

**National Geographic Live**  
presents  
**Dakshina/Daniel Phoenix Singh & Company in Dancing Across India**

### **The Philosophy in Culture**

Indian arts are more readily understood when placed in the ideological, aesthetic, and philosophical framework of Indian civilization. In this framework, the view of the world is largely concerned with the resolution of the central paradox of existence, which is that change and perfection, time and eternity, immanence and transcendence, the sacred and the sensuous, operate with differing tensions and integrally as parts of a single process. This conceptual view, when expressed in art, divides aesthetic experience into three distinct but interrelated elements—the senses, the emotions, and the spirit. Instead of depicting the tensions between the senses, the emotions and the spirit, Indian art, through a deliberate sensuousness and voluptuousness, fuses one with the other through a complex symbolism. In any given medium, the qualities of sensuous vitality, earthiness, muscular energy, and rhythmic movement are intertwined fluidly. Consider how dance, sculpture and painting attempt to transform the fleshiness of the feminine form into a perennial mystery of sex and creativity, wherein the momentary spouse stands revealed as the eternal mother goddess, bridging the sacred and the sensuous.

### **The foundation of Dance**

Dance and music were described and systematized in the treatises on performing arts, *Natya shasthra* (200 BC – AD 200)—attributed to the mystic sage Bharata and the *Abhinaya darpanam* (AD 200)—attributed to Nandikeswara. One legend depicts *Shiva* the Hindu God, in the incarnation of *Nataraja* (God of dance) instructing Bharata as he composes the *Natya Shasthra*. Regional cultures explored and developed specific aspects from the Sanskrit texts mentioned above and over the years systematized distinct movement vocabulary. Common to all dance forms are *Nritta* (abstract rhythmic movements of pure aesthetic value), *Nritya* (movements in which *abhinaya* or expression is emphasized), and *Natya* (dance with a dramatic aspect, including spoken text). *Lasya* (the softer, “feminine” quality) and *tandava* (the vigorous, “masculine” quality) map the range of the performance style and dance forms. The theme of merging opposites recurs in the incarnation of *Nataraja* as *Ardhanarishwara*—half male and female, symbolizing the perfect balance between the opposites that make a complete dancer—and, to extend the metaphor into traditional philosophy, the complete being. Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohini attam, and Odissi are considered the classical dance forms of India, with numerous other regional folk dances adding to the spectrum.

### **The Philosophy in Dance**

Indian concepts of the arts bridge these cultural and philosophical concepts seamlessly together, nowhere is this more apparent than in an Indian dance performance. One is hard pressed to separate the various levels of rhythm and melody as they swirl together in (a) narrated story as (b) poetry in (c) song, which, while sung, is sonically heightened by (d) instrumental music and translated into the language of (e) dance, in which motions function to unfreeze (f) painting and breathe life into (g) sculpture, thus leading us back to the beginning of the circle of arts: (a) the narrated story. All this is accomplished theatrically, on a stage, originally within an architectural venue imbued with numerical and spatial significance. Thus the composite Indian art forms embody their cultural ideas.

### **Dance explores *shringara rasa* (erotic love)**

The tensions of *shringara rasa* (erotic love) have been a central theme in Indian dance from its inception. When dance was an integral part of the temple rituals, this was depicted as the *atma* (human being) longing for the *param atma* (divine being), a theme that has remained central to Bharata Natyam. As the cultural milieu of dance shifted from the temples into the palaces, virtuosic movement came to the forefront as opposed to spiritual themes. These dances also carried a subtext of erotic love that explored the relationship between *Krishna* and *Radha*, as in the Kathak dance form. Instead of dancing for the gods, the dancer performed for the king (one could argue the king was personified as *Krishna* in the dance). Kathak was particularly cultivated in the royal Mughal Empire and shows the influence of Persian culture on Indian dance. Bollywood (coined from Bombay and Hollywood—a term some consider patronizing) continued this exploration of erotic love and situated it in every day couples. Thus representations of love in dance moved from the Spiritual (Temple rituals) to the aristocratic setting (palaces) to the secular (movie theater). The dancer finally performed for the people, in larger-than-life cinematic wonder no less. This was one of the most significant reasons for the popularity of dance sequences in the films, love was finally human.

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**Program**

**Section I – Bharata Natyam**

Bharata Natyam, one of the oldest dance forms of India, was nurtured in the temples and courts of southern India by the community of *devadasis* (temple dancers). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the four brothers known as the “Tanjore Quartet” codified and documented the dance form in its present format. The *devadasis* and *nattuvanars* (male gurus) were the sole repository of the art until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, the *devadasis* lost their royal patronage and a colonial puritanism that frowned on the sensual nature of the dance form also hindered the sensual art form. Disintegration seemed imminent, but was avoided by a renewal of interest in India's cultural heritage that prompted the rejuvenation of the art form. The revival of Bharata Natyam by pioneers such as Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale brought the dance from the temple precincts into the proscenium stage, though it retained its essentially devotional character. While their efforts undoubtedly saved the art form from complete dissolution, their efforts to “clean” the dance also erased some of its inherent sensuality. Current dance scholars such as Dr. Padma Subramaniam continue the research and regeneration of the sensual nature of the art form.

This dance form is known for its use of symmetry, angular lines, rhythmic foot work and interpretative mime that explores spiritual and philosophical themes. The dramatic or thematic interpretation of the lyrics in the songs is juxtaposed against percussive rhythmic sequences that conform to strict musical rules creating an interplay between the abstract and the thematic elements. The intricate *Mudras* (hand gestures), the elaborate facial and eye movements, along with the precise geometrical shapes of the dance phrases, create striking narrative murals vibrant with aural, visual, and spiritual stimuli that serve as a feast to the senses.

**Invocation**

**Nandi Chol** in Raga Vasantha (melodic scale) and Adi Tala (meter)

**Choreography** Adayar K. Lakshman, Staged by Guru Meena Telikicherla

**Dancers:** Vrindarani Buchwald, Sindhu Raghavendra and Daniel Phoenix Singh

This opening dance uses the syllables “Nan di” (Nandi is the name of the bull the Hindu God of Dance *Nataraja* rides on) in complex rhythmic arrangements and is in praise of Lord *Nataraja*. The dance explores the many stories of the conquests of Nataraja by describing him in his various iconic names such as Neela Kanta, Maha Deva, Chandra Sekhara, and Goddess Parvati's beloved.

**Pada Varnam** in Raga Mayamalavagowla (melodic scale) and Adi Tala (meter)

**Choreography** Shanta and V. P. Dhananjayan, Staged by Guru Meena Telikicherla

**Dancers:** Vrindarani Buchwald, Sindhu Raghavendra and Daniel Phoenix Singh

Varnam translates to “colors” and is the piece de resistance in a Bharata Natyam repertoire. This varnam depicts the life of “Shanmuga” the six headed son of Shiva and portrays him riding on his peacock. The dancers query, “Why do you hide from me, My Lord? I have been faithful to you and am longing for your vision, why this indifference? Won't you appear before us?” The dance continues to describe his miraculous birth, his youth as a warrior, the beloved son of Goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva, and beseeches him to have mercy and grant the dancers his blessed vision. The narrative sections are matched with abstract sections that allow the dancers to explore both thematic and abstract elements.

**Section II – Kathak**

Kathak is a syncretic dance from north India and it draws on both Hindu and Muslim cultural traditions. This dance style from is an amalgamation of folk and formalized court dances popular between sixteenth and eighteenth century India. The Bhakti and Sufi movements that swept India during this time, along with the entertainment oriented performances patronized by the royal courts, shaped the repertoire of Kathak dance. The folk traditions of the Bhavai of Gujarat and the Ghumar of Rajasthan, the singing and dancing of the Kathak caste of Uttar Pradesh and the Vaisnava sects of Bengal, the Kathabachaks of North and East, and the court dances of

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the Mughal Nawabs and the Hindu Maharajas all blended to form the multifaceted mosaic of Kathak dance. The quest for origins mostly links the dance to the Sanskrit traditions of Vedic India. However, it is largely accepted that the dance we are familiar with today as Kathak flourished in the Mughal and Hindu courts of Lucknow and Benaras in Uttar Pradesh, Jaipur in Rajasthan and Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh.

The technique of Kathak today emphasizes elaborate footwork and rapid pirouettes ending in statuesque poses. The dance technique is structured around syllables (or percussion beats) that form rhythmical patterns within a metrical scale. Although the *gharana* traditions of Kathak (linking them to founding forefathers and male lineages) are the most celebrated aspects of Kathak, the contribution of the courtesan culture to its refinement and popularization is equally significant. The interpretative portion contains subtle gestures and facial expressions and is based on tales of Radha and Krishna and other mythological lore.

### **Thumri**

**Choreographer and dancer:** Pallabi Chakravorty

This semi-classical musical genre from North India literally means rhythmic movements (*thumak*) and songs. Thumri is associated with the courtesan culture of Mughal courts. It rose to prominence in the court of Wajid Ali Shah, especially its renditions by Kathak dancers. The emotions in Thumri are usually connected to *shringara rasa* (erotic love) depicting Radha's longing for Krishna. Through gestures, rhythmic movements and melodic verses, dancers create emotional hues of tenderness, pathos, anxiety and reproach. A Thumri singer has the liberty to bring in shades and shadows of other related ragas to enhance the emotional trajectory of the lyrics.

### **Tarana**

**Dancer:** Pallabi Chakravorty, **Composition** Bandana Sen, set to teen tala (meter)

This is an abstract dance set to a musical composition using rhythmic words that have no meaning such as *tram-tarana-tanum-tanadere*. These rhythmic syllables are repeated in cycles in increasing tempi as the dance progresses to a climax. The genre emerged with other north Indian musical genres in royal courts and is associated with the genius of Amir Khusrao.

## **Section III – Contemporary**

### **Bollywood in a nutshell**

Film arrived in the subcontinent in 1886 and in the next few years, silent film became the ascendant form of popular entertainment. In March 1931, Imperial films released filmmaker Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*—sound rushed in and where one silent film had sufficed for the different cultures in India, a set of mutually incomprehensible tongues looked set to wreck havoc on the film industry. The 1945 edition of the Hindustan Year Book estimated 225 official languages current in India, but that left out so-called “insignificant languages”. In order to bridge the cultural and language gaps, filmmakers fell back on what pleased crowds—song and dance—proving that music and therefore dance was indeed the universal language. Continuing the Indian aesthetic tradition of fusing improbable elements into composites, films incorporated song and dance sequences into comedies, tragedies and dramas of all sorts. Unlike western musicals, actors in Indian cinema lip-sync the words of the song while professional musicians record the actual sound track. The reach of Indian films is much broader than the subcontinent and its far-flung diaspora—it has become an international phenomenon with popular DJ's mixing film songs (particularly Bhangra) with popular songs worldwide. Indian films have surpassed Hollywood in their output and have staked out an international following that is growing by leaps and bounds.

In terms of access, Bollywood allowed everyone to see themselves in the dancers. Until Bollywood, dance was either controlled within the structures of the temple or the palace. Only the “Brahmin” dancers were allowed into the temples of yore, and to be a courtesan in a king's court was heavily dependant on wealth. The average person did not have the money and time associated with the years of training classical dance forms required. In terms of classical dance, what was mostly a solo art form slowly began to transform into the dance-theater format. With the advent of films, artists began experimenting with group choreography, symmetry and lush sets that allowed dance to become huge production events, with a huge corps of dancers supporting and accentuating the lead dancers.

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Currently, a new genre of “film dance” that is specific to the film culture and is an hybrid of classical and folk dances, with definite western influences has come into its own in India. One could thus argue that Bollywood has continued the tradition of Indian philosophy and situated the dance of the gods in the human body, bridging the sacred and sensuous.

**Yaadon Ki Bharat—Caravan of Memories**

**Choreography:** Daniel Phoenix Singh & Dancers

**Dancers:** Danielle Fisco and Brent Lawrence

For this evenings performance we’ve chosen two songs by Lata Mangeshkar, the all time queen of Bollywood’s playback singers and one by a more recent vocalist Chitra. Media artists Ted Bain, Ludovic Jolivet and Kavitha Krishna assist in converting a small stage with minimal sets into an exploration of contemporary dance—particularly toying with the idea of the camera as one of the performers as in Bollywood.

**Collaborators**

**Stage Manager:** Emily Berry Bodoh, **Nattuvangam:** Meena Telikicherla, **Vocal:** Geetha Navnithan,

**Percussion:** Magarajaroo Srinivas, **Percussion:** Daniel L Scholnick **Violin:** Mani Iyer, **Lighting**

**Designer:** Alex Cooper, **Video Artists:** Ted Bain, Ludovic Jolivet and Kavitha Krishna, **Bhangra**

**Specialist:** Kumud Mathur.

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