

Drive East 2018

Karen Greenspan

Upping its game once again, the 2018 Drive East Festival of Indian Music and Dance offered an inspiring week-long program featuring a rich variety of top-level performing artists from India and the United States. The range and quality of the performers presented is a tribute to the work and vision of the Navatman organization and the culture's supreme dedication to its performing arts. I report here on just a sampling of the wide-ranging dance offerings from the 2018 festival presented at The Downstairs, La MaMa's basement theater.

Shijith and Parvathy

Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy Menon, who make up the duo Shijith and Parvathy, complemented and amplified each other in an uplifting bharatanatyam recital of classical themes. They opened the evening with *Alingana*, a captivating and beautiful depiction of Ardhanārīshwara – the half-woman/half-man form of Shiva and Shakti (female generative power). The choreography neatly evoked this archetypal image employing complementary postures and gestures to form composite shapes in an expression of the coming together of opposites to create a whole that is greater than the constituent parts. These compound poses alternated with bold unison sections of bright, energetic footwork and floor patterns. The dance concluded with a simple, yet

apt, motif that had been introduced earlier. The two dancers faced each other and wrapped one arm around the other's waist as they spun as Shiva and Shakti in their dynamic dance of life.

For the *Varnam* (fundamental song form in Carnatic music), Nambiar and Menon danced the journey of two pilgrims to offer their devotion to Krishna. Again, these two beguiling performers made excellent use of their duality to create a resonating and complex expression. Even as they pulled off speedy *nritya* (pure dance) sections with breathtaking precision, the truly transporting experience resulted from their sensitive integration of *abhinaya* (mimetic aspect). One dancer would enact coming upon the deity within the shrine with gestures and facial expressions of adoration and devotion. Then the other would portray the same encounter, but differently – reflecting and deepening the total experience. In other scenes, one dancer would dance Krishna while the other danced the devotee.

Finally, as they re-became the two pilgrims, their distinct and richly drawn expressions of awe in the presence of the divine created an exuberant final scene. Menon's gestures ripple out like flowing water while



Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy Menon. (Photo: Drive East Festival)

Nambiar dances with youthful athleticism and irresistible magnetism. Together, they convey a magical and complete experience.

Kathak Triple Bill

A full evening of Kathak performances featured artists from several different lineages, or *gharanas*. Sandeep Mallick, from Kolkata, opened with a powerful invocation to Lord Shiva, in which he churned spiraling offering gestures heavenward and followed with a set of formidable spins that revolved in a circular floor pattern – finally ending in the center, spinning into oblivion.

Mallick then displayed his commanding footwork with microphones placed strategically on the stage floor to amplify the thunderous percussion tapped out with his bare feet and rattled with his *ghungroos* (anklets of tiny jingle bells worn by dancers of many Indian dance forms). He extemporized a rhythm conversation with his accompanying musicians – actually calling it a composition for *ghungroo* and *tabla*. Literally playing percussion with his feet, he danced like a wizard summoning entire worlds with his rhythms and then dissolving them gradually to a point of stillness. In a demonstration of *abhinaya*, he danced the life cycle of a flower. He was the sprouting bloom, the lover picking the blossoms, and finally the charming and generous performer wrapping up the floral gift and offering it to the audience.

The husband and wife duo Piyush Chauhan and Preeti Sharma from the Jaipur Gharana pulled out all the stops with polish and panache in their dynamic show piece – *Jhankaar*. Costumed in flowing red chiffon, the choreography rotated through the kathak movements of choice – mind-boggling speedy spins, quick-silver gestures, precision footwork, and striking still poses. In a virtuosic finale, Chauhan performed multiple pirouettes in the center while Sharma did the same. But she traveled around him in a large circle – like a sparkling, spinning planet orbiting the fiery, magnetic sun.

The trio led by Anuj Mishra, a member of the traditional family of musicians of the Varanasi Gharana, brought bravura technique and razzle-dazzle showmanship to their program called “Yatra: The Journey of Kathak.” Unfortunately, the choreography and recorded music for the section they styled as Sufi-kathak was commercial, treacly veneer to its core. These talented performers deserve better material to dance. Anuj Mishra redeemed the show with a breathtaking solo in which he executed the longest series of multiple turns I have ever seen, changing the direction



Sandeep Mallick. (Photos: Robert Fantauzzi, DEF)

of his spot with each revolution. He kept this up while varying the speeds. Mishra finally paused to rattle off some rapid-fire footwork, conduct the air with lightning-fast arm strokes, and jump up kicking his feet backwards and bending his head to meet them in an explosion of delight.

Neha Mondal Chakravarty

The heroine Draupadi of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* made a comeback this year in *The Unheard Plea* danced movingly by Neha Mondal Chakravarty. I did not expect that anyone could come close to the interpretation of the same story last year by Janaki Rangarajan,



Preeti Sharma and Piyush Chauhan.

but Chakravarty offered a compelling portrait of the character and her drastic change of circumstances.

Seated on the floor downstage left, Chakravarty reflected aloud on her emotional wounds from her harrowing experience before the royal court of men who should have been her defenders. An energetic line of per-



Anuj Mishra.

cussion summoned Chakravarty to her feet and she took her place on a platform upstage center to dance the narrative. With lithe movements, crisp turns, spritely leaps, and self-assured expression, the petite Chakravarty portrayed Draupadi as the five Pandava brothers' dignified queen, who had everything going for her. Then with transparent facial expression and movement patterns infused with emotion-inducing rhythms, she became the terribly wronged victim of a male power struggle. With no justice or dignity in sight, Draupadi realizes she is to be sacrificed as collateral for her husbands' game of dice, de-

ceit, and loss of power.

Chakravarty used pedestrian movements of walking and tripping over her feet to show her pitiable loss of control over life and body. Draupadi is ordered to disrobe before the lascivious eyes of the all-male court and Chakravarty danced the scene with wrenching pathos. Endlessly turning to indicate the unwinding of her sari, she gestured in horror, disbelief, and embarrassment until she fell to the floor sobbing.

Chakravarty returned to her original seated position downstage left and continued her opening reflection, "The bruises are still fresh though now old." Then musing over the fact that she is now a goddess in a temple, she concluded, "They create you, then re-create you. When will I be free?" It's no wonder they keep dancing this story.

My only complaint with the performance is that Chakravarty performed the fully narrated work by lip-syncing to a recording of the narration. A better choice would be an independent narrator onstage. If dancers are going to include the spoken word as part of their performance, they need to treat the composition and delivery



Neha Mondal Chakravarty. (Photo: Himmat Sodhi, DEF)

of those words with as much care and attention as the dancing.

Prabal Gupta

Prabal Gupta, a highly recognized Kathakali performer and scholar, performed a Kathakali interpretation of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* – or more precisely, he took a deep dive into the character of Cleopatra. Gupta has

an affinity and talent for exploring Shakespeare's tragic heroines using the dramatic, all-male, colorful Kathakali dance form. And it works! His gripping portrayal of Lady Macbeth at the 2014 Erasing Borders Festival in Lower Manhattan's Battery Park City held the audience in his thrall. The highly charged Kathakali conventions bring a whole different range of expression to the human experience.

In the opening scene, Gupta portrays Cleopatra confiding to her friend about Anthony, taking a page right out of the Hindu dramas of Radha pinning to her *sakhi* (confidant) about her feelings for her lover Krishna. His use of circling eyeball movements with eyelids held wide open and unblinking for interminable periods, along with the rising and falling of his eyebrows in a fluttering action, signal Cleopatra's anticipation and fantasies of her lover's arrival.

The character has so many thoughts that she must express – in fact, they come flying out of her mouth as hand gestures moving outward from her vivid, painted lips. Gupta then pantomimes writing a love letter to Marc Anthony with nuanced imagination – writing, thinking, writing again, folding and sealing the letter, breaking the seal to write more, folding and sealing again, and finally dispatching.



Prabal Gupta. (Photo: DEF)

Gupta harnesses the Kathakali lexicon and masterfully captures Cleopatra's emotional states and processes. In the final scene, after engaging in a war against Caesar, suffering defeat and misunderstandings, Cleopatra prepares to kill herself by reaching into a bowl of poisonous asps. Gupta's trembling lips and pulsing cheek muscles convey the woeful pain and irony of the multiple asp bites replacing her lover's kisses. In a portrayal of utter demise, Gupta emits foamy spittle from his mouth as Cleopatra's body finally yields to the poison and expires.

Bhavana Reddy

Bhavana Reddy brought delicate grace to her recital of *kuchipudi*, the classical dance form from the southeastern province of Andhra Pradesh. The form originated as a male-per-

formed dance-drama dedicated to Lord Krishna, hence much of Reddy's repertory revolved around Krishna. The *kuchipudi* dance sari is noticeably longer than that worn for *bharatanatyam* and makes for long, sleek lines with a softer, less athletic appearance.

During her invocation to Lord Ganesha and *Tarana*, Reddy made use of stillness in order to call attention to her minute lateral shifts in the head and ribcage. She did this again moving her eyes and lower lip in *Krishna Sabdam*, an *abhinaya* of a *gopi* (milkmaid, female devotee) making offerings to Krishna to entice him into lovemaking. Reddy is quite skilled at applying these diminutive movements to charming affect.

In a fresh stroke of creativity, Reddy offered a classical *kuchipudi* interpretation of George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord." With her danced



Bhavana Reddy. (Photo: DEF)

gestures of devotion to Krishna, she made the song come to life by giving it the appropriate physical intention, expression, and context of worship. It was interesting to see how the Western melody and instrumentation inspired more direct, straight lines performed with a sharp attack. She truly captured a merging of East and West with her ecstatic gesture of praise as she brought both hands up overhead, palms clasped in devotion. Then keeping her wrists together, she opened and closed the palms of her hands in a dainty reference to what one would do in a rock concert.

For her finale, Reddy performed a *tarangam*

– a traditional kuchipudi crowd-pleaser, in which the dancer balances on the rim of a brass plate and elaborates on the rhythm of the music. Reddy pounded out every rhythmic complexity aboard her tapping saucer – dancing it forward, manipulating it in circles, and hopping it backward. She gracefully floated above with flowing arm and hand gestures as she maneuvered the plate about the stage, pounding out rhythms with frenzied speed and intricacy. From this outburst of movement, Reddy stepped off the platter and captured a sublime moment of stillness in a one-legged balance to end the performance.

Mesma Belsaré

The most riveting performance from those that I observed was presented within a program titled "Dualities of Dance: Addressing Gender in Indian Classical Dance." The talented bharatanatyam dancer Mesma Belsaré brought her powerful charisma to the astounding choreography of New York's own Maya Kulkarni in two works – *Shilpana Natana* (The Dancing Sculptures) and *In Each Is Both*.

In the opening piece, Belsaré was indeed a sculpture come to life to invite an auspicious performance through the cosmic vibrational energy of Lord Ganesha. Costumed like the combined form of god and goddess, she wore a two-piece, champagne-color dance costume with bare midriff. The goddess was ornamented with gold jewelry and hair coiffed in multiple coiled buns woven with gold ribbon, while the god wore wide pantaloons. Belsaré, who is also a painter and quite capable with a sewing machine, designed and constructed the splendid and unusual costume in collaboration with her mentor Kulkarni. Together, they synthesized the design with inspiration from various Indian classical styles of sculpture and early painting.

Standing with arms upstretched in a central pool of golden light, Belsaré slowly swayed to the chanting of "Om," animating herself from the initial still posture. As a commanding drumbeat ensued, Belsaré moved with deliberate control through a series of one-legged poses taken directly from the ancient Sanskrit treatises on classical sculpture and classical dance (*Shilpa Shāstra* and *Nāṭyashāstra*). She descended into a deep plié to perform the invocation – a meticulous abhinaya of preparing an offering of sandalwood paste and gathering flowers to present to the god. She enacted the scene with attentive detail as she rocked side to side in the ongoing plié, and then effortlessly stood up. Then, as Lord Ganesha, Belsaré sank to the floor ending in a cross-legged, seated posture, ever ready to bestow blessings and remove obstacles.

In Each Is Both was spawned from two rather cerebral concepts: The Hymn of Creation (*Sūkta*) c. 1700 B.C.E. and the classical image of Ardhanārishwara (half-woman/half-man form of Shiva and Shakti). Belsaré narrated several translated verses from the hymn and continued with corresponding verses describing the Ardhanārishwara image:

"Then when 'existence' did not exist; even 'nothingness' was not. Darkness was wrapped in darkness. There was no time, no space, no planets, no earth, no water, no wind, nor the heavens beyond it.

"The unmanifest Self breathed wind-lessly. There was that One and there was no 'other.' The Unmanifest self is Shiva. That which causes him to rise and manifest is energy or Shakti. The two come together in the form of Ardhanārishwara. In Each is Both.

"Their wedding is the coming together of two creative principles, and their union, the birth of Desire that spins the cosmos into being."

This convergence of these two classical concepts is where the choreography began and cosmic creation arose.

Belsaré challenged notions of what is physically possible as she danced the interaction of Shiva and Shakti to shape a visual hymn of creation. An embodiment of vibrational energy, Belsaré assumed a deep plié, her hands quivering as they drew a large, encompassing circle. Harnessing each body part on command, Belsaré trembled and quivered in a pulsating vibrato to enact a full description of the gods' attributes. She ended this breathtaking passage balanced on one leg while vibrating the lifted foot in a perfect expression of Shakti's jingling ankle bells.

Belsaré rendered a beautifully developed abhinaya – one moment as Shiva, one moment as Shakti – moving through and holding power postures of these two energies. She finally descended into plié and vibrated her entire body, continuing as she slowly rose and burst into a surprise jump to a dissonant gong that continued its vibration long after her body had stilled.



Mesma Belsaré. (Photo: Gajen Sunthara, DEF)

A Conversation with Maya Kulkarni and Mesma Belsaré

Karen Greenspan

Mesma Belsaré: I came to know about Maya [Kulkarni] through the dance community in New York. Some colleagues had mentioned her name to me. I was looking for a dance mentor, an artistic mentor, a sounding board. I wasn't able to find anybody for about six or seven years. Then someone mentioned Maya to me. I had not heard of her, but something about her description intrigued me. I took the number and I called her. She was extremely generous. She invited me over and had me dance for her. Ever since then we have been working together.

BR: Had you just moved to Boston?

Belsaré: No, I had been in Boston for almost six years. I was a student at Massachusetts College of Art and was working at an art museum as a museum educator. But my first love is and was dance. All my time was spent dancing – thinking about it, doing it. However, I was doing it all by myself. I did not have anyone to look at what I was doing and guide me.

BR: And you are also a visual artist?

Belsaré: Yes. I'm a painter. In fact, Maya has a collection of my work.

BR: Maya, what are Mesma's qualities as a dancer that you wanted to highlight, explore, and challenge?

Maya Kulkarni: When Mesma came to me, she had already had professional training with other gurus in India. She had been performing a lot and was looking for someone to groom her. When I met her she was kind of agonized inside. Mesma was very sincere and passion-

ate about trying to find something, and very hardworking. All those qualities were wonderful, and visually she had such beautiful lines. She is able to use her body beautifully. So I was very attracted to her commitment to her art.

She was looking for a way to go beyond where she was at that point. She needed somebody to talk to, with whom to think things through, to talk about dance, and to talk about the direction in which she could go. I felt I could contribute to that. So, that is how it began.

Initially we worked on abhinaya. And over a long period of time, I began to see the inner Mesma. She flowered. She was able to trans-

late the ideas I had very quickly. There is a great deal of synergy between the two of us. And we became good friends as well.

BR: How long have you been working together?

Belsaré: Almost eight years now.

Kulkarni: I must tell you that in working with Mesma I have also evolved as a choreographer. My choreographic vision was latent, dormant within. And it flowered because she enabled me to do that. She was the right kind

of person. The more I gave her, the more she wanted. There was this give-and-take that was very fruitful, very productive.

Belsaré: By the way, when the two of us are together, we are not just talking about dance. We talk about everything that interests us—from painting to sculpture to literature. And she is a scholar in her field of political science and political philosophy. She has opened up many horizons for me. She has enabled me to think beyond just dance. She has taught me the value of really looking at life closely and to live it joyfully. She keeps telling me, "You must live life in a way that the beauty and joy move through you



Photo: Courtesy of Maya Kulkarni

Maya Kulkarni

into the dance.” And that is a wonderful gift.

BR: So you both have really nurtured each other.

Belsaré and Kulkarni: Yes, that is the right way to put it.

BR: How did the piece *Shilpa Natana* come about?

Kulkarni: When I composed works for myself to dance, I stayed strictly within the traditional genre. With Mesma, I was stepping out – stepping out of the traditional *margam* structure [of *bharatanatyam*]. That is what we did with *Shilpa Natana*. I wanted to bring the temple sculptures to life.

Every movement in this comes from the *Natyashastra* and the *Abhinayadarpana* [ancient Sanskrit treatises on the performing arts]. We explored the different prescribed positions of the feet. Any Indian classical dance will contain these structural elements. However, we isolated them and strung them together in a cohesive presentation.

Belsaré: In this piece, the visual and kinetic arts come together, with an emphasis on the sculptural aspect. Maya came up with this concept during one of our walks along the Hudson River. We subsequently gave it the Sanskrit name *Shilpa Natana* (The Dancing Sculptures).

BR: Tell me about *In Each Is Both*.

Kulkarni: I had wanted to choreograph the *Hymn of Creation* (*Nasadiya Sukta*) from the *Rig Veda* for a long time, but it’s a very abstract, philosophical concept. The hymn does not talk of the image of Shiva. But all of creation is encompassed in him as an underlying creative force. Shiva consists of everything. When Shiva’s male and female energies separate, the two halves long to unite again, and so “desire” is born. This desire is the source of creation.

BR: Did you choreograph the piece specifically for the theme of the program “Dualities of Dance: Addressing Gender in Indian Classical Dance”?

Kulkarni: No. We created it two years ago, not specifically for this theme.

Belsaré: Shiva’s form of Ardhanārīshwara

is not a physical concept. It’s not about gender or androgyny. Also, Maya’s way of visualizing narrative is different than other choreographers. While working on this concept, we came to a point where we discovered a compelling connection between the meaning of the sculptural image of Ardhanārīshwara and the abstract ideas in the *Hymn*.

Kulkarni: We assembled images around this theme to break open the concept. For example, normally, when a dancer tells how Shiva proceeds to his wedding with Uma, she would simply show the *mudra* of Shiva sitting on the bull and indicate that he is passing by. Instead, we danced the whole scene. We elaborated a detailed tableau of the entire event – Shiva’s vehicle and his companions, the playing of the drums by Vishnu and cymbals by Brahma, the ecstatic accompaniment of the trumpeters and drummers, and so on – like the painted detail in a temple mural or sculptural frieze. Other dancers in the audience came up to us afterwards and told us they understood every single facet – the *sanchari* (thoughts). It was in tradition, and yet not traditional.

Belsaré: Maya’s choreographic style and vision are so crystal clear; there is no room for ambiguity. Her clarity is what evokes such poetic images. Her imagination knows no bounds. Although her images are rich and plentiful, she pushes me to economize movement. So we say a whole lot but only dance the essential.

Kulkarni: Mesma is a different kind of dancer. This vision could not be articulated by anyone else.

Belsaré: It is Maya’s faith in me that allows me to do what I can do.

Kulkarni: We are now working on something completely different. *The Allegory of the Cave* by Plato.

Belsaré: Maya is beginning to flesh out the ideas. She is visualizing the potential for a dramatic dance. The impact of a strong narrative is always exciting to us.

Kulkarni: We like to be in conversation. Through conversation, new works emerge.