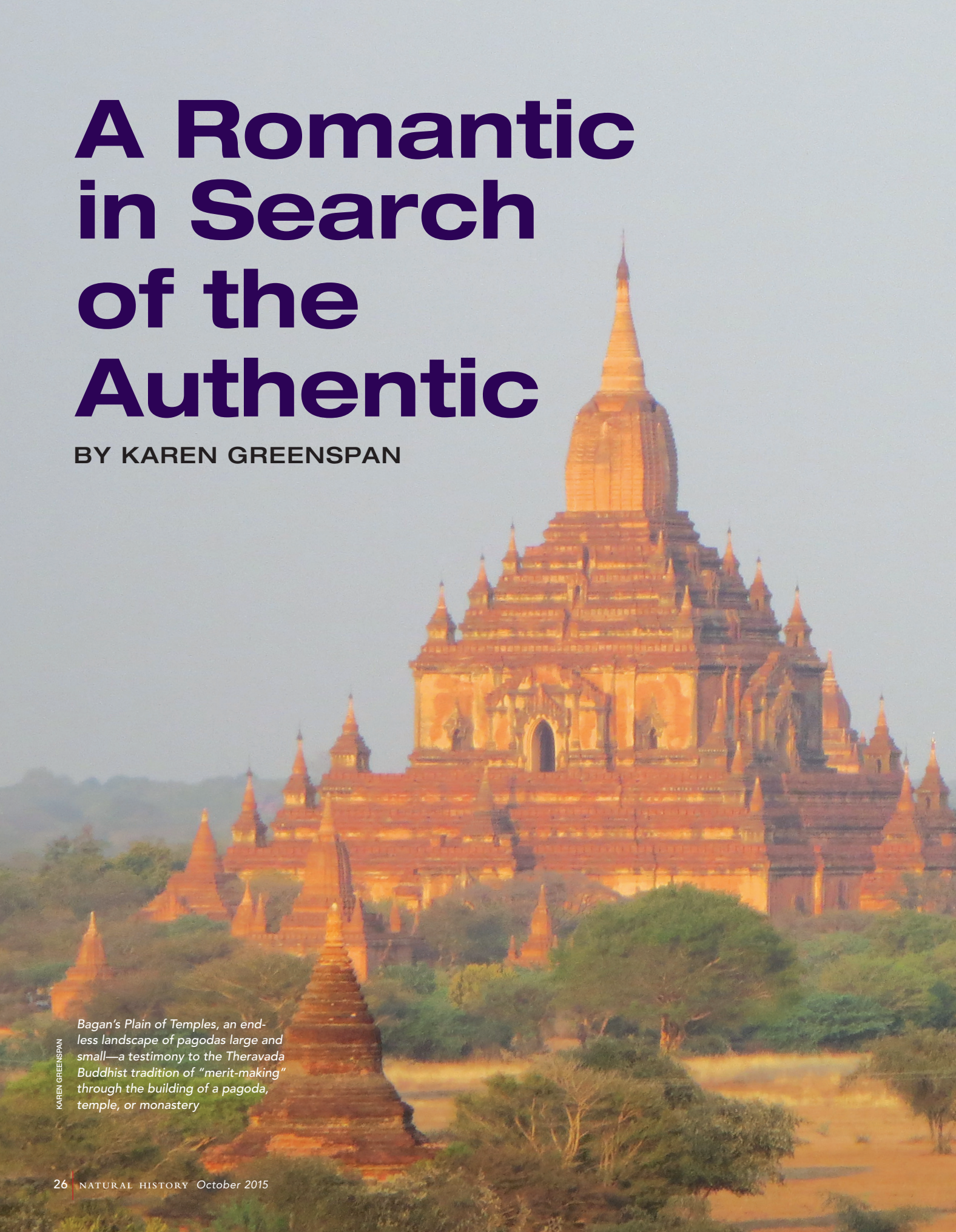
A Romantic in Search of the Authentic

BY KAREN GREENSPAN



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Bagan's Plain of Temples, an endless landscape of pagodas large and small—a testimony to the Theravada Buddhist tradition of "merit-making" through the building of a pagoda, temple, or monastery

A most graceful form of Burmese dance is unscripted.

About two years ago, among the countless travel catalogues that inundated my mailbox, I noticed a surge in trips offered to Burma. The brochures triggered romantic notions of seeing the golden-spired country that had captivated Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell, and Somerset Maugham. Sympathetic to a people who had negotiated their independence from England in 1948, only to contend with a protracted civil war and then subsist under the heel of a military dictatorship until 2011, I wanted to support the push for democracy represented by Aung San Suu Kyi. And I felt the urgency to experience the next "Angkor Wat" before it became as overrun with tourists as is Angkor Wat. I studied the map of Myanmar, meaning "Golden Country," as the country has been called since 1989. The former name Burma is derived from "Bamar," the name of the ethnic group that comprises two-thirds of the population. I took note of the fact that the Himalayas rise up in the north of the country, while the "tail" in the southernmost part of Myanmar is directly across the Gulf of Thailand from Cambodia. As I had been enthralled by the primal sacred dances of the Himalayas (*cham*) as well as the delicate court dance of Cambodia (*Robam Boran*), or Cambodian ballet, from having observed and written about them [*Natural History*, November 2012, June 2014], I was curious to explore the dance traditions that occupy this geographic space that lies between them.

I began to feel the tension between mountain and jungle cultures as I read the booklet of "Traveler Notes" provided by my travel company. It mentioned that the country's inhabitants are primarily descendants of a tribe that migrated from Tibet and China in 800 A.D. (mountain culture). Nonetheless, about 90% of the population is Theravada Buddhist, a conservative branch of Buddhism prevalent in Southeast Asia (jungle culture). The Burmese version of Theravada Buddhism, however, incorporates some animistic beliefs held over from pre-Buddhist times in its inclusion of *nat* worship, which is the appeasement of thirty-seven spirits through food, flower, dance, and incense offerings (Buddhism generally embraced indigenous beliefs as the faith spread throughout Asia). The Burmese language is derived from the Tibeto-Burman language family (mountain culture). Burmese script, however, developed from the Pali language of south India (jungle culture). I sensed a fascinating tug of war, and decided to learn more in person.

On my first day in the bustling city of Yangon (formerly Rangoon), we drove down a dusty road lined with modest flats, where I took a private lesson in *Kapya-lo* in the home of performer Aye Aye Myint and her sister, Than Than Htay. The sisters, raised in a family of famous traditional music masters, were trained in Myanmar dance, musical instruments, and singing. The dance studio, a dedicated room in their small apartment, had a mirrored wall, a

Three minthas from the Shwe Man Thabin troupe hamming it up with the hsaing waing (melodic percussion ensemble) playing behind the gilt frame enclosure

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blue and white laminate floor, and a supply of costumes, masks, and Burmese musical instruments stashed along the walls—presumably used by the sisters' Myanmar culture performing troupe.

Kapya-lo is the traditional Burmese dance technique that translates as "dance without verse," because it is performed to purely percussive accompaniment. The Basic Form consists of twenty-one steps. This set of rhythmic movements develops technical proficiency in a movement vocabulary and style that the Burmese use for their traditional dance repertoire. These training exercises were formulated in 1953, when the acclaimed performer Daw Oba Thaung was appointed to the post of Instructor of Dance at the newly-founded State School of Music and Drama in Mandalay. Thaung developed a five-year course of study. Each of the five courses is divided into 125 technical dance sequences, or forms, each of which is ten minutes in duration. She is also credited with codifying the Burmese dance repertoire that was basically undocumented until then.

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Female dancers wear the long narrow longyi with white train that they frequently flick around with a backward kick of their foot

As the Western colonial period began to end in Southeast Asia after World War II, citizens of the various nation/states were awakening to their cultural heritage, which governments began to promote to strengthen national identity. In 1953, the Burmese government opened state schools for music and drama in both Rangoon and Mandalay. Government-sponsored dance institutions pushed to classify court and ritual dances from the nineteenth century. The resulting collection of dances is frequently staged for national occasions, international festivals, pagoda festivals, and cultural shows produced for tourists and visiting officials.

The underlying step of the Basic Form involves alternately touching and stepping on one foot and then the other, with the touch sometimes to the front, side, or behind the standing foot. Each step is repeated and performed to a regular count of eight. The torso is wholly integrated, bending to the front, side, or back, or bending while rotating. The dance movements incorporate arm gestures and stylized hand gestures as well. Some of the descriptive terms my instructor used for the arm and hand movements were "flower gift," "pick up the flowers," "hike up the *longyi*" (wraparound Burmese skirt worn by both women and men), "seagull arms," "butterfly arms," "comb the hairpiece," and "ogre arms". The Basic Form also includes some shoulder rotations and chin-jutting movements.

Aye Aye Myint began my lesson by performing the steps in front of me and occasionally stopping to mold my arms and hands into the correct position. About twenty minutes into the two-hour lesson she left to get dressed for her evening performance, at which point her sister resumed the instruction. At the end of the lesson Aye Aye Myint came out in full costume (watermelon red longyi and blouse) with stage make-up. She asked my guide to take our photo together—a true diva!

Her sister then gave us a lovely serenade on the Burmese harp. This gracefully arched horizontal harp looks like a boat or a swan. Its long curved neck is carved out of the root of a tree. The traditional stringed instrument is based on a seven-tone scale and is regarded as the national instrument of Myanmar. Its origins may date back as many as 1500 years. Certainly, there are representations, both written and pictorial, from the Bagan period (1044-1287). It was used for chamber music in the royal court up to the mid-1800s. Now it is often included in cultural programs and is also popular with the general population.

Burmese dance appears to have a love affair with the floor. Many of the sequences begin seated or kneeling on the floor. The technical training has perfected the ability to transition from the floor to standing and to the floor again. When a fellow dance writer asked me about Burmese dancing, I laughed and replied, "They have no respect for the knees!" They jump down onto the knees as

opposed to up in the air. Many turns and jumps are performed in a squat or crouch. The small amount of locomotion (moving the entire body through space) contained in their choreography is frequently performed almost hugging the floor, in a crouching or deep squatting position, requiring tremendous control. These postures may have evolved from court etiquette that required subjects to kneel as a sign of respect to the ruler, or, alternatively, from the religious code of behavior wherein devotees kneel to honor a religious master, the Buddha, or any number of deities or spirits.

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Mintha from the Shwe Man Thabin troupe landing into a puppet pose from a jump

The movements are also influenced by the costumes, based on the court styles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in turn largely influenced by the fashion of the Thai royal court. For females, the long, narrow longyi with white train prevents any wide stances and open bending or high extension of the legs. The women sometimes kick up their foot to the rear, thereby flicking the train. They sport a short, tight-fitting jacket that flairs out above the hips, "like the petals of a downward-pointing flower," as George Orwell put it. In earlier times the garment was constructed from a sheer fabric stiffened with a rattan reed. The men wear the traditional costume of wide-legged, ankle-length trousers with a folded loincloth, allowing them to dance with open legs. Their jackets hang straight, unlike the women's. In earlier times they were made of brilliantly colored Burmese silk. Today they are constructed of shiny fabric with generous amounts of golden appliqué decoration.

The dancer's torso, head, arms, and hands are constantly bending—creating sharp angles with a percussive quality, much like the wooden movements of a marionette. Marionette theater, known as *yokethay thabin*, developed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries into a highly technical performing art in Burma. It was a favorite entertainment in the Mandalay court during the court's final dynasty from 1752-1885. It frequently portrayed the *Jataka Tales*, a collection of 547 morally instructive fables depicting earlier incarnations of the Buddha. As human actors were believed to be impure, the marionette theaters, using wooden puppets that could not succumb to human frailty, held a monopoly on performance of the sacred *Jataka* stories.

Marionette performers today display remarkable artistry in their ability to manipulate the puppets to move in a complex human fashion—even performing actual dance

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Yokethay thabin (marionette theater), a favorite entertainment in the Mandalay court, is a most interesting and unique influence on Burmese traditional dance

choreography. Some marionettes have up to sixty strings in order to enable these complicated dance movements, as opposed to the twenty-odd strings of most puppets. The gestures of the human dancers mimic the puppet's wooden quality and angular joints, most specifically in the way dancers fall to the floor—like a puppet whose control strings have been released. In *Burmese Days,* Orwell's account of a British timber merchant living in Burma in the 1920s, he describes a performance:

"In a moment the girl began to dance. But at first it was not a dance, it was a rhythmic nodding, posturing and twisting of the elbows, like the movements of one of those jointed wooden figures...The way her neck and elbows rotated was precisely like a jointed doll, and yet incredibly sinuous."

The Burmese troupes frequently incorporate a very clever puppet dance in which some performers take the role of the marionettes, while others take the role of the puppeteers who manipulate the controls of their dancing puppets. This influence of the puppet theater on the dance vocabulary and quality is the most interesting and unique characteristic of traditional Burmese dance.

A few days after my private lesson in Yangon, I attended a performance in the ancient capital of Bagan and another in the former royal capital of Mandalay. Though packaged for tourists, my guide assured me that the same type of dances are enjoyed by the local population at all-night *zat pwe* performances during annual pagoda festivals. The zat pwe, during the week-long anniversary celebrations held at each Buddhist temple, encompass a full spectrum of popular entertainment (comedy acts and popular singing) as well as the traditional dances. The stars of the zat pwe are the *mintha* and *minthamee*—the lead male and female performers. Their facility with improvised comedy adds significantly to the choreography.

The two performances that I attended offered the typical Burmese dance repertoire—a pure movement dance performed by one or more females invoking the nat spirits, puppet dances that mimic the wooden, angular movements of the highly developed Burmese marionette theater, dance portraits of well-known characters from Burmese culture, a folk dance highlighting the colorful costumes of one of the ethnic tribes, as well as story ballets usually portraying an account from the *Ramayana* or the *Jataka Tales*. Both performances included a comic dance of U Mingyaw, a nat, renowned for his drunken debauchery. Locals are quite familiar with this character. As the dance is a solo piece, its success depends on the talent and ability of the individual performer.

The performances also included a female group piece called Bagan Dance. The Bagan dynasty (1044-1287) was a prosperous regional powerhouse of religion, learning, and culture that developed alongside the notable Khmer Empire (802-1431) in what is now Cambodia, and the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai (1238-1438). Over 13,000 temples and stupas were built in Bagan as a tribute to the new Theravada Buddhist faith that inspired its most impressive ruler, King Anawratha.

There was a great deal of cross-pollination among the Southeast Asian cultures throughout the ages. Theater and dance traditions were a valued court commodity. And, like the treasure of a conquered kingdom, its dancers and traditions were captured booty taken away to the victors' courts. Six bronze Khmer sculptures taken in a raid from Angkor Wat in 1431 are now housed within the famous Mahamuni Pagoda complex in Mandalay. When the Thai defeated the Khmer Empire in the fifteenth century, they took temple dancers captive and subsequently the Thai court adopted many of the Khmer dance traditions. In the eighteenth century, the Burmese conquered the Thai

Intha fisherman plying his trade on Inle Lake as he simultaneously works his oar and the nets while balancing on one leg

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kingdom of Ayutthaya, and some of the Khmer and Thai traditions spread to Burma, though the Burmese have developed their own unique forms.

The Bagan Dance choreographies are purportedly derived from Bagan temple carvings. The present-day Bagan Dances, performed for tourist consumption, are staged with the same type of colorful costumes used for popular novitiation processions that occur throughout the country when young boys and girls are ordained. On the day of celebration, the novices are dressed up and paraded as Prince Siddhartha. The next day their heads are shaven and they are robed as monks and nuns. The overall concept of the Bagan Dance seems an attempt to duplicate what the Royal Cambodian Ballet accomplished with Apsara Dance, a pure dance piece based on the bas reliefs of the *apsara*, or celestial dancers, from the temples at Angkor. Unfortunately, the Bagan Dance interpretations that I saw did not approximate the refinement of the Cambodian choreography or the complexity of Indian classical dance—considered to be the prototype for Southeast Asian dance—nor did they demonstrate any authentic style of their own.


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Female devotee propitiating a nat

As mentioned before, the dance performances always include a dance/drama re-enacting a chapter from one of the eastern epic tales—frequently the *Ramayana* or the *Jataka Tales*. The costumes make use of masks, golden headdresses, and colorful shiny fabrics decorated with glittery appliqué. The gesture-driven movement tends toward simple mimed narrative.

The highlight of the performances, however, was the classical Burmese orchestra (*hsaing waing*) that accompanies the dance. The melodic percussion accompaniment is comprised of a drum circle, a gong circle, a gong frame, and a bell and clapper. In addition, there is usually a bamboo xylophone, bamboo flute, oboe, and cymbals. The melodic percussion orchestra is a typical musical tradition used across Southeast Asia in dance theater. The all-male Burmese orchestral musicians are a spectacle, wearing their signature *gaung baung*, pale pink tied head wraps, and playing within the elaborate, gilt-framed drum and gong circles.

In contrast to the dance performances staged in Burmese cities and tourist sites, the most entrancing dance-like movements I saw while in Burma were those by fishermen on Inle Lake in Shan State in eastern central Myanmar. The Intha—an ethnic group of lake dwellers—row while standing on the stern of their boats, perfectly balanced on one foot. The other leg is wrapped around the oar, rowing—leaving their hands free to maneuver their fishing nets. The graceful movements of the fishermen proceed from the rhythmic single-legged rowing, to the casting of the nets, to the beating of the water with an oar to move the fish into the nets while standing or squatting, to pulling the nets into the boat, and then shaking the contents free from the nets. The gentle curve of the boats and the wide-brimmed conical bamboo hats complete the design and costume for this daily ritual performed on the reflective fluid stage of Inle Lake.

A few weeks after returning home to New York City, I viewed a video recording of Burmese dance, dated 1926, from the Ted Shawn Collection at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library. Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis—early pioneers of American modern dance—were on a performance tour of the Orient. Dressed in the debonair attire of the 1920s, at Hadji's Palace Hotel in Rangoon, they are observing and interacting with "native dancers" who perform improvised solos and duets that frequently end in some variation of a puppet pose. The silent footage suddenly cuts to a scene of festivities held on the Royal Lake in Rangoon. Captured in a few grainy black and white frames on camera is a regatta. The royal golden barge, with two gilt dragons at the fore, is out on the lake amidst the competing long and short wooden boats with their teams of seated rowers. Among the competitors is a boat with not one, but ten standing rowers, perfectly synchronized, as they balance on one foot, the other leg wrapped around the oar, rowing in the graceful, rhythmic dance of the Intha boatmen.

Karen Greenspan, a New York City-based dance writer, researches and observes contemporary and traditional dance forms in the U.S. and abroad. A former professional dancer, Ms. Greenspan is a frequent contributor to *Ballet Review*. She also travels regularly to Asia, engaging with performing artists to gain a deeper understanding into the world's dance traditions and cultures. Most recently, she wrote of a Bhutanese ritual reenactment celebrating a historic battle strategem ("From War to Enlightenment," *Natural History,* March 2015).