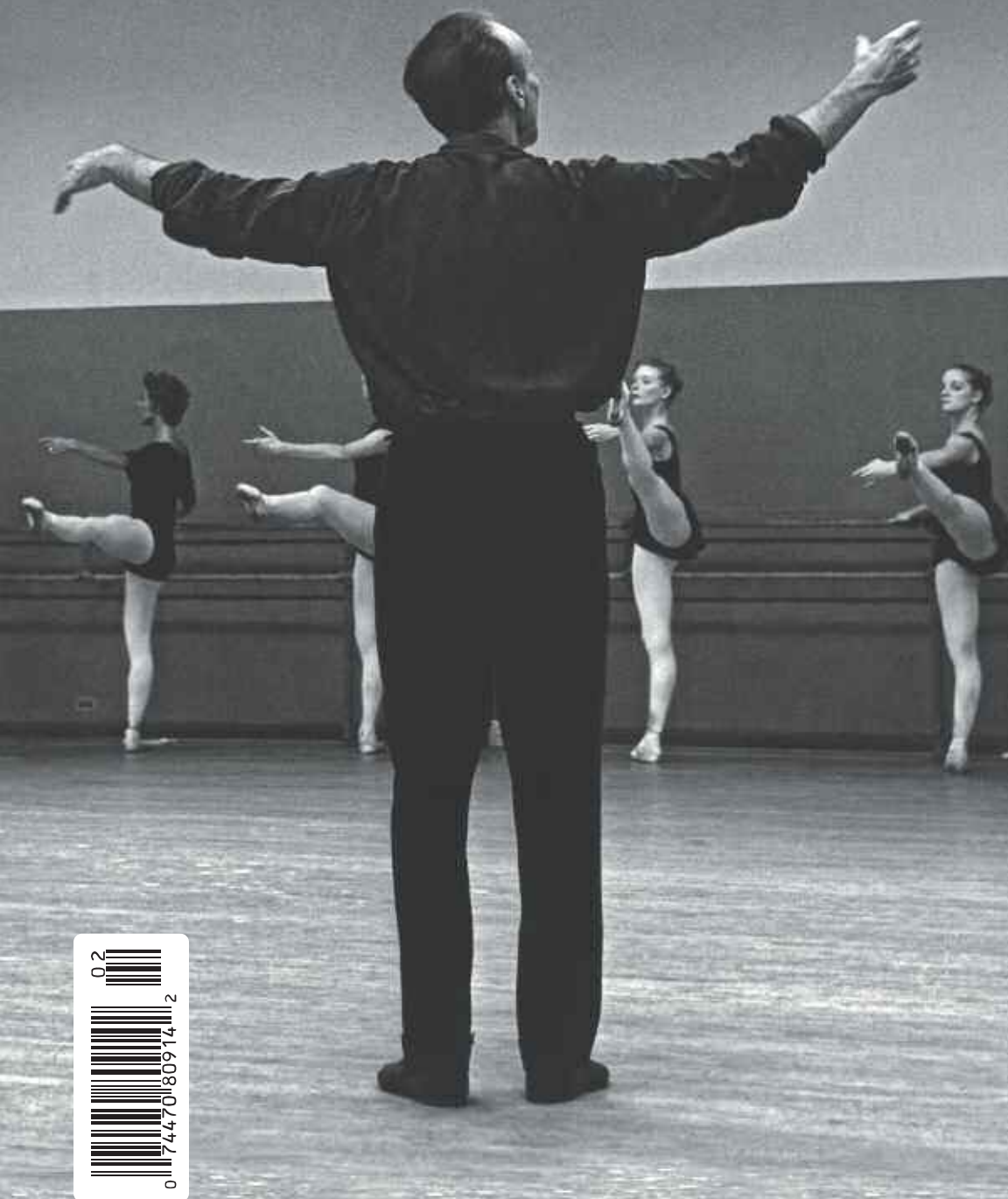


Summer 2017

Ballet Review



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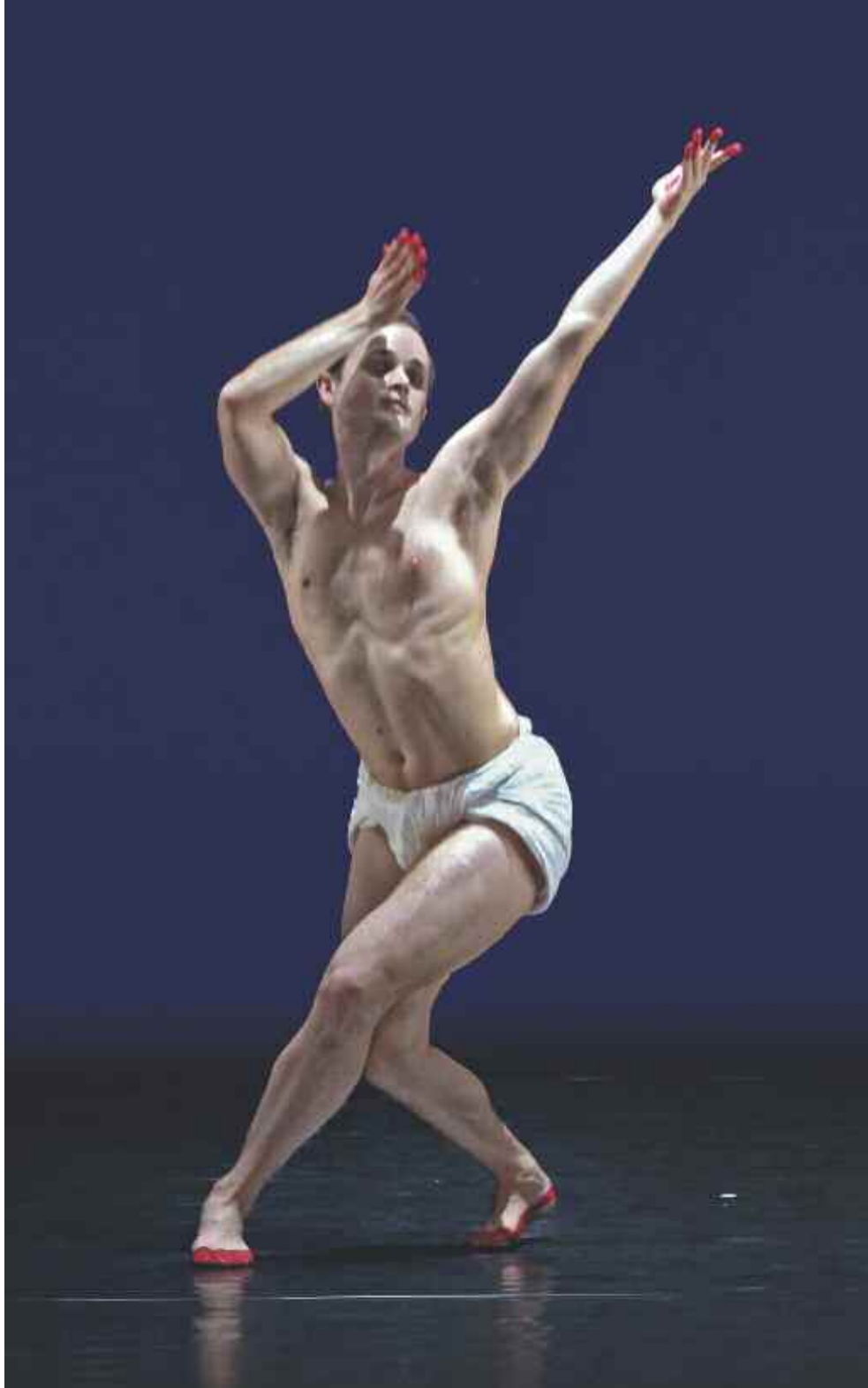
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Dallas McMurray in Mark Morris' *O Rangasayee*. (Photo: Costas, Mark Morris Dance Group)

White Light 2016

Karen Greenspan

What does it mean to be human – or more specifically, humane? This was the heady subject matter grappled with at Lincoln Center's White Light Festival Panel Conversation moderated by John Schaefer. This was a most relevant conversation to have, given the deeply troubling national political discourse and that the White Light Festival, now in its seventh year, was conceived to draw inspiration from the transformative power of the performing arts to encourage reflection on the shared, collective experience of being human. The paleoanthropologist from the panel, which also included a writer, a cognitive scientist, and a theologian/psychoanalyst, pointed out some of the behaviors of humanity that differentiate humans from other sentient forms of life. These include abstract thinking, planning, creativity, identification with multiple, imagined communities, symbolic thinking and communication, and cognizance of a theory of mind. All of these stem from a capacity for self-consciousness, or self-reflection. Given this, the making of art, or the creative process, is a supreme manifestation of humanity. Another act of humanity is the gathering of audience members to appreciate and reflect on the performed expression as well as the process of creating. In this spirit, I share some highlights from this always thought-provoking and uplifting festival.

Most of us are familiar with the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel from the book of Genesis in which the Lord observed the people of the earth who, at the time, all spoke one language. With this ease of communication, they were able to cooperate in building a great city with a tall tower that reached the heavens. To punish this act of hubris, the people were plunged into utter confusion as they all suddenly spoke different languages and became

unable to understand one another. This is the starting point for the 2010 dance-theater work *Babel (words)* that was presented at the Rose Theater.

The co-choreographers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet took us from this point of chaos-driven isolation through many challenges and landscapes until the skills of cooperation were relearned – ultimately allowing for integration of the self as part of the collective. For this journey, they chose a cast of performers from thirteen different countries who speak in twenty different languages as well as have fluency in a variety of dance and music languages. The process of creating the piece actually mimicked the story being told as the multicultural cast collaborated together in a six-month creation workshop. Cast members confessed how argumentative and confrontational the creative process was with so many strong-willed, expressive personalities involved.

Cherkaoui has sought through his choreographies to explore identity and cultural diversity with their misunderstandings and inspirational interconnections. His own story exemplifies these issues as he was born to a Flemish mother and Moroccan father and raised in a multilingual household in an Antwerp suburb, with a foundation in both the Catholic and Muslim faiths. Many of these explorations have been co-created with Jalet, his artistic partner since 2000. For *Babel*, the third piece in a trilogy that began with *Foi* and *Myth*, Cherkaoui also collaborated with sculptor Antony Gormley, whose defining set design of five moveable, aluminum, cube-shaped frames creates a shifting architecture that the performers manipulate.

Throughout the piece, the performers are multi-fluent and fluid – easily transitioning between dancing, speaking, singing, acting, and rearranging the set without traditional roles or boundaries. The ensemble of world musicians are mostly stationed upstairs behind a black scrim, where they play the harp, dulcimer, taiko drums, Japanese flute, harmonium, tabla, bells, and more. But they are

also fluid, moving among the dancers onstage while chanting Latin early music or leading the dancers in polyphonic song. Cherkaoui encourages the use of any and all means of expression in the service of storytelling. He has said, "The essence of my work is the communication and the dialogue with the audience. Sometimes you don't have words to express yourself and then you dance. Sometimes it can't be danced and then you sing. Sometimes it can't be sung and then you tell it."

Indeed, there is notable use of spoken words in his pieces. *Babel (words)* opens with statuesque actor-dancer Ulrika Kinn Svensson, who acts as a kind of facilitator throughout the work, delivering a monologue, "The first language humans used were gestures. There is nothing primitive about this language that floats from people's hands," while she earnestly gestures a made-up sign language. The dancers line up kneeling on the floor behind her, and when she finishes and steps aside, they move in unison with percussive, angular arm gestures fiercely marking out their individual territories to the martial beat of the big, Japanese taiko drum.

As the work evolves, the metal frames are pushed, stacked, tipped, and tumbled into new architectural formations that call to mind a cityscape, a boxing ring, a prison, an airport security line, a time tunnel, a Tower of Babel. In a particularly kinetic tableau, some dancers continuously move the silver cubes like a carousel while others dance (in their varying styles of movement – modern, break dance, martial arts) within the shifting spaces, or rooms, to dreamlike music played on harp, flute, dulcimer, and bells, with Indian vocals. This gentle scene morphs into a construction site in which dancers climb on the structures while others slide several together into ever-more-complex, tall, and changing configurations. The only constant is the changing nature of the landscape and the dancers' relationship to it.

Babel (words) is as much an aural experience as it is visual. The multicultural cast of musicians from Rajasthan, Japan, and Italy drive

the piece with their distinctive rhythms and melodies. In addition to the "musicians," Belgian singer-dancer Christine Leboutte belts out the initial, raw, solemn strains of a Sicilian traditional song. While coordinating movements inside a cube, the other dancers soon respond with full-throated harmonies in an ocean of polyphonic singing. Leboutte informed me that the song is part of traditional mourning rituals and, thus, a piece of the social fabric in both Sicily and Corsica.

Cherkaoui learned about polyphonic singing through Jalet, who introduced him to Leboutte, and includes it as an essential part of his own training as well as that of his dancers. The practice observes rules of initiative and responsibility without a conductor or hierarchy. Each person is equally important and responsible for the needs of the song in which one "calls" and the others answer or join. Each voice plays a specific role in the common process, but also remains independent. The goal is to make one voice coalesce out of three (or more) without merging or subordinating one or another. The voices remain autonomous and evolve together but separately in order to maintain the architecture of the song. The very structure and performance of polyphonic songs mirror the mechanics of integrating the self with the collective.

There were several ingenious scenes, some more essential than others. And with a running time of one hour and forty minutes, there is no question that the work would be more impactful with another pass across the editing table.

For me, the climax of *Babel (words)* begins unremarkably as a single dancer kneeling on the floor initiates a Sufi (mystical, ascetic strain of Islam) practice integrating the recitation of the Arabic word for God, "Allah," with a breathing technique that suddenly pulls him up to standing before crashing back down to his knees again. The vocalists begin a quavering Sufi devotional chant with its repetitive formula and controlling rhythm played on the daf, a large frame drum. As more dancers join



Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Babel (words)*. (Photo: Koen Broos, Lincoln Center)

the line, they too perform the breath-induced repetitive movements, twisting their heads to initiate a rise from the floor – in a form of ascension – then plunging onto their knees to perform a hyperventilatory, rhythmic sequence. As they repeat this rising and falling motion, the lines of dancers alternate moving forward in a manner that evokes wading through sand dunes. This trance dance embodied the spiritual flavor and fervor of actual Sufi practices (performed to achieve union with the divine) with its breathing, movement, and musical layers.

Cherkaoui explained that this section evolved as a way to bring the group together through the collective breathing practices that Jalet had been experimenting with. The

dancers spoke of viewing videos of different Sufi rituals, and Cherkaoui recalled that Jalet suddenly threw himself on the floor performing a breathing exercise and found the movement for this section. Musician Patrizia Bovi added that the Sufi chant was overlaid with Japanese mantra recitation and early Latin Christian music. The result of this exhaustive exploratory process was a sublime devotional experience.

Svensson then corrals the dancers into a tight line across the stage for an exercise in which they interlace their feet and try to walk forward together. After an awkward attempt, they have another go at it. The audience perceives the difficulty of the task and the patience, empathy, cooperation, and synchrony

required to move forward, not as individuals, but as an interconnected group. We read the sense of satisfaction marked by a group embrace once the effort is successful. The accompaniment of a gentle, fiddled tune with harp and bell tones heightened the redemptive quality of the scene. In the final moments the journey is completed without ceremony. The dancers simply arrange themselves – standing separately but occupying the space together – inside the silver frames that are placed across the stage.

Mark Morris offered an inspired taste of devotion with his 1984 solo dance *O Rangesayee* set to a recording of the Carnatic raga of the same name composed by Sri Tyagaraja and sung by vocalist M. S. Subbulakshmi. Mark Morris, who curated the *Sounds of India* portion of the White Light Festival, freely confesses that he has had an ongoing love affair with India and its culture. He first traveled to the country in 1981 on a State Department cultural diplomacy tour as a member of Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians and returns every couple of years to imbibe more of the culture he loves so much. It is this unrestrained enthusiasm for the Indian experience that shines through in this gem of a piece that was originally performed by Morris himself.

Sri Tyagaraja (1767–1847), revered as a saint for his Carnatic musical compositions, lived a Spartan life composing devotional music as a way to experience God's love. The lyrics of “O Rangesayee” speak of devotion to Lord Ranganatha – a reclining form of Lord Vishnu. In *O Rangesayee*, Morris created a devotional dance using compositional elements common to Indian classical dance forms – a narrative component; the soloist's inhabiting and transitioning between multiple roles; foot, hand, and hip positions – with the arc of the piece culminating in a merging with the divine.

For the White Light Festival, the twenty-three-minute solo was performed by veteran Mark Morris Dance Group dancer, Dallas McMurray. Wearing a simple white loincloth, he crouches in a lowly squat like an Indian sadhu (ascetic spiritual seeker) in the darkness.

He touches his head to the ground in a posture of submission as Philip Sandström's mystical lighting warms up and distinguishes the devotee from the shadows. We can see the palms of his hands and the edges of the soles of his feet are stained red as is the custom in many Indian dance forms. Once he pulls himself up to a vertical stance, he moves through a discernable set of postures (another aspect of Indian dance) including poses of supplication as well as the sensual tribhanga stance with one displaced hip. The dancer repeatedly returns to a refrain in which he stands bearing his red palms to the audience as he waggles his head.

In a refreshing response to the music, Morris created variations on this phrase of poses (many of which are single-leg balances) by manipulating their tempo (slow motion) and their attack (fiercely jumping into them and holding them). The softness of the torso, dropped hands, and loose feet belie the steely strength and balance required by the poses. It is reminiscent of a martial arts standing meditation.

The dance progresses into a section, danced along a gold-lit diagonal, in which the dancer performs an assertive dance phrase stomping into a wide plié to initiate a traveling step moving downstage, and then retraces the diagonal path walking upstage with arms and hands uplifted in offering with the signature wagging head. This is repeated a multitude of times as a devotional ritual is repeated.

The rhythms of the percussion take over in the next section of the dance and their speed and complexity are reflected when the dancer performs a series of chaîné turns with ever more complicated footwork. The dance is demanding and we perceive the physical ordeal that this dancer/devotee undertakes. As exhaustion and surrender ensue, he seems to lose himself in a rhythmically induced state of ecstasy. His arms float atop his flying, spinning body in total abandon, until completely spent, he yields to the floor.

The sound of the drums erupts through the dancer's supine body. He has become the instrument – devoid of his own energy, will, or



Kalamandalam Roudrabheema and Kalamandalam Ravikumar with musicians in *Dussasana Vadhom*. (Photo: Kevin Yatarola, LC)

ego. He repeatedly jumps up and falls down in a last gasp of devotion – until, utterly transformed and at one with the deity, he descends and rolls onto his side in the reclining posture of Lord Vishnu.

O Rangasayee is an amazing assimilation of a foreign aesthetic apparent in Morris's early creative stew, and the recording of Mark Morris's performance of it at BAM in 1984 is pure poetry. He manifested a suppleness and utter ease in his torso and face while his movements and balances were supported with bedrock stability. These qualities built further into a rapturous freedom of the torso riding on top of exacting footwork – a consequence, I am guessing, of Morris's early years of performing Balkan folk dance. The piece has not been performed again until now, and Mc-

Murray gave an extremely invested rendition.

A troupe of kathakali artists from Kerala Kalamandalam performed their highly theatrical, ritualized, all-male form of dance-drama reenacting a story in which the up-ended cosmic order is restored. This distinctive performance form developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the coastal region of southwest India in what is now the state of Kerala. The Kalamandalam is a premier public institution offering high school, university, and postgraduate training in fourteen art disciplines. It is here that India's great performers of kathakali are groomed.

Kathakali performances are usually all-night affairs. The abbreviated one-hour presentation of *Dussasana Vadhom* (The Killing of

Dussasana) at the White Light Festival was excerpted from the kathakali classic, *Duryodhana Vadhom* (The Killing of Duryodhana) by Vayaskara Aryan Narayanan Moosad (1841-1902). It is a scene from the great Indian war epic the *Mahabharata*. This episode occurs after a game of dice in which the five Pandava brothers (all married to the same wife—Draupadi) lose their kingdom and all worldly possessions to their hundred Kaurava cousins. The victors, led by the two eldest Kaurava brothers, Duryodhana and Dussasana, demand that the Pandavas forfeit their wife. Draupadi is humiliated at the hands of Dussasana and vows revenge.

To express the narrative, performers combine a movement vocabulary from twenty-four root mudras, nine facial expressions manifesting different inner (emotional) states, set rhythmic patterns, and dance patterns that were assembled into countless nuanced variations to deliver a hyper-theatrical experience. The gesture language is inherited from the *Natya Shastra* (ancient Sanskrit treatise on drama and dance dated between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.), while the footwork and dance patterns have origins in Kerala's martial art tradition, *kalaripayattu*. The actor-dancers perform the dialogue of the play through their movements while the actual lines are sung by the vocalists. The choreography serves to accentuate the mood of the scene and also moves the dramatic action forward.

Before their entrance, the actors pay obeisance to the musicians by touching the instruments with their hands and raising them to touch their forehead and eyes. They offer a silent prayer for the successful endeavor and acknowledge the sacred instruments.

The staged episode begins as Draupadi appeals to Krishna for justice after the humiliation she has endured at the hands of Dussasana. She shakes her head in distress as she lifts up her long tresses. They serve as a metaphor for herself. When Krishna stands up and performs a stomping dance gesturing with trembling fingers accentuated by the characteristic silver finger extensions, Draupadi's facial

expression registers incontrovertible satisfaction. In kathakali, the eyes are the window into the character's internal state, and therefore, training involves exhaustive and detailed eye exercises. Before the actors' initial entrance, they place a tiny crushed seed under each eyelid to cause their eyes to redden. It is another means to accentuate the expressiveness of the eyes and reveal the characters' mental states.

The subsequent scene is a backroom negotiation between Krishna and the two eldest Kaurava brothers, Dussasana and Duryodhana, during which Krishna tries to convince the brothers to give up half of the kingdom to the unfortunate Pandavas. Here, we are treated to a high-octane stage entrance as the performers enter from behind the small silk curtain held by two stagehands. The curtain is dramatically lowered with much trembling and energetic drumming to reveal the frightening and spectacular images of the two terrifying brothers.

The costuming (for male characters) includes a tight fitting jacket worn together with a bulbous, hoop-shaped skirt under which yards of starched undercloth are wrapped. The players wear heavy, multitiered, handcrafted headdresses, which frame the striking makeup that is applied by makeup artists in a color-coded design over a two-to-four-hour time period. While the makeup is applied dancers may meditate, get into character, or sleep. During the curtain call, it became obvious that the Kalamandalam troupe had brought along an individual makeup artist for each performer.

The climax of the performance occurs when the mild-mannered Bhima (one of Draupadi's five husbands) assumes a heroic countenance to avenge Draupadi's dishonor. He faces off against Dussasana in a stylized duel with angry stomps, wild gesticulations, and the use of painted clubs for weapons. Intense drumming accompaniment, played by the musicians who are always standing onstage, amplifies the combat. The opponents kick, bump, and tussle with each other until Bhima finally wrestles Dussasana to the floor, pulls out a

long sword, and stabs him multiple times. Then, leaning over the dead body, Bhima bathes his hands and face in the blood. Taking the gory act a step further, Bhima disembowels Dussasana and parades the bloody entrails (a thick, knotted, red rope) before Draupadi, as she enters on the scene. He embraces her and restores her honor by painting her braids with Dussasana's blood. Justice now served, Draupadi's face reflects overwhelming satisfaction.

This extreme display of bloodletting is an accepted convention that occurs in most kathakali plays toward the end. It is the hero's sacrificial act and duty – an intervention that is necessary to restore a disordered cosmos back to a state of balance and harmony. Although, by today's standards, it seems comedic in its ghoulish exaggeration, perhaps it is an accurate measure of the effort required to galvanize forces to bend the arc of history toward justice.

The Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, led by Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy, performed an evening of five dance selections in the Odissi classical dance style. The program began with *Sankirtanam* (a prayer to Lord Krishna) and closed with *Sridevi* (a dance in praise of the mother goddess). As always, the Nrityagram experience follows a developmental pathway. As Satpathy explained to me, "What the traditional repertoire has given us is a path – a path of a journey. It starts with invocation and ends with salvation." How these artists choose to map this path is a wondrous process.



Surupa Sen in *Aali*. (Photo: Darial R. Sneed, LC)

Nrityagram's executive director and lighting designer, Lynne Fernandez, lit the opening of each piece using low lighting and vapors, creating the illusion that the dancers were stepping out of the ancient temple friezes and sculptures from which the Odissi movements originated more than 2000 years ago. Nrityagram's fluid use of rounded lines; the sensuous, displaced hip; and rhythmic movements of the rib cage, wrists, neck, and footwork are enlivened with crisp leaps and assertive jumps, stomps, and slaps. The ensemble work included Pavithra Reddy, the third

guru in the Nrityagram dance village, as well as three much younger dancers, and was well rehearsed and beautifully performed.

Two love poems formed the centerpiece of the program. The first, *Lalita Lavanga*, was a duet for Sen and Satpathy to a poem from the twelfth-century epic ballad, the *Gita Govinda*. My favorite part of their dances is the ritualized prologue, in which Sen narrates the poem with her refined Brahmin delivery, while Satpathy dances the distilled story as a super-saturated solo. The language of this love ballad is rich with fertile imagery – clove trees with creepers, bakula flowers clustered with honeybees, saffron trees with golden pistils – all danced with Satpathy's poetic abhinaya (the mimetic aspect that leads the audience to a felt experience).

The main part of the dance opens with a flute solo, eventually joined by the enlivening rhythm of the tablas. The Nrityagram Music Ensemble of four musicians sits in a row on the stage floor, audience left. Sen enters with a sauntering walk, shifting into each hip with a subtle twist of the torso as she steps – an image of lovesick yearning. Satpathy spins onto the stage to join her, and they slip easily from their roles as the lovers (Radha and Krishna) to the many metaphors from nature used in the poem. The choreography and execution

demonstrate a most satisfying interplay of complementary poses, stillness, and bold unison movement.

In *Aali* (Lost in Love), Sen renders a narrative solo based on a love poem by Meera (Mirabai) a sixteenth-century mystic, poet, and devotee of Lord Krishna. Using her gift of nuanced facial expression, Sen dances a portrait of adoration in solitude.

Both of these works reflect one of the strongest influences on Odissi – the Vaishnava belief that all humankind is feminine energy (Radha) constantly seeking union with the divine (Krishna). For Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy, creative process mirrors this belief as well. As Sen explained, “For me, the journey has to be a spiritual path – I must go somewhere. By the time I finish the performance, I must reach a quiet place, be more at one with myself, and have an elevated sense of unison with something greater than me. That is important to me. I believe in that.”

And that is the goal of classical Indian performance in general – to provide moments of transcendence, when we can shed the separation between self and other and merge with the divine (or our best nature). These highlights from the White Light Festival provided this experience – a much-needed antidote for our times.