IMAGINARY HOMELANDS: CREATING A NEW DANCE LANGUAGE

I have called my paper *Imaginary Homelands*. This will probably be the only paper in this conference which has as its starting point a tube of shaving cream. This particular one was my gift to my brother and it bore the legend 'Mysore sandalwood shaving cream', and since our childhood home was not a million miles away from Mysore I thought it was a rather well chosen little gift. On receiving it, my brother rather unsubtly, I thought, started reading the small print. 'But it says made in England' he exclaimed in a rather accusing tone of voice. So there you have a living everyday example of 'border tensions' as two supposedly mutually exclusive territories encroached on each other's terrain, producing a wail of dismay at the loss of authenticity and integrity. (Ironically, my brother is part of that international community of computer professionals whose culture brooks no limits of geography).

Despite the multiple compass points of modern urban life, there are areas where a simpler mythical version seems to be preferred. You notice this in many areas and I suppose an area that immediately springs to mind is politics. In politics, definitions of national identity are often a denial of the sort of complex present in favour of some nostalgic, eternal and much purer past. Advertising, that ultimate myth-making machine, for example, makes easy fictions whether they be of ideal families or exotic holidays. These are, I think, all symptomatic of a refusal to see the changing borders raging all around. This refusal to see or to be allowed to see does not come about in a haphazard manner; rather it follows established patterns of power and discourse. The advertiser obviously wants to sell you his holiday, the politician wants the supreme power of it all, to shape the story of the past – what we call history – in order to shape your present. One such established discourse is that between the East and the West. What we really mean is the 'colonised' and the 'coloniser' and the unequal power relationship between them. (See Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, which deals with this whole area in great depth, as do the writing of Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, and Salman Rushdie).

So I can only talk about my personal experience in this area. In fact, whenever I hear the phrase 'East-West collaboration' used about what I do I have a very strange sensation. It is a sensation of being a baby wanting to be born but being pushed back into the uterus, of not being allowed to be born. 'You cannot come out' says the midwife. 'Not as a common or garden British choreographer you can't, specially if you don't have any particular mission. Yes, you can have a mission – I mean to update Bharata Natyam. You can come out if you want to give voice to non-western cultures or to oppressed minorities or Indian women or Third-World issues. You can be a social ambassador, but not just a choreographer. You can come out if you make perhaps a colourful dance about arranged marriages, told entirely through hand gestures, of course. And this is very important – before you actually perform it, you have to explain each one because, of course, each one has a specific meaning

and... What? You mean you want to work with a white composer? That will be a "cross-cultural collaboration". Never mind that he lives next door to you in Stamford Hill. But, of course, if *he* wants to work with you that will be different, that will be "influenced by world music and his rich eclecticism". And what do you mean "West-East collaboration"? That just never happens. No, no, we engage in deeply ironic postmodern quotations but never collaborations, so in you go'.

I find this kind of experience as a citizen of a country where I want to be born, where I am labouring to be born, to be deeply undemocratic. I think it is very undemocratic to be prescribed your areas of concern, the issues that you want to deal with as a choreographer and as an artist. So I suppose what I reject about these categories is perhaps the best prologue to talking about what I do or what people like myself do. Central to these frustrations is not that I resent being an ambassador, because I think all dance work is representative of its maker's life and concerns and I think in that way all artists are ambassadors to their own private countries. I think what gets me is the sheer inaccuracy of the country I am supposed to be representing. The country I represent, I admit, is difficult to chart. It is definitely not India, especially that fictional incarnation of India as a place entrenched in deep spiritual and cultural certainties, if that exists. It is difficult to chart the landscape of my country for the simple reason that it is being created and imagined even as we board the train. The journey and the destination are one and that is home. As Marina Warner says in her book *Managing Monsters*, 'Home lies ahead in the unfolding – of the story in the future, not behind waiting to be regained'. There is nothing particularly radical about what I say about this dynamic, ideal home. I think it is the experience of most city dwellers, of anyone whose life is different to their parents'. Those of us who have been part of the great post-war migrations are only an extreme example of this imaginary home making. In fact, Homi Bhabha says in his book *The Location of Culture*, 'The truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision'. Perhaps that is why the Booker Prize is won again and again by the Rushdies and the Ondaatjes and the Ishiguros – by those who illuminate the dynamism of journeys, the constant packing and unpacking, the constant loss and recovery and loss again. Those who illustrate a pattern of belonging that is multi-dimensional. However, this experience of 'unhomeliness' is not to be confused with 'homelessness'. Rather, I think to these artists their unhoming has been a source of immense creative activity. It is also no surprise, I think, that Marina Warner in her last Reith Lecture where she talked about British national identity does not invoke Churchill or Shakespeare but Derek Walcot – a man of mixed parentage who is content to forget the injuries of history and the vain search for one island that heals with its harbour and a guiltless horizon. Obviously what he finds joyful is that 'there are so many islands'. Late 20th century living, whether lived in Bombay, in London or in that imaginary homeland of the Diaspora, which is where people like myself belong, has made Captain Kirks of us all.

Choreography 1991-1994

I shall start first with *Making of Maps*, which I made in 1991. I suppose the first thing I thought about when I made *Making of Maps* was the question of heritage. One of the things that I found very frustrating about East-West collaborations and crosscultural ventures was that they seemed to prescribe to me a very static view of my own heritage. For me, my heritage is a mix of David Bowie, Purcell, Shelley, and Anna Pavlova, and it has been mixed as subtly as a samosa has mixed itself into the English cuisine in the last 10 years or so: impossible to separate. But it is surprising how to many people my heritage could only be things Indian.

About two years ago I asked Richard Alston to make a piece for my dancers, and he chose the music of Purcell. In one of the reports that I got from the Arts Council observers was the comment 'The dancers are now dancing to our music, Purcell. It is wonderful that they have made it their own'. What I think the person did not know or did not care to know was that someone like myself from the age of 12 in my school assembly in Malaysia heard nothing but Purcell. So, for me, Purcell, like Shelley, like David Bowie, is not 'the other' – it is part of my heritage. And in dance terms Rukmani Devi and Merce Cunningham are also part of my heritage. So, *Making of Maps* really started in a way as a process of inventing my own heritage. One of the first things I did was to commission two composers to make the music. One, Alistair Macdonald, who lived in Birmingham, and the other R.A. Ramamani, who lived in Bangalore. One of the images that I had for *Making of Maps* was someone sitting in a room and playing different cassettes and different CDs into their machine or sitting in front of a radio and twiddling the knob. It seemed to me that one of the things that characterised the way my peers and I lived was the amazing accessibility and openness of the universe which was there for the taking. I also wanted sounds of everyday life, of station announcements, of church bells because, again, as Homi Bhabha says in his book, 'The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions'. So that was the kind of logic behind this work *Making of Maps*.

When I started *Making of Maps*, obviously I had to also look at what I did with the dance language. The dance language that I was given was Bharata Natyam and the reason why is rooted in certain historical events. The reason I learned Bharata Natyam was a direct result of the British presence in India. One of the movements in India which led to Independence came to be known as the 'Self-Respect Movement'. I suppose when the psyche of a country has been bashed around for over 100 years, one of the things that actually happens when you want to break free is that you begin to reevaluate and re-find your own culture. The struggle towards political independence was paralleled by our struggle for cultural credibility against the predominance of Greece and Rome. Therefore, for my parents, who were typical of their generation, it was important that their daughter learned Bharata Natyam, the classical dance of India. The idea was that by doing that we kept faith with something ancient and precious about Indian culture. In fact, as I grew up and started reading about the history of Bharata Natyam, I found that its antiquity was only half the story. It had suffered a great neglect and was rediscovered and

rejuvenated in the early decades of this century – a process in which even Anna Pavlova had a part to play. It is a far more interesting and a more subtle story than sometimes one is led to believe.

The advantages of a classical dance language are its strength and its power to communicate with sureness and confidence – and its objective technique that you can fit your body into. The things that I wanted to change were the rigidity that is there in lots of classical dance, the almost mechanical quality. You work very hard to attain a kind of virtuosic quality for no other reason except to be virtuosic, and I think in a way classical dance also has this feeling of a kind of impersonality which did not suit me. I wanted in some ways to introduce a strain of idiosyncrasy to balance this non-personal feeling, and I suppose, most importantly, it did not offer me those domestic spaces where those historically intricate moments happen. So we as a company looked at vocabulary, and I also looked at the composition because I think in a way in *Making of Maps* more things happen in the area of composition than in the area of vocabulary, although obviously both cannot but be interconnected. Often, when one simplified the dance language – because obviously it started off as solo dancing and it has an immense density of structure but within one body – if one wanted to unpick that structure from the individual body, then one found that in fact one had to compensate by compositional layerings. Otherwise, you just ended up with something extremely flat and one dimensional.

In the area of emotion, the floor seemed to beckon me in a very passionate manner. It is a very logical thing actually for a Bharata Natyam dancer to think about the floor. Bharata Natyam takes the body from the erect standing position and it wants the dancer to turn out at the hips and then lower the body along the central median into a demi-plié. Eighty percent of the dance is actually done that way. The depth of plié is a very important part of Bharata Natyam. It is a dance which very much obeys the pull of gravity. It is very aware of the floor, but the way it actually relates to the floor is very contained, very formal. I wanted to make the dancers roll on the floor and embrace it in a much looser way than doing Bharata Natyam footwork. One of the things that I know, being a Bharata Natyam dancer, is that because it is quite a cerebral, quite an academic dance language, Bharata Natyam dancers become great experts at marking. It was good to have a movement which was outside the normal terminology of Bharata Natyam and which could not be marked. I think the formal qualities which I like about Bharata Natyam are still there in *Making of Maps*. The whole way I think about space and about bodies in space and their relation to time is very influenced by the formality in Bharata Natyam.

In the work *Romance... with Footnotes*, I was trying to see how much emotion I could get out of formal movement. For me touch was something that I and my dancers played around with because, again, we come from a solo tradition where the body is extremely self-sufficient. It is also very much in command of the space that it performs in. With each piece that I make, I try and go further – to go further into an emotional relationship which the dancer has with the space around or with the

person with whom they are dancing. *Romance* starts off with certain iconic positions which are there in Indian dance, and I have tried to change them and give them much more of an incidental feel, a much more friendly feel.

Raid, which we are touring at the moment, is based on a game that is played in the streets of India and Birmingham and Glasgow, called 'Kabbadi'. I suppose it is the sheer perversity of the game really that interested me because although there are the two teams, the 'raiding' is done by a single raider who runs into the opponents' territory and takes on the entire team singlehandedly. All the time they are in the enemy territory they have to hold their breath and chant 'Kabbadi, Kabbadi' to prove that they are holding their breath. While they are holding their breath they have to try and touch one person on any part of their body and then run as fast as they can back home. Once they have actually touched somebody, all seven of the opponents can tackle the raider, piling on top of them and holding them down until they lose their breath. The other thing that intrigued me was that even though it was a game of territories the border line was there for crossing. It was crossed and re-crossed the whole time and all the interesting things happened when the raider actually crossed and went over to the other side. While they were in their home ground nothing much dynamic happened at all. I find sport an interesting area because with all this talk about East and West, sport is one area where post-colonial discourse does not seem to happen. People are quite happy for Linford Christie to be extremely British as long as he is winning, and I sometimes wonder whether if Linford Christie were a choreographer or a painter, whether his ethnic origins would be more of an issue.

Raid is a piece about two territories, and because I am called Shobana Jeyasingh, people assume that these two territories must be East and West. In fact, they are not. They are sport and dance. I suppose the prosaic and the poetic. One of the things that I had in mind when I choreographed it was something that I had read a very long time ago in that book *A Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez where he goes from describing something very, very ordinary, a scene in somebody's kitchen, to then looking out of the window where he says 'and then there was a rain of marigolds'. I thought it was really a brilliant way of one territory very slowly going into another with perfect credibility. In my own humble way I also wanted to go from the kitchen into that rain of marigolds.

Questions received from Conference delegates

Question: What type of things do you do in the studio with your dancers? Can you describe the process?
SJ: The process actually changes from piece to piece and from year to year because I don't have a permanent company. In fact, each year there is always a change to the people in the company so in a way a lot depends on who the people are. For example, for this particular piece *Raid* we started by watching lots of videos of the game and looked at the rules of the game and the type of movements. On the whole, I suppose I am quite a directive choreographer in that I have a picture in my head

when I come to the studio of roughly what I want to do and where I want to go. With this particular company that I am touring with at the moment there have been more instances of me handling phrases which the dancers actually developed or played around with. We would look at it and see whether it would fit or not. Obviously, one of the things that characterises the way I work is that all the dancers are trained in Bharata Natyam so that gives us a common language as far as things in that area are concerned. However, when the movement is personal and invented, we do not have that common terminology and have to make up our own.

Question: I am curious how you take from that traditional vocabulary.
SJ: It is really trial and error. Sometimes I have an image in my head of what it could look like and then I ask the dancers to try something. I use improvisation in a way as a process of communicating rather than as a way of getting vocabulary out of the dancers. So sometimes I set up a particular problem or a particular thing to solve and by doing it I hope they understand what I want them to do. I might not actually be what they have been doing, but it is a way of showing the road which I want to take – which I often do in the studio.

Question: Do you see yourself in the future seeking a new, third language, say, designating a movement so that this is movement number 1. Not so much finding a terminology as a movement vocabulary, so that you could say to your dancers 'Do movement number 1 or movement number 2'.
SJ: I think it's difficult when you make contemporary dance work actually to find that way of signalling because it changes from year to year. If I put a name to it, then I'll be doing what I'm trying to get away from. Because when you put a name to it, that's when you make it rigid. In some ways it's good to be rigid, I'm not saying it's all bad – but that it would be the problem because one year I might want to call it X and the next year I might want to call it Y. Very confusing for the dancer!

Question: In Indian film music, there are all kinds of influences; they have Mozart's *40th Symphony* or popular songs, for example. Do you think that the ritual and general nature of the history of Bharata Natyam is one of the reasons why people, Indians in particular, think it's so sacrosanct, not to touch it or tamper with it?
SJ: I think it goes back to what happened in India in the 1930s and 1940s. I think it has to do with those political reasons why Indians such as my parents felt that in dance and music one had some image of India which they wanted to hold very precious. Obviously, to recover Bharata Natyam took a lot of effort by various people, so there is a very natural inclination to conserve. But when one has the confidence that comes out of that conservation – and I'm saying that it's a very important process – then the next step is to say 'Well, actually, now that I'm sure and free, I need to take a step forward'. I'm not saying that Indians have a very specific culture and therefore they won't find the relevances. I'm saying the opposite, actually. I'm saying that in cities in India, as you say, there is an amazing mixture of influences. So I think Indians are not any more particular than anyone else in any

other country where there is also a mixture of past and present, of juggling various elements. We’re all jugglers now.