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ZUR ANSICHT: Tilt Pause Shift. Dance Ecologies in India



tiltpauseshift

DANCE ECOLOGIES IN INDIA

EDITED BY ANITA E. CHERIAN



The book is a result of a double documentary endeavour as it were. Presenting the contemporary dancescape of India in the form of a book covers the first ambition. This obviously comprises a large number of photographs and accompanying texts by both practitioners and scholars. The second aspect goes back to an experimental project on Writing about Dance sponsored by the Swiss and German cultural institutes (Pro Helvetia and Goethe-Institut). It aimed at developing forms and approaches of describing current practices and aesthetics via portraits of one selected choreographic work by one choreographer. These in-depth portraits are accompanied by inserted photographic material much smaller in size than the corpus of the book. Different colours of the paper further mark the different portions within this archival opus. Thus a complex and sumptuous graphic layout combines various documentary levels so as to account for the broad variety of current dance making in India. Yet as the title indicates, the scope is not only on aesthetics and style, but more on the intricate interlaces between social, political, and historic facets as well as the role tradition can play in dance appreciation. The book thus comes to serve not only as an archival insignia but at the same time collects source material apt to open up further research; it grants ›fluid access‹, to use the term informing MAP's activities and research topic.

Anita E. Cherian (ed.): tiltpauseshift. Dance Ecologies In India. Delhi: Tulika Books and Gati Dance Forum 2016. ISBN 978-93-82381-85-3 (http://gatidance.com/?page_id=290)

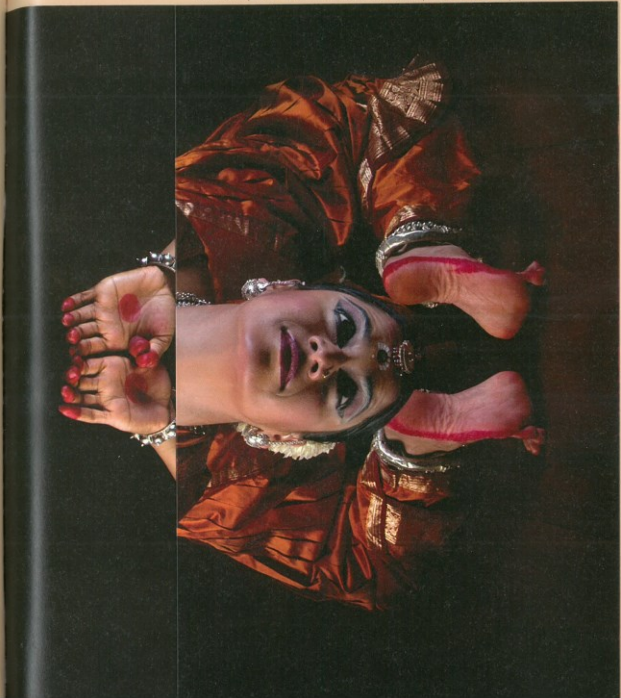
Despite the physical distance between them, slight details reveal their intimacy as the dancers rotate to face each other. There is an energy that links their gently inclined chins, while their eyes are unrelentingly locked in contact. Closing in, one dancer offers an upraised palm on which the other places a fist with the thumb held erect – evoking the image of a *linga*, in reference to Shiva. Even as they freeze into poses – choreographic bookends – there is something tactile about the way they complete each other's sentences. The music builds up, the cycle of beats played on the *mandala* now accompanied by a steadily rising *aloap*, an arrhythmic melody improvised by the singer. Gradually, as the musicians segue into the next section of the song, the dancers' suggestions of duality and division attain greater form, leading into the elucidation of a Sanskrit poem.

Vibhakti, by the choreographer Surupa Sen, is based on the *Arghanariswara Stotra*, a set of Sanskrit verses describing Shiva and Shakti, the masculine and feminine aspects, as inhabiting a single body. There is no consensus on the origins of the text; it is attributed to the *Matsya Purana*, a post-Vedic scripture, or alternately to the eighth-century saint-poet Adi Shankara. Performed as an Odissi duet by Surupa and her dance partner Bijayini Satpathy, the choreography explores a text that is believed to be a hymn sung by a devotee, as a setting for the mutual admiration between Shiva and Shakti. Drawing on physical and material attributes, the verses bring out the stark contrast between the two halves of *Arghanariswara*. Thus Surupa as Shakti embraces Bijayini's leg as she describes the snakes that curl around Shiva's body. In turn Bijayini, playing Shiva, leans forward, tenderly reaching out to draw attention to the golden anklets that adorn her partner's feet.

Continuing a partnership that has lasted for over two decades, Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy – the choreographer and her muse – live and work at Nrityagram, a dance village on the outskirts of Bangalore. As one of Nrityagram's first students, Surupa studied Odissi under Kelucharan Mohapatra and Nrityagram's founder Protima Gauri. She trained in *abhinaya* and choreography, besides learning the martial art forms of Chhau, Kalaripayattu and Aikido. Appointed Nrityagram's artistic director before she turned 30, she began to choreograph 'under duress', to create new work for the fledgling Nrityagram ensemble. Her varied dance training, approach to music, and sustained interactions with contemporary dance artists and choreographers are some of the strands that inform her work.

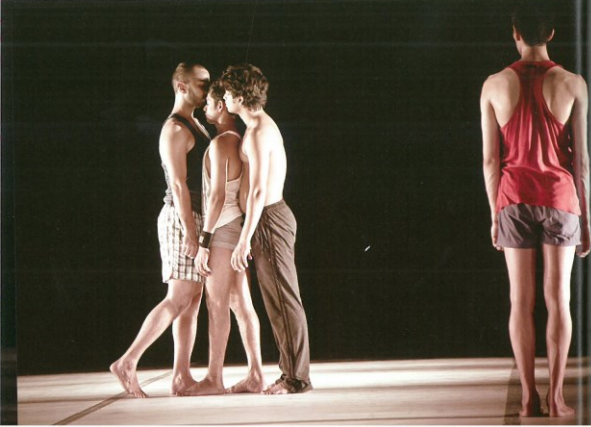
Surupa Sen's choreographic practice revolves around a critical investigation of the geometry of the body in relation to Odissi. In her work, there is an emphasis on the dichotomy between the strength of the lower body

and the fluidity of the upper body. Dance practice at Nrityagram draws on several strands: the existing vocabulary of Kelucharan Mohapatra's style of Odissi, canonical movements derived from facets of daily life, and performance traditions from Odisha – all of which are further layered with movement patterns constructed from descriptions in the *Natyashastra* and



As the piece develops, the frontal choreography dissolves into other lines, spaces and clusters. Staying predominantly with everyday movements, gestures and postures, the dancers tease, bully and play with each other. Choreographer Mandeep Raikey builds duets, exploring different aspects of masculinity. In one scene, a dancer allows his body to slip into effeminate postures, with a hip sticking out or an arm draped gracefully to one side. Each time he does this, another dancer pushes, shoves and literally straightens him out. At first, the straightening out is done through physical manipulation, but soon a sharp bark is enough. The duet opens up into an ensemble section with each dancer's body slowly melting, then suddenly snapping to attention, as they make their way across the stage without any apparent external command. Another duet starts with the dancers comparing sizes of different body-parts. The faded male preoccupation with comparing penis sizes is built up into a comic duet with the dancers comparing all sorts of body-parts. A third dancer enters the competition: it is a woman, and still the comparing goes on – to hilarious effect. Mandeep uses synchronicity and canon, abstract movement and everyday gestures to build an ensemble piece that examines masculinity by allowing its mental construction to unfold in front of the audience.

The significance of this piece is highlighted especially when placed within



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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PIECE IS HIGHLIGHTED ESPECIALLY WHEN PLACED WITHIN

form or technique, but rather connecting back to the body with a focus on methods or principles of movement. The choreographer also developed his relationship to composition during this time, and was able to articulate his own approach to putting moving images together. After graduating in 2005 with a B.A. (Hons) in Dance Theatre, Mandeep was looking for something that would give his dancing a specificity, and he found this in Shobana Jeyasingh's company. Her treatment of Bharatanatyam attracted him because, while providing the 'specificity' he was seeking, it was not restricted by the traditional form. Not having had any formal training in Bharatanatyam, Mandeep says, 'playing with the form came along with learning it'.

The research questions that have occupied the artist since have changed with each of his major works. *Inhabited Geometry*, created soon after his return to India, explored the notion of 'home'. In this work, Bharatanatyam is a reference point, with the geometry of the form suggesting the geometry of the lived space of a home. In a *male ant has straight antennae*, Mandeep sets out to explore masculinity through diverse bodies. In this piece he is not concerned with performing his 'Indian-ness', for by now he is sure that it is present in his body and choreography without having to labour the point. He places the dancers in situations that subtly shift between play, threat, competition, flirtation and tentative tenderness. With predominantly a male cast, the study of masculinity is evident without getting bogged down in stereotypes: the presence of the single female dancer only serves to further highlight the emphasis on the masculine. It goes without saying that it is not only the men who are masculine and the woman who is feminine, but that natural shifts in the bodies are also present in the work.

Mandeep Raikey moved back to Delhi in 2009, and has since been actively involved in the contemporary dance landscape as a new voice in choreography and a co-initiator of spaces like the Gati Dance Forum. As a choreographer, he seems to be moving past obvious identities, and exploring subtler and hence more exciting areas. His work seeks not to prove, but to propose.

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