

Behind the Scenes of Chavittunatakam: Makeup

JANAL Team

Summary - *The art of makeup in theatrical performance adds dimension to a character. The JANAL team interviewed a Chavittunatakam dance-drama makeup artist who shared experiences and insights into the art.*

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Figure 1. Antony applying makeup on Treasa, a female Chavittunatakam artist. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

Antony, the makeup artist with the Kreupasanam School of Folk Arts took a keen interest in arts club activities in his school days. He acted in dramas every year and found himself drawn to the makeup aspect of it. This early exposure to the theatre world ignited a passion for makeup artistry that stayed with him through the years. "Around 15 years ago, I got a chance to put my skills to the test when Rev. Father V.P. Joseph (founder and director of Kreupasanam Religio-Socio-Cultural Centre) asked me to do makeup for a performance," he said during our interaction. This opportunity was a game-changer for him, marking the beginning of his career as a makeup artist.

The Importance of Appearance

From the point of view of the makeup man, applying makeup is about enhancing the artist's facial features and transforming them into the characters they portray on stage. It is a fascinating art form that requires creativity, skill, and a keen understanding of the character's personality and traits. Antony pointed out that the type of makeup used varies

depending on the story and the nature of the character. Furthermore, the makeup style changes depending on whether the performance is a traditional Chavittunatakam or a contemporary story. The makeup artist explained that traditional characters' makeup is done differently, with a flashier approach, as it is essential to distinguish them from modern characters. Interestingly, the makeup artist is the only one responsible for the makeup, and he considers the character's age and social status to create a distinct look. "If the look is not right, they will not *become* the characters in the drama," he told the researcher.

A thought-provoking aspect of the conversation with the makeup artist was the manner in which he emphasised the significance of makeup in Chavittunatakam performances, highlighting that not all performers are fair-skinned. He commented that Chavittunatakam includes people from backward classes who may not have fair skin, and makeup is essential in making them appear brighter and fairer. The makeup artist noted that makeup aims to change the performer's face and create a new character. When questioned why all

the artists, irrespective of the background of the character they were portraying, have to be fair, all Antony said was, "Yes, they have to be fair. It is a programme. While on stage, they have to look good". (further interview needed to understand why there is this emphasis on people being fair. He pointed out individual performers to the researcher to illustrate how each of their skin tones makes it difficult for him to make them appear fair).

A purely Christian theatre exists only in Kerala, and it is interesting to note that the Portuguese invasion made this possible¹. The theatre was never an imitation of the European style but was an art form that integrated local Kalaripayattu's movements with European storytelling themes and opera elements. The effects of the spirit of the Renaissance, which the Portuguese missionaries brought to the cultural landscape of Kerala, can still be seen in the music, stories, and costumes of Chavittunatakam.



Figure 2. The make-up products used by Antony. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

The makeup makes the difference between a royal and a fisherman, and the makeup artist relies primarily on the pancake for Chavittunatakam performances. The numbers on the pancake refer to the skin tone, with 25 being the light shade and 27 having a red

¹ George, Dewmol, and Dr. Celine E. (Sr. Vinitha). "Indigenised European Theatre: The Transfusal Narrative of Chavittu Natakam." *Teresian Journal of English Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 2020): 44–52.

tinge to make the skin appear darker. The makeup man chooses the appropriate shade depending on the skin tone of the actors and the story they plan to perform. Irrespective of the story's setting, he uses the same products to prepare every actor: blush, lipstick, and eyebrow makeup compliment the pancake.



Figure 3. Performers putting on their costumes with the help of the costumer and director. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

The Process of Makeup

The makeup man must first study the script, the character's background, and the director's vision to understand how the character should look. This preparatory work helps select the right products, colours, and techniques to achieve the desired look, after which he starts the transformation process. The look is discussed with the director only at times, for Antony is a senior makeup artist who has been working in the field for years, and the directors trust him to do justice to the characters. As the artist sits in the chair, the makeup man starts by prepping their skin, ensuring it is clean and moisturised, and applies the pancake and powder to create a smooth base. Next, they work on the eyes, adding eyeshadow, eyeliner, and mascara to make them pop. The eyebrows are then shaped and filled in to match the character's look. The makeup man then

moves on to the lips, selecting the right shade of lipstick or gloss to complete the overall look. He may also add contouring and highlighting to add depth and dimension to the face.

Throughout the process, the makeup man and the artist bond over their shared passion for their craft. It is a collaborative effort that requires trust, patience, and attention to detail. For both the artist and the makeup man, it is a way to escape from the hardships of life and immerse themselves in the world of the character they are creating. Ultimately, the makeup man's work transforms the artist into a completely different person. "Seeing the character come to life is a powerful feeling, and the makeup man takes pride in his ability to make that happen. It is a job that requires a lot of hard work and dedication, but it is a dream come true for those who love it," says Antony.

Balancing Makeup and Other Occupations

As with any art form, makeup has evolved, and Antony has continuously improved his skills. He credited a retired senior for teaching him and helping him hone his craft. The use of permanent makeup artists in Chavittunatakam troupes varies depending on the troupe. Antony does make up for other shows based on the schedule of Chavittunatakam performances. These events include Bharatnatyam, dance shows, youth festivals, school programmes, and dramas.

Antony revealed that he was a tailor by profession. He had lived in Mumbai for a decade, from 1970 to 1980, and returned home to Pattanakaadu to continue his work as a tailor. He creates the Chavittunatakam costumes from scratch, including stitching them together. The costumier on the team is only responsible for dressing the performers. While the

costumes for contemporary Chavittunatakam performances are less elaborate, the costumes of traditional plays tend to be gaudy and glittery, especially for royal characters.

Completing the makeup for everyone takes one and a half hours: Antony works on the makeup for all 12 performers alone, and the performers do not do their makeup themselves on any occasion. Commenting on this preparatory time, he said he sometimes finds himself in hurried situations, but completing the makeup quickly without compromising quality is always challenging. The artist shared that passion is the key to surviving in this field, as it is difficult. If one has a genuine passion for this work, it can become a way of forgetting one's problems and difficulties. Bonding with the performers and belonging to a team can be a therapeutic experience, helping to get through difficult times.

While doing makeup for the performers of Kreupasanam folk arts school, Antony has also worked as a counsellor for a Charismatic Prayer group. He emphasised that the relationship between the artist and the performers is not merely professional but rather personal, the shared space allowing them to overcome their respective challenges. In this sense the makeup artist is an integral part of the Chavittunatakam team, and his contribution to the performances is significant.

Acknowledgement

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Further Reading

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