

In India, dance is all around us- in films, on TV, at festivals, and weddings. Dance is a celebration, entertainment, a social function, sometimes a religious ceremony. Watching a dance performance on stage is particularly exciting, and this past year we saw many such great performances.

Seated with 600 other audience members in an auditorium all absorbed in the performance, there is a unique shared energy. A great dancer makes the theatre in which he/she performs a sacred space, reaching out to even the last rows of the audience with the intensity of her dance. Unlike watching TV or movies, for audiences in the theatre, what you see is what you get- no interfering technology of a camera or an editor. We can see the subtle details of a dancer's facial expressions, the stability or shakiness of a pose, the vulnerability of a human body performing extraordinary movements, the skillful coordination of the dance, music, and lights.

It is impossible to put this thrilling feeling accurately into words, but possible to experience, if you are open to it. In classical dance theory, it is called 'rasa' or essence. An informed and sensitive audience member is called a 'rasika'- one who experiences the essence of a performance. A dancer's challenge is to convey the essence, or 'rasa' to the audience. This is the challenge for all performing dancers- classical, contemporary, ballet, etc. Very simply, if it touches your heart, it is good dance.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The most unique aspect of dance in India is that it has ancient origins, yet it is constantly evolving. There is evidence of dance in India even 4500 years ago- in a little bronze sculpture called 'the dancing girl' which was found at the archaeological site of Mohenjo Daro. It is also believed that the Natyashastra, the main text on dance and

drama in India, was written in the second century AD. Even thousands of years ago, poetry, music, and dance were flourishing!

Dance grows because performers and gurus create new pieces and contribute to the form that they have inherited. There were many such turning points in the history of dance in India, such as the Bhakti movement, with its peak in the 17th century, when dance and music flourished as a connection to religion. More recently, in the 1940's, when India as a nation was struggling for freedom and an independent cultural identity, many gurus were instrumental in shaping classical Indian dance as we see it today. These include Kelucharan Mohapatra in Odissi, Vempati Chinna Satyam in Kuchipudi, and Rukmini Devi in Bharatanatyam. 'Traditional' and 'modern' are ambiguous categories in Indian dance because of this constant evolution and sharing between past and present.

Dance evolves also because performers constantly adapt to the changing world around them. Over the years, the site of dance performance has changed drastically. Traditionally, dance was performed in the temple, royal court, or village maidaans. In the temples, devadasis were dancers who sang and danced for god and devotees as a part of the rituals and processions. Their repertoire was rich in poetry and music, and dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Odissi as we see them today draw largely from the dances of the devadasis. In Tamil Nadu, the dance of the devadasis was earlier referred to as 'sadir'. In Orissa, the 'maharis' were the female dancers in the temples.

Storytelling has always been an important part of dance in India, and forms like Kathak originated in the royal courts, where 'kathakars' told stories through dance and music. In olden days, when movies, TV and internet were not options for entertainment, traveling troupes performed their dance-dramas in the village maidaans, or central square of the village, for the education and entertainment of the villagers. Kuchipudi for example, developed out of this kind of dance-drama tradition. Today, a dancer lives and performs on the city's stages, with sophisticated sound and light technology, and for diverse audiences, sometimes international. The context of dance has changed

significantly.

The content has also changed. Today, with TV, movies, YouTube and faster communication and transportation technologies, a dancer in India can learn a Brazilian rhythm and use it in performance with his Japanese co-dancer in a performance in Paris. Back then, a dancer in a village in Orissa probably would not have known what was happening in Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu, unless he spent the precious resources and time to make the long trip there and back. Dancers now freely use movements from different traditions, poetry of various languages, innovative and unusual costumes. Today, dance is a reflection of the hybrid lifestyles we lead- comfortable with different styles of moving, dressing, singing, and speaking.

2012 DANCE PERFORMANCES



One of the best performances that we saw in India this year was Akram Khan's 'Gnosis'. Akram Khan is of Bangladeshi origin, and learnt Kathak and contemporary dance in England. A small handsome bald man, he is a powerful and soulful performer on stage. Both his Kathak (first half of the program) and contemporary dance (second half) are equally compelling. He says that when he performs classical, the stage is a temple. When he performs contemporary, it is a laboratory- a place to experiment, test and find the unknown. He performed in India after 11 years, and he was received warmly as a celebrity of dance!

Akram Khan's choreography is pathbreaking. The general impression of contemporary dance is that it is acrobatic, western, and tells 'new' stories, not mythological ones. Akram Khan's choreography has minimalism. Though he is capable of doing incredibly acrobatic things with his body, he uses it only when it is meaningfully placed. The story he chooses is a 'classic' one- exploring the character of Gandhari from the Mahabharata. A simple prop of a long stick was used in amazing and innovative ways in the choreography. On stage with Akram Khan were 5 musicians- a cello, Carnatic

violin, tabla, drums, and vocal- as well as a well-known dancer originally from Taiwan, Fang Sheu-yi. The music, lighting, and dance came together to make an unforgettable performance, followed by a much-deserved standing ovation.

Another incredible performance this year was by Nrityagram Dance Ensemble. In residence at NCPA, Mumbai for one week, the dancers performed 'Samyoga', a duet, and 'Samhara', a collaboration with Chitrasena Dance Company of Sri Lanka. They also taught master classes, presented a special lecture- demonstration for 900 school children in Mumbai, and spoke in a seminar on 'Dance Matters'.

Nrityagram is a small dance village gurukul started by Protima Bedi located two hours away from Bangalore. She passed away in a landslide in 1998 leaving the gurukul to two of the most beautiful dancers in India today- Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy. Together, they have worked over 20 years to create some of the most exquisite and unique Odissi productions. The ensemble tours USA every year, and are considered 'rock stars' of the dance world! This year, they collaborated with Kandyan dancers from Sri Lanka to make the production 'Samhara'. There are surprising similarities in Kandyan dance and Odissi- the pulsing movements of the torso, the 'chauk' basic position of Odissi and the 'mandya' basic position of Kandyan. Both have origins in ritual dances of temples. The flawless movements, strong expressions, and perfect synchrony between the artists made for an experience that will stay in our minds for years to come.

Like the partnership between Nrityagram and Kandyan dancers, one of the secrets of great dance is great collaborations- with musicians, painters, lighting designers, co-dancers, directors. Some of the most beautiful productions come out of fruitful creative partnerships. Aditi Mangaldas, for example, presents 'Now Is' with music by Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan, with German painter Siegwald Sprotte's paintings projected on three panels behind the dancers. She also presented 'Timeless', which has not just great dancing, but also innovative light design and costumes never before used in Indian dance. This year, she travelled to Singapore, Sri Lanka, Australia,

and the well-known Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. Aditi Mangaldas' performances are some of the most sought after, around the world.

Many dancers today find inspiration for contemporary work in other traditional practices, not necessarily dance forms. These include kalaripayattu, the martial art form of Kerala; thang ta, the martial art of Manipur, mallakhamb which is pole gymnastics, and other such physical practices. Priti Patel's Manipuri production, the 'Throw of Dice', used Thang ta, including swords and spears! Daksha Sheth's productions have aerial work, where the dancer is hanging from a rope in mid-air. She also incorporates mallakhamb practices. Kalaripayattu has become a standard form of training for most dancers, like yoga. A dancer is always searching for new ways of moving and emoting, and for strengthening his/her body.

Dancing is an endless journey and it goes far beyond the strength of a physical body. The unique aspect of 'abhinaya', or emotive facial and body expression, in Indian dance is the most beautiful and soulful aspect of dance in India. The greatest artists of abhinaya can bring to life a character or create a whole new world on stage for the audience, solely with the power of their imagination and expression. Bharatanatyam dancer Bragha Bessell is one such artist who presented an evening of abhinaya titled 'Patra Dhwani'. In it, she transformed from one character to another, bringing to life each of their emotions. She even revived an old English javali, 'Oh my lovely Lalana' which was written around the 19th century, when the British ruled India! The Mumbai audience was thrilled to see such a rare and interesting composition!

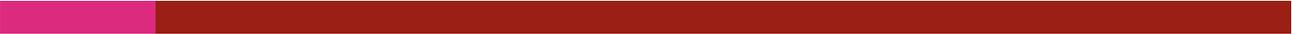
Alarmel Valli is another master of abhinaya. She presents 'Scent of the Earth' and 'Until the Light Fades'. She too used an English poem, and interspersed it with Carnatic music to create a beautiful Bharatanatyam piece. This year, a film on Alarmel Valli's life was released, titled 'Lasya Kavya'. In it, one sees the endless creative work and passion that goes behind a successful dancer. She also speaks of her studying under T. Brinda, a musician from a traditional devadasi family, under whom she realized how to 'see the

music, hear the dance’, the title of another of her productions. Alarmel Valli says she ‘sings with her body’ when she is on stage.

Some of the most passionate performances during the past year came from young upcoming dancers. Although one hears some people complain that classical dance is declining in popularity, the number and high quality of young dancers, and the full audiences watching them, is an indication of the opposite- classical dance is thriving and will continue to prosper in India. For within the classical dance repertoire there are infinite possibilities for exploration and growth. Some of the outstanding upcoming dancers we saw perform are Saswati Garai Ghosh (Odissi), Anuj Mishra (Kathak), and Pavitra Bhat (Bharatanatyam). They train rigorously in the classical dance form, and also challenge the boundaries.

As Bharata writes in the Natyashastra, “There is no art, no knowledge, no yoga, no action that is not found in natya (dance)”. Dance as an art form brings together movement with not just music, but so many other art forms- painting, sculpture, lighting, costume, textiles, literature, and poetry. Indeed, in India, it is all around us. You can simply enjoy the entertainment of Bollywood dance in films, or watch the acrobatic performers on dance reality shows, or immerse yourself in the experience of a performance in a theatre, surrounded by hundreds of others absorbed in a breath-taking dance performance.

AMRITA LAHIRI | JANUARY 2013



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