

**INTROSPECTION INTO THE EVOLUTION OF BHARATHANATYAM
IN SRI LANKA AND SRI LANKAN TAMIL DIASPORA
DURING AND POST CIVIL WAR**

MEERA KANAGESWARAN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DANCE
YORK UNIVERSITY

APRIL 2021

© MEERA KANAGESWARAN, 2021

Abstract

Unity, devastation, courage, helplessness, perseverance, sorrow, valour and loss were experiences of the Sri Lankan Tamils living in Sri Lanka and the broader global diaspora throughout the nation's Civil War period. During this time, Sri Lankan Tamil artists around the world introduced new gestures and movements as well as altered existing Bharathanatyam vocabulary in order to produce dance works that addressed their lived experiences. If this was not contemporizing Bharathanatyam, then what is? The pain and oppression endured overflowed as expressive dance works. Through the creation of two dance films, *I_lappu* and *Isolation*, this thesis investigates the potential of furthering Bharathanatyam by contemporizing and secularizing. Exploration into dance works created during the Civil War period is the fuelling factor for *I_lappu*. In addition to acknowledging the contributions of Sri Lankan Tamils to contemporary Bharathanatyam, this thesis will intensify the versatility of Bharathanatyam movement vocabulary to tell present-day, relevant and urgent stories, such as the ones coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Isolation*, the second dance film as part of this thesis, is an exploration into the various different lockdown experiences. The shared experiences of the War and the pandemic is the common theme within the films.

Dedication

This thesis is my dedication to all the Sri Lankan Tamil Bharathanatyam artists, who selflessly and confidently blazed trails in creating dance works to reflect personal, social and political realities during the Civil War period in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgements

It is a long list of people I need to acknowledge for making this journey possible for me. First my life partner, Krish Karunakaran, I am grateful for your tireless support throughout this process. You have been my sounding board every step of the way. My children Santhosh and Diya, I am very proud of you for understanding the importance of my work and adjusting to the changes over the last two years. Thank you for being by reading buddies.

To my parents, Shanthavathana Kanageswaran and Kanageswaran Kanagaratnam, I will be ever grateful for you initiating me into dance. It is because of your sacrifices that I am where I am today. Mithuna Kanageswaran, my little sister, you have always been the person I can rely on and once again you have stepped in whenever I (or Diya and Santhosh) needed you. Thank you!

Subagini Navaratnasingam, my closest friend, I am truly grateful for your emotional support and for the many hours you have spent with me discussing my research. Ekta Malhotra, thank you for your encouragement throughout the process and special thanks for helping with school drop offs and pick-ups of my children.

Thank you, Nova Bhattacharya, Lata Pada and Jacqueline Tyler for your help and motivation for me to pursue my graduate studies. Professor Sudharshan Duraiyappah, I am truly grateful for all our conversations about my research, and I appreciate your suggestions and ideas.

Thank you to everyone who made it possible to get Tamil texts from Sri Lanka: Dr. Valanteena Elangkovan, Dr. Karuna Sivaji and my parents in law Kala Karunakaran and Karunkaran Kanagasabapathy.

Thank you to my MFA cohort I appreciate the energy of dance we shared during classes. Kaitlyn Seibold, Michael Vintila and Arsenio Andre, I will miss the times we worked together

on projects and certainly the long discussions. Paulo Alcedo, I am happy I will continue to have your positive energy around me as you have become a part of my family. Arpita Bajpeyi, although we were not in the same program, we connected the day we met at York University. I truly appreciate our regular check-ins.

My research would not have been possible without the generosity of the following artists that agreed to be interviewed: Kirupanithy Ratneswaran, Atputharani Kirubaraj, Mathivathanie Suthaharan, Arulmohan Murugiah, Anusha Satkunanathan and Vasundara Sivasothy. Thank you!

Thank you Rathiruban Paramsothy, Jeyanthe Ratnakumar, Atputharani Kirubaraj and Sarvi Kathirithambi for introducing me to choreographers for the interviews.

Thank you to my collaborators, Rodrigo Michelangeli and Ed Hanley for all the hard work you have put into the creation of *Ilappu* and *Isolation*.

I am proud and thankful to have Vysnavi Thanendran, Ranjani Ravichandran, Priyanka Meyyappan and Christine Joseph as my dancers, who confidently owned the characters of the dance films, *Ilappu* and *Isolation*. All your work and creative input is greatly appreciated.

I am happy I was able to work with Dheepthi Gnaneswaran to create the spoken word lines used in *Isolation*. Thank you for the time and effort you put into it.

Thank you to my dance teachers Madurai R. Muralidharan, Chithra Muralidharan and Kirupanithy Ratneswaran for imparting your knowledge and invoking my love for dance.

Thank you to my inspiring Professors, William Mackwood, Freya Olafson and Darcey Callison. I appreciate the knowledge you shared with me. Thank you, Susan Lee, my secondary supervisor, for your creative suggestions for my thesis films.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Patrick Alcedo, who has supported and guided me from the beginning of the thesis process till the end. I appreciate the countless meetings, phone calls and your invaluable advice every step of the way.

I am thankful to have received the N. Sivalingam Award in Tamil Studies through York Center for Asian Research, which made the thesis films possible.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Dedication</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Marginalized Bodies and Voices: Devadasis</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Sri Lankan Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Choreography for the Screen</i>	<i>18</i>
Inspiration	<i>18</i>
Hollywood	<i>19</i>
Bollywood	<i>19</i>
Kollywood	<i>21</i>
Bharathanatyam – dancing between stage and screen	<i>24</i>
Bharathanatyam and Screendance	<i>25</i>
<i>Interviews</i>	<i>32</i>
History.....	<i>34</i>
Creative Process.....	<i>37</i>
Post-Civil War	<i>42</i>
<i>Creation</i>	<i>46</i>
Changes and Challenges	<i>46</i>
<i>Ilappu</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Isolation</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Concluding Thoughts</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Works Cited</i>	<i>70</i>

Introduction

I have heard people say, “cultural babysitter”, which at that time did not occur to me that is what I am expected to be as a Bharathanatyam teacher to children of first- and second-generation Sri Lankan Tamils, Indians or South Asians in the diaspora. It used to irritate me, that children were being enrolled in Bharathanatyam classes to speak Tamil, learn Hinduism and get exposure to their culture in the process. Dance, at least I believed it to be, was about the body and about movement itself. I had no hesitation telling the parents not to expect the children to learn Tamil, religion or culture in my classes, as I run my classes open and inclusive to anyone and everyone. I still do maintain that belief and strive to create a safe space for dancers regardless of their culture or religion. However, I am also realizing my connection to Bharathanatyam is beyond just body and movement.

I never thought I would say this, as for many Sri Lankan Tamils, Bharathanatyam has been my connection to my language, culture, and country. My mother is Christian. Although her father was a strict practicing Hindu, she followed her mother’s strong Christian faith. My father comes from a Hindu family. Having fled the Civil War in Sri Lanka, making ends meet, and establishing a livelihood was priority for our family when I was growing up. This was the case for many Sri Lankan Tamil families in the global diaspora. My father was holding two jobs at any given time and was rarely home. My mother was the one who taught me Tamil, taught me how to pray and took me to Bharathanatyam classes. We were also the only Christians amongst the Tamil Hindus, who had become like family to us. I was always curious about Hinduism; however, my father was busy working seven days a week and had no time to teach me religion. Bharathanatyam classes took care of my curiosity. Bharathanatyam classes felt like I belonged there.

I was always deeply interested in learning Tamil. My mother taught me how to read and write in this language. I would wake up early mornings on Saturdays to learn Tamil. My interest in Tamil is one aspect that connected me to Tamil Nadu, India, and eventually took me there to further explore my journey in Bharathanatyam, which is one of the dance forms of India. Although we use different dialects, it is easy to understand each other. The written form has minimal or no differences. Writing letters in Tamil to my grandmother in Sri Lanka was the highlight of my weekends. Again, that was my connection to the country: the exchanges of handwritten letters. When we received a reply and she mentioned how I should continue dancing and one day I can teach Bharathanatyam, that was enough for me. There are not many artists in my family and if there are any, they were not encouraged to pursue dance or any other art as a profession. In fact, whenever my grades dropped in school, my parents would resort to taking me out of Bharathanatyam classes or not allowing me to take part in performances.

I was like the circus monkey when we had guests over. Be it acting, dancing or just presenting a speech, I was always ready to perform. Whenever we invited guests over, which was quite often, once dinner or lunch was done, everyone would sit with their teas and either one of my parents would bring up that I was practicing for a dance show, stage play or speech competition. Somehow that conversation would end in asking me to show the guests what I was practicing. I remember waiting with hope and anticipation that someone would remember to ask me. I used to go to my room and cue my audio cassettes and have it ready to play to perform my dance pieces. I realize now that I had plenty of opportunities to practice in front of family-friends before presenting anything on stage, which took the fear out of me and gave me the confidence for the actual performances. Performing was what made me happy as a child. That

feeling of joy was so strong that it compensated for other aspects of my childhood that were not picture perfect.

Looking back, I was not always treated well by others in my school. I was called names because of my skin colour, made fun of because of my long last name and it did not help that I was not really interested in “pop culture”. I did not watch the movies that others were watching nor was I listening to the same music. Looking at pictures, I sure was not wearing the clothes that my classmates were wearing either. None of that ever bothered me. I had no desire to go on class trips or go hang out with friends when I was young. Dance classes, performances and practices were what made me happy. Most of my evenings and weekends were spent in classes, rehearsals or performances. Recently, I found a notebook from when I was in grade three, where I wrote about my favourite things and what I wanted to do in the future. My dream job was to be a dance teacher. I probably did not realize that one could build a career out of performing and choreographing in dance.

After a very long honeymoon stage experiencing Tamil culture and Hinduism in dance classes and through dance performances, I realized there was more to this art form. It is very versatile and lends itself to telling stories of any sort. As much as rhythm made my heart jump in happiness, the storytelling aspect of Bharathanatyam gave me satisfaction and fulfillment. My initial years of training was spent learning *adavus* (basic movements of Bharathanatyam) and choreographies which I believed to be ancient and traditional treasures of Bharathanatyam. I was taught to keep the authenticity of the form by not altering gestures and movements taught and repeated. Most, if not all, compositions I learnt were about Hindu deities. There was a strong religious aspect to this form. Most Bharathanatyam dancers, teachers and choreographers were practicing Hindus. *Bhakthi* (the feeling or emotion of devotion towards a deity) was the

common theme across most dances performed. Although some lyrics were about love and lust, the choreography would somehow redirect the dancer and the audience to believe that the dance is about devotion. Many years later, when I was old enough and more mature to understand the layers of meaning behind the lyrics of Bharathanatyam compositions, I started to understand that some of the songs I was performing to were not really about devotion. I eventually came to the realization that there was such heavy emphasis placed on preserving what was now considered “traditional” only due to fear of digging too deep and discovering the real history of Bharathanatyam; a history that was not taught to me or shared with me as a Bharathanatyam student. Talking to other artists like me and reading about the history of Bharathanatyam made me understand that the original roots of Bharathanatyam were one our society wanted to erase and forget about. Bharathanatyam has a rich history with diverse influences, maybe not what in our present societal norm is considered reputable or morally superior. I felt as if Bharathanatyam was not being utilized to its full potential with all the rules and restrictions imposed on it. That can be changed. That ought to be changed. I started exploring using Bharathanatyam to tell different stories, stories that are usually not told through Bharathanatyam vocabulary, old and new.

I spent two years introducing Bharathanatyam to a Tamil Protestant church, where I worked with many limitations. No songs about Hindu gods were allowed to be used in their space. Performing *namaskaram*, which is a series of movements performed by Bharathanatyam dancers before and after practice to get the blessings of mother earth, was restricted as well. I was commissioned to create Bharathanatyam works using Christian concepts, stories and songs. I had to experiment with how to tell those stories using Bharathanatyam vocabulary, which also meant putting forth new hand gestures and movements or reimagining existing ones. It was my

search for performing in different spaces that initiated this journey. I was originally only requested to dance at one of the church events, which was granted after much discussion and contemplation amongst the church leaders. When they witnessed and realized the effectiveness of the storytelling aspect of Bharathanatyam, I was requested to teach at the church on a weekly basis and choreograph Bharathanatyam works to Christian songs and concepts. In addition, I was invited to a conference in Switzerland to conduct workshops on choreographing Christian dances using Bharathanatyam. The two years I spent on this project opened up so much possibility for me to look at Bharathanatyam choreography through a different lens. There was no limit as to what stories can be told through Bharathanatyam.

I started exploring concepts like materialism, mental health awareness, science and astronomy in my choreographies. In addition to collaborating with writers to create Bharathanatyam to spoken word, I tried to be inclusive by using English instead of any Indian languages typically used in Bharathanatyam. Moreover, I experimented with eliminating language by using instrumental music. In an attempt to bring together western classical music with Bharathanatyam, I choreographed for excerpts of Antonio Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, which was performed by one of my students with a string quartet. The acceptance and appreciation received from the audience was what kept driving me to create more unique Bharathanatyam works.

For one of my students' *arangetram* (debut solo recital), I conceptualized and choreographed a dance called *Balancing on the Hyphen*. It was meant to be a dance work that was personal to the dancer to be performed that evening. As I did with other students I started with brainstorming about her interests, hobbies and passion outside of dance. Somehow this evolved into a discussion about the struggles of Sri Lankan Tamil youth in the global diaspora,

living with the pressure of their parents' sacrifices made fleeing a War-torn country and working tirelessly to provide the best for their children. The first part of the piece portrayed the parents' lives and their sacrifices while the second part focused on the youth. This was when I started remembering after many years, the dances I was part of as a young dancer. Dances that told the stories of the Civil War in Sri Lanka.

My vision is to tell present-day stories through Bharathanatyam. I want to create art that can be understood by everyone. Bharathanatyam performances are predominantly interpretations of lyrics and understanding the lyrics are important to not only artists but also to the spectators. That is the reason we cannot present dances without explaining the concept and each line of the song to the audience. The lengthy introductions are typically frowned upon by audiences and artists alike. However, in my opinion if we avoid the explanations, the essence of the performance is lost. One can argue that our performances to date are about stories based in Hindu mythology and are sung in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit or other Indian languages, which are not broadly understood by audience members in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). It cannot be denied that Hindu mythology offers vast amounts of themes and narratives that can be moulded into enjoyable dance works. However, it is not to say that we cannot use this art form to tell other stories.

It is not my claim or attempt to reinvent the wheel. There are artists who are creating innovative dance works and successfully presenting relatable stories for our present-day audiences through Bharathanatyam. Lata Pada from Mississauga, Anita Ratnam from Chennai and Hari Krishnan from Toronto are few of the artists that have pushed boundaries and succeeded in using Bharathanatyam to tell diverse stories.

However, there is one group of artists who unfortunately, in my opinion, are not recognized for their immense contribution to the art form. The Sri Lankan Tamils have created numerous dance works during the Civil War in Sri Lanka about the War and their collective experiences living through War. As Bharathanatyam is the main dance form learnt, taught and performed by the Sri Lankan Tamils, most of the movements used in these performances were taken directly from Bharathanatyam or derivatives of the existing Bharathanatyam vocabulary. Dance and art in general have always been an outlet to share personal, political and social messages. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the Sri Lankan Tamil community not only in Sri Lanka but also the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora (Canada, USA, Germany, France, England, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) used Bharathanatyam as a language to communicate and as a cathartic outlet to talk about the War, political situation, their feelings, sufferings, sorrow, loss and more importantly their helplessness. The 26-year long Civil War, which ended on May 18, 2009, also concluded these expressive creations. Consequently, the performances reverted back to pre-Civil War repertoire. I am not claiming that no original work is emerging out of the Sri Lankan Tamil Community, my concern is the significant reduction of their contribution.

The dance works produced and performed during the Civil War period were performed anywhere and everywhere. Artists did not wait to be commissioned, neither did they ask for funding. I am certain they were not compensated for any of their work. Demanding for specific stage equipment, special lighting or costuming were not options for these artists, they had to work without all these frills. Their works were driven by content only. I was part of some of these works and had sat as an audience member in others, only to witness the involvement and enthusiasm with which the audiences watched these performances. That to me shows the power

of Bharathanatyam as a storytelling art form, especially when you use it to tell stories that are relatable to the audience.

As far as I know, no one ever questioned if it was acceptable to use Bharathanatyam gestures to depict guns, helicopters and bunkers, which were essential parts of the stories being portrayed through dance during that period. Although the contributions of Sri Lankan Tamils to the field of Bharathanatyam extends beyond the present-day, contemporary choreographies produced during the Civil War period in Sri Lanka, my research will focus on works created by select artists during the Civil War period to study and understand the narratives, creation processes and collaborations that resulted in powerful and effective performances.

My original intent for my MFA thesis was to create a two-part public performance at the McLean Theatre (York University). The first part would have been a performance incorporating elements of my research of the dance works created during the Civil War in Sri Lanka. Movement aesthetics developed by diasporic Sri Lankan artists during the Civil War period would have been utilized. The second part of the showcase would have been a performance exploring the use of Bharathanatyam technique to tell a secular, contemporary story.

My dream was to create a performance for a small intimate space. Bharathanatyam being predominantly a solo dance form with heavy emphasis on facial expressions resonates at a different level when the audiences experience it from a close distance to the performers. Presenting Bharathanatyam choreographies in an intimate space would be akin to reimagining the form closer to its original manifestation before the form was reconstructed. The form was only put onto a proscenium stage after the British Colonization in India. Davesh Soneji in his book, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, writes about “salon performances in the homes of elite patrons” by *devadasis*, whom he refers to as

courtesans. They danced in palaces and private events. He talks about them being secular dance artists, not always tied to Hindu temples as many of us are led to believe, although some did perform in temples. Soneji's historical and ethnographic research written about in his book spans from *devadasi* groups in the northernmost tip of coastal Andhra Pradesh to Tamil speaking regions in South India. Soneji makes references to the various influences that created the *devadasi* dances. Parsi theatre (fig 1), Western and Hindustani music were incorporated into dance performances by the *devadasis*. The photographs included clearly show a variety of costuming and musical accompaniments. Many performances were about love, lust and sensuality. Knowing our predecessors in dance performed to such diverse music and themes makes the possibilities of creating with Bharathanatyam as a tool endless.



o.3 Sikkil Vedavalli and Kottanarvitu Pappa perform a dance drawing from aesthetic influences of the Parsi theater, c. 1920. Standing behind Vedavalli is Sikkil Ramaswami Nattuvanar [1876-1972].

1.Screencapture from book *Unfinished Gestures* pg.12

The theme or narrative is vital in Bharathanatyam performances. Artists like Shobana Jeyasingh from London and Padmini Chettur from Chennai have deviated from using Bharathanatyam- trained bodies as only storytelling tools and explored the possibilities of pure movements and body. However, in my opinion *abhinaya* (art of expression) is an inseparable part of Bharathanatyam. Bharathanatyam can be considered theatre with strong rhythmic and physical movement components.

For the second part of my presentation, I was contemplating themes like racism, environmental awareness as well as food and culture. However, now I find myself working on my thesis project and paper during the COVID -19 global pandemic. I have reimagined it and have decided to present both parts of my project on film. Although the initial plan was to include film as part of my performance in the form of projection on a cyclorama, now the entire performance is on film. The second performance explores stories coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice was not merely based on the fact that COVID-19 is the reality we live in, but also because of the similarities in emotions to the War of separation, isolation, pain and suffering people are experiencing. Information found in news clips, my personal experience, experiences of the dancers as well as other stories I have heard in relation to the pandemic is reflected within the choreographic work recorded on film.

Bharathanatyam has been included in many Indian, Tamil films. There have been movies made about Bharathanatyam dancers. Most Indian movies are musicals and dance plays a vital part in them; this role I will discuss in detail later. The dance films as part of my thesis are different. These are choreographies in collaboration with a cinematographer to only exist on the screen. In most movies the dances are only a small part of the stories, whereas in my project I intend to tell the entire story through dance. The impact of this pandemic requires the thesis

performance to utilize a different medium. I wanted to create a cozy, intimate space for the performance, now that the audience will be watching from the comfort of their homes.

Resistance and resilience are now not only the narratives in the choreographic works; they have become the “mantra” I had to work with to present my thesis.

Through my research about using Bharathanatyam vocabulary (old and new) to narrate present-day stories, my hope is to encourage more Bharathanatyam choreographers, especially Sri Lankan Tamil choreographers, to take risks and liberties to create new works. Exploring the dance works created by Sri Lankan Tamil artists living in the diaspora will provide insights into the works created during the Civil War period in Sri Lanka and more importantly bring to light the contributions of the Sri Lankan Tamils to Bharathanatyam. In *Unfinished Gestures*, Davesh Soneji mentions Ancukam, a Tamil-speaking *devadasi* who lived in Kochchikade, Colombo, Sri Lanka. He makes reference to a text Ancukam wrote in 1911. He writes “For Ancukam, print afforded possibilities for self-representation in the face of early reform movements in colonial Ceylon”. (87) Soneji explores Ancukam’s text *Uruttirakanikaiyar*, in the article “Siva’s Courtesans: Religion, Rhetoric, and Self-Representation in Early Twentieth-Century Writing by *devadasis*.” Janet O’Shea touches upon the political use of Bharathanatyam in Sri Lanka in the chapter “Temple to Battlefield”. More recently Ahalya Satkunaratnam’s book *Moving Bodies, Navigating Conflict: Practicing Bharata Natyam in Colombo, Sri Lanka*, examines how the dance practice in Colombo (capital of Sri Lanka) embodies War. Valanteena Elangkovan has written about dance history of Jaffna (city in the northern tip of Sri Lanka) and the lives of *devadasis* in the Tamil text *Yālpāṇattu Nāṭṭiya Marapukaḷ*. Other than that, to my knowledge, there has not been much mention about the Bharathanatyam creations about the War by Sri Lankan Tamil Artists or history of Bharathanatyam in the Sri Lankan context in other scholarly

writings. There is dearth of literature about Bharathanatyam in Sri Lankan Tamil context. Sri Lankan Tamils and their relationship to Bharathanatyam is different. Not all Bharathanatyam dancers can be grouped as South Asians. Sri Lankan Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora, Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in the GTA and other places in Canada, where Sri Lankan Tamils have settled, all carry different stories within them. As a Sri Lankan Tamil who is also a Canadian Bharathanatyam artist living in the GTA and who believes in a cultural mosaic, it is important for me to document the individuality of the Sri Lankan Tamil Bharathanatyam artists in the diaspora as part of the mosaic. It is equally important that their contributions be recognized.

My thesis is an artistic response to the dance works of diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil Bharathanatyam choreographers. The first piece in my thesis is created in response to the Civil War in Sri Lanka and are reflections of the harrowing experiences throughout that period. The second part of my thesis is a choreography exploring experiences and stories coming out of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The switch to using film instead of a live performance has resulted in an organic collaboration with a cinematographer and editor fulfilling one of the MFA dance thesis presentation requirements to include a collaboration beyond dancer-choreographer collaboration.

Marginalized Bodies and Voices: Devadasis

Anti-*devadasi* movement or anti-nautch movement resulted in what is seen as acceptable, reputable Bharathanatyam aesthetic today. Before the form was reconstructed by people of the dominant caste of South India, it was exclusively practiced by *devadasis* in courts, private events and temples. The *devadasis*' main source of income was generated by their performances. They were compensated by their clients and sexual partners, most of whom were men of privileged class. The lifestyle of *devadasis*, especially their non-conjugal sexual activities was seen as dirty, immoral and inferior in colonial Madras (Chennai). The *devadasis*, who came to Madras with hope for a better future after dancing in courts of Tanjore and other places, ended up moving to villages as they could not sustain themselves. (Soneji 2012, Krishnan 2019)

The reformed version of Bharathanatyam has had such a dominance in India, Sri Lanka and the broader Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. With the eroticism removed and all the theatrical additions of stage lighting and costuming, some people from privileged class and dominant caste, out of whom Rukmini Devi Arundale might be the most known, had succeeded in institutionalizing and popularizing the art form. The Hindu rituals that have become an integral part of this artform made it divine and stripped away the “unacceptable” past of the form for the privileged from the dominant caste to enjoy. In the process of making Bharathanatyam suitable for people from the dominant caste, as well as its women taking over and owning this art form, the *devadasis* were denied opportunities to perform and more importantly taken away their livelihood.

The oppression endured by *devadasis* is not just a tale from the past, but rather continues with the contemporary women from the *devadasi* community. Dancers from this hereditary dance community continue to face discrimination and struggle to have their voices heard and to

have equal paid performance opportunities. Bharathanatyam is now practiced all over the world; however, Chennai (called Madras in colonial India), continues to be the hub for most Bharathanatyam dancers. Chennai is the place all Bharathanatyam dancers desire to learn, practice and perform. Most *sabhas*, the organized groups that conduct dance recitals, performances and dance festivals are headed by dominant caste *brahmins*.

Many artists have struggled for their recognition because of the *brahmin* dominance in the Bharathanatyam landscape. They have claimed the position of gatekeepers of the art form, making it difficult for others to excel in the field. Whereas the differences between caste within Bharathanatyam in Sri Lanka is not openly talked about, it seems accepted in the Indian community by some artists and scholars alike. Malini Srirama, when reviewing *Cultural Rhythms in Emotions, Narratives, and Dance* by Nita Mathur, writes: “It is easy to see the parallels between Bharatha Natyam and Tamil Brahmin culture, both immersed in tradition, yet able to evolve while still maintaining their framework”. Srirama, who identifies herself as a Hindu *brahmin*, describes her experience of growing up learning Bharathanatyam as “sociocultural phenomenon”. This perceived connection of caste and art, *brahmin* culture and Bharathanatyam, completely negates the true history of Bharathanatyam.

Nrithya Pillai, an artist from a hereditary dance community writes about the struggles to be accepted into the contemporary Bharathanatyam scene. Pillai has been using social media platforms to amplify her marginalized voice. She writes about the fear her community faces to let their children or grandchildren take up Bharathanatyam as a profession, where there is caste/class discrimination. She decided to insert herself and let her marginalized body be seen in *sabhas*, by paying to perform. She talks about the importance of reclaiming spaces, which artists and creators from her lineage were denied access to. *Indian Express*, a news site, quotes Pillai:

“The devadasi system is long gone but we are its remnants. But someone like me reclaiming my heritage is like saying we are the daughters of the witches you burnt.”

It had become a place and form the dominant caste performers appropriated for themselves. Recently in a video released by dance artist and scholar Padma Subrahmanyam, she addressed the topic *varnashrama dharma*, which divided the society into four different groups by birth. Although this system cannot be revived, she advocated for the system by claiming it is the reason for Hinduism’s survival, while so many other religions could not last as long. She said that everyone’s divided identity resulted in contentment. Their professions were meant to be inherited not chosen. She referred to the division of labour in this system as “dignity” of labour. Nrithya Pillai’s response to this video was to point out that according to the *varnashrama dharma*, she and her great-grandfather, the well-known dance choreographer and teacher, Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, who Krishnan writes extensively about in his book *Celluloid Classicism: Early Tamil Cinema and the Making of Modern Bharathanatyam*, belong to the *shoodra* division. She argued that Bharathanatyam would therefore be a *shoodra art form*. Subrahmanyam, hailing from a *brahmin* family and releasing a video on this topic initiated many debates and arguments amongst the Bharathanatyam artists; some in private, others more public using social media platforms.

Sri Lankan Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

It seems ironic that when Sri Lankan Tamils refer to themselves as traditionalists when it comes to Bharathanatyam, they are referring to the reconstructed form of Bharathanatyam as tradition. The Sri Lankan Tamils, being marginalized people themselves in Sri Lanka as well as arguably within the Bharathanatyam fraternity, choose to erase the history of the already invisible bodies of the hereditary dance community.

Tamils and Sinhalese have been occupying the island now called Sri Lanka for thousands of years. Tamils are Dravidians and to the rest of the world might be the same as the Tamils from South India. The Sinhalese people's lineage is traceable to northern parts of India. The languages are different and while the Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist, most of the Tamil population are Hindu. Sri Lanka has been governed by Tamil and Sinhalese rulers and has seen an ethnic conflict for many years. (Weiss 2012)

There are many similarities between the Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils. The class/caste system also exists within the Sri Lankan Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. When interviewing diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil artists about War-related choreographies, which I will write in detail later, I asked about the class system within the Bharathanatyam landscape. Most of the artists confidently said that there is no discrimination within the Bharathanatyam field in Sri Lanka and alluded to the difference observed in India compared to Sri Lanka. Thereafter, I had private conversations with other Sri Lankan Tamils, who pointed to the fact that most if not all pioneers of the reformed version of Bharathanatyam are from the dominant caste as they were the ones who had the economic means to travel to India and learn the form.

Yet, when compared to Indian Tamil dancers, the relationship Sri Lankan Tamil dancers have with Bharathanatyam is different. I argue that Bharathanatyam, as a storytelling artform,

has to resonate with the Sri Lankan Tamils very differently. The twenty-six-year long War, that the Sri Lankan Tamils endured might be one of the major factors that differentiates Sri Lankan Tamils from their Indian counterparts. For Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the violent past and the ongoing devastation of their lives due to discrimination and oppression endured has to result in using Bharathanatyam as a storytelling tool differently. An art form that was performed by a marginalized group of people, *devadasis*, has now become a tool to tell stories and to express emotions of the marginalized dancing bodies of Sri Lankan Tamils, diasporic as well as still residing in Sri Lanka.

Choreography for the Screen

Inspiration

In my search for inspiration and information about dance films, Maya Deren's short films caught my attention. Many of these films are driven by movements of the body that are choreographed differently from how movements would be set for a stage performance. One such film, *Meditation on Violence*, for example is performed by a solo dancer, where her use of time and space through the eyes of the camera and power of editing makes the camera and therefore the director behind it to appear like another performer in the film. *A Study in Choreography for Camera* and *The Very Eye of Night* are two of Deren's films for which she worked with dancers and choreographers. In both the films, body and movements are their main drivers. Although Deren was not a dancer or choreographer, the way she has captured the moving bodies shows her deep interest in dance. When Erin Brannigan writes about Maya Deren's creations in her book *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* she states, "that dance had a special significance and aesthetic function for Deren is clear". Deren's dance films were produced and released in the 1940s and 1950s, yet we can see that present-day dance films employ similar techniques to capture and present the moving body. In my opinion, dance film directors or cinematographers have to have an in-depth understanding or at least a curiosity for the moving body in space and time. In the process of making dance films, the choreographer's role might entail stepping into the shoes of the director as well. The roles ought to get blurred to have a true collaborative process and a successful outcome.

Hollywood

Dance has also had its unique place and presence in the Western film world. Artists like Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor have acted in movies in which dance plays an essential role. Gene Kelly's dances in movies were diverse and infused with humor and emotion. His ingenious and creative choreographies for the camera in terms of space and use of props is noteworthy. A collaboration with an animator is seen in his movie *Anchors Aweigh*, where he dances with Jerry from the animated comedy short film series *Tom and Jerry*.

Dance is what carries the story of a more recent animated movie *Happy Feet*. *Footloose* and *Center Stage* are Hollywood movies based on dance entirely and tell stories about dance and dancers. Another movie that is remembered for its impactful dance scenes is *La La Land*, although the movie's storyline is not about dance or dancers.

Whereas musicals, where dance is either in the foreground or a small part of a film, only occupy one genre within the Western movie industry, most Indian movies are musicals. Hence, dance has always been present in Indian movies.

Bollywood

Bharathanatyam is presently taught, practiced and performed all over the world and within that statement I would like to add and acknowledge the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's contribution to that very fact. Though it is practiced widely, people still confuse Bharathanatyam and many other Indian dance forms to the popular Bollywood film dances. It is interesting that Bharathanatyam a dance form predominantly taught and practiced in the state of Tamil Nadu is often confused with dances from the Hindi film industry. The Tamil film industry, referred to as Kollywood, also produces a large number of movies that incorporate dances; however, it lacks international popularity compared to its Bollywood counterpart. When combining

Bharathanatyam and film, it is important to acknowledge the existence of Bollywood film dances, which have traveled from screen back to stage, a rich travel that enabled the opening of many dance studios around the globe. Embedded into movies and its narratives, Bollywood dance sequences have gained popularity not only amongst Indians but also non-Indians alike.

In the article “Swaying to an Indian Beat...Dola Goes My Diasporic Heart: Exploring Hindi Film Dance,” Sangita Shresthova argues that “part of the search for understanding Bollywood dance and its enduring popularity lies within the dance sequence in the films themselves”. I agree that such popularity can be attributed to the films itself, but I equally believe many of the Bollywood dances would have gained that same popularity if they had been alone standing dance films - especially the ones that carry a full narrative within the song and dance. Compared to other dance films where the choreography and film technology play a major role in the success of the film, the effectiveness and success of Bollywood dances often include the popularity of the actors, famous locations and colourful costuming. Shresthova mentions “item numbers” in her article, which she describes as “featuring guest performers in an extra-diegetic release of tension”. This is an example of bringing different actors into a movie for the purpose of the dance, which usually helps popularize that dance.

Just like the other Indian language film dance choreographers, Bollywood or Hindi film choreographers are trained in many styles of dance and utilize different movement vocabularies in their choreography. Much like screendance works, which I discuss in detail later, Bollywood film dances also do not discriminate between dance styles. The discrimination is rather seen from the Bharathanatyam practitioners’ side. Ann R. David mentions this in her article “Embodied Migration: Performance Practices of Diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil Communities in London”. David writes when young dancers were asked about their view on Bharathanatyam vs.

Bollywood, they started talking in quiet voices hoping their teachers are not listening to their conversation, as most Bharathanatyam teachers David interviewed had no interest in Bollywood and did not want to discuss it. This portrayal of presumed superiority of Bharathanatyam over Bollywood by many artists is reminiscent to what I have witnessed myself. I can only explain this as an effort to preserve the supposed purity of the form achieved by the restructuring. David states that the dislike shown by some Bharathanatyam artists towards Bollywood dances is due to the movements that draw attention to the female physique notably the breasts and pelvic area. Contrary to the senior Bharathanatyam artists and teachers' view, David discovers through her interviews with young Bharathanatyam dancers that they enjoy dancing Bollywood dances and do so in their free time and in events held at their schools.

Kollywood

The amalgamation of Bharathanatyam with screen occurred in the times of early Tamil cinema, an industry now referred to as Kollywood. The nationalist reformation of this dance form started in the late 1800s slowly taking it away from *devadasis* (courtesans), who only danced in palaces, homes of elites and temples and were presented in festivals starting in the early 1930s. (Sriram V., 2016) Hari Krishan states in his book *Celluloid Classicism: Early Tamil Cinema and the Making of Modern Bharathanatyam*, "The anti-*devadasi* legal interventions of the late 1920s in colonial Madras coincide not only with the reinvention of dance at the hands of upper caste urban elites, but also with the diverse possibilities opened up by mass cinematic production in India". The dancers from the courtesan or hereditary dance community were an essential part of the dances created and performed in initial Tamil films. Employing the technology available at that time, cinematographers, choreographers and film directors started experimenting with ways of presenting Bharathanatyam on screen.

The Tamil movie *Nam Iruvar* released in 1947 has Bharathanatyam dances that were choreographed and performed by artists of the hereditary dance community. *Aduvome Pallu Paduvome* is a song that expresses Indian nationalism. The lyrics of the song translated to English is “let’s dance, let’s sing, proclaiming that we have achieved ever-blissful freedom” (Krishnan 2019, 141). Considering the British rule in India ended in 1947, the message of the song would have been a relatable one for not only the Tamil population of India, but the entire country. This dance starts with the curtain opening and two dancers on a space that resembles a proscenium stage dancing. Editing as a tool is used to travel back and forth to capture close ups of one dancer’s facial expressions and goes into wide shots to cover the entire stage showing both dancers. The backdrop and stage setup change throughout the dance showing the dancers against the Indian flag, inside the map of India, on top of a globe and in front of Lord Natarajah. The changes in the backdrop and stage set-up were essential to convey the message of the dance, which would have been hard to achieve in a live performance in less than five minutes. What struck me the most about this dance is the employment of technology to double the dancer. Both dancers are Kamala, a famous dancer during that period. The doubling of the dancer shows the availability of technology that Bharathanatyam choreographers for films had access to as early as the 1940s. Although I am examining this song within this context to showcase the adaptability of Bharathanatyam to film and the power of editing tools, I would like to point to the fact that the theme is one that closely resembles Civil War related dances created by Sri Lankan Tamil artists.

Another dance that Tamil movie fans might remember for the doubling technology is *Kannodu Kanbathellam* from the movie *Jeans* released in 1998, which used motion capture and 3D holograph to show two dancers (both Aishwarya Rai) dancing on stage. The dance choreography uses a mixture of genres, not only Bharathanatyam; but the reason it is worth

mentioning is the fact that unlike in *Nam Iruvar*, the technology used in *Jeans* helped carry the theme of the song and the story of the movie. In the movie narrative, the protagonist is trying to convince another character that Aishwarya Rai's character has a twin. The dance was filmed in a humorous manner, where the director shows the technology failing and scene ends with a skeleton dancing Bharathanatyam. The director of the movie *Jeans*, Shankar Shanmugam is known to use technology and screendance techniques within his movies. Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram writes in detail about Shankar's work in regard to the employment of screendance techniques in the article "Navigating Hyperrealities: Tamil Film (Kollywood) Choreography as Screen Dance." Kalyanasundaram mentions that working with Shankar is a choreographer's delight. Shankar is known for his big budget movies, where the songs are filmed all over the world using expensive technology. *Thillana Mohanambal* is a movie that utilizes close ups and editing to effectively merge Bharathanatyam and screen. The song *Nalamthaana* is a duet between the Bharathanatyam dancer Padmini Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan, who plays a Nathaswaram (south Indian wind instrument) artist. The movie was released in 1968 and includes facial expressions of artists that might now be considered over acting; however, the use of close ups provides the ability to direct viewers' attention to facial expressions when needed. There are many more examples of Tamil film dances that have effectively utilized screendance techniques.

The reason I refer to Indian films and not Sri Lankan Tamil films is due to the dearth of the latter produced to date, and the plethora of Indian Tamil movies on the market. Sri Lankan Tamils rely on the Indian Tamil movie industry for entertainment. Although there have been some Sri Lankan Tamil movies released in the past, they have been mainly low budget and were not very successful movies. Having acted in one such film produced in Canada, I can attest to

the struggle the Sri Lankan Tamil filmmakers and actors face and the lack of resources available to them. Including dances within such films becomes a hard task.

Bharathanatyam – dancing between stage and screen

As previously mentioned, dance has always been present in Tamil movies and other Indian language movies alike. Currently the dances you see in movies are a fusion of different styles and the dance choreographers are known to have training in various forms including Western styles of dance. Although one might see traces of Bharathanatyam movement vocabulary, it is rare to have a full Bharathanatyam choreography in a movie.

As Hari Krishnan outlines in his book *Celluloid Classism*, the beginning of Tamil cinema was dominated by Bharathanatyam artists. Movies gave choreographers and dancers from the hereditary dance community a livelihood and popularity. Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai, Vaideeswarankoyil Meenakshisundaram, Muthuswami Pillai, Kutalam Ganesan Pillai and Kanchipuram Ellappa Pillai are a few dance choreographers who had made an indelible mark in the South Indian movie scene. Krishnan describes their contribution to Bharathanatyam as molding the form into one that can easily move from screen to stage. The aesthetic changes brought about by these artists made this art form more versatile and gave artists the ability to present it through different mediums. Cinema gave hereditary dancers a platform at the beginning; however, the ones that were able to take this now more tightly choreographed form to stages were predominantly from dominant class *brahmin* families. The dance choreographers/conductors from the hereditary dance community continued to teach and train the dancers from the dominant caste families.

Over the years there have been many dancers like Padmini Ramachandran and Shobana Chandrakumar who are successful Bharathanatyam artists on stage and are very well-known

actresses and dancers on screen. Vineeth Radhakrishnan is a rare example of a male Bharathanatyam dancer, who both acted and danced in movies. Dancer Rukmini Vijayakumar is a present-day Bharathanatyam artist who had the opportunity to act and dance in movies. She is an artist who has been able to move from stage to screen. After gaining more popularity she moved back to stage. Kamal Hassan's role as a dancer in the movie *Salangai Oli* inspired boys to take up Bharathanatyam, which is a form predominantly performed by female dancers. Although the actor in the movie was not known for stage performances, the dances from *Salangai Oli* were part of stage performances by Bharathanatyam artists in many parts of the world. Movie *Mayuri* is based on the real-life story of Sudha Chandran, a dancer who had to get one leg amputated due to a car accident. Sudha Chandran's dances with her prosthetic leg in *Mayuri* made the movie successful while providing her opportunities to do many stage performances thereafter. Valenteena Elangkovan in *Yālpāṇattu Nāṭṭiya Marapukaḷ* mentions about *devadasis* in Sri Lanka also making a living from performing dances from Indian, mainly Tamil movies.

Bharathanatyam and Screendance

With the abundance of dance videos available through Kollywood movies, there was no need or space for artists to create dance videos outside of movies. As we have seen, the dances embedded in Indian movies are popular and do employ screendance techniques. While stand-alone dance films have not been prevalent in the past, few independent artists from Sri Lanka, India and the diaspora have started to create them. Having viewed selected videos, they are choreographed around existing compositions performed in a similar way as they would be presented on a proscenium or black box theatre. The camera angles or editing play a minimal role, and hence could not be categorized as screendance productions.

Douglas Rosenberg in his book *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* describes screendance as “the most accurate way to describe the passage of ‘dance’, via its mediated image, to any and all screens without articulating material”. (pg. 3) It is the screendance qualities, the camera dancing with the performers and letting dance journey through the camera to reach the audience, that I strive to achieve in my thesis dance films. For the purpose of this thesis my definition of screendance does not include works that utilize the camera as a documenting device. I am using the term screendance to refer to dance works that included the camera and/or editing as part of its creation process.

The effectiveness of the use of close ups and editing is what John White examines within his article, “Intimate Encounters: Screendance and Surveillance.” He writes that the camera has the ability to create kinesthetic empathy in viewers, bringing them closer into an intimate space with the dancers. What White is exploring within his article resembles the difference of viewing a play and watching a movie. Although they both provide a different experience to the audience, in my opinion the film has the power to transform the audience into intimate spaces. The intimate space I imagined in a cozy room, will now be achieved through the camera in my dance films.

In “Proposing a Theory of Screendance” Rosenberg quotes Laura Mulvey: “a commodity’s market success depends on the erasure of marks of production, allowing commodity fetishism to triumph as spectacle” to describe the journey screendance has taken since its inception. The success the current screen dance productions are receiving when compared to the earlier screen dance productions by artists like Merce Cunningham, Rosenberg says is due to the “erasure of marks of production”. He also suggests that the success is mainly due to moving away from experimental choreography, the better film quality and adopting a

style that created mainstream exposure. La La La Human Steps and DV8 have produced dance films that are testament to such success.

It is not to say that screendance works utilizing Bharathanatyam movement aesthetics do not exist at all. Post Natyam Collective is a group of collaborators, some of whom are trained in the form of Bharathanatyam. This group of artists has been utilizing the web for collaborative creations with participants from around the globe using art for activism. Notable works that came out of these collaborations explore topics such as feminism and queerness. They have been using technology to connect with artists around the globe and to create works that have been published on the web. Moreover, some of their works have also been presented in theatres and universities. The raw and minimalistic approach to their choreography and presentation seen in their dance videos amplifies the narratives driving their work, as opposed to stylized dance film presentations seen in some dance videos Bharathanatyam artists have released. In Post Natyam's *cyber manifesto*, a dance video overlaid with spoken word portraying who they are and what they hope to achieve through their creations, they use many cameras and editing techniques within their choreography. Whereas COVID 19 has recently encouraged many Bharathanatyam artists to collaborate via online tools and produce dance videos, Post Natyam collective does not fall under that category as they have been actively producing dance videos since 2008.

Another screendance work that was created to fit the medium of delivery is *Dafeena* choreographed by Natasha Bakht and directed by Marlene Millar and Philip Szporer. According to the description accompanying the video, it is an existing work that was recreated for the camera. The collaborative work of the choreographer with the directors and the camera is notable in this screendance work. The camera angles, close ups capturing isolated movements of certain body parts, utilization of various lenses, use of lighting and employment of editing

techniques all come together to produce an effective screendance work. The dancers use known Bharathanatyam vocabulary; however, the way it is presented in this work provides a different experience for the viewers. It is filmed in an abandoned crystal quarry and shots cutting back and forth from the ambient shots to the dancers' expressions through their face and body add to the narrative of the dance film.

Inverse is another screendance work that is informed by Bharathanatyam vocabulary. Choreographed by Hari Krishnan and directed by Billie Mintz, this screendance work is performed by four dancers. As per the video description "Four dancers from different cultures explore the continuum of life, combining their own ideology and individuality, relating to each other, and forming a community". The camera movements are dominant within this work. At times the dancers are still, and the camera moves fast. The camera moves in with the dancers at times and in opposition to the dancers at others. By filming from different angles, the background changes from store fronts, spectators, street signs to traffic lights. There are times where the camera moves in an unsteady manner, resembling videos shot with cellphones. This might have been intended to create the feeling for the viewers of being amongst the spectators in the video. This work was initially created for stage and recreated for screen later. I would categorize *Inverse and Dafeena* as screendance works that have successfully achieved the "erasure of marks of production".

Many Bharathanatyam artists, who are now exploring film and video as a medium to present their work, are using this medium as a temporary solution for the lack of opportunity to perform on stage. When viewing videos, it is quite visible that the camera is an afterthought and not taken into consideration when choreographing. One dance film released recently choreographed by Rukmini Vijayakumar that received attention from artists and non-artists alike

is *Reticence*. Choreography as well as cinematography in terms of close ups and use of different camera angles were noticed by the viewers, which were expressed through comments in social media posts. Another noteworthy choreography on video published through social media platforms is *How to name it* by Janaki Rangarajan. In my opinion, one of the reasons for the immense appreciation and support she received for this video is her transparency in accepting that she is experimenting with this new medium. Although she is an accomplished, celebrated dancer, she becomes one with everyone else who is experimenting with the same medium during the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Anita Ratnam initiated a project to encourage dance artists to create short screendance works using technology readily available to them to present on social media platforms. *Boxed* featured fifteen artists who created two-minute dance videos each. While *Boxed* was initiated and curated by the Bharathanatyam dancer Anita Ratnam, the featured screendance works were from all over the world and employed various different dance forms. Due to the enormous response Ratnam received for this online initiative, she produced various subsequent events. *Boxed* gave some Bharathanatyam artists the opportunity to explore creating for the screen and present them alongside other screendance works. The videos were filmed for example in hallways, bathtubs and sets of stairs. The creators experimented with lighting for the camera and used various editing techniques including layering of footage, split screen and numerous different cuts. Many artists are now playing multiple roles to present dance videos.

Bharathanatyam may be new to the screendance scene; however, screendance does not discriminate between dance forms or styles. With that in mind and the successful historical presence of Bharathanatyam in films, I believe Bharathanatyam lends itself suitably well to

choreographing for the screen. As a believer in using Bharathanatyam as an outlet and a form of expression, I say a dance film offers possibilities that traditional dance venues might not offer, and this is where my thesis project intends to contribute.

Bharathanatyam in its experimental stages within the screendance genre might leave some traces of “marks of production”. I suppose that a shift for the story-telling aspect of Bharathanatyam is needed in order to capture each part of the facial expression and bodily actions and reactions. Isolation of body parts is a unique part of Bharathanatyam. As opposed to many Western dance styles, a Bharathanatyam dancer sees the body in parts first and as a whole next. Bharathanatyam is now commonly seen performed on proscenium stages, where the audience do not observe the performance from a distance where these details can be captured with the naked eye. Dancers can only hope that the audience will identify and appreciate the isolated movements when performing on traditional stages, whereas with the ability to focus on certain parts of the body through a camera, the viewers’ attention can be directed to wherever the choreographer desires. The audience is so far yet so close.

As we have seen from early cinema to Instagram, Bharathanatyam has had its presence on screen. The question here is if the camera is a documenting device or a collaborative partner. I treated the cinematographer as a collaborator and the camera as another dancer when creating my thesis dance films. The ability to use close ups helps highlight the facial expressions, which are important for storytelling as well as the movements of isolated body parts which are essential in Bharathanatyam. With a reasonable budget and readily available technology the opportunity for creating successful Bharathanatyam dance works for the screen exists. The potential to tell effective and impactful stories through Bharathanatyam in screendance works is limitless if we keep in mind Maya Deren’s words from the article “Amateur Versus Professional” “Improve

your films not by adding more equipment and personnel but by using what you have to its fullest capacity”.

I choose to refer to my thesis projects as dance films, as I felt that would be easily understood by my audience compared to the term screendance. In my opinion the term screendance is also becoming blurred with the addition of social media offering platforms for dances to be presented. With that stated, I would like to emphasize that the choreography for both films as part of my thesis project were specifically designed for the screen.

Interviews

The dearth of literature available about dances created by Sri Lankan Tamil artists during the Civil War in Sri Lanka motivated me to conduct interviews with artists who had done extensive work during that period. I started the process by liaising with artists whom I presently work with in efforts to identify those who created dance works that were impactful during the Civil War. A few names were in the forefront and mentioned repeatedly. Once I began reaching out to the artists for interviews, there was clearly a difference between my perception and their reality. My initial assumption when starting the process was that most artists, if not all, would eagerly commit to being interviewed to be part of and support my university research. I was under the impression that Sri Lankan Tamil artists would be delighted to have someone recognize and document their work. I did sense joy and genuine excitement of being recognized and being approached for the purpose of research in most of their voices. Having said that, many were overcome with fear soon after the initial introduction. Several of those artists revealed their anxiety surrounding the discussion of their works that were politically charged. They indicated that my interviews may create unnecessary problems for them. They were scared of the possibility of facing unwanted scrutiny and difficulties by the Sri Lankan government when and if they choose to visit Sri Lanka in the future. Although I did not want to come across as being imposing or even insisting for an interview, I did mention that my research is purely from an artistic perspective and political conversations are beyond the scope of my research.

Unable to allay the concerns of many of the artists and reach a level of comfort to talk about their contribution during the Civil War, I have decided to base my research only on interviews with six artists. They were amongst the many that were actively involved in creating notable dance works during the Civil War period. Some artists I approached showed hesitation

to sign the informed consent form, which is the reason I am not writing about the two artists I interviewed who still reside in Sri Lanka. Verbal agreements are the norm within the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Written agreements and contracts are not commonly signed between organizers, producers, choreographers or dancers. Most agreements are verbal and there is a mutual understanding between the organizers and artists, but this custom is slowly starting to change amongst the younger generation of artists.

Despite encountering hurdles with finding suitable artists to interview for my research, it was a relief to find artists who had no qualms about signing the informed consent form as well as were willing wholeheartedly to share information during the interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions all interviews were held through Zoom (a video communication technology); yet I gladly embraced this platform which provided equal opportunities to comfortably converse with artists from other parts of the world. The interviewees were Kirupanithy Ratneswaran (Canada), Atputharani Kirubaraj (Canada), Anusha Satkunanathan (Switzerland), Vasundara Sivasothy (Germany), Arulmohan Murugiah (France) and Mathivathanie Suthaharan (Switzerland). It was certainly a disappointment to me given I could not include interviews of artists who are presently residing in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, I was able to interview artists who began their creative journeys including works reflecting experiences of the War while living in Sri Lanka. Anusha Satkunanathan, Vasundara Sivasothy, Atputharani Kirubaraj and Arulmohan Murugiah were able to share their experience about choreographing and presenting dance works in Sri Lanka during the Civil War period. After leaving Sri Lanka, they have continued their works as diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils in the countries where they have settled. Given the current political circumstances and understanding that there are concerns for safety, I decided to end my search to include artists who are presently in Sri Lanka.

Preprepared interview questions were used as anchors, however, I was more interested in having casual conversations with the artists in regard to their creations and creative processes. The interviews generally lasted one to two hours. I am only addressing three main points in this chapter. The interviewees were asked to talk about the history of dance specifically Bharathanatyam in Sri Lanka. This was not meant as a test of their knowledge base, as the artists I interviewed are accomplished, successful artists and teachers in their own right. This question was asked to discover their knowledge of various historical contexts of the art form and more importantly what they were comfortable to talk about and share. Next, I asked them to explain in detail their motivation behind the War-related dance creations and describe their creative process. The interviewees were also requested to reflect on the reaction of their audiences. Lastly, I probed to ascertain if they continue to create original dance works and inquired, to their knowledge, whether other Sri Lankan Tamil artists in Sri Lanka as well as the broader diaspora are continuing to create such dance works pertaining to contemporary social or political matters.

History

The interviewees introduced themselves proudly with their respective accolades, alma maters they studied in and their Guru's names. After the introductions, they were asked to share facts they were aware of about Bharathanatyam within the Sri Lankan context and history. Kirupanithy Ratneswaran, talked about Koothu (also known as Therukoothu, is a storytelling art form, which includes music and dance) as a dance form that existed prior to Bharathanatyam amongst Tamils in Sri Lanka. She described how show producers brought Bharathanatyam artists from India, which resulted in the proliferation of Bharathanatyam in Sri Lanka. The interest created by such performances by Indian artists led to a few enthusiastic students traveling to India to learn the art form and return to Sri Lanka as Bharathanatyam teachers. It

was noteworthy when she mentioned that there were dancers prior; however, they were not practicing the form in a “reputable manner”. I stopped probing with additional questions as I sensed the discomfort this topic created for her.

Anusha Satkunanathan and Atputharani Kirubaraj, on the other hand, talked about *Devaradiyar* (commonly known as *devadasis*, which could be translated into servants of god), in a very respectable manner. Anusha Satkunanathan shared she is aware of the existence of *devadasis* in the 1800s in temples in Sri Lanka, but no one knows their subsequent whereabouts. Atputharani Kirubaraj described how dance was an offering in Hindu temples and with the destruction of the temples by the Portuguese and Dutch colonizers the art form was lost. She continued that *Devaradiyar* lived and danced in Thiruketheeswaram and Thirukoneswaram temples in Sri Lanka. When asked about history of dance in Sri Lanka, Vasundara Sivasothy, said that amongst our (referring to Sri Lankan) Tamil people dance was not prevalent because our culture must have avoided “things like that”. She pivoted to talk about the reconstruction of the dance form in India and as such I stopped myself from further requesting for more information as I did not feel she was comfortable addressing my questions.

Arulmohan Murugiah started talking about Koothu/Naatu Koothu as the dance form that pre-existed present-day Bharathanatyam. He went on to say that Koothu was predominately performed by males and the fact that Bharathanatyam was brought from India gave women an opportunity to practice dance. He said *devadasis* did exist in Sri Lanka, but they had all come from India to dance in temples and some settled in Sri Lanka and never went back to India. For financial reasons, rather than being confined to dancing in temples, they expanded their performance repertoire to include dancing to songs from movies on public stages. The

determining factor for people shunning away from pursuing dance, which then was called *Sathir*, was the *devadasis*' involvement in activities that were not accepted by societal norms.

Mathivathanie Suthaharan, first identified that Bharathanatyam is an Indian art form which was adopted by Sri Lankan Tamils; if she was to identify a Sri Lankan Tamil art form it would be Koothu. Bharathanatyam, she said, used to be a temple artform danced by *devaradiyar/devadasis*. The predecessors of Bharathanatyam were known by names such as *Sathir* and *Chinna melam*. She mentioned that the reputation of Bharathanatyam suffered when it left the temples and *devadasis* started dancing in courts. She credited E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale for preserving the form by restructuring and placing it in a conventional societal context. She spoke openly about the refusal of the Tamil society to take part in the artform prior to the restructuring and described that the reformation gave access to the dance form at least to the privileged class.

The reputation Bharathanatyam has as a classical art form and the respectability attached with practicing this art form as well as the devotional aspect attached seems to be a shared feeling of gratification for the Sri Lankan Bharathanatyam artists. It is the same art form that was used by them to portray the violence of battle, combatants and impacts of the War. Veeramani Iyer, Erampu Suppiah (Suppiah master), Nalliah master, Thirupurasundari, Leela Selvarajah are artists that were mentioned as being the pioneers of the reconstructed form of Bharathanatyam in Sri Lanka. The restructuring or reformation of Bharathanatyam was referred to some of the interviewees as *maru malarcci* which translates to re-flowering.

Creative Process

In Kirupanithy Ratneswaran's description of her War-related dance creations she stated that many initial performances were interpretations of lyrics of the well-known Indian Tamil poet Subramania Bharati. What I can surmise from this statement is the relatability of Bharati's poems on India's struggle for Independence and its relevance to the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle. Subramania Bharati is from the Tamil state of India, hence his writings are in Tamil. His works lent themselves readily for the Sri Lankan Tamil dance artists to interpret and relate to the conflict they were facing. Resembling the shared sentiment of the diasporic Tamils during the time of the War, she said her aim was to help the cause and contribute in her own manner. She further specified that although she had left the War by leaving the country, her fear and pain did not leave her body or mind. She started writing lyrics for dances herself and in addition approached others to support her in writing songs about the ever-longing freedom of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. She said her works included narratives about being a refugee. She went on to share that it is the storytelling aspect of the art form that made her creations successful. Topics like separation from family and relatives and sexual abuse endured by Tamil women during the War were other narratives of her work, although they were not themes, they learnt or were allowed to explore during their training in the *margam* (path - course or order followed in Bharathanatyam repertoire) format. Her students and dancers were children of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, for whom it was easy or natural to embody the emotions of said dances.

Anusha Satukunanathan started the portrayal of her creations during the War with stating "art *vanthu* camūkattiṅ kaṇṇāṭi", "art is the mirror of society". She said, whatever was happening during the time of the *devadasis* is what they would have performed about. We could only give back to the society what we were experiencing. When we are going through a Civil

War, if we go and explain *thandava* (vigorous dance of Lord Shiva), no one would have accepted it and they would not have been interested in it. She elaborated on how Bharathanatyam offered versatile tools to work with and create dances about the War. Body movements, facial expressions and the ability of Bharathanatyam dancers to embody any character were ideal “*Vaḷam*” (resource), for creating such dances. She added, we did not have to search for tools, it was not hard for them to create, it was an easy process. With pride, she spoke about the power of Bharathanatyam to transform or change according to the need of the dance being created. Anusha Satkunanathan admitted to being fearful or hesitant when she started creating War-related dance works as her seniors in the dance field were all keeping Bharathanatyam within a “*Vēli*” (fence) and if the War did not happen during her generation of Bharathanatyam artists they would have stayed within similar boundaries. Experiencing the Civil War as a young artist, she felt she needed to do something about it. She elaborated on the initial criticisms that she and other artists endured while presenting their creations. They were accused of doing everything wrong, but by continuing to do the work they considered obligatory, it reached a point where it became acceptable.

Atputharani Kirubaraj started her choreographic work related to the Civil War while living in Sri Lanka. When asked about oppositions or criticisms she faced by creating War-related dance works, she led by saying that she never compromised on the characteristics of Bharathanatyam. She continued to state that one can portray the feelings and emotions of the War through Bharathanatyam itself. With a smile on her face, she said, others alter and change the movements of Bharathanatyam for such creations, but I don't. She continued to say that her Guru would always praise her for her creations because she does not leave the boundaries of Bharathanatyam even when creating the War-related choreographies. She spoke about the effect

of music and theatre on audiences as well as how Bharathanatyam encompasses both those aspects and gave a wholesome experience to the audience. Therefore, Bharathanatyam was an effective medium in conveying the War-related messages. She further described the War period in which the arts flourished. However, there was more freedom to produce and perform such dance works in the diaspora than within Sri Lanka as the Tamil civilians were scared to openly showcase their support for the separatist movement. When she left the country is when she choreographed most of her works. Comparable to others in her position, she took on multiple roles in her creations from writing lyrics, composing songs, designing costumes and choreographing the dancing itself.

Unlike the others I interviewed, Atputharani Kirubaraj shared her experience performing in her own creations. The expressions on her face, her body language, the hand gestures as well as the enthusiasm in her voice when elaborating about the dances based on the Civil War displayed her full involvement and investment. She said it is because of the War that many Sri Lankan Tamils were able to find refuge in countries in Europe, North America and Australia establishing comfortable lifestyles. She specifically asked me to note the fact that it does not make sense that diasporic Tamils could forget what is happening in their own country. She said she was getting goosebumps while recollecting what she saw through media in relation to the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka. It is that impact that steered her creations. She confidently said “cuyanalakkārarkaḷum nāṭṭilē parrillātavarum ceyya māṭṭārka!”, the people who are unattached to the country and are selfish will not do this work and subsequently commented in a joking manner about artists who only did War-related choreographies in effort to ingratiate themselves with societal expectations and gain popularity. She ended with registering that she

has seen and worked with artists who really had an emotional connection and created dances as a reflection of their feelings.

Vasunthara Sivasothy is also a Bharathanatyam artist, who has worked on creations telling Civil War stories in Sri Lanka as well as in the diaspora. She began by saying that her initial works had subtle messages about the War inserted within the songs she chose for her dances. She, along with her sister, changed lines of existing songs or inserted an additional stanza reflecting the situation they were facing in Sri Lanka. One example she gave as her inclusion into a song is the line “Vāḷka Tamiḷ Īlam, Vāḷka Tamiḷ Moḷi”, which translates to long live Tamil Eelam, long live Tamil language, lines I hear sung in many shows and events even in the present. She shared her experience about writing and presenting dances about individuals like Kittu, who died while on hunger strike in Sri Lanka. Her way of inserting such messages started with including them as one dance piece within the *margam* format. Such creations were well received by the audience Vasundara Sivasothy shared and recounted the asking for “once more” and her students performing the War-related dance for the second time. She presented dances at *Maveerar Naal*. *Maveerar Naal* is still observed by Sri Lankan Tamils worldwide to remember the lives sacrificed while fighting for the independent Tamil state.

Vasundara Sivasothy, like most other interviewees made certain that she does not make alterations to the foundation of Bharathanatyam. She revealed that there were not only shows, but also competitions that only accepted original creations about the War and took pride in sharing her group won first prize many consecutive years. Vasundara Sivasothy astutely pointed to the fact that the lyrics in the songs about the War, unlike other Bharathanatyam compositions, were in simple Tamil language easily understood by everyone. She explained that it is for this precise reason that the creations had a large reach leaving an indelible impact on the audience.

As the interview progressed and she continued to talk about her creations as part of the Tamil diaspora she stated she does not like that diasporic artists use “unacceptable” costuming for dances. She prefers a scarf covering the upper body of the dancers.

For Arulmohan Murugiah an art should be able to portray anything not only devotion or religion. He said the prior focus on devotion, had its reasons. He asserted that artists in Tamil Nadu India are creating dances on other topics using Bharathanatyam. As the Sri Lankan Tamil community’s focus was to achieve “cuthanthiram” (freedom), our creations evolved around that theme. He firmly stated that he did not break any rules of Bharathanatyam, he was able to create within the restrictions of Bharathanatyam. Arulmohan Murugiah’s focus while choreographing was on the musicality of the creations and he included various complicated rhythmic components. Interspersing the Civil War messages within such compositions is what he explained as his methodology. He stressed that the boundaries of Bharathanatyam were not broken, rather preserved. He strongly disagreed with artists including different costuming for Bharathanatyam choreographies, even when they were telling stories of the War. He was of the opinion that props like flags should not be incorporated into dances and the dancers should possess the ability to use Bharathanatyam hand gestures and expressions of the face and limbs to replace whatever purpose the prop would serve. Moreover, the music used should be classical, he added, so that it does not ruin the characteristics of Bharathanatyam. Melody and rhythm were important for his creations and hence he will not compromise on that aspect. Although the messages were reflective of the War, the accompanying music has to fuse with the style of dancing, otherwise it would not work. Being particular about such choreographic approach, he said, was effective in creating impactful works that reach the audience.

Mathivathanie Suthaharan shared that she was hesitant to start choreographing dances about the War and she joined in this work much later than her contemporaries. She felt she needed to conform to what others were doing and decided to be part of it. Although she was carrying the pain and suffering from the War, after leaving the country she did not see the urgency in converting those into dance works. With her conflicting thoughts about choreographing War-related works using Bharathanatyam, her initial choreographies had the dancers in full Bharathanatyam costumes. She soon realized that she had to deviate a little from traditional Bharathanatyam presentation style in order to effectively convey the messages to the audience. She spoke of the budget or lack of it as a hindrance in her ability to produce the works she desired; but with creativity, she was successful in conceiving full-length dance productions using existing music. She started including different styles of costuming to give context to her work. Rather than facing criticisms against her creations, the opposition she received was due to her lack of participation in War-related events and dance creations. She further explained that there was a realization within her that in addition to preserving the authenticity of Bharathanatyam as a Sri Lankan Tamil artist, she had the obligation to present stories coming out of the War. Mathivathanie Suthaharan's choreographic process for the War-related dance pieces involved her students. She shared that sometimes she simply told the dancers what she needed for the dance and her senior dancers came up with ideas. This kind of creation process is rarely seen in Bharathanatyam spaces.

Post-Civil War

Regarding dances about freedom and the independent Tamil state, all the artists were in agreement that such creations have reduced since the conclusion of the War in 2009. Lack of need for such dances, as well as loss of hope were mentioned as possible causes. Organizers not

coming forth to present such events as well as presenters not requesting such dances is another rationale. The fear of artists to openly present such works thereby compromising their safety when visiting Sri Lanka was also discussed by some artists. Importantly, they stated that their own students and dancers do not want to be part of such works and they do not think they should be compelled to take part.

Arulmohan Murugiah mentioned a few current original compositions and choreographies by Sri Lankan Tamil artist, which were all tied to Hinduism. He said he himself recently choreographed a piece on Thiruketheeswaram, a Hindu temple in Sri Lanka. He revealed that to bring out the uniqueness of the Sri Lankan Tamils in the dance world, he would like to include some components of Koothu within his future works. Vasundara Sivasothy expressed her concerns about more stylized versions of dances being created with the Tamil independence themes, which in her opinion are not as effective. She acknowledged sadly the decrease in original dance creations coming out of the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

Atputharani Kirubaraj lightheartedly mentioned that she has many ideas for dance works she wants to create, but it is harder to collaborate now with the compensation expected by musicians. Moreover, she said that she is surrounded by the Tamil community only and does not know how the funding system works, therefore doing such work and paying artists becomes a challenge. Anusha Satkunanathan's main reasoning for the decrease in original dance works by Sri Lankan Tamil artists was the lack of opportunities. She said show organizers in the community do not give that space.

Mathivathanie Suthaharan said there are still some events that promote original works by Sri Lankan artists, or at least present a platform for such works, but she does definitely see a decline in the volume of works produced. With disappointment Mathivathanie Suthaharan

shared that she collectively with other Sri Lankan dance teachers and choreographers in Switzerland tried to figure out the arts funding system. However, with their limited language proficiency, they were unsuccessful, resulting in their inability to produce new works.

Kirupanithy Ratneswaran was very confident in stating that the Sri Lankan Tamil identity is present within the current Bharathanatyam scene. She spoke of artists inserting their own stories within the traditional *margam* format. She mentioned dances Sri Lankan Tamil artists created on topics like environment and mental health. Nonetheless, she expressed the importance of preserving what was created by Rukmini Devi Arundale and taught to her by her own Guru. She would not compromise and regards Bharathanatyam as a treasure to be passed on.

The artists explained the use of hand gestures for example to depict weapons, helicopters, bombs and bunkers not as inventing new ones, but rather reimagining existing Bharathanatyam *mudras* (hand gestures). The motivation and inspiration for how emotions and expressions were used was mainly based on what they had experienced and witnessed while living in Sri Lanka. The process might have differed artist to artist, but they all individually, as well as collectively with other Tamil artists, evolved throughout the years of the War. Hand gestures used, costuming and presentation style of their works changed diachronically. Most of the artists were involved in the writing process as well as composing music. This diverse skillset is seen within many Bharathanatyam artists. The collaborations with other lyricists and musicians were also easily achieved as most of these artists did not request any compensation during the War period. The work for the most part was done on a voluntary basis, considered the artists' contribution to the purpose of achieving the independent Tamil state. The camaraderie felt by artists whilst working with each other cannot be compared to the formal collaborations of present time. More than artists coming together for the purpose of art, artists coming together to address a purpose

and serve a cause had a larger impact. One aspect that stood out to me in each and every interview is the heavy focus on the themes and narratives rather than movement vocabulary. If one removes the emotions and feelings, the pieces may not exist. Most artists found the need to explain that they did not change or alter the art of Bharathanatyam, they continually assured that they kept the authenticity of Bharathanatyam while creating the War-related dances.

As the reason for the lack of original work produced by Sri Lankan Tamil Bharathanatyam artists, I was able to identify that funding was a key player. Equal to wanting to preserve the originality of Bharathanatyam, their reason for not producing original dance works on contemporary themes was the lack of opportunities to present such works. When they were presented with opportunities and organizers constantly approached them to create War-related choreographies, they did so without expecting anything even remuneration. Now, the hesitation comes with the contemplation of how to endure the cost of creating and presenting their works.

The use of codified hand gestures of Bharathanatyam as well as facial expressions are employed in my thesis choreography. As it was done with many of the War-related choreographies, costuming will reflect the characters in the dance works. Realistic, everyday movements will also be incorporated. Inspired by the War-related choreographies, themes are the protagonists of my thesis films. Small sections of each of the six interviews are featured in my dance film *Iḷappu*.

Creation

Changes and Challenges

As this thesis is part of a studio/practice-based program with an emphasis on choreography and collaboration, its public presentation portion is imperative. When I joined the MFA in Dance in 2019, I started conceptualizing how I wanted to present my thesis production. I was envisioning an intimate space with a smaller audience where I would serve Sri Lankan Tamil cuisine. My rationale for including food, which is an important part of any culture, was to jog the memory of the Sri Lankan Tamils in the audience of home, whether in Sri Lanka or elsewhere where they have settled, to remember and reminisce. Moreover, the food and performance would serve as an introduction to the Sri Lankan Tamil culture to others. I wanted the performers at a close proximity to the audience and experiment with how the movements especially the facial expressions for the storytelling sections would be altered to be effective in that setting. Equally, it was important to me to have media representatives from the Canadian Tamil community present to document and make this work public. Setting such kind of environment was for me an opportunity to decrease the detachment I felt between practitioners and academics working in the field of Bharathanatyam. Most practitioners, at least the ones I have interacted with from the GTA, are unaware of the research, historical and ethnographic work being conducted, or even the programs available through universities to do such work. That kind of unawareness was evident during my interviews with the artists as some were astonished that as a Bharathanatyam practitioner I was doing my master's degree in dance at York University.

When the pandemic hit the GTA in March 2020, amongst all other things that changed, the biggest challenge was to reimagine the thesis production on film, work with the dancers virtually and observe all lockdown rules while filming, including physically distancing at all

times. In the effort of controlling filming and production aspects I had command over, I decided to only use my students who I have a rapport with and have successfully worked with in the past. Ranging between seven to thirteen years, these students have been learning from me at my dance school and therefore know me well personally and as a choreographer. The rehearsals were held virtually, and the four dancers I chose to work with were committed and invested time and energy to learn, create and perform this production with the limits presented, utilizing newly learnt technology. Limiting the number of dancers helped in managing the dancers on screen as well as being able to devote one-on-one with each dancer. The virtual rehearsals offered the possibility to imagine the final product on screen with ease. Maneuvering the computer camera to imitate camera lens zooming in and out as well as placing the mobile devices in different parts of the space to see the moving body from different angles became part of our rehearsal ritual. My anticipated performance with live musicians, a spoken word artist and dancers using their voices on stage had to be converted to recorded music and voice overs. The silver lining of the restricted environment presented to me was the opportunity to explore choreography for film and collaborating with a cinematographer and editor.

The Ontario government rules for gatherings and events in relation to COVID-19 kept changing day after day; it was difficult to decide on a venue to film. With the increasing communal spread of COVID-19 and not wanting to put anyone at risk, I decided to film outdoors. Concerned about the weather getting too cold for the dancers to perform, especially barefoot, the filming was done in early October with only the dancers, cinematographer, two volunteer production assistants and myself.

Another choreographic challenge contemplated was the heavy footwork that Bharathanatyam entails. Given the dancers would be performing on concrete, I intentionally

reduced the intensity of the footwork and sometimes even omitted footwork completely keeping the safety of the dancers in mind. Toning down the exaggerated expressions usually seen in Bharathanatyam stage performances in order to make it more realistic to the viewers of the dance film required concerted consideration during the creation process. I was reminded of what Stephen Nachmanovitch mentions in his book *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. He writes, “The limits are either rules of the game to which we voluntarily accede, or circumstances beyond our control that demand an adaption. We use the limits of the body, of the instrument, of conventional forms and of new forms that we ourselves invent, as well as the limits created by our collaborators, the audience, the place in which we play and the resources available to us” (pg.79). It might seem paradoxical; however, this project’s challenge of being presented with unusual limitations motivated us. I say this in plural as it applies to everyone that took part in this production-to find alternate ways of successfully completing it.

As a choreographer, I was determined to create in collaboration with the dancers as opposed to the customary way of creating for the dancers for this project. Although I have experimented with the said process of working in my previous creations, this was the first time I saw this method applied to its fullest. Present-day Bharathanatyam is a heavily codified and structured form. The teacher/choreographer-student/dancer relationship is also very structured and formal. I would not go to the extent of describing the existing choreographic process within Bharathanatyam as Steve Paxton’s description of choreographic process as “dictatorship” mentioned in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*; however, the hierarchical structure is undeniable. Throughout the process of the thesis creation, I made a conscious effort to create with the dancers in a collaborative manner.

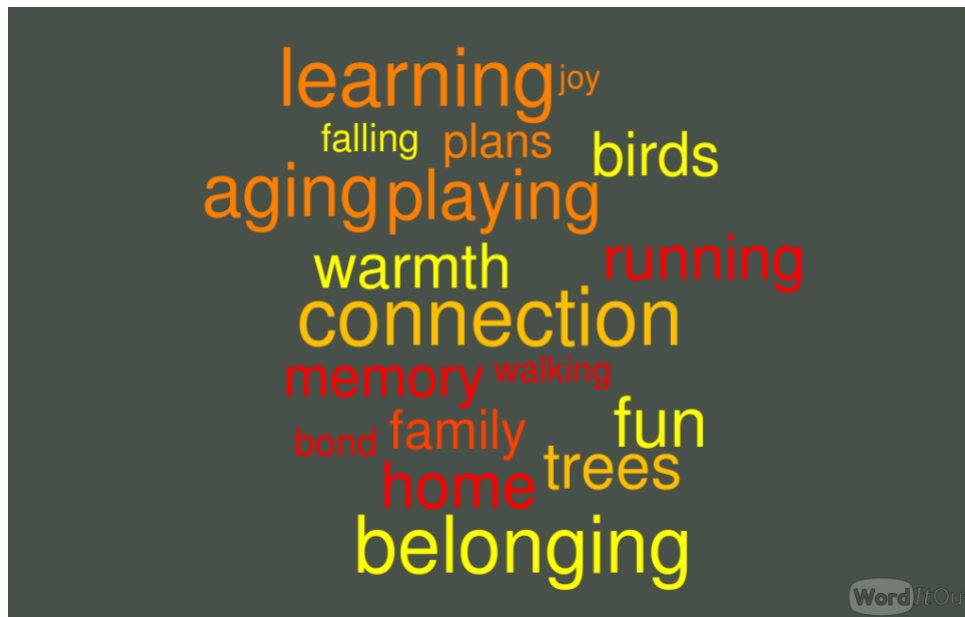
Ilappu

Ilappu (Loss in Tamil) is inspired by the dance creations of Sri Lankan Tamil artists, specifically dances that told the stories of the Civil War. While working on this project, I remembered the dances I was part of as a young dance student and the dances I have witnessed during the Civil War. More importantly, I was motivated by the compassionate explanations and descriptions of the interviewees.

Prior to starting the creation process, I spent time with the dancers talking about the Civil War in Sri Lanka, forced migration, genocide and loss of loved ones, land and hope. It was central to me that the dancers understood the theme of the production and were able to understand and embody the emotions. I should note here that three out of the four dancers are not of Sri Lankan descent. Doris Humphrey mentions in her book, *The Art of Making Dances*, that “the subject matter is paramount mostly for the choreographer. It is his source, his dream, his love” (pg.26). As much as this statement resonates with me, it was equally important to me that the dancers who were part of the film worked with the same enthusiasm. Hence, all the time spent on reviewing history, conversing about and discussing the theme was significant.

This eleven-minute dance film was created in four parts. Each part has the potential to be presented as stand-alone short dance films. The first section consists of isolated movements of feet and hands and ends with facial expressions. Isolated movements of body parts are prevalent in Bharathanatyam. Students learn to think of their body in parts or sections, which makes it easier to learn movements in which certain body parts are performing different movements while others are stationary. *Alarippu*, typically the first composition dancers learn and present in Bharathanatyam includes the idea of isolated movements of eyes, neck, shoulders, etc. I thought it would be effective to start my film in a similar manner. It was also important to

me to establish the setting of where these scenes take place. Given traveling to Sri Lanka to film was not an option, I wanted to find a location with certain physical features resembling Sri Lanka whilst we filmed in the GTA. After much searching and through a friend, I found a backyard that was being renovated. As the general contractor on the project, my friend was able to get permission for us to film there. Using machinery available at the construction site they were able to turn the soil and prepare the space to not only make it resemble the soil in Sri Lanka but also apt for the dancers to execute movements with their hands and feet in a safe manner. My vision of having the soil move with the dancers was achieved. In this first scene, which I referred to as *Identity*, I wanted to showcase the connection with land. Collectively with the four dancers we came up with words that came to mind when we think of land or homeland (fig 2). Those words were used to establish the movements in this section.



2. Word cloud used for *Identity* section choreography

The costuming for this part was essential as I wanted it to resemble what Sri Lankan Tamil women wore during the '80s when large numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils started to flee the

country. Based on conversations with many of my friends and family, I decided to have the dancers in simple georgette and chiffon sarees, which was common everyday attire for Tamil women in Sri Lanka during that time period.

Consequently, I choreographed the movements for the song “Nambungal”, which was a very popular song during the Civil War. “*Nambungal Tamil Eelam Nalai Pirakkum*” can be translated to: “believe that Tamil Eelam will be born tomorrow.” The choreography for this part was inspired by the interviews with the artists as well as my memory of the aesthetics of dances about the Civil War. This song appears twice in the film, once at the beginning immediately after the facial expressions and another shorter version of it is placed towards the end. This section also contains small parts of my interviews with the artists interspersed.

The next section portrays the juxtaposing feelings and emotions associated with forced migration. The happiness of fleeing the wore-torn country and the devastation of leaving the loved ones behind and the uncertainty surrounding the situation in their homeland. As this explanation suggests, I refer to this section as *Happiness and Devastation*.

In Bharathanatyam we distinguish between *Nritha* and *Nrithya*. *Nritha* is referred to as pure dance or abstract dance and does not have any emotions or feelings attached. “Its basic constituents are time measure and rhythm. In *Nritha* the emphasis is on clarity of dance movements”. (Fundamentals of Bharathanatyam, pg.9). *Nrithya* also known as *abhinaya* can be defined as the storytelling aspect of dance involving feelings and emotions. For this section I took *adavus* (basics of *nritta* or pure dance movements) and infused them with emotions, an aspect of *Nrithya*. Dancers were tasked with choosing three to five abstract movements, *adavus*, that they previously learnt in class. As the next step, they had to perform the same movements while emoting happiness. Subsequently, the movements were repeated with the feeling of

devastation. During the creation process dancers were afforded the freedom to improvise and play with repetitions. Later, I worked with each dancer individually to weave together the movements with smooth transitions and added subtle facial expressions to clearly communicate the emotion. Once we established a movement phrase, I asked the dancers to take their phrases and dance them at various speeds, perform the movements within the phrase in reverse order and also try emoting with different parts of their body while performing. Eventually, together with the dancers, I had a choreography in which dancers still had some room to improvise. As much as I would have liked to experiment with a score and dancers improvising on the filming spot, I could not take the risk of not finishing filming within two days, especially given the strict restrictions on public gatherings due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I should also note here that I was working with a tight budget that only afforded me the cinematographer and the equipment rental for two days for both my films.

Although I started choreographing both parts together, the happiness portion and the devastation portion were rehearsed and filmed separately as I felt the importance needed to be placed within the dancers internalizing and holding the respective emotion throughout each portion. The effect of depicting the conflicting feelings and the states of their minds was elevated by editing. We used black and white for the devastation section. Editing tools also allowed us to bring all four dancers emoting happiness as well as devastation onto one screen at the end of this section. (fig 3) The costumes for this section as well as the remainder of the film were long flared skirts. This choice was made based on the memory of my mother and aunts wearing them especially in the '80s and '90s. Digging through some of my old photographs assured me that this was the appropriate costuming for the film.



3. Screen capture of dancers Christine Joseph, Vysnavi Thanendran, Priyanka Meyyappan and Ranjani Ravichandran at the end of *Happiness and Devastation* section.

There was careful consideration given to the choice of the two locations in this section and the two other consecutive sections. I wanted it to be places that either resembled the emotions of the scenes or places Sri Lankan Tamils could relate their initial memories of migrating to and living in the GTA. After consulting with my supervising professor, Dr. Patrick Alcedo, as well as friends and family, I decided to film in front of apartment buildings that were heavily occupied by Sri Lankan Tamils during the '80s and '90s and also include some Tamil stores that have been around since the '80s. I utilized WhatsApp groups that have a large number of Sri Lankan Tamils to garner consensus as to which apartment buildings or storefronts to use. I posed questions regarding apartments they lived in when first moving to the GTA and the Tamil stores and restaurants that come to mind when they think of the GTA in the '80s. With a list of buildings, stores and restaurants, I drove around an entire weekend and took pictures and videos, which I later shared with my cinematographer, Rodrigo Michelangeli. After taking into

account his concerns regarding the traffic in front of the stores and restaurants and the time it would take for the dancers and crew members to move from location to location, I decided to only film in front of two apartment buildings. Both final locations used for filming were mentioned multiple times in the WhatsApp groups; hence, I was reassured that they would be ideal locations for the theme of my work. Moreover, I consulted with the cinematographer to ensure that the buildings would complement the movements and invited him to join our Zoom rehearsals.

This section was followed by a shorter version of *Nambungal* song; however, this time the dancers were wearing skirts not sarees and was filmed in front of both the aforementioned apartment buildings. Once I conceptualized the costuming of the dancers wearing skirts for a large part of the film, I asked them to wear skirts during our rehearsals, assuming they would find dancing in skirts difficult. However, I was pleasantly surprised that they were very comfortable and expressed a sense of freedom and ease while dancing. The emotions the dancers articulated corresponded to the feeling of being free in Canada or the GTA compared to the War-torn Sri Lanka. In a physically distanced manner given the COVID-19 restrictions, I placed the dancers to perform this section as a group. It was important to me to showcase the solidarity of the diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils, despite the differences in class, caste and religion that I described earlier.

The last section of the film was very emotional for me from the moment I started conceptualizing it to the last stages of editing. I tasked the dancers to select some images by searching “Sri Lankan Civil War” and share their findings with the other dancers and myself. After all of us viewed our combined images, six images were selected and used for the creation process, while only four were used in the film. When I was creating this section, I was listening

to the audio book *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* as I had read it some time ago and wanted to revisit the book. I had not personally witnessed any part of the Civil War. The book truly aided me in visualizing what happened during the War, particularly the experiences and fate of the civilians during the last months of the War. The descriptive words of Gordon Weiss, a journalist and a UN spokesperson, who lived in Sri Lanka during the final years of the Civil War made me very emotional and helped me articulate and emote the feelings to the dancers. Going through the images was not easy for the dancers. I did contemplate not having the dancers perform this exercise as I was particularly careful in not wanting to add stress to their lives while going through a global pandemic. However, the dancers insisted that they wanted to learn about the War as much as they can in order to do justice for the film.



4. Tamilguardian. May 2009. During the last month of the Civil War.

The image with a lady holding a heavily wounded child (fig 4) created an impact with the dancers and it made me realize that this was the reality for many during the days of the War. Weiss describes how Tamils lived in so much fear right before the end of the War in May 2009 he says: “You couldn’t stop kids flying their kites, you would trip over their twine as you walked around. They were ingenious figuring out their kites from the skeletons of palm fronds and plastic bags. It was all such a game for them. Many kids died because their parents couldn’t keep them inside”. (pg. 163) We could not stop imagining the happiness this child would have had while playing moments before getting wounded. The sorrow felt by the parents, grandparents and siblings were unimaginable. I incorporated the said feelings into the section choreographed as a response to this picture.



5. Tamil Guardian. May 2009. Tamil Civilians cross over into Sri Lankan military territory.

As a Bharathanatyam artist, I have travelled to Tamil Nadu, India for training and performances. Having said that, I never visited my homeland during those travels despite the close proximity. I have felt that Tamil Nadu made me feel nostalgic and Sri Lanka always felt foreign to me. I also do not have close relatives or friends who still live there. Weiss writes, “In the wake of 1983 riots, the threat of Indian intervention loomed. Tens of thousands of Tamil refugees had fled to India, mostly to Tamil Nadu, whose citizens considered Black July an atrocity committed against all Tamils, and Jaffna a beloved repository of Tamil culture”. (pg. 49) I felt a connection between these lines from the book *The Cage* and the image. The picture used for this section (fig 5) is not of people arriving in Tamil Nadu. Yet that is what came to my mind when I saw this picture and wanted to incorporate it into the choreographic process. When viewing this image and creating this section, I was more focused on bringing out the sentiment of people who were left behind in Sri Lanka - people who did not have the means or the opportunity to flee.



6. The Star. Image from May 2009. The end of the Civil War.

The lines from the book that resonated with the picture taken after the end of Civil War (fig 6) for me are: “Memory or grievance, is passed from one generation to another like a talisman and shapes our present. Survivors or victors process these grievances, and their children are initiated into the past in a variety of narratives, traditions and pageants, depending on the course of history.” (pg.223) By these lines I was reminded of the fact that the effect of the War does not stop with my generation. When looking at the image I felt an urge to go to the place depicted in the picture and see if anything can still be preserved. Even if it is not humans or other living things, will the material remains have the ability to preserve and carry our tradition and culture into the future and tell the stories of the Sri Lankan Tamils? This thought process is what was reflected in the choreography of this section.



7. Tamil Guardian. May 2009. During the last month of the Civil War.

I could not look past the slight smile on the face of the child (fig 7), despite being injured. The innocence of the child in the image used speaks louder than any other aspect in this picture. The lines from Weiss's book that I incorporated into the creation process and corresponds to this image are one of hope even in the hardest times of people's lives. "Nevertheless, a serious injury meant a certain kind of luck, in so far as a person and some of their family might qualify for evacuation on one of the ICRC ships." (pg. 163) I related these lines to the smile on the child's face and used the idea of kicking fate in its face and walking away from it. I would like to note that some Tamils were lucky enough to be able to do that whilst not forgetting that many unfortunately were not that lucky.

Isolation

Checking in with the dancers as to how they were feeling and how their family and friends were doing physically as well as mentally was how the choreographic process for *Isolation* started. I came to learn about the dancers' frustration and boredom they were experiencing while going through these unprecedented times. Some were focused on embracing the additional time they had to spend with their family whilst others revealed concerns regarding their suffering mental health. No matter the situation they were in or how they felt, the dancers were staying home for the most part. When the government officials declared the pandemic and state of emergency, they all went home similar to the majority of the country without questioning it.

The first part of this fourteen-minute film reflects the day when Ontario was put officially into lockdown and the entire province went home not knowing what to expect. It is precisely that confused and troubled response to the situation I wanted depicted within the first scene. I choreographed this portion and instructed the dancers on exactly what movements to execute.

They were not afforded any freedom to improvise or contribute to the choreography. I instructed all four dancers to perform the same choreography to illustrate the fact that the pandemic affected people from all walks of life. I used my voice in the soundtrack as a metaphor for the instruction received from the officials. The traditional choreographer-dancer relationship was used to represent the officials in power who were making the decisions regarding the pandemic and the public. I used *sollukattu*, which is spoken rhythmic structure without any meaning. At my dance school Confidance Bharatham, we refer to *sollukattus* as *jathi* as that is the term my teacher Ramachandran Muralidharan, who has created a copious amount of *sollukattus* uses. Hence, this section was referred to as *Jathi* section during the creation process. The *jathi/sollukattu* also helped keep emotions out of the dancers' thought process while performing. Conventionally, dancers would be asked to perform *jathis* with a smile on their face; however, I had to strip away that smile from their faces in order to depict the confused state of mind people were in when the province went into lockdown.

Ed Hanley edited the video and composed most of the music for this film. He added ambient rain capture sound as well as a hurdy gurdy drone sound to the *sollukattu* that I had recorded to complement the tension and confusion portrayed. The costuming for this section was decided by the dancers. My request was solely to wear something that characterised their usual work or school attire. The filming for each dancer took place outside the front entrances of their respective homes. Bringing realism within the dancers' facial expression and including everyday actions into dances is a characteristic often used in my recent choreographies. Previously I had utilized actions of diaper changing and bedtime storytelling in a piece I created for a solo dancer using a lullaby song. Moreover, I had developed movements depicting use of cellphones and computers in another choreography. The aforementioned examples show the

extent of realistic movements I have been using in my creations. *Isolation*, a piece meant to depict the feelings and emotions of life during the COVID-19 pandemic, only made sense to be filmed in or around the dancers' own homes.

Bharathanatyam choreographies have a heavy reliance on music and lyrics. Learning from my MFA courses at York University, being part of creation processes of different choreographers as well as my personal interest in exploring different choreographic methodologies encouraged me to tackle the next section with a different approach. The constant voices we all heard during the lockdown was that of the various provincial and federal government officials. Three of the dancers were working from home, while one was in online school. Their breaks were consumed by watching news, or their parents or partner updating them on COVID-19 related information. The restrictions and updates, number of COVID cases, government financial support and predictions on the course of the pandemic were primary concerns and daily conversations. I wanted to capture this sentiment within the film and therefore asked each dancer to select a news clip that they considered important, were concerned with, sensitive about or resonated with them personally. The creation process started with very long news clips of five to fifteen minutes. I devoted time with each dancer to determine the portion of the news clip that was relevant and impactful. After the selection process, movements were created in response to the words within the news clips. Many different approaches were used to create movements and each dancer's response to their respective news clip differed. I believe it is important I name and mention the dancers individually for this section as it was partly created based on their experiences and emotional states.

Ranjani Ravichandran selected a news clip that announced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). This program was put in place to help people who lost their income

due to COVID-19. Ranjani's rationale for selecting this clip was the hope it gave her. She said: "I chose this clip because it was one of hope". She explained the stress she was feeling to keep up with the constant bad news. She was specifically attracted to the words of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau "Canada will come roaring back". Ranjani mentioned the gratitude she felt for living in Canada as this kind of support was not given to people in many other countries.

Priyanka Meyyappan selected a news clip that expresses the concerns of people having to travel in crowded public transit during the COVID-19 pandemic thereby putting themselves at risk. She was drawn to the words "embraces the crowd" which reminded her of the presence of physical and social interactions in everyday life with friends, family and other members of the society. This news clip was reflective of the fact that people's experiences during the pandemic can vary based on many factors including geographic location.

Christine Joseph selected a clip which directly expressed the harsh reality we were facing. The Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, who we saw daily during the first wave of the pandemic, was putting out a warning of the next wave of COVID-19 approaching. Christine had mentioned multiple times during the creation process that she had not left the house for anything other than essentials like grocery shopping given she lived with her parents and did not want to put them at risk. This clip points out people's negligence in taking necessary precautions. She said: "It was a good reminder about the need for all of us to stay together and combat COVID-19."

Vysnavi Thanendran selected a news clip by the Ontario Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, regarding reopening of schools in September. Vysnavi shared the difficulty of having to make the decision of committing to online school versus physically going into school with all COVID-19 measures observed and its impact on her and her family. As a grade twelve student

she says: “this is not how I imagined my senior year to be”. She went on to highlight that the time she got to spend with her family was the only bright side of the pandemic and she did not want to put her family members at risk. Her immune compromised brother and grandparents were a big part of her decision-making process.

Ed added percussion to the found audio of the newsclips. Priyanka’s footage had heavy video processing. Kaleidoscope effect as well as mirroring was used to stress the message. Christine’s part was edited with layering the found footage of the news clip with multiple layers of Christine’s dancing footage. The waves created by the visual image complemented the COVID-19 waves the news clip was addressing. The costuming for this section as well as the remainder of the film were loungewear, which the dancers shared they primarily wore during the lockdown period.

In my pursuit of nurturing confidence through dance training, I have been encouraging dancers to use their voice and be articulate in addition to possessing the ability to think and speak with their body. I have included dancers’ voices in my recent choreographies. *Isolation* was created based on the dancers’ experiences during COVID-19 and therefore using their own voices for this section was apt. There are artists and scholars who argue that trained bodies can think as well as express and as such there is no need to use words or voice in dances. Cynthia J. Novack’s book on contact improvisation, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, for example portrays the power of the thinking and articulating body eliminating the need for voice or words in dance. Broderick D.V. Chow in his article “How Does the Trained Body Think?” challenges the notion that trained bodies act unthinkingly. Although he uses examples of wrestling and weightlifting in his explorations, the observations and arguments he makes can easily be transferred and applied to movement forms. Despite my

thoughts of ambivalence around the topic of supplementing movement with words, I strongly felt the need to include the dancers' voices in this film to depict their experiences in a wholesome manner, through movements as well as words. As I have mentioned earlier, Bharathanatyam is a multifaceted, storytelling artform and can be classified theatre with a strong rhythmic and movement component. The spoken words used in this film were only in English and not in any Indian language, which to me showcases the versatility and adaptability of Bharathanatyam and opens up possibilities to tell universal stories using Bharathanatyam vocabulary.

For the next section of the film, I collaborated with Dheepthi Gnaneswaran, a writer with whom I had worked with in the past. They have been learning dance from me at Confidance Bharatham, which was helpful as they understand Bharathanatyam, and the movement aesthetic used in the film. Together with Dheepthi, Ranjani, Christine, Vysnavi and Priyanka, I brainstormed about scenarios of how people were dealing with COVID-19 while maneuvering the demands of daily life. Dheepthi turned shared ideas into verses that the dancers used as spoken words for the film. The lines used by each dancer was chosen by them based on what resonated with them and was a reflection of their feelings as well as experiences in dealing with COVID-19. Lack of motivation due to being confined within the four walls of their homes as well as lack of social interaction were common themes. Even with their school and work lives the dancers expressed boredom as one of their complaints; hence, we referred to this section as *Boredom*. The initial plan was to film scenes of this section inside the dancers' homes. Due to the increasing pattern in COVID-19 infection numbers, I decided against the filming crew entering homes of the dancers and therefore filmed outside their homes. I worked on this section with each dancer separately using different spoken word lines; however, when editing I identified common themes and expressions. Consequently, rather than keeping each dancer's

choreography separate, I decided to edit this section cutting back and forth between the four dancers. Choreography through editing was effective in conveying the shared feelings and emotions of the dancers. Ed added a mechanical clock ticking sample using a VariSpeed, a feature of audio recorders that allows for the time and pitch to vary, to the lines spoken by the dancers in order to emphasize and direct the attention of the viewers to the perceived pace of time associated with boredom.

Working with the dancers for *Boredom* made me realize the fact that despite the boredom and feeling of entrapment, we were experiencing the pandemic from somewhat of a privileged context. The bitter reality of COVID-19 was the economic impact on people and their livelihood. Most disheartening was its fatal impact. I wanted to include a section that spoke to the reality of losing loved ones. The increasing numbers of COVID-19 related deaths reported was an indicator that COVID-19 stories cannot be told in its entirety without the mention of death. I commissioned Dheepthi to write a few lines reminding people in privileged positions about the reality of many others globally. The creation process of this section did not include the dancers. I worked with Dheepthi and presented the finalized lines to the dancers. Facial expressions were the focus for this part as I wanted emotions to dominate and steer this section. The lines were divided and assigned to each dancer. I worked with the dancers to individually hone their expressions to suit the screen, which was new for them, for they are used to overemoting in order to convey the emotions from proscenium stage distanced from the audience. Close ups of the dancers' faces were used to effectively convey the message. The spoken word lines below were recorded in Dheepthi's voice and a pre-existing soundtrack Ed Hanley co-produced with Suba Sankaran was added.

Loved ones were always our escape from reality. Their presence brought us a form of warmth that is not easily found elsewhere. But now, some of us are troubled. Others are tired. Our loved ones surround us - always there and readily available. They bicker and they bug, and sometimes you may wish you were apart. But how lovely is it that we can be with them? And to dine with them, bask in their smiles, and laugh at their silly, overused jokes. But while we kiss our children goodnight and watch the steady rise and fall of their chests - others must mumble their final goodnights and goodbyes to their loved ones over the static of a phone.

I wanted to end this film with hope, hence decided to film the last portion depicting nature with greenery (fig 8). The song used for this section was composed by my teacher Ramachandran Muralidharan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Thaaye innum sothanai enadi?* The first line of this song can be translated to “Mother, why are you still putting us through these trials?” When asking the composer about this song he says: “The composition describes the current situation of COVID-19. This song is in praise of the Goddess Shakthi. In Hinduism, Shakti means power, energy or force. Mythologically, Shakti is described as feminine, often personified as the Goddess, Devi, the divine feminine consort of the divine masculine God Shiva.” With regards to the composer, the questioning of when will all of this suffering end is directed to Goddess Shakthi or Devi. In my secular approach, I decided to direct the question to earth or simply nature. In her book, *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship*, Yvonne Daniel talks about African dance forms that can move from sacred spaces to secular social spaces fluidly, depicting the adaptability of dance forms according to context. I attempt to omit the hegemony of Hinduism in many of my choreographies. Yet I readily embrace the intersectionality of sacredness and secularity when offered ideal situations such as the ones my dancers, artistic and film collaborators and I have experienced in the making of this thesis.



8. Screen capture of dancers Vysnavi Thanendran, Christine Joseph, Priyanka Meyyappan and Ranjani Ravichandran at the end of *Isolation*.

Conceptualizing, creating and filming *Ilappu* and *Isolation* was challenging yet rewarding. I have discovered a new medium to present my work effectively and the dancers felt the experience was a learning curve. The physical distancing whilst directing and reviewing footage on the camera was choreography in and of itself. The added aspect of editing by reimagining my thesis project from a live public presentation to film presented an opportunity to learn the art and power of editing as well as explore choreography for screen. The camera has become a collaborator instead of a documenting device.

Concluding Thoughts

This thesis is my first footprint in the academic world of dance. It has been a journey that taught me to think critically and to carefully re-examine what it means to use Bharathanatyam vocabulary to create dances for our contemporary times. I have always been passionate about making dance works that spoke to my audiences. However, this journey allowed me create work that in my opinion is important. It gave me the opportunity to converse with artists about the evolution of dance in the Sri Lankan Tamil context, familiarize myself with what historical and ethnographic work has been conducted and more importantly what work still needs to be completed. As a Sri Lankan Tamil Bharathanatyam artist, the unique position of the Sri Lankan Tamils within the dance world needed emphasis. Hence, I focused my research on the Sri Lankan Tamil dance creations during, what I consider, a pivotal time in dance within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the Civil War period.

My invaluable gain was aided by the limitations the COVID-19 pandemic imposed. I have discovered a medium that complements my art of storytelling through Bharathanatyam. Research and creation took a digital form for my thesis work; nevertheless, I am happy to embrace a hybrid approach going forward. Starting with improvisation as part of the creation process to choreographing movements for news clips and voices of government officials, this thesis project gave me a spectrum of different experiences.

I am interested in further exploring the medium of film to present my future dance works. With the experience of creating *Ilappu* and *Isolation*, and the course “Dance Video and Intermedial Performance” as part of the MFA in dance program, I have gained substantial creative and technical tools to work with. It is my aspiration to expand *Ilappu* to create a full documentary film using the unused interview footage from the thesis research and movements

created and not included in the films. Post-COVID-19 I would like to engage in in-person conversations with the interviewees and obtain footage of their everyday lives and activities, dance classes and choreography sessions to be included in the film.

Although creating, teaching and dancing will continue to be part of my life, I feel compelled to contribute to the historical and ethnographic work that needs attention within dance in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Documenting and preserving Koothu, has also become part of my vision after conducting my MFA in dance thesis research. The course “Issues in Dance Ethnography and Cultural Studies” has reassured my interest in conducting dance ethnographic research in Sri Lanka. The different regional Koothu forms in Sri Lanka have lost popularity and are in danger of being lost completely. With my focus on storytelling, I am convinced that aspects of Koothu can be fused with Bharathanatyam to produce effective dance works. It is important to take a pedagogical approach to researching Koothu and share with the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in order for it to be passed on to the next generations. As I complete my thesis, I am realizing that I am only starting this important and urgent work.

Works Cited

- Anchors Aweigh. Directed by George Sidney, Loew's Inc., 1945.
- AP International. "Naam Iruvar-Aaduvomey Pallu Song". YouTube, March 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdAxFP3S5KY>.
- AP International. "Nalandhana Song-Thillana Mohanambal Movie Songs-Sivaji Ganesan-Padmini-K V Mahadevan". YouTube, May 29, 2020
- AP International. "Kannodu Kanbathellam Video Song-Jeans Tamil Movie-Prashanth-Aishwarya Rai-AR Rahman". YouTube, May 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnW2737FkW8&list=PLgN-L3qgl0ZX8KAMjvO7CGZDJK1ZpNgJP&index=2&t=0s>.
- Brannigan, Erin. *Dancefilm: Choreography and Moving Image*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Bravofact. "Dafeena" YouTube, December 4, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCtjDm1L2WU>.
- Bravofact. "Inverse". YouTube, April 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laksL1pMMsg>.
- Center Stage. Directed by Nicholas Hytner, Columbia Pictures, 2000.
- Chow, Broderick. "How Does the Trained Body Think? in *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance*". London: Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019.
- Daniel, Yvonne. *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
- Deren, Maya. "Amateur Versus Professional." *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, edited by David E. James and Adam Hyman, Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 39-40. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gz99w.10.
- David, Ann. Embodied Migration: Performance Practice of Diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil Communities in London. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. 33, 4. August 4, 2012. Pp. 375-394
- Elangkovan, Valanteena. *Yālpāṇattu Nāṭṭiya Marapukaḷ*. Germany: Vettrimani Veliyeedu, 2008.
- Footloose. Directed by Herbert Ross, Paramount Pictures, 1984.
- Happy Feet. Directed by George Miller, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006.
- Humphrey, Doris. *The Art of making Dances*. Trenton: Princeton Book Company, 1959.

Janardhanan, Arun. “A young dancer takes a hard look at Bharatanatyam’s burden of caste.” The Indian Express. February 17, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/why-i-call-myself-a-devadasi-6269432/>

Kalyanasundaram, Sandhiya. “Navigating Hyperrealities: Tamil Film (Kollywood) Choreography as Screen Dance”. *The International Journal of Screendance 11*, 2020.

Kirubaraj, Atputharani. Personal Interview. July 30, 2020.

Krishnan, Hari. *Celluloid Classicism: Early Tamil Cinema and the Making of Modern Bharathanatyam*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019.

La La Land. Directed by Damien Chazelle, Lionsgate, 2016.

Lloyd Newson DV8 Physical Theatre. <https://www.dv8.co.uk>.

Lazarus, Susanna. “Unboxing Dancers on Instagram”. *The Hindu*. May 22, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/dance/on-boxed-anita-ratnams-new-instagram-series-for-young-dancers/article31649952.ece>.

Mayuri. Directed by Singeetam Srinivasa Rao, Ushakiran Movies, 1985.

Muralidharan, R and Sarala M.S. *Fundamentals of Bharathanatyam*. Escondido CA: Alagappa International LLC, 2005.

Murugiah, Arulmohan. Personal Interview. August 11, 2020.

NatyamNrityam. “How to name it – Bharathanatyam- Dr. Janaki Rangaraja”. YouTube, July 22, 2020. <https://youtu.be/e9wK-u5JhIU>

Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1990.

Novack, Cynthia. *Sharing the Dance Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

O’Shea, Janet. *At Home in the World: Bharatha Natyam on the Global Stage*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

Pillai, Nrithya. Varnashrama dharma. Facebook, April 27, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/665654118/posts/10158693040959119/?d=n>.

Post Natyam Collective – Process Praxis Performance, <https://www.postnatyam.net>.

Radhakalpa Dance Company. “Reticence”. YouTube, July 1, 2020. <https://youtu.be/eHatIyr8pXo>

- Ratneswaran, Kirupanithy. Personal Interview. July 9, 2020.
- REVOIRVIDEO. "Meditation on Violence – Maya Deren". YouTube, 2009.
<https://youtu.be/H9O9PrvRnjg>
- Rosenberg, Douglas. *Screendance; Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Rosenberg, Douglas. "Proposing a Theory of Screendance". *Screendance: The State of the Art Proceedings*. American Dance Festival, Duke University, Durham, NC. July 6-9, 2006.
- Salangai Oli. Directed by K. Vishwanath, Poomodaya Movie creations, 1983.
- Satkunanathan, Anusha. Personal Interview. July 25, 2020.
- Satkunaratnam, Ahalya. *Moving Bodies, Navigating Conflict Practicing Bharata Natyam in Colombo Sri Lanka*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020.
- Shresthova, Sangita. "Swaying to an Indian Beat...Dola Goes My Diasporic Heart: Exploring Hindi Film Dance". *Dance Research Journal*. Vol.36, No. 2. Congress on Research in Dance, 2004, pp. 91-101.
- Sivasothy, Vasundara. Personal Interview. July 30, 2020.
- Soneji, Davesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Soneji, Davesh. "Siva's Courtesans: Religion, Rhetoric, and Self-Representation in Early Twentieth Century Writing by Devadasis." *International journal of Hindu studies*. 14, 1:3-70. 2010.
- Sriram V. "The birth of Bharathanatyam". *The Hindu*. December 15, 2016.
<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/dance/The-birth-of-Bharatanatyam/article16834047.ece>
- Malini Srirama. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2004, pp. 235–236. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4133361.
- Suthaharan, Mathivathanie. Personal Interview. August 26, 2020.
- The House of Hidden Knowledge. "Maya Deren: A Study in Choreography for Camera (1945)". YouTube, August 24, 2019.
- Weiss, Gordon. *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of The Tamil Tigers*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2012.

White, John. "Intimate Encounters: Screendance and Surveillance". *The International Journal of Screendance* volume 8, 2017, pp. 29-46.