

PLAY

THE DANCING- GIRL'S WORSHIP

Rabindranath Tagore



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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

This dance-drama — Tagore's first work in the form — was composed in 1926, drawing on Buddhist legend surrounding the court of King Bimbisara of Magadha: patron of the Buddha, father of the rebellious Ajatashatru, husband to a queen who cannot forgive the faith that drew her son away from her. Proper names are kept in their Bengali and Sanskritic forms. The Pali liturgical passages are given in transliteration, each followed by an English rendering, so as to preserve something of their sound as ritual utterance and not only their sense.

PROLOGUE

[Enter the monk UPALI]

(Sings)

Over the eastern rim of heaven the fair dawn has kindled, flushed with the young red of morning. This bright and blessed hour — make it bear fruit, ferry yourself across into the deathless. Who is awake, who is awake, to claim a portion of measureless merit?

Is anyone there? I ask for alms — I beg in the name of the Lord Buddha.

[Enter the NATI, an actress of the court; she bows low]

UPALI. May blessing and grace be upon you. Child, who are you?

NATI. I am the dancer of this royal household.

UPALI. Are you the only one awake in this whole palace today?

NATI. The princesses are all still asleep.

UPALI. I ask alms in the name of the Lord Buddha.

NATI. Master, allow me — let me go and call the princesses.

UPALI. It is from you that I have come today to ask alms.

NATI. But I am ill-fated. My offering would shame the master's begging-bowl. Tell me what I should give.

UPALI. Whatever is your finest gift.

NATI. But I do not know what in me is finest.

UPALI. No matter — the Lord has shown you mercy, and He knows.

NATI. Then, master, let Him Himself take up whatever is mine to give.

UPALI. So He shall — your flower of worship. Just as spring, king of the seasons, awakens of himself the flowering grove to the offering of itself, so your day has come; I have come only to tell you so. You are fortunate.

NATI. I shall wait.

[Exit]

[Enter the PRINCESSES]

Master, take your alms! Do not go back, do not go back! — What has happened? Has he already gone?

RATNAVALI. What is there to fear, Vasavi? There is no shortage of those who will take alms — it is those who will give them who are few.

NANDA. No, Ratna — it is the one who will take alms who must be sought through discipline and striving. Today has gone for nothing.

[Exeunt]

ACT ONE

In the pleasure-grove of the Magadha palace

Queen Lokeshwari, the nun Utpalaparna

LOKESHWARI. Has King Bimbisara sent for me today?

NUN. Yes.

LOKESHWARI. Today is the day appointed for worship at his Ashoka shrine — is that the reason, I wonder?

NUN. Today is the full moon of spring.

LOKESHWARI. Worship? Worship of whom?

NUN. Today is the Lord Buddha's birth festival — the worship is offered to Him.

LOKESHWARI. Go and tell my noble lord that I have finished with all worship, down to the last of it. Others may offer flowers, offer lamps — I have offered up my whole household, and emptied it.

NUN. What are you saying, my Queen?

LOKESHWARI. My only son, Chitra — my own prince — they lured him away and made him a monk. And still they ask me to offer worship! Cut the root of the creeper, and still you ask it for a spray of blossom.

NUN. What you have given, you have not lost. Whom you once held in your lap, you now possess in the whole world.

LOKESHWARI. Woman, do you have a son?

NUN. No.

LOKESHWARI. Did you ever have one?

NUN. No. I was widowed in my youth.

LOKESHWARI. Then be silent. Do not speak of what you do not know.

NUN. My Queen, it was you yourself who first summoned the true faith into this royal household, before all others. Why then, today—

LOKESHWARI. How strange — so you do remember, I see. I had thought your master must surely have forgotten it by now. I would summon the monk Dharmaruchi and have him recite the twenty-five verses of blessing every day before I would so much as take water; I would not break my fast till a hundred monks had been fed; every year, when the rains ended, it was my vow to give the whole Sangha their triple robes. On the day when Devadatta, enemy of the Buddha's faith, turned every heart here to wavering, I alone stood firm in my devotion, and had the Blessed Tathagata seated beneath the Ashoka tree in this very garden, that all might hear the truth of the Dharma from his lips. Cruel — ungrateful — and this, in the end, is my reward! Those queens who burned with hatred of me, who mixed poison into my very food — nothing has befallen them; their sons live still in royal splendor.

NUN. The worth of the Dharma is not measured by the worth of worldly things, my Queen. Is the price of gold the same as the price of light?

LOKESHWARI. On the day that Prince Ajatashatru gave himself over to Devadatta, I, in my folly, laughed. I thought they meant to cross the ocean on a broken raft. His hope was that, by the strength of Devadatta's power, he might become king while his father yet lived. And I said, fearless, proud: by the grace of a master whose merit outweighs even Devadatta's power, this evil shall yet be turned aside. Such was my faith. I had the Lord Buddha — the Lion of the Shakyas — brought here, and through him I had my noble husband blessed. And still — whose was the victory?

NUN. Yours. Do not turn that victory back outward, away from your own heart.

LOKESHWARI. Mine!

NUN. What else could it be! On the day that King Bimbisara, seeing his son's hunger for the throne, was able freely to lay down his crown — on that day, the kingdom he won—

LOKESHWARI. That kingdom is a mere word — for a Kshatriya king, it is nothing but mockery. Look instead at me. I am this day a widow though my husband lives, a

childless mother though my son lives, an exile though I dwell in the very heart of the palace. That is no mere word. Those who never once honored your faith now pass me by, laughing in contempt. Where is he now, the one you call the glorious Vajrasattva — let his thunderbolt fall, then, upon their heads.

NUN. My Queen, where in all this is the truth? This is but a dream of a passing moment — let them laugh, and let it pass.

LOKESHWARI. A dream, indeed! Well, it is not this dream I want. I want that other dream — the one called wealth, the one called a son, the one called honor. Go, then, and tell those who walk about with their heads held high, flourishing in that dream — let them offer the worship instead.

NUN. Then I shall go.

LOKESHWARI. Go, then — but they are not fools as I was. They will lose nothing; everything will remain theirs. They never honored the Buddha, the mercy of the Lion of the Shakyas never fell upon them, and so they were spared — spared! Why do you stand there so silent? Have you learned to feign patience?

NUN. How shall I answer that? Even now, within, my patience breaks again and again.

LOKESHWARI. Your patience breaks, and yet in your heart you do nothing but forgive us. This silent insolence of yours is unbearable. Go.

[The NUN moves to go]

Wait, wait, Sister. Chitra has taken some new name for himself, I hear. Do you know it?

NUN. I do. Kushalashila.

LOKESHWARI. The name his own mother called him by — that, to him now, is unclean! And so he cast it off and went his way.

NUN. If it is your wish, my Queen, I might bring him to you one day.

LOKESHWARI. What shame would let me even wish for that? And is it you who is to bring him to me now — I, who first brought him into this world!

NUN. Then bid me go, and I shall go.

LOKESHWARI. Wait a moment. Do you see him — you yourself?

NUN. I do.

LOKESHWARI. Well then — just once, perhaps him — if he — no. Let it be.

NUN. I will speak to him. Perhaps, then, you and he shall meet.

[Exit]

LOKESHWARI. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps! I nourished him with the very blood of my own veins — there was no "perhaps" in that. And now the whole claim of that ancient debt of motherhood has come down to this one small "perhaps." So this, then, is what they call faith! — Mallika!

[Enter MALLIKA]

MALLIKA. My lady.

LOKESHWARI. Have you had news of Prince Ajatashatru?

MALLIKA. I have. He has gone to fetch Devadatta. Nothing will be left of the worship of the Three Jewels in this kingdom.

LOKESHWARI. Coward! The king has not even the courage to rule. What power the Buddha's faith holds — that has already been proved upon me. And yet he cannot summon the courage simply to disregard this falsehood, without standing behind that worthless Devadatta.

MALLIKA. My Queen, those who have much to lose have much to fear. He is the lord of a kingdom, and so, fearfully, he seeks peace with every power at once. When honor to the Buddha's disciples grows too great, at once he calls in Devadatta's disciples and honors them the more. He would keep his fortune safe from both sides at once.

LOKESHWARI. My own fortune is entirely safe. I have nothing left, and so the weak wisdom that seeks falsehood as an ally has left me for good.

MALLIKA. My lady, that is very much what the nun Utpalaparna herself says. She says Queen Lokeshwari is fortunate indeed — that by the grace of the great Bodhi, every stake to which falsehood ties a person has, in her case, already been broken.

LOKESHWARI. Listen — such fine-spun words only kindle my anger when I hear them. Keep your own too-pure, empty truth for yourselves, and give me back those mud-smeared stakes of mine. Then I might once more light lamps at the Ashoka shrine, feed a hundred monks their rice, and have every one of your chants recited from beginning to end. And if that cannot be, then let Devadatta come — genuine or false, whichever he may be. I am going now, up to the palace roof, to see how near they have come.

[Exeunt both]

[Enter SHRIMATI, a vina in her hand]

SHRIMATI. *(Spreading a seat beneath the flowering bower, gazing into the distance)* The hour has come — come, all of you.

(Sings to herself)

In the depths of night, what was it whispered to my heart? I do not know, I do not know. Was it in sleep, or was it waking? I do not know, I do not know.

[Enter MALATI]

MALATI. Are you Shrimati?

SHRIMATI. Yes, I am — but why do you ask?

MALATI. The doorkeeper sent me to you, to learn singing.

SHRIMATI. I have never seen you in the palace before.

MALATI. I have only just come from the village. My name is Malati.

SHRIMATI. Why did you come, child? Were your days not passing well enough there? You were a flower of worship, and the god was well pleased; you will become a garland of pleasure, and some lesser demon will smile. Your springtime

will be spent for nothing. You have come to learn singing? Is that the whole of your hope?

MALATI. Shall I tell you the truth? It is a far greater hope than that. I am ashamed to say it.

SHRIMATI. Oh, I understand now. The foolish hope of becoming a queen. Well, if you did much evil in a former life, it might yet come to pass. The bird of the forest covets the golden cage, when a wicked cunning weighs down its wings. Go — go back, go back, while there is still time.

MALATI. What are you saying, sister? I cannot quite understand you.

SHRIMATI. I am saying—

(Sings)

Why does bondage beguile you, dressed in ornament? Alas, poor luckless one! Why does death rock you gently, smiling its beguiling smile? Alas, poor luckless one!

MALATI. You have not understood me at all. Let me speak plainly, then. I have heard that once the Lord Buddha sat here, in this pleasure-grove, beneath the Ashoka tree. King Bimbisara, they say, raised an altar there, on that very spot.

SHRIMATI. Yes, that is true.

MALATI. The women of the royal house offer worship there in the evening. If I have no right to that, I hoped at least to sweep the dust from that ground — and so I enrolled myself among the singers here.

SHRIMATI. Come, come, sister — this is well. In the princesses' hands, the lamp of worship gives more smoke than light. It was for your own two clean hands that we were waiting. But who was it that put this thought into your mind?

MALATI. How shall I say it, sister? These days some spell, like fire, seems to have caught in the very air, blowing everywhere. Not long ago my brother went away. He was eighteen. I took his hand and asked him, "Where are you going, brother?" and he said, "To seek."

SHRIMATI. The sea has called out to every wave of the river with a single cry. The full moon has risen. — But what is this? I see a ring on your hand! How strange it looks to me. That heavenly mandara-bud — surely it was not sold off for the price of common dust?

MALATI. Then let me tell you the whole of it — you will understand.

SHRIMATI. Through much weeping I have gained the power to understand.

MALATI. He was rich, we were poor. From a distance, in silence, I used to watch him. One day he came himself and said, "I am fond of Malati." My father said, "Malati's good fortune." Every preparation was made — and then, on the very day, he came to the door. Not in a bridegroom's dress, but in a monk's — the ochre robe, the staff in his hand. He said, "If we are to meet, let it be on the path to freedom — not here." — Sister, do not think ill of me — the tears still come to my eyes even now; my heart is a small thing yet.

SHRIMATI. Let the tears fall, let them flow. The dust of the path to freedom will be laid by that very water.

MALATI. I bowed to him and said, "My own bonds are not yet worn away. Give me, at least, the ring you promised to place on my hand." This is that very ring. On the day it slips from my hand and falls at His feet, in the worship of the Lord — that day, we shall meet upon the path to freedom.

SHRIMATI. So many women who had built their homes have this day broken them. So many women have put on the pilgrim's robe and set out upon the road — who can say whether it is the road itself that draws them, or the traveler upon it! How often, hands folded, I pray within my own heart — I say, "Great one, do not remain indifferent. It is you who have set loose this flood of women's tears in house after house — grant them, then, their peace." — Here come the women of the royal house.

[Enter VASAVI, NANDA, RATNAVALI, AJITA, MALLIKA, and BHADRA]

VASAVI. Who is this girl! Look, look — she has tied her hair up in a crown, and set a hibiscus in her curls. Nanda, come and see how she has wound her braid up high with a garland of milkweed flowers. And is that a necklace of gunja-berries round her throat? — Shrimati, where has she come from?

SHRIMATI. From the village. Her name is Malati.

RATNAVALI. So you have found yourself a catch. Meaning to make her your disciple, I suppose? You could not save us — so now you will run your trade in salvation on some village girl instead!

SHRIMATI. What need has a village girl to trouble herself over freedom? There, heaven's own handiwork lies uncovered — hidden neither by dust nor by jewels; and so heaven knows its own, of itself.

RATNAVALI. If I never reach heaven, so be it — but I have no wish to get there on the strength of your preaching. I have no enthusiasm for winning salvation by the grace of Ganesha's mouse; I would sooner take my chances with the buffalo of the King of Death.

NANDA. Your own mount stands ready, Ratna — the owl of Lakshmi. Look here, Ajita, why must you mock Shrimati so? She has not come here to preach to anyone.

VASAVI. Her very silence is itself a mountain of preaching. Look there — she is smiling to herself, so quietly. Is that not a sermon too?

RATNAVALI. A noble sermon indeed! Meaning, I suppose, that sweetness shall conquer bitterness, and a smile shall conquer speech.

VASAVI. Why will you not quarrel a little, Shrimati? Who can bear so much sweetness! It is far better to make a person angry than to make them ashamed.

SHRIMATI. If I were truly so good within, then feigning ill without would do me no harm. It is only the moon that can wear the pretense of a blemish and still be lovely. But the new moon — the dark of the month — what if it should wear a mask of cloud?

AJITA. Look there — the village girl is wondering, amazed, whether these palace girls' tongues have any sweetness in them at all, or only edge. What is your name again — I have forgotten it.

MALATI. Malati.

AJITA. Tell me, what were you thinking?

MALATI. I have come to love my sister here, and so it hurt me to hear it.

AJITA. It is those we love that we make a game of wounding. That is the very rule of ornament in the royal house. Remember it well.

BHADRA. Malati, you seemed about to say something. Go on and say it. I am most curious to know what you make of us.

MALATI. I was going to say — "Well now, you all love the sound of your own talk so much that the time for hearing any song slips clean away."

(General laughter)

VASAVI. "Well now"! "Well now"! Call the palace grammarian — his teaching has plainly not yet reached as far as proper address.

RATNAVALI. Well now, Vasavi! Well now, O crest-jewel of the royal crown!

VASAVI. Well now, Ratnavali! Well now, O moonlight of beauty that enchants the world! What a fine new treasure this is for grammar — "well now," as a form of address.

MALATI. Sister, are they angry with me now?

NANDA. Have no fear, Malati. When the maidens of the sky rain down hail upon a grove of shiuli blossoms, it is not done in anger — that is simply their own way of showing tenderness.

AJITA. Look there, Shrimati is singing quietly to herself, and not a word of ours has even reached her ear. Shrimati, sing out loud — we will join you too.

SHRIMATI's song

In the depths of night, what was it whispered to my heart? I do not know, I do not know! Was it in sleep, or was it waking? I do not know, I do not know! Through many tasks, in many ways, I wander home, I wander the road — does that word, unseen, still sound within me, moment on moment? I do not know, I do not know! Does that word, for no cause I can tell, still trouble my heart — is this fear, or is this triumph? Does that word whisper, again and again, into my very ear, "No more, no more"? Does that word, in changing strains, say to me, "Come away, come far

away" — does it sound within my own breast, or does it sound across the sky? I do not know, I do not know!

VASAVI. Malati, your eyes have filled with tears. Tell me, what did you understand in this song?

MALATI. Shrimati has heard the call.

VASAVI. Whose call?

MALATI. The same call by which my brother went away. The same call by which my—

VASAVI. Who — who was yours?

SHRIMATI. Malati, my sister — hush, say no more. Wipe your eyes; this is no place for weeping.

VASAVI. Shrimati, why did you stop her? Do you think we know only how to laugh?

BHADRA. Do we truly not know, then, where laughter cannot reach at all?

MALATI. Princess, have you truly not heard? A word is moving through the very air today.

NANDA. In the morning light the lotus petal opens of itself — but the walls of a royal palace do not open so.

[Enter LOKESHWARI. All bow]

LOKESHWARI. I cannot bear it any longer. Do you not hear it — that chant of praise running through every street: Om, homage to the Buddha, the Teacher; homage to the Sangha, the most exalted. Even now, to hear it sets something trembling within my breast. *(Covering her ears)* It must be silenced this very day. Now! At once!

MALLIKA. Be at peace, my lady.

LOKESHWARI. At peace, by what means? By what mantra shall I be given peace? That one — homage to the supremely peaceful, the greatly compassionate — no, that mantra is no longer mine, no longer. My mantra now is: homage to the

thunderbolt-wrathed Dakini, homage to the glorious great Vajra-Kala. By weapon, by fire, by blood — so shall peace come into this world. Otherwise sons will go on leaving their mothers' laps, and royal splendor will go on falling from the throne, leaf by withered leaf. — And you, princesses, what are you doing here?

RATNAVALI. (*Laughing*) Waiting for salvation, my lady. Purifying our tainted hearts, little by little, on the road to becoming this Shrimati's disciples.

VASAVI. That is a shameful exaggeration — one should not even repeat it.

LOKESHWARI. So — this actress's disciple! This is exactly what it would come to, in the end — this is the very faith that has arrived. The fallen one comes bearing the teaching of salvation! Has Shrimati suddenly turned saint today? On the day the Lord Buddha came to the Ashoka grove, everyone in this palace went to see him — I sent, out of kindness, to summon even this one. And the sinner did not come at all. And yet today, they say, it is to her hand alone that the monk Upali comes for alms in this palace, passing the princesses by. Fools! Born of a royal house, and yet you sit here welcoming this faith — a faith whose whole purpose is to drag the high seat down into the dust. Where once the king's authority stood, the monk's authority shall stand instead — and this you call faith, you who destroy yourselves with your own hands? Come, actress, let me hear what mantra Upali has taught you — say it aloud. Let us see how great your courage is. Will your sinful tongue not be struck with palsy?

SHRIMATI. (*Rising, hands folded in reverence*)

Om, homage to the Buddha, the Teacher; homage to the Dharma, that carries us across; homage, homage to the Sangha, the most exalted.

LOKESHWARI. Om, homage to the Buddha, the Teacher — enough, enough! Stop, stop!

SHRIMATI. To the helpless, to the friendless, in compassion, He who is the Lord—

LOKESHWARI. (*Striking her own breast*) O friendless one — friendless indeed! Shrimati, say it once more — "Mahākāruṇiko nātho—"

(*Both recite together*)

Mahākāruṇiko nātho hitāya sabbapāṇinaṃ Pūretvā pāramī sabbā patto sambodhimuttamaṃ.

"The great compassionate Lord, for the welfare of all living things, having fulfilled every perfection, attained the highest awakening."

LOKESHWARI. Enough, enough — no more. Homage to the thunderbolt-wrathed Dakini.

[Enter an ATTENDANT]

ATTENDANT. My Queen, come this way, in private. *(Aside)* Prince Chitra has come, to see his mother.

LOKESHWARI. Who says the faith is false? No sooner was the sacred mantra spoken than misfortune fled. You faithless ones, you who laughed to yourselves at the sight of my grief — the great compassionate Lord — how vast is the power of His mercy! Even stone melts before it — I tell you all, here and now: I shall have my son again, I shall have my throne again. Let us see how long the pride endures in those who dare insult the Lord.

I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the Dharma. I go for refuge to the Sangha.

[Exit, still speaking, with the attendant]

RATNAVALI. Mallika, from which quarter does the wind blow now?

MALLIKA. These days a very wind of madness fills the whole sky — does it hold any fixed course at all? No one can say whom it will carry off, or in which direction, or when. That very Kalandaka, who spent forty years at nothing but gambling — I hear he has suddenly become one of their arhats! And Nandivardhana, who once vowed to give his whole fortune to sacrifice, now flies at any Brahmin he sees, as if to strike him down.

RATNAVALI. So Prince Chitra has returned, then.

MALLIKA. Let us wait and see what comes of it in the end.

MALATI. Is it true, sister, that on the day the Blessed One, the incarnation of mercy, came here, you did not go to see him?

SHRIMATI. It is true. To let oneself be seen by Him — that itself is an offering. I was unclean; within me no offering lay ready.

MALATI. Alas, alas — then what happened, sister?

SHRIMATI. To go to Him too easily is to have the going come to nothing. Does merely gazing at Him mean I have truly seen Him? Does merely hearing His words with my ears mean I have truly heard them?

RATNAVALI. Well! That was aimed straight at us. It takes only the smallest breath of encouragement, and the actress's veil of courtesy blows clean away.

SHRIMATI. My days of counterfeit courtesy are over. I will not offer false praise — I will say it plainly: the one your eyes looked upon, you yourselves have not seen.

RATNAVALI. Vasavi, Bhadra, how can you bear this actress's insolence?

VASAVI. If I cannot bear the truth when it comes from without, then I shall have to go on bearing the falsehood that lies within. Shrimati, sing your chant once more — let it wear away the edge of the thorns in my own heart.

SHRIMATI.

Om, homage to the Buddha, the Teacher; homage to the Dharma, that carries us across; homage, homage to the Sangha, the most exalted.

NANDA. We went to see the Lord — but it is to Shrimati that the Lord Himself has come and shown His face, within her own heart.

RATNAVALI. You forget yourself, actress! Will you not protest against such words?

SHRIMATI. Why should I, Princess? If He sets His foot within my heart too, is the glory of it mine — or is it His alone?

VASAVI. Enough, enough — words only breed more words. Sing, now.

SHRIMATI's song

Have you come to my door, seeking my own true self? By that very call of yours, the flower breaks from its hiding into the bare branches — call to that self of mine, today, with that same call. At your call, every bond is forgotten; the green and hidden life throws off its veil of dust. At that call of yours, the young dawn comes suddenly, a ewer of light in her hand, and answers, even into the thick of darkness.

(From offstage) Om, homage to the Three Jewels, to the Bodhisattva, the great being, the greatly compassionate one!

[Enter UTPALAPARNA]

ALL. Reverend Mother, our homage!

NUN.

Bhavatu sabbamaṅgalaṃ rakkhantu sabbadevatā Sabbabuddhānubhāvena sadā sotthī bhavantu te.

"May every blessing be yours; may all the gods protect you; by the power of every Buddha, may you know lasting welfare, always."

SHRIMATI. What is your command?

NUN. Today, on the full moon of spring, is the birth festival of the Blessed Bodhisattva. The charge of offering worship at His seat in the Ashoka grove falls upon Shrimati.

RATNAVALI. I believe I must have misheard. Which Shrimati do you mean?

NUN. This one here — this Shrimati.

RATNAVALI. This actress of the royal household?

NUN. Yes — this actress.

RATNAVALI. Have you taken counsel with the Elders on this?

NUN. This command is theirs.

RATNAVALI. Who are they? Let me hear their names.

NUN. One is Upali himself.

RATNAVALI. But Upali is a barber.

NUN. Sunanda has said the same.

RATNAVALI. He is a cowherd's son.

NUN. This is Sunita's command as well.

RATNAVALI. He, they say, is of the pukkusa caste.

NUN. Princess, in caste, these men are all one and the same. You do not know the true nobility of their birth.

RATNAVALI. I certainly do not. Perhaps this actress knows it, though. Perhaps there is no great difference in caste between them and her — else why so much tenderness for her?

NUN. That much is true. King Bimbisara himself will come today, out of his solitary retreat in the city of Rajagriha, to keep this observance. I must go and receive him.

[Exit]

AJITA. Where are you going now, Shrimati?

SHRIMATI. I am going to wash the altar-seat in the Ashoka grove.

MALATI. Sister, take me with you.

NANDA. I shall go too.

AJITA. I am thinking I might go as well.

VASAVI. I too shall go and see what manner of rite this is.

RATNAVALI. What a fine sight it will be! Shrimati shall conduct the worship, and the rest of you shall form her train of maids, fanning her with whisks.

VASAVI. And you, from where you stand, shall go on breathing out your hot sighs of curse. They will scorch neither the Ashoka grove, nor disturb Shrimati's peace in the least.

[Exeunt all except RATNAVALI and MALLIKA]

RATNAVALI. This cannot be borne! It cannot! It is a thing utterly against nature. Mallika, why was I not born a man! I could curse this very hand of mine, bound as it is with bracelets. If only I bore a sword instead! And you too, Mallika, sat there the whole while in silence, not a word from you. Do you, too, long for the post of that actress's handmaid?

MALLIKA. Even if I did, I should not get it. The actress knows me far too well.

RATNAVALI. I cannot understand how you can simply sit and bear it in silence. Patience is the weapon of the helpless, of the low-born — not of a king's daughters.

MALLIKA. I know that the remedy is close at hand, and so I do not waste my strength.

RATNAVALI. You know this for certain?

MALLIKA. For certain.

RATNAVALI. If it is a secret, do not tell me. I only wish to know this much — will that actress truly perform the worship this evening, while the princesses of this house stand by with folded hands?

MALLIKA. No — never, under any circumstance. I give you my word.

RATNAVALI. May the fortune of Rajagriha make good your word.

ACT TWO

The Royal Garden

Lokeshwari and Mallika.

MALLIKA. You have seen your son now, Great Queen — then why, even now—

LOKESHWARI. Seen my son? Where is my son? This is worse than death. I did not understand it, before today.

MALLIKA. Why do you say such a thing?

LOKESHWARI. There is no sorrow greater than this: when a son comes to his mother no longer a son. How strangely he looked at me! His mother has vanished from him utterly — nowhere in him is there any trace of her left. I could not have imagined so complete, so total a ruin of my own self.

MALLIKA. In wholly effacing the birth of flesh and blood, they attain a new and stainless birth.

LOKESHWARI. Ah, flesh and blood! Ah, unbearable hunger, unbearable pain! Is the penance of flesh and blood one particle less than this penance of emptiness they practice?

MALLIKA. But say what you will, my lady — I saw him. What radiance! Like an image of a god washed clean in light.

LOKESHWARI. With that very radiance he shamed his mother! That radiance mocked her whose life runs in my veins, whose tenderness lives in my heart. The birth I gave him — his new birth does not merely part from that old one; it stands against it. See, Mallika, today I understand with perfect clearness: this faith is a thing made by men. In this faith a mother is needless to her son; a wife is not required by her husband. That we might give some small alms to those homeless ones who are neither son, nor husband, nor brother, our whole life is to be left to wither, and we abandoned in an empty house! Mallika, this religion of men has struck us down. We too shall strike it down.

MALLIKA. But my lady, have you not seen? It is the women themselves who go in multitudes to offer worship to the Buddha.

LOKESHWARI. Fools, all of them. Their hunger to worship has no end. What strikes them down hardest is precisely what they give themselves to most freely. I will not indulge this delusion.

MALLIKA. You say so with your lips, Great Queen — but I know well enough that this very son of yours has today walked out through the door of your nursing-chamber only to walk in through the door of your chapel. Your son of flesh has climbed down from your lap to climb, a son of the gods, onto the altar of your heart.

LOKESHWARI. Hush — hush! Do not say it! I begged him, my two hands joined together; I said, "Stay this one night in your mother's house." He said, "My mother's house has no roof — it has only the sky." Mallika, if you were a mother, you would know how hard a saying that is! It was thunder — but the thunder was in a god's hand. Did not my breast split open at it? And through that very rift in my broken breast, the roar of the wandering monks in the street goes echoing among my ribs even now — *Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami*. [I go for refuge to the Buddha; I go for refuge to the Dhamma; I go for refuge to the Sangha.]

MALLIKA. What is this, Great Queen? Even now, as the chant sounds, you yourself bow your head!

LOKESHWARI. That is the very danger, Mallika. The faith of the weak makes men weak; to make them weak is its whole purpose. Every head held high, it will bow low. It will tell the Brahmin: serve. It will tell the Kshatriya: beg. For a long time, and of my own will, I nursed the poison of this faith within my own blood. That is why, today, I fear it more than any other soul alive. Who comes there?

MALLIKA. The Princess Vasavi. She has come, ready to go to the place of worship.

Enter Vasavi.

LOKESHWARI. Going to your worship?

VASAVI. Yes.

LOKESHWARI. You are no longer children, surely?

VASAVI. Do you find some fault in our conduct on that account?

LOKESHWARI. Children! They say you go about declaring, *ahimsa paramo dharmah* — non-violence the highest virtue!

VASAVI. It is those far older than we who go about declaring it. We do no more than recite the words.

LOKESHWARI. How is a fool to be made to understand that non-violence is the creed of the base! Violence is the ruby armlet on the Kshatriya's mighty arm, blazing with a fierce splendor.

VASAVI. Has strength no gentle form, then?

LOKESHWARI. It has — when it is drowning something. Not when it is binding something fast. The Creator built the mountain of unyielding stone, and not of mud. By your teacher's grace, is everything, from summit to base, to turn to mud? Raised as you are in a king's house, does it not disgust you to grant such a thing? Why do you stand silent?

VASAVI. I am considering it, Great Queen.

LOKESHWARI. What is there to consider? You saw it with your own eyes: a prince, in a single moment, forgot how to be a king. He went off saying he would give his life to showing mercy to every moving and unmoving thing. Did you not hear it, Vasavi?

VASAVI. I heard it.

LOKESHWARI. Then who is to take up the grave labor of dealing sternly with the world? If none does, what will become of the earth, which belongs to the brave who can hold her? In the hands of these head-bowed, fasting-wasted, faint-voiced, dull-flamed, lifeless creatures — will her ruin know any limit? You are daughters of Kshatriyas. Why does this seem so strange to you, Vasavi — so new?

VASAVI. This old truth seems, of a sudden, to have been covered over in a single day — as the bare bough of the kingshuk tree is covered over with blossom in the spring.

LOKESHWARI. There are times when a man's judgment fails him, and he forgets his own manhood's creed. But if the women allow him to forget it, then death is what awaits those women. Does not the great creeper need the great tree? Is it well for her if every tree should turn to mere shrub? Speak. You have no answer to give.

VASAVI. The great tree is needed, certainly.

LOKESHWARI. But your teacher has come for nothing less than to uproot the forest tree entire — though he lacks the strength to do it, axe in hand, as Parashurama did. He will set the worm of gentle scripture to work in secret, layer upon layer, until it has eaten away the very marrow of manhood, and so, without a single battle, strip the earth bare of her Kshatriyas. His work will then be done, and you, daughters of kings, will go shaven-headed from street to street with a begging-bowl in hand. May you die before that day comes — that is my blessing upon you. What are you thinking? Does the thought not take hold?

VASAVI. Let me consider it well.

LOKESHWARI. There is no need to consider — look at the proof before you. My noble lord Bimbisara, a Kshatriya king, for whom the throne was never a thing of mere enjoyment but was itself his practice of dharma — yet some desert-bred faith whispered a word in his ear, and how lightly, how easily, he slipped from that throne: not by the sword, not on any battlefield, not in the face of death. Vasavi — have you given up the hope that one day you too will be a king's queen?

VASAVI. Why should I give it up?

LOKESHWARI. Then let me ask you this. A king who only totters on his throne in the wind of mercy-chants, whose sceptre hangs slack in his hand, whose mark of victory has gone dim upon his brow — could you honor such a man, and choose him for your lord?

VASAVI. No.

LOKESHWARI. Let me tell you my own case, then. King Bimbisara has sent word that he will come today. It is his wish that I be ready to receive him. No doubt you imagine I mean to adorn myself for him! For a man who is neither king nor monk, who belongs neither to enjoyment nor to renunciation — I should prepare a welcome? Never. Vasavi, I tell you again, and I will tell you again: never, in any way, give your assent to this unmanly faith of self-abasement.

MALLIKA. Princess, where are you going?

VASAVI. To my chamber.

MALLIKA. But see — the dancer has come, ready.

VASAVI. Let it be. Let it be.

Exit Vasavi.

MALLIKA. Great Queen, do you hear that?

LOKESHWARI. I hear it well enough. A terrible uproar.

MALLIKA. They must have arrived, surely.

LOKESHWARI. But listen — I can still hear it. "Namo—"

MALLIKA. The tune has changed. "Namo Buddhaya" — the cry has only grown fiercer for the blow it has taken. And listen, rising now beside it — "Namah Pinakahastaya." There is no more cause for fear.

LOKESHWARI. It breaks — it breaks! When it has all turned to dust, who will ever know how much of my own life went into it? Ah, what devotion it was! Mallika, let the breaking be done quickly, and I shall be at peace. For what lies within it lies also within my breast.

Enter Ratnavali.

LOKESHWARI. Ratna — are you, too, going to the worship?

RATNAVALI. Through error I may fail, at times, to worship what deserves worship. But the sin of worshipping what does not deserve it — that will never be committed by me.

LOKESHWARI. Then where are you going?

RATNAVALI. I have come here, to the Great Queen herself. I have a petition to make.

LOKESHWARI. What is it? Speak.

RATNAVALI. If that dancer is granted the right to worship here, I shall not be able to go on living in this defiled palace.

LOKESHWARI. I give you my word — this worship shall not take place today.

RATNAVALI. If not today, then tomorrow.

LOKESHWARI. Have no fear, child. I shall tear this worship out by the root.

RATNAVALI. Even that will not undo the insult I have already borne.

LOKESHWARI. Lay your complaint before the King, and the dancer may be banished — she might even be put to death.

RATNAVALI. That would only add to her glory.

LOKESHWARI. Then what is it you wish?

RATNAVALI. Let her go, not as a worshipper to worship, but as a dancer, to dance — in that very same place. Mallika, why are you silent? What do you say?

MALLIKA. It is an amusing proposal.

LOKESHWARI. My heart does not consent to it, Ratna.

RATNAVALI. I see the Great Queen still bears some tenderness toward that dancer.

LOKESHWARI. Tenderness! I could set dogs upon her, to tear the flesh from her bones — that is my tenderness. For years I offered worship there with my own

hands. Even to see that altar broken to pieces — even that I can bear. But that a dancer's foot should fall, today, upon the very seat where a queen once worshipped!

RATNAVALI. Forgive my boldness — but if you indulge that small pain of yours, then upon that very pain the broken altar will rise again, and again, and again.

LOKESHWARI. That fear is not altogether absent from my own mind, I confess.

RATNAVALI. To put away, at a distance, the falsehood you once honored in your delusion — that alone will not dispel the delusion. Heap insult upon the falsehood itself. Only then will you be free.

LOKESHWARI. Mallika — listen. The sound comes now from the north side of the garden. They have broken it. They have broken it all. Om namo — let it go. Let it go. Let it be broken.

RATNAVALI. Come, Great Queen — let us go and see!

LOKESHWARI. I shall go, I shall go — but not yet.

RATNAVALI. I shall go and see for myself.

Exit Ratnavali.

LOKESHWARI. Mallika, it wounds so — the tearing of a bond.

MALLIKA. There are tears falling from your eyes.

LOKESHWARI. Listen — "Jaya Kali Karali!" The other sound has grown faint now. This I cannot bear.

MALLIKA. If you banish the Buddha's faith, it will only come back again. There is no peace unless another faith is pressed down over it. Once you have taken a new initiation from Devadatta, only then will you find comfort.

LOKESHWARI. Shame — do not say it, do not say it, do not even let it come to your lips. Devadatta is a cruel serpent, a worm out of hell. Even while I still kept my vow of non-violence, in my heart I burned him daily, and pierced him through. And now — into the very seat where I myself brought and set my great teacher, pure and

radiant with light — shall I now call Devadatta to sit there! (*Kneeling.*) Forgive me, Lord — forgive me. Whatever offense I have committed, by the three doors of body, speech, and mind, may my Lord forgive it in me.

(*Rising.*) Have no fear, Mallika. The devotee within me may remain within — let her remain. Outside stands one without pity, stands the wife of a royal house, and none shall ever overcome her. Mallika, let me go and sit now in my own quiet chamber. Call me only when the vessel of my worship, built up through all these years, has sunk, at last, entirely, into that sea of dust.

Exeunt.

Enter a company of women of the palace, bearing incense, lamps, sandal-paste, garlands, the auspicious vessel, and the other implements of worship. They gather about the vessel of flowers, and recite together:

This gathered wealth of blossoms, rich in hue and fragrance, I offer at the lotus feet of the Lord of Sages.

Obeisance, and the sounding of the conch. They gather about the incense-vessel:

With this sweet incense, rich with gathered fragrance, I worship him who alone deserves our worship, the noblest vessel worship can hold.

The sounding of the conch, and obeisance. Shrimati, gathering the tray of lamps, recites:

With this lamp, kindled of fine camphor, that scatters the dark, I worship the Enlightened One, the Lamp of the Three Worlds, who drives away all darkness.

The sounding of the conch, and obeisance. They gather about the offering of food:

May the Blessed One be pleased to accept this food we have made ready; out of compassion, may the Most Excellent One receive it.

The sounding of the conch, and obeisance. Kneeling, they recite:

He who sat beneath the noble Bo-tree, and there overcame the great host of Mara, and came to perfect Awakening, boundless in knowledge — to that Buddha, most exalted in all the world, I bow.

The worship at the grove's entrance is completed. Now, on to the foot of the stupa.

MALATI. But look, sister Shrimati — the path this way is closed off with a fence.

SHRIMATI. We can climb the fence. Come.

NANDA. It seems this is by the King's own order!

SHRIMATI. But there is the Lord's own command.

NANDA. What a terrible roar! Can this be some uprising in the kingdom?

SHRIMATI. Let us sing.

Song

Now shall the labor be to break every bond; we shall leave the shore, crying, *fear not, be strong!* He in whose hand the garland of victory gleams is the very flame of Rudra's burning — I bow, I bow, I bow before that Terrible One. A traveler of light on the sea of time, who races through the void by day and by night — his summons has come, borne upon the wave; let the thunder-drum sound within this breast, at this festival of the restless soul.

Enter a company of guards from the inner apartments.

GUARD. Turn back, all of you, from here.

SHRIMATI. We are going to worship the Lord.

GUARD. Worship is forbidden.

MALATI. Today is the Lord's birth-festival.

GUARD. Worship is forbidden.

SHRIMATI. Can this even be possible?

GUARD. Worship is forbidden. I know nothing more than that. Give up your offerings.

They snatch away the trays of offerings and the rest.

SHRIMATI. What trial is this that has come to me! Have I committed some offense?

With my very head I bow before the dust of your most noble feet. Whatever fault I have fallen into against the Buddha — may the Buddha forgive that fault in me.

GUARD. Stop that hymn.

SHRIMATI. Barred, even at the very gate! I could not enter. I could not.

MALATI. Why do you weep, sister Shrimati? Can there be no worship without offerings, without chants? The Blessed One has taken birth within our own minds, too.

SHRIMATI. Not only that, Malati. In his birth, all of us were born. Today is the birth-festival of every one of us.

NANDA. Shrimati, why has so evil a day gathered over us, so suddenly, in a single moment?

SHRIMATI. Today is the very day on which an evil day turns into a fair one. What has broken will be joined again. What has fallen will rise once more.

AJITA. Look here, Shrimati — it comes to me now that there must have been some error in entrusting the worship to you. That is why it has all come to ruin. We should have understood as much from the very beginning.

SHRIMATI. I have no fear. I know that no one, from the very first, finds the temple door standing open. Little by little the bar is drawn back. And yet I say without any hesitation: the Lord himself has called me. Every obstacle will be cut away. It will be cut away this very day.

BHADRA. Can you set aside even the King's own obstruction?

SHRIMATI. There, the King's sceptre does not reach.

Enter Ratnavali.

RATNAVALI. What you were saying — I heard it, I heard all of it. You will not yield even to the King's own obstruction. Such is your daring.

SHRIMATI. In true worship there is no obstruction from any king.

RATNAVALI. No obstruction from the King? Truly? Go, then — go and worship. I shall watch, and feast my eyes on it to my heart's content.

SHRIMATI. He who dwells within all things — he alone will see. To take away everything from without only raises a veil before it. And now —

With word and with mind I do homage, always, to the Tathagata, whether I lie down, or sit, or stand, or walk — at every moment, without ceasing.

RATNAVALI. Your day has come at last. Your pride will be broken.

SHRIMATI. Let it break. Let nothing remain of it — nothing at all.

RATNAVALI. Now it is my turn. I shall go and make myself ready.

Exit Ratnavali.

BHADRA. Nothing about this sits well with me. Vasavi was the wise one — she slipped away from all this long ago.

AJITA. I find myself afraid, somehow.

Enter Utpalaparna.

NANDA. Blessed Mother, where are you going?

UTPALAPARNA. Turmoil has come upon the city. The faith itself lies under assault. The monks are in fear. I go now to the streets of the city, to recite the mantras of protection.

SHRIMATI. Blessed Mother, will you not take me with you?

UTPALAPARNA. How could I take you? The charge of this worship still rests upon you.

SHRIMATI. Does the charge of worship still stand, then, holy one?

UTPALAPARNA. Until it is fulfilled, that charge knows no end.

MALATI. Mother — but the King's own obstruction stands in the way!

UTPALAPARNA. Have no fear. Hold to patience. That very obstruction will open the way itself.

Exit Utpalaparna.

BHADRA. Do you hear that, Ajita? Is it weeping, in the street — or is it a roar?

NANDA. It seems to me that someone has broken into the garden itself, and is smashing everything to pieces. Shrimati — come quickly. Let us take shelter in the Queen Mother's chamber.

Exit.

BHADRA. Come, Ajita. All of this feels to me like nothing but an evil dream.

Exeunt the princesses and the rest.

MALATI. Sister — outside, I seem to hear the very weeping of death. Do you see that flame in the sky? Has the city caught fire, I wonder? Why, on a day of birth, this tumult of death?

SHRIMATI. It is through death's own great gate that the triumphal procession of birth must pass.

MALATI. I am ashamed, sister, that fear should come into my heart at all. To go to worship, and to carry fear there with me — this I cannot bear in myself.

SHRIMATI. What is it you fear, little sister?

MALATI. It is not the fear of danger. It is only that I understand nothing at all. It feels like darkness. That is my fear.

SHRIMATI. Do not look for yourself out there, in the world beyond. Look for yourself within him whose birth is imperishable, this day — and your fear will pass from you.

MALATI. Sing, sister. Then my fear will go.

Song of Shrimati

Leave me no longer in the dark — let me see. Let me see my own true self, there, within you. If I must weep, then let me weep now; I can bear no more the weariness of joy — let my eyes be washed clean in a flood of tears, let me see. I do not know what shadow, dark and nameless, beguiles me, calling itself my own, when this heavy spell of illusion gathers close. The burden has gathered, weighted with dreams — a whole life spent, seeking only emptiness — that light of mine, hidden away beyond the night: let me see it.

Enter one of the guards of the inner apartments.

GUARD. Listen, listen, Shrimati.

MALATI. Why are you all so cruel? Do not tell us again to leave. We are only two girls, sitting on the ground near this garden. What harm could that possibly do you?

GUARD. And what need have you of it, either?

MALATI. Even at the farthest edge of this garden, which the Lord Buddha once entered, the dust of his footprints remains. If you will not let us go within, then let us sit here, in that very dust, and hold his birth-festival within our hearts. We will speak no chant. We will make no offering.

GUARD. Why should you not speak the chant? Speak it — speak it. What sin would it be, even for me to listen? The other guards are far off now. Let me, this one hour, on this one holy day, hear the Lord's own praise from your sweet voice, Shrimati. Know this of me: I too am his servant. On the day he came beneath the Ashoka tree's shade, I looked on him with these sinful eyes of mine — and from that day, he has dwelt within me.

SHRIMATI.

Homage, homage to the Buddha, sun among men. Homage, homage to Gautama, moon among men. Homage, homage to him, ocean of boundless virtue. Homage, homage to the joy of the Shakya line.

Guard — say it with me, now, word for word.

GUARD. Could a holy chant ever come from a mouth such as mine?

SHRIMATI. Devotion lives in your heart. Whatever you speak will become holy for the speaking. Say it —

Homage, homage to the Buddha, sun among men.

(She has her repeat it, phrase by phrase.)

GUARD. The burden has lifted from my breast, Shrimati. This day has been made worth the living, for me. Now let me say the thing I came to say. Flee from this place. I will make a way for you.

SHRIMATI. Why?

GUARD. King Ajatashatru has taken initiation from Devadatta. He has broken to pieces the Lord's own seat beneath the Ashoka tree.

MALATI. Oh, sister — oh, no. I never even saw it. My fortune is a bitter one. It has all been broken.

SHRIMATI. What are you saying, Malati? His seat cannot perish. Only what King Bimbisara built has been broken. Does the Lord's seat need to be made fast with stone? It is the Blessed One's own majesty alone that keeps it safe.

GUARD. The King has proclaimed that whoever performs the arati there, or speaks the hymn of praise, shall be put to death. So then, Shrimati — what more will you do here?

SHRIMATI. I shall stay, and wait.

GUARD. For how long?

SHRIMATI. For as long as the call to worship does not come. For as long as I am alive — that long.

GUARD. I ask your forgiveness now, Shrimati, before it comes to that.

SHRIMATI. Forgiveness for what?

GUARD. It may be that, by the King's own order, I shall be made to strike you, too.

SHRIMATI. Strike, then.

GUARD. That blow, perhaps, will fall only upon the palace dancer. But to the devoted handmaiden of the Lord — my homage today, and my homage on that day, too. Forgive me.

SHRIMATI. May my Lord grant me the grace to forgive every blow. *Buddho khamatu! Buddho khamatu!* [May the Buddha forgive! May the Buddha forgive!]

Enter another guard.

SECOND GUARD. Rodini!

FIRST GUARD. What is it, Patali?

PATALI. They have killed the Blessed Mother Utpalaparna.

RODINI. What ruin is this!

SHRIMATI. Who killed her?

PATALI. Devadatta's own disciples.

RODINI. Then the bloodshed has begun. If it has come to that, then we too have weapons in our hands. This sin will not be borne. This is the very killing of the Lord's own Sangha. Shrimati — forgiveness will not do now. Take up a weapon.

SHRIMATI. Do not tempt me, Rodini. I am a dancer. At the mere sight of your sword, even this hand of mine, made for the dance, grows restless.

PATALI. Then take this.

She offers her a sword.

SHRIMATI. (*Shuddering, she lets the sword fall from her hand.*) No — no. I have already received my weapon, from the Lord. My own battle goes forward. Let Mara be defeated. Let the Lord be victorious!

PATALI. Come, Rodini. We must carry the Blessed Mother's body to the burning-ground.

Exeunt.

Enter Ratnavali, with several guards.

RATNAVALI. Here — here she is still. Let her hear the King's own command.

GUARD. This is the King's command: you are a dancer, and you must go and dance in the Ashoka grove.

SHRIMATI. Dance! Today?

MALATI. What is this you are saying! Did the King feel no fear at all, in giving such a command?

RATNAVALI. Fear would be the fitting thing, indeed! So that day has come, has it, when the Lord of Kings stands in fear even of his own dancing-slave. A rustic. A barbarian.

SHRIMATI. When is the dance to be?

RATNAVALI. Today, at the hour of the arati.

SHRIMATI. Before the Lord's own altar?

RATNAVALI. Yes.

SHRIMATI. Then let it be so.

Exeunt.

Enter the monks, singing.

The earth runs mad with violence, in endless, pitiless strife, her ways grown dark and crooked, fettered fast by greed. For your new birth, every living thing lies in anguish — grant deliverance, great of soul; bring the word of the deathless; make bloom the lotus of love, forever streaming its sweetness. Be at peace, be free, O boundless in merit, dense with compassion — make the face of the earth free of every stain.

Come, great in giving, grant the hard discipline of renunciation;
great mendicant, take as alms the pride of every one of us.

Let every people forget their grief, let delusion be broken apart,
let the sun of wisdom blaze forth in the pageant of its rising,
let every world find life, let the blind find sight.

Be at peace, be free, O boundless in merit,
dense with compassion — make the face of the earth free of every stain.

The whole world's heart lies drowned in weeping, ablaze with burning anguish,
wasted and torn by the poison-corruption of all worldly craving, still unsatisfied.

Land after land has worn the mark of blood, of sin, of shame —
bring now your conch of blessing, bring your own right hand,
your holy strain of music, your beautiful rhythm.

Be at peace, be free, O boundless in merit,
dense with compassion — make the face of the earth free of every stain.

(End of Act Two.)

Translator's Note

This is Act Two of *Natir Puja (The Dancing-Girl's Worship)*, a dance-drama Rabindranath Tagore wrote and staged in 1926, developed from his earlier narrative poem "Pujarini" in the collection *Katha o Kahini*. Its action is set at the Magadhan court in the time of the Buddha, and turns on a real historical rupture: King Bimbisara, the Buddha's great royal patron, has been supplanted by his own son, Ajatashatru, who has taken initiation from Devadatta — the Buddha's cousin and rival, whose bid to lead the monastic order split the Sangha. Against this backdrop, a court dancer named Shrimati asks only to be allowed to worship at the Buddha's shrine.

A note on choices made here: the Pali liturgical verses recited during the puja are rendered in a somewhat more formal register, to preserve their character as canonical chant rather than ordinary speech. Two especially well-known formulas — the Threefold Refuge, and the Buddha's plea for forgiveness — are given first in transliteration, with their sense following in English. Stage directions follow the *Enter / Exit / Exeunt* conventions of classical English playtexts. No glossary was attached to the file for this task, so historical and religious terms (Kshatriya, Brahmin, arati, and so on) are rendered according to standard usage — I'm glad to adjust names or terms to match a specific glossary if one is shared.

ACT THREE

The Royal Garden

Malati and Srimati

Malati. Sister, I can find no peace.

Srimati. What is it?

Malati. While they had taken you off to be dressed for the dance, I slipped away to that wall and looked out toward the road. I saw them carrying off the body of the nun Utpalaparna, and—

Srimati. Why do you stop? Go on.

Malati. You won't be angry with me, sister? I am very weak.

Srimati. Never.

Malati. I saw him walking beside the body, reciting the funeral rites.

Srimati. Who was walking there?

Malati. From that distance, it seemed to me it was Him.

Srimati. It is not impossible.

Malati. I had made a vow — that until I attained liberation, I would not look upon Him, not even from afar.

Srimati. Keep that vow. One does not see the far shore merely by gazing unblinking at the sea. Do not indulge your heart with vain longing.

Malati. Do not think it is the hope of seeing Him that troubles my heart so. I am afraid they will kill Him — that is why I long to stay near.

Do not scorn me, sister, for failing to keep my vow.

Srimati. Do you think I do not understand your pain?

Malati. I cannot save Him — but I can die. I can bear no more, sister; everything has broken apart, this time. Liberation will not come to me in this life.

Srimati. He to whom you go is the very one who can grant you liberation — for He himself is free. Hearing you speak, I have understood something today.

Malati. What have you understood, sister?

Srimati. An old wound still lies hidden within me, and it has begun to ache again. However far I have driven bondage from without, it has only crept further within, and hidden itself the deeper.

Malati. There is no one in this palace as alone as you, and so it grieves me deeply to leave you. But go I must. When you have a moment to spare, say the prayer of forgiveness for me.

Srimati. *Buddhe yo khalito doso, Buddho khamatu tam mama* — whatever fault I have committed against the Buddha, may the Buddha forgive it in me.

Malati. *(bowing low)* "*Buddho khamatu tam mama.*" Before I go, sing me a song. Today I cannot give my heart at all to your songs of liberation. Sing me, instead, a song of the road.

Srimati's Song

You called me to walk this road with you, but I have fallen behind — how shall I go now?

- The night has come, thick and close,*
- the path has faded into it —* *answer me, answer me, through this whirl of darkness.*
- I fear that, turning and turning,* *the further I go, the further I stray.*
- I tell myself you are near,*
- and yet I fear* *that when tomorrow's night turns to dawn, I shall be here, and you gone.*

Malati. Listen, sister — the roar again. There is no mercy, no mercy anywhere. The Buddha of boundless compassion has set His very foot upon this earth, and still the flames of hell will not be quenched here. I can wait no longer. My reverence to you,

sister! When you attain liberation, call to me once — make one last effort on my behalf.

Srimati. Come, let me walk you as far as the garden gate.

Both exit.

Enter Ratnavali and Mallika.

Ratnavali. Devadatta's disciples have killed a nun. Why such distress over that? She was only the daughter of that field-warden, after all.

Mallika. But today she was a nun.

Ratnavali. Does reciting a formula change one's blood?

Mallika. These days, it seems, a change of creed counts for far more than a change of blood.

Ratnavali. Enough of that talk. The king troubled because his subjects have grown restless! That I cannot bear. Your monkish faith is corrupting the very order of kingship.

Mallika. There is more cause for the unrest than that. His Majesty Bimbisara set out on a pilgrimage of worship and has still not arrived — the people have begun to suspect the worst.

Ratnavali. I too have heard the whispers. I grant the matter looks ill. But here, at least, is the fruit of past deeds made visible before our very eyes.

Mallika. What fruit of deeds do you mean?

Ratnavali. King Bimbisara destroyed his own father's Vedic faith. Is that not worse than the murder of a father? The Brahmins have said, from that very day, that the sacrificial fire he extinguished — that hungry fire — would one day devour him in return.

Mallika. Hush — softly. You know how the fear of that curse has left him so utterly spent.

Ratnavali. Whose curse?

Mallika. The Buddha's. In his heart, the king holds Him in great dread.

Ratnavali. But the Buddha curses no one. It is Devadatta who knows how to curse.

Mallika. That is precisely why he is held in such honor. A merciful god, men cheat with mere words; a vengeful one, they offer costly gifts.

Ratnavali. A god who does not know how to do harm must go hungry — like an old lion stripped of claw and tooth.

Mallika. Be that as it may, I tell you this: this evening, at the Ashoka shrine, the worship will go forward, whatever comes.

Ratnavali. Let it, then — but I tell you just as plainly, the dance shall come first.

Mallika exits.

Enter Basabi.

Basabi. I have come, ready.

Ratnavali. Ready for what?

Basabi. To settle a score. That dancing girl has shamed me sorely, more than once.

Ratnavali. By preaching at you?

Basabi. No — by making me revere her.

Ratnavali. Is that why you come with a knife in hand?

Basabi. Not for that. There is fear of upheaval in the state. If danger comes, I do not mean to die unarmed.

Ratnavali. And with what will you settle your score against the dancing girl?

Basabi. *(showing a necklace)* With this.

Ratnavali. Your diamond necklace!

Basabi. A costly insult, fit for the royal house. She will dance, and I shall fling my reward at her, upon her very body.

Ratnavali. And if she should scorn it, and cast it back upon you? If she will not take it?

Basabi. (*showing the knife*) Then this remains.

Ratnavali. Go quickly and fetch Her Majesty Queen Lokeshwari — she will find great amusement in this.

Basabi. I sought her out on my way here. I am told she has shut herself in her chamber. Whether from fear of the coming upheaval, or from wounded pride against her husband, I could not tell.

Ratnavali. But today is the dancing girl's little pageant of submission — the queen must be present for it.

Basabi. "The dancing girl's pageant of submission" — well coined, that name.

Enter Mallika.

Mallika. Just as I feared, so it has come to pass. King Ajatashatru has sent messengers throughout the kingdom to summon every last disciple of the Buddha before him. And so the worship of the planets goes endlessly on — now Saturn, now the Sun.

Ratnavali. All the better. Let him hand over every one of the Buddha's disciples at once into the hands of Devadatta's followers. It would save a great deal of time.

Mallika. That is not why he summons them. They come, day and night, to chant the rites of absolution on the king's behalf. His Majesty has been utterly overcome by it.

Basabi. Why this weakness in him?

Mallika. Have you not heard what people are saying? The king can no longer restrain Devadatta's disciples himself.

Basabi. And what of it?

Mallika. How strange, that the rumor has not yet reached your ears! Everyone suspects that somewhere on the road, they have murdered King Bimbisara.

Basabi. Heaven forbid. This can never be true.

Mallika. But this much is true — that the king seems to have been set alight by some inward fire. He wanders about, tormented by some remorse he will not name.

Basabi. Alas, alas — what news is this.

Ratnavali. Has Queen Lokeshwari heard of it?

Mallika. Whoever brings her such bitter news, she will tear him in two. No one dares.

Basabi. We are ruined. From a blow of sin so great, no one in this palace will be spared. Can one trifle so wantonly with faith, and think it will be borne?

Ratnavali. There now! I see Basabi leaning once more toward becoming the dancing girl's disciple. Let fear once give chase, and people always try to hide themselves behind the folly of faith.

Basabi. Never. I fear nothing at all. Let me go and carry this news to Bhadra.

Ratnavali. Do not run off on some false pretext. You are afraid — I can see it. This faintness of heart in all of you shames me deeply. It comes only from keeping low company.

Basabi. You wrong me. I fear nothing whatever.

Ratnavali. Very well then — come and watch the dance in the Ashoka grove.

Basabi. Why should I not go? Do you imagine you are dragging me there by force?

Ratnavali. No more delay. Mallika, summon Srimati this instant, dressed or not. If the princesses will not come, then we must have every one of the palace maids. Otherwise the spectacle will be incomplete.

Basabi. There — Srimati is coming now. Look, look, how she moves — as though walking in a dream. Like the shimmering noon-day mirage, she seems, and within herself, she seems hardly to be there at all.

Srimati enters slowly, singing.

O great life, O great death, I have taken refuge — I have taken refuge.

- Kindle the flame within my darkened lamp,*
- set upon my brow the mark of light,* *O take from me my shame.*

Ratnavali. This way lies the path. Can you not hear us at all? Here — this way.

Srimati.

The touchstone of my life is your feet alone, I have taken refuge, I have taken refuge
—

- whatever in me is stained, whatever is dark,*
- whatever is misshapen, let it turn to good,* *sweep away, sweep away every veil that covers me.*

Ratnavali. Basabi, why do you stand there? Come.

Basabi. No. I will not go.

Ratnavali. Why will you not go?

Basabi. Then let me speak the truth. I cannot.

Ratnavali. Are you afraid?

Basabi. Yes. I am afraid.

Ratnavali. And are you not ashamed to be afraid?

Basabi. Not in the least. Srimati — that prayer of forgiveness, if you would.

Srimati. With my own head I bow before the sacred dust of your feet; whatever fault I have committed against the Buddha, may the Buddha forgive it in me.

Basabi. May the Buddha forgive it in me! May the Buddha forgive it in me! May the Buddha forgive it in me!

Srimati's Song

You have made me yield, you have broken my pride.

- The dim-lit dish*
- my faint hand kindled*
- lies shattered now, in pieces.*
- So now, kindle instead*
- the light of your own far star —* *let this twilight of painted shadows come at last to its end.*
- Come, companion of the farther shore —* *the wind of the road has risen, the lamp of the house gone out.*
- Here, tonight, on this lonely path,*
- at the landing-stage of darkness,*
- in this play where all is lost,*
- I have brought only this song.*

All exit.

The monks enter, singing.

Take from us all our darkness and defilement,

- victory, victory be to you.* *Sprinkle the water of immortality*
- over the whole wide world.*
- Great peace, great well-being,*
- great merit, great love.* *Let the dawning radiance of wisdom's sun shatter the night of darkness, let it slay the unbearable nightmare*
- and drive all fear away.*
- Great peace, great well-being,*
- great merit, great love.* *The wayfarer, his heart afraid,*
- darkened by these evil, delusion-ridden days,* *bewildered by doubt, entangled*
- in the perilous thicket of the road—* *O compassionate one, refuge I beg of you— take from us the fear of misfortune, grant us passage across the bondage of sorrow,*

- the knowledge of liberation.*
 - Great peace, great well-being,*
 - great merit, great love!*
-

ACT FOUR

Beneath the Ashoka tree. A broken stupa. An altar-dais, all but fallen to ruin.

Ratnavali. Palace maidservants. A company of guards.

First Maidservant. Princess, our duties in the palace are falling behind.

Ratnavali. Wait a little longer. Queen Lokeshwari herself wishes to come and see. Until she arrives, the dance cannot begin.

Second Maidservant. We have come at your command. But our hearts are troubled with fear of this wrongdoing.

Third Maidservant. It was here, in this very place, that we made our offerings to the Lord — and today, in this same place, we must watch the dancing girl perform. Shame, shame — how shall this sin ever be washed away?

Fourth Maidservant. I did not know so vile a thing was to happen here. We cannot stay — not for anything.

Ratnavali. Have you not heard, you wretched creatures — the worship of the Buddha has been forbidden in this kingdom.

Fourth Maidservant. It is not within our power to defy the king. We may forgo the worship of the Lord — but that does not mean we can bear to see Him insulted.

First Maidservant. The palace dancing girl's dance is meant for princesses and royal brides. What business have we in this gathering? Come, sisters, let us go where we belong.

Ratnavali. *(to the guards)* Do not let them leave. Now, quickly, go and bring the dancing girl.

First Maidservant. Princess, this sin will not touch the dancing girl. This sin is yours alone.

Ratnavali. Do you imagine I care anything for this newly-fashioned sin of your new-found faith?

Second Maidservant. To insult the devotion of another — that is a sin as old as time itself.

Ratnavali. I see this saintly dancing girl's contagion has spread to every one of you. Do not try to frighten me with talk of sin — I am no child.

A Guard. (*to the First Maidservant*) Basumati, we revered Srimati — but we were mistaken in that, were we not? For she has consented to dance.

Ratnavali. Of course she consented! Would she dare defy the king's command?

Guard. It is we who are afraid, but—

Ratnavali. Does the dancing girl's rank now stand above your own?

First Maidservant. We had ceased to think of her as merely a dancing girl. We had seen the light of heaven within her.

Ratnavali. Did you not know? Even in heaven, the dancing girl goes on dancing!

Guard. We feared we might be made to strike Srimati at the king's command — but now it seems there is no need to wait for that command at all.

First Maidservant. Let us leave those sinful women be. But if we stain our own eyes with this sinful spectacle, what will become of us?

Ratnavali. The dancing girl is still not done dressing. See how much delight your saintly dancer takes in her adornment.

First Maidservant. There, she comes! Look how she glitters.

Second Maidservant. A hundred lamps' worth of light, kindled upon a body steeped in sin.

Enter Srimati.

First Maidservant. Sinner! Srimati! Shameless woman — before the Lord's very seat, you mean to dance today! Have your two feet not withered to wood before now!

Srimati. There is no choice. The command has been given.

Second Maidservant. I tell you now — in hell, for a hundred hundred-thousand years, you will be made to dance, day and night, upon burning coals.

Third Maidservant. Only look at her! The sinner has decked herself in ornaments from head to foot. Do you know that every one of those ornaments will become a fetter of fire, binding fast to your flesh and bone, sending a current of burning through every vein in your body?

Enter Mallika.

Mallika. (*aside, to Ratnavali*) The ban proclaimed against the worship of the Buddha in this kingdom has now been withdrawn. Even now the drums are sounding through the streets to proclaim it. It may well reach even here before long — that is why I came to bring you word. There is other news besides. Today King Ajatashatru himself intends to come here and make his own offering — he is even now preparing for it.

Ratnavali. Then run at once, Mallika — go quickly and bring Queen Lokeshwari here.

Mallika. There — she comes now.

Enter Lokeshwari.

Ratnavali. Your Majesty, here is your seat.

Lokeshwari. Wait. I have something to say to Srimati, alone. (*Drawing Srimati aside*) Srimati!

Srimati. What is it, Your Majesty?

Lokeshwari. Here, take this — I have brought it for you.

Srimati. What have you brought?

Lokeshwari. Nectar.

Srimati. I do not understand.

Lokeshwari. Poison. Drink it and die — and you will find your deliverance.

Srimati. You believe there is no other way of deliverance left?

Lokeshwari. None. Ratnavali has already gone and secured the king's order that you must dance. I know that such an order will never be recalled.

Ratnavali. Your Majesty, there is no more time — let the dance begin.

Lokeshwari. Here, take it — drink it quickly. Die here, and heaven awaits you; dance here, and you go straight down to the deepest hell.

Srimati. First, let me carry out the command that has been given.

Lokeshwari. You mean to dance?

Srimati. Yes. I shall dance.

Lokeshwari. Have you no fear?

Srimati. No. None at all.

Lokeshwari. Then no one will be able to save you.

Srimati. No one — save Him who is the Savior himself.

Ratnavali. Your Majesty, not one more moment can be spared. Do you not hear the commotion outside? The rebels may break into the royal garden at any moment now. Dancing girl — let the dance begin.

Srimati sings and dances.

Forgive me, O forgive me; homage, O homage to you — I call you to mind, O peerless one; in the very rapture of the dance my heart

- swells and resounds.* *With the whole restless clamor of my body, beyond all power of chant, in praise of you, to left, to right, rhythm descends*
- into the midst of a new birth.* *Today my worship of you lives in my movements,*
- and abides in this song.*

Ratnavali. What manner of dance is this! This is no dance at all, but a mere pretense of one. And what is the meaning of this song!

Lokeshwari. No, no — do not interrupt her.

Srimati sings and dances.

What is this that shakes my soul with such utter anguish,

- a trembling that seizes my very breast —* *across the sea of peace a wave comes rippling,*
- and beauty wakes within it.* *All my consciousness, all my suffering*
- have wrought — what worship is this! —* *let my devotion, laid at your feet,*
- not perish now in shame.* *Today my worship of you lives in my movements,*
- and abides in this song.*

Ratnavali. What is happening now! One by one, in time with the rhythm, she is casting her jewels into the rubbish of that broken shrine! There goes her bracelet, there her armlet, there her necklace! Your Majesty, do you see — these are all ornaments of the royal house — what an insult is this! Srimati, that is an ornament from my own body. Go, gather it up, and touch it to your head in penance — go now.

Lokeshwari. Be calm, be calm. She is not at fault — this casting away of ornaments is itself a part of the dance. Even my own body sways now with joy. (*Removing the necklace from her own throat, and casting it down*) Srimati, do not stop — do not stop.

Srimati's Song and Dance

No flower have I gathered from any grove,

- no fruit has ever been mine to pluck.* *My pitcher stands as empty now*
- as it was — I have filled it with no water of pilgrimage.* *Yet from this body of mine, all bonds undone,*
- my heart pours forth a stream unbroken;* *let it all be spent now at your feet,*
- in the holy labor of worship.* *Today my worship of you lives in my movements,*
- and abides in this song.*

Ratnavali. What travesty of a dance is this! She has cast off, one by one, every garment of her dancer's costume. Do you see, Your Majesty — beneath it, the yellow robe of a nun! Is this not exactly what they call worship? You there, guards — you are witnesses. Have you forgotten what punishment the king has decreed?

Guard. But Srimati has not yet spoken the words of the sacred vow.

Srimati. *(kneeling)* *Buddham saranam gacchami* — I go for refuge to the Buddha—

Guard. *(putting a hand to Srimati's mouth)* Stop, stop, reckless woman — stop, even now.

Ratnavali. Carry out the king's command.

Srimati. *Buddham saranam gacchami* — I go for refuge to the Buddha. *Dhammam saranam gacchami* — I go for refuge to the Dhamma—

The Maidservants. Do not destroy yourself, Srimati — stop, stop!

Guard. Do not go into the very jaws of death, madwoman!

Second Guard. I beg you, hands folded — have mercy upon us, and stop.

The Maidservants. We cannot bear to watch, we cannot watch — let us flee.

They flee.

Ratnavali. Carry out the king's command.

Srimati. *Buddham saranam gacchami* — I go for refuge to the Buddha. *Dhammam saranam gacchami* — I go for refuge to the Dhamma. *Sangham saranam gacchami* — I go for refuge to the Sangha.

Lokeshwari. *(kneeling beside her, joining in)* *Buddham saranam gacchami. Dhammam saranam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami.*

The instant the guard strikes Srimati with her blade, she falls upon the altar-seat. Crying, "Forgive us, forgive us," the guards, one after another, take the dust of Srimati's feet.

Lokeshwari. *(taking Srimati's head into her lap)* Dancing girl — you have left me this robe of a nun, in leaving this world. *(Touching a corner of the cloth to her own head)* This now is mine.

Ratnavali sinks down into the dust.

Mallika. What troubles you?

Ratnavali. *(covering her face with the end of her garment)* Now, at last, I am afraid.

Enter the Doorkeeper.

Doorkeeper. King Ajatashatru waits at the garden gate with offerings for the Lord's worship — he asks the ladies' leave to enter.

Mallika. Come, let me go and give the king word of the ladies' consent.

Exit.

Lokeshwari. Say it now, all of you — *Buddham saranam gacchami.*

All except Ratnavali. *Buddham saranam gacchami.*

Lokeshwari. *Dhammam saranam gacchami.*

All except Ratnavali. *Dhammam saranam gacchami.*

Lokeshwari. *Sangham saranam gacchami.*

All except Ratnavali. *Sangham saranam gacchami.*

I have no other refuge; the Buddha alone is my most excellent refuge. By the truth of this utterance, may there be victory and blessing for me.

Enter Mallika.

Mallika. The king did not come after all — he has turned back.

Lokeshwari. Why?

Mallika. On hearing the news, he began to tremble with fear.

Lokeshwari. Fear of whom?

Mallika. Of her — that dancing girl, now lifeless.

Lokeshwari. Come, let us bring a bier. Her body must be carried away by all of us together.

All exit except Ratnavali.

Ratnavali. *(touching Srimati's feet in reverence, then kneeling) Buddham saranam gacchami. Dhammam saranam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami.*

Translator's Note: The following renders Acts Three and Four of Natir Puja, the dance-drama Tagore wrote and staged in 1926, dramatizing his own earlier poem "Pujarini," which draws in turn on a Buddhist legend preserved in the Pali* Avadanashataka*. Its heroine, Srimati, is a court dancer — a* nati — in the palace of King Ajatashatru of Magadha, son of Bimbisara, an early royal patron of the Buddha. She has secretly become the Buddha's follower; commanded to dance before the court, she turns the royal command itself into an act of worship, casting off her ornaments one by one until nothing remains beneath but the ochre robe of a nun.*

No glossary file seems to have come through with the text — only the Bengali original reached me — so I have glossed a handful of period terms and Pali liturgical lines at the end instead, in its place. Do send the glossary along if you have one, and I'm glad to revise any of these choices against it.

A Note on Names and Terms

- **Nati** — a court dancer or dancing-girl; a professional performer of a rank distinctly below the princesses and royal wives at whose gatherings she performs, which is the source of much of Ratnavali's contempt.
- **Bhikkhu / bhikkhuni** — rendered here as "monk" and "nun": an ordained follower of the Buddha, male or female.
- **Stupa** — a domed shrine housing sacred relics; a **chaitya** (rendered "shrine") is a related Buddhist place of worship.
- **Bimbisara and Ajatashatru** — historical kings of Magadha (sixth–fifth century BCE) and contemporaries of the Buddha. Tradition holds that Bimbisara was an early royal patron of the Buddha, and that he was deposed by his own son, Ajatashatru — the political backdrop against which this play unfolds.
- **Devadatta** — the Buddha's cousin, who in Buddhist tradition broke from him to found a rival following; here, the leader of the faction persecuting the Buddha's disciples.
- **The Three Refuges** — the formula *Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami* ("I go for refuge to the

Buddha, the Dhamma [the teaching], and the Sangha [the monastic community]) is the oldest and most universal profession of Buddhist faith. Tagore left it in Pali in his original; I have kept it in Pali as well, with the gloss following each line.

- The closing Pali verse — *Natthi me saranam aññam...* — is a traditional chant of blessing: "I have no other refuge; the Buddha alone is my most excellent refuge. By the truth of this utterance, may there be victory and blessing for me."