

## **Classical Dance Contemporary Dancers**

Key note speech delivered at the Navadisha Conference in Birmingham on the training and development of South Asian dancers in the UK

My brief for today is how I go about choosing dancers to work with and my reflections on a career in dance in Britain. I think I need to make very clear from the outset that I am not a teacher or trainer of dance of any kind though I have been very grateful to those who have trained the dancers and to the institutions that have produced them.

The choice of dancer collaborators (for that is how I think of them) for any choreographer depends on the vision they have for dance itself and I am no different. What I have found in my experience is that choreographers take a bit of time to find out what kind of dancers they would like to collaborate with. It is part of the same journey that they make to find out what they really want to say and how they would like to say it. As a choreographer I am given the freedom to create a personal vision. This is a responsibility and a privilege. All dance works show the values and politics of the creator. This is inevitable no matter what the individual work is about. Decisions about theme, range of dynamic, gender, partnering, composition, choice of music, the use or not of historical dance values, and above all the choice of dancers - these all reveal the core text of a

piece of dance. It is in fact the biography of the maker or makers.

I am now going to use the dreaded C word. I see it raising its head above the parapet and looking insouciantly at me. The word is contemporary. If I was making classical work my answer to the choice of dancers would be easy and I would finish my keynote talk in a couple of minutes and leave you all in peace to have an extended coffee break. But alas that is not the case and I will be bending your ear for some time.

I think the primary thing that influences my choice of collaborator is the fact that I am a contemporary choreographer. This is a much-debated word and has been used by so many in so many contexts that I would be asking for trouble if I tried to define it.

When I use the word about myself I generally mean that I am on the side of change. Change is not a fixed thing (it would not be called change if it were!) – it is more like an excursion without a fixed destination that one decides to undertake. How far one goes and how much one decides to be changed is a personal choice. For some a little way from the historical base camp is enough. Others are happy to go on moving and hang the consequences. The constant traveller comes up against some irritants. Friends who knew you at the beginning might say regretfully “hey we don’t recognise you anymore!” or there are always self-styled arbiters who might point to invisible lines on the ground and say “well if you pass this point we are going to revoke your

passport”. Contemporary I would say is when the identity of the artwork is of greater concern than the cultural or racial identity of the artist.

Contemporary is also a useful indicator when one is thinking about the role and value of history and of historical dance cultures in one’s work. South Asian Dance asks this question of you with more emphasis than most. Bharatha Natyam for example, which is the dance that I am most familiar with, is probably the most invested in terms of politics and history. For me to have dance classes as an urban middle class girl a huge social upheaval had to take place in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have the pioneering and remarkable genius of Rukmini Devi as well as the rise of Tamil cinema which produced dancer celebrities like Kamala Laxman to thank for that. My mother like many mothers who grew up in India as it struggled for independence from the British believed that this new Bharatha Natyam was different from the old Sadiraatam. It was part of the new confident Indian identity that she was helping to create as she cycled to her college in Chennai to read for her degree in maths. She was also a great fan of Kamala. So although dance played no part in her education she wanted it to be part of mine.

Bharatha Natyam was part and parcel of the defiant self-assertiveness formed as a riposte against not only the European models of classicism but which also sought to redress the low opinion of dance and dancers held by the colonisers. Speaking about the setting up of the iconic arts training institution Kalakshetra Rukmini Devi described her intentions thus . Kalakshetra was to be in

‘ Recognition of the priceless artistic traditions of our country and of imparting to the young the true spirit of Art, devoid of vulgarity and commercialism.’”

Under colonialism the artistic traditions in dance had been under threat or declined and had to be reclaimed, rehabilitated, re invented and in that process also inevitably changed.

Today the web site of Kalakshetra which is now a premier dance college still bears witness to those noble, patriotic and defiant times

*.” It exists in order that youth may be educated, not to become artists alone, but to have the right attitude to life, the right attitude to art, in order that they may be of great service to our country.”*

That was a period in history. That was a period in history and it probably had the same dynamic effect on Bharatha Natyam that the Tanjore quartet had had much earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Art and specially dance, before the camera began to record it, has a complex and changing history and its functions, values and properties change accordingly. Mapping these movements allows us to construct a biography of the subject.

My mother although she sent me to dance classes probably never thought of dance as a professional career choice. She believed like Rukmini Devi in the ideals of the great Indian heritage but also like many of her generation thought that dance had its place chiefly as a noble hobby untainted by the economics of earning a living. She probably thought that orthodoxy had been restored and equilibrium reached. However, when I

chose to be a dance professional in Britain and not a noble hobbyist I presented a challenge.

So, my relationship to historical dance culture is a continuous dialogue rather than a fixed entity. Does this mean that I do not value any rule based historic dance? Of course, I do but I have a perspective towards the functions and values behind the rules while giving them the utmost respect. I am aware that rules come out of aesthetics. People create culture and aesthetics and that culture is sensitive to historical and political change. Furthermore, culture is not monolithic but often has competing ideologies within it.

The end of foreign rule did not mean the happy ever after for many people of South Asian origin. It was often followed by post-colonial migration - a seismic change which created the diaspora and which is why we are here today.

If the first feature that colours my choice of dancers is my own attitude to history and culture then the second feature is my interest in a certain untidiness.

As a resident of London, I recently received a flyer from a politician who suggested that I vote for him because he recognized and respected my difference as a Tamil. In a fine piece of racial profiling it even assured me that my jewelry would be safer with this candidate. My immediate reaction, apart from musing on the absurdity of owning a hoard of jewelry as well as having a mortgage in London, was to feel how different that attitude was to my experience of the UK today. The flyer seemed to ignore the cultural elasticity of diasporan life

as well as the innate generosity of people in cities as they connect to their similarities as human beings rather than guard the differences. The politician's vision was of a carefully manicured multiculturalism where the tulips are held in distinct beds of their own and firmly separated from the daffodils in the next. That may make for neatness and a certain kind of easy to recognize profiling but what I notice is what is going on underground – that the roots are doing what they always do. They are twisting and curling and becoming enmeshed with the other roots in search of sustenance in a common soil. Most of the roots in my garden belong to my neighbor in fact! Roots seem to like exploring and are no respecter of fencing, suburban or otherwise. As a dance maker I have always wanted to place my work in that common soil where the roots are active.

So finally, via a slightly roundabout way the answer to the questions that was asked.

The qualities that I could flag up are

1. Technique What I mean by technique is intense and prolonged time spent in training the body in whatever dance form that inspires one. The body is a stubborn entity (at least mine is) and to plumb its depths and realize its potential needs time as well as talent. It's also a psychological and possibly a neurological state, which the best technicians have. When I work with that quality it reminds me of what the Irish poet Yeats meant when he spoke

about the dance and dancer being one. There is a unity of being where even the periphery of the body is shining with dance intelligence.

2. Literacy – I think this is a quality that helps one transcend the technique and use it rather than merely replicate it. It's what helps me when I can communicate natya arambha arms to a dancer from Rambert as a physically rather than a culturally understood experience. It's the quality that helps a Spanish ballet dancer impress Leela Venkatraman the dance critic of the Hindhu with her teermana adavu. " Bharata Natyam phrases were impeccably rendered" was the comment. I am not saying that the ballet dancer became a BN dancer. Rather that she had the physical knowledge and intelligence to understand and deliver a differently coded movement. She was a dancer who benefitted from a rigorous classical training as well as post graduate qualification in contemporary dance, Being Spanish she had also learnt some flamenco.

3 Imagination – Contemporary dance might require a personal signature but it is a signature that needs the endorsement of the dancers who deliver it. I work with tasks in the studio where the dancer collaborator is a partner in generating material – the first stage of choreography, as we build up a bank of raw words and phrases. Later this bank is used to select, direct and compose. This comes, in my experience from the facility

that the dancer has to respond to ideas through movement but also to the connection that they see between their dance training and the rest of the world they live in. Connections to other cultural artifacts such as film, books, visual art and other dance works. Its where dance training opens up a way to critique other artistic experiences and thereby see connections and differences.

A career in dance is a complex one. Success in the arts is a difficult parameter. Is it influence, integrity, or is it financial success? Is it having the biggest audience or reaching the right audience in a small venue? Is it being a marketable international star or is it someone who makes a huge difference to their locality? Or is it simply personal satisfaction? These are questions that each artist has to answer for themselves. Many years ago I saw a small puppet company perform Marlowe's Dr Faustus where Helen of Troy was just a wooden doll with yellow wool for hair. It was performed in a barn theatre. However it was a performance that I still remember with gratitude even today. Recently I saw the same play on a west end stage with a celebrity cast and a fortune spent on design. I almost wrote and asked for my money back, to me there is no doubt where I encountered art and artists. It was definitely in that barn in Devon. However it was in the context of a small audience, tiny theatre and a small production budget. And I don't even remember the name of the company. Success in the arts is measured in different ways to other professions and it needs strength of character and also support from one's family but above all from one's colleagues, teachers, mentors and fellow professionals



to embrace, understand and value a variety of models of success.

To train in dance is an aspirational activity. To train and work in the South Asian diaspora is to be part of history in the making – no less momentous than those other social upheavals that have left their imprint on dance. In Britain local and national state funding for dance is a factor in the shaping of the dance biography. It has meant that the South Asian dance training narrative has been linked mainly to the politics of cultural diversity. This is in contrast to the narratives of other institutions that deliver dance training. The Royal Ballet School for example is incredibly practical, clear and precise. It says "Our mission is to train and educate outstanding classical ballet dancers for The Royal Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet and other top international dance companies."

The website of London Contemporary dance school states its aims as

"Developing highly motivated, imaginative and creative graduates, who will be ready to enter the profession as skilled, flexible, and responsive artists with an understanding of the realities of a career in contemporary dance"

Rambert Dance maintains that

"It was, and remains, a place of dance innovation based on a sound technical training. Our graduates now can be found all over the world. They work as dancers, directors, choreographers, teachers, researchers and academics".

Laban invites contemporary dance professional's artists to

"Deepen your understanding of contemporary dance, extend your technical abilities and increase your creative skills to succeed in the competitive world of dance."

What is notable in all the above is a clear-eyed understanding of the market and the possible trajectories of their students.

I am sure that South Asian dance in Britain will continue to make its own distinctive biography.

One of the most hopeful signs is the increasing number of British Asian dancers who have found a way to carve their own paths. Finally, what will sustain us is our own desire to learn and the realization that dance training is a strength that will take us forward whether we end up as professional dancers, choreographers, dance teachers, work in other ways in the dance sector or take one's dance education to enrich totally different careers.

Finally I would like to dedicate this talk and this moment to the memory of Rashpal Singh Bansal. 1980 -2009. He met the complexity of a being a young Asian dancer in Britain full on and dealt with it with remarkable honesty. His training as a dancer in Britain, his identity as an Indian and an East Londoner, his voice as a choreographer, his obsession with video games, his love of electronica (I could go on) created an amazingly rich matrix. A matrix that we can all probably recognise. It is also within this matrix that the future training and career paths of young Asian dancers will be made.

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