

Kali Dances

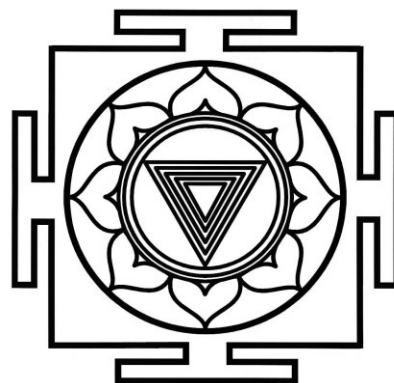
by Patricia Montley

SYNOPSIS:

When a music teacher is found at the church organ with her throat slit, her lesbian lover, the pastor, and his young daughter confront one another with their grief and anger. The investigating detective interrogates each of them as a suspect. Just as the Judeo-Christian God of Genesis broods over the face of the deep at creation, so does the classical Indian Goddess Kali brood over the re-birth of souls...and over the events of this play, challenging the characters to come to terms with her. Although at its most superficial level, the play is a detective story, at its heart it is a mystery play—exploring the intersection of Hindu and Christian beliefs about death.

SETTING:

The set suggests the Kali yantra. A low, raked equilateral-triangle platform. One or two steps lead up to it on all three sides. Small backless benches are on the R and L edge of the platform. The points of the triangle are joined by a line that forms the circumference of a circle painted on the floor. This circle forms the center of a lotus whose eight petals emanate from it. Enclosing the lotus is a square. Upstage of the platform is a tall rectangular arch with decorative lintel and column-supports. Within this arch hangs a screen on which the audience views slides.



Scene 1

AT RISE:

In the dark, we hear the loudly amplified sound of exaggerated, deep, slow breathing. Then unrealistic lighting fades up slowly on KALI, the black Goddess of India. Her very long hair is luxuriant and disheveled. With her whole body she breathes. As she inhales, the lights dim; as she exhales the lights brighten. Slowly, Indian music fades in as breathing sound fades out. She begins to dance. She is at once comforting and menacing. She gives birth, then devours her offspring. She battles demons and slays them. She makes love to her consort, then devours his entrails. We become aware of MAYA lying on the floor, asleep. KALI dances around and over her. The dance comes to a climactic close as the music ends abruptly with a loud dissonant organ chord. KALI freezes. MAYA springs up to a sitting position, screaming.

MAYA

Ma! Ma!

(Louder.)

Maaaaa!

(Lighting changes. KALI backs off as FATHER enters and crosses to MAYA. He wears a black cardigan and clerical collar.)

FATHER

Maya! What is it?

MAYA

(Still screaming.)

Ma!

FATHER

(Shaking her.)

Maya, wake up! You're dreaming—you're having another nightmare.

MAYA

No, Father! She was here. She danced me. I could feel her.

FATHER

Who?

MAYA

Kali.

FATHER

Kali?

MAYA

The Goddess. She dances me!

FATHER

What do you mean?

MAYA

She's inside me. She...

FATHER

She what?

MAYA

She...urges me...to *feel*.

To feel what? FATHER

Things I shouldn't. MAYA

What things? FATHER

No! MAYA

You can tell me Maya. I'm your father. FATHER

(She catches her breath, then again, and again until she is hyperventilating. FATHER pulls her to him and rocks her. Over his shoulder she screams.)

Maaaaa! MAYA

(Crossfade.)

Scene 2

Lights up on ARTEMIS, presenting a lecture. Slides are projected for the audience to see.

ARTEMIS

(Slide 1.)

And here we have the Indian Kali Ma, the Black Goddess who embraces all that is.

(Slide 2.)

Kali has a trinity of incarnations: Creator, Preserver, Destroyer, represented here by the trident. She was worshiped by India's dark-skinned Dravidians—long before the Aryans invaded and their priests assigned her functions to male gods, naming Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer.

(Slide 3.)

One myth has Kali dancing with Shiva, Lord of the Cosmic Dance. The two grow wilder and more competitive until the world shakes itself to pieces.

(Slide 4.)

In another myth, Kali is the fierce, emaciated hag

(Slide 5.)

whose primordial hunger feasts on animals and men to replenish the energy that drives the universe.

ARTEMIS (*Cont.*)*(Slide 6.)*

Thus she slays demons on the battlefield...and drinks their blood.

(Slide 7.)

Drunk with slaughter, she dances on them, thrilled to feel the lifeless flesh beneath her naked feet.

(Slide 8.)

Gradually she realizes it is her consort Shiva under her and she is dancing him to death. She slows at the awareness, but is destined to resume the dance that will end the world.

*(Crossfade.)***Scene 3***Lights up on DETECTIVE and FATHER.*

Did you ever kill anyone?

DETECTIVE

Of course not.

FATHER

Could you?

DETECTIVE

I don't need to, Detective. I have you and the justice system for that.

FATHER

Begging the question.

DETECTIVE

Could you?

FATHER

Have done. Once. In the line of duty, of course.

DETECTIVE

Of course.

FATHER

You haven't answered.

DETECTIVE

FATHER
You're very observant.

DETECTIVE
And persistent.

FATHER
I...I don't know. Probably not. At least I hope not.

DETECTIVE
Not even if your life were threatened?

FATHER
My life is threatened every day. I drive a car. I eat red meat. I drink tap water. I *breathe*. Anyway, in my profession, one is supposed to be prepared to die.

DETECTIVE
Do you think Sheila Dunn was prepared to die?

FATHER
Who can know the state of another's soul?

DETECTIVE
Her confessor.

FATHER
We don't do much of that any more.

DETECTIVE
So she wasn't a parishioner you knew very well?

FATHER
I didn't say that.

DETECTIVE
Was she?

FATHER
She was music director for our school. Played the organ for Sunday masses, conducted the choir. Helped to plan the liturgies. She was good at it—very talented.

DETECTIVE
So you saw a lot of her?

FATHER
The parish will miss her very much.

And you personally?

DETECTIVE

(*Beat.*)

FATHER

Yes. I personally will miss her very much. She was a generous parishioner, a trusted colleague, a friend.

DETECTIVE

Did you know, when you hired her, about...her lifestyle?

FATHER

No.

DETECTIVE

And would you have—

FATHER

Probably not.

DETECTIVE

So you disapprove?

FATHER

(*Beat.*)

My Church disapproves.

DETECTIVE

And you?

FATHER

I...prayed for her.

DETECTIVE

Doesn't that seem a bit hypocritical—coming from a Catholic priest with a daughter?

FATHER

I was not a Catholic priest when my daughter was born.

DETECTIVE

Oh? Tell me about that.

FATHER

Is my personal history part of your investigation?

DETECTIVE

Everything is part of our investigation. And your daughter is involved, remember.

FATHER

How could I forget?

(Beat.)

There were many British missionaries in India and the one in my parents' village was quite persuasive. After they converted from Hindu to Episcopal, they moved here to the States. I was baptized, confirmed, married and ordained in the same church. My father was grounds keeper for the cemetery behind it—where they are buried.

DETECTIVE

And then...?

FATHER

My wife died. I raised my daughter. I became a Catholic.

DETECTIVE

Why?

FATHER

You are nosy.

DETECTIVE

Humor me.

FATHER

Apostolic succession.

DETECTIVE

Pardon?

FATHER

The Pope is the direct successor of Saint Peter.

DETECTIVE

Pure blood lines?

FATHER

Only without the blood.

DETECTIVE

If you don't count the Medici's. Or the Inquisition.

FATHER

Even popes are only human.

DETECTIVE

There must have been something else, something more...personal.

FATHER

Do you moonlight as a therapist?

DETECTIVE

Don't have to. I see a lot of human nature in my day job.

FATHER

More than you want to, I'd guess.

DETECTIVE

So what was it—the something more personal?

FATHER

Perhaps it was the asceticism that appealed to me. Offering liberation from this life of suffering. It's a lot like Hinduism in that respect.

DETECTIVE

Ironic, eh?

FATHER

God's little joke.

DETECTIVE

What about doctrinal differences? Any bones to pick with the Episcopal hierarchy?

FATHER

I'm sure ministers in every denomination have things they don't see eye-to-eye on with their bishops.

DETECTIVE

But most don't leave one to join another. What was it exactly you didn't see eye-to-eye on? Obviously not the married clergy thing.

FATHER

Obviously.

DETECTIVE

What about women clergy? Do you approve of ordaining women?

FATHER

No. I don't.

DETECTIVE
What else?

FATHER
Isn't that enough?

DETECTIVE
You might as well tell me. If there were other reasons, I'll find out.

FATHER
I...I didn't think the church should be giving its blessing to homosexual unions.

DETECTIVE
So you jumped ship.

FATHER
I decided I would be more theologically at home in the Catholic church.

DETECTIVE
(Beat.)
That's quite a journey.

FATHER
Not as exciting as yours, I'm sure. Or perhaps you come from a long, unbroken line of police officers?

DETECTIVE
My parents were anthropologists. When we were living with the Yoruba in Nigeria, there was a raid on the village. They were both killed.

FATHER
Oh. I'm sorry. How old were you?

DETECTIVE
Fifteen...Maya's age.

FATHER
Did they find who did it?

DETECTIVE
No.

FATHER
(Beat.)
What a devastating experience for a young boy. It must have seemed like the end of the world to you. How did you...manage to...?

DETECTIVE

The Yoruba taught me how to grieve. How to make an ancestor shrine...and masks. So that my parents would not simply dissolve into ghosts, but would be able to go on loving me and protecting me.

FATHER

And have they?

DETECTIVE

As best they could.

FATHER

A parent's protection is important.

DETECTIVE

And what if your daughter's life were threatened?

FATHER

Excuse me?

DETECTIVE

Could you do it then?

FATHER

Do what?

DETECTIVE

Kill?

FATHER

Perhaps.

(Beat.)

(Crossfade.)