Norvin Hein’s book was based on fieldwork done in the 1940s and 1950s, and is the parent or grandparent of many ethnographic and performance studies undertaken in more recent decades; and although complemented by this later work, it has never been superseded. The book covers two main themes: the Rasîlīlā traditions of Braj, and other dramatic traditions of the Mathura area such as Râmlîlā, Kathak, and Jhânkī. The text is illustrated with black and white photographs, and with local woodcuts such as the one on the left of this page.

Each of the various dramatic arts included here is explained against its historical backdrop, and illustrated with textual examples in Hindi with English translation. There is a seamless combination of the ethnographic, the historical, and the Indological in Hein’s approach, resulting in a wonderfully rich and satisfying study. Here is an example of Hein’s careful observation of “performance” — if that is the right word to capture the static Jhânkī tableau that he observed taking place in the temple of Mathurânâth in Mathura city:

It is eight o’clock in the evening of January 21, 1950. We pass through the portico of the temple without stopping at any ticket booth, for neither here nor at any other of the indigenous dramas is anyone charged any price for admission. We step into the inner court, where a platform has been improvised, and a sofa has been placed on it and covered with rich plush. Potted plants flank this dais on either side. A crowd has gathered in the court, and as we enter, it is in the act of rising to its feet with a great shout of ‘Râm Candra ji ki jay!’ The acclamation hails the emergence from behind a backdrop of svarūps of Sîtâ and Râm, two boys of 10 or 12 years. They seat themselves on their lofty throne. The distinctive dress of the goddess Sîtâ is worn by the younger and more delicate lad (female actors are quite unknown to any of the dramas with which this study deals). Worshipers immediately gather about the throne and contend for the privilege of rendering to the deities various traditional services. Someone soon begins to swing the honorific yak-tail whisk (caṅvar) in slow measured arcs over the heads of the svarūps. An attendant appears with a flaming ārâṭī tray and waves it before the
deities, and then the assembly is seated. Rām is dressed in gold-trimmed robes of rich red velvet; Sītā wears the traditional sārī, a dupattā or mantilla, and her special tiara. Under the powerful illumination the silver and glass of their crowns glitter like stars. A sādhu kneels before the throne and takes upon himself the task of massaging the feet of the deities. The handsome Rām and even more handsome Sītā accept the attentions of their devotees with aloof grace… (pp. 19-20)

Through such rich depiction Hein offers a detailed account of devotional performances and of the sentiments that enliven them. Songs sung in these ritual contexts are transcribed and translated, beginning with a verse that justifies the fact that “the worship of Rām has come to Krishnā’s very capital, yet neither the incarnate Rām nor any other person present feels that it challenges the position of the established Lord of Mathurā in any way” (p. 20):

राम कृṣ्ण दोऊ एक हैं
चतुर एक जय नामः
लीलाधारी कृष्ण हैं
मयुदामय रामम्

Rām and Krishnā, the two are one;
Repeat it as one name, O wise man!
Krishna is the Frolicsome One,
Rām is the soul of propriety! (p. 20)

A chapter on Kathak dance begins with a comment from the art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy who wrote in 1914: “I have never seen, nor do I hope to see, better acting than I saw once in Lucknow, when an old man…a poet and a dancer and a teacher of many, many dancing girls…sang a Herd-Girl’s ‘complaint to the mother of Krishnā’” (p. 31). Coomaraswamy here spoke of Binda Deen, whose famous name is taken with great reverence in the world of Kathak. In 1950, Norvin Hein worked in Vrindaban with Binda Deen’s pupil Nand Kiśor; and Hein’s careful analysis of Kathak performance is accompanied by photographs and descriptions of the most important gestures or mudrās, showing in loving detail how a song was rendered, phrase by phrase and word by word, in the context of the dance performance, with cross-reference to the mudrās shown in the nine sample photographs shown here.

The chapters on Rāmlīlā at the heart of
the book offer three main dimensions. The first is an account of the norms of performance and its role as a “distinct social institution”, looking closely at its subject matter and the organisation of its roles. The second, embedded within the first, is a transcription of a performance of the Rājgaddī, or Rām’s enthronement, from the Rāmlilā stage in Mathura: this shows how the recited verses from the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsīdās are interwoven with lines or short passages of spoken linking dialogue and commentary in contemporary Hindi. The third is a separate chapter on the history of the Rāmlilā.

Hein’s discussion of Rāsa Līlā similarly includes the full text of a performance of the Uddhav Līlā, one of 106 līlās listed as being in the current repertoire of the rāsḍhārīs. (All of the narratives are set in the Braj landscape, with the exception of one — the Sudāmā Līlā, whose story from the Bhāgavata purāṇa involves Krishna’s encounter with a childhood friend in the city of Dwarka.) Here too there is a linking of sung metrical verses (often based loosely on such poets as Sūrdās) and spoken dialogue, though the spoken parts are in a slightly Khari-inflected Braj Bhasha rather than contemporary Hindi per se. The following brief extract, for which Hein offers a full translation, demonstrates this:

उद्धव:

नहीं मेया, ऐसी मति कही। वे आपके ही लाला हैं और आपके ही पास रही।

श्यामसुंदर ने मोते सैंदर्सी कही है सो मैं कहूं कि:

गायन

ऊधी इतनी कहियो जाय, ऊधी मेया

हम आयों दोनों मेया, मैया जिन अकलाय, ऊधी... कही है कि हम दो चार दिन में आइये बारे हैं, और मैया, ना समय श्यामसुंदर तुहारी याद करे है तो बड़े दुखी होय है। कही है कि:
UDDHAV:
No, mother! Don’t talk like this. They are your very own sons and will remain only with you. Śyāmsundar has given me a message, so I shall tell it.

_Song_

Ūdho, go and say thus, brother Ědho!
‘We are coming, both us brothers,
Mother. don’t be distressed.’
Oh Ědho…

He says that they are coming in a few days. And mother, when Śyāmsundar remembers you, he is very sad. He said,

_Song_

I have never had breakfast in the morning
Nor have I suckled the cow at evening
Since the day we were separated from you,
Nor has anyone called me ‘Kanhaiyā’. (pp. 196-197)

_The Miracle Plays of Mathurā_ has greater depth and richness than can be shown in a short review. It happened to be published just at the time when my own interest in “the matter of Braj” was just beginning, and I have always thought of this fine and beautiful book as “Hein’s Miracle”.

_Rupert Snell — HINDIDOX_