

Medea's choral ode 627-6 58 set to Bharatanatyam dance: an Introduction.

The ode is the prayer to Aphrodite to send love in moderation. Bharatanatyam is a highly technical South Indian classical dance form originating in Tamil Nadu.

The repertoire and vocabulary of Bharatanatyam can be divided into abstract rhythmic choreography (*nritta*) and *abhinaya*, dramatic dance.

The 'abstract' sections consist of virtuoso footwork and the thematic sections are performed in phrases of stylized gestural movements traced by articulated fingers, hands and arms while emotions are expressed by movements of the eyes, eyebrows, lips and eyes.

In a traditional performance of Bharatanatyam, the performer would have preceded the dance with a demonstration and the verbal explication of the gestures that are characteristic of the dance. We rejected this for this occasion because we want to avoid the impression that there is a one-to-one correspondence between word and gesture.

Before choreographing the piece and devising the recorded music we worked on various juxtapositions of gestures with, verbal and non verbal meanings and with various rhythms. We found many striking parallels between Greek and Indian forms. The dance of the Medea ode by Ash Mukherjee is a synthesis of this work and represents a number of artistic choices. These choices are but examples of the innumerable ways in which the Bharatanatyam repertoire could serve the performance of Greek dramatic dance.

●The translatability of Bharatanatyam.

There is an inherent translatability in Bharatanatyam because it does function like a verbal language governed by grammatical rules—it is more abstract and more versatile than other coded dance languages for the following reasons which I shall enlarge on:

- Bharatanatyam is derived from a kind of writing,
- it is still connected with religious worship
- its repertoire of images, emotions and themes inhere in the actor/dancer's body,
- it is a re-constituted dance form that has re-invented its history.

The above make Bharatanatyam especially suitable as a form in which to recast Greek theatre performances and to highlight areas of research

Bharatanatyam is to dance what a *lingua franca* is to language.

- This is because it is a deliberate creation which makes it
 - accessible**—since the creation is within relatively recent cultural east-west history
 - standardised** and **abstract**
 - it has been **internationalised** [by theosophists, ballet dancers in the context of Indian nationalist politics]
 - it is **internalised** by the dancer and so has a strong emotionally communicative element. The Bharatanatyam dancer, for example, recreates the sacred space of a temple and statues in her/his mind's eye regardless of the space in which she/he is actually performing—see below.
- Bharatanatyam's ancestry in the *Sama Veda* mudras gives it the character of a written script;
- as does its close association with a body of theory—a manual which happens to stress communicability.

●Bharatanatyam’s antecedents: sanitization, internationalization, internalization reincarnation.

Bharatanatyam is a sanitised version of what was called *sadir nautch*-- a dance with strong erotic elements previously performed by temple dancers, the *devadasis* (*deva* means god, and *dasi*, slave).

Central to this transformation, during the first half of the 20th century is Rukhmini Devi Arundel (dancer, scholar, upper-class Brahmin member of the Theosophical society and married to George Arundel). Rukhmini Devi dedicated her life to the dance renamed Bharatanatyam, which was established as a national cultural treasure by the lawyer Krishna Iyer in the 1920s¹. Rukhmini Devi founded Kalakshetra – The *par excellence* Bharatanatyam establishment in 1936. The ‘recasting’ of Bharatanatyam is intimately linked to the Theosophical society (a mystical occult association founded in 1875) whose activities were bound up with Indian nationalist and trans-nationalist politics.

This was also the time during which ballet (another deliberately constructed dance form) influenced and was influenced by south Indian dance through

- Ruth St Denis (1879-1968)²,
- Ted Shawn (1891-1972) –divinity student turned dancer,

1

¹ Bharatanatyam dance school, Kalakshetra (Academy for Fine Arts) for the transmission of traditional knowledge in 1936. an Institute of National importance in 1994)

2

² see her famous *nautch* dance

•and Anna Pavlova (1881-1931—*la Bayadère*) who taught Rukmini Devi.

Also, furthering the internationalisation of Bharatanatyam was the beginning of touring by Indian dancers in Europe.

In India, the *devadasis* and their teachers were replaced by upper caste Brahmins, and the dances were removed from the temples, courts and salons to be performed in concert halls and on the public stage. Paradoxically, the move from religious temple to hall enhanced their respectability. The spaces and sculptures of the temple were to be internalised by the dancer and communicated through their bodies and emotions to the audience. In a classical Bharatanatyam concert during the introduction, the dancer appraises the space of the temple in his mind's eye—the dance frees itself from the actual place.

The reincarnation of Bharatanatyam was implemented in accordance with the rules of the *Natyashastra*³ (said to be authored by the sage Bharata, supposedly around 300 BCE, but probably the work of several authors compiled in the 3rd century AD).⁴

3

┆ It covers stage design, music, dance, makeup, and virtually every other aspect of stagecraft and gives such detail about the music and instruments of the period.

The text, which now contains 6000 *slokas*, is attributed to the *muni* (sage) **Bharata** and is believed to have been written during the period between 200 BC and 200 AD. The *Natya Shastra* is based upon the much older *Gandharva Veda* (appendix to *Sama Veda*) which contained 36000 *slokas*. There are no surviving copies of the *Natya Veda*. Though many scholars believe most *slokas* were transmitted only through the oral tradition, there are scholars who believe that it may have been written by various authors at different times.

4

┆ Moreover it was made accessible to 19th and 20th rationalists by a major 11th century reinterpretation by *Abhinavagupta*.

The *Natyashastra* is a detailed text on the rules of dramaturgy (and especially dance as one of its inextricable elements):

It is a highly prescriptive treatise on the execution and meaning of dance poses, gestures of minor limbs, hands, other limbs, gaits, diction, instruments, metrical patterns, costume, makeup including a detailed section on (***Sattvika***) the highest mode of acting by means of internal emotions, expressed through minute movements of the lips, eyebrows, ear, etc. ⁵

A dance re-created deliberately by reference to a treatise—a manual based on theory—is very different to a dance that evolves less self-consciously through its history. The appeal to a 2000 year-old divinely revealed treatise on the one hand sanctifies the dance form but the careful attention to a set of rules in fact creates a flexible and abstract dance vocabulary which can be applied to an untold number of narratives, music and dance—Ash for example has set Chopin, Artaud and Michael Jackson to Bharatanatyam (and much else!)

●Bharatanatyam has its roots in religious writing.

Hindu religious practice prevalent in contemporary India is in fact an uninterrupted tradition which includes the recitation of the (four) Vedas⁶—a body of metrical chants said to date

5

‡ Four kinds of *abhinaya* (acting,) or histrionics) are described – that by body part motions (*angika*), that by speech (*vachika*), that by costumes and makeup (*AhArya*), and the highest mode (*sAttvika*), by means of internal emotions, expressed through minute movements of the lips, eyebrows, ear, etc.

6

‡ Rigveda 1028 Sanskrit hymns (10,600 verses) dedicated to deities, Yajurveda, Samaveda, Atharvaveda

approximately between 1500-500BC. These are essentially performance texts (received through revelation to poets) dedicated to various deities and transmitting instructions for the correct execution of mainly sacrificial rites. One technique used to assist in the memorization process was/is the use of hand gestures which served as a kind of writing.

The *Natyashastra* (on which Bharatanatya is based) is in fact linked to the *Vedas*.⁷ More precisely, it is linked to an appendix to the Sama Veda in which the spirit of prescription (an insistence on precision in the execution of ritual) and the centrality of revelation through ritual action give pride of place to religious performance.

A long-trained Bharatanatyam dancer such as Ash Mukherjee thus commands a highly flexible dance language combined with strict technique.

The film below records Ash's performance of the devotional hymn to Eros in Euripides' *Medea* (lines 629-646) at Central School of Speech and Drama in London, June 2012.

Ash's dance preserves the original Greek metre in the form of what he calls a baby hybrid *Varnam*—a section of a classic Bharatanatyam concert. This begins with a devotional *veda*-like chant to invoke the god, followed by an appraisal of the temple space along a corridor of colour in his mind's eye. This is followed by a *Jathi*—a rhythmical section with elaborate footwork (part of the abstract part of Bharatanatyam) which is in turn followed by the lyric section—the actual Greek lyrics—performed in the more

7

⁷ Popular belief holds that, in order to make religion more accessible to ordinary mankind, a fifth *Veda* was invented which contained not only the great Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata*, but also the *Natyashastra*. This, like many other rationalizations has no accredited source.

familiar Bharatanatyam dance language (acting). The dance ends with the devotional section to thank the god.

play film

●Post Script

Greek tragedy evolved from a number of other traditional forms of religious performance and was a live song and dance composition. The route by which the choral lyrics of tragedy found their way from the stage to the page is a subject steeped in scholarly controversy. By contrast, the religious content of the lyrics and the religious context of their performance is not in question. *Bharatanatyam*, as a deliberate creation with religious antecedents is especially suitable in performing the choral odes of tragedy *today*. However, the process of adapting the performance texts that have come down to us as verbal texts does not reflect the original practice of composition in the ancient world.

I am indebted to **Janet O'Shea's** excellent article both for this introductory talk and for my work in setting ancient Greek tragedy performance to Bharatanatyam. See O'Shea's '*At Home in the World?: The Bharatanatyam Dancer As Transnational InterpreterAuthor(s)*'.

TDR (1988-), Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 176-186.

This talk is an adaptation of '*Hierarchy and the Body: setting ancient Greek choral lyrics to South Indian classical dance*' with performance from *Euripides' Medea*, by *Ash Mukherjee*'

for the APGRD and CSSD Symposium on *Hierarchy/ies in the
Theory and Practice of Greek and Roman Drama.*, June 19th 2012.