

DESIGN OF THOUGHT AND MOVEMENT

INTERVIEW WITH MITI DESAI
BY MANJULA NANAVATI



Performance at Melbourne Recital Centre

Miti Desai is the founder and creative head of Miti Design Lab. A designer and classical dancer, Miti teaches as a visiting faculty at the Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology (Bengaluru) and at Sophia Polytechnic (Mumbai), and has personally created and executed courses initiating children into Holistic Design, Aesthetics and Culture through the performing arts.

She has performed extensively at dance festivals as an exponent of *Mohiniattam* (a classical Indian dance form) and her performances are uniquely marked by an absence of the need to overstate or overwhelm. As in her design work, what comes through is a serenity and a surrender to the medium in its purest and most subtle form.

THE ACROPOLITAN: Miti can you tell us about how you came to dance.

MITI: My journey in dance began from my journey in Design. I had studied Applied Art in Mumbai and went to USA to study Design. There I began to think about the role of design and what it means, about engaging with and experiencing design internally and holistically. I began to grow more and more uncomfortable at the idea of a life that revolved around commercial and financial transactions alone.

I had taken *Bharatnatyam* classes as a young girl and I found myself drawn to dance as I felt I could internalize the principles of design and actually experience design within my own body through the medium of dance.

The search for a teacher and an internal, spiritual and design approach to dance brought me in touch with my teacher, danseuse Mandakini Trivedi. Her dance school, Natshvari Dance Gurukul situated in Mumbai & Lonavala, is committed to reviving the yogic tradition in Indian dance through the perfection of technique and the perfection of self. Mandakiniji believes in creating dancers who assimilate the principles of art into life. It was truly a blessing of nature that brought me in touch with the teacher and an approach to the art, which has given me a holistic perspective in the practice of the art and in my life.

TA: Tell us a little more about *Mohiniattam* as a classical dance form.

MITI: There are seven different classical dance styles that the Indian tradition offers. Each one comes from a different state in India, with a different geometry of movement, costume, jewelry and even music; yet the principles and values are the same in

all. *Mohiniattam* is one such form. It is a gentle and lyrical classical dance style from Kerala. Its swinging and swaying movements are reminiscent of the swaying palm trees and the undulating backwaters of Kerala. Its rich mimetic technique beautifully offsets its simple pure dance movements. Together they create a dance that enchants.

Classical Indian dance is a solo dance form...it was all about the individual spiritual journey. And a spiritual journey must be walked alone.

Classical Indian dance has two aspects. One is pure dance, the exuberance of movement, where the dancer (and through her the viewer) experiences bliss and joy. The other aspect is the mythological or storytelling aspect. This borrows from literature and poetry, and is usually about gods and goddesses within the Hindu tradition, but really it is about universal truths. Most Indian art forms are multi-layered, but dance most of all, because it combines Poetry, Music, Theatre and Movement, each a specific art form with its own form, structure and complexities. When all these arts are combined and layered one upon the other you can imagine the sheer multiplicity and intricacy of thoughts, values and ideas that are presented.

In addition, classical Indian dance is a solo dance form. Although today you have ensemble casts also, it originally developed as a solitary discipline, as it was all about the individual spiritual journey. And a spiritual journey must be walked alone.

TA: Are there aspects of dance that have spilled over into other parts of your life?

MITI: Dance changed everything in my life. It changed me personally, privately as well as

professionally & publicly. My exposure to the Indian arts changed my sense of aesthetic completely. I credit classical dance with bringing me back to my cultural roots and to traditional aesthetics, which is the hallmark of my design sensibility.

TA: And are there philosophical values that you have lived through your dance and applied to your life?

MITI: Classical Indian dance by itself is devised and designed in a way that it facilitates an inward journey. But of course it is up to the practitioner's intention, integrity and intensity (all at once) that would result in the art penetrating into one's day-to-day life, beyond just a profession or activity that one engages with. Though the form by itself is designed such that the mere practice of it also gives immense energy.

The dance school that I trained in, and more importantly the teacher that I trained under, focus on the ability of dance and art to penetrate into one's life. In any master-disciple, or *guru-shishya*, relationship what you are taught is expected to be applied to your life.

Mandakiniji focuses on what she refers to as 'The Yoga of Dance'. The meaning of *yoga* is to become one with, to unite. Through the aesthetic form, the themes and the experience, classical Indian dance facilitates this process at the physical, intellectual and psychological level. And that is how I have been initiated into the world of classical Indian dance. The dancer must integrate with the dance; the essence of the dance must be held within and exist in everything that one does.

When a sculptor sculpts a statue of Ganpathi he says, "That is Ganpathi," but when a dancer dances the role she says, "I am Ganpathi." I must understand the very essence of Ganpathi as deeply as my consciousness allows. For example, Ganpathi rides a mouse, which is a metaphor for a swiftly darting restless mind. Ganpathi is therefore the master

Goodenough Fashion (London)



All Images Courtesy: Miti Desai

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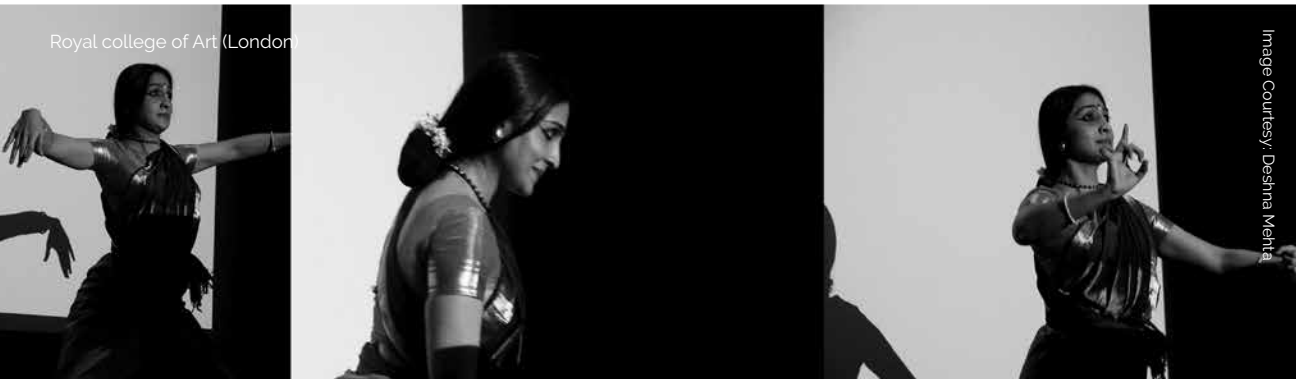


Image Courtesy: Deshna Mehta

of the mind. When I dance, *that* is what I need to convey. And when I succeed in allowing that value to exist within me, through all my actions that is art entering my life.

Inner growth is a value of prime importance to me. Every action I try to view through that peephole. So professional decisions are weighed against core values. The practice of classical dance leads to an inner journey, an introspection; and I try to support that value in everything I do.

TA: For a personality who is so understated both privately and professionally, how do you feel about performing on stage?

MITI: Performing is about shedding one's own personality and becoming the character; the principles and the value of the dance and what is being depicted. And in the process it is about forgetting the individual self and moving towards a possibility of transcending into a higher realm. So the mere individual personality is actually of no consequence in performing.

Also, performing is like tight rope walking. The completion of the walk successfully can be overwhelming and the possibility of not being able to achieve the target could have dips at many levels. Sometimes, even fatal. Performing is like that. It can result in the most ecstatic inner experience that one can have, leading to a burst of vital energy, but it also has the immense potential to turn poisonous. Glamour, visibility, fame and applause go hand in hand with performing; and these are vital ingredients that can disrupt an inner equilibrium. It is very easy to be affected and controlled by all the outward sparkles that performing results in. The challenge is to perform with the highest intensity and hold the inner experience, without letting the outward experience control the inner space.

Performing is an unavoidable challenge, because dance is in itself a performing art. And if the

dancer believes that that the principles of art must penetrate and assimilate into one's own life, then the responsibility is immense. Then the challenge is to dance in front of an audience of 500, or 5, with the same purity as if you were dancing alone (independent of the outward) and yet, at the same time it is not about ignoring the audience, but rather drawing them in, because dance also focuses on the value that - you and I are one; just as the dance and I are one. And I (the dancer) want you (the audience) to be able to experience what I am experiencing at the fullest. There is an inner feeling of wanting to share and give in abundance that the performer operates from; and if that feeling comes from an honest and pure space then real communication emerges.

TA: What is the most important thing that dance has taught you?

MITI: Discipline. In order to lead an integrated life you need discipline. It centers you. Dance was my first taste of intense discipline. The practice of the art encompasses physical, mental & emotional discipline all at once.

TA: What does dance mean to you. Is it a career, a passion, an outlet for creativity?

MITI: To me my dancing is a form of self-expression that emerges from an innate passion; from a yearning to engage with something more than the mundane; towards a possibility of transcendence.

The *shastras* tell us that "From the formless comes the form, and the form takes you back to the formless." In Indian thought the purpose of life is to elevate, engage, introspect, and integrate. This thought is given a form through the actual form of the dance. But the real purpose of dance is for the dancer to understand and express through the magnificent form, the experience of the formless. In other words rigorous training has the potential for a dancer to master the form and move inwards to experience the formless. This to me is a challenge and a journey that I engage with.

TA: What do you see as the future of classical Indian dance?

MITI: The history of classical Indian dance began with *Devdasis* in temples and moved over time into a respectable small industry. While there is an abundance of practitioners, professionals, children and youngsters who are practicing, teaching & learning dance, classical dance as a professional future seems dim. There is a lack of financial stability for a young individual who would like to take this up as a full time profession. There is not much money in dancing professionally, the experience can be unpleasant and the commercial and professional aspect sometimes is a complete contradiction to the philosophical aspect of dance. While anything commercial takes away from its intrinsic value, without financial stability the art form will die; so there is a need to engage with the commercial aspect also.

One reason for this is that the audience is dwindling. The complexity of the dance form requires the understanding of many other art forms, and there is a language that must be deconstructed and understood. Art education is not active enough and especially in Mumbai the influence of Bollywood inculcates the exact opposite values to those required for art appreciation. The arts are mediums to elevate you and nudge you to look more deeply into yourself, and Bollywood is a medium to entertain you and to escape from yourself. To appreciate any art form you need to be attentive, you need to think, then you will come out of the experience elevated and energized. You can't watch a classical dance recital with popcorn and a cola; but sadly that's the nature of the society we live in.

TA: The way of the dancer and the way of the philosopher have a similar core. Do you relate to that? According to you, what is the philosophy of dance?

MITI: Yes indeed! The philosophy of classical Indian dance is the philosophy of the civilization and the culture through which it emanated. What is the purpose of life? It is to grow; it is to raise the level

of consciousness, yours and everyone else that you touch. How does the layman grapple with this?

In India, spirituality is so pervasive that even at the grassroot level everyone is familiar with words like *moksh* and *dhyan* and concepts of meditation and detachment. In ancient times, to help people on this path, ladders were created, in the form of all the arts, and classical Indian dance was one such ladder created to allow a glimpse into the possibility of a higher self.

The challenge is to perform with the highest intensity and hold the inner experience, without letting the outward experience control the inner space.

In the *shastras* the Sanskrit expression used to describe the experience of classical arts, its essence or *rasa*, is known as *brahmananda sahodara*, which literally means 'born from the same womb'. This expression recognizes the similarity between the experience of art and the bliss of *Brahman*. The artistic experience is therefore put at the same level as the supreme bliss of *Brahman*. Thus the practice of classical Indian dance intrinsically takes you deeper to understand the philosophy that rests beneath its magnificent form.

TA: Design and dance are so integral to your life. What would you rather be known as - Miti, the Designer? Or Miti, the Dancer?

MITI: Actually I feel that they are two sides of a coin, inseparable from each other. To me they are different dimensions of the same aspect and they coexist together and facilitate each other. When I am designing I am exploring the dance of design. And when I am dancing I am exploring the design of dance. ★★★