At Home in the World?

The Bharatanatyam Dancer As Transnational Interpreter

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The stage lights come up gradually as a *bharatanatyam* dancer, costumed in a tailored silk sari and beautifully adorned in jewelry, walks out from backstage. In a manner neither formal nor completely relaxed, she walks downstage to a point beyond the normal performing space but still removed from the audience. She begins to explain the key features of this South Indian classical dance form. More specifically, she extracts, for decoding, the symbolic hand gestures known as *mudras* from bharatanatyam's semiotic lexicon. Standing in one place and without musical accompaniment, she performs mudras fluidly and gracefully. Meanwhile, she also translates into English the *sahitya*, or lyrics, of the song that the gestures will accompany. Demonstrating her skill in elegantly balancing the competing tasks of speaking and rendering gestural movement, she alerts the audience to the linguistic nature of the *abhinaya*, or dramatic dance.[1]

At the end of the synopsis, the dancer retreats backstage. A musical interlude signals the beginning of the "actual" performance. The dancer reappears, walking crisply. When she launches into the performance of the piece, her gestures flow easily as in the explanation, but now she augments them with evocative facial expressions and a directed use of her gaze.

Bharatanatyam, a highly technical, primarily solo South Indian classical dance form, consists of a repertoire and vocabulary that bifurcates into *nritta*, abstract rhythmic choreography, and *nritya* or abhinaya, dramatic dance. Its nonthematic sections consist of explosions of virtuoso footwork, performed with legs rotated outward into a bent-knee position that exemplifies the form's characteristically grounded use of weight. An erect torso floats gracefully above the dynamic feet. The abhinaya component, by contrast, organizes itself around lyrical, leisurely phrases of gestural movement traced by articulated fingers, hands, and arms. In these segments, the dancer walks in time to the music, her body position almost quotidian in comparison with the sharply delineated positions of the more staccato phrases.

Preperformance explanations have characterized bharatanatyam performances over the course of the 20th century. In the mid-1920s, when brahman lawyer E.

Krishna Iyer initiated his mission to resurrect bharatanatyam as a cultural treasure, he did so through lecture demonstrations as well as performances, which he offered in cities and towns of Southern India (Arudra 1986/87b:33). Jewish-American dancer Ragini Devi's first international tours of classical Indian dance forms in 1937 and 1938 consisted of lecture demonstrations as well as concerts (*The Civil and Military Gazette* 1938).[2] In the mid-1940s, Ram Gopal introduced to his tightly designed series of short, classical Indian dances brief verbal explanations, which preceded each dance with a sketch of its overall theme (David 2001:35–36). The specific practice of executing mudras while offering a verbal interpretation of sung poetic texts rose in popularity in the 1980s and early 1990s. During the early 1990s, the practice became so prevalent that dancers imported explanation into Indian performance contexts, including into bharatanatyam's home city of Chennai, formerly Madras.[3]

The demand for translation signals bharatanatyam's 20th-century history of recontextualization and its long-standing international circulation. The practice of interlocution both responds to and obscures the dance form's participation in a global culture market. It reveals the kind of historical double binds[4] with which the late-20th-century bharatanatyam dancer contended. The practice of verbal explanation thus speaks to the 20th-century predicament of bharatanatyam in which the dance form appears internationally as both an emblem of national and diasporic identity and as a "high art" that transcends national and linguistic boundaries.

At the same time, however, verbal translation paradoxically accords the choreography an inscrutability while also demonstrating its translatability. This kind of preperformance synopsis lines up two thought systems: an English verbal framework and a South Indian choreographic one. The explanation of mudras in succession interprets the "Eastern" choreography through the "Western" linguistic system. The English-language epistemology thereby emerges as the means through which the audience finds the choreography intelligible. Thus, this style of translation relies upon a problematic[5] that treats the English-language framework as a mere explanatory device without its own cultural coding. A spoken interlocution thus risks representing bharatanatyam more as a means of entry into a cultural field of reference,[6] than as a set of choreographic choices and compositional devices.[7]

Orientalism and Globality

When a dancer, viewer, or promoter presents bharatanatyam as both requiring and evading translation and treats the English-language explanation as culturally "neutral," s/he revisits the central premise of the 18th- and 19th-century orientalist treatment of Indian literary and scholarly texts.[8] The orientalist model of translation rested on the assumption that the "Eastern" text required the intervention of an interlocutor who, through his[9] specialist knowledge, could unlock its mysteries for "the West." The public who received this information, within the orientalist paradigm, inhabited the position of subject rather than object of knowledge. The representation of "foreign" texts and practices within 19th-century European society thus did not encourage viewers/readers to examine their own cultural investments but rather reinforced the presumed objectivity of their own social and political position.[10]

Preperformance translations, like the textual material of the colonial orientalist period, characterize bharatanatyam as an object of knowledge, to be uncovered and explained by an expert interlocutor. Nonetheless, they invert an orientalist division of labor by conflating the roles of "native informant" and translator-author. As such, the translating dancer generalizes her own subject position by

1. Subathra Subramaniam (left) and Mayuri Boonham from the British dance company Angika (2001). (Photo by London Dong)

interlocuting for the dance form. The act of translation, then, marginalizes the dance form for its international viewership, designating it as that which requires explication; but at the same time, this translation universalizes the dancer's status as she adopts the position of the agent of information.

The very appearance of verbal translation, however, complicates even this dichotomy between subjects and objects of knowledge. While a preperformance synopsis foregrounds the dance's "foreign-ness," its standardized mode of delivery reveals the dance form's history of international circulation. Bharatanatyam, as well as *sadir* before it,[11] circulated internationally and responded to global discourses on dance. This transnational circulation dates back to, and, in some instances, anticipated the bharatanatyam "revival" of the 1930s and 1940s.[12]

The international performance careers of both Indian and non-Indian dancers inflected the refiguration of the previously marginal sadir as the respectable concert form bharatanatyam.[13] Modern dance forerunner Ruth St. Denis (Coorlawala 1992; Allen 1997),[14] ballerina and choreographer Anna Pavlova,[15] and Indian modernist Uday Shankar (Erdman 1987)[16] all played a role in the bharatanatyam revival, encouraging the return of audience members' and dancers' attention to Indian classical arts. Conversely, Balasaraswati's emphasis on expressivity won admirers among pre- and early modern dancers such as Ted Shawn and Martha Graham (Cowdery 1995:51; La Meri 1985:12; Pattabhi Raman and Ramachandran 1984:26) who found in her claim that interior experience articulated universal themes (Balasaraswati 1988) a corroboration of their own views on artistry. The early 20th-century refiguration of bharatanatyam as a stage practice likewise intersected with a global, modernist concern with the reinvention of dance as a serious "high" art. Revival period practitioners like Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati both invoked discourses of individual creativity in their representation and legitimation of bharatanatyam.[17]

In the 1980s and 1990s, bharatanatyam circulated through ever-more global trajectories. The dance form operates as, in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) terms, intentional cultural reproduction for nonresident Indians in places as divergent as Los Angeles, Singapore, and Manchester. Bharatanatyam likewise provides a means of maintaining nationalist sentiment in exile for Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada, Germany, and the U.K.[18] Practitioners of this dance form have brought it to such disparate locales as Japan and Argentina. Iconic representations of bharatanatyam appear in advertisements and travel guides; bharatanatyam dancers formed the back-up routine for Madonna's performance for the 1999 MTV music video awards. The practice of this dance form likewise offers the successful performer international travel opportunities[19] and acclaim, and requires a global orientation to achieve this level of success. Dancers who strive to maintain professional lives in Chennai perform internationally in order to attain a level of financial reimbursement that offsets the generally low honoraria offered by Chennai venues and to generate the credibility needed to maintain the interest of Chennai promoters.[20] This state of transnational circulation, like the bharatanatyam revival's relationship to international discourses of dance, marks the concert art form as "always-already" global.[21]

Translation not only operated as a method for negotiating this international circulation of dancers and choreographies, but also provided dancers with a strategy

for marketing their performance work in transnational dance milieus. By the late 20th century, bharatanatyam's reputation as a reclaimed and respectable tradition produced a proliferation of trained and accomplished dancers. Chennai, for much of the last century, housed a surplus of bharatanatyam dancers in relation to its viewing public (Coorlawala 1996:71; Gaston 1996:119–21; Meduri 1996:xl)[22] as did other Indian and international metropolises. In order to develop a career as a performer, a dancer, facing such a surfeit, can contend with her competition by cultivating new audiences. This task presents obstacles as the complex coding of bharatanatyam requires specialized skills on the part of audience members for full comprehension. When a dancer translates a piece before performing it, she bridges a perceived gap between content and perception, thereby enabling a broader range of spectators to access the piece.[23]

Although verbal interlocution reiterates an orientalist problematic, the factors that foster the appearance of interlocution unsettle orientalist notions of a static tradition. The 20th-century's translating bharatanatyam dancer, rather than representing an ancient, unchanged culture, grappled with numerous, contemporary paradoxes. While some practitioners of the 1980s and early 1990s used verbal interlocution to contend with competing pressures upon the dance form, choreographers of the mid- to late 1990s, especially those working internationally,[24] developed projects that "translate" (Erdman 1987) epistemologies, choreographic devices, and poetic texts, foregrounding rather than masking their transnational position.[25] These projects align different linguistic, movement, and musical vocabularies in such a way that they subvert a tendency to place European thought systems as the primary framework of interpretation.

Tactics of Globality: Alternatives to Orientalism

Toronto-based choreographer Hari Krishnan's composition *When God Is a Customer* (1999)[26] relies upon verbal translation but uses Telegu songs and their English translation, each as an accompaniment to different kinds of choreography. The piece counterposes sections that feature short, Telegu-language songs, which Krishnan[27] interprets through bharatanatyam's stylized gestures, with phrases of either quotidian gesture or abstract expressionist, contemporary dance–derived movement. The latter is accompanied by a spoken English translation of the poetic text projected over the sound system. This strategy retains bharatanatyam's characteristic relationship of dance to text. The piece de-exoticizes the mudra system for its Canadian audience, however, by treating it as equivalent to expressionist and pedestrian movement vocabularies.

As the poems begin, the lights come up slightly and Krishnan materializes out of the shadows. Barely visible in silhouette, he suggests, through stylized gestures, an intimate encounter between a courtesan and her god-lover. In silence, seated on a pedestal, Krishnan mimes the heroine's awakening the following day, stretching his arms, throwing back his head, and using small delicate movements to suggest the lady's ablutions. He holds a dignified, feminine pose, with a straight arm propped on a raised knee, accompanied by the voice-over of an English phrase that expresses the courtesan's joy: "Today is a good day."

Krishnan stands, descends from the pedestal, and, in conjunction with the sung Telegu lyrics, uses mudras and facial expressions to convey the mood of the song. He traverses the stage in a stately manner, walking in time to the music. In the role of the heroine, Krishnan extends his hands and draws them back, indicating the request "ask him to come." Subsequently, he raises a hand to his forehead and extends it forward, bowing slightly, conveying the promise "I will give him a royal welcome." He develops this mood of joyous anticipation, tracing his articulate hands and arms through improvised elaborations that invoke the regal status of the

absent lover. At the end of the Telegu song, Krishnan resumes a more quotidian pose as he represents the woman patiently awaiting the paramour's arrival.

The piece proceeds in this manner as stylized mudras sculpt the particular images referred to in the Telegu refrains, the tone of which Krishnan conveys through semirealistic facial expression. During the English translation, however, his countenance remains neutral and he either holds a suggestive pose or extracts one word from the line of poetry, the connotations of which he invokes through the expansion of a symbolic gesture. For other phrases of English text, he suggests emotional overtones through full-body positioning rather than through facial expression and gestures with a specific linguistic meaning. For example, in one section, as the poetry describes the heroine's anxiety, he contracts his torso, bringing his hands to the center of his chest. He follows this sinking of the chest with a counteracting arch of the spine, led by the hands. He reaches his arms out from his center, pulling his entire torso into an open flexion and creates a vulnerable look that supplements the straining arms.

In creating the piece, Krishnan aligned the Telegu songs so that they formed a linear narrative (1999). As a result, the non-Telegu speaking audience member can anticipate the development of the theme as it unfolds, aided not only by English translation but also by the momentum of the storyline as evoked by Krishnan's gestures. Rather than dwell on a process of decoding, the non-Telegu speaking viewer's attention can focus on the choreographic priorities of the bharatanatyam-derived movement as well as the more expressionist ones. Krishnan's alternation between stylized gesture for Telegu songs and a more abstracted vocabulary for their English translation therefore speaks directly to the problematic of interpretation for an international audience.[28]

In *When God Is a Customer*, Krishnan provides an alternate solution to a pre-performance explanation by situating verbal interpretation within the work itself. Instead of mystifying the bharatanatyam text by providing a synopsis of the presumably cryptic mudras, Krishnan accompanies both English and Telegu sections with movement. He therefore equates the languages by treating both as dance accompaniment rather than presenting one as the explanatory device for the other.

By contrast, *Triple Hymn* (2000) by Angika, a British dance company consisting of dancer-choreographers Mayuri Boonham and Subathra Subramaniam, translates not linguistic but melodic, choreographic, and rhythmic components into one another. The choreography interweaves bharatanatyam and carnatic music with European classical music. To the sounds of a European operatic melodic structure based on the words of the Sanskrit Gayatri Mantra and on a recitation of various names of Hindu goddesses, two dancers in classical costume render lyrical gestures from the bharatanatyam movement vocabulary. During the *Gayatri Mantra* section, they perform symbolic mudras, suggesting worship, prayer, and other ritual actions. They subsequently depict the various forms of the goddess through characteristic iconographic poses.

Rather than treat bharatanatyam as a cultural icon that depends on a European vocabulary for clarification, *Triple Hymn* places two signifiers of classicism—bharatanatyam and European classical music—alongside each other. Boonham and Subramaniam intertwine two traditional forms instead of interpreting one through the other. The choreographers thereby make explicit the cross-cultural exchange that fostered the project. The piece speaks to the dynamic, cosmopolitan London environment in which it was performed and, by pointing to such an ongoing interculturality, queries the need for explication.

Canadian choreographer Lata Pada's *Cosmos* (1999), like *Triple Hymn*, finds similarities in two different epistemological systems. As its name implies, the work concerns itself with theories of universal creation. *Cosmos* opens on a semidarkened, empty stage. A narrator, invisible but audible over the sound system, trans-

lates into English a quote from the Creation Hymn, of the Ṛig Veda. The stanza reflects on the paradox of universal creation: "In the beginning there was nothing and there was not nothing." The unoccupied stage space reinforces the mysteriousness of the quote. An ensemble of dancers bursts forth from the wings, perforating the charged vacuum with their interjections of dynamic, rhythmic phrases. The dancers careen through the space, pursuing one another into an increasingly tighter spiral.

They wind their way into a close circle. They pause for a moment, tense in their stillness, before launching a phrase of staccato footwork. Each dancer takes a wide stance with legs rotated out and knees bent, hands at her waist. Their alternating pattern of footwork impels their bodies across the stage as the center appears to eject them outward. Their trajectories, linear at first, curve and cross, becoming increasingly chaotic. The ensemble, initially united, fractures into a collection of individual dancers, each tracing her own divergent spatial pathway after a "big bang" of explosive footwork.

2. (From left) Lakshmi Venkataraman, Prabha Raghavan, and Anandhi Narayanan in a program photo for the Cosmos *premiere performance at Premier Dance Theatre in Toronto, June 1999. (Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann)*

In the next scene, the dancers condense their traveling movements into parallel paths that follow specific orbits. Their routes widen and flatten elliptically so that they cross one another without pushing each other off course. While the first scene traced a transition from disorder to equilibrium, this scene moves from order to disruption. The dancers' set orbits waver as they deviate from their clear routes. The performers succumb to the pull of a black hole, resuming a pulsating phrase that indicates their increasing momentum as they catapult toward center stage.

The closing sections evince the harmony of the solar system. The dancers now develop cooperative relationships with one another, again interweaving without colliding or disrupting one another's trajectories. They break off into duets. Back to back, the dancers exchange weight, arms and hands articulating themselves into classical bharatanatyam mudras as bodies remain taut and straight even in tilted positions. The stylized gestures and the dancers' verticality reinforce the image of stability and balance in the relationships between the relatively proximate heavenly bodies.

Pada's piece depicts the creation of the universe by tracking the transition from the churning of nebulous, protoplasmic energy, its explosion into defined pieces of matter, and its ultimate condensation into the specific orbits of heavenly bodies. The choreography thereby blends the theories of creation put forth by European rationalist, scientific traditions, and by Vedic philosophy. As such, *Cosmos* explains the two epistemological systems through one another. The work, by placing the Vedic hymn at the beginning of a depiction of the "big bang," highlights the contradiction at the center of both the Vedic and scientific explanations of creation in that each hypothesis suggests that matter arose from an undefined primordial energy. Although Pada uses an English translation of the hymn, she nonetheless foregrounds the South Asian text as she uses it to demonstrate the paradox imbedded in the "big bang" theory rather than using the cosmological hypothesis to argue for the rationality of the philosophical tract. In contrast to an orientalist project of translation, therefore, her composition does not treat the European scientific model as an objective explanation but rather foregrounds how its contradictions echo the concerns of the Vedic philosophical tract. Thus, the South Asian knowledge system frames the scientific paradigm, a maneuver that reverses the premise of orientalist translation practices.
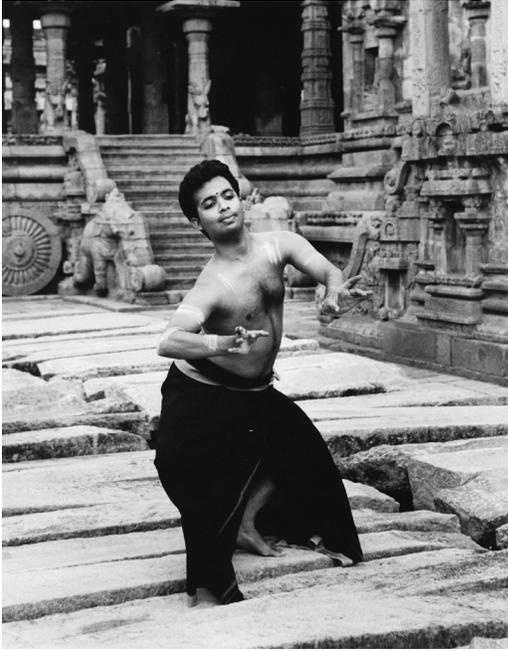
3. Hari Krishnan at the Darasuran temple in Tanjavur, India. (Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann)

Each of these late-century projects offers bharatanatyam an active role in a cosmopolitan urban environment by deploying methods of exchange between epistemologies that circumvent or reverse an orientalist problematic. Krishnan retains the translation paradigm but de-exoticizes the relationship between text and gesture by using English and Telegu in an equivalent manner. Boonham and Subramaniam create a harmonious fusion of classical disciplines and symbols that highlights the hybrid positioning of performers and viewers alike and, therefore, questions the need for translation at all. Pada, like Krishnan, examines different thought systems through one another and inverts an orientalist frame by interpreting the European epistemology through the Vedic philosophical one rather than vice versa. Each of these projects treats bharatanatyam as an entity that responds to the hybridity of its immediate, urban environment rather than as a discrete entity that requires explanation.

I began this essay with the image of the translating bharatanatyam dancer in order to query the historical legacy of this practice and, in doing so, to demonstrate what kinds of cultural and political dilemmas the late-20th-century bharatanatyam practitioner faced. I suggested that verbal interlocutions retain orientalist frames but also that they emerge out of factors that belie orientalist narratives of unchanging tradition. The late-century experiments that I discuss here engage explicitly with bharatanatyam's transnational position and offer the possibility that choreographic translations can move beyond orientalist models of interpretation. These choreographies, rather than representing isolated experiments, speak to the dance form's history of strategic negotiation with globality and hybridity as well as with the staging of local, regional, and national affiliations. In offering an alternative to orientalist paradigms, these projects present the possibility that practitioners can contend with the dance form's complex historical legacy while also challenging viewer expectations. As such, they level the choreographic field so that the dance form can truly be at home in the world.

Notes

1. This essay is based on presentations given at the Association for Asian Studies (2000) and Dance Under Construction (2001) conferences.
2. Ragini Devi performed bharatanatyam and *kathakali*. She was among the first foreigners to perform Indian classical dance forms, the first nonhereditary dancers of both forms, and the first female kathakali dancers.
3. The city of Madras was officially renamed Chennai in the late 1990s, a shift that reinstated the Tamil name of the metropolis.

   I base this observation of the relative prevalence of preperformance translation on my experience viewing international bharatanatyam concerts from 1988 to the present and in comparisons between concerts in Chennai in 1989, 1995 to 1996, and 1999.

   By using the phrase "home city," I do not mean to suggest that the relationship between bharatanatyam and Madras/Chennai is organic and unself-conscious. Bharatanatyam established itself in Madras at the time of the bharatanatyam revival of the 1930s. This relationship did not go uncontested nor did it merely fix bharatanatyam in this city. The relationship between bharatanatyam, urbanization, and transnationalism requires more attention than I can give it here. For more information, see my discussion of bharatanatyam's production of locality (2001:155–213).

4. I borrow this idea of the historical double binds of bharatanatyam from scholar and chore-ographer Avanthi Meduri who has designed a series of lectures in which she represents the tensions of gender, subjectivity, modernity, and nationhood through a performed limp.

5. I borrow this notion of a problematic of orientalism from Partha Chatterjee (1986). Chatter-jee argues that postcolonial nations inverted the problematic of colonialism—independence rather than continued subjugation—but relied upon the same thematic, that of a binary dif-ference between "East" and "West." Here, I reverse Chatterjee's argument in order to draw out a shared problematic between 18th- and 19th-century scholarly and 20th-century pre-performance translations.

6. British choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh comments on the assumption that contemporary dance derived from Indian movement vocabularies serves a function more "cultural" than artistic and links this premise to the practice of offering word-for-gesture translations (1995:192). Jeyasingh commences her *Making of Maps* (1991) with a deconstruction of the preperformance synopsis. Dancers' voices, projected over the sound system, intersect and in-terrupt one another with phrases like "*vanakkam*; good evening" and "the *tillana* is a dance of joy." Meanwhile, the ensemble moves slowly and decisively into and out of postures de-rived from bharatanatyam nritta choreography. Their impassive facial expressions contrast with the sunny voices of the verbal accompaniment.

7. Jeyasingh also identifies an over-emphasis on literal meaning in the British reception of In-dian performance forms (Jeyasingh 1982:4).

8. Edward Said cites the scholarship of Sir William Jones in the late 18th century as the incep-tion of orientalist scholarship in India (1979:75).

9. Here, I use the masculine pronoun intentionally in order to emphasize the gendered invest-ments of orientalist thought. See Koritz (1997) for more on the gendered underpinnings of Orientalism.

10. A classic example of this phenomenon is the 19th-century colonial exhibitions in Europe (Mitchell 1992).

11. "*Bayaderes*" (temple dancers) from South India appeared in Europe for the first time in 1838.

12. "Revival" is the most commonly used term for the reformulation of sadir as the concert art form bharatanatyam. As Matthew Allen suggests, however, this term is "drastically reductive" because this shift also consisted of a "re-population," "re-construction," "re-naming," "re-situation," and "re-storation" (1997:63).

13. The bharatanatyam revival—including its politics and its historical investments—has already received much scholarly attention and therefore I only gesture to it here. I refer to, for in-stance, Allen (1997), Coorlawala (1992, 1996), Gaston (1992, 1996), Meduri (1988, 1996), and Srinivasan (1983, 1985), as well as my own essay on the contrasting perspectives of Bal-asaraswati and Rukmini Devi (1998).

14. St. Denis performed her *Nautch Dance* and *Radha* before Indian audiences in 1926. Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1992) maintains that her performances encouraged Indian viewers to seek out the dance forms on which St. Denis based her choreography. Allen likewise notes this influence but also emphasizes that the direct impact of the Denishawn company on India was "short-lived" (1997:91).

15. Anna Pavlova, who brought ballet to the status of "autonomous art," encouraged Rukmini Devi to seek out the art form of "[her] own country" (in Ramnarayan 1984a:29). Joan Erd-man discusses in some detail the influence that Pavlova had on Uday Shankar (1987:71–73) who, in turn, was a "catalyst to the renaissance in Indian classical dance" (69).

16. Shankar influenced the revival of classical Indian arts in several ways. First, as Erdman indi-cates, Shankar participated in the institutionalization processes that supported the classical Indian dance revivals by providing his students with training in bharatanatyam, kathakali, and *manipuri* alongside his own technique and improvisation classes (1987:84). He also helped to spark the career of legendary devadasi dancer T. Balasaraswati. At Balasaraswati's first concert at the Music Academy in 1933, Shankar, as a member of the audience, was so captivated by her dancing that he requested a repeat performance. Haren Ghosh, a friend of Shankar and an impresario, who also attended the performance arranged Balasaraswati's first concert out-side of southern India, which led to other concerts in north India and, ultimately, interna-tionally (Arudra 1986/87a:25, 1986/87c:20).

17. Both Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi located in bharatanatyam opportunities for creativity and individual expression. While Rukmini Devi found creative expression in the composi-tion of new dances which, she maintained, sprang from traditional aesthetics (Ramnarayan

1984b:32), Balasaraswati found opportunities for imaginative work in improvised sections of the inherited repertoire (Balasaraswati 1988:39).

18. I am indebted to Jeyanthy Siva for first calling my attention to the use of bharatanatyam in the production of Tamil nationalist sentiment.

19. For instance, Gaston states that younger generations of *icai vellala* (the caste group that largely constituted devadasi communities) dancers have pursued professional performance in recent years because of the possibility it provides for international travel (1996:129).

20. I base this observation on personal correspondence (1995–1996, 1999) with Chennai-based dancers who are at different levels of renown and seniority.

21. I borrow the application of this Derridean phrase from Meduri (1996:400). Meduri uses this phrase to query the gendered implications of the air of respectability that bharatanatyam acquired in the mid- to late 20th century.

22. Senior dancer and teacher Kalanidhi Narayanan describes this surfeit through reference to "supply and demand" (1999). She suggests that Madras simply cannot provide solo concerts for all of its dancers as the number of dancers outweighs the number of performance slots. Gaston likewise identifies a "dance boom" that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s (1996:119–20).

23. Performers use other methods of bridging a gap in comprehension, including the provision of *libretti* and, more rarely, the use of supratitles.

24. Translation experiments are not, however, exclusive to performances in non-Indian contexts. Chennai-based choreographer Gitanjali Kolanad's *What She Said* (1993), for example, deploys scholar A.K. Ramanujan's English translations of Tamil Sangam poetry. Maharashtrian bharatanatyam dancer Sucheta Chapekar has reconstructed 17th- and 18th-century Marathi-language dance compositions and has integrated Hindustani (North Indian classical) music with bharatanatyam (Sethuraman 1985:46).

25. Experiments with cross-cultural interpretation are not unique to the late 20th century. For instance, as Joan Erdman (1987) argues, modernist Uday Shankar's work translated Indian aesthetic components into European compositional frameworks.

26. Named after a scholarly text of the same title (Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman, 1994).

27. Here, in the interest of consistency and in capitulation to European and American conventions of nomenclature, I identify dancers and choreographers by their second names. This creates an awkward fit with Indian, and especially South Indian, naming conventions. However, I do this to avoid a situation in which scholars appear by last name and dancers by first name, an approach which might suggest that choreography is a less serious enterprise than writing.

28. The piece would have a different, although not necessarily predictable, effect in Chennai. The majority of dance viewers in Chennai speak Tamil with a significant minority speaking Telegu as their first language. Dance compositions until recently used a number of different languages, primarily Tamil, Telegu, and Sanskrit. In Chennai, as elsewhere, an emphasis on the comprehensibility of poetic texts has increased. Dancers, choreographers, and promoters have responded to this concern by presenting more pieces in the Tamil language (Nandini Ramani 1999).

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