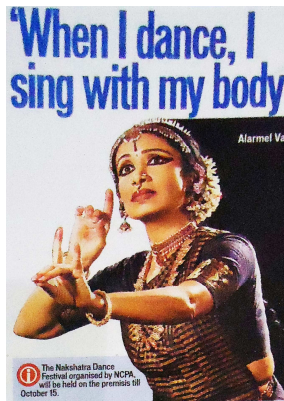


Padmshree Alarmel Valli



Alarmel Valli on her dance form and performing at the Nakshatra Dance Festival

Charlene Flanagan
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The symphony of words, melody and movement is the epitome of Indian classical dance. It is the union of body, mind and soul, encompassing the very essence of life. This can be explicitly seen in the performances of noted Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer, Alarmel Valli. "The key to my intuitive understanding of dance is the close inter-relation between movement and music," explains Valli. "When I dance, I sing with my body."

Valli, who performed at the ongoing Nakshatra Dance Festival organised by NCPA, is among a number of reputed dancers who are taking to this platform for a variety of captivating and eclectic performances.

On Stage
Her performance, titled *Until the Light Fades*, brings to life the treatment of love in a subtle, deeply internalised dance poetry. In collaboration with Arundhati Subramaniam, Valli explored this theme

with poems in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and English. Her recital includes interpretation of the pre-Aryan Tamil verse, medieval Sanskrit poetry, from the 19th century Padam and Javali and even contemporary poetry.

"What unfolds is a celebration of Indian classical dance," says Valli. "I begin with a Shringara, an invocation on love. What I've tried to do is to weave together three distinct layers—words, melody and movement. Keeping the theme of love intact but also bringing in other colours of emotion was extremely difficult. I've tried to bring out love through dance and poetry."

Happy feet

The Nakshatra Dance Festival is aiming to create a galaxy of sorts, with India's finest dancers glittering across its stage. It holds a twinkling promise in store for all dance aficionados. Says Valli, "I've been associated with the NCPA for decades. I've had many happy memories here. It only seemed natural that I be a part of this festival."

The dilemmas of going solo

Dance dramas, which seem to be more in vogue now, have a rationale for their popularity, says danseuse Alarmel Valli, who was in the city last week

By Ramya Sarma

Dance, like fashion, is a reflection of its practitioners, and this includes both dancer and audience. What the audience wants, it usually gets. Audience feedback does nurture art, and so every dancer needs to pander to his or her audience, be it in the concert repertoire or the way in which he or she is dressed and presented for public consumption.

However, there are some dancers who believe in a certain purity of form, of presentation, and of the relationship between dancer and audience, and Alarmel Valli is one of them. The Madras-based Bharata Naryam dancer is well-known in India and abroad as someone who does not compromise where the art itself is concerned. She has not, so far, deviated from the norms of dance and its performance by presenting 'themes', dance dramas or group shows, except for one collaboration with Odissi artist, Madhuri Madgal. But she is indeed wise to realise that a single dancer will, at some point in her career, have to give her audience what it wants, to keep that audience, if nothing else.

"What I've seen, in the last five years at least," Valli says, "is a pronounced shift towards group dancing, be it somebody breaking out of the classical mould and trying to use space differently, like Chandrababu, or people doing dance dramas, an old tradition in the south." There is a spite suddenly of these dance dramas and of thematic solo and group presentations, such as *Shakti Samadhanam* or *Vallu Vahnam*, where the whole performance revolves around a single deity.

According to her, these follow the old hackneyed formula of *narayan, padam, et al.* It's just old wine in new bottles," she remarks. "It does have its appeal for certain audiences, Valli admits, "because dramatic presentations are easier to understand, and action-oriented pieces are easier to do, since one depends on gestures and dramatics and one has a larger canvas to play with." As a solo artist, "The advantage is that you are able to do what you want, to give one a certain measure of freedom and one is wholly in control. But one needs an added quality, a something extra, to hold an audience."

Dancing in a group is far less stressful. "An audience watching five dancers on stage is likely to cheer up any one, so in terms of *abhinaya*, of overall excellence, one can use dancers who are not superb as soloists, but still make up a spectacular show," she points out.



Preserving the norm: Alarmel Valli

little more, can be slightly more casual." In a group presentation, the choreographer is the central figure who needs good material to work with, and a Pina Bausch or a Martha Graham can do wonders.

"The motivations for groups are not always because the dancer or choreographer is interested in using — sculpting — space which is very exciting. It is the work which should be interesting. It should begin with the creative impulse rather than have it grafted on due to other pressures," Valli explains.

Another factor perhaps in favour of group performances is that they are far more viable economically. When a group presents a group, the expenses are shared. And if one person shines, she is noticed, without having to take on the burden of a solo performance. The dancer population has boomed, according to Valli, with

to perform on stage. "When I was training," Valli remembers, "I think, the atmosphere was a less commercialised, there was a great deal of encouragement. Younger dancers find it so difficult today to get a break."

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For her own part, Valli says her "creative impulses are responses to whatever is around me. If I do group work, it will be with my students, or as a fun thing, like I did with

AGELESS MAGIC OF THE MARGAM

Noted Bharatanatyam danseuse Alarmel Valli goes down memory lane to dispel the perception that today the margam is obsolete and boring

SOME DECADES AGO, when globalisation was still an unfamiliar concept, I performed in a tiny jewel of a mountain village in Italy. The setting was picturesque — a village square with a breathtaking view of the valley. My audience was a large gathering of farmers, villagers and tourists who had come to

watch what had been billed as "Classical temple dance of India". The programme was an uncompromising long margam (traditional repertoire) complete with *alarpasu, varnam, padams* and *shillaks*. In those distant days, to that unimpressed audience, Indian culture, let alone Bharatanatyam, must have seemed strange indeed — art from an alien planet! Yet at the end of the performance, their response was overwhelming and heartwarming. An elderly woman in a black sari knelt at my feet and kissed my hands, thanking me, tears streaming down her face, while others queued up to express their joy. In all the years that I have performed, in diverse forums in India and abroad, whether in a sabha or opera house, college or museum, village or temple, to audiences spanning a vast spectrum of cultures, tastes and experiences, I have almost always presented a complete Bharatanatyam margam. And I have marvelled at its unfailing power to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers and to touch people at the most intense level to become what Ruth St. Denis

says of dance — "a means of communication between soul and soul, to express what is too deep, too fine for words". There is a perception today that the margam is obsolete, boring, lacking in contemporary interest, that it is the dancer in a figurative strait-jacket. I remember the amazement of a modern dancer on hearing that all the dances in a margam I presented at the International Festival in Vienna, had been choreographed by me and that even the poetry and music for some of the dances had been specially commissioned. He had been given to believe that the very concept of choreography was incompatible with the classical Indian dance repertoire!

In my view, the margam, with its perfect structural balance and harmony, is but a beautiful framework for the performance that gives ample scope for individuality and creative expression. It is up to the dancer, to invest it with life and meaning. The margam gives me a vast and diverse palette to choose from, with exciting colours to paint my dancing spaces. If it is boring, surely we have ourselves to blame.

In our age of sensationalism and short-takeaway spins, group programmes and dramatised thematic presentations make for easier comprehension and appreciation. The solo performance and margam can make enormous demands of both dancer and audience. Planning an interesting and balanced

margam is vital for an artist to communicate successfully, to forge that invisible link between audience and artist. But I do not subscribe to the view that dancers should play to the gallery, for to do so, would be to underestimate and patronise the audience.

Since I first began learning dance, I have seen many innovative changes in the margam. An invocation may range from the minimalist beauty and geometry of an *alarpasu*, through the lyrics of famous composers, to compositions entirely conceived of and structured by the dancer. In one of my invocatory dances, celebrating the magnificence and beauty of the sun, I used verses from both Sanskrit texts and from the Kamba Ramayanam and also introduced a *varnam* from the concert repertoire, shaping it to suit the dance idiom. Contrary to the opinion that the margam is limiting, I find it immensely liberating, for it does not tie me down to any one subject, but offers me the freedom to traverse myriad themes in the span of a single performance.

The strength, power and beauty of the margam lies in its ability to integrate the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of life. Martha Graham, a great modern Western dancer/choreographer, said, "I think the reason that dance has held such an enormous magic for the world, is that it has been the symbol of the performance of living."

footnote Alarmel Valli

ASIAN AGE
17 JUN 2008

Dr. Aananda Shankar Jayant

A question of danswers

Jasmine Shah Varma meets Ananda Shankar Jayant, whose dance-drama questions the status of women in our society

What About Me? asks Ananda Shankar Jayant through the dance-drama performed at the Godrej Dance Academy Theatre last evening. She questions the status of women in our society through a dance-drama that is a fusion of Bharatanatyam and contemporary theatre.

If you are connecting Ananda with the late Ananda Shankar, you are mistaken. Says Ananda, Hyderabad-based artiste prolific in both Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi styles of Indian classical dance, "I did meet him once and he said to me 'Hmmm, our name and profession both are the same'. But beyond that there is no connection.

Besides being an artiste, Ananda is chief commercial manager with the South Central Railway. She also runs Shankarananda Kalakshetra where her students learn Bharatanatyam.

What About Me? is rendered by a group of 11 dancers including Ananda and her students. Conceptualised, choreographed and

directed by Ananda, *What About Me?* raises questions about gender differences.

"In India most people feel that if a daughter is born it's the mother's fault. The Indian woman is always pegged against Sita and Draupadi who have been made into role models."

But the Ramayana and Mahabharata have been written from the perspective of men. Ananda asks, "Has anyone ever tried to explore how Draupadi must have felt when she was sold? Or what Sita went through when she had to undergo the fire test?"

The dance-drama juxtaposes episodes from the mythologies and contemporary experiences in a one-hour presentation. It begins with a happy scene in contemporary times where a girl is getting married. As the girl is being sent away to her new home her mother advises her as custom demands to be a slave to her husband, to serve him well, be good, forgive him for all his wrong doings

and so on. Then as time passes, the bride gives birth to a girl child. The husband tells her that she is unwanted and the woman has to leave with her daughter and bring the baby up on her own. One day the child asks her mother to tell her the stories of Sita and Draupadi. The epic stories are enacted in the presentation while also showing parallel episodes in contemporary times witnessed by the girl. For instance Sita's Agnipariksha is shown as parallel to contemporary incidents of dowry-related bride burning.

The story develops in a linear fashion drawing analogies for atrocities such as rape and widowhood as well.

Ananda leaves the audience with several questions and she offers no solutions for solutions have to come from the audience and society at large. The play uses a mix of Bharatanatyam supported by Carnatic music while there are questions which are asked in English.

This was the second performance of



DRAWING PARALLELS: Ananda Shankar Jayant performing *What About Me?*

What About Me? which premiered in Hyderabad earlier this year. It will also be staged in Trivandrum, Delhi and Madras. As you read this Ananda will already be on her way back to her home town of Hyderabad. She says, "I will rest on Sunday and then on Monday I will be back to work."

Ananda has always been a dancer but happened to take the UPSC exams and landed with this profession which

she says "takes care of *da-roti* and allows me to pursue my interest in art without being worried about finance."

To add to that she is also married. Balancing home and two professions is no mean feat and Ananda stands as a strong example of the woman that society fails to acknowledge.

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2000

Dr. Ananda Shankar Jayant

18* THE HINDU, Friday, February 23, 1990

Tradition, scholarship revealed

HYDERABAD, Feb. 20.

Ananda Shankar is one of the fine Bharatanatyam artists and a guru in her own right. She learned Bharatanatyam in Kalakshetra, Madras. Her performance always exudes tradition as well as scholarship. Ananda Shankar also learned Kuchipudi and her performance invariably combines both the styles. She gave a recital at the Ravindra Bharathi last week under the auspices of Max Mueller Bhavan, American Studies Research Centre and Alliance Francaise.

The recital was conducted by Mamata with sharp nattuvangam, while Prema Ramamurthy's vocal support added to the total appeal.

Ananda started with the Bharatanatyam numbers and presented the traditional opening Pushpanjali. Then came her exposition of Thyagaraja's composition 'Ksheerasagarasayana' in Devagandhari. This was a treat as the item was by itself marked by the detailed delineation by Ananda. She then went on to present another popular number, 'Panchashatpeetavasin'. She did a tarangam later in Kuchipudi and a tilana in Jonpuri during which she came out with brilliant patterns mingling interesting combinations and permutations. Her students Mamata, Srivalli, Prathiba and Neeraja also danced.

The number that stole the limelight was 'Vishvavidyalaya Kamala Varanasi', a ballet in Sanskrit. The script was by Dr. P. Sri Ramachandrudu. The set of slokas was the essence of the lyrical part. It depicts the students of a university as bees who approach a lotus. The teacher is the source of learning. The solo ballet was interestingly presented. The university is described as the lotus. It is a place for attaining liberty and learning. Music was composed by Prema Ramamurthy. — G.S.

4 Newstime Tuesday 23 October 1990

Dance

Classical and creative

Ananda Shankar's Bharatanatyam recital at Ravindra Bharathi recently was a flawless depiction of the classical nature of the dance form and yet free from the normal rigidity that technical perfection can impose on one's art.

It was an *Ekaharya* a 'monoballet' delineating the story of Sri Rama that Ananda chose to present through the media of Thyagaraja kritis. Ananda picked up a few Thyagaraja kritis of irresistible charm on the great composer's *lehta Devata* Sri Rama. Vainiki alokas and swara patterns have been used to provide the continuity.

The first part of the *Ekaharya* depicted the birth of Rama starting with the famous Kirti Soga-sa choda *Harane* 'O, beautiful

sent with precision and clarity.

After a brief interlude, the second portion of the monoballet started with Bharathu accepting to rule Ayodhya in the name of Rama using his padukas. Rama Sandehamu *Teerapavayya* Rama. Then the episodes of Sarpanakha, Sabari, construction of Varadhi were presented. Vali asking Rama 'Marugola Ra O Raghuva' why this indifference, O Rama, I have now realised that you are 'everything' - this episode brought out the immeasurable devotion and total surrender of a devotee to the all-mighty deity. Ananda's abhinaya - prowess came into play vividly in depiction of this scene making it aesthetically rapturous. The ballet came to an end with depiction of Rama Ravana Yuddham and finally culminating in the 'patibhishekam' of Sri Rama.

Although the presentation, Ananda Shankar excelled in presenting both the important facts of Bharatanatyam - 'Nritta' (rhythmic) and 'Nritya' (the emotionally expressive). The ballet was a rich experience in creativity.

The choreography for the dance was by the performer herself. The selection of relevant Thyagaraja kritis was thoughtful. Depiction of different rasas through the different episodes was vivid and varied. Kumari Mamta's nattuvangam was precise and had grit. Prema Ramamurthy sang melodiously.

Satyanarayana on Mridangam, Subbalekshmi on violin and Sri Ravi Kumar on flute gave able support.

Aarati



face Rama, am I fit to see your beauty and greatness' - we then see 'Kausalya', the blessed mother playing with the child and putting him to sleep - *Uyyalooogavayya* in Nelumbari. Ananda presented 'yatsalya bhava' effortlessly.

Then we saw in the court of Dasaratha sage Vishwamitra asking Rama's assistance to kill the demons. The scene then shifted to Janaka's court with Siva Dhanur Bhangam and Sita garlanding Rama. The Kirti slokas were *Akalalona adaga*. Ravana 'making' an abortive effort to lift the bow was pre-

Dr. Padma Subramaniam



different' till the media spoke about it and critics pointed it out. I suppose my style looks novel because there's a constant interaction between my research and dance; bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Fusion, according to you?

Globalisation in art does not mean creating prototypes. Exchange is fine but not at the cost of one's identity. I remember adapting a Russian composer's symphony for Romeo and Juliet to my solo "jatayu moksham" piece. I just used that music to emote...the sancharis, karanas and my technique of using the whole body (derived from the Natyasastra) were all there and went well with the composition. Having learnt Western classical I understood the piece before choreographing it.

Indiatimes Chat
 Excerpts from a live chat with Bharatanatyam dancer, Geeta Chandran

"Classical dance needs to be demystified"

Q: How do you think Indian classical dance form will survive the onslaught of the satellite TV?
—Mallika
A: I am an avid watcher of MTV and I am not one of those who runs down MTV culture because I am from a classical dance background. But, I think the challenge lies in adapting classical dance to suit today's audiences which would entail demystifying it, making it more accessible and packaging it better.

Q: Aren't western audiences far more appreciative of Indian classical dance?
—Lolo
A: Yes, I have performed abroad and yes it is a wonderful feeling to represent your country and be a cultural ambassador, but I don't agree that the audiences there give us more encouragement as you put it. Very often those audiences are seeing these dance forms for the first time and hence are obviously taken in by its richness, range and sophistication. One would be unfair in comparing an already initiated audience with these audiences. Besides they are a little more expressive of what they feel.

Q: Does the guru-shishya parampara still exist? If so, then why is it not so popular in urban centres?
—Mru
A: Everything changes with time. I don't know what you define as the guru-shishya parampara. I have been teaching for the last 10 years and I think I am completely involved with my students. They are my extended family. If you mean they are not staying with the guru and imbibing the art form I think that is not possible today. Formal education has become part and parcel of everybody's

life. Tradition is something which always evolves and changes. Today you see a changed form of the same parampara.


Q: Who in your opinion are the best all time Bharatanatyam performers in India?
—Cute
A: This is a very personal assessment. Yamini Krishnamurthy is a great performer. Great energy, power and stage presence. Bala Saraswati of yester years was the greatest artist that the Bharatanatyam scene ever saw. I am making a distinction here of a performer and an artiste because Balama as she is called was a complete artiste. She could not only dance but also sing wonderfully and even play the Veena. She would be my role model because I have always tried to be a complete artiste and focus my attention on all aspects of the style.

Q: You are very beautiful. How come all classical dancers including you and Mallika Sarabhai are so gorgeous?
—Lolo
A: Thanks for the compliment. It was just yesterday that in a press conference, I was asked to spell how dance could keep one healthy and the list is endless because dance is not only a physical exercise, but also it feeds the soul and when one has one's passion as one's profession, I think one always looks happy as one enjoys what one is doing.

Q: Is dance an inborn talent or can it be taught?
—Rome
A: Some basic attributes are essential to become a dancer which then are harnessed in order to make a performer. When I say attributes, I mean maybe a sense of understanding of rhythm and the basic love for movement.

Comment

Innovation in Bharata Natyam



Written by Geeta Chandran, a Bharata Natyam dancer. She also teaches dance at the Natyakalalayam in Delhi

The entire discussion on innovation in an art form as steeped in tradition as Bharata Natyam, is sure to evoke extreme reactions from its proponents. Yet, for an art form to survive, it is crucial that it grows and evolves, constantly. Bharata Natyam has stagnated in the public mind as an esoteric art form incapable of reflecting modern day realities. How can subservient images of pining women in varnams be digested by audiences whose women members are being empowered socially, politically and economically. How to make Bharata Natyam contemporary is thus a crucial and painful point of debate.

Indian theatre, with its deep roots within the classical Sanskrit tradition, was able to bridge this through contemporary playwrights who have made modern social concerns the arena of their writings. How can such a similar movement take root in dance? Dancers need to locate comparable contemporary poetry, in set metre and rhyme, and not in free verse, which can be set to music and rhythm and performed. Language is not important. It can be any language. Creative dancers can interpret such verses with their powerful tools of mudra and abhinaya. Such innovation is as yet, largely, only a dream.

Until now, the Bharata Natyam garnered through the devadasis (who were smart enough to divulge details of their art), or created anew by Kalakshetra, has seen very limited innovation. Of course, the old repertoire has changed considerably. The temple performances steeped in ritual and entwined with its spiritual life, gave way to an elaborate format for the presentation of the dance form on stage.

The traditional repertoire which I learnt from my devadasi guru was the allarippu, the jathiswaram, the shabdam, the varnam, a padam, a javadi, an ashtapadi, tillana, kurathi and andal, an almost three hour fare, which I presented at my arangetram. A host of dancers trained as late as the seventies would have undergone a similar experience. Then in the early eighties a sea-change occurred, so to speak, in this traditional menu. Dancers started performing kavuthams, pushpanjalis and melapritis as the first item, going straight to the varnam. In the second half of the repertoire there were generally two expressional numbers topped off by a tillana. The duration thus was reduced to an hour and a half (which is even today the average length of performance).