

## Making Life Dance by Gitanjali Kolanad

When I said at six that I wanted to be a ballet dancer, my mother, instead of saying, “yes, darling, now go out and play”, enrolled me for classes at the School of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. While I managed the *plies* and *relevés* and *rond des jambes* at the barre, I hated and dreaded the exercise that always ended the class. That’s when we weren’t told what to do beyond “move; like a robot”, or a butterfly, or the wind.

The little Canadian girls seemed to enjoy this part of the class, but for me, recently arrived from South India, it was confusing, not fun. I always peeked out of the corner of my eye, and tried to imitate the girl next to me. This the teacher invariably noticed. “No, no, no,” he would scold in his dramatic Russian accent, “feel it inside yourself first, and then move.”

When I switched to Bharata Natyam, I learned that dance was not to be confused with what we ourselves felt. The pure dance is abstract, not about robots or butterflies or the wind. And when the expressional dance says the lover’s face is like the moon, the dance teacher says, “look at how I show the lover, look at how I show the moon”. Don’t think of the real lover, because of course you are not supposed to have a lover, but don’t even think of the real moon. Only after many years of Bharata Natyam training did I encounter two dance teachers who said the words that had confused me as a six year old in the ballet class in Winnipeg; “feel it inside yourself first, and then move”.

**Guru Nana Kasar** worked on my pure dance. He forced me to rediscover every single movement that I had been taught by imitation; and make it my own. He put expression into the abstract movements: “Feel the arm move like a rope”.

**Kalanidhi Narayan**, who teaches abhinaya, asked me to observe my own emotions, to create the jealousies and anger and recriminations of the *padams* and *javalis* and *astapadis* out of what I myself felt; for example when the man I loved stood too close and listened too intently while a woman in a sec-through white dress talked about Derrida.

But the intersection of dance and life is not a decision, it is a process.

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...and when he is gone  
I grieve like a deserted house  
in a little hamlet  
of the wastelands  
where the squirrel plays  
in the front yard.

Anilatu Munrilar  
Kur41

Ramanujan’s translations, and his Afterword in *The Interior Landscape* allowed me to enter the poetic conventions of 2000 years ago without any sense of distance. But after five years of thinking, I had still found no way to make dances out of them, dances that were as immediate as the poems.

So I stopped trying to dance the poems at all. Anyway, romantic love and all its repercussions are well celebrated in movies and poems and pop songs and novels. I was tired of men. I wanted to dance about something else. But it didn’t occur to me to dance about my relationships with women.

The dances of “What She Said” happened this way: I got my best friend Seema Agarwal, (a wonderful intelligent dancer who is also very good at dissecting relationships), and I set out some kind of problem: “Can we do a whole dance seated on the ground?” or “Can we make a dance out of just walking?”

First, the dances were movements, about nothing. But slowly it became clear: they were about two women, friends, who can talk to each other about anything. They are examining the bloody little bits of their relationships, as they fetch water, pound grain, wash clothes. The Sangam poems are their conversations, but the dances are their chores and their intimacy with each other.

The news of my mother’s sudden mysterious death in a hospital in Canada reached me just two days before the first performance of “What She Said” in Delhi. What could I do? I danced. I don’t remember very much about it, except that in the heightened state of awareness that performance sometimes brings, I drifted in and out of trance-like interludes during which I could hear my mother’s voice, and my attention would leave the dance in order to catch what she was saying. Seema saved that performance.

Later on, when “What She Said” was performed at the Singapore Arts Festival Fringe ’94 I added another character, a gypsy woman who tells stories (based on A. K. Ramanujan’s translations again, this time of folk-tales) and gives out potions and advice to the love-lorn. That gypsy woman has a mother, a snake-mother, who saves her from a destructive relationship.

Of course, the husband in “What She Said” cuts off the heroine’s arms and legs and breasts, which hasn’t happened to me. But sometimes it felt like that inside.

In retrospect, I can see where life and dance have intersected.

Nowadays, I watch out for it. I watch children flinging themselves around at play; women working, carrying bricks, carrying water, carrying babies. Anyone who has ever done anything over and over again develops a sparse and elegant economy of movement that is a pleasure to watch. Observe the women who squat and swab the floor: it is a small dance.

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