, so people would wonder whether they saw it or not and where. Such a theatre would be continuous beyond the physical action. A theatre of memory.

I wrote something for Paris too. In the early morning rush-hour high in the sky there would be men dressed in a variation of colours suspended from balloons floating in a pattern contrapuntal to the pattern of the streets. A man driving to work would see one minute one 'angel' dressed in blue, the next he would see one exactly the same but in green, and so on. His mind would be conscious of the pattern, as when you show someone a circle, then hide half of it: the mind completes the pattern on its own. This theatre would be endlessly metaphoric.

### **How could Kathakali help you to realize the Biokinetic Theatre?**

Kathakali is an artform which not only emphasises the verbal aspect of things, as in Western theatre, but the physical movement of eyes, voice and body. All these get integrated into a flowering whole. This could be of immense value.

Actually the question is not to copy but to learn certain attitudes of mind that India has evolved over the centuries. Mondrian was influenced by India. He found a way of expressing again the old symbolism underlying the opposition of male and female in nature, which he expressed in terms of vertical and horizontal. He realised that all artists search for inner equilibrium. So did Brancusi who was very impressed by the Tibetan yogi Milarepa, and yet one cannot accuse Mondrian or Brancusi being romantics, sleeping in the past. They were looking for a timeless art.

### **How can this inner equilibrium be compatible with the violence of Kathakali?**

In Kathakali there remain traces of the war dances of Kerala. The actors eat the entrails of another actor, and vomits blood on the stage. But since it is a cosmic art, this violence is transformed into great serenity and equilibrium, joy and peace. Even if one doesn't know the meaning of the mudras (hand gestures), one realises that what is projected on the stage are one's own sensations and emotions. The violence is only you, perhaps without a proper orientation to the forces of nature and the forces of environment. What eventually is achieved in Kathakali is that the violent and destructive qualities in men are held in balance with the creative and constructive ones.

This is beautifully portrayed in the iconography of Indian art. Shiva Nataradja for example, lord of the dance, is both creator and destroyer of the Universe. In one hand he holds a drum, symbol of creation, in the other hand fire, symbol of destruction. Both of these are being balanced by Shiva who stands with one foot on the demon of Ignorance and the other held in the air showing release. He has got two more hands, one reminiscent of an elephant's trunk removing all obstacles, the other like a mirror, the gesture of protection, for in order to be truly protected one should know oneself. One should destroy within oneself the veil of Maya, or Illusion.

HERMINE talked with David Medalla shortly before he left for India earlier this month with poet Michael Chapman, American sculptor John Dugger and American film director Peter Goldman. David Medalla, painter, poet, sculptor and dancer, was born in Manila, Philippines, in 1942. He translated Shakespeare into Filipino at the age of 7. Went to Columbia University, New York, at the age of 12. Participated in surreal activities with Yves Klein and Duchamp in Paris. Together with Paul Keeler founded Signals Experimental Gallery in London about 1963 where his 'bubble machines' were first shown. In 1967 he started THE EXPLODING GALAXY, an experimental dance drama group who live as a community in Balls Pond Road, North London.

H D — Why are you going to India?

D M — To study Kathakali in Kerala, to seize its relevance as an artform to the growing consciousness.

Isn't Kathakali part of India's past, a dead India?

Kathakali may be archaic, but it is still performed in Kerala, and is as popular there as 'Coronation Street' is here. I am interested in modern India too, though. When I was lecturing in the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, for instance, I wrote a poem in which there may be an answer to the drought in Bihar. I say the soil has been neutralised and so no longer attracts the clouds, which drift away from it. I propose recharging the earth with magnetic power to recreate the attraction. Two scientists have actually told me it might be feasible.

You have been performing the BUDDHA BALLET each Sunday on Parliament Hill, and I have often noticed Kathakali gestures. Surely, Kathakali is Hindu and deals not with the story of Buddha, but the puranas, the old Hindu legends. Aren't you embracing the East rather naively?

India has many religions which have survived happily together.



Kathakali Dance gesture 'The Hunter'.

You are a sculptor. How did you become involved in dance?

I am a sculptor in the sense that most of my ideas deal with time, space and dimensions. But I have always been dissatisfied with making art-objects for galleries, so in '67 I envisaged the Exploding Galaxy which I meant to be a dance-drama company. Since then however it has evolved and proliferated on its own, involving 250 people altogether, 25 of whom have been constantly working on new forms of expression. The summer before last we saw the KERALA KALAM MANDALAM company of Kathakali dancers in London. It exploded my life as the Balinese Theatre exploded Artaud's life. It is a pity Artaud didn't go to Bali, he would have written dance-dramas there instead of being declared insane at home. So I refuse to gloat on the memory of Kathakali for the rest of my life. I want to immerse myself in its sources and possibly I shall evolve from this a new art, relevant to people now.

Do you intend to involve the people of India in new dance-dramas as you did on Parliament Hill?

The Buddha Ballet would go well in a warm climate; cold inhibits people's movements here. But no, I want to explore India.

Are you conscious of running away from the 20th century?

No, because I am always trying to utilise new scientific discoveries. My bubble machines make use of simple scientific principles to produce an effect which is



David Medalla and 'Cloud Canyons' Bubble Mobile.

## From KATHAKALI to BIOKINETIC THEATRE

organic, endless, and reveals mysteries in nature that can't be verbalised, only experienced directly. I am going to Kerala not to reform Kathakali Theatre, but as a simple devotee, and yet from it I hope to gain a knowledge which I could apply to the theatre I have in my mind, the BIOKINETIC THEATRE.

Why biokinetic?

It is both biological and kinetic. It is adaptable to every contingency and uses every modern technique. It can be easily destroyed and recreated. What goes into it won't have a linear structure as most western plays do, it will be a vast mirror in which people will come and look at each other, a 4-dimensional mirror. Everybody can participate from the instant it is made.

Why don't you do it now?

It is too expensive. It would entail the cooperation of actual communities of people. Actually it is more a temple than a theatre, a temple where the only religion would be the spiritual man. It will mean that people will have to contribute to the making of it, both in terms of energy and physical resources, and consequently it is a theatre which can only occur when people are ready for it.

Is it a place where one could stay for a few days?

Yes, it could be a plot of land where people can go and construct a biokinetic theatre, or it could be unlocalised. The construction is not haphazard because the theatre should be constructed in terms of cosmic symbolism. In the old days when people constructed cathedrals, temples and shrines, they selected certain harmonies or geometrical patterns. They had certain orientations — for instance, the altar in the east, or the custom of circling the Buddhist shrine with the right hand nearest the stupa. Everything in the Biokinetic Theatre would be symbolical, depending on many elements, all tied up with the cosmos. With ancient materials, like wood, stone, water, one already has a language. Suppose one had a sophisticated community, in Florida for example, with missiles going up over the place . . . they could also use computers, plastic and synthetic materials, but finding in them a new symbolism, a more cosmic one than the plain utilitarian association people have toward these materials.

For the unlocalised Biokinetic Theatre I wrote a play that could occur in streets, markets or squares. I actually set it in

Amsterdam. It involves a young virgin all dressed in white, with a very handsome young man, foreign looking, wearing an expensive fur coat, and ten thousand demons on barges on fire on the canals. They would appear for one minute, synchronically, all over Amsterdam, so people would wonder whether they saw it or not and where. Such a theatre would be continuous beyond the physical action. A theatre of memory.

I wrote something for Paris too. In the early morning rush-hour high in the sky there would be men dressed in a variation of colours suspended from balloons floating in a pattern contrapuntal to the pattern of the streets. A man driving to work would see one minute one 'angel' dressed in blue, the next he would see one exactly the same but in green, and so on. His mind would be conscious of the pattern, as when you show someone a circle, then hide half of it: the mind completes the pattern on its own. This theatre would be endlessly metaphoric.

How could Kathakali help you to realise the Biokinetic Theatre?

Kathakali is an artform which not only emphasises the verbal aspect of things, as in Western theatre, but the physical movement of eyes, voice and body. All these get integrated into a flowering whole. This could be of immense value.

Actually the question is not to copy but to learn certain attitudes of mind that India has evolved over the centuries. Mondrian was influenced by India. He found a way of expressing again the old symbolism underlying the opposition of male and female in nature, which he expressed in terms of vertical and horizontal. He realised that all artists search for inner equilibrium. So did Brancusi who was very impressed by the Tibetan yogi Malaripa, and yet one cannot accuse Mondrian or Brancusi of being romantics, sleeping in the past. They were looking for a timeless art.

How can this inner equilibrium be compatible with the violence of Kathakali?

In Kathakali there remain traces of the war dances of Kerala. In some scenes one can see murders. The actor eats the entrails of another actor, and vomits blood on the stage. But since it is a cosmic art, this violence is transformed into great serenity and equilibrium, joy and peace. Even if one doesn't know the meaning of the mudras (hand gestures), one realises that what is projected on the stage are one's own sensations and emotions. The violence is only you, perhaps without a proper orientation to the forces of nature and the forces of environment. What eventually is achieved in Kathakali is that the violent and destructive qualities in men are held in balance with the creative and constructive ones.

This is beautifully portrayed in the iconography of Indian art. Shiva Nataradja for example, lord of the dance, is both creator and destroyer of the Universe. In one hand he holds a drum, symbol of creation, in the other hand fire, symbol of destruction. Both of these are being balanced by Shiva who stands with one foot on the demon of Ignorance and the other held in the air showing release. He has got two more hands, one reminiscent of an elephant's trunk removing all obstacles, the other like a mirror, the gesture of protection, for in order to be truly protected one should know oneself. One should destroy within oneself the veil of Maya, or Illusion.



The Exploding Galaxy on Primrose Hill.