

THE FIRST TIME I SAW A KATHAKALI PERFORMANCE, I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING GOING ON ONSTAGE, BUT HAD A DISTINCT SENSE THAT EVEN IF I DID NOT UNDERSTAND, THERE WAS SOMETHING MEANINGFUL GOING ON. THE VISCERAL TENSION KEPT ME AT THE EDGE OF MY SEAT WITH ANTICIPATION.



Invisible worlds brought to life

With its preoccupation with myth, extraordinary worlds and play-acting - Indian dance is tailor made to excite and engage the child's imagination, says Bharatnatyam exponent Navtej Johar.

Text: Navtej Johar | Photos: Dominik Huber

Before the curtains open, there is a kind of anticipation that used to be unbearably acute for me when I was a child. I was ready to be taken away, willing to be sucked into the magic of the stage. A child seeks magic in performance; he or she is more than willing to be transported to another world, to wholeheartedly believe in the world of make-believe. A friend's little boy asked his mother while watching a Bharatantayam dance performance, "Mummy, woh kya bhagwan ji hain?" ("Mummy, is that god?") A child will go to great lengths to imagine and transpose the mysterious world of his understanding upon what goes on stage. A child is willing to put far more on stake than an adult would. Thus, the performer has a bigger responsibility when performing for



children. In fact, as I am writing this piece, I am making a resolve to make a classical work for children and tour it around schools.

Indian dance is myth-oriented. It seems tailor made to excite and engage the child's imagination because it a) deals with supernatural and the extraordinary realms that children are fascinated by and b) celebrates play-acting. The quicksilver fluidity with which a dancer glides through multiple identities - one

instant a man, then a seductress, then a god, a demon, a bird, a river, the breeze - can be exciting and bewitching for a child, apart from being immensely imagination-enhancing. For starters, children would understand and appreciate a classical performance better if they are already familiar with the myths being played out.

Having said that, let me add that there is actually far more in performance than the cognitive mind can register and understand.

Bharatanatyam is a classic dance form originating in Tamil Nadu. This dance form denotes various 19th and 20th century reconstructions of Cathir, the art of temple dancers. Cathir in turn, is derived from ancient dance forms. Bharatanatyam is usually accompanied by the classical Carnatic music.

In ancient times it was performed as dasiattam by temple Devadasis in various parts of South India. Many of the ancient sculptures in Hindu temples are based on dance Karanas. In fact, it is the celestial dancers, apsaras, who are depicted in many scriptures dancing the heavenly version of what is known on earth as Bharatanatyam.

In the most essential sense, a Hindu deity is a revered royal guest in his temple/abode, to be offered a standard set of religious services called Sodasa Upacharas ("sixteen hospitalities") among which are music and dance, as outlined in Gandharva Veda. Thus, many Hindu temples traditionally maintained complements of trained musicians and dancers, as did Indian rulers.

Bharatanatyam as a dance form and carnatic music set to it are deeply grounded in Bhakti. The word 'Bharat' is made up of three Sanskrit terms: Bhaav meaning emotion, Raag meaning music, and Taal meaning rhythm. The word Natyam means drama. The two words together describe this dance form. Bharatanatyam, it is said, is the embodiment of music in visual form, a ceremony, and an act of devotion. Dance and music are inseparable forms; only with Sangeetam (words or syllables set to raga or melody) can dance be conceptualized.



Understanding all that is happening on stage definitely allows the viewer a major entry point into the performance - but there is a lot in there for the untutored viewer as well as for the viewer unfamiliar with the story. The most distinguishing feature of a live performance is its infectious, dramatic energy. The first time I saw a Kathakali performance, I couldn't understand anything going on onstage, but had a distinct sense that even if I did not understand, there was something meaningful going on. The visceral tension kept me at the edge of my seat with anticipation.

I often say that the dancer sees things while in performance which the audience cannot. The dancer is totally involved in this make-believe world and is responding to invisible characters. The conviction with which the dancer engages with these will determine the degree of involvement on part of the viewer. The viewer should want to see what the dancer is seeing and he (the viewer) cannot. It is the unfairness of the situation

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that propels the viewer to identify with the dancer. So, a lot depends upon the capability, skill and conviction of the dancer.

The Grammar of Performance

When watching a performance there are three distinct elements at play: one is the technique or the stylised vocabulary, the knowledge of which can help the viewer read the performance better; second is the variety of texts or myths that are enacted or elaborated; and finally it is the visceral energy of the performance.

1. The vocabulary is distinct and sometimes undecipherable. Though it takes a lot from real life - it may be borrowing from life in a different era or place - an element of foreignness predominates. The very idea of stylization is to make life look a little unfamiliar, un-ordinary, even extraordinary.

It is actually OK if a viewer does not understand everything in performance. To this date, I don't always fully understand what a dancer is doing on stage. But as long as there is something recognizable to latch on to, I, as the viewer, am able to put the puzzle together as it bears meaning for me.

2. The dance either directly enacts episodes from myths or culls out frozen moments from these stories to depict and voice the human condition. Knowing the myths or getting to understand the general context is imperative in appreciating the finer nuances of the performance. When deciphering



the textual layer within a performance it is important to remember that often these texts are essentially non-linear. They belong to the mythic imagination that counters rational conditioning and actually facilitates us - adults and children alike - to think out of the box. So what goes on stage cannot really be read or judged from a vantage point of rational thinking as traditional performances presuppose a shift in vantage point.

3. The responsibility of generating that all-important 'visceral connection' lies, first and foremost, with the dancer. A good performance, like an exciting game, is hard not to get involved with on the energy-plane but the audience too plays a very important role

in it. A jaded, cynical or stiff audience can effectively deflate or kill a performance. It is here that I would like to add that a child is less likely to be jaded or cynical (unless he or she has been already bored to death by dance through the tedium of dance classes at school or by an overbearing parent) as compared to an adult. Thus, in an ideal situation, all that a

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child needs is the opportunity and the freedom to be his or her own person in order to make the best of a performance without any assistance or prodding.

Unselfconscious performer, Unselfconscious Audience

Whether the audience 'understands' a performance or not, the one thing that is fatal to the performance-experience is the element of self-consciousness. A self-conscious performer cannot slip and slide out of him/herself to inhabit different characters and create magic. A self-conscious audience will not be propelled out of their seats to engage with the performance.

I am personally acquainted with several people who feel very inadequate for not understanding the vocabulary of the dance. I urge them not to view dance from that slant - it makes the act of viewing tentative and self-conscious, and gets in the way of the visceral exchange so important to a live performance. The feeling of inadequacy is easily transmitted to young viewers. Another mistake is to making a cumbersome, heavy-duty monolith of the dance - representation of our illustrious past, emblem of high-culture, prerogative of the well bred. What an adult needs to preserve and protect in a novice viewer is the innocence and security of remaining his or her own person.

I often wonder if a child (or an adult, for that matter) would find it easier to enjoy a neighbourhood Ramlila more than a Bharatanatyam recital. A Ramlila is an event, an outing. It is fun - because it is unselfconscious - and it carries a similar message to, say, a classical dance performance. The difference in a classical dance



performance is that it is emotionally more distilled. It magnifies a dramatic moment, stretches it within a seemingly endless stretch of imagined time. In this imagined time, it may unravel multiple emotional and psychological complexities of that one dramatic moment. This process requires perspective - a resolved way of viewing, identifying and feeling from one-remove. And this perspective is well worth imbibing not just while learning to experience a dance performance, but in life and relationships as well. A classical dance performance can offer that experience - at least potentially.

Co-Authoring a Performance

Mindful watching from one-remove involves respect, or a respectful way of watching. This

means not jumping to conclusions. It means being sympathetic to the performer even though he or she may not be able to be magical or nuanced. It means exerting and extending yourself to read between the lines and actually feel the freedom to co-imagine or co-author the performance.

Co-authoring is can really enrich the performance-experience. And it can only come from a healthy dose of unselfconsciousness, respect and consideration. When watching a classical dance performance with your young loved one, exercise the basic rules of respect and restraint, refrain from intimidating messages that may make the child feel too inundated or self-conscious and allow as many forums to the child to imagine through engagement with a variety of arts.

It is important to remember that not all performers are great or magical. Mediocre performers far outnumber the gifted - and in such cases, it is perfectly fine if the viewers' co-authoring far exceeds the imagination of the dancer. The idea of watching a performance is that it can really ignite the wonderful faculty of imagination. ■

