**Looking For The Invisible: The Abstract in South Asian Arts**

Paper delivered for The Akademi , London
Feb 2012

I am going to preface my presentation not with dance or choreography but with a limerick introduced to me by an uncle in Chennai when I was a teenager.

There was young man from Deal
Who said " I know pain isn't real
But when I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin
I dislike what I fancy I feel"

I think this captures perfectly the body's resistance to theorising and abstraction. The body remains stubbornly pedestrian in the face of any attempts to make it ethereal or indeed invisible. As a choreographer there are three things that come to mind that make it difficult to talk of "abstract dance" with its overtones of the unreal, the metaphysical, the pure, its distance from the specific. One is what the limerick so aptly illustrates - the sheer "thingness' of the body. It is impossible to feel abstract or even abstracted when dancing. It is an activity that demands total devotion to the inscape of the physical. I know that dancing is different to choreography but it is

the major item in the choreographic tool kit. To say that embodiment is the default setting of dancing would be to state the obvious.
Choreography deploys the machinery of the human figure and everything that it creates - shape , line , dynamic etc are all bound up in the features and physical characteristics of a specific human body. Whatever history, culture or situation that might motivate the dance work it is still mediated through the biomechanics of the body.

If the first act of abstraction is flight from the figurative then we are hard pressed to find a body that is not figurative. I may, like Picasso want to represent my dancers as a series of blue cubes but I can't. I may want like Hamlet to bemoan the too, too solidly fleshy state of affairs but barring a smart change of profession , too too solid flesh is what I work with. Sometime I wish I could like some conceptual Turner prize winners produce a photograph of the stage and say dance happened here last week now I want you to recreate the experience through your imagination but I have a feeling that will probably be followed by a quick and early retirement.

Choreography, the expression of ideas through movement can of course deal with abstract ideas but it still cannot escape the peculiarities of its medium. Unlike other mediums the dancing body and brain is fluid and changeable. The amount of coffee that a dancer imbibes in the morning, a small injury sustained, a private

emotional trauma all these might have direct consequences to the dance meaning they create by shifting the delicate balance of energy, shape and line. This inbuilt mutability is far from the eternal and the essential that the term abstract suggests..
Another complication is that the body has always been an agency of meaning making through movement even without the mediation of a choreographer . The choreographic medium also happens to be the everyday tool kit of every single human being on this planet to create meaning for others, in effect to communicate - from the raising of the quizzical eyebrow, the stamping of a tantrum prone toddler to the more flamboyant Indian or Italian hand or head gesture. I remember a dancer from Leeds, when introduced to BN footwork, saying that she felt as if she being asked to have a tantrum. Her everyday meaning making was in conflict with my designed one. All this historical, culture -contingent, meaning making via the body means that invariably it is difficult to 'abstract" and shape meaning in a totally controlled way even when the dancing body is a highly skilled dancer using a technique that is a historical. Despite lighting, costumes and all the elements of presentation , one cannot completely escape our instinct to subjectively "read" the body in front of our eyes in a way that we don't when we look at paint or stone.

So can choreography be truly abstract or conceptual?

All I can say is that personally the reason I choreograph is because the human body can't help telling stories - even if you keep it totally still with its back turned to the spectator. In this seemingly simple act a series of choreographic decisions have been exercised in framing, dynamic , shape, use of weight, expectation - what I would call the core script of dance making. The body has become a designed character and the story telling has already begun. We may then go on to add another layer by developing the body into something extremely specific - a prince or a banker- as a novelist or playwright might. That is a preference that each choreographer has the right to choose.

The word emotion or lack of it always seems to enter the room when the words abstract and dance are mentioned . Some may find that a specific story such as the retelling of a known myth is needed to engage the emotions . I strongly suspect that structure is ultimately behind the evocation of emotion even in these cases. The well loved stories of Indian dance which move us time and time again, the nayikas who , in the hands of a skilled dancer, makes us believe that this is the first time that she has looked into that mirror to check her face, - these move us because they have tried and tested choreographic structures that mediate the idea. Structures that we perhaps half recognise and cherish through memory.

I have always found well designed movement emotional in the way that a wonderful sunset or the perfect shape of a

sea shell is enriching. However, examples of perfect structure need not always be found in nature. I remember also being stunned by the brilliant deployment of people and transport at Shibuya junction in Tokyo for the same reason

I have never seen any dance that has no narrative. The Bharatha Natyam arai mandi, its use of weight, the elevation and comportment of ballet, the contraction of the Graham technique or the countless decisions made by choreographers when they draw limits, select movement, choose musical partnerships, decide how much of the personal to let in, what type of physique, gender they prefer to cast - all these actions create the narrative of dance. We may not want to or cannot read these stories but they are there all the same and make any choreographer whether classical or contemporary a story teller by default. They may not be stories that one has heard at our grandmothers knee and may not function like a novel or a play and there may be more than one - challenging our multitasking skills to the extreme. You may not have the comfort of sharing the same story as the person sitting next to you.

In cities all over the world people find themselves is this situation - of not sharing a common history with their neighbours. Without the help of communal memory and operating within multiple and often clashing value systems and networks people manage to find coherence - to tell a living and dynamic story. Yes it does not have the comfort

of a big communal narrative where the plaiting of different histories  is complete .
However I would hesitate to call these stories abstract. Whether you find them emotional , in other word whether you recognise something of yourself in the work sometime depends on how hard you are prepared to work on discovering new facets in yourself as a member of the audience. Above all it might depend on how close you want to align your everyday experience of living  in the 21st century with what you want out of  engaging with the arts.