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### Dance In South Asia: New Approaches, Politics, And Aesthetics

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## ~ reports ~

### **Dance in South Asia: New Approaches, Politics, and Aesthetics**

*(Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania.*

*March 2, 2002)*

At this one-day, international symposium fifteen papers, along with an array of dance activities, reflected the proliferation and range of scholarship, choreography, and performance in the field of South Asian dance today. Kumudini Lakhia, the internationally acclaimed choreographer, teacher, and dancer from India, was the keynote speaker and conducted a workshop the following day. The symposium was followed by a performance titled *Dust*—an international collaboration between Dance Alloy of Pittsburgh and Arangham Dance Theatre of Chennai, India. The weekend was an unprecedented opportunity for dialogue and exchange between individuals from Swarthmore College, the Philadelphia community, and scholars and practitioners from around the world.

Needless to say, although titled Dance in South Asia, the dance forms discussed were predominantly Indian in origin. The symposium drew scholars and practitioners from Europe, North America, and India. The topics ranged from national identity and tradition, aesthetics and reception, to gender violence and subaltern history. The overarching theme was the re-contextualization of past and present discourses on classical Indian dance within the socio-political and aesthetic context of the “modern” and the “global.” The diversity of approaches used for addressing this changing dynamic spanned academic disciplines such as history, anthropology, dance studies, and performance studies, and included practitioners of classical Indian dance forms such as kathak, bharatanatyam, and odissi. The intercultural collaboration between choreographers Mark Taylor of Dance Alloy and Anita Ratnam of Arangham

Dance of Chennai highlighted the ongoing experimentations with movement vocabularies and choreographic forms that mark the new frontiers of South Asian dance.

The morning began with an eloquent introduction by professor Sharon Friedler, the director of dance at Swarthmore College. She outlined the program’s commitment to the discipline of dance as an integrated approach that includes history, theory, and practice. In this context she pointed out the appropriateness of Kumudini Lakhia as the keynote speaker for the occasion. Kumudini Lakhia, coming from a practice-based orientation, was self-reflexive. She spoke about the difficulties she faced as a dancer and a choreographer within the classical world of kathak, which was bounded by the unquestioning tradition of “guru-shishya parampara.” By using video clips of her exquisite and abstract choreographies, she explained how she reimagined the stage, once only occupied by solo performers, to be filled with dancers, patterns of colors, and music. In her words, “I discovered a whole world of movement from within as well as in the space outside.” She set the tone for the rest of the day by encouraging participants to push the boundaries in each of their fields and to strive for originality of thought and movement. Throughout the day—which was packed with papers, dance videos, and a documentary film—the presenters spoke about their own exploration of space, not only choreographically and metaphorically but also within the postcolonial context of politics of location as it shapes the dancer, her dance, her patron, and her audience.

Alessandra Lopez y Royo, from Roehampton University of Surrey, analyzed how museums in Britain are changing their representations of South Asian dance forms. She explained that these forms are no longer merely “exhibits” and “exotica” of a past orientalist mindset: through participation of the

South Asian diaspora as performers and choreographers, the meaning of hegemonic cultural heritage is questioned, revealing plurality and contradiction. Chitra Sundaram, a practitioner of bharatanatyam and the director of Suchitdance in London, illustrated through her choreographic work *Moham: A Magnificent Obsession*, how she went back to traditional technique to depart radically from the more popular convention of bharatanatyam, thus pushing for a new aesthetic within the structure of the form. She elaborated on the ubiquitous nature of bharatanatyam in England, which she explained was not one but many things. Her choreographic work reflected Alessandra's point that bharatanatyam in Britain is a living, vibrant, and contemporary art form with multiple interpretations.

Priya Srinivasan, from Northwestern University, analyzed the history of bharatanatyam in the context of its international circulation during the period of Indian nationalism and the birth of modern dance in America. In her discussion of the history of the form (in the construction of modern American dance), she argued that while white, female dancers like Ruth St. Denis, who appropriated Indian forms, were marked as modern subjects, their South Asian counterparts, such as bharatanatyam dancers, were marked as carriers of tradition. She explained that this label of tradition ideologically prevented South Asian dancers in the United States from sharing the same modernity. Roxanne Kamayani Gupta, from Albright College, in a reversal of such claims, argued that the subject position for the white American or European dancer practicing Indian forms is often viewed as illegitimate, inauthentic, and orientalist. She argued that there is not one but many orientalisms, and from her own subject position as a white American bharatanatyam dancer, the "orientalism" she embodies is a radically liberating

and universal discourse. She argued that "orientalism" should be invoked once again to begin a critical reassessment of the "sacred" dimension of Indian classical dance. In a similar but a more limited vein, Janaki Patrik, a practitioner and choreographer with Kathak Ensemble in New York, spoke about her experiences as a white American dancer, and showed video clips of her works that she claimed went beyond such narrow definitions of ethnicity and authenticity. Andrée Grau, from Roehampton University of Surrey, drew from anthropological and sociological theories to talk about the epistemological conundrums that plague postmodern and postcolonial theories. In a critique of Edward Said and others, she argued that such theories of totalizing Western hegemony reduce postcolonial subjects to ahistorical beings devoid of agency. How useful is it, she asked, for South Asian subjects/dancers/scholars, coming from upper echelons of society to claim such victim status?

The second session began with the screening of a film by Ashish Avikunthak of Stanford University, titled *Dancing Othello/Brihannala Ki Khekali*. Drawing on Shakespearean theatricality and the kathakali dance tradition, this subtle, experimental film used theater and performance to articulate the postcolonial irony of contemporary India. The film's theme of the incongruity of kathakali aesthetics for contemporary urban audiences in India, was foregrounded in Ananya Chatterjea's paper and video presentation. However, her focus was different. A contemporary Indian dancer, trained in classical styles, Chatterjea (from the University of Minnesota) argued for a break or rupture from classical/romantic aesthetics of odissi to represent social issues like violence against women. Speaking about the dance form of odissi again, Ratna Roy from Evergreen State College explored the subaltern text of the Mahari tradition, which was traditionally



Plates 1 and 2. A scene from *Dust*, Dance Alloy of Pittsburgh and Arangham Dance Theatre of Chennai, India. March 2, 2002. Courtesy of Media Services, Swarthmore College.

practiced by devadasi dancers. She argued, and showed through gestures/voice modulations (being a dancer herself), how the female voice is different in the odissi vocabulary from the male or the Gotipua narrative, which is dominant now.

The third session was more eclectic in theme and content than the first two. The importance of the relationship between performance and audience was explored in two papers but from different perspectives. Uttara Asha Coorlawala, from Long Island University, examined and illustrated through video clips how Rasa theory of ancient India resonates with postmodern aesthetics of performance and continues to have relevance. In a careful analysis of a video clip of a kathakali performance she showed how this critical relationship is established. Janet O'Shea, from the University of Surrey, approached audience reception by reading contemporary Indian dance performances in London and Toronto as a scholar of bharatanatyam. She argued that modern choreographers and performers like Lata Pada, among others, who are interpreting the dance form for a Western or uninitiated audience, do not privilege English language translations of movement vocabularies. She argued that such translations during performances inherently create a subject/object dichotomy. These choreographers let the translations occur internally through weaving of forms, music, and content within the choreography itself, rather than in the external printed programs, she explained. Lata Pada, the director of Sampradaya Dance Creations in Canada, presented a video of her choreographic work *Revealed by Fire*. She explained that the piece was a multidisciplinary collaboration using photography, video, Western and Eastern music, dramaturgy, and playwriting. Her choreography about a search for identity from a personal cathartic experience illustrated Janet O'Shea's idea about the weaving of different narratives within the

choreography, rather than letting the translation occur externally. Divya Kumar, director of WordSoundAction, argued that the structural changes that occurred within bharatanatyam during its reconstruction from Sadir were heavily influenced by the technique of film editing. I presented the last paper. By turning an anthropological lens towards the larger collective of women dancers and practitioners in India, I explained how the knowledge of kathak, despite its problematic patriarchal, nationalist narrative, empowers ordinary women in Calcutta and its surrounding small towns.

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

The symposium created a new impetus for dialogue and exchange among scholars, practitioners, and students of Indian dance and culture by throwing into relief the critical relationship between history and theory, aesthetics and politics, subject and object, the individual and the collective. It also brought into focus the field of dance scholarship in India, a subject that receives little academic attention. The hope is to enrich the study of Indian dance by continuing such cross-disciplinary conversations.

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A version of this report appeared in the August, 2002 issue of *Sruti*, the news and features monthly devoted exclusively to Indian music and dance.