



Indian dances

When we mention “Indian dance”, more often than not we instantly picture “Bollywood” dance in our minds. And we muse on these dazzling choreographies which leave their mark on mighty sagas which the Indian film industry produces in abundance. We watch in wonder as battalions of dancers, clad in flamboyant regalia parade, perfectly sequencing rhythmically-pulsed movements, articulating hand and head gestures with well-honed moves. The “Bollywood” style combines elements of classical Indian dances, such as the *Bharata Natyam*, the *Kathak*, folklore dances from the subcontinent with figures from modern jazz, rock and, more recently, hip-hop. As such, this style produces a mix of forms, rhythms and movements taken from American and Asian cultures. Its emergence and current-day success stem from choreographic globalization which began at the end of the 19th century when artists from Europe, Asia and America started to perform on the world’s stage and to exchange and borrow each other’s gestural vocabulary.

This first part of the Indian dance journeys, devoted to encounters and exchange, is styled after “seasonal”-type TV series, thus offering an opportunity to embrace future developments which tomorrow’s performances or the acquisition of new videos may prompt. This first season takes a look at choreographic creations, performed in French venues, in which Indian dance brings its touch. It crosses the paths of other dances, interweaves with them. It inspires movements and unique energy. It is said to be like a distant resonance of flamenco. It also parades through the streets of the City of Lyon, carried along by the revolutionary chant of the *Canuts* (Lyon silk workers back in the 19th century). It is, therefore, through the dialogue that it initiates with other choreographic, musical and performance forms that the 1st season of this Journey invites to discover Indian dance.

In short, a few pas de deux – or more – between dancers, choreographers, musicians and storytellers from here and from India.

In *Tempus Fugit*, the Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui who studied Indian dance – *Kathak*, *Kuchipudi* - explores human destiny through the prism of the passage of time. With its moments of eternity, its inevitable regrets and its appalling recurrences. The ten performers of this cosmopolitan troupe move around a metallic scenscape composed of Chinese poles juggling between the highs and lows of their existence, aspiring to heights yet frequently held back by earthly reality. In this play on bursts and drops, leaps and falls, nose to the ground, ambiguity reigns supreme. And that is exactly what this “Bollywood” sequence is all about. Just like in an Indian musical, the female performer’s demonstrative monologue gradually takes on a rhythmic accent which triggers the choreography. Music, dance and confetti transform soul-searching into a festive, joyful scene where the disorder of the world and antagonisms are absorbed. Everyone joins in the dance. Everyone moves forward at the same pace yet unison is but fleeting. The stone doesn’t budge from the shoe. Just like slapping and stroking are



initiated by the two sides of a single hand, the enchantment which the “Bollywood” dance lavishes is crisscrossed with complications. Consequently, this sequence serves to emphasize here that the Bollywood style only represents one aspect of Indian dance, most certainly one of the most well-known around the world, yet it should not be underestimated as this alone.

“Silk Roads”, the theme of the Lyon Dance Biennial in 2000, invited to celebrate Indian dance. For the **Défilé**, a huge popular celebration, where thousands of amateur dancers parade through the city mentored by professional artists, the group from Vénissieux, one of Lyon’s peripheral towns, dreamt up a project bringing together Fatiha Bouinoual, a hip-hop choreographer and dancer and Annie Torre, a Bharata Natyam dancer and teacher, a classical, sacred dance from Southern India. Yet, there was no question of the two artists wishing to merge their two styles in any way. Each choreographed their part, both would follow on in sequence to the score of *Le Chant des Canuts*, sung *a cappella* by the Fanfare à Mains Nues’ choral. Although the costumes may hint, minimally, at the traditional sari worn by Indian dancers, with its “choli” – a type of slim-fitting upper garment -, Annie Torre’s choreographic creation remains true to Bharata Natyam codes, rules and spirit as she had been taught them by her master, the great Swamimalai K. Rajaratnam. She also invoked the history of this dance, undertaken up until the 1920s by *devadasis*, priestesses dedicated to the temple who would parade pageant-style during processions. In the streets of Lyon, for the amateur dancers who had the opportunity to have a go at this dance which is rarely performed in France, the difficulty encountered was to maintain the sound quality of their stamping feet and to keep up with the choral-initiated rhythm, in spite of the noise from the streets.

Foot-stamping is a fundamental feature of Indian dance. It creates a sound element which overlaps the percussion instruments played by the orchestra, such as the *mridangam* (drum) and *talams*, small tambourines. In Rajasthan, musicians use two rectangular sticks of wood, known as *kartal*, which they tap rhythmically together in their hands. These are the ancestors of flamenco castanets. The journey the dance completed from Northern India to arrive in Spain is actually the framework of *Yatra*, - “journey” in Sanskrit. This work, bringing together Andrés Marin, major figure of contemporary flamenco, two dancers from Kader Attou’s company Accrorap, the drummer Manuel Wandji and the traditional musicians of the Divana Ensemble from Rajasthan, initiates a surprising dialogue between two forms of dance, hip-hop and flamenco, rather unaccustomed to mixing together. What brings them together in this instance is not so much gesture or form but more so the idea of challenge spurred on by the percussions. No desire whatsoever to mix together: each dance highlights the specificities of the other, simply by its power.

In this extract, the *kartal* player and Andrés Marin engage in a rhythmic joust. The hands of the former challenge the feet of the latter. Although, strictly speaking, the instrumentalist does not dance, it is striking to see the analogy of his gestures in tune



with the arm movements of the *bailaor*. This vigorous face-to-face between the two men, born and bred in two far-distant lands, reveals the kinship between flamenco and *Kathak*, a classical dance from Northern India. The swift twirling, arm lunges and, even more so, the fast-paced feet stamping which characterize it are recognizable through Andrés Marin's frenzied zapateados and taconeos which, as he says himself, accomplish a "musical pilgrimage" here. On stage, the history of the world and that of dance tell their stories.

Akram Khan learned the *Kathak* dance when he was just 7 years old, in London, taught by Sri Pratap Pawar, a disciple of Pandit Birju Maharaj, one of the greatest masters of this style. Born in England into a Bangladeshi family, Akram Khan pursued his studies at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, in Leeds, and obtained a scholarship to attend P.A.R.T.S., a contemporary dance school directed by Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, in Brussels. After ten years of traditional *Kathak* discipline, he encountered other choreographic approaches which led him to question his initial training. Yet, the task proved difficult. By listening to the confusion within his body, he managed to grasp the correspondences between the dances. And, went on to create a new choreographic language characterized by sharp, powerful, precise velocity. Arm positioning and flings, wrist inflections and swirling gyrations are all highly-recognizable features of *Kathak*. Yet, Akram Khan's dance is one of uniqueness, drawing its strength from the alliance of antagonisms: a dance which is meticulous yet sensual, gracious yet percussive. A sort of "motionlessness at extreme speed", in the words of the choreographer himself, or even "clearness through chaos".

This extract from *Gnosis* focuses on the tension between similarity and mismatch. Hand-in-hand with the Taiwanese Fang-Yi Sheu, former solo dancer with Martha Graham and at the Cloud Gate Dance Theater in Taiwan, Akram Khan explores a character from the *Mahabharata*: Gandhari, the wife of a blind king who, through love, deprived herself of the power of sight. In this sequence, the protagonists engage in a pas de deux aiming for unison when a gesture, from one or the other, runs counter to this promise. We imagine they are together, yet their glances tend to opposite directions, before reuniting, only to shift yet again. Impactful movements accumulating energy and freezing it in space evoke the rapid whirling of *Kathak* which, following a rhythmic explosion, conclude with a long pose.

In *Ibuki*, whose choreography was created by the Japanese choreographer Ushio Amagatsu, we can easily make out the legacy of *Kuchipudi*. Shantala Shivalingappa, who trained in this classical style from Andhra Pradesh, located in Southern India, had the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with ballet and contemporary dance choreographers, like Pina Bausch. These encounters led her to perceive her dance differently whilst, at the same time, strengthening it. Her collaboration with Ushio Amagatsu, founder of the *Butoh* company Sankai Juku, whose creations seem ever-so far removed from Indian dance, focused on the conviction that, despite their highly-differing technical languages,



they were inhabited by the same conception of dance. In this extract, the dancer combines continuous, rather slow movements, although a few accelerations, stemming more so from the energy of *Butoh*, are detectable, with *mudra* – hand gestures – arm geometry and foot positioning specific to *Kuchipudi*.

These gestural features are also characteristic of the *Bharata Natyam*, of which Priyadarsini Govind is one of the greatest performers of her generation. With her associate Elisabeth Petit, a French dancer of the same style, she created ***Sahasam***, a performance designed for youth audiences to discover Indian dance and music. In this extract, she calls on *Abhinaya*, the art of narrative dance where, through the body, hand gestures and facial expressions, the performer recites a sung poem. Here the text is chronicled by the on-stage narrator, who provides the spectator with the signification of this body language. The gestures used are less symbolic more analogous, resembling pantomime-style, most certainly to make it easier for the public to understand.

The performance ends with a sequence of pure dance, the second aspect of the *Bharata Natyam*, this time purely choreographic, where hand gestures do not take on any symbolic sense. This new extract from *Sahasam* can be discovered in the upcoming season of the Indian Dance Journey!



To go further:

Rosita Boisseau, *Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui*, Textuel, 2013.

Anne Décoret-Ahiha, *Les Danses exotiques en France : 1880 – 1940*, CND, 2004.

Xavier Fischer, *Chorégraphe Akram Khan*, DVD, Albalena films, 2012.

Emmanuel Grimaud, *Bollywood film Studio ou comment les films se font à Bombay*, CNRS Edition, 2004.

Credits:

Extract selection

Anne Décoret-Ahiha

Texts and bibliographic selection

Anne Décoret-Ahiha

Production

Maison de la Danse

Author's biography:

Anne Décoret-Ahiha is a dance anthropologist, who holds a PhD from the University of Paris 8. A lecturer, trainer and consultant, she develops propositions focusing on dance as an educational resource and creates participative processes involving corporeality. She runs the "[Spectator warm-up sessions](#)" at the Maison de la Danse.

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