

Teaching Indian Dance in New York

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Be it said to my credit that I did not choose New York. New York chose me. If God had left me any choice in the matter, I would have opted for the West Coast of the U.S., where life is more relaxed, people more easygoing, and the climate more favourable to my still unchanged Indian constitution. What is more, our classical dance and music are better received in the West Coast, so that those dancers and musicians who have settled down there are flourishing, while we in New York wait in vain for the heavens to open up and shower manna upon us! But the invitation came from New York, Lady Liberty beckoned me, and I packed my bags and landed here, for better or for worse!

The invitation to teach Indian dance was from the Chairman of the Dance Department of New York University's School of the Arts (later renamed Tisch School of the Arts). I received it in 1972, while I was on a dance tour of U.S.A., as I have recounted in an earlier essay in *Sangeet Natak* ('My Dance-odyssey', *Sangeet Natak* Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, 2001). Those who have read the essay would also be familiar with my life-situation at that juncture. Suffice it to say that the offer then seemed like a sign from the heavens. I accepted the assignment, and, in the process, threw up my dance career in India. The assignment promised a steady pay-cheque every month, which was an improvement on the uncertain and undependable income of a dancer back home. As it happened, my scheduled performances in India just then had been plagued by a series of abrupt cancellations — on account of riots, floods, the death of a VIP, events where the arts too are a casualty.

The Chairman, Stuart Hodes, had seen Indian dance, especially Bharatanatyam, at Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra, and had become thoroughly enamoured of it. He was a man of vision — open to the best that the world outside America could offer — and decided after seeing me perform in New York to include Indian dance among the curricular options in his Department. My assignment at the university entailed teaching five days a week, which left the weekend free for possible performances. It was an ideal situation, and I worked hard, determined to contribute my best efforts towards building up the reputation of the School as a teaching institution in the performing arts. The curriculum of the School included drama and film-making besides dance. And the dance department there offered, besides Indian dance, the customary fare of ballet and modern American dance.

Since my subject was not mandatory, the number of my students varied from year to year, ranging from one to twenty. The Chairman would recommend my class to all new students at the School, telling them that the study of Indian dance would be of infinite value, regardless of whether they continued with it later, professionally or otherwise. "Ritha will at least straighten out your backs", he would add in jest. My students, all Americans, loved me, because I paced my classes according to their capacity, alternating hard, practical work with theoretical lessons on *hastas*, and narrations of mythological stories which I thought they should know as students of Indian dance. How they loved those story-telling sessions, for they could then lay their aching bodies, sore after a whole hard day of ballet

and modern dance, on the studio floor, and listen to fascinating legends from ancient India! The end of the semester either brought them to my apartment for an Indian feast (cooked with a lot of affection to make up for my lack of expertise), or we would spread a sheet on the studio floor and share a convivial repast. My students also performed in the annual concert, and despite their preoccupation with Western dance, acquitted themselves quite creditably; they had well trained bodies to compensate, to some extent, for their lack of adequate practice. At the end of a long day of Western dance, they often had neither the time nor the stamina left for practice, nor yet the concentration necessary for my lessons. Even so, two or three among these students developed an attachment to Indian dance and continued performing Indian dances after they had graduated. Unfortunately, the most brilliant among them, a male student called Lee, died of Aids.

What did I teach them? In my first year I taught them Bharatanatyam, because that is what my Chairman most wanted. But this dance proved to be too physically demanding for the students, so the next year I changed over to Odissi — only to realize that the American body lacked the fluid grace so essential to practise this beautiful dance form. Finally, in my third year, I introduced them to Kuchipudi, and that seemed to agree very well with the students, both in terms of physique and temperament. Then onwards, for the next seven years, I taught them this dance alone; the students delighted in its chiselled lines, vibrant footwork, fast pace, and exuberant spirit.

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Normally, a dancer learns just one dance. I learned many, as I have detailed in my previous article. Perhaps this happened because I did not belong to a traditional family of dancers — where one's choice of dance is predetermined — and had to find my way through the whole world of Indian dance. For me, there was no role model to follow. But if the path I took was long and hard, the effort I made wasn't wasted, for it made me familiar with all the major dance forms of India. In the process, I also acquired a discerning eye, and an innate understanding of what would be best suited to a student's physique and temperament. This stood me in good stead in my work at the School.

There and elsewhere, in my thirty years of teaching dance in America, I have had occasion to guide and initiate a varied assortment of students — Americans (black, white, and yellow), and Europeans — into Indian dance. In general, I have found that a fluid form like Odissi does not agree with the body and body culture of white Americans; their bearing and movements are apt to be rigid. Such students fare better in Bharatanatyam or Kuchipudi, where the body-flexions are not so sinuous. I mentioned Lee earlier, who was exceptionally good in Kuchipudi, as was Leslie, my private student, who worked with me for nine years and learned many dances including my forte in the Kuchipudi repertoire — the Ardhanareeshvara Shabadam. Outstanding among all my non-Indian students was Carmen, who came from San Salvador on a scholarship to study modern American dance, but was turned off by its mechanical soullessness. Her interest in dance was revived after she saw me dance, some time in 1985; that was the first time she had seen Indian dance. She then became my devoted student, and studied both Kuchipudi and Odissi. However, her vivacious



Ritha Devi in her New York City apartment during a photo session for the promotion of her book, *The Eternal Flame*.

Latin temperament accorded better with the exuberance of Kuchipudi, and less with the grace of Odissi.

My black American students have all been born dancers, capable of executing magnificent leaps and turns. The European students have a more intellectual approach and a finer understanding of nuances, but, being mostly of Anglo-Saxon or Nordic stock, fare better in the South Indian dances. I have had only one Italian student, who was naturally more graceful than other Europeans. The occasional Chinese or Japanese student looked and danced like a porcelain doll, which was a soothing contrast to the energy exuded by students from the Western hemisphere.

Unfortunately, despite having very supple, trained bodies, not one of my Western students has been able to satisfy me with her *abhinaya*. Ballet dancers have this habit of constantly staring into the mirrors that line the walls of their dance studios, and that imparts to their faces a peculiar glassy expression, which does not at all conduce to producing the myriad expressions, both subtle and obvious, that the Indian dancer needs. A world apart from our culture and our ethos, my Western students stand as though at a barred gate, and can never enter the life of the character they are portraying. The difficulties are compounded when it comes to depicting some typical (Indian) feminine expressions as of bashfulness, coy coquetry, pretended anger — or the sentiment we Bengalis call *abhimana*, for which there is no corresponding word in English. Even the *shanta rasa*, the expression as of tranquillity, is often beyond them. I have despaired of teaching them the soul-entrancing *ashtapadis* of the *Geetagoindam*, which I personally adore.

As I was to gradually find out, cultural differences can't be easily overcome. One or two of my private students have got seriously interested in Indian dance and read up on our philosophy, history, and mythology, but that is not enough. One has to feel in one's own person the trials of Draupadi, for instance, in order to emote her plight in the *vastraharan* episode. I remember how, when I was dancing this scene of Draupadi's humiliation in the court of the Kauravas — with Duhshasana attempting to disrobe her — there would be sniggers among students in the back rows of the auditorium. At that time, in the early 1970s, streaking was the latest thing on U.S. campuses; male or female, some student would disrobe completely, and streak across the grounds to the applause of other students. Where disrobing in public can be such fun, it becomes difficult to empathize with Draupadi in her hour of shame.

There is also something about the facial structure of people of European origin, by and large, which does not admit of the various shades of expression South Asians commonly exhibit. European ballet and modern dance are almost devoid of facial expression. It may interest the reader to know that ballet dancers have come to me to learn various ways of using the eyes, as well as our *hasta-mudras*. The eyes are a feature that remain quite uncultivated in Western dance. This is something I have tried assiduously to undo in my students — telling them that the eyes must follow the hand, that eyes have their own dance, their own appeal; in other words, that the eyes are the window of the soul. I am glad to say that one or two of my private students have absorbed my teaching, and in time their eyes have become brighter and more expressive!

I should add here that all that I have written so far about the failings of my American

students applies equally to my Indian American students, most of whom, brought up in the U.S., are more American than the Americans! Typically, such a student is coerced into joining my class by her parents, in the vain hope that a course in Indian dance would enable her to make a connection with her roots, and help her acquire some feeling for 'Indian culture'. But, left to themselves, these young people would rather dance to tap and jazz (and thus seem to belong in the American milieu) than to 'boring' Carnatic or Odissi music! They usually come into the class with sour faces, spend half the time talking among themselves (in what still seems to me a jarring American English), and refuse, or seem to be incapable of, doing the steps and movements I show them. However, there also emerges the rare student who displays genuine interest, and shows promise of blossoming into a fine dancer if time and circumstance permit. Alas, life claims these promising students, and they either move away, or get married, or suffer a separation, or are unable to dance for pressure of other work. So far, I have not found one Indian student who could inherit my art. Even with my best students, dance has not been a passion that could supercede all other passions!

Of course, not every Indian student is pushed into a dance class by her parents. A few students do come out of a genuine desire to explore their past and their heritage. As for the Americans, some of them come with the typical American belief that the world is their oyster, that any knowledge, however esoteric, is theirs for the asking; they need only 'check it out' (that classic American phrase!). So they rush in where angels would fear to tread! Of course, after a couple of lessons, these students realize that Indian dance is not as easy as they thought, and rush out in the reverse direction! This happens especially in the case of amateurs who have received some basic training in Western dance, and have been attracted to Indian dance by watching our dancers on the stage.

However, professional U.S. dancers themselves do not share the amateurs' perception of Indian dance. I once gave a week-long workshop at the Alvin Ailey School of Ballet and Modern Dance, and at the end I asked the students, all of them superb dancers, what they thought of Indian dance. In one voice, they answered that it was far more difficult than Western dance, with so many prescribed ways of coordinating the hands, feet, eyes, neck, chest, lips. Indian dance was a total experience, they thought.

Some students come to me from yoga centres, in the mistaken belief that their knowledge of yoga would help them master dance. But then, dance is not static, the flexibility acquired through yoga has to be put to disciplined use, the body has to move to precise rhythms and ever changing tempi; this is a far cry from sitting in *padmasana* in *dhyanamudra*. Also, the erotic devotion expressed in the *Geetgovindam*, for instance, confuses Westerners. Their idea of spirituality is denial, the withholding of one's natural emotions, as opposed to the passionate pouring out of the same by those among us who follow the *bhaktimarga*. Those who are conditioned by the exaltation of celibacy in spiritual life would naturally find it difficult to relate to the way of *bhakti*! On the other hand, an art form which combines in itself music, painting, sculpture, philosophy and iconography, and which has survived so many centuries of upheaval and devastation, would equally hold some fascination for a rootless people, at least as an unfirm anchor in an uncertain life. Stability has never been a mark of American life, or the mind of its people.

One strange characteristic most of my American students have shared is the inconstancy



Ritha Devi with some of her students at her birthday performance held at the Producers Club Theatre, New York, in December 1999. From left to right: Sridevi, Sujana, Durreen, Leslie, Melitta, Stephanie, Halina.

of their relationship with me, their guru. So long as they are with me, they seem to be very close to me; they even share with me the most intimate details of their love lives! But when they decide to leave, they leave abruptly, almost brusquely, without even a gracious word of farewell. And, afterwards, they do not even trouble to enquire whether I am still alive! For them, there is no lingering backward glance; there are always newer pastures. I mention this not out of personal pique but as illustration of how the American mind works, and to show the contrast my situation offers with the life-relationship of a guru and a shishya in India. Needless to say, I would not describe all my American students thus. I have already spoken about some of those who have mattered to me — and I to them — but the number of such students is so small!

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To go back to my NYU days, the year-end concerts by my students were impressive enough for my Chairman to congratulate himself for choosing me for this teaching assignment. Stuart Hodes would often say to me, his words reinforced with a bear hug, "I would not change you for ten other dancers, even if Balasaraswati happens to be among them! As long as I am here, you're here too!"

His words proved to be prophetic. In 1982, after ten years of teaching, the blow fell. Due to differences on policy matters with a new administration, the Chairman submitted his resignation, and the ballet master in the School took his place. Being thoroughly ballet-oriented, he had neither the sympathy nor the breadth of vision Stuart Hodes had, and thus found it difficult to accept the presence of a dance so totally alien to his own discipline within the precincts of the School. He had never watched me teach. He certainly did not see me perform, and he did not even go to the semester-end concerts by my students. Since my class came at the end of the day, and because it was not mandatory, there were many dropouts among the students. (Most of them came from outside the city.) So, without any notice whatsoever, the teaching of Indian dance was stopped. The new Chairman pleaded a budget-cut; the dropping out of students was, naturally, also cited as a reason.

After this abrupt *tamam shud* to my teaching at NYU, and fortified by a glowing credential from the Dean of my School, I applied for teaching assignments at every college in the tri-state area (which includes New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut) which offered dance and music in their curriculum, but to no avail. Not a single response came in. Indeed, even today, I know of no other college in the U.S. other than the NYU School during the years I worked there which offers even a year-long course in Indian dance. A few workshops, a single semester, is the most they allow for practical Indian dance, or other non-European performing arts. Accordingly, my other engagements in U.S. universities have been short-term, including a semester at New York's Hunter College, and occasional workshops and lecture-demonstrations on various campuses throughout the country. The calibre of students elsewhere has seemed to me appallingly poor as compared to students at NYU. At the end of an hour-long lecture-demonstration focusing on technical nuances of our dance, I have been asked questions completely unconnected with the subject. To hold their attention is no mean task.

In the following year — 1983 — I concentrated on my fellow Indians, many of whom want their children to learn Indian dance. Thus began my commuting — to Albany, New Jersey, Pennsylvania — to teach small groups of Indian children, as well as individuals, in private homes. Precious hours were wasted in travel, on journeys that took anything from an hour-and-a-half to three or four hours. Sometimes it took even longer, on account of breakdowns, traffic jams, and the horrendously uncertain weather. This way, I sometimes spent just one week in a whole month at home.

I was not happy, because my own dance was suffering under the pressure of so much travelling, and so was my health. But the hardship had to be borne because it is impossible to survive in New York without some independent income. New York itself did not bring forth many students. Very few students came for private lessons, and those who did come to me were erratic in their attendance. These were mostly working women who lived far away. Among the local students, some had to move out of the city, losing their jobs.

The Indian population in America is increasing every year. But, unfortunately, the majority of resident Indians are not really interested in classical music or dance. And among those who are interested in classical dance, not many are too well aware of Odissi, my own chosen dance. There are those who come to me with some perfunctory knowledge of Bharatanatyam. This knowledge is usually severely flawed; therefore, instead of straightening out their idea of Bharatanatyam, which would be frustrating for teacher and student alike, I prefer to start them on Kuchipudi, a new dance altogether. Odissi I impart only to those who are really keen to learn it, and are willing to devote several years to the pursuit of the dance. By this, I do not imply that Kuchipudi is easier to learn. I am only emphasizing the fact that a transition from Bharatanatyam to Kuchipudi is a more natural one than a changeover from Bharatanatyam to Odissi. It is well nigh impossible to retain Bharatanatyam and Odissi in the same body, or to change over from one to the other.

I am not very popular in the Indian community, and my younger students are steadily declining in numbers — perhaps because I insist on their practising the basic movements for several months before starting them on dance proper. Moreover, I do not encourage them to perform on stage just a few months into their dance training, which is what many students and parents would dearly wish! The parents lavish large amounts of money on costumes and jewellery for their children, but are unable to inculcate the discipline that learning any art requires. Consequently, most of these students are unable to reach even the basic standard of dance performed in India.

By contrast, my few adult students, whom I teach out of my apartment in New York — all of them working women earning their own living — train with me because of the attraction they feel towards Indian dance. They spend hard-earned money on their study, and appreciate every step and movement they learn. Some of them are very close to me; over a period of time, my relationship with them has blossomed into friendship, and extends beyond the classroom into other shared activities. I would dearly love to bring these students to some degree of excellence as dancers.

With regard to my art and my teaching, I can say that I have never sacrificed integrity for the sake of popularity and an easy life. I could certainly have made more money and lived a more comfortable life if I had agreed to teach popular dances, or taught classical

dance with a more relaxed attitude, not insisting on *angashuddha* (purity of position) in every movement, precision in footwork, clarity in the hastas, and harmony in the lines of the body. But these excellences have been inculcated in me by my gurus, whose invisible presence guides and inspires me whenever I teach or perform, even after all these years. I am sure I would still hear their voices admonishing me if I faltered or wavered, or decided to condone a wrong or shabbily performed step — whether by my students or myself!

My life's journey is almost ended, and I still await the disciple who will wear my mantle after I am gone, and will carry on with my work in the same spirit of devotion and dedication. I have felt this devotion deep within me ever since I realized that my mission in life was the resuscitation of the Mahari tradition of Odissi dance; in reality, this has seemed to me only a continuation of the *seva* (service) performed by the unknown Mahari I must have been in some previous incarnation.