

This short script was originally written for performer Leigh Evans. Or rather, adapted, from the original text by Marguerite Yourcenar. The language is all MY's. Leigh and I produced a half-hour excerpt at San Francisco's Bindlestiff Studios in May 1995, with music by Peter Whitehead and Elaine Buckholtz. The project was abandoned thereafter, as Leigh embarked on a long trip to India. Now I see Kali Beheaded as a scenario for the puppet theater.

Kali Beheaded

sketch for a performance in three acts

based on the story of the same name,
as adapted from the Hindu myth
by Marguerite Yourcenar

adapted for the stage by Ross Lipman

1995

A rough scenario. Kali Beheaded was originally intended for a single performer with live musical accompaniment. The spoken sections should alternate with the choreographed sections, and not overlap. Music cues originally noted for sitar and tabla. to provide an overall sense of tone. The actual instrumentation should for the most part be minimal (in keeping with the whole), and in a general way be either melodic or rhythmic, as suggested by the cues.

prologue

Bare stage, darkness.
Golden light onto Kali,
ash white in black rags,
bearing a clear bowl of water.

KALI

Kali, the terrible goddess, roams the Indian plains.
She can be seen both in the north and in the south,
and at the same time in holy places and in the market squares.
Women shudder as she passes;
the young men, nostrils quivering,
come out onto the thresholds, and
even the little crying children know her name.

Sitar.
She lays the bowl at her feet.

Black Kali is beautiful and horrible.
Her waist is so slender that the poets who sing about her
compare her to the banana tree.
Her shoulders are round like the rising autumn moon;
her breasts are like buds about to burst;
her hips sway like the trunk of
the newly born elephant calf;
and her dancing feet are like green shoots.
Her mouth is as warm as life;
her eyes as deep as death.

Sitar.
The light shifts from golden
to wine red to deep blue.
She kneels and looks into the bowl.

In turn she gazes at herself in the bronze of night,
in the silver of dawn, in the copper of dusk;
in the gold of midday she stares at herself.
But her lips have never smiled;
a necklace of bones coils around her slender neck,
and upon her face,
paler than the rest of her body,
her large eyes are pure and sad.

Kali's face, eternally bathed in tears,
is ashen and covered with dew
like the uneasy face of dawn.

Sitar.
Kali rises
and crosses lightly to the stage's edge,
while her gaze remains fixed into the
theater.

Her tiny feet dance frantically below the chiming anklets,
but her eyes never stop weeping,
her bitter mouth never kisses,
her eyelashes never caress the cheeks
of those who embrace her,
and her face remains eternally pale
like an immaculate moon.

Darkness--
a sparkle in the bowl of water.
Tabla.

Act I

Kali's Song; wordless.

KALI'S DANCE IN INDRA'S HEAVEN:

with sitar, tabla.

After which:

KALI

A long time ago, Kali, lotus flower of perfection,
reigned in Indra's heaven as in the depths of a sapphire;
the diamonds of dawn glittered in her eyes,
and the universe contracted or expanded
in time with the beatings of her heart.

The dance resumes...

and ceases.

But Kali, perfect as a flower,
ignored her own perfection
and, pure as the day itself,
had no knowledge of her own purity.

KALI BEHEADED:

A storm, an eclipse
(thunder, silver light).

Sitar: Kali pursued by the gods.
Lightening flashes.
Blackout.

Lights up:
Kali's headless torso
(a mask of mirrors?)
radiates in the darkness,
then is thrown across a chasm
and at last comes to rest.
The music ceases.
A cold wind blows,
and a blanket of white snow
falls over her still form.

Gradually,
Kali's face, in black mask,
appears atop the snow.

The jealous gods followed Kali one evening,
during an eclipse, into a cone of darkness,
in a corner of a conniving planet.
A bolt of lightening cut her head off.
Instead of blood,
a torrent of light sprang from her sliced neck.
Her halved body,
thrown into the abyss by the Jinns,
rolled down into the uttermost pit of hell,
where those who have not seen
or have refused the heavenly light
crawl and whimper.
A cold wind blew, condensing the clear flakes
that started to drop from the sky;
a white layer began to collect on the mountaintops,
beneath starry spaces where night was falling.
The monster gods, the cattle gods, the gods of many arms
and many legs like turning wheels,
escaped through the shadows,
blinded by their halos of fire,
and the haggard immortals regretted their crime.

Sitar.
Then, with voice:

Contrite, the gods descended
along the Roof of the World,
into the abyss full of smoke
where those who were once alive now crawl.
They crossed the nine purgatories;
they passed prisons of ice and mud,
where ghosts devoured by remorse
repent the wrongs they have committed,
and prisons of fire, where other dead,
tormented by vain greed,
bemoan the wrongs they did not commit.
The gods were astounded
to find that man has such an infinite capacity for evil,
so many resources and agonies of pleasure and sin.

Kali's mask is removed.
The blanket of snow which covered her
now rises like a body of water,
her severed head floating atop it.

Dimly lit from above, Kali sings her wordless song
as the gods search for her body.
They discover an ash white corpse,
and lifting the white sea,
unite the body and Kali's head.

At the bottom of the ossuary, in a swamp,
Kali's head bobbed like a water lily,
and her long black hair rippled around it
like floating roots.

Piously, they picked up the lovely pale head
and they set off to find the body that had borne it.
A headless body was lying on the shore.
They took it, placed Kali's head upon those shoulders,
and brought the goddess back to life.

The body was that of a prostitute condemned to death
for having sought to trouble the meditations of a young Brahmin.
Drained of blood, the ashen corpse seemed pure.
The goddess and the harlot
had on the left thigh the same beauty spot.

Music begins,
then fades with the lights.
Darkness

Act II

Bare stage; the bowl of water.
Tabla.
Kali sings and dances

THE BEATIFICATION OF DEBASEMENT

wordless, under green light,
in silhouette behind a broad veil.

Tabla.

KALI

Never again did Kali,
lotus flower of perfection,
reign in Indra's heaven.
The body to which the divine head was joined
felt homesick for the streets of ill repute,
the forbidden encounters, the rooms where the prostitutes,
meditating on secret debauches,
survey the clients' arrival through the slits of green shutters.

The veil is lifted.
Kali looks directly ahead.

Kali is abject.
She has lost her divine cast
by having given herself to pariahs, to outcasts,
and her cheeks kissed by lepers
are now covered with a crust of stars.
She presses herself against the mangy chests

of the camel drivers of the north,
who never wash because of the intense cold;
she sleeps on vermin-ridden beds
with blind beggars;
she passes from the embrace of Brahmins
to that of miserable creatures, the unclean,
whose very presence pollutes the day,
who are charged with washing the corpses;
and stretched out in the pyramid-shaped shadows of the funeral pyres,
Kali abandons herself upon the still warm ashes.

She also loves the boatmen, who are rough and strong.
She even accepts the black men who work in the bazaar,
more harshly beaten than beasts of burden;
she rubs her head against their shoulders
raw from the swaying of their loads.
Wretched as a feverish woman unable to find cool water,
she goes from village to village,
from crossroads to crossroads,
in search of the same mournful delights.

THE RITUAL DISEMBODIMENT:

Tabla, sitar.

1st movement

In which Kali, possessed by the spirits of
those she encounters in her travels,
assumes their physical presence.

Twixt each, she is captured by
her reflection in the pool of water.

She became the seducer of children,
the inciter of old men,
the ruthless mistress of the young;
and the women of the town,
neglected by their husbands and feeling like widows,
compared Kali's body to the flame of a pyre.
She was as unclean as a gutter rat
and as loathed as a weasel of the fields.

She stole hearts as if they were
strips of offal from the butcher's block,
and the liquified fortunes of men
clung to her hands like strands of honey.
Never resting, from Benares to Kapilavastu,
from Bangalore to Srinagar,
Kali's body bore the goddess's dishonored head,
and her limpid eyes continued to weep.

2nd movement

In which Kali sings

THE MOURNING OF THE SPIRIT FOR
THE PAINS OF THE FLESH:

Wordless. Sitar, tabla.
Head transfixed, her consciousness is severed
from her body's abandon.

One morning in Benares, Kali, drunk,
grimacing with fatigue, left the harlot's street.
In the fields, an idiot quietly slobbering,
seated at the edge of a dung heap,
rose to his feet as she passed and ran after her.
When he was barely the length of a shadow away,
Kali slowed down and allowed him to overtake her.

After he had left her,
she continued her way toward an unknown city.
A child begged her for alms,
and she did not even warm him
that a snake, about to strike,
was lifting its head between two stones.

Sitar, tabla.
Darkness.

Act III

Sitar, tabla.
Kali, her body now
spotted here and there with blood,
performs the dance of

KALI THE MURDERESS:

primal, stalking;
soaring, descending;
stamping, beating.

KALI

She had been overcome by a hatred for all living things,
and at the same time by a desire
to swell her substance,
to annihilate all creatures as she fed on them.
She could be seen crouching at the edge of graveyards;
her jaws cracked bones
like the maw of a lioness.
She killed like the female insect
devouring the male;
she crushed the beings she brought to life
like a wild sow turning on her young.
Those she killed,
she finished off by dancing on their bodies.
Her lips stained with blood
exuded a dull smell of butcher shops,
but her embrace consoled her victims,
and the warmth of her breast
made them forget all ills.

Sitar.

At the edge of a wood, Kali met a wise man.
He was sitting cross-legged,

palms placed one against the other,
and his wizened body was as dry as firewood.

Sitar.

Nobody could have said if he was very young or very old;
his brilliant eyes barely lay visible
beneath their half-shut lids.

KALI'S DANCE AT
THE EXHAUSTION OF BEING;
HER RE-MEMBERING, AND ABSOLUTION:

Sitar, tabla.

"I desire and do not desire," said Kali.
"I suffer and yet I enjoy,
I loathe living and am afraid to die."

"We are all incomplete," said the wise man,
"We are all pieces, fragments, shadows, matterless ghosts."

"I was a goddess in Indra's heaven," said the harlot.

"And yet you were not freer from the chain of things,
nor your diamond body safer from misfortune
than your body of flesh and filth.
We have all believed that we have wept and
that we have felt pleasure for endless centuries."

The Master of Great Compassion
lifted a hand to bless the passing woman.
Kali felt rising from her own inner depths
the presentiment of a vast definitive peace,
where worlds would stop and beings would be delivered;
of a day of beatitude on which
both life and death will be equally useless,
an age in which the All will be
absorbed into the Nothingness,
as if that pure vacuity that she had just conceived
were quivering within her like a future child.

A pause, a breath.

“I am tired,” moaned the goddess.

“Perhaps, unhappy woman,
dishonored traveler of every road,
you are about to attain that which
has no shape.”

Sitar. Kali's wordless song, reprised.
Kali slowly washes herself with the water in the bowl
until the white has run from her skin
and the bowl is empty.

She lifts the transparent bowl before her
face
and looks out through it's emptiness.

“Desire has taught you
the emptiness of desire;
regret has shown you
the uselessness of regret.
Be patient,
Error of which we are all a part,
Imperfect Creature thanks to whom
perfection becomes aware of itself,
O Lust which is not necessarily immortal...”

Blackout.