

ARTISTE EXTRAORDINAIRE: RAMAA BHARADVAJ

By Manjula Nanavati



Ramaa Bharadvaj is a celebrated dancer, choreographer, storyteller, educator, writer and arts-curator. She has lived and worked in the US for 32 years, where she was the recipient of numerous prestigious awards for choreography, as well as for her exemplary contribution to the Arts in California. She has served on the boards of both state and national arts agencies and has been a visiting faculty member of various reputed universities, while her essays and cultural commentaries have been published by leading publications.

Having returned to India in 2009, she currently lives in Bengaluru where she teaches, writes and speaks on the arts, with an emphasis on dance. She curates the annual national dance and music festival at Chinmaya Naada Bindu Gurukula in Pune.

As a dancer Ramaa ji displays remarkable confidence, precision, and fluidity, combined with an extraordinary spectrum of nuanced emotion. As a story teller she essays multiple roles with the ease and skill that comes only with a mastery of the craft. As a choreographer she seamlessly blends the geography of space, the geometry of form and the syntax of music. And as a writer and lecturer Ramaa ji is articulate and knowledgeable, punctuating her scholarship with experience and humour.

Despite her busy calendar Ramaa ji enthusiastically shared her insight through an interview with The Acropolitian Magazine.

THE ACROPOLITAN: The 1st chapter of the *Natyashastra* gives us a fascinating origin story of the Theatre Arts, of which dance is one. Can you recount that for our readers?

RAMAA BHARADVAJ: This origin story about the ancestry of India's theatre-arts is rooted in the Indian psyche which dedicates all to a Divine Source. It is quite an intriguing tale that speaks of changing times; of creativity and collaborations; and most importantly of humility and grace.

The story is set in the *Treta Yuga*, and it begins when 45 distinguished sages (including Vyasa, Valmiki, Visvamitra, Bharadvaja, Vasishtha, Agastya, Durvasa and Narada) pose questions to sage Bharatamuni who had become the custodian of a new 5th *Veda* created by Brahma - the Creator. In fact, the entire text follows the format of questions and answers, with sage Bharatamuni recounting why this 5th *Veda* was created, and detailing its contents and purposefulness for the people of the Earth.



Image Courtesy: Bala Bharadvaj

The story starts as if in a flashback when the Guardians of the world are troubled by a moral decline among humans. They see that the wisdom of the already existing 4 *Vedas* was too esoteric to be even understood by the common man, let alone be applied in life. So, they approach Brahma to ask for a new body of knowledge that is not only both visible and audible, but also accessible to all. Brahma distills the core values of the 4 *Vedas* (poetry from *Rg*, music from *Sama*, communicative means from *Yajur*, and aesthetics from *Atharva*) and creates *Natya Veda* (wisdom of theatre-arts) as a timeless science for all.

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So extensive are the contents of this new scripture, that it is decided that only sages who are capable of intense discipline can be its proper custodians. Thus, sage Bharatamuni is chosen to receive this knowledge and pass it on through his 105 disciples/sons. Bharatamuni puts this 5th *Veda* immediately to use by creating the first theatrical production for the prestigious Flagstaff Festival honoring Indra. The theme, as in any successful play, involves heroes (*Devas*) and villains (*Asuras*) and the victory of the former.

Here there is a twist in the story. One would expect that a production created with the cooperation of celestials would have had a smooth run. But not so! As the play begins, the *Asuras* object at being shown negatively and create havoc by freezing the actors.

Indra, enraged at this sabotage, wields his flagstaff and defeats the *Asuras*. So, this first play has a sloppy and chaotic ending. But, Visvakarma the celestial architect is then summoned to build a proper theatre to keep away disruptive gate-crashers.

Bharatamuni then embarks on a new production, even better than the first one, this time with Siva and Brahma as his collaborators – Brahma providing the storyline, and Siva and Parvati introducing dance into this new play.

Scene shifts! Bharatamuni and his sons have now descended to Earth. It is here that the scholar-sages surround him, eager to hear directly from him about this 5th *Veda* that would benefit mankind. Bharatamuni's answers to their questions become the *Natyashastra* - the comprehensive manual on the science of Indian dramaturgy.



Ramaa Bharadvaj at a South Indian temple

I remember reading an interesting viewpoint on this origin story, by the renowned actor-director Girish Karnad. According to him, this myth points out that however carefully devised, live theatre carries the risk of failure and that the purpose of good theatre is not to play safe, but to continue to live and to provoke.

TA: Why are the arts so important? What is its purpose and what can it teach us?

RAMAA JI: I doubt if anyone can expand on the purpose of the arts, more than what the *Natyashastra* has already defined. Even while contemplating the creation of a new instructive tool, Brahma decides to combine wisdom from various sources – *Vedas*, epics, mythology, science, arts, and crafts. This new medium of instruction was to be a source of advice to humans in matters of worldly life namely, duty, wealth, and fame.

Later in the text, through a soliloquy Brahma further explains the purpose of Theatre-Arts; that they are meant to

- represent the activities of the three worlds,
- mimic all types of humans (good, bad, indifferent), all types of emotions, and all types of exploits of both the gods and *Asuras*, kings, and commoners.
- to be a model of all the sciences (*shastras*)
- incorporate goals of life relating to the righteous (*dharma*), secular (*artha*), sensual (*kāma*), and spiritual (*mokṣa*)
- portray the good and bad that befalls all

- teach the path of virtue, give courage to the cowards, enlighten those of poor intellect, soothe agitated minds, admonish the ill-natured, encourage self-control, cheer the sorrowful, and
- offer encouragement and sound advice as well as entertainment and pleasure.

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He further declares that there would be no wisdom, no knowledge, no art or craft that cannot be found in the scripture of drama, and that it has been created for the benefit of all and not for exclusively glorifying any particular class or crowd of society.

Such use of the dramatic arts as a mirror to the society for seeing itself has given this inherited divine legacy a purpose beyond mere entertainment. Dance and drama (both live-theatre and film) are supposed to facilitate the awakening of higher qualities such as goodness, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, devotion, etc., thus creating a positive shift in the behavior of an entire society. As an example, when the movie "Babe" about a talking baby pig was

released in the United States, this "drama" invoked feelings of great compassion and non-violence towards animals to such an extent, that the sale of pork dramatically went down for several months.

Throughout history also, there are instances of social change created by dancers and actors through their art form. My favorite one comes from a 16th-century episode. Once, as a group of Kuchipudi performers is traveling to perform in the court of a king, they rest in the village of Siddhavatam. There, they witness the sufferings of the people at the hands of the local chieftain and decide to do something about it. When they reach the king's court, they enact a dramatized version of the chieftain's methods of torture. An inquiry follows and the chieftain is punished.



Image Courtesy: Kshiti Saverna

Other examples of using drama as a tool for dialoguing come from contemporary contexts. In the 1960s, a Brazilian director named Augusto Boal began a new form of theatre known as the Theatre of the Oppressed which has influenced theatre practitioners all over the world, including India. To Boal, Theatre was not a spectacle to be observed, but a collaborative experience of, by, and for the people, in which the spectators themselves become actors, both participating and observing.

In California, where I lived for more than 2 decades, there were organizations that creatively engaged incarcerated youth in conflict resolution while teaching them concepts of tolerance, understanding, and respect, through dance and improvisational theatre. Their themes included traumatic occurrences in these children's lives such as racism, gang violence, drug/alcohol abuse, teen suicide, domestic violence, and war. Where the justice system of society could not reach, theatre and dance easily did.

In fact, when I see the word "Nartan" used as an epithet for dance, I see another definition in it. I see a combination of the words *Nara* (human) + *Tanoti* (expansion) thus signifying its purpose as that which allows for an expansive experience through a comprehensive portrayal and understanding of humanity in all its varied aspects.

TA: Is Art primarily for self-expression and self-discovery or a more universal and unifying experience?

RAMAA JI: In order to answer this question, it is necessary that we first understand that from the Indian context, the primary purpose of all Art is to invoke *Rasa*. And this

Rasa or aesthetic essence was itself called *Brahmananda Sahodara* (the twin brother of spiritual bliss). This implies that Art is capable of bestowing a mystic experience of realizing the Divine Truth. In this process, the priority of an Indian artist is more ennobling than just self-expression, because Art has always been about experiencing a Universal Being within oneself. But the audience member was not excluded from this experience. It was never about the artists having a personal experience irrespective of the audience, but rather the artist becoming a conduit through whose Art the spectators have the experience too.

Hence, the receivers of the Art thus created, were also designated with a special name, "*rasika*" the "experienter", thus elevating them from mere sensory levels of seeing (spectator) or listening (audience) to that of being an intuitive participant. So, the artistic-journey was not just a personal expression or happy entertainment. It was a collaborative pilgrimage between the art-maker and the art-receiver, towards a spiritual encounter.

Here, I recall a lovely phrase that I once heard from renowned dancer VP Dhananjayan that the purpose of Theater-Arts is to educate the illiterate, to enlighten the literate and to entertain the enlightened.

TA: How does Dance speak to an audience differently from the other arts?

RAMAA JI: Rather than say that dance speaks 'differently', I would like to rephrase it, that dance, because of its inherently collaborative nature, speaks 'comprehensively'. Dance is naturally a

multi-dimensional art-form, and it combines poetry and literature, painting and sculpture, nuances of adornment such as clothing and jewelry, along with movement vocabulary, music, and language of a particular global or even regional culture. However, from the Indian perspective, this sort of interrelationship is not peculiar to dance alone. And, this symbiosis is explained beautifully in an episode in the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*.

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Once, King Vajra approaches sage Markandeya and asks to learn the art of sculpting or image-making (*pratima lakshanam*). The sage enlightens him in a sequential way that the king cannot comprehend the art of sculpting unless he learns the art of painting (*citra sutra*), and in order to learn painting he must be well versed in the art of dancing (*nrtta Shastra*), and to understand dancing he must first



acquaint himself with instrumental music (*atodya*), and this, in turn, can be fully grasped only through mastery of vocal music (*gita*).

In dance, this interrelationship is explicit in its expression and so it feels as if it is different from other art forms.

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The Native-American shamans speak of the Great Spirit as the Father of creation from whom the soul descends and of Earth as the Mother, for it is she that creates the body for the soul to live in.

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TA: You have said that learning starts from the outside and proceeds inwards, and while giving, in terms of performance, it starts from the inside...can you explain?

RAMAA JI: With regard to the journey from the external to the internal and vice versa, we can start by looking at the descriptions that the word 'Dance' bring to mind, such as movement, action, rhythm, stories. However, these are only lateral experiences like the rim of a wheel. The real core of Dance or the axle of the wheel is Stillness. Dancing is Stillness punctuated by movement – not vice versa. It is similar in music also, where the true core is Silence. And it is this still and silent core that we refer to as Spirit. Our classical arts are

rooted in this aspect, and it is this core spiritual essence that the performance or the outward expression of art, aims at radiating. That is what I mean when I say that in performance, the expression is from inside to outside.

However, accessing this inner core is not a casual affair of reach-out-and-touch! It requires '*tapasya*' or penance-like dedication towards mastery of this finite physical form. In fact, all finite objects have been blessed with the capacity to create a portal through which the soul may reintegrate with its Source. This in fact is the very premise of *Tantra Shastra*, which has been described by Swami Satyananda Saraswathi as the "*Science of seeing, feeling and knowing the Infinite in and through the finite*" and as "*being sucked into the Infinite through a whirlpool of material objects and energies.*"

In the performing arts also, it is this body which becomes that finite tool - first for accessing and then for expressing. So, it is the outer layers that have to be penetrated first during the training phase, because we need to start with the gross before we are able to access the subtle. Moreover, limbs that are not conditioned and prepared adequately, cannot manifest the images born in our imaginative realm. However, detailed attention is given not only to the fortification of the external limbs but the internal mind as well. This is because a weakness in the mind is displayed as a weakness in the external body. The science of Yoga clearly warns of this. For example, a person's wobbliness and lack of balance would signify his wobbliness in determination and belief. Therefore, it was towards this end that Indian dance

pedagogy developed as a holistic learning and practice system in order for the body to be in readiness to embody divinity. So, that is what I mean when I say that the training phase followed the formula of 'outside-to-inside'.

TA: Classical Indian Dance is much more than mere Technique. You have spoken of how the different subtle layers of the body must be prepared to fully connect with the dance and communicate to the audience. Can you take us through that process?

RAMAA JI: That phrase you have used – "communicate to the audience" – is the key here. Communication requires a language, and what that language is, depends on what is being communicated through it. Just because Kalidasa's poetry is glorious, we cannot use that to communicate with computers. Computers have their own programming language.

When it comes to performing arts, the term for communication is "*abhinaya*" which literally means, to bring closer (*abhi+nayati*). This suggests the bringing of the *rasika* and the artistic creation close to each other, and enabling the former to experience the appropriate *rasa* of the latter. As I have mentioned earlier, in Indian art, this *rasa* itself is termed as the "twin brother of Supreme Bliss". So, since what the art seeks to communicate is of transcendental nature, this determines the language used for this communication, as well as the training methodology of the body-instrument that will use this specific language.

I have always felt that we do not dance 'with' the body, but we dance 'through' it.

Thus, this human body itself becomes the primary sacred space because this is where the first sprout of movement germinates. And this 'sacred-space' encompasses the entire body-unit, with its limbs, mind, intellect, and spirit. In Dance, it is this space that is traversed first. An understanding of this sacred space becomes clearer when we approach it through the Upanishadic concept of '*panchakosha*' or the gross and subtle layers. These layers are listed as:

- the physical layer nourished by food – *Annamaya*
- the layer of breath and vital energy – *Pranamaya*
- the layer of mind, emotions, and thoughts – *Manomaya*
- the layer of intellect - *Vijnanamaya*
- and finally, the inner layer of Bliss or *Anandamaya*, which is the spiritual core.

A dancer employs all the first four layers in their fullest capacity in accessing the final inner essence, and the preparation begins of course at the physical layer, for this is the gross layer.



sitting positions in three different height levels along with leaping, sliding, circling, and various other space-explorative ways that demonstrated the principles of alignment through stasis, repose, symmetry, asymmetry, etc.

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Then, there are contemplative exercises as well. To give a simple example, in order to portray Lord Rama, one cannot just mime the holding of a bow in the left hand and arrow in the right, for these weapons can be held by other characters as well, each with a different tale to tell and therefore different kinesthetic energy. Arjuna the warrior held a bow and arrow, as did Manmatha, the God of love. The similarity between these characters ends with the weapon they carry. Therefore, to portray Lord Rama would involve understanding and meditative reflection on His qualities so that the essence of His nature is imbibed by the dancer, both conceptually and somatically. It is only then that the energy of Lord Rama will pervade the portrayal.

Then, there is the most important element in the training of this expressive art form - adeptness in *satvika abhinaya* which belongs to the realm of the mind. This contained a variety of expressive techniques. First of all, there are eight

determining emotions (love, humor, sorrow, anger, valor, fear, hatred and wonder); Then, come external determinants that answer the questions of what, where, when and why; Then there were planned gestures of the body in response to an emotion - some of these are culturally conditioned; These were all colored by 33 transitory emotions; Finally, comes the ability to invoke spontaneous physical reactions such as shedding real tears, blushing, horripilation, etc.

Only by developing proficiency in *satvika abhinaya* does the dancer develop a physical form that exhibits a contained strength, and yet pulsates with expressive energy. Ironically, only the principle of *satvika abhinaya* can be taught to the students. They cannot really be "trained" in it. That expertise comes only with experience.

In this kind of training pedagogy, we can see that the development of the physical, the energetic or pranic, the emotional, and the intellectual layers have all been taken into consideration, in the preparation of the sacred body-space.

Here, I would also like to point out the respect that is given to the external earth-space in which the dance would be seen. The sacred dances of many traditions from around the world display this deep reverence for Earth with strong earth-bound footwork. It is as if the dancers become the voice of mother Earth and that she begins to sing through their feet. The Native-American shamans speak of the Great Spirit as the Father of creation from whom the soul descends and of Earth as the Mother, for it is she that creates the body for the soul to live in.



Image Courtesy: Kshilpi Saxena

Ramaa Bharadvaj @Chinmaya Naada Bindu Gurukula - Pune

In the Indian practice, no dancer in India would begin the first steps without a *bhoomi-pranam* (Earth prayer) seeking the blessing and forgiveness of mother Earth. This offering performed both before beginning to dance and at the end, consisted of a gesture of gratitude to Earth by touching Her reverentially with both palms and then joining them together over the head (*sahasrara chakra*) to offer gratitude to the Gods, at the eyebrow center (*ajna chakra*) to the Guru and at the heart (*anahat chakra*) to the audience.

Thus, you can see how the intent of the art-form is reflected not only in the theme and content but extends holistically to every aspect, from preparation to presentation.

TA: Classical Indian Dance evolved as a solo art form, in temples as a medium of worship and a spiritual path, to experience universal truth. What is this intangible truth and how does one create a tangible experience of it?

RAMAA JI: First of all, I want to make clear that not all classical dance was sequestered within the temple walls. There were court dancers too who used the classical vocabulary. So, we cannot say that dance evolved in the temples only or as a worship ritual only. In fact, if we refer back to the origin story of Theatre-Arts, the intent is clear, that performance Art was created from the mind of Brahma as an educational tool. The purpose of that education was to uplift towards nobler thinking and higher values. So, the integration into temples became a natural partnership, and the themes reflect the adoration of the highest Universal Being, or God, or Universal Truth or whatever we may want to address this Divinity as.

The method of connecting with this intangible Infinite was to be done through the tangible finite of course. In fact, the book *Srimad Bhagavatam* refers to eight material objects - stone, wood, metal, sandalwood paste or clay, precious stones, paintings, sand, and the image within your heart – as being suitable for creating images into which the Universal Spirit can be summoned and worshipped. And to those who question, how one can create an image of a Supreme Being who is without form, the answer is given by sage Markandeya himself in the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*:

“The entire universe is the vikrti (modification) of Prakrti (the formless). The meditation on the Supreme is possible for an ordinary being only when the formless is endowed with a form; and that form is full of significance.”

These material objects served an important purpose for they formed a *Mandala*, a focal center for tuning into and drawing in

Cosmic Consciousness. Even though the Tantric texts say that any object on earth could become a *Mandala*, they gave a special place to the human body, for while the sculpted and painted images required elaborate rituals in order to be infused with energy, the human body, possessed an immediate aptitude for incarnating the Divine because it was endowed with the capacity for conscious awareness. What it practically means for us is that the body is not to be looked at as an obstruction to spiritual enlightenment but as a tool for achieving greater insights.

And when it came to the dancing body, there was a further significance, for as pointed out by Swami Satyānanda Saraswati, what supercharges a *Mandala* is concentration combined with emotional feeling (*bhāvā*) and devotion (*bhakti*), two aspects inherent in the art of dance. This is the reason why the Śāstras have prescribed that a worship ritual would come to successful completion only with an offering of music and dance and included them as part of *upacāra* (rites of hospitality) in the honoring of the invoked deity.

The idea of making the microcosmic into a receptacle for the macrocosmic can be found in other esoteric practices of the world as well. The Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order of Sufism demonstrate this through a 7-century old ritual practice known as the *Sema* ceremony, in which, they transform their bodies into a *Mandala* while performing a "dance" of turning. They equate their spinning motion to a "conscious and harmonious participation" in the revolution of particles in the atoms and to an intentional replication of the cycle of life. During this dance, which they refer to

as the "turning towards Truth", they open the right palm to the sky to receive God's blessing and direct the left to the earth as a means of passing on the spiritual gifts to all of creation. ॐ

Further in the interview, Ramaa ji sheds light on the importance of transmitting Tradition, which she views not as something etched in stone, but as a vibrant, flowing, creatively relevant river, that can transport cultural values to future generations. [Click here to read the full article.](#)



Image Courtesy: Scott Ellis

Offering