

## What do Dancers Create?

---

Oopalee Operajita

THIS PAPER will explore Indian classical dance with reference to Indian and Western aesthetics. In examining the dance, I will be drawing from theories formulated by some of the finest minds in the East and West. While there has been some debate about the relevance of Western aesthetics to Eastern art, I would like to show that there is a relevance, and that the thinking of some of the finest minds in Western thought does indeed apply to classical Indian dance,—what Plato and Socrates said, for example, does apply. So do the postulates of Heidegger's famous disciple, Hans-Georg Gadamer. I will also be referring to the thought of Susanne Langer and Rene Daumal. Amongst Indian aestheticians, I will be drawing from Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Nandikeshvara and Anandavardhana, to demonstrate that on basic issues eastern and western thought seems to agree for the most part.

In examining the dance I am going to be asking three questions, which are those asked by Langer in her now famous essay on dance in her book, *Reflections on Art*: What do dancers create? For what is this image (the dynamic image: the dance) created? and, How is a dance created? While using Langer's questions as a basic frame for my argument, I will differ from her now and again, and also corroborate my thinking with quotes and examples from both eastern and western aesthetics.

Let me ask the first question then: what do dancers create? Langer says that they create "something over and above what is physically there." And what is physically there is, "the materials, or ambient space, light, musical tone, forces of gravity, or any other physical provisions." The dance is only visible, not tangible. It exists during the moments of performance and perception. And the question of perception opens up the question of the audience/perceiver/observer's role in creating the art object. Langer goes on to say, "the forces we seem to perceive most convincingly and directly are created for our perception, and they exist only for it." In other words, when there is no perceiver, the dance does not exist as performance. The *Natya Shastra* seems to uphold this view, which is an awkward way of putting it, since it came before. But going back to Langer's definition of dance; she calls it a "virtual entity" and says:

"Anything that exists for perception, and plays no ordinary, passive part in nature as common objects do, is a virtual entity." Virtual because it is only visible, not tangible, and analogous to, say, light. Langer calls the dance "an apparition of active powers, a dynamic image." I would substitute the word "cohesion" for "apparition". Because the movement is actual, even if intangible, at the instant of creation-perception. Ananda Coomaraswamy calls dance, "the crystallization of a state of being in (visual) images." The images are the dance, but so is the crystallization, sometimes perceptible, but mostly not.

Langer then touches a very important point in the contemporary discussion of dance: "The physical realities are given....But in the dance, they disappear, the more perfect the dance, the less we see its actualities." Gadamer supports this view: "Total communication means that the communicating element cancels itself out."

Apart from the physical realities of the setting—space, light, costume, and so on—another kind of physical reality is the sheer mechanical movement deployed to actuate the dance, to bring it into being at a very basic level. But that technique does not make the dance. And in bringing this point to light, I think we are throwing the field open for a very distressing development in contemporary Odissi. Most young (or not quite young) aspirants seem to think that conning the technique by rote makes for the dance. What they fail to recognize is that poses, however sculpted and beautiful they may be, are not the dance. And Odissi is replete with sculpted poses, having been described as "fluid sculpture." The accent is on the word fluid, or "dynamic" and that takes us back to the description of dance as the dynamic image. The dance is dynamic: it is the transition from one pose to another, not merely the poses in themselves. Likewise, the poses themselves have meaning only in the context of movement, and in a sequence. In fact, when one films a dancer and a non-dancer doing, say, the same pallavi, a trained eye will easily be able to differentiate one from the other. In a dancer's transitional movements there is that all-essential dynamism; in a non-dancer's, the movement is—paradoxically—static. It is mechanical and stunted; there is an overwhelming obsession with "getting the movement right." And in trying to master the movement alone, the non-dancer loses sight of that energy—emanating from within—which characterizes dance. Another absolutely crucial element of Indian classical dance is music. I have always held that a dancer must know music to be a complete dancer. She need not be a professional musician, but again, a trained eye can easily discriminate between a musical dancer and an unmusical one—the latter is not mastered by

music, so her movements exhibit an easily discernible lack of harmony. I was delighted to have Guru Vempatti Chinna Satyam corroborate my view in my conversations with him in 1983. However, even Markandeya held this view in the Vishnudharmotara Purana when he said that a knowledge of instrumental music was absolutely indispensable to the dancer. But this is a vast topic, and the subject of a whole paper in itself, so we must leave it here for the present.

So if an intended dancer, the aspirant, has no musical background, and is obsessed with technique for the sake of technique, we get to see what Langer calls the "actualities" of dance mechanical, dry and uninspired dance, visual acrobatics, without the illuminating force that comes from within. It is acrobatic, and does not provide aesthetic relish, *carvana*, nor *camatkara*, which ultimately establishes *rasa*.

My point in stressing what a non-dancer does not create will hopefully serve to strengthen what a dancer creates. I will return to this question when I ask: How is a dance created? for that is another way of asking, How does a dancer create the dance?

The second question is: For what is this image created? The *Natya Shastra* says that "it is created for the simple reason that it is beautiful." That beauty gives pleasure to the observer. Langer seems to uphold this point of view when she says that dance is created "for our enjoyment." However, we mustn't lose track of the ritualistic origin of Indian classical dance—and ancient western dancing too—because the ancient world was a world "perceived as a realm of mystic powers."

Indian classical dance has its indubitable origins in worship, and in Odissi, the origins of the form—as we know them—are evident in the temples all over the state, but noticeably at the Jagannath temple in Puri. Nataraja danced the cosmic dance of creation—and the destruction of Evil—so there was a decided purposiveness in his dance, which we must take to be the original dance, the type on which future dance is founded.

The inspiration behind Indian classical dance is, as I said earlier, worship. But there are two patterns—wrong ones—into which dancers sometimes fall: they take cognition of the religious impetus behind the dance, and wear their religion on their sleeves—running passionately towards their displayed images onstage. The other is the grotesque phenomenon where dancers stick their eyes up at the end of Moksha, in the naive—and literalistic—interpretation of the number. These do not, however, provide what a dancer basically lacks in terms of spiritual motivation. And one cannot overempha-

size the importance of inhering spirituality in a dancer: it existed in Balasaraswati, and Ram Gopal: it still exists in that superhuman Koodiyattam guru, Mani Madhava Chakkiyar, and a handful of other dancers. And it exists in Nureyev, or Mikhail Baryshnikov, or Natalia Makarova. The fact that it exists in western classical dancers can only underscore my point: that spirituality in dance is not idol-display or a vulgar display of fake religious fervour to win an illiterate audience.

That fakeness destroys the true purpose of the dance, which is, as Gadamer says (with reference to art): "In art man encounters himself, spirit meets spirit." That encounter with the self is crucial. Which is why any great performance transports the audience—the artists transcends herself, and in doing so, elevates the sympathetic audience to heights that are beyond the ambit of everyday experience. And that is what the dance is created for.

Hence it follows that communicative ability is of crucial importance in a dancer. That again, is the reason behind Balasaraswati's supremacy as a dancer. Indian and western aestheticians seem to voice similar opinions on this issue. Langer touches briefly on the idea of dance as communication: it expresses "its creator's ideas of immediate, felt, emotive life. It directly sets forth what feeling is like". The word "emotive" is of significance—"rasa" has its basis in emotion—not of the poet alone, or of the sympathetic spectator, or the dancer—it belongs, as Rene Daumal says to all three: "it unites them in a single moment of consciousness." Gadamer has the same thing to say about the "experience of art": "Neither the separate life of the creating artist—his biography—nor that of the performer who acts a work, nor that of the spectator who is watching the play, has any separate legitimacy in the face of the being of the work of art."

For a dancer to create rasa—which is the ultimate purpose of dance—is to fulfill the purpose of dance. Because "it gains, through being communicated, its proper being." (Gadamer). There is no differentiation of the work of art, the dance, from the interpretation—that difference, which I would call a schism—can be seen only when the interpretation fails. And that brings me to another important point: the communicative ability of a dancer is judged by her ability to lose her identity as X, Y or Z, belonging to this or that place; and the greater the communicative ability, the less visible the communicating element. This is the ideal situation for "rasa nishpati".

If dance, as we have held earlier is "the representation of the divine" (Gadamer), it is also, like all play, "realization, sheer

fulfillment, *energia* which has its *telos* within itself. The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact, a wholly transformed world. By means of it everyone recognizes that that is how things are." I see a similarity between this and Abhinavagupta's description of "tanmayibhava", or the transcending of oneself in one's awareness of consciousness. Aesthetic experience, Abhinava says, "enables one to relate art to life intimately and to grasp the core of reality experientially." So Gadamer holds that art raises reality, which is untransformed, into its truth; and that ultimate transformed reality is the spiritual experiential element which is of quintessential importance in any estimation of great art. Thus, Abhinava says in his *Locana* that the aesthetic experience has a transformative power: he equates aesthetic enjoyment with refinement of the spirit. The spectator shares in this quality, and the spectator is the *sahrdaya*: the sympathetic, initiated observer, not unlike the *theoros* at the Greek festival who is in a state of self-forgetfulness, just like the *sahrdaya* is in a state of "tanmayibhava"—no doubt a positive state, which arises from the total attention of the spectator to the object.

Indian dancing, as we know, requires, as its audience, a trained audience. There is a highly sophisticated code—the language of gesture (*mudras* in their *vinayoga*); of facial expression, and a drawing from our legends and myths—which the dancer presumes her audience understands. Whatever the case might be with audiences in the west vis-a-vis their relation to the dance, the *sahrdaya* was not entirely unknown there, as is revealed in this quote from Plato's *Ion*: Socrates tells Ion: "Do you know that the spectator is the last of the rings which, as I am saying, receive the power of the original magnet from one another? The rhapsode like yourself and the actor are intermediate rings, and the poet himself is the first of them."

However, in western classical dance, the language of symbolic gesture—whether it is of *mudras* or of the face—is much less codified. And when there is a narrative element in the ballet, the troupe of dancers relies on its audience's familiarity with the storyline rather than its ability to interpret their every movement. So in terms of decoding, the western audience has much less to do, and that is because of the comparatively lesser emphasis on the code. Thus the analyses of Langer and other western aestheticians can have only a limited relevance to Indian dance. But back to the code; the non-coded movements in Indian dance are non-communicative, except as pure dance. And in western dance, pure dance is of paramount importance. I do not intend to undermine the import-

ance of pure dance in Indian dance, but we have to concede that its importance is secondary in our estimation of the dance as a whole.

Thus, the *sahrdaya* has to possess the skill to appreciate *rasa*, and this skill, Anandavardhana calls "*sahrdayatvam*". Ananda also says that the mind of the *sahrdaya* "is a trained one... aware of the tradition of his situations and that of the past.... It is a born talent and cultivated taste." What the *sahrdaya* perceives is "what is going on" through "what is happening"; "inner reality behind what appears outwardly." She "experiences the Significance through *sabdartharacana* of *Kavya*." (Anandavardhana)

And that brings me to the final question: How is the dance created? Langer narrows the question down to its essence: "What does it mean to express one's idea of some inward or subjective process?" Her answer: "It means to make an outward image of this inward process, for oneself and others to see; that is, to give the subjective events an objective symbol." I think Langer's use of the word "subjective" is inappropriate here. All aesthetics points to the universality of the experience of art—for the artist it is personal and simultaneously—and essentially—universal: "a coming in touch with the essence of things" (Anandavardhana).

Dance is born of a primordial urge in the human being: "it marks the union of visible appearance and invisible significance" which is the basis of all religious cults. Dance is symbol: it enables one to use a presentation in images for something that is imageless. So the true dancer—not the mere imitator—is struggling to express herself through symbolic movement and gesture. This struggle for expression is the seed, as it were, for the future existence of the dance. What is struggling to be expresses in what is 'given' to the dancer, and what differentiates her from an ordinary person. I will use the concept of *Erlebnis* to specify what I mean; Gadamer defines this as, "what is directly given, the ultimate material for all imaginative forming." But what is given is incomplete, until it is expressed, and perceived, and comes to life.

In the dancer, the content of imaginative experience "*das erlebte*" is permanent; it is the aesthetic experience, which is, as Gadamer says, "not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of Experience itself." *Erlebniskunst*, or the art of experience, can be compared to *Rasa Nishpati*. *Rasa Nishpati*, which is the aim of dance, comes into being by the "ingenious manipulation of fixed forms and modes of statement which makes the work of art a work of art." In dance, we have a given framework, handed down to us by tradition, and from the past; the form already exists: we have to manipulate that form to make it significant or expressive. And

without creativity, art ceases to be art. Thus Gadamer says: "Whenever one must 'come upon something' that cannot be found through learning and methodical work alone, that is whenever there is *inventio*, where something is due to inspiration and not to methodical calculation, the important thing is *ingenium*, genius." Without genius and creativity, that is to say, there is no true dance; there is only, at best, perfect uninspired (and uninspiring) technique.

And if one pursues the point a little further, the importance of abhinaya can be seen clearly. Abhinaya can come only through *ingenium*—it can never be taught or mastered by perfecting method. In abhinaya, the necessity of understanding the sabdartha, as opposed to a literalistic—and often naive—interpretation of vacyartha alone, cannot be over-stressed. Understanding the verbal nuances in a given language are indispensable to the dancer, for that is at the root of how the dance is created. In the dancer's interpretation of language—which is the essence of classical Indian dancing—the dancer and the sahrdaya meet in the language. That language is of two types: the written word, or the poetry, and the enacted word. While the dramatic interpretation/enactment depends on the dancer's inborn capacity for abhinaya—and in a much more limited fashion, to her training—the language has to be studied thoroughly before the visual element can come into its own. The enactment follows the interpretation of the poetry: in that temporal sequence it has a privileged status—privileged because a shortcoming on that level inevitably results in inadequate emotive-visual interpretation which, in turn, results in a failure to create rasa. A failure to establish rasa defeats the very purpose of the dance; it is not just the ultimate aim, it is the impetus underlying creativity, and it is because of that creativity and originality that the dance is created in the first place. We might conclude then, that if rasa has not been established, the dance, notwithstanding all sorts of external trappings, has not been created.

A paper of this length cannot do justice to what is an appropriate subject for volumes. However, I hope I have opened up some avenues for discussion, and I hope that this might provide occasion for dancers and sahrdayas to do some more thinking about some of the issues raised here.