



Ghungroos Speak Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet in Kathak



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Abstract:

Romeo and Juliet is a 90-minute Kathak ballet conceptualized and choreographed by Saswati Sen under the mentorship of Pandit Birju Maharaj. This paper examines the ballet as a first known instance of Shakespeare's tragedy rendered entirely through the aesthetics of Indian classical dance. Based on performance observation, embodied participation, and artist interviews, the study explores how abhinaya, rhythm, raga, and tala translate Shakespeare's emotional world into Kathak. The choreography, music, and stagecraft bring Western storytelling into conversation with Kathak, demonstrating how tradition and modernity can coexist in performance, and how movement alone can convey complex narrative and emotion.

Keywords: Pandit Birju Maharaj; Saswati Sen; Kathak Ballet; Romeo and Juliet; Intercultural Dialogue; Shakespeare Adaptation; Raga and Tala

Research Paper

Introduction

Under the guidance of Pandit Birju Maharaj, Saswati Sen adapted Romeo and Juliet into a full-length Kathak ballet. In this transformation, Shakespeare's verse was interpreted through Kathak's rhythm, melody, and expressive vocabulary, creating a meeting point between a Western dramatic text and an Indian classical performance tradition.

Shakespeare's plays have frequently been reinterpreted within Indian theatre and dance traditions. However, adaptations within Kathak remain virtually nonexistent. The ballet Romeo and Juliet in Kathak therefore represents the first known attempt to translate a Shakespearean tragedy entirely into Kathak's movement vocabulary. As such, it offers an important case study in how a classical Indian dance form can reinterpret a Western dramatic narrative without abandoning its stylistic principles.

Saswati Sen conceived the idea of adapting Romeo and Juliet into Kathak after experiencing a Western ballet in Europe. She was drawn to the story's enduring emotional appeal and sought to interpret it through Kathak's vocabulary of movement and abhinaya. While Pandit Birju Maharaj initially expressed concern about maintaining the purity of Kathak, Sen's approach carefully navigated this tension, ensuring the production remained faithful to classical form while exploring a new narrative context. Sen recalled that she promised Maharaj ji she would "remain true to the form," emphasizing the delicate balance between innovation and tradition (Sen).

One of the production's most striking features was its reliance entirely on music and movement. There were no songs or spoken dialogues; the entire narrative unfolded through the soundscape created by Pandit Birju Maharaj and Louis Banks. Pandit Birju Maharaj carefully selected ragas and talas to maintain the

integrity of Hindustani classical music while supporting the unfolding narrative, emphasizing the “purity of the Hindustani classical system” even while integrating Western musical elements. This musical balance enabled Shakespeare’s emotional narrative to be expressed within Kathak’s rhythmic and melodic framework (B. Maharaj).

The production demonstrates that universal themes, such as love and relational bonds, can be expressed through Kathak without losing narrative coherence. As one contemporary review noted, “Only the name of the story is changing,” underscoring the universality of the emotions depicted (Innovate).

Romeo and Juliet in Kathak thus became an experiment in which the language of Kathak gave Shakespeare’s tragedy a new cultural dimension.

Research Focus and Approach

This paper examines how *Romeo and Juliet* navigates the balance between tradition and modernity using Kathak’s expressive vocabulary. I first experienced the ballet as an audience member in Delhi in 2003, an encounter that left a lasting impression on my understanding of Kathak’s narrative potential. This study is based on performance observation, embodied participation, and interviews with key artists involved in the production, including Pandit Birju Maharaj and Saswati Sen, along with principal performers such as Mamta Maharaj, Deepak Maharaj, and Vipul Das. Additional perspectives were gathered from ensemble dancers and select audience members. Mandakini Chaudhari, an ensemble dancer in the production, recalled the scale of the production and the intensity of its preparation: “When it was first choreographed, it was a huge production, almost about 150 dancers. There were full day rehearsals and Maharaj ji would be sitting there and directing” (Chaudhari).

Sonali Roy, an ensemble dancer in the production, emphasizes how rehearsals balanced technical precision with emotional engagement: “Footwork and formations were precise, but Maharaj ji insisted that dancers ‘live the moment’ by understanding the emotional situation of each scene” (Roy). This illustrates that the training emphasized not only technical mastery but also emotional authenticity, where intention, eyes, and subtle gestures conveyed the depth of each scene.

Translating Shakespeare into Kathak

Adapting *Romeo and Juliet* into Kathak required rethinking how a Western narrative could be communicated through the form’s movement vocabulary.

Saswati Sen aimed to explore the full expressive range of Kathak, focusing on Satvik Abhinaya rather than the broad Angik Abhinaya typical of Western ballet. She observed that Kathak’s linear grace and upright stance made it particularly suitable for translating Western poise while maintaining classical subtlety. “I wanted to focus on Satvik Abhinaya, and was already imagining Juliet in Kathak” (Sen).

Vishal Krishna emphasized that Sen adhered strictly to Kathak shastra even while experimenting, ensuring the ballet remained rigorous and preserved the classical integrity for younger dancers (Krishna). Neelima Beri, one of the ensemble dancers, noted that while Sen conceptualized the choreography, the guidance of Pandit Birju Maharaj was evident throughout, highlighting the collaborative nature of the production. (Beri).

My observations of the rehearsals and performances revealed that Maharaj ji’s mentorship extended beyond the lead performers. He guided the ensemble collectively to ensure unity while giving individual corrections, so that even dancers in minor roles understood the emotional conflict and tension between the families, allowing the tragedy to resonate across the stage. Participating in the marketplace scenes and the fight sequence allowed me to witness firsthand how each dancer, through precise footwork, hastakas, and chakkars, brought the story to life. Experiencing the choreography firsthand made me aware of the physical and emotional precision required in Kathak, and how subtle shifts in posture or gaze can convey deep narrative meaning. The duel and ensuing tension were conveyed entirely through movement and subtle expressions, showing how Kathak communicates complex emotions without words.

Vipul Das noted that the role of Friar Laurence was unique, as it involved acting over dancing. Maharaj ji guided him on every detail—how to walk, read letters, and even perform gestures like crossing the stage—to ensure the audience understood the story through body language and subtle expressions rather than traditional footwork (Das).

Music as a Cross-Cultural Bridge

The music of *Romeo and Juliet* in Kathak lies at the heart of its intercultural achievement. Pandit Birju Maharaj and Louis Banks created the music that balances Indian classical structure with Western emotional tonality.

“He created an alternative to Prokofiev’s Russian music, structured for kathak - percussively rhythmic, with ragas (improvisational patterns) and tablas (bongo-like

drums) - also enlisting their friend Louis Banks, the godfather of Indian jazz, to help write the 90-minute score” (Glentzer).

“The ragas were chosen to suit Western sensibilities and the mood of each scene: Raag Kirwani was used for Juliet’s entry for its youthful melodic character, while Mishra Bhairavi was used for the Ball Dance, providing elegance and emotional nuance. Mishra Malkauns and Darbari were also used across the scenes to add depth in more reflective passages” (B. Maharaj). These musical choices helped translate Shakespeare’s feelings into Kathak’s melodic and rhythmic logic.

Louis Banks’ inclusion of jazz elements added a Western inflection without compromising the Indian foundation.

“The music was so powerful that during the grieving scenes, my body began to shake on its own” (M. Maharaj).

The narrative of the ballet unfolds through a sequence of scenes that mirror the structure of Shakespeare’s play. Each scene uses Kathak’s rhythmic vocabulary, abhinaya, and spatial composition to translate dramatic action into movement.

Scene I: The Marketplace – Early Morning

The ballet opens with darkness on stage. In the marketplace, performers quietly light lamps along the streets, evoking the atmosphere of an older Verona. Maharaj ji’s meticulous attention to such details was evident. As the lamps glowed, the dancers brought the streets fully to life through Kathak’s rhythm, gestures, and movement, without any spoken words or songs. Choreographed in Teentaal, the scene used synchronized footwork, hastakas, and chakkars to capture the energy of a bustling marketplace. Observing and later performing in this scene revealed how carefully arranged props and precise movements created an immersive environment for both performers and audience.

The attention to detail extended even to the props used on stage. Ragini Maharaj recalls:

“During the first performance in Kamani auditorium in Delhi, I was startled to see many of my own toys on the stage as props. I was very little and I wanted them back immediately, but as soon as I saw my father entering as Romeo, I forgot everything and became lost in the scene” (R. Maharaj).

When the Prince of Verona enters, the scene calms, and the dancers’ movements return to balanced, still patterns.

Neelima Beri explained that while the principal characters carried the emotional weight of the narrative, the ensemble focused on symmetry and collective body language: “In a group dance, symmetry becomes so important... emotion is not just shown by the face” (Beri).



Scene II: Juliet’s Room

Juliet is introduced in a quiet, intimate setting, her innocence expressed through soft rhythms and delicate abhinaya. Her affectionate play with the nurse is conveyed through tender expressions and gentle movements, highlighting the warmth and emotional closeness of their bond.



Several dancers involved in the production observed that emotional authenticity in Kathak depends more on sensitivity and imagination than on the performer’s age. With Maharaj ji’s guidance, mature dancers like Saswati Sen were able to convincingly portray youthful love, demonstrating how abhinaya in Kathak can transcend literal age.



When her parents arrive with Paris, the mood shifts from playful intimacy to the formality of social expectations. This transition is mirrored in Juliet's movements: her flowing hastakas and circular spins soften into controlled postures and measured steps. The scene presents Juliet's emotional world before love and tragedy intervene.

Scene III: The Ballroom

The ballroom scene introduces the grandeur of the Capulet household. The atmosphere is festive, with dancers moving to Dadra taal in Raag Mishra Bhairavi. The music gives the scene a gentle rhythm and elegance, suitable for a social gathering. Deepak Maharaj as Romeo, along with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio, enters the hall disguised as guests. Their movements reflect curiosity and excitement as they explore the unfamiliar surroundings. When Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time, their gestures and silent exchanges make the moment gentle, poetic and romantic, which transcends the need for words.

Neelima Beri observed that the choreography stretched traditional Kathak grammar, particularly in the ball dance, adapting its movement vocabulary to suit a Western-style setting: "The classical grammar of Kathak was definitely stretched... it looked very nice in a Western set-up" (Beri).



Mamta Maharaj reflected on the demands of this scene from a performer's perspective, describing the complexity of portraying Lady Capulet within the lively atmosphere of the ball: "The Ball Dance scene was the toughest because it was Juliet's first ball, and she was to meet Paris, her fiancé. As a mother, I had to keep an eye on her and also attend to the guests. I had to walk around, making sure everything looked perfect. I imagined it as a real party at home so that my movements would appear natural" (M. Maharaj).

Mamta Maharaj's description illustrates how Kathak choreography in the ball scene balances technical precision with emotional authenticity. Each movement, from Lady Capulet's careful monitoring of the room to her subtle interactions with guests, reflects both character and context. This shows how the dancers embody narrative through posture, gesture, and rhythm. The harmony of the gathering, however, is short-lived. Tension rises as Tybalt spots Romeo, and the music quickens, mirroring the unfolding conflict.

Scene IV: Juliet's Balcony

The balcony scene, a duet between Romeo and Juliet, is the emotional center of the ballet. Set to Raag Bhairavi, the choreography conveys tenderness and quiet intensity. The dancers' synchronized steps, gentle chakkars, and expressive hastakas, combined with subtle facial expressions, communicate the growing bond and hesitation of first love.

The music's soft melodic phrasing mirrors the characters' cautious emotions, while pauses in rhythm allow moments of longing and uncertainty to surface. Through controlled footwork, subtle shifts in posture, and carefully timed gestures, the dancers embody both the excitement and hesitation of young love. This scene demonstrates how Kathak's movements and rhythms can express emotion entirely without words, making the audience feel the intimacy and tension of the encounter.



Scene V: The Marketplace

In the market place, the busy energy of the streets contrasts with Romeo's quiet inner calm. Amid the surrounding activity, his movements are inward-

focused, with subtle shifts in posture and restrained footwork. Even as the crowd dances in celebration and the newlyweds exchange affectionate glances, Romeo's gestures remain measured, showing that his attention is entirely on Juliet. The lively rhythms of the scene highlight the contrast between public excitement and his private emotion.



When Juliet's nurse enters with a letter, the mood shifts. Romeo's face lights up and his movements become more animated, reflecting the joy of receiving her message. The nurse, Romeo, and his friends move together in synchronized patterns to the accompanying music. Through careful footwork, gentle rhythms, and expressive gestures, the ballet conveys the anticipation and happiness of the moment, demonstrating how Kathak communicates emotional nuance entirely without words.

Scene VI: The Chapel

The chapel scene conveys a quiet sense of sanctity and hope. Romeo and Juliet's secret union, performed before the friar and observed only by Juliet's nurse, is intimate and restrained. The scene's solemnity is reflected in the stillness of the performers and the careful staging, emphasizing the sacredness of the moment.

Vipul Das, who performed as the Friar, explained that every gesture and pause was meant to convey the gravity of the ritual: "Even without dance, the positioning, timing, and interaction of the characters must express devotion and secrecy. The audience should feel the sanctity and tension of the moment through silence as much as through movement."

Watching the scene unfold, I noticed how the performers' restrained gestures and deliberate pacing conveyed the sanctity and tension of the secret union.

Scene VII: The Marketplace

This scene represents the peak of dramatic tension in the ballet. The clash between Romeo and Tybalt is conveyed entirely through rhythm. The market setting becomes a site of rhythmic disruption. Tybalt enters with sharp, forceful footwork, his movements accentuated by the music, immediately signaling the intensity of the confrontation. The scene is heavy with emotion as Mercutio is killed and Romeo avenges his death by killing Tybalt.



Being part of the fight sequence, I experienced firsthand how each sharp chakkar, hastaka, and footwork accentuated the conflict. The rhythm dictated every movement, and the ensemble's coordination made the duel feel immediate and intense. The grief following Tybalt's death, amplified by the performers' restrained yet powerful abhinaya and underscored by music and percussion, made the tragedy tangible and left a lasting emotional impact on both dancers and audience.

Scene VIII: Juliet's Bedroom

This scene focuses on abhinaya-led interpretation, using controlled movement and spatial stillness to express Juliet's anxiety as she waits for Romeo.



His entry is discreet, marked by a subdued movement quality that reflects the circumstances of secrecy and the weight of the preceding violence.

Her brief reunion with Romeo conveys restrained grief and the inevitability of separation, while the entrance of her parents introduces firmer, directive movements that reflect societal expectations. The choreography contrasts Juliet's inner emotional world with the social expectations imposed upon her, emphasizing the tension between personal desire and external control.

Sonali Roy notes the power of stillness in conveying tragedy: "Tragedy could be communicated through a still posture combined with only a slight change in facial expression or eye movement, proving stillness can be more powerful than fast movement" (Roy).

Scene IX: The Chapel

The Chapel scene marks a moment of crisis and concealment, both dramatically and thematically. Juliet's movement vocabulary here reflects urgency tempered by restraint, her gestures oriented inward rather than outward, signifying the turmoil of decision.

Vipul Das described the night scene with Juliet receiving the sleeping potion as particularly intense. Maharaj ji coached the actors on how to communicate the drama clearly, ensuring the emotion of the scene was visible without relying on spoken words.

Scene X: Juliet's Bedroom

The bedroom sequence heightens the emotional intensity of the ballet. The scene opens with Juliet's visible struggle between obedience and defiance. Her movements are restrained yet deliberate, marked by subtle abhinaya, gestures of hesitation, trembling hands, and a downward gaze, to depict her inner conflict.

When Juliet finally drinks the potion, the moment stands still. The discovery of her lifeless form is performed in collective movements heavy with disbelief and grief. The music deepens the atmosphere of grief through its slow tempo and restrained melodic phrases, allowing the intensity to resonate throughout the scene.

Scene XI: The Graveyard / Crypt

In this scene, the music moves beyond tala and adopts an abstract quality. The haunting score intensifies the emotional gravity of the moment.

In the final scene, the ballet lets its story settle into a space where love, loss, and fate meet, leaving a feeling that lingers long after the movement stops.



The abstraction of rhythm in this final sequence shifts the ballet from narrative action to emotional resolution, allowing the tragedy to settle through atmosphere rather than choreography.

Choreography and Stagecraft

The production featured an elaborate stage design, including a full balcony with an attached staircase constructed directly on stage. This gave the production a vintage charm, almost like stepping into an old European house.

As Sinha observes, the fight sequences relied entirely on Kathak's rhythmic vocabulary, demonstrating how the form's technical compositions could communicate dramatic tension without spoken dialogue (Sinha).

"I always emphasize minimal stage design and integrated lighting to foreground movement architecture," veteran dancer and choreographer Kumudini Lakhia observed. "In Romeo and Juliet, the elaborate set, especially the constructed balcony, drew attention more to theatrical spectacle than to spatial composition. Casting Saswati Sen as Juliet, at the age of fifty, complicated the adaptation. While Kathak allows performer to transcend literal age through abhinaya, the production did not fully resolve the tension between youthful characterization and mature embodiment" (Lakhia).

The dancers' personal experiences also reveal what it took to bring this idea to life.

"Saswati didi is so senior and someone I looked up to as an elder sister and a Guru. To imagine her as Juliet, and have to do romantic scenes with her, was emotionally disorienting. I even refused the role until Maharaj ji personally asked me to accept it, I could not disobey him" (D. Maharaj). "Guru Aagya", he phrased it. Once he did, his performance became a profound study in discipline, an example of how artistic duty can overcome personal discomfort.



Mamta Maharaj faced a similar dilemma. She played Juliet's mother and her uncle Krishna Mohan Maharaj played her husband and Juliet's father. "Treating a real life uncle as an on-stage husband was not easy. I had to forget my real relationship with him so I could do justice to my role" (M. Maharaj).

"Age did not affect the believability of the characters. Saswati Sen and Deepak Maharaj appeared fully immersed and youthful on stage due to their mastery and discipline, demonstrating how training and experience can transcend literal age in Kathak performance" (Krishna).

Vipul Das recalled that Maharaj ji demonstrated every character himself and continued to refine the production over the years by singing and adding subtle nuances (Das).

Costume and Aesthetic Translation

Costume design in *Romeo and Juliet* in Kathak emerged as an interpretative bridge between two distinct aesthetic worlds, Renaissance Verona and classical North India. Instead of copying Elizabethan fashion or dressing the characters in traditional Kathak attire, Saswati Sen created a middle ground for Shakespeare's story and Kathak's movement vocabulary.

She adapted the idea of Western gowns for women but expressed them through Indian craft. "A mix of long skirts and lehengas were created specifically for this performance" (Chatterjee). She used lighter fabrics and soft drapes so the costumes would move naturally with the dancers. The dupatta was replaced with a scarf in some scenes, demonstrating a blend of Renaissance modesty and Kathak elegance. For the men, the pyjama and short fitted vests were crafted in a way that faintly resembled the breeches and shirts worn in Verona. This visual similarity helped place the story in its Shakespearean world.

The colour palette was also carefully considered, with pastels for noblewomen and deeper earthy tones for the townspeople. "They wore costumes that suggested a fusion of Italian Renaissance and contemporary India. The sets, too, were cross-cultural. But the story was all Shakespeare, just to a different beat" (Glentzer).

This showed how a classical form like Kathak, handled with sensitivity and imagination, can absorb new cultural references while retaining its identity. At the same time, the flowing silhouettes and lighter fabrics ensured that spins, footwork, and gestures remained clearly visible, allowing the costumes to support rather than restrict the choreography.

Audience Reception

When *Romeo and Juliet* in Kathak was first presented, it elicited both surprise and admiration from the audience. For many, the very idea of translating a Western tragedy into the idiom of Kathak was unexpected. Yet, once the curtain rose, viewers were drawn by the novelty of the ballet. The absence of dialogues or songs made the audience rely on the expressive power of music, rhythm, and gesture. This silent eloquence and the quality of the music was appreciated by spectators and critics as one of the ballet's greatest achievements.

Kathak dancer Rashmi Mishra, who attended the performance as an audience member, recalled being struck by the scale and originality of the production: "The show was fantastic. Everything was choreographed in Kathak, yet it felt completely different" (R. Mishra).

Sonali Roy observed that even audience members unfamiliar with Shakespeare could connect emotionally because the themes of love and loss are universal. She emphasized that in *Romeo and Juliet*, emotion itself became the language, leaving no gaps in understanding, and underscoring Kathak's ability to translate complex foreign narratives for diverse audiences (Roy).

Rather than appearing foreign, the story blended smoothly with Kathak's aesthetic language. Several senior dancers and critics praised this production as a successful example of cultural translation, one that neither Westernized Kathak nor Indianized Shakespeare.

"The idea of *Romeo and Juliet* and the Shakespearean tragedy being performed barefoot and wearing ghungroos, did not go down too well with some of the audience in USA. They found it difficult to relate to the idea. On the other hand, some of the audience in USA, Canada and India, responded with an almost meditative silence during key sequences and thunderous applause at the end, moved by the sheer sincerity of the performance" (M. Maharaj).

Akhilesh Mishra, who works at the Library in Bhatkhande University, Lucknow, attended the ballet in Ravindralaya, Lucknow. He said, "There was pin drop silence as the ballet came to an end. People were crying and finally everyone got up and started clapping. It was a highly emotional moment. I have never seen such audience response."

Critics emphasized that the production did not attempt to modernize Kathak through superficial innovation but instead revealed its timeless expressive potential. The



audience response thus became an extension of the ballet's central argument: that tradition, when deeply understood, can itself be a form of modern expression.

“The music and unique choreography were a testimony to the imagination and vision of Birju and Saswati as they took 70 performers on stage through to tell the story of lost love. Birju Maharaj collaborated with the Indian film composer, jazz musician and singer Louis Banks to set the unique musical score that wound through the production. The result was a stunningly appealing production of Romeo and Juliet in the unexpected style of Kathak.” (Malhotra)

Conclusion

Romeo and Juliet in Kathak occupies a unique space in the history of Indian classical performance. The ballet reimagines a Western narrative without compromising the structural or spiritual coherence of Kathak.

A big part of its success comes from how firmly it stays within the Kathak tradition. Maharaj ji's apprehension, that the sanctity of Kathak might dissolve in adaptation, was dispelled through Sen's insistence that every gesture, rhythm, and movement must emerge from the dance's indigenous vocabulary. There was no imitation of Western ballet, no verbal explanation, and no narrative assistance from lyrics. The entire story unfolded through movement, rhythm, and emotion. The success of the ballet affirmed Kathak's capacity to function as a language of universal storytelling.

The testimonials of Mamta Maharaj and Deepak Maharaj further humanize this artistic experiment. Their accounts of familial bonds, discipline, and emotional restraint reveal that the ballet was a creative challenge on that front too. Performing alongside mentors and relatives demanded an emotional balance that mirrored the play's own conflicts between reality and stagecraft.

Within discussions of tradition and modernity in Indian classical arts, Romeo and Juliet in Kathak represents an act of creative renewal. What began with apprehension ultimately resulted in widespread appreciation. It demonstrates that classical forms can evolve without dilution, and that the essence of modernity in Indian art lies in ongoing renewal.

In this way, Romeo and Juliet in Kathak demonstrates that Kathak possesses the expressive depth to interpret stories that travel across cultures and centuries.

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