

Foreward

The vibrant blue and gold colors reel across the stage accompanied by her beating feet, the hundred chimes on her ankles, and intricate rhythms of the tabla (Indian drum) and the vocals. Her costume, hair, arms, and legs all seemed so precise and geometric, but everything about her seemed to move. As I checked the time, I realized the performer had been dancing for twenty minutes already and her energy seemed unremitting. The longest I'd danced that intensely for a performance was probably something close to five minutes. "Are they really dancing for entire four hours?" I asked incredulously to my aunt. "Yup, that's why they spend half of their childhood training for it. They're professional storytellers, carrying with them entire history of the ancient Indian culture", she nodded, understanding my admiration,

Storytellers? But wait: I thought they were dancers. Turns out they're both. But how does one tell an entire story, conveying its entire purpose and message without uttering a single word? What do these storytellers have to do with the Indian culture and why is their means of expression and art so significant? In creating this photo book and researching a variety of sources, I hoped to uncover the intricacies of this dance and create a deeper general appreciation for this art form. I hope that the reader can develop a sense of the art form, and gain a more thorough appreciation for this aspect of the Indian culture.

Introduction

BHava (expression) + RAga (musical mode) + TAla (rhythm) NATYAM (dance) =
BHARATA NATYAM

Bharatanatyam, which originates in the state of Tamil Nadu, is an extremely cherished dance form in India as well as outside of it, because its core ability in cultural expression. Since it began in the early tenth century, Bharatanatyam has undergone much change and transformations but it has maintained deeply rooted in the spiritual Hindu heritage. This art form has followed Indian generations as they've travelled, introducing and familiarizing its concepts to people throughout the world. As a basic means of expression and communication, it attracts many different kinds of people and is readily appreciated by other cultures. Modern Indian dancers can be both male and female artists, though originally dancers were only women and teachers were only men. As an activity, it is extremely demanding and complex in terms of dedication and daily practice. Nowadays, while most learn it as a hobby or for an experience in the arts, a small number also from it create their career and a lifestyle. While most university degree courses offer the theoretical base in Bharatanatyam, there are educational centers and colleges that will acknowledge this dance with a degree. Bharatanatyam started out as an archaic, beautiful routine of God worship/spiritual uplift and entertainment, and now, though it has kept its roots intact, its purpose has transformed it to serve as a bridge between cultures.

Preserving a Culture

“Being in dance has kept me in tune with the historical aspects of Indian culture. So much of it combines the mythical tales of our gods like Krishna and Shiva with our rhythmic footwork and intricate hand gestures. It helps me relate to my roots, which were my people thousands of years ago.”

-Yasha Saxena

Interest in dance in general has a way of fluctuating; peaking and fading as culture and society change, especially in America. We’ve transgressed through the tango, the jitterbug, swing, the disco, the running man, and etc. All had their time in the spotlight, but they inevitably were cast out, as soon as something new and innovative came on stage. Bharatanatyam, on the other hand, has been alive and expanding since the tenth century, even when the dance form immigrated with the people into other countries. How can such an ancient dance form continue to captivate the interest of young generation after another when so many others can’t?

Every year, about 60,000 Indians immigrate to America; faced with new homes, new communities, new ethnicities, and new foreign cultures they reach out toward the familiar parts of their culture that they associate with. Thousands of young Indian Americans are drawn to Bharatanatyam because it provides them with a bridge to their ethnic identity and can help them find a greater sense of community. Mallika Gargeya, a freshman in highschool who has been participating in the dance since 4th grade, remembers how the dance allowed her to find a large community of Indian people after she moved to a place that had seemed foreign to her. It allows its students to connect and relate the dance and their cultural history, in areas where their parents and the rest of society can’t help keep their Indian heritage intact.

In the process of learning the dance, the apprentices learn the traditions, stories, and myths of the gods and the culture that are reflected and portrayed in the dance. In a book about the relevance of Bharatanatyam, *At Home in the World*, Jane O’Shea says, “This association of bharata natyam with “traditional” Indian culture has bolstered the dance form’s popularity. The connection...encourages large numbers of girls to take up bharata natyam training... The diasporic demand for cultural symbols results in...large numbers of young women into pursuing dance as a career. This surplus, in turn, puts pressure on dancers to differentiate themselves from their peers through the authorship of original works, while the importance of bharata natyam as a cultural emblem encourages performers to demonstrate their fidelity to the past” (p55). So in addition to providing a connection to the traditional culture and religion of India, it also allows its adherents to develop and foster a sense of individuality and purpose on their own. The arengetrum, which is the student’s debut performance, is meant to be a unique composition, in which they use the symbols and techniques they’ve learned in class to make an original interpretation of stories of their choosing.

Shilpa Krishnan, a performer who spent years perfecting her skill in Bharatanatyam says, “Once I started learning and really got into the swing of it, I found that dance gave me a sense of peace and also a thrill. It was wonderful to perform as a teenager and see how the [audience] really enjoyed the performance. It was even nicer learning that there was

so much in it of itself. The mythology was fascinating and I was thrilled that one could tell stories from the great epics using mudras and abhinaya....”

Oxana Banshikova, also a well known disciple of Bharatanatyam recounts her passion for participating in the dance: “Since I remember, I was always interested in dance and always knew it would be my career. At the same time “magic” India also captivated my mind with its traditions and culture, its bright colors, beautiful music and its mystique image. I had no idea that one day I would be able to join two passions together....Bharatanatyam is one of the best examples of Indian Culture and one should fully accept and experience Indian devotional aspect, its traditions and everyday life to be able to understand the depth of this dance form. Devotion and traditions - these are what this dance is about.”

Though, in the United States, much of the motivation to begin and do well in the dance comes from/ is initiated by the parents. [quote by Mallika] The Hindu myths that the dancers incorporate also contribute to the religious and social aspects of the Indian culture. The stories that are taught give the students a sense of the folklore and traditions in India. In addition to learning the basic stories, the students are exposed to the ethics and moral standards, represented through the mythology. [quote by Padma].

Sena- “Dance is my outlet of energy. Because in classical dancing you can tell when its a sad dance or a happy dance. It helps people express emotions cuz I know when I’m mad or really happy I dance my best”

The History of the DANCERS:

Haresh- “It is the black belt of dancing. It requires the level of dedication of an Olympian and the dancer looks as graceful as a ballerina.”

Many centuries ago in Hindu temples in southern India, dancers/priestesses, called devadasis, were well-cultured and educated in singing, playing many of India’s musical instruments, and dancing Dasi Attam (a more basic form of Bharatanatyam). Typically, these female dancers were trained by male teachers, or saints, called "Nattuvannars". These training artists were presented with land and privileged gifts that were held extremely valuable. These dancers were taught in language of Sanskrit (the equivalent to Latin in India), which was considered highly intellectual and venerated in the time, along with many other languages, demonstrating their revered position in society. In the earlier days, the devadasis were required to lead a very strict, celibate life, in which they were not allowed to have a family. Instead of a family life, they had daily rituals and dances to worshipping the gods Shiva and Vishnu. These religious dance traditions were performed by either travelling dancers belonging to several courts, or performers pledged to a single court. The devdasis dancers who performed in the royal courts were called Rajanartakis; however, in some instances in the royal courts, they gradually became royal prostitutes. When the Mughal and British empires invaded and suppressed the Indian people, they also tried to suppress the culture. When the Mughuls extended their influence over India, they replaced the devadesis with their own Persian dancers. In an attempt to prolong their

lifestyle in dancing, many of the woman learned Persian dancing, so they could maintain their position in the courts and keep receiving the benefactions. Later when British invaded, the court system altogether was banished, which consequently lead to the demise of the dancers. With nowhere else to get money, the dancers used the only art they knew to survive in the streets. The dancers' professions fell into disgrace, when many of the formerly respected women turned to prostitution. It wasn't until 1936, with the establishment of the dance institution Kalakshetra, that the dance was rediscovered and reconstructed so that it modeled its earlier more respected form. Today, all associations it had with that disrespected phase have been shed, and Bharatanatyam is recognized by renowned colleges as a degree.

As demonstrated by many young Indian American students today, this dance has helped them connect to a culture that is far away both in distance and in time. Through daily practices and weekly lessons, Mallika Gargeya, a 14 years old student at Homestead High School, has learned the value of discipline of both the mind and body. Through many years of dedicated practice, Mallika has gained physical agility that allows her to cross to other dance forms with ease. As she participates in weekly classes, Mallika has developed a love for this dance form, creating a desire to not only to continue to learn but excel and develop a mastery in this field. To further her knowledge, she took her entire summer vacation to learn from masters in India. In addition, she dedicates many weekends to support other dancers with their final dance graduation recital, always making an effort to better herself in the process. With the stories in the culture, she's found an understanding of the morality of her culture as well as an basic appreciation for the religion and its myths. She has developed a love not only for the dance, but a desire to understand the stories behind the dance, her culture, and her understanding of her spirituality.

PARTS OF THE DANCE:

"When the world had become steeped in greed and desire, in jealousy and anger, in pleasure and pain, the Supreme One (Brahma) was asked by the people to create an entertainment which could be seen and heard by all, for the scriptures were not enjoyed by the masses, being too learned and ambiguous." "This art is not merely for your pleasure, but exhibits cosmic expression (bhava) for all the worlds. This art has been created following the movements of the world in work and play, profit, peace, laughter, battle and slaughter, yielding the fruit of righteousness to those who follow the moral law, a restraint for the unruly, and a discipline for the followers of the rule; to create wisdom in the ignorant, learning in scholars, afford sport to kings, and endurance to the sorrow-stricken; it is replete with the diverse moods, informed with varying passions of the soul, and linked to the deeds of mankind — the best, the middling and the low — affording excellent counsel pastime and all else."

This passage describes the story behind the creation of Bharatanatyam. It details a scene in which the common people appeal to the Indian God to create for them a form of entertainment that they can understand and relate the scriptures to (the scriptures, like the

Bible, defined the culture and its moralities). According to myths, to create this entertainment, Lord Brahma (God) used four elements: pathya (words), abhinaya (communicative elements of the body movements, cf. mime) , geeth (music and chant), and rasa (vital sentiment and emotional element). According to stories, after creating these terms, Lord Brahma handed it to sage Bharata and asked him to propagate it on earth. Obeying, the sage Bharata wrote the downa and performed natya, nrta and nrtya before the goddess Siva.

She holds her hands out and places them within each other, while moving her fingers to fit as well, until they make the symbol she's looking for. She stumbles through pronouncing a long phrase in Sanskrit and moves her hands side to side to demonstrate its meaning. She stops and puts her hands behind her back in the traditional pose and looks uncertainly towards her teacher.

{quote by malli about theory}. In each class, the students are required to memorize and understand all of the different aspects of the dance, in preparation for the time, when they will be independent of their teachers and have the experience to compose the pieces themselves. Bharatanatyam is contains three basic elements, called Nritta, Nritya and Natya. These three outline the expressions, hand gestures, and define the basic structure of the dance .They act as a guideline for learning dancers and to verify the symbolism of the dance.

The students do all these theory, for approximately 10-12 along with their training, so they can prepare for their Arangetram, which is the students first official debut as masters of this art form. The composition and the steps of the Arengetrum are meant to be of the performer's original and unique design and conception. The dancer uses the knowledge she's gained about the symbolism and traditional aspects of the dance and implements those in telling the audience a story. This performance also consecrates that they've mastered the concepts and have developed an appreciation for Bharatanatyam's roots. The girls, who generally train with their instructors until they are 15-16, practice for so years on end so that they can acquire the stamina that's necessary for them during this three hour debut. At the end of the performance, the students pay their respects to their teachers, for instructing them in this vital area of their culture, and the teacher in tern acknowledges that the student has ascending beyond the title of student to a master of the artform.

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