

## JOURNEYS THROUGH NATYA.

### DANCE AS A PLAY OF LIFE

Monica de la Fuente

#### Prologue

As the invisible curtain rises, the creation of the world unfolds. If in the Genesis light is God's first act of creation, in the Indian ethos it is sound, "*ta dhit thom nam*" (in the Upanishads associated with Brahman, "*tad hi tvam nam*"), what resonates in the beginning of the cosmic performance.

#### Act I

I am sitting on a chair with another hundred people around me in front of the Chitragupta temple dedicated to Surya, the Sun God, who with a gentle smile withdraws to transform his power into the colourful stage lights. A sculpture comes alive. As the dancer emerges from the shadow, for two hours the captured time ornamented by intricate rhythmic syllables turns poetry into dance; or maybe it is the dance, and not the dancer anymore, what evokes bodily words.

If I had been a well-versed poet I would have shaped her dance in eloquent words to make a poem: "*Her anklets sprinkle melody/ and choke the mind with stardust/ as this jewelled dancer / lives a language on her limbs/ waking ritual into metaphor*" (from "Bharata Natyam" by A.K Ramanujan). Or if I had been a *rasika* in the audience, returning home enraptured by the aesthetic experience of the performance, I would have described this moment as defined by the concept of *rasa*, "pure, indivisible, self-manifested, compounded equally of joy of consciousness, free of admixture of any other perception, the very twin brother of mystic experience" (from *Sahitya Darpana* by Viswanathaaviraja).

But I was a nine-teen year old theatre student from Spain, and I had no words then to explain what happened to me on that specific day, the 20<sup>th</sup> of February of 1994, at the Khajuraho Dance festival. My entire life changed, when I saw Alarmel Valli's enthralling Bharata Natyam dance that evening. After that unforgettable performance I took a train from Khajuraho to Chennai, her hometown, and knocked at her door to inquire whether she would accept me as her student. Following her suggestion, I ended up applying for admission at Kalakshetra College in Thiruvannamiyur, Chennai, and few months later had a letter from ICCR granting me a scholarship, stating that I could start the journey of my life in dance.

As a theatre student in Spain I had to fight to convince my family to accept my decision to become an artist. And if that was not already difficult enough, my firm determination to study dance in India was to become an even greater challenge. I called my parents over the phone from an ISD booth in Chennai, and when I informed them about my decision it was a rather heavy blow for them as I was still a teenager, and this was India, thousands of miles away from home.

Of course, I did tell them I had applied for a scholarship, which gave more credibility to my new adventure, and so I have to acknowledge ICCR for having given me such a great opportunity in my life. In the context of a young student, as was my case, to pursue a dream like this, so far away from home, and at the same time to be able to certify my studies in India with the support of a scholarship, this meant a lot.

What did I experience that evening in Khajuraho? I could sum it up in three words: "*Satyam Sivam Sundaram*", a phrase from the traditional Indian world view which means "truth, goodness and beauty". I have kept these words in my mind as a mantra and it still inspires me today to find the ultimate meaning of art in my daily life. Also crucial for me was the idea of "*Lasya kavya*", which also signifies fluidity and creativity, and the concept of "*drishya kavya*", the visible poem, the dancer as creator, poet, painter, sculptor, actor and singer, at the same time referring to the symbolic and metaphoric world of dance. Dance not as something removed from life, that is, esoteric or remote, but as the essential and truthful expression of my being.

Walking into Kalakshetra campus that very first day in June 1994 in the scorching heat of Chennai was like entering into a dream world. From very early in the morning students were walking to school in silence, then sat on the ground around a beautiful banyan tree and started to chant a universal prayer. The teachers, the Principal and the staff, students and newcomers like me were participating in a ritual where everyone was welcomed and where art was the sacred thread that connected us all, beyond religion and culture. The first lesson before starting the physical training was the explanation of the origin of drama, taken from the first chapter of the great treatise on Indian performing arts, the *Natya sastra*. This ancient Sanskrit text explained the sacred essence of the arts and the relevance of art in society, valid even today. Nowhere else in the world is there such a compendium of wisdom on the art of expression as the sacred integrator of life and knowledge. And it is not only a theoretical work but a manual for artists that incorporates and studies the precise art of movement and integrates all the arts and sciences. The ritualistic aspect of Indian classical arts and the devotion of the artist to embody and communicate the intangible became essential in my life.

I later continued my Bharata natyam training in Chennai for several years under my guru Meena Raman, who introduced me to the subtle nuances of the *padam* poems from the *Bhakti* tradition. But then, another turn in my search as an artist drew me into

the world of Kathakali, the dance-drama of Kerala. In a metaphorical sense, it was like entering a deeper layer, a new discovery which satisfied my nature as an incessant researcher and theatrical performer. Kathakali offered me a new door to experience “*natya*”, the vital union of dance and theatre, and the sacred act of a ritual. A tradition where the temple was the sacred stage and the audience were the devotees, witnesses of this sacrifice to accomplish the symbolic pact with the Gods.

## Act II

In 1996 I took a train from Chennai to Shoranur in Kerala and then reached Kerala Kalamandalam school situated in the remote village of Cheruthuruthy. The moment I entered the space and admired its astonishing Koothambalam (traditional temple theatre) I could feel the energy and the great work accomplished by the visionary artist poet Vallathol. He had founded this pioneering institution in the 1930s to restore, preserve and institutionalize the performing arts so that still, in today’s digital world, young children can decide to dedicate their lives to the beautiful classical art forms of South India.

And thus parallel to my Bharata natyam training I got deeply immersed in the art of Kathakali, its technique and practice, learning the nuances of the connections between the body, the voluntary and involuntary impulses, the breathing, the gestures in the precise and codified language and the *navarasa*, the nine emotions. The uniqueness and singularity of this holistic art that interconnects the body, the mind and the soul represent for me the greatest artistic contribution of Kathakali to the world of theatre. In order to communicate complete artistic expression, an actor in Kathakali has to experience and master the four types of *abhinaya*, which literally means “the carrying forward of expression”.

As is the case with all Indian classical arts, before getting into expression and characterization, a beginner like me had to go through a period of very hard physical training based on *Kalaripayattu* martial art, and also master all the body conventions based on the classical treatises. So, it was only after a few years of intense work that I could do my *arangetram* (the first performance in public) which in Kathakali is still a traditional ritual carried out in the temple by the new incoming professional performer. By that time I had moved to the city of Trivandrum to undertake Kathakali studies at Margi, the Centre for Performing Arts where I was able to continue my studies and at the same time put my years of preparation and training into practice by performing with the Margi Kathakali troupe in full night traditional programmes that took place regularly as part of the temple festivals celebrated in the small villages of Kerala. Parallel to my years of physical training I had to make a big effort to read and study about Indian mythology, the epics and the *puranas* and more precisely to learn the dramatic texts in

Kathakali called *attakattas*, which are the poetic-dramatic scripts that incorporate the gestures, specific rhythms (*tala*) and characterization of each scene in a Kathakali play.

### Act III

For most explorers (especially of the arts) a journey will be incomplete without a return ticket, understanding the concept of “return” as a circular movement instead of a movement in a linear direction. Though I returned to Spain after 7 long years studying in India, I had the feeling that I had never left India as it was already embodied in my artistic expression. And till now India continues to be the source of inspiration for my professional carrier as a dancer-creator and as a teacher carrying the knowledge forward. And moreover, as part of my life force and existence (*prana*).

As it is understood in the *guru shishya parampara* model of transmission of art, I have always felt very much part of the Indian artistic tradition, as I believe this central idea is not limited by borders, cultures or races. It made me grow as an artist, as a dancer, choreographer, actress, artistic director and as a teacher, by being faithful to the inner multidisciplinary essence of “*natya*” and its transmission.

Throughout the years of my professional career and as Monica de la Fuente Dance Company I have created and performed more than twenty works of dance and theatre in Spain, other European countries, India and America, and brought my teachings to students of dance and theatre all over Spain. I teach and direct the Laboratory for Performing Arts at Casa de la India, the India Cultural Centre in Spain supported by ICCR. Apart from the artistic creations and exchanges that I am involved in at this unique cultural centre, I also believe in the transformational role that the arts need to play in our complex modern societies, today more than ever. With this vision I also collaborate and create educational programmes for children and youngsters at schools, reaching out to thousands of students every year, introducing them to the traditional Indian wisdom and values through dance and movement. Using dance as a powerful tool of communication and of self-understanding and self-expression, and at the same time as a peace-making tool to create a better world.

I strongly believe in the preservation, - and at the same time organic evolution-, of Classical Arts in today`s world, and I keep promoting and performing Indian Classical Dance as much as I can. At the same time, I also find it essential to experiment and create by adapting content from the Indian tradition incorporating contemporary techniques of dance and theatre. This allows me to develop a new and personal artistic language through which I can reach out to larger audiences in Spain and other European countries.

## Epilogue

I hope that in this short but intense journey playing out my life I have been able to exchange and share with you, as I do with audiences on stage, my personal story and aesthetic exploration which is no other than the seeking of *rasa*: to evoke through art the ultimate state, bliss or delight with no boundaries. As Rabindranath Tagore wrote in a letter to Uday Shankar, the pioneer of modern Indian dance in the world: “...there are no bounds to depth or the expansion of any art which like dancing is the expression of life’s urge...”



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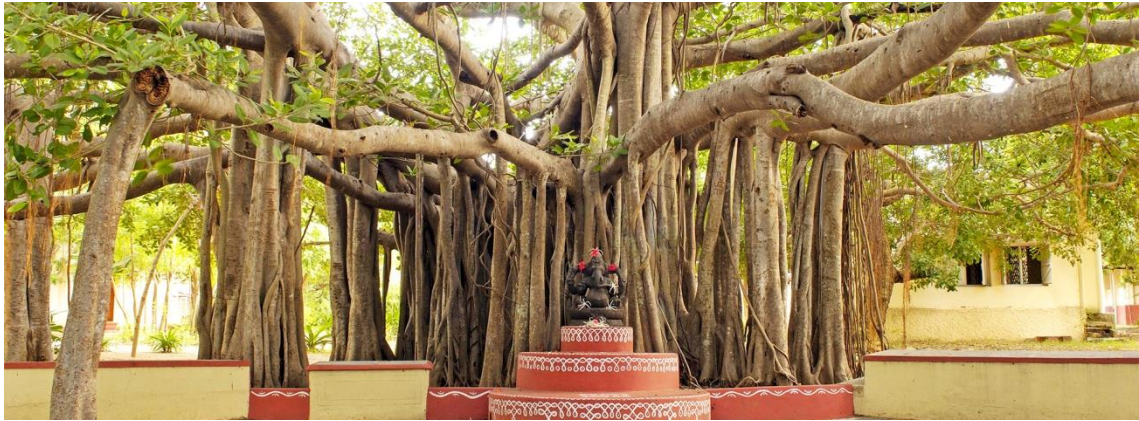
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