

Appreciations

B alasaraswati belonged to the time-honoured and orthodox tradition of Bharatanatyam which prescribed that the artiste should draw attention away from herself and towards the art...

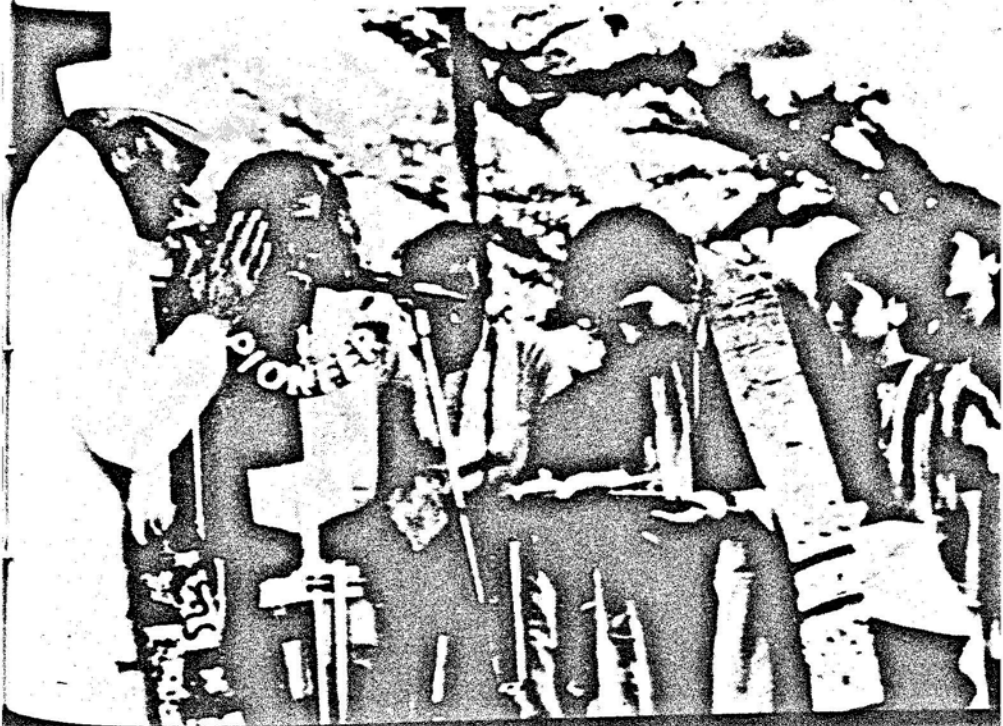
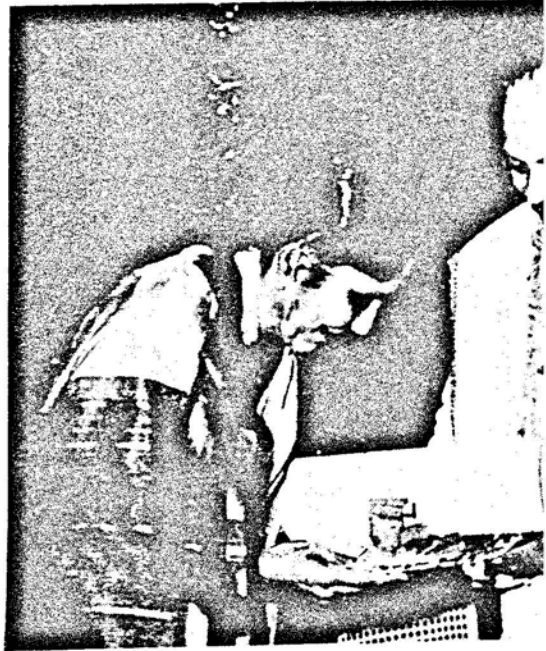
An important aspect of her art was reticence. By this one means an economy of expression that was suggestive and not exhaustive. The economy had several facets. One was to limit the delineation to the highlights of the symbolic narration. It is not as if the audience is unaware of the meaning of what is being portrayed. The background musicians are intoning the words all the time, and all that the artiste has to do is to translate the meaning into the requisite representation. If the song says: *Alas, what will I do, my Lord Muruga has gone away*, it is not necessary to show the symbols for all the words, but it is sufficient to show the mudra for Muruga and put on a woe-begone face. Bala was an adept in this economy...

Her suggestions were brief. And she never lingered on a gesture but passed on to the next. A raised eyebrow was a question. A compressed lip turned down at one corner was petulance or

contempt. A wave of the hand was sufficient to show *who cares*, looking up meant a tower or a temple gopura. A slight bunching up of the sari meant water. And so on. Where wealth of meaning inhered in a song, or even in a single line of it, she never allowed the abhinaya to sag by over-indulging any single symbol (mudra), but there was a kaleidoscopic variation from one to another that showed the richness of her imagination. A good illustration of this gift is the line 'Jagadoddharakanamma' in the song *Krishna nee begane baro* which she made famous. After initially expressing wonder at the greatness of Lord Krishna so as to show the reaction of the devotee, that is, devotion through love (or *anuraga* and *adbhuta*) she proceeded to elaborate the details of the glory of the Lord, mainly through the pranks of the boy Krishna, and later on supplementing it with the important incidents in the other incarnations. One could easily be bored with such a long narration, but Bala redeemed it from dullness by her artistry as well as by swiftly moving from incident to incident. Here the two economies, namely brevity of



Anti-clockwise: Balasaraswati garlanded by Kamaladevi Chatt (Photo: S.N.A. Archives); receiving the Desikottama award from Morarji Desai, 1978 (Photo: Visva-Bharati); receiving the Isai Perarignar title from K. Rajaram, 1975 (Photo: Tamil Isai Samadras).



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gestures and change from one theme to another combined to constitute the excellence of her performance...

Although Balasaraswati was an adept in representing every rasa or dramatic emotion, her portrayal of scornful anger was unmatched in its perfection. The feelings of a woman betrayed are varied and poignant. But hers was not a moving picture of weak wailing and helplessness. On the other hand, it was the disdain of a princess who dismissed an unworthy being. Pada-s like *Ini enna pechu irukkudu* in the raga Sahana (Go away, what more is there to say; please go, go) and the padam in Suruti where also she asks the faithless lover to clear out (*po, pora*) brought out the full power of angry emotion and her gestures of dismissal were particularly fascinating.

S.Y. Krishnaswamy

Bala exemplifies the term 'genius'. She was a legend in her own lifetime. Her exposition of Natya had a flawless and happy blend of the three aspects of Bha-ra-tam — bhava, raga and tala.

It was the enchanting grace and expressiveness of her abhinaya that kept her audience spellbound. She had a tremendous capacity for improvisation while strictly adhering to the norms of traditional discipline. The impeccable rhythmic sense in her

was portrayed through every movement of her body. Her proficiency in music which was an inheritance and part of her training complemented her dancing abilities. She was gifted with a sweet voice that would blend perfectly with *sruti*. Her traditional padams and javalis interspersed with songs of Hindustani flavour enraptured one and all. Such a combination of innate talent and dedication made her the genius she was.

Semmangudi Srinivasier

Balasaraswati is unique in several respects. First of all, she represents an authentic and rich tradition. Secondly, the tradition incorporates the two aspects of the art — namely, music and dance... the dance is so much a physical emanation or expression, through the limbs and parts of the face, of all the glances and the ideas which you hear through the music — it is in Bala that you have this integration of the music and the dance.

V. Raghavan

Balasaraswati made the public Bharatanatyam-conscious, not by conscious efforts as a torch-bearer or a reformer but by the beauty and the eloquence of her dancing. It was left to others to fight prejudices and stupidity,

do research, delve into the past. But Balasaraswati made us aware of the living miracle of Bharatanatyam to be seen and to be enraptured. She has a fantastic repertoire — some fifteen Varnams, several Jatiswarams, Shabdams, Tillanas and, of course, countless padams and Javalis, literally countless. Her technique is so superb that one has come to take it for granted and to Balasaraswati herself it has become second nature. Her gestures are eloquent, her abhinaya sheer poetry. Her sense of rhythm is so compelling that there is a kind of inevitability about it. Added to these fabulous gifts is her fine musicianship. Balasaraswati is a musician in her own right and as an exponent of certain types of Karnatic music such as Padams and Javalis, she has few equals.

Balasaraswati's art has to be evaluated against the background of the Karnatic tradition. Other dancers there are who have carried the message of Indian dancing to the four corners of the world, who have streamlined it and electroplated it and tailored it to suit the tastes of all and sundry. All honour to them. But Balasaraswati would admit of no compromise. She is incapable of it. Her Padams are as inseparable from the Karnatic tradition as Jayamma's Sahana or Saveri. The one seems to grow from the other. It is, as it were, the abstract music given concrete shape. Balasaraswati's bhava is not merely the enactment of the words of a song. It is the

recreation in another idiom of the musical subtleties of the song. When she dances *Mera topu seyaka* she dances Sahana, and what Sahana it is! These are concepts and achievements which many a Bharatanatyam dancer in her innocence cannot even grasp. How many dancers today can follow the implication of, let alone dance, the jatiswaram in Sankeerna nada of Ponniah Pillai?

Narayana Menon

Abhinaya allows a great opportunity for interpretations to a dancer fully endowed with imagination and power of expression. All cannot be gifted with the delicacy of feelings and sensitiveness of response to suggestion. A dancer, if inspired in adequate measure to unravel inner meanings of a theme, can work marvels of artistry and creative fancies upon an initiated audience. For instance, Lord Krishna mentioned in any of Kshetragana's padams becomes the starting point for a garland of connected images of the Lilas of Krishna; which rendered with grace and delicacy of emotion can take one to a transported plane of mystic experience.

But it is given only to a few as to Srimati Balasaraswati to picture to us Krishna as on the chariot seated opposite Arjuna and delivering the message of his Gita. She can suggest infinite varieties of ideas, crowning them all with

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her original conceit of applying the Sankha Mudra to her mouth and turning towards the four directions, thereby intimating to Rasikas the universality of the resounding message that the Gita holds for all humanity, be they in any quarter of the globe.

K. Chandrasekharan

Balasaraswati excels in the rhythmic (nritta) aspect of Bharata Natyam and her reputation must be attributed to the balanced versatility she commands over the total dance repertoire. Nevertheless, her exposition of nritya abhinaya is without any doubt the leading edge of Balasaraswati's impact upon the world of dance. She learned the techniques and vocabulary of abhinaya from her teacher Kandappa, and from others as well. Gauriamma, the lady whom she holds originally responsible for her inspiration and desire to dance, taught her many padams, and often danced to the singing of Jayammal and Jayammal's sister Lakshmiratnam. Chinnaya Naidu introduced Balasaraswati to several Kshetragana padams, showing her many sanchari bhavas (interpretative deviations from the text) and another extremely influential teacher was Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastri of Kuchipudi fame. He was not a sophisticated man, nor a great musician; but the sheer vitality of his imagination captivated Bala-

saraswati and she was able to learn a great deal from him about improvisation in abhinaya...

She is the mistress of an active and restless intellect, forever taking apart the smallest segments of her art in order to examine them freshly, and put them together in new ways. Seated alone on the veranda of her Madras home she may be seen by visitors and passers-by, lost in the creative meanderings of her mind. A raga-phrase, explored, divided, analyzed, caressed with her voice, becomes no longer a phrase so much as a potential "opening up" of the grammatical structure of the raga. The same is true of her probing analysis of material for abhinaya; she considers, in much the same way as poets and scholars of earlier centuries, each fine distinction characteristic of a given human situation and extends her sympathy into a multitude of directions—one by one, yet with a sure intuitive grasp of the relationship between them. Constantly "researching" her art, Balasaraswati's imagination never sleeps.

Jon Higgins

Freed from the technical mass of Bharata Natyam's rules and restrictions, she deals with enlightenment and revelation. Watch how she makes the difficult seem easy; watch how she throws away a passing movement to go directly to the peak of what it means; watch how

effortlessly she stretches out her arms to the exact alignment, or forms her fingers to precisely measured curves and bends. The tension will be in her eyes, not in her body. Watch how she makes a word—coded into Bharata Natyam's cryptic sign-language, the mudras—come alive; look between the gestures to the rhythmic breathing that links the poses and postures and transforms them from something static and perfect, like a temple sculpture, into a flow of resonances...

No dancer I know of gives quite the intellectual and emotional exercise Bala manages, and this is not because of the unfamiliarity of Bharata Natyam's exoticisms, or the complexity of its lover-beloved, god-man themes. Bala exercises areas of understanding we have too long left fallow. Her dance is not easy to grasp, if it is "graspable" at all. It is intricate, deceptive, evasive, fireworks-less, it is *not* overwhelming. It grows in the mind, and this process continues long after the performance is concluded — afterwards you ask yourself, "What have I seen?" The answer is often startling, because Bala's images are suffused with the passions of human experience...

Every country, each generation venerates a single genius in a particular art — Italy's Duse, Japan's Utaemon, China's Mei Lan Fang, Russia's Pavlova, England's Olivier. And to the list India's Balasaraswati is added. This does not mean — contrary to the popular misconception that

art is universal — that the idols of one nation are invariably worshipped elsewhere. The magic of gods is potent only when performer and spectator participate in a mutual act of intuition. Great artists, however, make this easy, because they work at an advantage over words and the entrenchment of preconception: they speak from soul to soul, not always at mind-level, and what operates and is affected is the psyche rather than reason.

Faubion Bowers

There are things I can never forget — the realization of genius that had come to me after seeing fifteen or sixteen performances of *Krishna Ni Begane Baro*, each completely different in mood and emphasis, the hair-raising moment when Yasoda sees God... the first performance in New York when she parted like a flame around a tiny space at one end of a room in Asia House, summoning great reserves of energy from heaven knows what source... the Bhakti-filled performance in a South Indian temple mandapam inside the Philadelphia Museum ... a stretch of time at the last emotional performance in San Francisco, where she led us all out onto some incredible plane of experience, that even she must seldom have visited before.

Robert E. Brown

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In 1961 I was in Japan for the first (and only) time in my life for what promised to be an exciting Festival, an East-West encounter organised by one of the few post-war impresarios who could have moved into the Diaghilev sphere had he set his mind to it — Nicholas Nabokov, who actually composed a ballet for Diaghilev and later inspired festivals and artistic manifestations all over the world. The first of these East-West encounters involved a large number of people travelling immense distances to Tokyo to read and listen to papers, discuss possibilities for co-operation, and above all to hear and see performances.

By light years the most interesting and enthralling I saw was a dance recital, an evening of which the first half was provided by a group of dancers from Thailand (who were still shaky from their flight and constantly and disconcertingly fell to floor from their carefully prepared positions, which did nothing for either verisimilitude or the delight of the audience), and the second half came from Balasaraswati.

This was nothing short of revelation. I knew no more about her than that she was a leading Bharatanatyam dancer, the finest of her generation and now performing outside India for the first time in her life. I had never seen Bharatanatyam and had no more than a general idea of what to expect, but even if I had, it would not have prepared me for what

I saw.

In the West we have gradually learnt not to expect constant and total illusion from the stage but rather to accept that stylisation is necessarily a major part of stage projection and performance, but nothing Brecht or anyone else had engineered for the stage could have prepared one for the casualness, almost effrontery of Bala's performance. She walked on as if she were coming into a room, made herself comfortable and, until she was performing, did not behave as if she were visible at all. In effect, she wasn't. But once she started, audience submission was complete. There was the arrogance of the great performer and the humility of the great artist; the brilliance of a virtuoso and the lyricism of a poet; the beauty of a young girl in love shown through the experience of a mature woman at the height of her performing powers. I was totally captivated and for days after could think of nothing but the exhilaration which the performance had engendered.

On my way back from Tokyo to Europe, I was already planning to pass through Delhi as my ambition was to have in 1963 at the Edinburgh Festival (of which I was then Director) an Indian Festival-within-a-Festival and I had arranged for detailed discussions with the Ministry of Culture. Bala had now become a central part of those plans and in Delhi there was no opposition at all, provided Bala would agree to come — it would be only her

second, or conceivably by then third, excursion from India.

In Edinburgh, we found a small stage in a not-too-big auditorium — a firm stage which lived up to Bala's injunction that she was used to dancing on stone and would not perform on a sprung ballet floor! She arrived, rehearsed, performed and conquered, and others have described the effect she had on the uninitiated, which included most of her audience.

I saw her later in recital in India and in London and was planning to do so again when my wife and I were in Madras in early 1968 but unfortunately went down with dengue fever just before. My wife went alone and, on the morning of the day when, half-recovered, I was due to fly to Bombay, she seemed somewhat conspiratorial — with reason, because mid-morning, there was a telephone call to say that Bala was down below and would like to come to say goodbye. It was a goodbye with a difference because she had brought musicians and for half an hour played and mimed Padams for me in what had previously seemed an austere if large hotel bedroom but was transformed by Bala into a temple of magic and understanding.

I don't know that *Krishna ni begane baro* was ever more various or more beguiling than it seemed in this private performance, unless it was thirteen years later when, convalescent from her heart complaint, Bala consented after a

little dinner party in her house one evening to sing it again. This time, she remained sitting down, but the mime was just as vivid and the total effect even more overwhelming. One or two people present knew this particular piece only from legend — Lakshmi, Bala's daughter, said she would never venture on it herself — others had not heard it for a number of years, but it was possibly the nicest birthday present I have ever had.

I knew Bala so little, and yet I feel I knew her all my life. From the time I first saw her, she will affect all dance, all theatre, all performance that I am able to experience. Of who else, unless it be Maria Callas, can I say that?

Lord Harewood

'K rishna, come, come soon'. Krishna, being dark blue, has always been one of my favourite gods. When his mother ticked him off for eating mud he opened his mouth and she beheld the entire universe.

I cannot have been the only uninitiated Westerner who, confronted with a glimpse of the infinite complexities of Indian music and dancing at this Festival, felt like Krishna's mother. Lord Harewood fell for the sacred sub-continent years ago, then saw Balasarasvati, who had never been out of India before, dancing in Tokyo in 1961. His decision to have demonstrations and recitals,

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together with a thrilling exhibition of Music and Dance in Indian art, in Edinburgh, turns out to be one of the halcyon inspirations of this festival.

'Krishna, come, come soon, come soon and show me your face!' The same happy despair assailed me at the thought of Balasarasvati's limitless lore and repertoire as at the realization that I could not possibly follow the rhythms and counter-rhythms of the drummer Palghat Raghu in the introductory demonstration on Tuesday. For Balasarasvati, on whose family tree I can count twenty-two musicians or dancers deriving from an eighteenth-century ancestor at the court of Tanjore, has ninety-seven padams in her repertoire. The Padam is a lyrical number in three parts which forms the fifth item of the necessary six or possible eight in a Bharatanatyam recital. Of Padams the dancer performs six in Edinburgh, announcing her nightly choice before the show. The story of Krishna and his mother quoted above forms part of one of them.

I had long known the fame of Balasarasvati (born 1918) and read about her in 'The Other Mind', the late Beryl de Zoete's record of her inspired wanderings. And suddenly here the legendary dancer was; the living embodiment of countless centuries of sculpture, painting, music, dance and song: for in India all these are part of one art

designed by Shiva to lead us to a comprehension of the two infinities — inwards, inside us, and outwards, beyond the stars.

Above medium height, plump, attractive, in green and yellow, with bells on her ankles, flowers in her hair and a diamond in her nose, she stands looking pre-occupied and rather cross, waiting for her music cue. (When not dancing she thinks she is invisible). She renders the invocation and the early formal passages of the recital. We admire her strength, control and flexibility, but are not carried away.

In between dances she twitches her sari and looks anxiously at the dance master. Then comes the varnam (part four), a big scene in which a love-lorn lady's confidante appeals to her mistress's absent lord. Now we see the encyclopaedic richness of the gesture language. The first of three Padams is on a similar subject; in the second, a jealous wife is bitchy about her rival, and Balasarasvati might be Millamant or Celimene — 'Gone are the days when she came by to borrow jewels and saris'. This is comedy almost as we understand it, with gestures replacing words. Last is the episode of Krishna eating mud, and I see Balasarasvati shining with awe, and I too am filled with awe and become Balasarasvati, and we are both Krishna's mother.

Richard Buckle