Rahul Acharya. (Photo: Andy Chang, World Music Institute)

The Legacy of Shiva

Karen Greenspan

In thy dance, Divine Dancer, freedom
finds its image . . .
And churns up existence into surging
joys and sorrows.

—Rabindranath Tagore
from "Dance of Nataraja"

The Hindu God Shiva, Nataraja, or Lord of the Dance, is often rendered in sculpture performing his divine dance of bliss within an aureole of flames, lifting his left leg while balancing on his right leg that stands on a demon who symbolizes ignorance. The eternal movement of the cosmos is represented through Shiva's dance that destroys all illusion. It is this dance of destruction that allows for creation – within the ongoing cycle of existence. In Hinduism, dance is an expression of spiritual energy which informs all of existence and through dance, this energy annihilates and creates the universe anew. Dance was first performed by Shiva, and it is believed he conveyed the art to mortals through his disciple.

New York City received a drop of Shiva's sweat as three different programs of Indian classical dance, showcasing the bharatanatyam, kathak, and odissi dance forms and repertory, were offered during the final week of April 2014. The World Music Institute (WMI) produced its third year of "Dancing the Gods," a weekend celebration of Indian dance and culture followed later that week by Baryshnikov Arts Center's presentation of Nrityagram Dance Ensemble's compelling dance duo, Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy. It was a journey into an exotic, highly defined, and refined system of movement and conventions designed to create an ideal expression. Many moments truly achieved this perfection as dramatic universes were churned into existence and then dissolved across the stage.

To appreciate this expression both in its ideal and lesser forms, it is useful to know that every aspect of the art form was codified into a Sanskrit treatise called the *Natya Shastra*, dated sometime between the 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. This treatise, sometimes regarded as the fifth Veda (sacred scripture), is the basis for all eight classical dance forms in India, taught by the dance gurus and handed down to their disciples – even today. The *Natya Shastra* maintains there are three main components to classical dance – *natya*, the dramatic element; *nritta*, pure rhythmic movement of the body; and *nritya*, the suggestion of mood and sentiment.

Natya and nritya are concerned with conveying stories, themes, moods, and sentiments through *abhinaya*, which signifies the techniques used to convey the dramatic narrative and emotion to the spectators. Abhinaya is accomplished through the use of gestures, poetry (including song, recitation, and music or rhythm), costume (including makeup and jewelry), and physical manifestations of emotional states. The emphasis on abhinaya – inducing drama and emotion from the dancer's use of the body and face – is one of the most distinctive aspects of Indian classical dance.

Just to give an example of the breadth and detail of this dance system, within the breakdown of body gestures that may be employed, there are thirteen for the head, thirty-six glances, seven movements of the eyeballs, nine movements of the eyelids, seven for the eyebrows, six gestures for the nose, cheeks, and lower lip, seven gestures for the chin, and nine for the neck! Next come the sixty-seven *hastas*, or hand gestures.

It seems that every possible aspect of this dance form is prescribed, down to the jewelry and make-up for each type of character. Through this ancient formulation, Indian classical dance and its artists re-create and dissolve the drama of the human condition time and again.

Word Music Institute's "Dancing the Gods" consisted of two separate programs at New

Vidhya Subramanian. (Photo: S. Anwar, WMI)

York University's Skirball Center for the Performing Arts. The evenings began with a preperformance lecture/demonstration given by Rajika Puri, a noted scholar and classical Indian dance performer in her own right, who co-curated the festival along with WMI's director, Karen Sander. The evenings concluded with a postshow "Chat & Chai," a nice touch innovated by Sander that allowed the audience to engage with the artists or other audience members over a cup of spiced tea.

The first night's program opened with Rahul Acharya, a male interpreter of the more typically feminine odissi tradition, which originated in the eastern state of Orissa, considered to be a land of temples. The development of dance in this region was closely associated with the religion and it is one of the oldest in the world.

Friezes and sculptures from Orissa's temples confirm that odissi was performed as far back as 200 B.C.E. and was practiced by dancing girls, known as *maharis* and their male counterparts, *gotipuas,* who were dedicated to temple service. At festival processions, ceremonies, and daily rituals, they would attend to the gods with hymns and dances.

Whereas the maharis continued their service through the rest of their chaste lives, the gotipuas, who dressed and danced like the maharis, were forced to leave the temple at the age of eighteen. They frequently became the odissi gurus responsible for passing along the tradition.

Rahul Acharya displayed organic physicality through a wide range of lyrical movement with perfectly focused control. His extraordinarily long limbs and long torso, along with the accentuated arch held in the lower back, are sensuous and expressive – especially observed with his bare-torsoed costume.

Acharya's unusually long hands drew the eye to the many mudras of devotion, while the frequent choreographic sway of the hips was a reminder of odissi's feminine origins. His dancing appeared to be a prayer issuing from his innermost core. Acharya, who is also a Sanskrit scholar and lecturer, sculpted him-

self into Shiva's poses of yogic hyperflexibility with ease and assurance in a perfect mind-body feat.

Vidhya Subramanian, a performer and choreographer within the bharatanatyam dance tradition originating from the temple dances of south India, opened each of her three pieces with a live narration of the dance-dramas she performed. Her sublimely spoken words, using a regal vocal tone, slow ritualistic recitation, and evocative vocabulary accompanied by exquisitely performed key dance gestures, served as an opening dance in itself. The convention was innovated in the 1980s as audiences were becoming more international, and even native audiences were sometimes unfamiliar with the literature and subject matter portrayed – though not all performers pull it off with Subramanian's finesse.

Subramanian danced a narrative piece based on an episode from the epic poem *Ramayana*. Her command of precise rhythm in the feet, delicate hand gestures, and incredibly subtle facial expressions sparked life into the entire cast of characters she portrayed in the drama – from the heroic Prince Rama; to the old, conniving demoness Surpanakha; to the frightened captive Princess Sita.

Subramanian's interpretation of a love song from the classic twelfth century Sanskrit poem, *Gita Govinda*, which tells of the love and longing of the goddess Radha for the god Krishna, took the audience through a vast range of emotions as she confided her lovelorn anguish over Krishna to her *sakhi*, or confidante, until she embodied the serenity of consummated love (and every nuance in between).

Subramanian's final offering, *Omkarakarini*, was a compositional evocation of the Goddess Devi. Subramanian's sculpturesque poses rendered the image of a goddess, as the beautifully coordinated lighting made them appear to melt one into another.

The ensemble of musicians who played for Subramanian's performance was a complete act of its own. Roopa Mahadevan's vocals were supremely expressive as she seemed to coax the dance out of the dancer. Rajika Puri's preshow lecture explained that the dances are conceived as visualizations of music with rhythms articulated first with the feet and ankle bells (part of the prescribed costume). Then the upper body reflects the melodic phrasing of the music. A noteworthy member of the bharatanatyam musical ensemble is the *nattuvanar*, the dance master and musician who recites the rhythmic *jati* syllables that the dancer reflects with her feet.

Shambhavi Dandekar. (Photo: Vikas Shinde, WMI)

The following night's program introduced Shambhavi Dandekar, an exponent of the kathak dance tradition from northern India. *Kathak* means storyteller and it originated in the Vedic period (1750–500 B.C.E.) as wandering performers travelled the subcontinent and conveyed the stories of the great epics to the indigenous population. During the eleventh century, with the advent of the Muslim Mughal Empire, Hindu dancing became more secularized with the costume modeled on Persian styles that were the accepted court attire of the day. Today's kathak is a solo dance that includes mime as well as pure dance sections, with signature staccato footwork punctuated with spinning sequences.

Janaki Rangarajan. (Photo: Santosh, WMI)

In the piece *Taal Tritaal*, Dandekar demonstrated her technical command of lightning speed kathak footwork, which was amplified by the *ghungrus*, small, round, ankle bells strung together on a cord and tied around the ankles (girls may wear 101 on each ankle, men may wear 151). This exposition of progressively faster and more complex rhythmic phrases was an ideal example of kathak, virtuosic, pure dance. The curious tradition of the soloist vocalizing the rhythmic phrase before dancing it disturbed the magic of the performance as Dandekar was clearly out of breath and could not speak the syllables comfortably.

Dandekar's final dance, *Chatarang*, was inspirational as she conjured a rainstorm with her feet pounding the ground and causing her entire body to vibrate with the joyous sensation of being pelted by rain.

The second half of the evening revisited the bharatanatyam idiom with a powerful performance by Janaki Rangarajan. Her tall physique accentuates the fullness of her poses. That, along with her precise movement – large and microscopic – and a heightened use of stage makeup (on her face, hands, and feet), contributed to her performance that sizzled with dramatic and physical energy.

Rangarajan's opening in the piece *Varnam* (her choreographic interpretation of a codified form which is a classic centerpiece of the bharatanatyam recital) captivated with its restrained simplicity as she took a vertical stance with feet together, while her eyeballs danced their distinctive choreography. She returned to this striking movement motif several times through the piece. In this love song to Shiva, Rangarajan alternated between portraying Lord Shiva with displays of technical prowess and the lovesick young maiden

Bijayini Satpathy and Surupa Sen. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, Baryshnikov Arts Center)

with her vulnerable longing. She accomplished the dramatic shifts with mastery as she took the necessary time to transition through the most nuanced emotions.

I found the recital's varnam section, with its back and forth between the exposition of the story and the pure rhythmic dance sequences, to be a bit schizophrenic. As Subramanian was in the audience that night, I asked her about it. She explained that there is no connection between the two aspects of the dance. As a performer, while dancing the nritta sections, she focuses on her character and upcoming actions in order to maintain the dramatic intent even though there is a pause in the actual drama. This seems to be a rather challenging order.

Rangarajan then gave a thrilling performance of *Thillana in Purvi*, a pure dance piece which, with its marathon length, was more generous than ideal. She is a riveting dancer.

The Baryshnikov Arts Center presented an exemplar of odissi, the exquisite pair, Surupa Sen (artistic director) and Bijayini Satpathy (director of education) from the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble.

Nrityagram sounds (from the descriptions) like an idyllic dance village, located outside of Bangalore, dedicated both to training dancers in the ancient practices as well as developing contemporary expressions of the tradition. Sen and Satpathy performed *Songs of Love and Longing* choreographed by Sen and based, once again, on the *Gita Govinda*, the romantic ballad from the twelfth century that depicts the love drama of Radha and Krishna. A translation of the poetry was provided in the program. Though the words articulate the erotic

sensuality and emotional fragility of love between human beings, the story is also considered a metaphor for the love of humankind for God.

As the audience observes the preperformance stage, the musician's instruments are lined up in a row on the left side and a shrine is set up downstage, right. The shrine consists of an effigy dressed in costume, wearing a face mask, seated among offerings of fruit, flowers, and oil lamps. A lone dancer appears, bends before the effigy, and spills flower petals on the ground as an offering. Soft lighting and the drone of the harmonium fill the stage and create a sense of mystery and eros.

The opening poem, in which Radha confides her longing for Krishna to her sakhi, was a showcase for Satpathy to demonstrate her formidable artistry as she integrated postures, mudras, facial expression, and rhythmic footwork into an expressive whole. Her leaps, balances, and attack of the space had an animallike quality.

The second poem was a sensitively choreographed and performed love duet which elevated this dance form to another level. The two lovers perform the same gestures, though Krishna is standing and Radha is seated. The gestures grow to become complementary until the two lovers finally dance together in unison, exuding electricity – especially as they move together rhythmically with their ankle bells keeping time. A seamless physicality pervaded the piece as the dramatic intent and tension of the narrative sections filled the pure dance sequences as well.

From scene to scene, you never knew which dancer would portray which character as they frequently switched roles. However, the moment they began dancing, there was never a question about the character or the dramatic action.

In *Yami He*, Sen performs Radha's heartbreaking dance of experiencing rejection by her lover. The singers' mournful tune seemed to literally play through Sen's entire body as the painful emotions took over every aspect of her performance – including the skittish floor patterns she travelled. Sen's gestures honestly depicted a fragile, young woman's aching loss of a sense of herself when she is no longer reflected in the eyes of her beloved.

In the fourth poem, Satpathy portrays Krishna's return to Radha with a display of generous dancing as she embodies the proud god with his unabashed self-assurance. These huge, full movements transition into a portrayal of repentance at having caused Radha pain and then a soothing invitation to reunite – quite an arc of emotion permeated with absolute dramatic commitment.

These two lovers have a lot of work to do in order to reach the necessary ending of reconciliation and blissful love. The final duet begins with a confident Krishna asserting himself in a wide plié followed by muscular, angular, and staccato movements. Radha appears more circumspect, standing with legs crossed and her body spiraling in sinuous curves. With time, they begin to mirror each other's movements exactly, first with undulating torsos, then balancing in stillness while the drummer continues to beat his rhythm. Krishna's foot slaps the floor in exultant joy. The lovers do not glance at each other, though they are completely synchronized in their movements.

Finally, their bodies and gaze connect. The piece climaxes in a most unusual, sublime coital union, in which Krishna's pair of trembling hands insert themselves into the awaiting open hands of Radha. After this dramatic peak, the couple's energy is transformed as they move through just a few final poses in which their bodies are physically connected, emanating blissful unity.

The lighting bathes the dancers in a golden afterglow as the final strains of the harmonium dissipate.