

Choreography: No Explanations, Please!

I am 5'4", slim, dark, with black wavy hair that I cannot bear to tie up. My feet are big; the toes long and widely spaced, like the grasping toes of monkeys. My second toe is longer than my first, which my grandmother says accounts for all my problems with lovers and husbands: I will have my own way.

Interesting, you say: but isn't this is an article about choreography? Just wait.

I was born in India, spoke Tamil and Malayalam, ate mangoes and jackfruit and appams and that surprisingly purple rice that you get in Kerala. I went to Winnipeg in Canada when I was five, learned English and forgot the convolutions of my mother-tongue, skated on the frozen river in winter and played hide-and-seek under the midnight sun of Northern summers. I returned to India when I was 10 and did things other Indian girls weren't allowed to, like ride a bicycle and swim. I went back to Canada when I was 12, and had a hard time learning the intricacies of teenhood, but by the time I was 16, I was 'hip' enough to be crazy about Bob Dylan.

Yes, but what does all this have to do with choreography? Be patient. There is a point to all this.

At 16, I ran away from home, and hitch-hiked all the way from Thunder Bay to Toronto, a thousand miles, with 20 dollars in my pocket and no idea of what I might do when I got there. I danced in a modern dance production— did I mention that I had studied ballet?— worked as a waitress in an Indian restaurant, and hung around with artists and filmmakers and poets and bums on the street until the winter came and it got too cold. Then I came back to India.

But choreography....Don't interrupt. I'm just getting to the good part, the Shoba De stuff, the sex and drugs... .Oh. This is not that type of magazine, you say! Sorry.

Hegel ripped apart spirit and nature, severed thought from the external world and then put us humans in the middle, trying to get them back together. He saw the work of art as arising from that attempt to forge, to heal. The dancer, of all artists, most completely embodies that Hegelian notion, of thought and body merging as the artist attempts the work of art.

So now you know what the personal history is all about: I am what I dance, my dance is me.

But then it gets slippery, because elusiveness is at the centre of dance, both for the dancer and the audience. You, the audience, can't look at a dance performance close up and then move away, as you might do with a painting, or move around it

as you could with a sculpture, or go back to the beginning, as you can with a book. While it is going on, each member of the audience in different parts of the auditorium effectively sees a different dance, different angles, different relationships between dancer, movement and space. At the end of the performance, there is no residue, except in memory, in the elusive after-image; no 'thing' to point to after the performance, no painting or sculpture, no script, no book.

**In short, physics has discovered
That there are no solids,
No continuous surfaces.
No straight lines:
Only waves,
No things
Only energy event complexes.
Only behaviours,
Only verbs,
Only relationships....**

(I don't remember where I got this, but it is so beautiful, and I include it here in the hope that someone will recognise it, and enlighten me about the author).

Dance, like music, and more so than any other art-form, is beyond verbal description, notation or any other symbolic account of it. But while musicians can at least hear the sounds they produce, dancers are so indivisible from their dance that through no sense can they objectify and attend to their own performance. The dance performance hardly exists without the audience: a dancer all alone on stage with no one to watch is a Zen problem, like the sound of one hand clapping.

This elusiveness of dance has allowed dance to escape being subjected to the various critical 'readings' that address, with varying degrees of insight, the less transitory arts, especially literature. Nowadays, each text may generate analysis that is deconstructionist, Marxist, psychoanalytical, feminist, post-colonial, post-structuralist, semiotic or any combination thereof. Sometimes it seems that 'meaning' is either the wood that post-modernists can't see for the trees, or the baby that they have thrown out with the bath-water.

**"In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art," —
Susan Sontag.**

So what exactly is the dancer doing on stage?
The expressiveness of dance is not like language: abhinaya is reduced to sign language if there is a one-to-one relationship between a movement and a word. The body must be up there on stage to

say what words cannot say; otherwise the audience could simply read the programme notes and go home.

Presumably, the dancer communicates through dance because no other means is adequate; otherwise why go through the masochism of training and the trial-by-fire of performance? So, 'What does it mean?' is not the best way to respond. Dance is not, in Ian Hacking's terms, a 'truth-value candidate'; it cannot be reduced to sentences, cannot be judged as true or false, right or wrong. As Octavio Paz said about poetry, dance is communion, not communication. Rasa is taste: sensual, immediate. That means that you know whether a dance performance is chocolate or chalk, mangoes or mud.

Do you really need Sunil Kothari, Leela Venkataraman or any of their ilk to tell you whether to savour it or spit it out?

"Why not decide that beauty is fun, fun beauty, that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Umberto Eco quotes this in Interpretation and Overinterpretation).

Nor can the dancer avoid this expressiveness of the body. To enter the performance space and submit one's body to the gaze of the audience is to be expressive. If the choreography sets itself against the tradition of expressiveness that is part of dance, then the dancer, with a look of self-conscious blankness or indifference, is communicating that rebellion. Even if the dance communicates nothing else, it will at least communicate the choreographic intention to be non-expressive.

After I started studying Bharatanatyam at Kalakshetra, I saw Yamini Krishnamurti perform at the Music Academy. Twenty four years later, I can still conjure up the image of her, seated on stage with the soles of her feet together, enticing her lover in the Kuchipudi Krishna Sabdam. She showed the nayika as a woman who was confident, playful and seductive. She held the audience with her gaze as surely as she held her lover. But seduction was the least of her accomplishments that evening. Yamini transcended that moment, that lover, that beloved, and revealed the essence and meaning and truth of that particular. Yamini did that night what I think art is meant to do: she changed my life. She altered forever how I defined myself as a woman.

That is what I want to do with my choreography. I want to change your life. I want images to remain with you. I want you to see the world differently after a performance of my work.

The narrative assumptions of the Bharatanatyam dance performance in Madras are what we take

for granted. We all know our role as audience, what is expected of us, that we should come in take our seats and wait patiently for the performance to begin. We know how to dress for the performance, we know how we expect the dancer to dress, what to expect from the performance in so many ways. We accept fat dancers, old dancers, badly constructed stages, lighting that is inadequate or uninteresting, huge banners across the stage advertising TV sets, and Chief Guests who delay and disrupt. Rasa is not dependent on these things,

Or is it?

No, it isn't. All of us who are devoted to dance and music know of performances that transcend the circumstances. We put up with the inconveniences and the parade of mediocrity for the rare moments of profound enjoyment. Lacan compares these to sexual pleasure, because they disrupt the symbolic order; or to use the neologism of Lee Weng Choy, the symbolic order is "ra/uptured".

But unfortunately, usually the fat dancer does not practice enough; the dancer who agrees to dance with the banner behind, lacks aesthetic judgement in other aspects of the performance; the dancer who allows the coming and going of the Chief Guest to interrupt the performance has valued prestige above art, and it shows in her dance. And believe me, the audience knows. Of course, we all have our tastes. But when a performance has touched us, then any discussion of what it means is superfluous. Just listen to the way we talk about great performances: Ray Langenbach, performance artist, about an Ali Akbar Khan concert: "I felt like he was playing my nervous system." Avinash Pasricha, photographer, after a performance by Leela Samson: "I fell in love with Leela this evening." Dipanjali Bedi, Kathak dancer invited out to eat after a Sankai Juku [Japanese Buto dancers] tour de force: "I couldn't possibly eat. I'm full from this dancing." Rainer Wolfgramm, a journalist, who knows little about dance, about a simple demonstration by Kalanidhi: "I heard every word she didn't say." Me, about Valli: "Her movements are burned into my retina, like a mandala."

Let me recap: What I dance and what I am are inseparable, I can't tell you what it means, and if you are looking for explanations then I have failed in my choreography. I never thought about dance as discourse when I was 16 just starting to learn Bharatanatyam at Kalakshetra. When I was told that Bharatanatyam was thousands of years old, and based on the Natya Sastra. I never questioned it. We were never told that the name was invented hardly 40 years previously, that the name effectively

rendered it safe, safe for the good, chaste woman of forward castes, sanitized it of its devadasi connections, so that it could be used by the castes that had no art of their own, but had, through interaction with the West, realised the value of art, and wanted some.

Does this seem simplistic?

There are many levels of textuality

in the emergence of Bharatanatyam as an art-form (sexual, political) that I have not addressed, and that baffle me. But whether this is the most interesting reading of events in the resurrection of Bharatanatyam is not the point. The point is that history is 'text', written and 'read' and interpreted to suit an agenda, and it depends very much on who is doing the writing, the reading and the interpreting.

In Kalakshetra, I was taught that the devadasi tradition had degenerated into a kind of prostitution and that is why Bharatanatyam had become degraded. But at many points in the long and complex history of dance in Tamil Nadu, prostitution and dance were linked. At some points in this history, prostitution was an acceptable and admired profession. Courtesans had a valued place in society. They were well-educated and cultured women, so that, in British times when high caste girls were given an education, they were mistaken for prostitutes, because they could read and write. So dance did not become degraded because some devadasis became prostitutes but because prostitution itself had lost its value. The devadasi system, which embraced temple, dance and music, and prostitution, suffered, maybe as British sexual values gained currency in colonial India.

But we must not blame the British for everything: there has been for a long time a record of dichotomy between the 'chaste' woman, whose sexuality is expressed within the marriage, and the 'unchaste', or sexually available woman. The aggression between them is well-established in Silappadikaram, which also provides a lovely description of a dance by the courtesan Madhavi. E. Krishna Iyer restored the respectability of Sadir/Bharatanatyam by presenting devadasi dancers who were steeped in the tradition. Then along came Rukmini Devi who had the necessary qualifications to 'cleanse' the dance, even though she came to dance late. She knew that Bharatanatyam needed to be ancient, to hark back to the glory of a golden past. It needed to be 'spiritual', to be stripped of association with the world of the devadasi, which involved desire, seduction, and sex.

She eschewed javalis. She had no compunction about changing lyrics of songs to suit her definitions of what was acceptable. She responded to the discrepancy between the dance-form and the demands of her audience by turning sringara into bhakti. No

questions of authenticity bothered her when she reworked adavus, dances, costumes. Now her radical changes, made hardly 50 years ago, are accepted as the 'tradition'.

Once you start to question, you can't go back to the innocence of believing what you're told. I knew already that my long black wild hair, worn loose, was a signifier, that it was 'read' by those who saw me, and that the message was considered subversive.

Then Kalanidhi, another brahmin, came along and put the eroticism back in. Thank God. But what is one to say about the phenomenon of Madras virgins who've grown up on a steady diet of Mills and Boon entering the matrimonial market-place by swooning on the stage over Krishna's erotic prowess to attract the most eligible bridegroom before retiring to . . . all too ordinary sex with human husbands?

Sometime during the process of breaking up with my first husband and meeting the second, I started to feel the disjunction of what I was doing on stage from my own life. My relationships with men were troubled at best and there was no name for me in the Natya Sastra schema of women.

I wanted to escape the Ashtanayika classification, and cross the lokadharmi/natyadharmi divide. What if we don't buy into the sanitized, Sanskritised version of Bharatanatyam? What if we don't want to prop up our work with Natya Sastra terms and look simply at what goes on, and see whether it meets the needs of dancer and audience? What we see is that the concept of lokadharmi and natyadharmi, and the selection of movements or moments, or characters, as worthy for depiction on stage has produced images that are idealised, aristocratic, elitist.

That's not what I wanted. I was looking for images that the audience could read in the same way that they read my long black hair.

"Any movement may be beautiful, depending on how it fits the choreographer's vision."

Thomas Wartenberg

That's when I choreographed What She Said. Sangam poetry translated by A.K. Ramanujam touched me: even 2000 years ago, women had the same problems. It was in conversation and collaboration with Seema Agarwal that the dances evolved. I could say anything to her. We talked and the dances took form, as much about my friendship with Seema, and my minor and major heartbreaks, as about the poems.

My dance has always started from images, and a sense of urgency; no conceptualising, no desire to instruct or empower or address issues, other than my own disturbances. The images come to me as mysterious and rich and significant as the images in dreams. I watch my child, the man I love, strangers walking down the street, people waiting for the bus and suddenly a moment seems beautiful, expressive, meaningful, but I don't really know, or care what it means. Much later in the context of the dance I may discover what I'm dancing about.

Once, travelling on the 19M bus in Madras, I saw a young girl looking out of a blue barred window and braiding her hair. That image turned into the Song for Virgins, and Bharatanatyam dancer MeenaRaman perfectly expressed that girl-woman's intensity; private, deep in secret thoughts, looking out at the world from behind bars, from the haven and prison of home.

Other images are too disturbing and personal for words. It would be gossip: the end of a relationship; what he said, what I did, the habits of two bodies together even when the love is gone. I found the image of the woman with the pounding stick, her sari tucked up and knotted for convenience, strong, sweaty; with neither the time nor the inclination for pining, but wanting love too. That pounding stick, visual metaphor for the lover, became other things in my sanchari of direct images: the tree I lean on, the yoke I bear, the pole I push my boat with, the body I cling to.

Like the two tailors in that cautionary tale The Emperor's New Clothes, critics spin dialectic and hermeneutics and big words into a cloth we can almost see hiding the essential emptiness of much of modern dance work. I suspect I could do it myself because I know some big words, but I doubt if anyone would get the joke. Parody might be taken seriously, quoted, plagiarised, used parrot-fashion by other dancers in interviews in The Hindu. So I keep on trying to create work that stands without exegesis, that ruptures the symbolic order, that tastes. Why hide behind words? When I appear naked on stage, I want the audience to know it.

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