

Intercultural Performance: Bharatanatyam in the practice of a Western choreographer

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Fera Matter. Photo: Jussi Ulkuniemi

ABSTRACT

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<p>This thesis examines the practice of a Greek choreographer trained in Bharatanatyam and in western dance techniques such as, ballet, Cunningham, Graham and release, through the lens of intercultural performance making. It touches on the challenges found in a culturally mixed practice and discusses cultural appropriation and persisting Orientalist notions in the discussion of classical Indian dance forms in the West.</p> <p>In the first chapter, I introduce my background in dance and how I have experienced the symbiosis of the eastern and western dance trainings. The chapter is divided chronologically, starting with my years as a student of Bharatanatyam in Greece and continuing with my formal dance training at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London.</p> <p>In the second chapter my latest choreographic work 'Fera Matter', is brought as the case example which initiates the conversation. I elaborate on the conception of the piece and the starting points which were drawn by Greek mythology. The making process is also examined in its interculturality and reveals discussions of the working group around cultural appropriation. Additionally, I touch on the overall dramaturgy of the piece, and I focus on the discoveries made through the employment of <i>abhinaya</i> as a choreographic tool.</p> <p>In the third chapter I view more microscopically the topics of intercultural performance making, cultural appropriation and Orientalist notions found in interculturalism, with an emphasis on how they appear in my own work and practice. The direction of my analysis is inspired by anthropologist Pallabi Chakravorty and dance writer Janet O'Shea.</p> <p>The fourth and final chapter consists of a comparative analysis of the praxis of Akram Khan and Shantala Shivalingappa, to highlight existing methods of employing classical Indian dance on western stages and to reveal nuances among different practices. The chapter concludes with a further exploration of the term 'guru-less' which appeared during my written exploration.</p>	
KEYWORDS Bharata Natyam, Intercultural performance, cultural appropriation, Greek choreographer, practice, choreography, performance	

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INTRODUCTION

It is rather intimidating to think as a writer, that these first couple of sentences indicate the introduction of a process evolving for nearly 16 years. I cannot fathom how I could successfully wrap up the experience, thoughts, questions, concerns and vision encountered in this (continuing) journey in a 40-page text. Perhaps this overwhelming feeling affected by the need to **understand** or **define** one's practice is what led me to pursue a master's degree in choreography. For six years I have been trying to reconnect with the dance form that drove me to choreography in the first place, Bharatanatyam. I am happy to acknowledge that the past two years have been crucial to this reconnection, and with the support of my professor and mentor (whom I cannot thank enough times) Kirsi Monni and Jana Unmüßig respectively, I was equipped to face and own the reality of working with an Eastern classical form in a Western context.

In the course of the thesis writing, I experienced a constant repositioning on the **how**. How do I combine two distinct trainings? How do I own my practice being Greek? How does my approach stand in the overall discourse of classical Indian forms outside of India? How can I establish my own movement vocabulary? I have carried these questions for numerous years yet failing to find a way out. I recognise that this questioning is timeless, and should be continuously posed throughout my career, but at the time it functioned as a congestion and not as a means for development. The writing process commenced a week after the last performance of my artistic component. The writing was inarguably an extension of the choreographic research and a delineator of the upcoming creative ventures. Part of me wished I had started composing the text ahead of the production, as the pages offered the opportunity to wonder in a less pressured and more private fashion, reify concepts and map out fundamental aspects of my artistic thought such as starting points, interests and intention. Typing about my background and intimacy with Bharatanatyam provided a rather cleansing feeling, detoxing from years of doubt, confusion and insecurity. This sense of freshness allowed me to view my artistry from a different lens and unveiled new possibilities where my culturally complex artistic identity can find its space to thrive.

For the written thesis I am attempting to clarify aspects of my practice as a choreographer trained in Bharatanatyam and western dance techniques, by amalgamating personal experience and artistic work, theory, discourses and comparative analysis. Intercultural performance making consists part of the frame through which I am viewing my practice, as it represents my interest in multicultural artistic collaborations and facilitates the understanding of my own culturally multi-faceted practice. Through the writing process I examined my artistic approach in relation to discourses such as cultural appropriation and Orientalism, which informed a whole new approach I can adopt for presenting and applying Bharatanatyam as a Greek choreographer in the West.

It was important to begin the written exploration with my own background as it lays out the cultures and their conversations from which the topics are being examined. I always feel the urge to explain my background after stating my training in Bharatanatyam, so I follow with the text the same impulse I would have in a face-to-face introduction. I choose to have my artistic thesis as the study case, so the current state of my practice becomes visible, along with the questions and problematics that surround it. I am investigating how I arrive in the western and classical Indian dance trainings and what are the conditions that frame me.

By exposing the process of practice understanding to these discourses, I have broadened my perception on the historical, political and cultural reverberations of staging classical Indian dance in the West and obtained a strategy on how to seriously challenge these notions in the work. The comparative analysis of Akram Khan's and Shantala Shivalingappa's works is aiming to mention existing employments of classical Indian dance on western stages and create a point of reference from which my own approach can be weighed. Ideally for the purpose of my thesis, the last chapter would have been a comparative analysis of the work of non-South Asian makers working with classical Indian dance styles in the West, which unfortunately was not feasible. With this statement I am not denying their existence, but the extent of this research did not lead to any examples which could have been suitable cases for the text.

To conclude the introduction, I would like to make known to the reader that this thesis is solely an indicator of the topics that currently orbit my artistic radar. I would have wished to expand further on the subjects and expose more connecting links between practice and theory, but in the context of master's studies I have expanded to the permitting capacity.

1. A PRACTICE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

As prologue to this chapter, which will touch and reflect on my dance background, it is essential to clarify why I emphasise on the word ‘training’. I am interested in approaching the subject by broadening the meaning of the word **training** as a synonym for **becoming**. How factors like teachers, environment, information and time have formed the anatomy of my practice today. By introducing my practice in depth, I revisited thoughts and feelings from the past that accentuated the landscape of this journey. The anamnesis of the first years of dance training presents a complexity that requires understanding in view of the embodying acquired knowledge following the expansion to new territories.

1.1. Bharatanatyam training in Greece

The possibility to study classical Indian dance in Greece is very limited; there is only one school in Athens that offers Bharatanatyam classes, the founder of which, Leda Shantala, trained in Kalakshetra school in Chennai in the 80’s. Classical Indian dance is not very known in the Greek community, which perhaps resulted in the form not receiving any particular attention. After practising ballet for 6 years, I wished for a change in my dance training and my interest was turned towards folklore dances of other cultures: that was when my mother suggested I try Bharatanatyam. The questions on identity and culture were seeded when I switched from ballet to Bharatanatyam classes as my after-school activity at the age of 13. Only a few classes in my classical Indian dance training, I was quickly enticed by the nature of the form; the animated storytelling, dynamic footwork and intricate hand coordination presented a whole new set of possibilities in dance. My previous experience with ballet, had offered me an understanding of the in-class hierarchy between teacher and student which translated similarly in the classical Indian dance frame, as guru and disciple.

In India, gurus are considered with great attention and importance, as they are the source of all information and cultivation (Marathe and Wagani 2022, 326). The relationship with my Bharatanatyam teacher in Greece did not convey this tradition in our practice, and as an effect I followed a ‘guru-less’ path. In the first years of

Bharatanatyam training, I envied the possibility of having a mentor, a guru guiding me through my *margam* (path) holistically. I perceived it as I was missing an important part of the experience of being a Bharatanatyam dancer. The presence of a guru enhances the expected sense of respect and dedication, which comprise a vital part of the required practice of a bona fide dancer.

Despite training in Bharatanatyam for years, I never completed the step which signifies the completion of one's formative dance years: the *aragentram* recital. Aragentram is the first public recital of a disciple, lasting for two to three hours, and traditionally symbolises their initiation as a professional dancer. It is a solo performance composed by 7 to 9 items ('item' is the term for describing choreographic pieces in Bharatanatyam), with each item demanding specific aspects of the art form, such as intense physicality, high level of abhinaya, musicality and ability to memorise a margam. The demonstration of a margam offers the opportunity to the dancer to demonstrate their entire skillset as a performer. The lack of aragentram from my experience has always left me with a sense of incompleteness. By not having had this traditional milestone of the training, my capability to call myself a **professional** was delayed. With time, I revisited the feeling of incompleteness and I observed that it provided me with the notion of continuous effort, an ongoing development and an openness. It is unclear whether I will ever pursue my aragentram in its traditional arrangement, but thanks to the thought process brought by my western training, I like to perceive my own choreographic works comprising a wider, personal aragentram.

Learning the form in Greece signified certain cultural aspects, such as apparel or relationship with the teacher were more relaxed and adapted to the characteristics of the local culture. The classes were seen by most attendees as a leisure activity, a condition which did not allow the access to more intense training for those who were seeking to perform professionally. At the age of 18, after deciding to pursue dance professionally, I began to envision how I could become a Bharatanatyam dancer making and performing for a non-Indian audience. The standard 2-hour recitals performed in the traditional structure of Indian classical dance did not seem like a palatable option for engaging with western audiences in the long run: it became imminent that I would have to play with the form. Having no guidance on how this could be achieved, I researched

choreographers in Europe that employ classical Indian dance in their work. I was particularly impressed by Shantala Shivalingappa's ability to include Kuchipudi in her collaborations with Western choreographers and I was inspired to contact her. Shivalingappa's advice was to achieve a high level in both disciplines and the merging would then start to appear itself. Her advice displayed the possibility of pursuing formal training in contemporary dance, so due to the limitations with training in Bharatanatyam in Greece, I chose to pursue this goal abroad.

1.2. Formal training in the U.K.

I would like to disclaim that the following statements originate from my own experience and interactions in the U.K., which might be contrasting other people's experience.

During my studies in London, I focused primarily on my undergraduate studies curriculum in techniques such as ballet, Graham, Cunningham and release. Along with the lectures on history and theory of contemporary dance, my body and mind were reforming to a new way of thinking and moving. The western dance education set in motion the possibilities of concurrence of the two forms in my practice. The act of practising classical Indian dance in Greece as Greek resonated differently from practising it in the U.K. The works and collaborations I made while in London, did not include Bharatanatyam in the creative process. Not even concepts of it. I was very reluctant and not inspired to take any risks in this direction. The location oozed a cultural overcharge and my relevance signalled **non-existent**. Working with western choreographic tools fresh out from Trinity Laban provided a feeling of **belonging**.

Once I moved to London, I began to perceive my identity from a new prism, as a Greek artist practising Bharatanatyam in the U.K. I was repositioned to a place of severe colonial history towards India, in a time when British Indian artists were commencing to gain more visibility in the local dance field. Part of my excitement to move to London had been the access to the British South Asian community and the possibility to meet other practitioners and discuss the nature of the dance form in the West, a discourse which had not been available to me until then. My expectations though were

not met, as I felt unable to enter the discourse due to my background. The community was rather closed and protective towards sharing practice with non-British Indians, and the institutions, which are predominantly run by White British, focused on offering their platforms to artists of South Asian origin. After years of effort to comprehend my position in the British dance scene, together with the excruciating freelance reality of London that only drew me further away from making, I decided to relocate myself as an instinct of artistic survival.

2. FERA MATTER

Relocating to Finland for further studies has offered me a fresh ground for investigating the topic of culture and identity around my practice. The difference in multiculturalism between the U.K. and Finland, has somehow provided me with a **quieter** space where I can clearly observe the changes my identity as an intercultural dance practitioner has experienced through the years. During my master's studies I received several opportunities to approach, from many different angles, the relationship of Bharatanatyam and contemporary dance in my practice, leading to my thesis work 'Fera Matter'. The making of 'Fera Matter' was a moment in my practice where accumulated thoughts, experience and feelings around Bharatanatyam and contemporary dance collided, revealing problems, answers and new questions, but most importantly unveiling an anticipated clarity on this symbiotic relationship.

2.1. Research

For my graduation project it was vital to remind myself, and through reminding to enhance, the fact that I am ultimately a Greek artist, an aspect often lost in translation after living abroad for 8 years. I wanted to commence my artistic exploration by sourcing directly from what is indisputably **mine**. I steered my content research towards Greek myths involving female mortal characters who suffered divine punishment. This thematic aligned with my interest to highlight allegories on female identity and role in ancient Greek society and observe their relatability and validity in the present global spectrum. The incentive was loosely inspired by Chantal Bilodeau's critical reflection on Aristotelian narrative structure and view which describes the format we employ for constructing our societies to be alike to the format we utilise to form our tales (Trenscényi 2021). The referencing of Greek mythology was my attempt to find an access point to the local audience; Greek mythology is a cultural thematic which can be familiar to an international audience, initiating perhaps a different connection to the work from the very beginning. The possibility to form my own working group has catered the opportunity to closely investigate interculturalism in the creative process. Our group consisted of artists from China, Finland, Greece, Russia and Singapore creating stimulating conversations around cultural appropriation and multinational collaboration.

Before I continue, I would like to make known some of the external conditions that surrounded my creative process and affected a large amount of the decision-making of the working group. My five-week creative process in Studio 3, was shared with my classmate Ryan Mason's thesis project, with whom I agreed to present both our works in one evening. This condition required us to share rehearsal space, collaborators, and to make spatial decisions that will facilitate the realisation of a double bill. Ryan and I were also sharing the same set designer, Aino Kontinen, who was responsible for the overall spatial dramaturgy of the evening, as well as assuring equal negotiation of the space. The producer of our thesis projects had resourced a lighting designer, Anssi Ruotanen, to be part of both working groups for easing the transition from one piece to the other during the performances. The first element drafted for the creation of the piece, was the sculpture 'Untitled' (part of 'Installing Allusions' installation) by Xiao Zhiyu, which he presented in Kuvan Kevät exhibition in 2022. Due to the large size of the artwork, Ryan and I had to compromise on how and where the sculpture would be placed in space.

The movement research was defined by my recent interest to investigate the state of hanging. This bodily state was something that I have been curious about employing as a primary condition for creating movement. The placing of the **hanging** experimentation by the wall offered a sense of partnership in this exploration. Despite drafting an entire sculpture six months ahead of the production period, I rarely have specific materials in mind that I require for beginning my investigation; I always start with whatever is in my immediate disposal, cost free. Therefore, the material that was used as my hanging contraption were three 2-meter slings made of PVC fibre (Polyvinyl chloride fibres), used for lifting heavy equipment overhead and sourced from the stage department of the school. The slings were stiff with no elasticity, becoming a catalyst for the shaping of the movement language.

The sculpture was composed of 12 pieces of 3 meters high and 80cm wide rippled aluminium, which could be hung or stabilised against the wall or floor. I was interested to explore the relationship between the performer and the sculpture floating in the same space. Its metal nature prompted me to consider its ability as a conductor for energy.

This ability symbolised to me a **medium**. A mediator between low and high, and extensively; earth and sky, human and God. My proximity to the wall, floor and ceiling generated questions around this analogy; what can movement suggest in the in-between space of those binary notions? I considered my identity (female, Mediterranean, late 20s) to be the guideline when asking questions such as **why** and **what**. By recognising the semiotic references of my presence in space, I understood that the wider frame of this piece was going to be about female nature navigating high and low.

2.1.1. Myths of Atalanta and Persephone

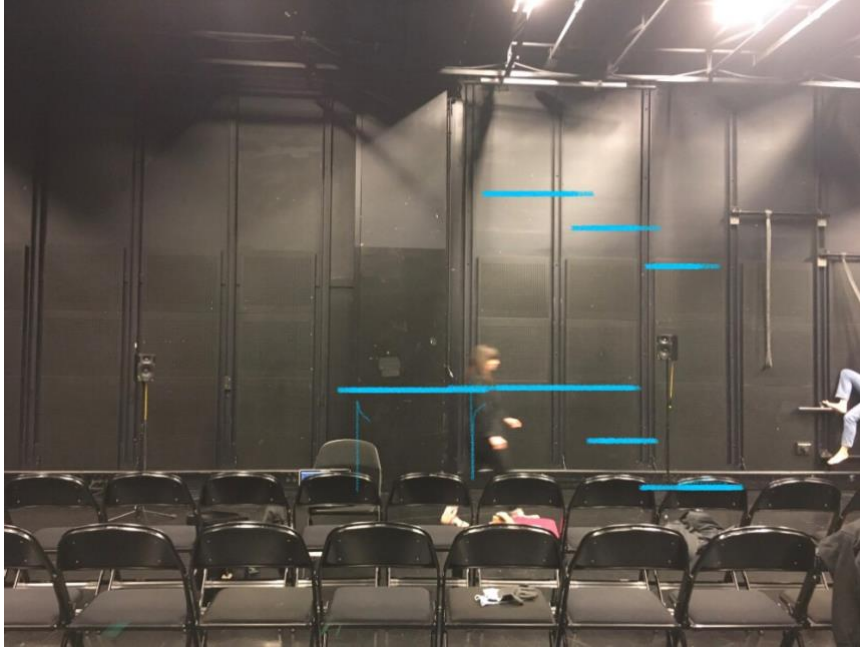
As one of the largest exports of Greek culture, Greek mythology has been a great source of inspiration for innumerable artists around the globe. The recognisability and popularity of the myths outside of Greece, is offering a fruitful ground for the making of intercultural performances. This presented me with a translatable, to the West, starting point for building the thematic language of my work. However, that was not the sole reason I preferred to work with mythology. I like to be critical of the **superiority** of the ancient Greek products, as at times they echo the structure of modern Greek society. My personal focus is on the open-ended gender inequality that characterises modern Greek reality. In this case, I hold mythology, meaning how we choose to tell stories, one of the factors for hardwiring the current Greek mentality towards abuse and victim blaming of women. I respect that Greek mythology is heavily symbolic, however I would also like to bring forth that ancient Greek society was profoundly phallocratic. In numerous myths, female figures are seen as victims of abduction, rape, and eternal sentencing, with the frequent narrative of female deities punishing female mortal characters as an act of jealousy (e.g. Leto, Arachne, Medusa).

One of the mythical figures that surfaced from my investigation was Atalanta. Atalanta was an athletic female character in Greek mythology known for her skills at hunting and wrestling. When she was a baby, she was abandoned in a forest by her father, king Schoeneus, presumably because he wanted a son, and she was raised by a she-bear sent by goddess Artemis. She was then found and adopted by a family of hunters, and later reunited with her biological family. After continuous pressure from her father, Atalanta agreed to marry the man who could beat her in a race. With the help of Aphrodite,

Hippomenes was able to defeat the heroine and marry her. The couple angered Zeus after they made love in a temple dedicated to him (or Rhea, or Cybele) who transformed them to lions, excluding them from human society (Cartwright 2021). Her myth is often an allegory for societal expectations on women, and the prescribed dilemma of career over family and vice versa. Atalanta's dynamism and defying of gender norms inspired me in including her features in my movement research. Her toughness shown in the tales, influenced the manifestation of female vitality and strength intended in the work.

The second myth that informed 'Fera Matter' was that of Demeter's daughter Persephone. In accordance with the myth, God Hades was struck by Persephone's beauty and immediately abducted her to the Underworld. After searching everywhere for her daughter, Demeter retired to her temple in Eleusis causing an immense drought to demand the intervention of the rest of the Gods. As the repercussions of the natural disaster were claiming more and more mortal lives, Zeus agreed to negotiate with Hades by sending Hermes to the Underworld demanding Persephone's freedom. At the end of the negotiations, it was agreed that Persephone would be allowed back to her mother one third of the year (or half a year in some other versions) after which she would have to return to the Underworld. The symbolism behind Persephone's myth might be an indication of the continual shift from life to death, and then life again, and extensively the seasonal changes as experienced in crop production (Cartwright 2016).

The focus was not to narrate the myths in the work, instead, I searched for elements or parts of the stories that could be brought to a modern context. From the myth of Atalanta, I drew the intention for high physicality and the desire to investigate physically demanding scenes. The description of the heroine greatly inspired the overall performativity of the piece. From the story of Persephone, I isolated the element of **abduction** and the overall passivity of the character. I could see the act of abduction reflecting in my movement exploration with the slings and hanging. The depiction of Earth and Underworld in the myth, provided visual stimuli for the designing of the space and the journey of the choreography. My choice to illustrate an ascending sequence on the wall was my personal take on the myth, where I imagined Persephone breaking her passivity and taking control over her fate, by making her way up to the world of the living independently.



Sketches of wall setup. Photo by: Aino Kontinen

2.2. Dramaturgy

To describe the dramaturgy that carved the piece I will elaborate on the main concepts of the work, the relationship with narration, turning points in the composition, use of gesture, intention, and the overall dramaturgical arc of the performance. I am starting by clarifying that there was no dramaturg involved in the creative process. The way we worked as a group, was that everyone contributed their dramaturgical knowledge from their discipline point of view, with few suggestions on each other's parts, and the choreographer having the final say.

The design of the performance proposes two distinct phases: the first phase explores the condition of hanging from the slings and facing the wall, while the second phase is engaging with the practice of abhinaya, not hanging, and facing the audience. There was a clean-cut division of concepts between the two parts, with only a couple of movement and sound elements interlacing the two worlds. The one repetitive gestural part in the middle sling, and the return of the acoustic instrumental sound in the second phase were two aspects that united conceptually the two phases. The reason I decided for such a dualistic approach was so it would be clear (to me) how the eastern and western

elements are being fused and how each concept is being developed. The approach sounds rather conservative, but as it was my first artistic attempt to bring Bharatanatyam in my choreographic work so vividly, it was helpful for me to engage with simple explorations and maintain clarity throughout the process. I do wish that with practice and experience my ability to interweave culturally different elements in the future will be more educated and confident.

There were two conditions in the piece whose break would indicate a turning point. The first condition was that of not stepping on the ground. As the performer is already hanging from the lowest sling when the audience arrives, a relationship between the performer's distance with the floor commences to be established. The performer is not seen disconnecting from the ground, proposing an undisclosed timeliness on this first state of hanging. This condition did not intend to problematise the relationship with gravity or ability to stand upright but inquired about the relationship of the audience and the performer. The kairotic moment for this condition to break, indicates the end of the piece. Stepping on the ground is the last action the performer makes before bowing. Based on the available research time, I decided the breaking of this condition to bring the performance to closure. If there was more time for experimenting, I would focus on what could occur after this turning point. It felt natural for this work to come to an end there, yet I would have wished to challenge what could have happened after changing a dominant condition as such, now that the performer and the audience would be levelled.

The other turning point dealt with the direction of the gaze. During the first half, the performer is interacting with the slings while facing the wall. The only time the audience could see the performer's face was during upside-down positions. The break of this condition indicated the transition from the first phase to the second. By establishing the back side of the performer as the norm for reading the piece, I wanted to encourage the audience's feeling of participation in the dancer's actions. I was aiming to provide a sense of **togetherness** between audience and performer by bringing everyone's focus to the hanging construction. The frontal direction to the wall was mutual for viewer and performer, constituting the journey through the slings higher in importance than their physical frontality and hierarchy of the dancer and audience. The initial withdrawal of the gaze from the audience, provided an interesting foreground for

the introduction of abhinaya in the second part. Suddenly the performer is not only looking at the audience members but proceeds to employ a largely articulate narrative tool like abhinaya, opening a channel of communication.

The thought behind the intention of the performer was informed by the dialogue between the two female mythological characters. From Persephone, I deduced the sense of **giving in** and from Atalanta **taking control**. The movement language of the piece is launched with an interchange of these two states, gradually establishing **taking control** as the dominant state, which opens the gate for the gestural articulation in the second phase. The intended physical relationship between sling and performer underlined the notion of conformity. The slings slowly moulded the physicality of the performer who was gradually **releasing** or **complying** less. As the slings were made of non-flexible material, it became quite painful to practice on them. Despite the continuous discomfort and feeling of pain, I decided to stick with them and not seek an alternative. Somehow the physical feeling of pain bonded me more with the work and embodiment of empowerment. This is a performative choice I followed being the choreographer and performer, which would have not been imposed on someone other than me performing the work.

The decision around the entrance and exit of the audience was made to accommodate the running of a double bill. Due to the unfortunate circumstance of not having Ryan's piece performed at all, the idea of a circular audience flow was not complete. The initial thought was to have the audience enter from backstage and exit from what is normally used as the studio entrance main doors, and then follow the same pattern for the second piece. We found this choice interesting as the audience would experience two different works through their own choreographic loop. As we had to remain open for the possibility to have Ryan perform at any day, and due to logistical reasons, I chose to not make any spatial dramaturgy changes: the audience entered and exited backstage, a choice which I was not fully happy with. Another spatial compromise that drastically affected my exploration was the negotiation of Xiao's curtain sculpture in space. A placement had to be agreed that did not require adjusting or removing during the turnover of the pieces yet provided everyone with the appropriate associations for their work. Ideally, I would have liked the sculpture to be more closely associated with the

wall and treat the black floor and empty space in the middle of the studio as a **void**. Despite not having the possibility to experiment to the extent I desired, I was quite content with the result which proposed an intimate framing for the audience and opened the possibility for the sound designer, Alina Ostrogradskaya, to experiment with exciters attached to the metal curtain.

Although I am pleased with the mode of collaboration we followed with the group, I am still curious about the unravelling of this process with the inclusion of a dramaturg in the equation. The sense of feeling lost or confused was not absent among collaborators, but I suspect the lack of a dramaturg discouraged **stirring the pot** enough. The possibility to discuss and work with a dramaturg could have potentially created a sense of unity in the **feeling lost** aspect of the process between artists, placing the questions more on the work and not so much on its individual elements. It would also signify a person with expertise in Western theatre practices would enter the conversation, assisting with the interlocution between Eastern and Western theories on stage. I would have found this collaboration quite refreshing, as traditionally I have been allocating the work of dramaturgy to all collaborators, limiting perhaps the extent of question making in the process: an aspect which I would like to enhance in my artistic making.

2.2.1. Light, Set, Costume, Sound and Music

The choice of collaborators for this project was conditioned around the usual process of the institution which encourages internal collaborations among Theatre Academy students. In this text I am referring to several conversations I had with my artistic partners, with a larger emphasis on the sound and music collaboration between Alina (sound designer) and Oh Jin Yong Derek (composer). The topic which appeared in the beginning of the process in almost every individual conversation with my collaborators, was the presence of Indian cultural elements in the work and the risks of cultural appropriation.

As an artist in a collaborative process, I like to think that everyone is a master of their discipline who needs to have the appropriate space and stimuli to bring in their own artistry and voice to the work. I begin by making my research and questions known to

the group and how I see the dialogue of choreography and e.g., light or set, to be developing. One of the first discussions was with costume designer Havina Jäntti. I discussed with Havina the questions in choreography and the presence of classical Indian dance which could perhaps open references to the costuming of that form. She voiced early on the process her concern on applying stylistic approaches from the classical Indian aesthetic, and we concluded with only a nod to Bharatanatyam costumes being the wrap over the left shoulder on the top. The direction of lighting design and the arrangement of the space and sculpture were the elements least affected by the presence of Indian cultural elements. The different point of views in the working group conflicted more during the discussion on the sound and music. Alina was reluctant to use Carnatic elements in her work, while Jin was willing to incorporate them in his composition. This objection created uncertainty in the direction of the piece, which required either the sound or choreographic starting points to compromise.

The soundscape of the work was perhaps the sole aspect for which I had a clear vision. I wished for coarse electric sounds of western taste to coexist with a composition based on Eastern principles. I had an explicit (and maybe literal) intention to echo the questions of the movement exploration to the sound. Alina's interest is mainly in electronic music and, as this project also comprised her own artistic thesis, she wished to collaborate with a composer and experiment with excitors being part of the sound system. Along with her technical interests she also introduced her own thematic layers to the process. She found relations to the exploration I pursued with mythological female characters and collocated it with the importance of female presence in sound designing. Alina also problematised the perceived duality of her identity according to her location for e.g., how white and privileged she feels in her home country Russia, and how this privilege and status is reversed in Finland. The approach on the musical composition was influenced by Jin's current artistic focus on learning to play the guzheng (古筝) a Chinese plucked zither. Jin is originally from Singapore, and his cultural background is that of a Mandarin speaker. His main interest in the project was to experiment musically with abhinaya and the incorporation of Carnatic rhythmic patterns in a composition for guzheng.



Fera Matter. Photo: Jussi Ulkuniemi

Whilst Alina was cautious about culturally appropriating Carnatic music in her design, Jin presented the perspective of sound as a support to the venture of the movement. He explained how important it is to back the cultural nuances seen in the dance by reflecting a similar exploration in the musical composition, and the appearance of a **new cultural conversation**. Jin and I are artistically bound by our mutual interest in intercultural performance making. He advocates for the meeting of different cultures in the arts, and he critically discusses the possibility of cultural appropriation as a topic hindering artistic creativity. During the discussion I observed that perhaps his Singaporean background provided him with a less rigid and more confident approach on interlacing traditions which differed from his western colleagues. I experienced his voice in the conversation to encourage my personal exploration and minimise the concern of a **cultural wrongdoing**, which was often encountered under the emotion of fear. As a group we proceeded by having two clear music scores for guzheng (one at the beginning of the piece and one at the second phase during the abhinaya sequencing), and Alina creating her sound design from recorded guzheng and foot stepping sounds, with no Carnatic references included.

The collaboration between sound and movement was the closest of the process as we were dialoguing daily in the studio. Alina's method of working was closest to the one of a choreographer, with consistent studio presence and openness to change and diversion from day to day. Our mode of collaboration was new to Jin who was more used to working independently while knowing a large part of the dramaturgical arc beforehand.

The partnership between sound designer and composer was possible by co-owning the authorship of the composition. Unfortunately, my discussion with the lighting designer came closer towards the final week of the production, for which I wish I had organised differently. I was not able to contribute before I had most of the choreographic elements in place, allowing Anssi to follow an aesthetic path which had to be simplified at the end.

Lastly, I was interested in producing uneven parts in duration (e.g., ‘first scene’ lasting 10 minutes, and ‘end scene’ lasting 5 seconds), and desynchronised departures and conclusions for light, movement and sound. I was curious to explore how a less well-proportioned structure can affect the hierarchy of moments within the piece, equally explored through an anomalous relationship between elements. When the audience enters the space, there is light revealing the sculpture, then movement commences and then sounds. In the conclusion, movement ends first, then sound, then light.

2.2.2. Abhinaya

The second phase of the piece constituted the toughest part of the performance to compose choreographically. Its difficulty does not describe the technical aspect but more the sentimental side of finally incorporating Bharatanatyam in my work. It required me to overcome the fear of associating my work with classical Indian dance. Previously I was concerned that if Bharatanatyam was part of my choreographic practice, I would be solely considered as an artist who is occupied with the blend of dance forms, and not as a choreographer at the cutting edge of the contemporary dance field.

I chose abhinaya to be the entry point for classical dance, after taking into consideration the nature of the first half of the performance. By establishing the relationships with hanging and not stepping on the floor, it felt inorganic to include an *adavus* or *talam* exploration to this research. Abhinaya was offering me also an interesting opportunity to create perhaps a challenging semiotically narrative for the audience. Although I was researching Greek myths which could have provided a fertile ground for structuring *abhinaya* sequences, I decided to not include their narration in the work but pursue

abstract sequencing instead. The abstract approach encouraged me to experiment on combinations of *hastas* and *bhavas* freely without being bound to a specific story. I noticed that during the performances I instinctively subscribed to sequencing concrete narratives (composed by three to four movements), proving a need for some concreteness. Additionally, I was inspired to repeat some of the pre-explored combinations from one performance to the other, as the need for concreteness in *abhinaya* expanded to the overall structure of the piece. The repetition was lenient and naturally arising from my gradual familiarisation with Jin's composition, which reinstated a more classical approach to abhinaya such as *vacika* and *angika abhinaya*.

Kapila Vatsyayan when discussing the epistemology of Natya Shastra, mentions Bharata-muni to be regularly referring to the 'eye' and 'ear' catharsis. The artistic cosmos is the universe of the 'audible' and 'visible'. She further explains:

The senses and sense-organs and perceptions play a critical role in the evolution of the theory, as also the techniques of each of the four instrumentalities of expression – sound, word (*vacika*) and body language (*angika*), décor and dress (*aharya*), internal states (*sattvika*) (Nair 2015, 23).

It was interesting to observe how the four categories of abhinaya appeared in the hanging exploration of the first part. *Vacika* and *angika* (accordance of sound and movement) was more abstract and equal hierarchically. The movement did not aim to induce the bodily visibility of the sound, but the two elements co-existed in a slightly nuanced symphony. The *aharya* abhinaya of the piece emphasised more on the wall construction, platform and slings, suggesting a spatial interested in the employment of *aharya*, as opposed to the costume of the performer. The costume separated the performer from the blackness of the wall, while delicately referenced the Greek and Indian cultural aspects of the process. The most difficult part in the improvised exploration was to attend to *sattvika* abhinaya. The etymology of *Sattvika* arrives from the Sanskrit root *Sath* (सत्), meaning 'being', 'truth' or 'existence' (Ponkshe, 2016).

According to Bharata *Sattva* is at basis the human body:

The emotional states (*bhāva*) which humans experience arises from *Sattva*, are due to the association of the body. They find a suitable expression 'through' the body. A simple and natural expression of an emotional state is called *hāva*; and when an expression acquires a charming quality by way of a flourish of

movement or a gesture, it is called *helā̄*. Thus *bhā̄va*, *hā̄va* and *helā̄* are connected to one another and they are only different aspects of *Sattva*. (...) Bharata explains that *Sattva* originates from the mind. It is caused through concentration of pure mind (Ponkshe, 2016).

Sattvika abhinaya is a physical portrayal mixed with strong emotions, the development which demands the ultimate commitment of the performer in character. This intensified mode of concentration is solely possible to correlate to meditation (Ponkshe, 2016). The abstract narration did not easily allow me to connect to a certain **feeling**, as a result I experimented with *Sattvika abhinaya* in depth. The quick interchange of meanings during the *abhinaya* part, required quick thinking with the *mudras* whilst the emotional state remained unnurtured. The discovery in this experimentation revealed how perhaps I can refrain from *Sattvika*, and how the concepts comprising *Sattvika* can be enough stimuli for a future exploration of an independent piece.

3. INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE MAKING

Living abroad for nine years now has largely affected my interest and tendency in interculturality. As an immigrant, my first interactions in a new place have always been with other immigrants and afterwards with locals. Hence, my friend groups and, extensively, working groups hold a rather multicultural character, offering a rich in stimuli and information environment for inspiration. The possibility to be close to people from many different ethnicities and share ideas and experiences in the same group, has inspired me to incorporate this exchange in my artistic process. I like to include voices from different backgrounds and invite various ideologies in the discussion, to create works that can be accessed by as many audience members as possible. A multicultural synergy is aligning with my wish for unity among people. It's perhaps my personal desire for positive human relationships to pour into my work. This chapter reveals some characteristics of intercultural collaborations and comments on the specific form in which the notion of cultural appropriation is discussed in my case.

Before delving into the discourse of 'intercultural performance' practices, it is favourable to priorly discuss the term 'intercultural'. There are many synonyms to describe the presence of many cultures in one place or activity, such as 'multicultural', 'transnational' or 'multinational', yet 'intercultural' suggests a specific type of exchange or **effect**, if I could describe it more loosely. For this take on the word 'intercultural', I was inspired by Laura U. Marks' approach on intercultural cinema:

““Intercultural” indicates a context that cannot be confined to a single culture. It also suggests movement between one culture and another, thus implying diachrony and the possibility of transformation. “Intercultural” means that a work is not the property of any single culture, but mediates in at least two directions. It accounts for the encounter between different cultural organisations of knowledge (...)’ (Marks 2007, 6-7).

From Marks' understanding on 'intercultural' I would like to isolate two points which suggest further discussion; 'diachrony and the possibility of transformation' and 'not the property of any single culture'.

Transformation and evolution are elements that I naturally search to include in my practice. Always ping-ponging ideas between Greek, Indian and local cultures, has

advised me with the notions of fluidity, destruction and reconstruction. Colliding my own culture with the carried culture of my classical dance training, suggested an intercultural transformation through the tools of choreography. As I often tend to describe my practice as cradled by Greek and Indian cultures, and via Marks' reference of 'not the property of any single culture', it feels impending to consider the balance between cultures in my artistic work. I do not experience the domination of one culture over the other, since they control different **departments** of my choreographic process. My artistic idiosyncrasy is Greek, which means my reactions, concerns, topics, aesthetics, and way of seeing belong to that culture. My movement lexicon originates from classical Indian dance and provided me with an intricate ability for articulation which I did not inherit from my folk culture. For example, what is known as traditional Greek dance refers to a collective, circular dance and not the staging of solo performances with emphasis on storytelling and spectacle. However, I do not see myself limited to the binary of these two cultures. I am curious about many cultures, ideologies, theories, traditions, mythologies to which I would always like to allow to inform my work.

My choice to study abroad, in a metropolis like London, ignited my initial interest in interculturality. Carrying my own culture and observing my encounters with people from other nationalities has revealed to me similarities, differences and dynamics that can occur in certain cultural relationships. I started to perceive the apposing of different cultures as chemical reactions that can create **new elements**. Nikos Papastergiadis argues that:

...migrants in metropolitan spaces become agents of cultural and social changes, empowered to transform the host country at many different dimensions (Counsell & Mock 2009, 44).

In addition to Papastergiadis view, Marks states that as opposed to 'nation', 'culture' is carried more continuously by those who migrate; culture flows in through national borders and alters nations from within (Marks 2007, 9). In these references of the impact of cultural exchanges caused by migration, I can recognise the porosity in my identity as an immigrant artist, moving from place to place holding cultural morsels from the encountered cultures. This geographical movement has also affected how I continue to experience or relate to Greek culture. The established distance from my

family, childhood friends and familiar surroundings, is influencing how I witness my growth from my origins as they mainly rely on memory and short-term reconnections. Embracing different cultures on the way has somehow complicated the fashion I carry Greek culture in my daily life. As I affect the host countries as an immigrant, according to Papastergiadis and Marks, in a similar manner the host country is changing the essence of **culture** within me.

3.1. Cultural appropriation?

Before I begin to discuss the question of cultural appropriation in the practice of traditional dances of different cultures other than my own, I would like to pin down the two different points of view that emerge from this analysis. Firstly, I am viewing it generally from the perspective of dance being made and presented in the West, and secondly from my perspective as a Greek artist. The reason I am separating myself from my professional locale is because I seek for a microscopic articulation on the topic which will perhaps reveal nuances in the diversity of the European dance scene, rather than putting myself in the large pot of generalisation, eliminating any critical approach.

The reason I feel so strong about making a distinction between my case and the rest of my western colleagues is because I cannot relate historically, culturally and artistically with the majority of the nations that comprise the forefront of contemporary dance (e.g. French, Flemish, German, British, American etc.) whom are usually the measure of congruity in western contemporary scene, hence I owe to investigate cultural appropriation from my point of origin. This separation refers mainly to the aspect of cultural appropriation, as seen in the definition of the term found in Encyclopaedia Britannica, which states that cultural appropriation happens when people of a larger group endorse cultural aspects of the few in a credulous, profane, or stereotypical manner (n.d.). A definition which perhaps instigates more of a ‘coloniser-colonised’ dynamic and how this is addressed post-colonially, but of course not exclusively. However, it has been easier to examine cultural appropriation during the period in which I was practising Bharatanatyam in Greece, as opposed to when I was stirred in

London's melting pot, where interculturality is found in every possible constellation, and the limits of one's actions are usually indicated by the British moral compass.

A clear definition of the word 'culture' will provide a better understanding of the repercussions of appropriation. The notion of culture has been continuously difficult to pin down, with British anthropologists Edward Burnett Tylor stating the popular interpretation that:

'culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.' (Britannica n.d).

Tylor elaborates that culture is not **biologically inherited**, but it's composed by actions and acquired knowledge from participating within a specific body of people (Britannica n.d.). Additionally, one of the definitions of the verb 'appropriate', as seen in the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023), is 'to take or make use of without authority and right'. A popular example of cultural appropriation in dance is the music video of Madonna's song 'Vogue', which included *voguing*, a dance style originating from Harlem's drag ballroom subculture. Despite the inclusion of drag dancers in the video, supposedly honouring the roots of this style, Madonna was the sole beneficiary when 'Vogue' became double platinum in the U.S.A. Due to the singer's monetary and artistic capital enhancement after the song's success, and the subsequent lack of which the originators of voguing suffered, the usage of voguing in the video was cultural appropriation (Britannica n.d.).

Examining retrogradely my dance training in Greece, I acknowledge the lack of awareness I had at the time around cultural appropriation. From my recollection, the local Indian community was involved in the events and activities of the dance school, which often hosted or facilitated functions of the Indian embassy. My personal involvement with classical Indian dance happened only during the classes or performances and the dance form was my only connection to Indian culture. Therefore, there has always been a cultural separation between me and the dance form. It is often that western practitioners of classical Indian dance change their names to a more Indian-like sound as part of establishing themselves in the field of classical dance. I have never felt the need for my classical training to fully reflect on my (artistic) personality, yet I

always strived to understand more around Indian culture to enhance my expertise in the dance.

3.2. Orientalist notions in the discourse of Interculturalism

As a conclusion to this chapter, I would like to bring in information from continuous interlocutions on post-colonialism, orientalism and nationalism, with focus on Indian post-colonial state. The reason I deem essential to bring historical and political facts in my text, is for including in the text a less Euro-centric approach on intercultural exchanges and how interculturalism has influenced the shape of Bharatanatyam as we know it now. Additionally, for locating my positioning in the worldwide discussion of modern classical Indian dance practice. By understanding the historical and political factors, I can develop a considerate practice, avoid cultural appropriation mishappens, and make sure that my ethos, work, research and understanding, are not indirectly supporting oppressing attitudes originating from colonial behaviour. For this analysis, I am leaning on the views of native anthropologist Pallabi Chakravorty and cultural historian Janet O'Shea, who reveal nationalistic and colonial notions that persist today, and challenge Orientalist misconceptions.

Interculturalism is a vital approach for inspecting artistic methods in this moment of cultural globalisation. The notion of it elicits its postmodern anchorage, especially its close relation with the avant-garde western art. Usually described as 'cultural borrowing', interculturalism challenges cultural appropriation when placed in the middle of a disparate balance of power, for example between Western nations of developed capitalism and the emergent nations. The connotations for interculturalism differ for those in poverty-stricken nations and for technologically forward countries. Although interculturalism (in the field of performing arts) holds culture in its core, it accentuates aesthetics of form as opposed to an understanding of the 'historical-cultural-social-religious' background of established performance practices. Rustom Bharucha explains that the forms have been stripped down from their initial context to be utilised as performance ideals in western artistic capitals, characterising

interculturalism as 'ahistorical'. Following from this statement, interculturalism shows to be included under the main tale of capitalism, to be displayed in European and North American 'metropolitan supermarkets'. Potentially the 'eclectic' employment of a range of different dance traditions (frequently linked to postmodern dance) underlines the disposability of every culture in the globe gathered in one place for consumption. (Chakravorty 2001, 108-109).

There is an intercultural exchange that precedes the flow of classical Indian dance in the dictionaries of western performing practices, and which contributed to the ideologies responsible for the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam as we know it today. A high-class society of Indians adopted western notions on rationalism and historicism to design the embryonic stage of the Indian state. The restoration of traditional dance forms cannot be removed from the context of the creation of a national identity in India. The interlocation between East and West fused and assisted the moulding of Indian identity, and traditional dance styles were an aspect of the same discussion. As the revival of forms like Bharatanatyam were directly linked to nationalist activity, dance began to represent the **spiritual** origins of the past. The nationalist belief was that Westerners had overpowered the East with their material superiority yet missed to succeed in colonising the core identity of India found in her exceptional culture. However, this separation of 'material' and 'spirit', prompted the establishment of a pseudo-historical context of orientalist perception of Indian traditional dances. It is hardly recognised that the current form of traditional Indian dance styles is a development of the nationalist rhetoric on post-colonial and colonial India. Due to the nationalist movement taking the lead of rewriting dance history, the culture of devadasi (temple dancers) and nautch performers was eradicated, which outcast the female performers' status to prostitution. While the devadasis were experiencing ostracism, their dance form was being 'purified' by the upper class, under the premises of enhancing the Indian aesthetic, 'spirituality' and reminiscing Vedic era, that withstood colonialism (Chakravorty 2001, 110-114).

When western high society people began extracting cultural information from India, the traditional dance forms started to be systemised and sanctified leading to their **classical** status. The nationalist interest was to showcase an unbroken, from colonialism, historical timeline of unceasing dance culture. Classical dance forms symbolised the

original Sanskritised Hindu identity, which was besmirched by colonialism, an illustration of the spiritual East which remains to influence Bharatanatyam today.

The staging format during the 20th century consisted of an explanatory introduction to the dance material by the dancer ahead of the performance. The practice of prefacing was a double-edged sword in the international presence of classical Indian dance forms: while it reacted to the need of it being known, it also obfuscated its ability to engage with the global scene. A vocal rendition of the dance attributes the choreography with a disadvantage for analysis whilst showcasing its translatability at the same time. This practice arrays two paths of cogitation: an Anglo-Saxon linguistic frame and a South Indian choreographic one. The elucidation of the *hastas* combinations translates the ‘Indian’ choreography via the ‘English’ language. Therefore, the western-language knowledge becomes the medium in which the viewer can transcribe the choreographic material. This form of transcription leans on a questionable practice that considers a Western-linguistic frame as a simple interpretive machine without its individual cultural coding. A verbal communication is hence perilous for showing Bharatanatyam more as a means of entering a cultural area of reference, than as a series of choreographic decisions and compositional tools. When classical Indian dance is presented as both depending upon and avoiding explanation and uses the English-language translation as culturally ‘impartial’, then the 18th and 19th century orientalist approach on Indian scholarly and intellectual scripts is resurfacing. The orientalist exemplary of interpretation was based on the belief that the South Asian text demanded the interference of an expert speaker, who could unravel the conundrums of the East to the West through their expertise.

Bharatanatyam hints at the condition of an intricate coding that demands specific knowledge from the audience for its full apprehension. When a performer explains the choreography beforehand, they overpass an anticipated chasm between material and awareness, widening the number of viewers who can connect with the work. In the 1980s and early 1990s, some dance artists employed spoken translation to fill in the presumable gap of the audience’s understanding due to the intense competition in the dance form, however dance makers in the late 1990s, particularly the ones presenting globally, proceeded with ‘translating’ epistemologies, compositional tools, and poetry,

bringing the intercultural character at the front as opposed to concealing it. These works employ a disparate language, movement, and sound lexicons in a manner that rebels against the habit of positioning Western cogitation as the main frame of perception (O'Shea 2005, 177-179).

4. EXAMINATION OF SYMBIOTIC PRACTICES

The text is investigating Classical Indian dance in its contemporaneity, and impact on Western audiences. Observing what fails to translate in culturally different audiences, what succeeds or what remains unnoticed. In what fashion can the form's architecture, theory, movement vocabulary and storytelling tools exist in European dance making, and what can be identified as part of their unique contribution to the greatly expanded Western dance field.

The two artists whom I bring as examples for this chapter sustain a different approach from each other on communicating classical Indian dance to the West. On one hand, there is Akram Khan, whose choreographic ability to merge styles has been renowned in the U.K. and Europe, and Shantala Shivalingappa whose classical repertoire is spreading Kuchipudi in Western audiences. I will be examining their methods on merging the classical forms together with Western contemporary dance, with the aim of presenting existing possibilities revealed by this cohabitation. The cases I have chosen are of South Asian heritage, allowing me only to study them from a technical point of view of choreographic practices, and not as paradigms wholly reflecting my case.

4.1. Akram Khan (Kathak)

The work of Akram Khan has been an evident reference to how a choreographer can utilise Indian classical dance to create performances contained in the field of contemporary dance. I am particularly interested to bring in his challenges of merging the two forms, his interest in using *abhinaya* (art of expression) to tell stories appertaining to modern topics, and the intercultural character contained in his performance making.

After his mother's encouragement, Khan began his Kathak training at the age of 7, under the teaching of his guru Sir Pratap Pawar. He later pursued studies in contemporary dance, first at De Montfort University and then at the Northern School of

Contemporary Dance, where he trained in ballet, Graham, Cunningham, Alexander, release-based techniques, and physical theatre (Sanders 2004, 3). Khan's approach on communicating the two forms was set on course by his guru's advice to 'not mix modern in Kathak' but to 'use Kathak for modern work' (Mitra 2005, 39). In her article on the choreographer, Royona Mitra (2005) is highlighting that Khan is not synchronising Kathak but rather forges a special movement vocabulary from classical Indian dance principles and embeds it onto the political and emotional aspects of the British dance scene, especially in conversation with physical theatre, metamorphosing the latter interculturally.

The insertion of Kathak in contemporary dance works has a unique form in Khan's aesthetics and propels his 'new interculturalism'. His creative process is educated by the use and understanding of abhinaya as taught in Kathak practice, however his engagement with abhinaya is multicultural and multiplex. On one hand, Khan employs the lexicon of abhinaya as found in *Natya Shastra* to unfold tales that he and present audiences can connect. This systemised vocabulary from Kathak, together with European dramaturgical techniques of physical narration, occur to be purposely shocking for most of his audience, which is of white and Western origin with no means of entry to these ethnically coded gestures. On the other hand, Khan interferes and adjusts what has been previously viewed as codes of abhinaya by composing a gestural lexicon that emphasises the choice of non-culturally fixed meanings and quotidian gestures, whilst conserving its onomatopoeic ability and moving force (Mitra 2005, 38-40). It is important to notice that the form of Kathak 'does not use the rigid system of hastas found in Bharatanatyam' (Sanders 2004, 34), signifying that Khan had already a more abstract and simple approach on storytelling through gestures originating from his classical training. The authentic *Natya Shastra*'s emotional phases which are portrayed through facial expressions, mudras and hastas into rasas are preserved, but their shape is adjusted for the purpose of addressing to the international audience of this century (Mitra 2005, 38-40). I find Khan's method to create the allegory of abhinaya functioning like a mirror useful; it is stripped down of evident cultural references to South Asian culture, only to reflect the culture that is standing opposite to. I find this approach to be presenting an effective way of connecting with any audience yet risking

reducing the potentialities of this collision due to the (assumed) restricted understanding of the non-eastern viewer to this coded language.

The choreographer's bifold approach and concurrent employment of abhinaya, both in the traditional and dissecting ways, exhibits the present-day importance of Natya Shastra, not only as an archaic discourse but as a rife, alive and reciprocal outlook of performance studies today and tomorrow (Mitra 2005, 38-40).

Mitra (2005, 39-40) continues to explain how Khan is activating a 'new interculturalism' which is initiated by his own perception of an 'internal-external' world that functions transversely through countries, cultures, language and performance dramaturgies. Besides being empowered by this 'internal-external' world to travel across cultural particularities, it also allows him to confer both western and eastern dramaturgical codes with equivalent aptitude. The character of 'new interculturalism' also comments on the 1980s highbrow and conventional address on 'intercultural theatre', ventured mainly by western theatre specialists who acquired information on performance traditions from non-western cultures, for the aim of galvanising western theatre methods, with the premise of a bilateral transaction. Hence, Khan's intercultural practice is a demonstration of political fight against predominant leaderships of whiteness, heading towards a more distinct commitment with and depictions of cultural disparity.

Lastly, as a maker whose practice is informed by two trainings, I haven't experienced yet a collaboration where I bring both traditional and contemporary influences in the equation, due to questions of cultural appropriation rising from colleagues who have not embodied the classical form before. I am intrigued by Khan's ability to convey his hybrid movement vocabulary to his company dancers, who come from various training backgrounds yet fully embody Khan's crafted language.

4.2. Shantala Shivalingappa (Kuchipudi)

I consider Shivalingappa to be an important reference as her approach on owning a hybrid practice presents a reverse relationship of that of Khan. Her interaction with

other artists or dance techniques feed straight into her Kuchipudi practice, to which she stands faithful to preserve as a dance form of the present. Being the daughter of famous Indian dancer Savitry Nair, Shivalingappa began her dance training at a young age in Bharatanatyam and later in Kuchipudi as a disciple of Vempati Chinna Satyam. Despite her lack of training in western contemporary dance techniques or ballet, Shivalingappa has collaborated with an impressive list of artists of western theatre and contemporary dance scenes, such as Peter Brook, Maurice Béjart, Pina Bausch and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (Venkat 2001).

Shivalingappa is predominately a solo artist and her technically hybrid performances are usually a result of collaboration with other artists. The choreographer reflects on her collaboration with Pina Bausch and Ushio Amagatsu as experiences that have affected her Kuchipudi approach in various ways ‘to space, to musicality, to feeling, dynamics, symmetry, everything’. She states that not everything can be changed around but one of the advantages of classical form is that it is elastic, with aspects that permit deviation and experimentation porous to several different stimuli. That is how traditional forms can grow their capacity to develop with time and to be current in the now (Harss 2012). In an interview with dance writer Marina Harss (2012), the choreographer was asked if she is altering the language of Kuchipudi in her practice:

No I don't think so. First you have to forget everything else and do only Kuchipudi and get into that feeling—it's a very organic feeling— so that whatever you do after that, you know, if you are doing something that is going away from that, maybe it's not the right way.

Shivalingappa's response offers the understanding that **language** refers to an overall sense when executing the movement, as opposed to a specific choreographic tool of combining forms. If the movement sustains that **organic feeling** experienced in the traditional form, then that would be the correct direction for experimentation and expansion. The choreographer continues by stating that instead of transforming Kuchipudi, she is more avid to preserve her guru's route of practising the traditional form extensively, collaborating with the finest musicians and advance it to the next level by sustaining the ‘traditional and classical flavour and strength’ (Harss 2012).

Jacob's Pillow scholar Philip Szporer explains that it is simple to assume that Shivalingappa's interest in traditional conservancy was the impetus for her dance practice but now it seems to have transcended to something else. Classical Indian dance continues to be her footing, yet she is one of the increasing numbers of 'bilingual' practitioners fluent in both traditional and contemporary forms. Szporer adds that her creative process is 'neither a fusion nor a conscious blending of cultures and styles', but an effort to invite more audience in the world of classical Indian dance. By objecting prepossessed ideas on the nature of Kuchipudi, Shivalingappa is crafting an unparalleled movement lexicon accurately reflecting her distinct voice (Keefe 2017). Her focus appears to be more in **movement-oriented** choreography and less so in the narrative side of Kuchipudi (Harss 2012). Similarly with Khan, there is emphasis on developing a unique to the artist vocabulary, which surfaces after the distillation of elements of the classical and contemporary.

In opposition to Khan's practice who seems to tailor Kathak elements to his audience's cultural understanding, Shivalingappa resists this notion, by staying firm to the essence of classical Indian dance, acquainting her audience with the contemporaneous character of Kuchipudi. I find my practice to be positioned in the middle of the two mentioned approaches. I value greatly the resilience and deep knowledge of the traditional style, yet due to my training background and personal interest, I observe my process to be coming in and out of classical and contemporary mode, aiming for an elaborate interweaving of concepts, movement vocabularies and dramaturgies, as opposed to leaning on one practice more than the other. Lastly, an important point for future practice that I can amass from this examination, is their common axis on exploring the contemporaneity of Natya Shastra through the amalgamation of classical and contemporary, as it suggests numerous choreographic paths for exploration and experimentation.

4.3. 'Guru-less'

I would like to use this space as the last opportunity to elaborate on a thought that has emerged during this written exploration. In the first chapter of the thesis, I refer to my training in Bharatanatyam as being 'guru-less'. After analysing Khan's and

Shivalingappa's practices where the influence of their gurus is observed in their approach to dance, I would like to investigate how the absence of a guru in my training has formed my path.

I always perceived the presence of a guru to constitute a firm link to tradition, history and culture. In the beginning of my dance training, I craved a close association with a teacher. The way classical Indian dance was taught in Greece (and partially the Greek educational system too), prepped me for an approach to education where questioning the teacher was uncommon or, to an extreme extent, frowned upon. As the term guru sprang in a culture with strict societal hierarchies like castes, it appeared as a preposterous request to follow a guru style tutelage in the West, where democracy and personal independence conduct a disparate approach on teaching. I noticed that my desire to become a disciple was slowly adapting to a new reality post formal education. I gradually sought my relationship with a teacher to be subscribing closer to 'tutorship' than 'guru-ship', having a more seasonal approach as opposed to the hinted permanency of a guru-disciple contract.

I personally experience education as the moment where my ego and existing knowledge take a step back and are replaced with a sense of trust, the funnel from which new information, approaches and ideologies pour in. Questioning teachings critically is surely an essential part, but it is a process I go through after the exchange. I recognise the influence of Bharatanatyam and my Greek background to have turned me perhaps into a submissive student, yet this sense of humbleness is what keeps me extremely receptive and sensitive to information. The short temporality of tutor-student relationship responds to Western approach on education and, reflecting retrospectively, it has benefited me greatly. I have been acquainted with numerous approaches and theories which suggest there is not one (right) way of doing things, a thought which supports me in times of artistic uncertainty.

The difficulty in sticking with one teacher in Bharatanatyam has evidently compromised the consistency of knowledge I could have on the form, as I have been collecting the information from various sources: due to the endless variations and styles, I would describe my Bharatanatyam knowledge as miscellaneous. However, this

instability at sourcing information has compensated me with a sense of fluidity and ownership. I begin to consider myself my own guru, the same way I have been guiding myself through every aspect of life. Recognising this possibility can open a non-biased approach to experimentation, without the weight of a precious teaching or relationship behind the information. Even with acclaimed artists such as Khan and Shivalingappa, the view of their gurus survived time and conditioned some of their artistic views, proving the cultural responsibility of disciples. I do not argue that one scenario is more favourable than the other, but in view of this entire thesis I ought to highlight to myself and those familiar with my practice, that there is a need to feel less strayed about my non-standard mode of Bharatanatyam practice and embrace the unexpected possibilities ahead as a result of it.



Fera Matter. Photo: Jussi Ulkuniemi

CONCLUSION

The action of composing a conclusion to this written exploration suggests the rotation of my positioning from reflecting on the past, to sketching the future. The practical and theoretical research of this project, which has been unravelling since January and is completed with this chapter, has endowed me with a list of new questions and confidence for my artistic path. Simultaneously I do not wish to describe a full stop of this exploration. It is suggested that the current form of the research (being a master's degree) is coming to an end, yet the very notion of it subsists in my next endeavours.

The experience of working with a multicultural group in 'Fera Matter' has taught me the importance of communication among artists and cultures. How a multinational group can come together for the creation of a multicultural artistic work, and additionally, how different cultural backgrounds can cooperate for the support of one. The manner in which I included Bharatanatyam in the work and the positive feedback I received from audience members has given me the courage to pursue a more intricate weaving of concepts in the future. The juxtaposition of my practice with the discourse of persisting Orientalist ideas that hinder the possibility of a healthy discussion of dance forms like Bharatanatyam in the West, has offered me the awareness of knowing what my work can advocate for and how it can be part of this international discord.

As a result of the intense writing and researching period, I recognise my desire to not let go of the self-reflecting writing. I begin to explore various ways and forms the writing practice can occur as an integral component of my making. My choice of topics and discourses propose the possibility of maintaining the research on perhaps a doctorate level, where the opportunity for diving in depth to more complex discourses, with an inclination to research dance practices via a historical and sociological lens.

The 'guru-less' subject sprang during the written exploration and brought to my attention the importance of student and teacher relationship, on which I would like to continue reflecting after the thesis. This opening revealed a new stream of ideas that can inform how I treat the differences in my Bharatanatyam praxis with other practitioners.

Delving deeper into the topic might assist me with bettering my communication skills in the working environment, by enriching the way I articulate or approach the transmission of the form in a teaching context, and effectively my artistic work. By figuring my position in the student-teacher contract I can gain stability in how the eastern and western trainings converse in my praxis, solidifying the cultural pillars that comprise it.

Lastly, I am fortunate to have a residency opportunity this coming autumn at Zodiak Centre of New Dance in Helsinki, where I am given the space to research further the questions I touched here, and to experiment with the compositional elements of abhinaya and adavus in my movement vocabulary. The elaboration on my praxis as a result of the thesis project, has filled me with excitement for the upcoming residency as I can already start applying my new perspective in the studio. The residency offers the possibility to share the process with the public, an aspect which provides the unique opportunity to consider the frame in which I discuss Bharatanatyam with the spectators and how I can challenge the expectation of having to explain the traditional form in advance.

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