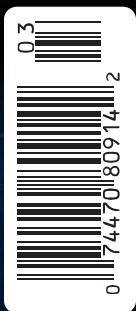


Fall 2016

Ballet Review



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Cover photograph by Paul B. Goode, Paul Taylor Dance Company: Jamie Rae Walker and Francisco Graciano in Doug Elkins' *The Weight of Smoke*.



Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy. (Photo: Nan Melville, Nrityagram, White Light Festival, Lincoln Center)

A Conversation with Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy

Karen Greenspan

Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy, the renowned duo of the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, are completing an Artistic Residency at Baryshnikov Arts Center (BAC). They come from the Nrityagram dance village, located just outside of Bangalore, where they work with a monastic dedication to their art – Odissi dance – one of the eight Indian classical dance forms.

The month-long residency program at BAC is conceived to support artists by providing space – free studio time, honoraria, technical and administrative services, and work-in-progress showings – for creative investigation and development without the expectation of delivering a finished product. There was a marked reaction when the audience attending the Words on Dance event at BAC featuring Mark Morris in conversation with Sen, learned, as Morris put it, “The miracle of this process is no product is required.”

The strains of Indian music lead me into the appointed studio. I am here to find out about the BAC residency and to get to the crux of what makes these two artists so extraordinary. When I open the door, Sen and Satpathy are working through a rhythmic sequence pounding out the percussion with their feet as they weave a floor pattern through the space. Their bodies finally come to rest in a series of generous, offertory gestures.

Sen stands in front testing out a step that looks like a pas de chat (they are known for infusing their Odissi dance with high leaps, aerial leg swirls, and intricate balances) as Satpathy’s wide, expressive face breaks into a huge smile of delight as she reproduces the step. With each repetition she adds more *abhinaya* (the art of expression that leads the viewer toward the dramatic experience) – bringing the choreography to life. Sen takes a

break and pulls up a chair to talk with me while Satpathy continues to work through the new choreography.

*

Surupa Sen: We were working with a remarkable musician here, a young woman called Jennifer Curtis. She is a concert violinist from North Carolina. We met her a year and a half ago when we were performing there. Her partner had been to Nrityagram. So she introduced us and Jennifer said, “I saw you dance and I’d like to play something for you.” When we heard her we were really amazed.

She is a versatile musician and plays in a range of projects, but right now she is performing with a group called ICE [International Contemporary Ensemble] here at The Armory. She was available during this time and I had written to her saying, “If you are going to be in New York, it would be a great time for us to collaborate.” So she came here. She’s performing almost every day. But whenever she has the time, she has been coming [to the studio]. And we worked, actually, only for a week. She was so perfect that we actually created a piece.

BR: What kind of music does she play?

Sen: She plays Western classical music. So the reason why I came this time was to work with some other genres of music. I have always been excited by all kinds of music. I listen to a lot of music – every morning actually for about three hours. Whatever I do, I’m listening to music. It could be Carnatic music, world music, Western music, a lot of classical music.

And I have never worked with anything other than my basic traditional music and a few other genres from India. Even what I’ve been listening to right now is another genre that I have never worked with before. In India, our musical genres are so dramatically different from each other – like our regions, languages, clothes, food, and everything – so we can’t begin to find the nuances that are so natural to the people of those regions. I had to come all the way to the West to find my Odissi body’s response to that music.

I felt this was a good opportunity for me to do that since I have been wanting to explore the body responding to the sound of different types of music. I am interested in the minute responses that the body makes and how they carry the cultural ancestry of the people.

When I look at dance I have found it reflects more than anything else the cultural ethos of the people. I have found that to be true as I worked for a year and a half with Sri Lankan dancers [a protracted exchange and collaboration with the dancers and musicians from the Chitrasena Dance Company of Sri Lanka]. We did a production called *Samhara*. It was shown here a couple of times and was in fact nominated for the Bessies. It was fascinating for me when we started working. And the sounds of their music – their drums . . . The Sri Lankans mainly dance to drum accompaniment.

BR: Was this Kandyan?

Sen: Yes. Kandyan dance. It was a complete and deeply respectful collaboration. And we found that, historically, the links we have are just incredible. And it showed through the body and the sound. And so much of it has been completely removed from history because it's politically not viable. In a lot of ways I believe that the body carries those secrets and history.

BR: Let's talk about the origins of the Odissi tradition.

Sen: It began as temple dancing.

BR: Offerings or worship?

Sen: They were part of the ritual worship in the temple because dance and music are integrated into the worship in the temples. It's a form of celebration, invocation, all of those things. Historically it's been there forever.

BR: Is there any evidence or documentation that this was how the gods wanted to be worshipped?

Sen: Tons of literature. Almost everything that comes from the Vedas onward tells how music and dance is part of worship in India.

Bijayini Satpathy: And all the gods and goddesses danced.

Sen: Yes, all our gods and goddesses danced

– every single one of them. We have the dedication to the goddess of learning, the dance of Shiva. Everybody dances!

Satpathy: Also we have a reference to the Fifth Veda. It's called the *Natya Veda*.

BR: Is that what the *Natya Shastra* came from?

Sen: Yes. The *Natya Shastra* is the codification of that. So there is a story, and who knows how far the story is true, that people got a little tired of mundane existence and they went to the gods and said, "We need something more sophisticated and more entertaining that will give us an illusionary world where we can live for awhile and remove ourselves from day-to-day existence. So the *Natya Veda* was created. It deals with theater, dance, music – everything – replete with almost every possible kind of information you will need on production, body language, musical orientation – everything! We haven't even touched the surface. We study it very intensely and practice a lot of movement from there. We try to integrate it into our dance form. A lot of people all over the world refer to it.

[The story goes that Lord Brahma composed the Fifth Veda, or *Natya Veda*, from elements of the previous four scriptures. He took speech from the *Rig Veda*, *abhinaya* (all aspects of expression) from the *Yajur Veda*, music and singing from the *Sama Veda*, and sentiment/emotion from the *Atharva Veda*. It was thus revealed to the Sage Bharata, who then consulted with Lord Shiva for the content on choreographic composition and pure dance movements required for worship of the gods and rituals. The *Natya Shastra*, attributed to Bharata, is written in the form of narrative and dialogue between Bharata and his pupils.]

BR: How do you see yourself as part of that continuum?

Sen: In fact, I find that not just I, but all of Southeast Asia, is part of that continuum. And that's one of the main reasons why I began to do the work with the Sri Lankan dancers. I'm also interested to work with Cambodian dancers and Indonesian dancers. I want to find those threads that tie us all. I feel that the arts are part of our connections. I'm very excited

by that because while working with them [the Sri Lankans], there were so many movements that came and are attributed to the *Natya Shashtra*. And I've seen Cambodian and Indonesian dance. In fact, I saw the Cambodian Dance Festival here. So now my main thing is to go to Cambodia. I want to go there and then Indonesia. I believe there are so many connections and I want to find some of that.

BR: Isn't it understood that their dance traditions originated from Indian dance?

Sen: The story is that there used to be a joint island called Jambudvipa in the traditional texts [the *Puranas* – ancient Hindu texts detailing the history of an India-centric universe]. All of this region was one. And everybody stemmed from the convention of the *Natya Shastra*. So what we have is what we call "great traditions" and "little traditions." The great tradition is the *Natya Shastra* and the little traditions are how each region has absorbed information from that and their own locales so it becomes something else. So the *Natya Shashtra* is the great tradition and Odissi would be a little tradition. But in Orissa, Odissi would be a great tradition whereas the folk dances would be the little traditions.

BR: What distinguishes Nrityagram's approach and dancers from other practitioners of Indian classical dance?

Sen: We are one of maybe two or three schools that have a residential program where students live and learn. And we are different from the other schools in that we are self-sustaining. We fund ourselves and the next generation of dancers. The village is a small community of dancers. It's not a huge government-funded school. We have created the village from scratch – it was just a barren piece of land. We grow our own food and every tree that has been planted has been planted by us.

BR: You were the first student?

Sen: Yes. It has been twenty-five years – as long as it has been there. We follow the system of the *gurukula* where we live with the guru and practice in the traditional way, but of course, in a modern context. Our whole lives are kind of holistic and it's structured around

the belief that dance is the only religion there. And so if you don't love it, it isn't very good to live there.

BR: How old were you when you went there?

Sen: Twenty.

BR: And you knew then that was going to be your life?

Sen: Yes – when I stepped into that village and saw my guru [Protima Bedi, founder of Nrityagram] there, I knew.

BR: Had you studied with her before?

Sen: No. I had never seen her before. But I had been dancing since I was four – but a different form.

BR: Bharatanatyam?

Sen: Yes, I unlearned that form to study Odissi. I hope you can come some time. It's a miraculous place. The village is very sweet. It has got a lot of heart – real blood and sweat, to tell you the truth. There is nothing there except the dancers. We do our best. We have tried to get the government to do something for us. But every time they do, it is difficult to avoid the strings attached. So we have tried just to do it by ourselves. And we hope that this next generation of dancers will find that this crazy belief is actually sustainable.

BR: So, now you two are the gurus.

Sen: Yes. We are the main teachers there ... and Pavithra [Reddy], who has also danced with us. But she is much younger. She was our student and now also is teaching.

BR: How many gurus and how many students do you have?

Sen: We have three teachers and there are about fifteen students. Each student gets individual attention. And then we have a program in which we teach hundreds of village children for free every weekend. And we also teach in the cities. But they are not residential; they come and go. We have a program where students come and learn three days a week and live with us then go away. We do a couple of workshops – one for a month and one for two weeks. That workshop, which is in June, is quite an intense workshop. People come from all over the world to study, dance, and live with us – they get a taste of our lives.

BR: What is a typical day at Nrityagram?

Sen: The students wake up at 6:30 and go for a walk. They come back for chores – like cleaning the gurukul. Then at 8:30 we do a body conditioning class, which involves different things on different days.

BR: Are you responsible for teaching all of these classes or do you bring in other instructors?

Sen: We have workshops with other teachers, but we teach the daily classes. We have created a body conditioning system that applies specifically to Indian dance. It was created for Odissi, but it applies to all Indian dance. So there is yoga; martial arts; traditional *Natya Shastra* exercises; traditional Odissi exercises; Western techniques like very, very basic ballet; and strengthening techniques like Pilates. [Speaking to Satpathy] Am I covering everything?

BR: What would an Odissi exercise be as opposed to a *Natya Shastra* exercise?

Satpathy: Odissi exercises are divided into two categories. We have what we call “silent exercises” and “sound exercises.” The silent exercises have more to do with strength and flexibility. There are things like this [she demonstrates an extraordinarily slow grand plié and transitions into a wide, low, unsupported side lunge] that require very strong quadriceps. We do many repetitions. First we do it very slowly and then faster and faster. With deep lunges, we add upper body movements – sideward stretches. Then we have sound exercises – lots of jumps.

Sen: Aerobic!

Satpathy: [Demonstrating jumps] It’s cardio. It makes a sound. Now for *Natya Shastra* exercises, we start with isolated limb control. There is a sung verse that describes the many positions for each part of the body. [Sen intones a song used to accompany these isolation warm-ups while Satpathy demonstrates moving each body part in isolation.] Similarly, we go through the whole body – eyes, neck, torso, hands, feet, ankles, toes, heels. So we warm up every part of the body.

Then we go on to something called *charis*,

which are sets of movement of the legs. There are two categories. We have leg movements that are earthbound. It starts with something as simple as walking. Then we have aerial movements – where you are raising the leg off the floor. There are sixteen variations for how to use your leg. These are the exercises that come from the *Natya Shastra*. They are different from the Odissi exercises. But they are all conditioning exercises.

Sen: When we come back to class at 10:30 we start the Skill Training exercises for Odissi. That’s a completely different thing.

Satpathy: Again we start with isolation that is very specific to Odissi. That would involve a lot of torso isolation. [Demonstrating ribcage isolations] Lateral movement of the torso, up and down, down and up, then forward-up-down [circular motion]. So you have complete control of the rib cage away from the shoulders and the head because our dance involves that kind of isolation.

Sen: From the waist downward has to be very solid like the roots of the tree. From the waist upward, we are constantly in motion, moving each body part in isolation – with the torso moving in one direction and the neck and eyes moving in the opposite direction. So there is a lot of pull on the body. The lower half has to be really solid and the upper half has to be really pliable and lyrical. Then we work a great deal with the joints because we believe that the grace of the body is in the joints. It is in how you use your fingers and how you use your wrists. Where you lead your hand from determines the grace of the movement.

Satpathy: We have this body position called *tribanga*. [She assumes the triple-bent, graceful, S-curve stance.] Using simple or complex coordination, we can build countless variations based on a single footstep. [She stomps and then demonstrates a whole series of stepping variations while Sen counts.] We have built from one to ten steps and a number of variations.

Sen: This is actually specific to Nrityagram. All this work has been created by Bijayini at



Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy. (Photo: Janelle Jones, Baryshnikov Arts Center)

Nrityagram. We learned it differently from our gurus, but a lot of research has gone into developing each step so when the student comes, they learn simple exercises to complex exercises. Otherwise the Odissi movement is very hard to learn. For example, this is how we were taught [she demonstrates to the count of one-two-three]: The feet are doing this, the hand is doing this, the torso is doing this, then the neck is doing the movement in the opposite direction, and the eyes have to . . . Then you change the speed of the footwork but the hands have to continue at the first speed. For a young child starting out, this is too much for them.

BR: Can you tell me about the S-curve position?

Sen: The S-curve is basic to Odissi. It is actually the basic principle of our sculpture. It comes straight out of the temples. If you go to any temple, you will find it exists. But, what

the gurus have done is they have studied all the sculptures and have threaded them together to make Odissi. It is probably the most sculpturesque of all the Indian classical styles. And the language is very vast. It takes students about three years to learn the basic language of Odissi. Then it takes another three years to do advanced training. Just absorbing all the information is huge.

There is a lot of memorization – verses in Sanskrit. We learn all the movements and their uses in the form of verses – so it becomes a recitation. You memorize the storytelling attributes of each single and complex hand gesture in Sanskrit.

Satpathy: We have single hand gestures and conjunctive hand gestures. Each gesture has a verse that tells how it is used in different ways for storytelling. This is a single hand gesture called *Tripataaka*. We can use it to show a crown, a tree, lightening, an oil lamp, king of

the Gods, a raging fire, a pigeon, writing a letter, a sharp weapon like an arrow, or to depict change. [My head is spinning as she narrates and demonstrates how the same gesture can be used with slight differentiations to convey these different meanings.] So we have the use of the gesture. Then we take it into the Odissi body combining it with countless foot patterns and body positions. Thus it becomes a whole body language.

Sen: It's like learning a language – like learning the letters of an alphabet. It's actually very easy because a teacher who is eighty years old can tell a student, "Use this head, this neck, this gesture, this whatever," and the student knows exactly what to do and there is no need for the guru to get up.

BR: So what happens after Skills Training?

Sen: Skills Training goes on till 2:00. Afterward, there is lunch. Then in the afternoon everybody does some form of community service. Somebody will work in the office; some do gardening. Sometimes they do their own work like washing their clothes.

Satpathy: [At this point she comes over and sits down to officially join in the conversation.] In the late afternoon we have individual classes, like private coaching, with different teachers. In the morning the basic skills training happens with everybody coming to class to practice together. It's like a barre or technique class. In the afternoon it's very specific, focused coaching that starts at 4:30 and goes to about 6:30 – for two hours.

Then at about 7:00 we start teaching repertoire to the senior dancers or hold rehearsal for the ensemble. This can happen simultaneously. They also need a lot of time on their own. They spend a great deal of time writing things down to digest all the material we are giving them. Like everything that she [Sen] just choreographed, I wrote down. We have layers of writing. I have to write the footwork, the hands, the meaning – the narrative that is running in my head. They have to write down the directions, work on it, and come back.

BR: When do they learn theory?

Satpathy: We don't have a class labeled "Theory." We might address it in a class when I am teaching a hand gesture so I would teach them the applications of hand gestures. If I'm teaching them a rhythmic phrase, I would show them how we would execute that rhythm – how the first speed is performed, how a second speed can be achieved, how third and fourth speeds can be accomplished. Then we give them a task conceived to transmit the concept of rhythm and how it can be used. So there are a lot of assignments on the "grammar" necessary for rhythmic understanding. We could just have a theory class, but I have the curriculum set in my mind knowing when to insert what during the year, keeping in mind how much we must achieve by the end. But I don't say that Tuesday evening is theory class. I bring it in as and when I feel the requirement is there. But we complete a certain amount of work within year one, year two, year three. I designed the training program and it is clearly defined.

BR: What about dance history?

Satpathy: Once again, all that is integrated into the learning. For instance, the very first dance of the traditional repertoire has many required elements. And one must learn to perform them along with understanding the meaning of each. That is, when one enters the performance space, there is a name for it. And there are certain moves within it. And then there is paying obeisance to the presiding deity – Lord Jagannath ["Lord of the Universe" and state deity of Orissa]. Then there is paying obeisance to the earth. When I am teaching the dance I must explain why we are doing this. So we go back into the history to talk about the temple dancers. We make it relevant to what they are learning. The history is retained within the choreography and the presentation. As they practice, they learn the theory and the history.

BR: How old are most of the students?

Satpathy: We try to take the residential students before they are twenty-four years old. They should have at least finished high school. We have a required one-month probation. Be-

cause more than skill and talent and aptitude, what we are looking for is the ability to integrate into community living.

Nrityagram is very isolated. There is not much in the way of entertainment. You have to be very self-motivated. That's what we look for. If we see within a month that they work, then they stay on and we can negotiate the age. But our thinking is that if somebody starts to train at age twenty-four and they finish within six years, then between thirty and forty they are able to perform well with good energy and physical stamina.

Beyond twenty-four years old, there is less of a performing lifespan. But if somebody has trained before, then they may finish their training with us in less than six years. We make that negotiation when we see them during the probation period.

BR: How many people are in the ensemble?

Sen: I normally never take more than six. But those can keep changing.

BR: Do they come from the student body?

Satpathy: Not always.

Sen: A couple of them now have been training with us for two years. They have learned elsewhere and are now in intensive training with us. But I'm still not so sure whether they will be taken. But the ones who have trained with us for six, seven, eight years are much more able to find the movement.

Satpathy: In the past we have sometimes advertised for ensemble positions. I have picked dancers from outside. And again, they have to go through a probation. If they clear it, they stay on. But they finally start working for us after living with us for two years because that's when the difference starts to show. We cannot tell people that you can come in as a dancer and immediately start learning choreography and start performing with us because something just doesn't work. Even if it physically and technically may work, I think what we bring into the performance is the way we live.

Sen: When you asked earlier how we are different, I think that's the main difference. When we dance, I always say that we are not

the most talented dancers in the world. But, what we do bring is the fact that we have nothing else. This is our life. We do nothing else. We just dance.

BR: I take it that you are not married?

Sen: She is married. I'm not married. And most of the dancers who are there are not married.

Satpathy: During training we ask dancers not to be married. Right now there are two dancers who are married. Basically they have to make a commitment to be away from family and to focus solely on work.

BR: How do you have a family? How does that work?

Satpathy: I have a husband.

BR: Does he live at Nrityagram?

Satpathy: No. We have an orchard together very close to Nrityagram. But I spend most of my day in Nrityagram. I leave in the morning at 7:00. I don't know how it has worked all these years.

BR: Is he okay with this?

Satpathy: Yes.

Sen: He's a photographer and he's traveling a lot of the time.

Satpathy: But, I don't think every marriage would work. I give very little time to our life together. I am always traveling with the group. We travel so much that I can't take away more time to do our own travel. So we do very little together. He has to be very understanding.

Sen: He is an exceptional man.

Satpathy: I don't give him the entire credit. I feel like I have always been very clear – even before we got married, I was always very clear. I thought he should know. I didn't apologize for who I was or how much time I wanted to give my dance. I think he probably figured out a way to understand. So, it has worked. Maybe the separation makes it work as well.

BR: Maybe! So is the object of the ensemble not only to perform the work but to earn an income for the village?

Sen: Yes. It is the only way we have been funding the village. Except when we need to fund the building of some new construction,

then we have to go out and raise funds. But this is the main way we earn a living for the village. And we also have a space at Nrityagram that we rent out to artists and we earn some income from that. It's a residency – so writers, dancers, theater artists come there. It's a space away from their home. It's exactly like this [referring to their BAC residency].

BR: So living together in this environment is essential and what you feel makes your art unique?

Sen: It really makes the dance and us what we are. I firmly believe that what you put in your head is what comes out. The way you live, the way you breathe influences your choices and your work. If you come there you will know what I am talking about. I would say that if I had not been a dancer at Nrityagram, I may have still been a dancer, but a very different one.

Satpathy: I think it's because we live it. We live every day of our lives – the way we plan the schedule, what we do – everything is around dance.

BR: How and when did you two first meet?

Satpathy: Twenty-two years ago, in 1993, during the planning of the first tour to the U.S.

Sen: It was the making of the first ensemble.

Satpathy: I thought you already had an ensemble.

Sen: No. We had a group that performed, but the teacher who was our guru, was the main star. The group was called the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, but it was not really a fully formed group. We were just like "the party" – Protima Bedi and Party.

And then in 1993 we started to dance as an ensemble. When she [Satpathy] came to our village, she had already been dancing for a time in Orissa, which is the home of Odissi. She had learned from a completely different teacher, different space; we had never met each other. She had never been to Nrityagram. The funny thing is the first time we made a piece together, in fact I made the piece in 1993, we danced like we had always been dancing together. Gaurima [Protima Gauri Bedi], my

guru, asked, "How did that happen?" That particular piece became quite famous.

BR: What was the piece called?

Satpathy: *Mokshya* – the last dance of the traditional repertoire. We always ended the performance with this.

Sen: And since then, it's just amazing. If I have a thought it has to find shape on her [Satpathy's] body. It's important to have a dancer who you can see it on. And Bijayini is definitely the one who translates my ideas into form.

Satpathy: Is it unusual for a dancer and a choreographer to be together for so long – because we get this question often?

BR: It's a very unique relationship.

Satpathy: We also *dance* together. She [Sen] is the choreographer and a dancer. We don't see many dancers who dance together – especially in India where the classical dance forms are solo forms. Actually, we should be competing with each other. You wouldn't find two very good dancers who dance together. Sometimes a husband and wife or two sisters dance together, but never two independent dancers.

BR: You're right. Now that you mention it, that is what we usually experience at an Indian classical dance concert. And what is so unique, beautiful, and stimulating about your performances is how you work off of each other and how that relationship plays out.

Sen: It also helps that we are completely different people. We bring totally different things to the table.

Satpathy: The thing is we have great respect for each other. For me, I feel like I am in a position where I gain from the experience on a daily basis. I am challenged every day in a positive way. Everything she creates causes me to find something new in my dance and in my body – so I'm learning. It's most exciting. I don't see anybody else around who would do that for me.

BR: It's a unique relationship from the point of the viewer. It adds a level of interplay and complexity that is quite a distinct presentation.

Satpathy: Rather than working as individuals we function more as a team.

Sen: Our teacher always said that it's more important to be a good human being. That's why I said earlier that how you fit into the community is connected with the quality of your art.

BR: When you begin a new piece of choreography, what do you start with? What is the first seed?

Sen: It's different each time. But for me, a lot of it is music. I love music. But when we do narrative pieces, she [Satpathy] is very

BR: So the composer works around your ideas?

Sen: *With me*, I would say. I worked with a musician who is a great composer and artist who, in fact, died recently. I would say to him, "Can we do this here?" And most of the time he would say, "It's okay." But sometimes he would say, "No. No, I think this is just fine."

BR: The reason I am asking how you work together with the music is I was having a conversation about the relationship of the dance to the music in bharatanatyam. Rajika Puri [classical Indian dancer, speaker, and curator]

was explaining to me how each element of the music requires a particular type of choreographic expression. She went on to say, "The musical composition is the map of what you can do." Does that apply to Odissi and the way you choreograph or are you moving away from that idea?

Satpathy: Odissi is very different from bharatanatyam.

Sen: She talked about traditional repertoire and I've moved away from that.

Satpathy: When you talk about a bharatanatyam *varnam* or *tillana*, they are particular musical formats. If that is the piece I am using as a musical score for the choreography, then I will follow that structure. I don't think the dancer or the choreographer has the freedom – because the structure is there. But within the structure, she can do something different and I can do something different. But the format – the components and their order, or the "map" as she says, stays the same.

In Odissi, it's not like that if you have moved beyond traditional structure. In the traditional repertoire there are five dances. Out of those, there are three dances that are very set in choreography. If one becomes a professional



Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy. (Photo: Janelle Jones, BAC)

good at Sanskrit and Oriya, which is the language of the dance. So we work together. I read a lot, but because I don't have a great facility with Sanskrit – it's like Latin – she finds poems that are sort of visual that I might be interested in. She digs up the background information. Then we decide if it works. I find a composer who takes the poetry and creates a musical framework for me. I go back and find some movement – exactly how we worked with Jennifer [the violinist], but that was not narrative. I come up with some dance and then they create some music. While I'm creating the dance I find spaces where I want the music to change – maybe the melody, the raga, the rhythm.

dancer, out of the five dances of the traditional Odissi repertoire, you will end up doing three of them the same for the next twenty-five years – exact same structure.

Sen: It's true about the structure of the choreography.

Satpathy: What the repertoire has given us is a path – a path of a journey. It starts with invocation and ends in salvation. So what Surya decides to do is to follow the same path, but the way she maps the path can be very different. And so she seeks help from the composer along with the lyrics and text she decides to use to build her path. Nevertheless, the journey is the same.

Sen: The piece you saw, *Songs of Love and Longing* [a piece they performed at BAC in 2014 based on songs from the twelfth-century masterpiece, *Gita Govinda* that describe the love of Krishna and Radha], is not in the traditional repertoire. One normally doesn't do a whole evening of songs like that. But, we have done several things in a similar vein. I actually do whatever I feel like doing.

BR: So you have a lot of freedom.

Sen: Yes. I've almost always done whatever I wanted to. And I had a guru who backed me 100 percent. I have been extremely lucky. I am very free.

BR: Would that have been possible in bharatanatyam?

Satpathy: Some people are doing what is called "theme-based productions."

Sen: I think everybody is experimenting a great deal with what they have because the language is so vast you can make pretty much anything.

Satpathy: But with bharatanatyam, there is a lot that is "given" already in terms of the music, so much of the time they just source the dance from the vast tradition they have. That gives them a structured framework.

Sen: The musical structure for them is very powerful – Carnatic musical structure. And that determines their presentation of movement. It's [bharatanatyam] so structured. I think I work more with the emotional content that each piece must deliver. So, it does not

have to be a traditional invocatory piece. I could create an abstract piece that, while I'm dancing, gives me the same emotional tone. That's how I work.

For me, the journey still has to be a spiritual path – I must go somewhere. I can't be doing the same kind of dance four times over. It has to lead from the outside to the inside. It can start from something that may be joyous and happy with a lot of external patterns in space and body. But by the time I finish the performance, I must reach a quiet space, 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.

BR: What have you been working on during this residency?

Sen: Right now? The first few days we worked with a trombone player and we experimented finding movement with his piece. We didn't work too hard on that. Then we did a piece based on a track by Persian composer Hossein Alizadeh. He has been a favorite of mine and we have been listening to his music but have never done anything with it. It's all about finding Odissi movement with different music. Then the third piece was with Jennifer Curtis, the violinist. We found a very exciting meeting ground and introduced some Indian sounds and some Western sounds. It came together beautifully. So we did a piece with her. Right now I'm working on a piece with Carnatic music that is completely different from Odissi music. I don't know, if I have a little more time left, I want to work with Hindustani music.

BR: How far have you gotten with all of these projects?

Sen: We showed two of the pieces [at a BAC public showing of resident artists] that are works in progress. You can always look at it and change and expand it. The first one [the trombone piece] I have eliminated altogether – I just don't know what to do with it.

Satpathy: [To Sen] What did you feel about the Persian piece?

Sen: It was actually interesting to find out

how the different parts of the body responded to it. What I find again is I respond to music that has some kind of power, energy, and quality to it. It has to be deep music.

BR: Was it Persian spiritual music?

Sen: It was spiritual in some way. It's an interesting story. I heard, I don't know how far it's true, that at a time when artists were being persecuted, they had all these tracks of various artists hidden in different places to keep them safe. It is a beautiful piece of music. It sounds a bit like Western classical music, but it has strong Middle Eastern content. It's very emotional. If you listen to it closely, it brings images of deserts and freedom. So I used that, and I found that I was just responding directly to the sound, or the call, of that. It brought out a completely different mood – even though it's all Odissi movement. It's also very moving for me.

Then the second piece was fantastic because I had to work so hard to count that music. I learned a completely different way of listening to music from the way we usually do. It's so different from the way we hear sound. . . . I'm hearing something, and she's hearing something else. That was exciting in itself. Then we introduced some Indian rhythmic sounds to it. It was very interesting, we found that while we were working, suddenly she came up with a small section where, when I hummed it, it immediately became an Indian sound. Then she took that sound and made something of it. We found movement that it inspired and we introduced rhythm. And it became a meeting ground.

BR: A true collaboration.

Sen: Truly. It was literally a week's work

and the other piece was only three day's work. We were only here for about twelve days before that. But I think there has been a substantial amount of work. I am very, very happy. And both of us are happy to be away from home doing this thing.

BR: Does being away from home allow for a different kind of creativity?

Sen: Yes it does. It has been amazing.

Satpathy: Our time at home gets divided doing a lot of administrative work for Nrityagram, a lot of teaching, a lot of looking after the young girls who live with us. They have their issues because they live away from their families. So we deal with a lot.

BR: You're parenting!

Sen: Oh we've been parenting other people's children for years.

Satpathy: We are also preparing the musicians, rehearsing for performances, and doing a lot of performing.

Sen: Basically we are performing all the time. I really needed to have time . . . and Satpathy is the Director of Teaching at Nrityagram, so she's constantly teaching. I work for the ensemble mainly, and I teach some of the conditioning classes. But, it's amazing that we have a studio space like this. It's a beautiful space, and we come here every morning like good little girls and we just stay here until late evening. I have time to think – it's such an amazing thing; my mind is working. It's been a fabulous experience.

Satpathy: It has been fabulous!

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