

The MOON drags

Perform bharatanatyam's 3-minute traditional alarippu close up to a stone wall. That should wipe the fixed smile off your 'bharatanatyam dancer' face! A long-time principal dancer with Chandralekha's company, here's Geetha Sridhar with some body-talk based on her time with India's acclaimed radical choreographer.

How did I become aware of the body?

In Chandra[lekha]'s works there was no narrative – no nayika-s, no elaborate abhinaya. What was central was the dance and the body. Movement was more felt and purposeful. For example, from the upright standing *sthanakam* we'd go to the 'full sitting' *muzhumandi* and take eight *avartana*-s or 64 counts to do the same! *Adavu*-s were done at a pace much slower than the already extended *vilambit* or *chowka kala* tempo. I recall the sitting in the one-knee-on-the-ground *parshvasoochi* for hours, experimenting and exploring movement using just the torso, head and neck. All this was routine. This kind of stretching of time gave us an opportunity or rather no choice but to dwell on every nuance of the body, and on what was unique and individual about it.

We were taught yoga and Kalari by practitioners from Kerala – each day started at 6:00 am with Kalari – but this was all done not to a specific >>

BODY TALK



Photos: Roy Peeters, Suptia Sabari Company

[It] is my instrument through which I reveal the most inner feelings and emotions, which words cannot ever come close to. (Hence why it is always a difficult task to compose programme notes about my work. If I could tell you what a piece is about why would I dance it?!).....)



it out!

➤ choreographic purpose or to learn a craft. It was all simply geared towards finding one's own body and its inner rhythms.

With all the concentration on it, did I feel "reduced to just a body", as detractors said about Chandra?

No, not really. For example, in *Shree*, we needed to portray 'lovemaking'. This was done not through simplistic, predictable facial expressions or hand gestures, but rather through *angika* or bodily abhinaya that nevertheless had thought and feeling behind it. It could be just an *adavu* that in a different context suddenly became sensuous and it was I who had chosen to do that particular *adavu*. So there was no question of just being 'a body'.

Photo: courtesy Geetha Sridhar



How was Chandra's process different from Kalakshetra's?

In some ways it is like comparing apples and oranges perhaps. In a sense, with Kalakshetra, it was not what you were that was crucial – it was what Kalakshetra made of you. They were a teaching institution, so even when you danced in a production, you were taught the material, there was no other visible process. I was studying and working with a set form and everyone knew what was needed done.

That was not the case with Chandra. Material was generated with us dancers and through a search and process. Seldom were the effects of lyrics or a story allowed to limit the dance. You could not hide behind a well-worn or established routine of a *keertanam* or a *padam*. Chandra had no trouble binning huge chunks of made work! But you brought your own quality to the finished product, which was therefore not a finished product at all. It was always work in progress. For example, we couldn't all perform the aerial-*cari-s* or 'formations in flight'

perfectly, but that didn't stop Chandra from including them in the performance work... It was OK and perhaps even necessary to 'show' the effort and reach.

With Chandra there was never a set path, just the direction in which to go. Thus, for example, she would choose an *adavu* that is usually done in one spot and ask each one of us to do it in a "travelling" manner, and choose what she felt best fitted that piece. This gave me an opportunity to push boundaries, but in my own particular way – not someone else's. Yet, the emphasis was always on teamwork: there could be a strong personality, but one could not dominate, and there were no heroes, no heroines.

Also with Chandra's works, musical support was frugal and basic. For example, in *Shree* for half of the performance the only accompaniment to dance was the noise we took turns creating with a coconut shell and stone – which bore no resemblance to *nattuvangam* or *thattukazhi*. The bareness of all this, with no paraphernalia, meant that all that there was to see was the body and what it did or attempted to do.

Did Chandra care for costumes and jewellery?

No, we never wore ornate costumes. She felt, and soon so did we, that they were a distraction and hindrance, limiting mind and body – at least for her works. Although, Chandra appreciated the sound of the *salangai* bells, she felt they fraudulently amplified and distorted the beautiful sounds created by our feet. Suggestions were made to wear a few bells, pinned to our sari, where you tucked it around your waist! Yes, occasionally, we wore silk sarees, absolutely no zari, but none of the dancers felt comfortable nor confident wearing silk: if nothing else, because it wasn't all stitched up by a tailor, we worried the sari would slip off with all the *kalari* kicks we were doing!

To sum up....

For half a decade then, when I worked with Chandra, it was me, my body, my mind, and the dance, down to their barest essentials – nothing bogus. I think the body doesn't know how to lie. ■

Geetha Sridhar is a graduate in *bharatanatyam* from Kalakshetra. She was a principal dancer with Chandralekha Dance Company for over five years till October 1992, through an intense creative cycle (*Anga Mandala*, *Angika*, *Lilavati*, *Prana*, *Shree*) and touring schedule, which included the UK for the *Vivarta Festival*. Now based in London, she teaches *bharatanatyam* and performs solo as well as in collaborations.

BODY TALK



Photo: Simran Richardson

My body is my best friend and my worst enemy, and I only wish I could stop seeing its reflection in fairground mirrors!