

SYMPOSIUM ON SOUTH ASIAN DANCE

A one-day international symposium titled 'Dance in South Asia: New Approaches, Politics, and Aesthetics', was held at Swarthmore College, near Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, U.S.A., on 2 March. The symposium was followed by a dance presentation titled *Dust*, an international collaboration between Dance Alloy of Pittsburgh and Arangham Dance Theatre of Chennai, India.

Kumudini Lakhia, the internationally acclaimed choreographer, teacher and dancer of Kathak, delivered the keynote address. She also conducted a Kathak workshop the following day.

The symposium drew scholars and practitioners from Europe, North America and India. The topics ranged from national identity and tradition, aesthetics and reception, to gender violence and subaltern history. The overarching theme was the re-contextualisation of past and present discourses on classical Indian dance within the socio-political and aesthetic context of the 'modern' and the 'global'. The diversity of approaches used for addressing this changing dynamic spanned academic disciplines such as history, anthropology, dance studies and performance studies, and included practitioners of classical Indian dance forms such as Kathak, Bharatanatyam, and Odissi. The inter-cultural collaboration between choreographers Mark Taylor of Dance Alloy, and Anita Ratnam of Arangham Trust of Chennai highlighted the ongoing experiments with movement vocabularies and choreographic forms that mark the new frontiers of South Asian dance.

Fifteen papers were presented at the symposium. These papers and the array of dance activities that complimented them reflected the proliferation and range of scholarship, choreography, and performance in the field of South Asian dance. Needless to say, although titled Dance in South Asia, the dance-forms discussed were predominantly Indian in origin.

The event was an unprecedented opportunity for dialogue and exchange between individuals from Swarthmore College, the Philadelphia community, and scholars and practitioners from all around the world.

The Symposium

The morning began with an eloquent introduction by Prof. Sharon Friedler, director of dance at Swarthmore College.

A scene from 'Dust'



She outlined the programme's commitment to the integrated approach to the discipline of dance that includes history, theory, and practice. In this context she pointed out Kumudini Lakhia's appropriateness to be the keynote speaker for the occasion.

Kumudini Lakhia, coming from a practice-based orientation, spoke about her own personal journey as a Kathak dancer and choreographer. She described the difficulties she faced as a dancer and choreographer within the classical world of Kathak that was bounded by the tradition of guru-sishya parampara. By using video clips of her exquisite and abstract choreographies, she explained how she re-imagined the stage, once only occupied by solo performers, to be filled with dancers, patterns of colours, and music. In her own

words: "I discovered a whole world of movement from within, as well as in the space outside." She set the tone for the rest of the day by encouraging participants in each field to push the boundary and strive for originality of thought and movement.

Throughout the day, which was packed with papers, dance videos, and a documentary film, the presenters spoke about their own exploration of space not only choreographically, or metaphorically, but also within the post-colonial context of politics of location as it shapes the dancer, her dance, her patron and her audience.

Alessandra Lopez Y Royo from Roehampton University of Surrey, England, analysed how museums in Britain are changing their representations of South Asian dance-forms. She explained that these forms are no longer merely 'exhibits' and 'exotica' of the past Orientalist mindset. Through the participation of the South Asian diaspora as performers and choreographers, the meaning of hegemonic cultural heritage has been questioned, revealing plurality and contradiction.

Chitra Sundaram, a practitioner of Bharatanatyam and director of Suchitdancer in London, illustrated through her choreographic work *Moham: A Magnificent Obsession*, how she went back to traditional technique to radically depart from the more popular convention of Bharatanatyam, thus pushing for a new aesthetic within the structure of the form. She dwelt on the ubiquitous nature of Bharatanatyam in England, which she explained was not one but many things. Her choreographic work reflected Alessandra's point

that Bharatanatyam in Britain is a living, vibrant and contemporary art-form with multiple interpretations.

Priya Srinivasan, from the Northwestern University in Illinois, U.S.A., analysed the history of Bharatanatyam in the context of its international circulation during the period of Indian nationalism and the birth of Modern dance in America. In her discussion of the history of the form (in the construction of Modern American dance), she argued that, while white female dancers like Ruth St. Denis, who appropriated Indian forms, were marked as modern subjects, their South Asian counterparts, such as Bharatanatyam dancers, were marked as carriers of tradition. She explained that this label of tradition ideologically prevented South Asian dancers in the United States from sharing the same modernity.

Roxanne Kamayani Gupta, from Albright College, in Pennsylvania, in a reversal of such claims, argued that the subject position for the white American or European dancer practising Indian forms is often viewed as illegitimate, unauthentic and orientalist. She argued that there is not one but many orientalisms, and from her own subject position as a white American Bharatanatyam dancer, the 'orientalism' she embodies is a radically liberating and universal discourse. She argued that 'orientalism' as a theoretical framework should be used in post-colonial dance analysis to begin a critical reassessment of the 'sacred/spiritual' dimension of Indian classical dance.

In a similar but a more limited vein, Janaki Patrik of the Kathak Ensemble in New York, a dancer and choreographer, spoke about her experiences as a white American Kathak dancer,

and showed video clips of her works that she claimed went beyond narrow definitions of ethnicity and authenticity.

Andre Grau, from Roehampton University of Surrey, England, drew on anthropological and sociological theories to talk about the epistemological conundrums that plague post-Modern and post-colonial theories. In a critique of Edward Said and others, she argued that such theories of totalising Western hegemony reduce post-colonial subjects to ahistorical beings devoid of agency. How useful is it, she asked, for South Asian subjects/dancers/scholars, coming from upper echelons of society, to claim a victim status?

The second session began with the screening of a film by Ashish Avikunth at of Stanford University in California, titled 'Dancing Othello/Brihannala ki Khelkali'. Based on Shakespearean theatricality and Kathakali dance tradition, this subtle, experimental film used theatre and performance to articulate the post-colonial irony of contemporary India. The film suggested that Kathakali aesthetics is incongruous for contemporary urban audiences in India.

This point was foregrounded in a paper and video presentation of Ananya Chatterjea from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, U.S.A. Her focus was however different. A contemporary Indian dancer trained in classical styles, she argued for a break or rupture from classical/romantic aesthetics of Odissi to represent social issues like violence against women.

Speaking about the dance-form of Odissi again, Ratna Roy from Evergreen State College, Washington State,

U.S.A., explored the subaltern text of the Mahari tradition which was traditionally practiced by devadasi dancers. She argued, and showed through gestures/voice modulations (being a dancer herself), how the female voice is different in the Odissi vocabulary than the male or the Gotipua narrative, which is dominant now.

The third session was more eclectic in theme and content than the first two. The importance of the relationship between the performance and the audience was explored in two papers but from different perspectives. Uttara Asha Coorlawala, from Long Island University in New York, examined and illustrated through video clips how the Rasa theory of ancient India resonates with post-Modern aesthetics of performance and continues to have relevance. Through a careful analysis of a video clip of a Kathakali performance, she showed how this critical relationship is established. Janet O'Shea, from the University of Surrey, approached audience reception by analysing contemporary Indian dance performances in London and Toronto as a scholar of Bharatanatyam. She argued that contemporary choreographers and performers like Lata Pada, among others, who are interpreting the dance-form for a Western or uninitiated audience, do not use English language translations of movement vocabularies. She argued that such translations during performances inherently create a subject/object dichotomy. These choreographers let the translations occur internally through weaving of forms, music, and content within the choreography itself, rather than in the printed programmes, she explained.

Lata Pada, director of Sampradaya Dance Creations, Toronto, Canada, presented

a video of her choreographic work titled *Revealed by Fire*. She explained that this was a multi-disciplinary collaboration using photography, video, Western and Eastern music, dramaturgy and play-writing. Her choreography about a search for identity from a personal cathartic experience illustrated Janet O'Shea's point about the weaving of different narratives within the choreography, rather than letting the translation occur externally.

Divya Kumar, director of WordSoundAction, argued that the structural changes that have occurred within Bharatanatyam during its reconstruction from Sadir were heavily influenced by the technique of film editing.

The last paper was presented by Pallabi Chakravorty of Swarthmore College. By turning an anthropological lens towards the larger collective of women Kathak dancers and practitioners in India, she explained how the knowledge of Kathak, despite its problematic patriarchal, nationalist narrative, empowers ordinary women in Calcutta, and its surrounding small towns.

The discussants for the symposium were Uttara Asha Coorlawala and Andre Grau. In their summaries of the papers they highlighted the importance of location of the producer of knowledge, and the importance of creating a dialogue between the individual/choreographer and the collective, respectively. Howard Spodek, a historian from Temple University In Philadelphia, made the concluding comments, which covered general information about India and the socio-historical and political context within which the discourse on dance is taking place.

The symposium created a

new impetus for dialogue and exchange between scholars, practitioners and students of Indian dance and culture by throwing into relief the critical

relationship between history and theory, aesthetics and politics, subject and object, the individual and the collective. It also brought into

focus the field of dance scholarship in India, a subject that receives little academic attention. The hope is to enrich the study of Indian

dance by continuing such cross-disciplinary conversations.

PALLABI CHAKRAVORTY

AFTERWORD

Notions & Motions In Swarthmore

“Oh, Chitra, you use that word so casually when it is so loaded by discourse!” demurred Uttara Coorlawala, smiling sweetly at me across the white-linen draped table. We had just been seated for a Cajun meal at the Louisiana-style New Orleans Restaurant in Media, a small non-descript town of turnpikes, highways, motels and strip malls (as on-a-strip-of-land, not the revealing kind!). Media’s non-descriptness is, however, relieved by a quaint tram system; this, according to Andre Grau, who swears she saw a tram and in motion too! None of the rest of us did. But Media’s real claim to fame is having a wealthy, well-known neighbour: just across the highway, on the other side of the tram-tracks as it were, lies Swarthmore College, the small liberal arts college which vies successfully with the Ivy League giants for American and international students. And, on its campus stands the state-of-the-art Lang Performing Arts Center which houses the College’s theatre and literature and dance departments, as well as an awesome 7000 sft. auditorium equipped with the world’s largest tension lighting grid! *Dust*, the Anita Ratnam-Paul Taylor collaboration showcased really nicely here; as would have *Rap Tillana*, Narendra’s 25-strong full-ensemble work, but he had to be content with it being a duet with Anusha Subramanyam. Their collaboration with Pittsburgh’s Dance Alloy company was a treat in that beautiful auditorium. The talented Narendra clearly revelled in the contemporary sections and Anusha astonished us with her beautiful, 17-minute imperceptible walk

across the stage. Choreographed with warmth, humour and poignancy, *Dust* was a fitting finale.

But on the evening we arrived, it was raining and dark, and so, we saw none of the lovely campus grounds, which, in any case, really don’t come into their own till Spring. It was still Winter at the end of February and the ‘we’ were Uttara Coorlawala, Andre Grau, Alessandra Lopez y Royo, Priya Srinivasan, Roxanne Gupta, Janaki Patrik, Ratna Roy, Ananya Chatterjea, Divya Kumar, Lata Pada, Janet O’Shea and myself, Chitra Sundaram. We were there for a one-day international symposium organised by Pallabi Chakravorty with the support of Sharon Friedler, both of Swarthmore College’s Department of Music and Dance. They had invited “academics, performers and practitioners”. The largest representation was from a highly visible new breed of ‘Indian’ dancers, particularly concentrated in U.S. universities: scholar-performers/practitioners, of Indian and non-Indian origin, who are trained in dance as well as discourse, complete with scarily impressive sounding theses that earned them doctoral degrees.

Kumudini Lakhia delivered the keynote address. (See report by Pallabi Chakravorty). She spoke about the agency of a lone individual within a traditional system. Although she did not frame her experience and effort of three decades in power-and-subversion terms, she spoke of her early artistic struggles with expectations of the guru-sishya

tradition and urged dancer/choreographers to seek individual conviction and expression within their forms. The tyranny of time is such that Kumibehn’s innovations have, in their turn, become ‘traditional’ ensemble repertoire in Kathak and individual expression has transcended traditional aesthetics as well as formal borders. “And what a beautiful dancer he is!” Kumibehn exclaimed to me over coffee, when I brought up the name of Akram Khan. She stayed in her seat all day, taking notes and participating, warmly, actively in discussion with two or three younger generations, without loaded or emotional words.

So, to get back to Uttara’s exclamation, I have forgotten what the word was that agitated her. Possibly, it was ‘essentialise’. I had used it in the sense of ‘capturing the essence of’, getting at something intrinsic, of value and good; I had made it up. But because we were interrupted by food orders and didn’t finish the exchange, I have no idea what my usage indicated to Uttara, except perhaps that I wasn’t logged-in to the ‘discourse’ on the term. Later, Ananya, in her presentation, used ‘essentialisms’ as something clearly undesirable, whether as doctrine or as goal. (The dictionary defines ‘essentialise’ as I used it but without the value judgement of good or bad. However, ‘essentialism’ was the educational doctrine that advocated the teaching of culturally important concepts, ideals, skills to all students regardless of their abilities, needs, etc. and is problematic).

So, the next day, when it came my turn to make a presentation, I opened with a self-defence move, a caveat that my interlocutors should hear my English as words they knew it before they turned academics and loaded the same with discourse!

In any event, what I meant, and, what was understood is not of importance here at all. I merely tell the unresolved tale to make the point that in academic argument and writing, words are, indeed, heavily loaded by earlier discussions and logically argued positions on phenomena or events or idea-constructs; it recalls to the familiar reader/listener all earlier references, like endless images in two mirrors facing each other and, understandably, it frustrates communication if you do not start at where the discourse has arrived at now. To me, for example, a mention of Bharatanatyam as ‘the thousands of years old temple dance’ does just that; I simply tune off.

However, academic research, if you have the patience, is not all boring: the search for a different nuance within a discourse is akin to the quest for a new sanchari! And, starting a whole new discourse is, of course, like finding a whole new sthavi, a certain different way of looking at something, resulting in even a whole new practical movement. I see Edward Said’s impact on orientalism as equivalent to Rukmini Devi’s on Sadir and Chandralekha’s on ‘traditional’ notions about Bharatanatyam. (I only wish she would name it). I mention