

RAGAMALA

• DANCE COMPANY •

RANEE RAMASWAMY AND APARNA RAMASWAMY, ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

Exclusive Representation

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The Artistic Directors

RANEE RAMASWAMY

Ranee Ramaswamy founded Ragamala Dance Company in 1992 and is Co-Artistic Director, Choreographer, and Principal Dancer with her creative partner, Aparna Ramaswamy. As mother and daughter, each draws from her generational experience –the rich traditions, deep philosophical roots, and ancestral wisdom of India meet and merge with their hybridic perspective as Indian-American artists.

As a dancemaker and performer, Ranee explores the dynamic tension between the ancestral and the contemporary, making dance landscapes that dwell in opposition—secular and spiritual life, inner and outer worlds, the human and the natural, rhythm and stillness.

A senior disciple of legendary dancer and choreographer Smt. Alarmél Valli, Ranee's training in the South Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam is the bedrock of a creative aesthetic that prioritizes truthful emotion above all else.

Ranee is the recipient of a 2014 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a 2012 United States Artists Fellowship, a 2011 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and 14 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Choreography. Ranee's choreographic work has been commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Lincoln Center, Krannert Center, Clarice Smith Center, Opening Nights Performing Arts and NYU Abu Dhabi, and has been presented by the Kennedy Center, Joyce Theater, American Dance Festival, International Festival of Arts & Ideas, University Musical Society/University of Michigan, Cal Performances, National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India), and Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India), among others.

Ranee currently serves on the National Council on the Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. Most recently, she and Aparna were awarded 2018 Guggenheim Fellowships and selected as Research Fellows by the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center (Italy).

APARNA RAMASWAMY

Described as “thrillingly three-dimensional... rapturous and profound” (*The New York Times*) and selected as one of *Dance Magazine's* '25 to Watch' for 2010, Aparna Ramaswamy is Co-Artistic Director, Choreographer, and Principal Dancer of Ragamala Dance Company with her choreographic partner Ranee Ramaswamy.

Born in India and raised both in India and the US, Aparna studies and performs in Chennai as a senior disciple and protégé of legendary dancer/choreographer Alarmél Valli while building her own body of work as a dancemaker and performer in the U.S. This cultural hybridity has given her the perspective to approach Bharatanatyam as a living, breathing language through which to create works that speak to the contemporary experience.

Aparna is a recipient of a 2016 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a 2016 Joyce Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and three McKnight Artist Fellowships, among others. Her choreographic work is supported by the NEA, National Dance Project, MAP Fund, New Music/USA, Doris Duke Foundation, McKnight Foundation, and USArtists International. Most recently, she and Ranee were awarded 2018 Guggenheim Fellowships and selected as Research Fellows by the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center (Italy).

Aparna's choreographic work has been commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Lincoln Center, Krannert Center, Clarice Smith Center, Opening Nights Performing Arts and NYU Abu Dhabi, and has been presented by the Kennedy Center, Joyce Theater, American Dance Festival, International Festival of Arts & Ideas, University Musical Society/University of Michigan, Cal Performances, National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India), and Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India), among others. She currently serves on the board of Dance/USA.



Ranee Ramaswamy by Ed Bock



Aparna Ramaswamy by Ed Bock



Sacred Earth by Grant Halverson

The Company

Under the Direction of Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy, Ragamala Dance Company has been described by *The New York Times* as “soulful, imaginative and rhythmically contagious,” and “providing some of the most transcendent experiences that dance has to offer.”

Ragamala’s work has been commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, the Krannert Center for Performing Arts at the University of Illinois, the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), and Opening Nights Performing Arts at Florida State University, and has been developed in residence at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) and during an NPN residency at The Yard.

The company has been recognized with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, National Dance Project, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Japan Foundation/New York, Minnesota State Arts Board, USArtists International, New Music/USA, MAP Fund, American Composers Forum, and a 2008 and 2016 Joyce Award from the Joyce Foundation.

Ragamala tours extensively, highlighted by the American Dance Festival, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Music Center of Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, International Festival of Arts & Ideas, University Musical Society at the University of Michigan, Just Festival (Edinburgh, U.K.) Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (U.A.E), Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai), and National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai), among others.

Support for Ragamala’s work comes from The McKnight Foundation; the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; Target; The Dr. Dash Foundation, whose mission is to preserve and promote rich Indian heritage and culture; The Goodale Family Foundation; the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund; and members of Ragamala’s “Rasika Circle.”



Written in Water courtesy of Valley Performing Arts Center

WRITTEN IN WATER

WITH LIVE MUSIC

CHOREOGRAPHERS: APARNA RAMASWAMY AND RANEE RAMASWAMY

5 DANCERS, 5 MUSICIANS

COMPOSERS: AMIR ELSAFFAR AND PREMA RAMAMURTHY

ORIGINAL ARTWORK: KESHAV V

LIGHTING DESIGNER: JEFF BARTLETT

“ancient Hindu and Persian traditions were woven into a fabric that illuminated their similarities and brought out the beauty of each. The way that the Ramaswamys were able to intertwine abstraction within the tight architecture of the Bharatanatyam form was truly magical.”
– Minneapolis Star Tribune

In *Written in Water*, the dancers activate the space by negotiating snakes and ladders—which represent the heights of ecstasy and depths of longing in Hindu and Sufi thought—to connect the human with the transcendent and reveal mysteries within the self.

Forging new artistic paradigms, Ragamala brings together internationally-celebrated artists: composer Amir ElSaffar leads a musical ensemble with a distinct alchemy of Iraqi, jazz, and Carnatic instruments, and Keshav’s lush paintings are projected onto the stage to create a mythic, mystical dance landscape. Additional artwork by Nathan Christopher.

Written in Water is commissioned by the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (Lead Commissioner) and Opening Nights Performing Arts at Florida State University, and supported by a 2016 Joyce Award from the Joyce Foundation, the Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards program, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, New Music/USA, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, and the Carolyn Foundation.



Written in Water by Bruce Palmer

THEY ROSE AT DAWN

WITH LIVE MUSIC

CREATOR AND SOLOIST: APARNA RAMASWAMY
4 MUSICIANS

COMPOSER: PREMA RAMAMURTHY

LIGHTING DESIGNER: MAT TERWILLIGER

“the heralded Bharatanatyam soloist and choreographer Aparna Ramaswamy preserves ancient dance forms with stunning technical virtuosity and expressivity. Yet she also aims to create a living tradition that is resonant for modern times” – The Boston Globe

In this solo work, women are depicted as carriers of ritual. Navigating inner and outer worlds, they invoke a sense of reverence, of unfolding mystery, of imagination. A stellar Carnatic musical ensemble accompanies Aparna Ramaswamy as she explores the spontaneous interplay between music and movement and the dynamic contours created by the artists onstage.

The creation of They Rose at Dawn was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project.



Aparna Ramaswamy by Darial Sneed

BODY, THE SHRINE

WITH LIVE MUSIC

CHOREOGRAPHERS:
RANEE, APARNA, AND ASHWINI RAMASWAMY
5 DANCERS, 4 MUSICIANS

COMPOSER: PREMA RAMAMURTHY

“Ragamala is one of the most important South Asian dance companies in the world. Everywhere they tour, audiences are astonished by the beauty and technique of the company’s craft, its adherence to the values embedded in the form, and its bold contemporary view of women’s representation in performance.” – Martha’s Vineyard Online

In *Body, the Shrine*, choreography, mythography, and *Bhakti* poetry entwine to connect the spiritual, the immediate, the intimate, and the transcendent. The *Bhakti* poets erased any dichotomy between the sacred and the personal, seamlessly interweaving the two to express deep longing, anguish of separation, ecstasy, and the desire to merge the soul with the Supreme Consciousness. *Body, the Shrine* excavates the visceral and primal wisdom of this poetic tradition—a tradition that strikes a chord across time and geography—to explore the sacred sanctuary that exists within each of us.

Body, the Shrine is made possible in part by the Marbrook Foundation, the Charles and Joan Gross Family Foundation, the Goodale Family Foundation, and members of Ragamala’s “Rasika Circle.”



Aparna Ramaswamy by Amanulla



Sacred Earth by Ed Bock

SACRED EARTH

WITH LIVE MUSIC

CHOREOGRAPHERS: RANEE RAMASWAMY
AND APARNA RAMASWAMY

5 DANCERS, 4 MUSICIANS

COMPOSER: PREMA RAMAMURTHY

ORIGINAL ARTWORK: ANIL VANGAD

LIGHTING DESIGNER: JEFF BARTLETT

“Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy, the mother-daughter team that heads Minneapolis’ Ragamala troupe, ground their creations in Bharatanatyam’s vast lexicon in thrilling detail” – Financial Times

Sacred Earth explores the interconnectedness between human emotions and the environments that shape them. In this work, the dancers create a sacred space to honor the divinity in the natural world and the sustenance we derive from it. Inspired by the philosophies behind the ephemeral arts of kolam and Warli painting and the Tamil Sangam literature of India, *Sacred Earth* is Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy’s singular vision of the beautiful, fragile relationship between nature and man.

The creation of Sacred Earth was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Ranee Ramaswamy by David Johnston

NOCTURNE

WITH RECORDED MUSIC

CHOREOGRAPHER: ASHWINI RAMASWAMY

4 DANCERS

COMPOSERS: SHUBHENDRA RAO AND SASKIA
RAO-DE HAAS WITH RAJNA SWAMINATHAN

“An enchanting journey—for one hour we are transported into an exquisite dream state” – Minneapolis Star Tribune

Nocturne is the first major work to be conceived/choreographed by long-time Ragamala soloist Ashwini Ramaswamy. The enigma of night – which conceals and liberates, frightens and absolves – is the universe of ‘Nocturne.’ This work is inspired by the natural, emotional, and spiritual migrations that occur after nightfall, and examines the potency of night creatures, moods, and impulses. The work draws from the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Jorge Luis Borges, the Tamil Sangam poets and the Vedas (sacred texts) to create a richly imagined world after dark.

Nocturne was developed in part through the Red Eye Theater’s Isolated Acts program, Triskelion Arts’ Split Bill Program, and generous support for Ashwini Ramaswamy’s Kickstarter campaign.

Press Highlights

“The eye often goes straight to [Aparna] Ramaswamy’s impeccable technique and incandescent beauty. Through her dancing, the music’s textures come into view.”

Siobhan Burke, *The New York Times*

“Ragamala imbues the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam with a thoroughly contemporary exuberance... a visionary approach to an ancient art form.”

Linda Shapiro, *Dance Magazine*

“Ragamala has become the standard bearer of a singularly successful kind of hybridity, merging ancient traditions into high-end productions that are hard to resist”

Mallika Rao, *The Huffington Post*



“Ragamala shows how Indian forms can be some of the most transcendent experiences that dance has to offer. This is an excellent company.”

Alastair Macaulay, *The New York Times*

“The relationship between the music and dance is not only meant to be, it exemplifies what happens when artistic boundaries (real or artificial) are radically tested, if not knocked down all together.”

Caroline Palmer, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“As Indian dancers based in the U.S., Ragamala’s works reflect the rich heritage and deep philosophical roots of India amalgamated with the inquisitiveness and creative liberty of the United States.”

George Pioustin, *The Hindu*

Minnesota

The Spirit of Minnesota

Monthly

THE DANGERS OF
TEEN SEXTING
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WESLEY SO
HALLOWEEN FUN



FAMILY DYNASTIES

DAYTON, BELLAMY, KLOBUCHAR, PARISE, PILLSBURY & MORE



make Minneapolis one of the world's milling centers with its innovative techniques and signature flour, "Pillsbury's Best." Over the years, Pillsburys have served as mayors, governors, senators, and congressmen, in addition to their far-reaching philanthropy work. Today, the company's brands are owned by General Mills and Smucker's, with Sally Whitney Pillsbury (wife of the late George Pillsbury, a grandson of Charles Alfred) representing the last generation in the Minnesota family business tree.

POHLAD

Carl Pohlad was born into a poor family in Des Moines, Iowa. While serving World War II, the budding entrepreneur ran a loan business out of a mess tent. Afterward, he got married, moved to Edina, and built a banking empire. He owned the Twin City Rapid Transit and the Minnesota Twins, as well as controlling interests in PepsiAmericas. Carl's three sons have continued his business legacy: Jim now owns the Twins, Bob is the former president of PepsiAmericas, and Bill divides his time between Minneapolis and Los Angeles, working as a film producer (*Brokeback Mountain*, *12 Years a Slave*) and director as well as leading the Pohlad Family Foundation.

RAMASWAMY

Dancer and choreographer Raneeramaswamy created a space for classical Indian performance in Minnesota after she moved here from India with her three-year-old daughter, Aparna, in 1978. In the mid '80s, one of India's premier dancers visited the Twin Cities and took Raneeramaswamy and Aparna under her tutelage. Around 1992, the year she founded Minneapolis' Ragamala Dance Company, Raneeramaswamy started adapting her centuries-old art for mainstream audiences. Since then, as co-artistic director and artistic associate, Aparna and her younger sister, Ashwini, respectively, have worked alongside their mother to maintain Indian cultural integrity while achieving global accessibility.



RANEERAMASWAMY WITH DAUGHTERS APARNA (LEFT) AND ASHWINI

APARNA RAMASWAMY

“It's hard for people to get their minds around the fact that we do create work together. I think especially when it's me and my mother, people often think: Raneeramaswamy started it, now Aparna's throwing it on. But it's only when they hear our story that they understand how we are partners. She is not grooming the next generation. We've always been one generation. And I've been observing this my whole life, so it feels natural to slip into the mix. And now Ashwini's joining us. It's a mother, one daughter, and then another daughter...The fact that we have this perspective that comes from different ages and different experiences and different immigrant stories is really valuable to our work.”

SILVA

Tomas and Maria Silva migrated from Aguascalientes, Mexico, to St. Paul where, in 1979, they transformed an 800-square-foot space into what would become El Burrito Mercado, with Tomas trekking to Chicago every week to load up on authentic goods for the Twin Cities' best-

known Mexican market. Today, the Silvas' daughter Milissa serves as CEO while her sister Suzanne serves as head of HR, with Suzanne's daughter Analita overseeing catering and events. ■

READ MORE INSIGHTS FROM THE LEGACY HEIRS AT MNMO.COM/DYNASTIES

whydance

by Aparna Ramaswamy

Co-artistic director and dancer with Ragamala Dance Company

Dance connects me to my ancestry. Raised both in India and the U.S., I relish finding a balance between two cultures and feeling the irresistible pull of both countries. I see parallels between the evolution I have undergone as a dancer and choreographer, and the personal transitions I have experienced as a product of the diaspora.

For me, dance and family are inextricably linked. For the last three decades, I have worked in a collaborative partnership with my mother, Rance Ramaswamy. It began in 1984, when we both started training with my guru — the legendary dancer/choreographer Alarmé Valli, in Chennai, India. When I first saw her perform, I was forever changed. I never knew that one person could embody a myriad of emotions with such grace and brilliance. I was a quiet, introspective child who felt much more at home conversing with adults than playing with children my own age. Bharatanatyam was my outlet to focus my energy and express my emotions.

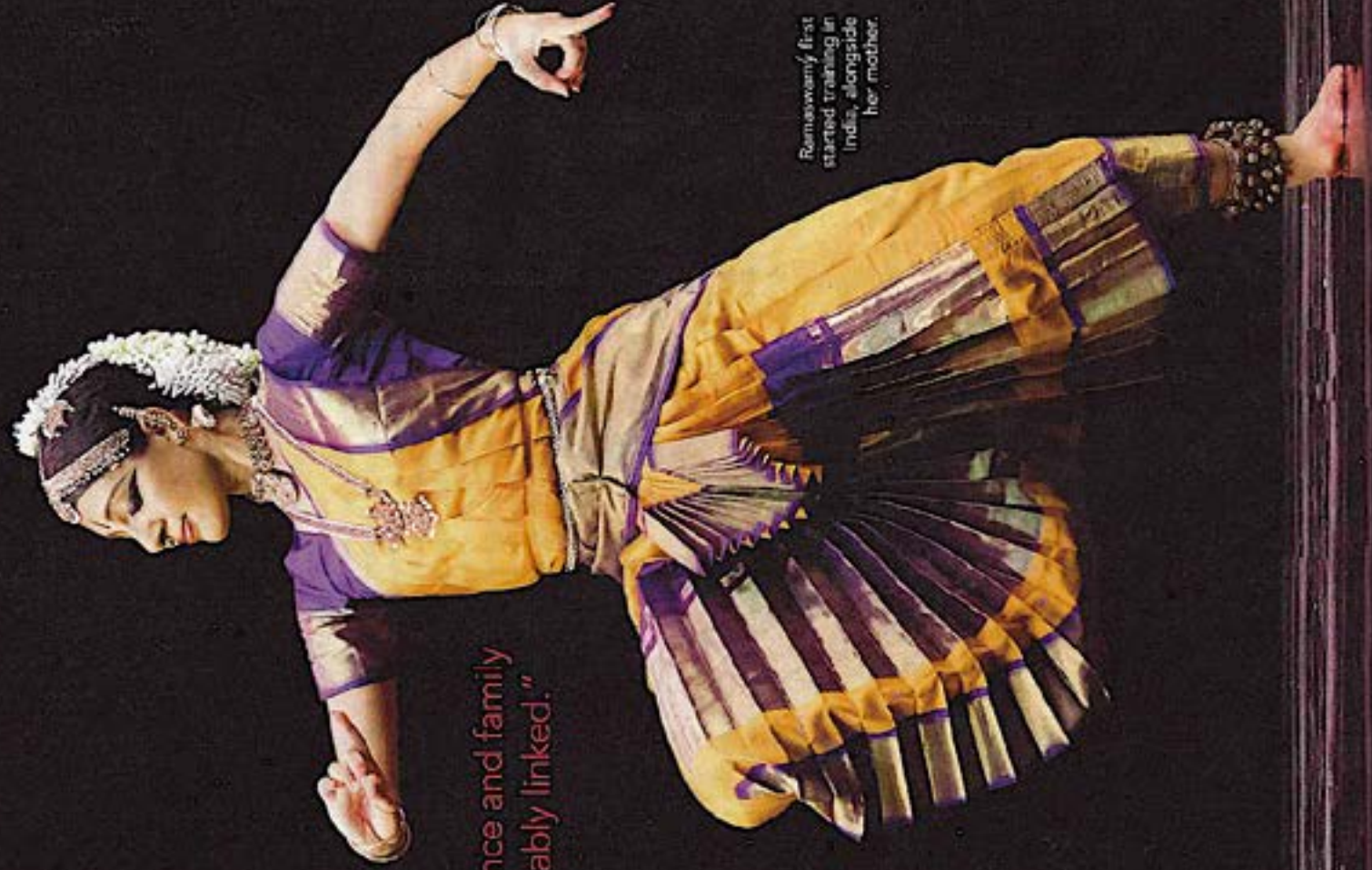
Rance and I — although from different generations — underwent intensive training side by side, living and breathing this timeless, poetic art form. We practiced together, challenging and supporting one another. Today, when we create a new work, our conversations are rapid-fire, fluid and undisguised. My younger sister, Ashwini, is a beautiful dancer in her own right and a key member of my company. I feel so proud that the three of us have recently begun to create work together.

Bharatanatyam holds a significant place in Indian culture, as it is a multi-dimensional art form, integrating elements of music, movement, theater, philosophy and psychology. I am committed to circumventing notions that culture-based forms are impenetrable. My form transcends classification to tap into an inner spirituality that is universal.

As a co-artistic director, choreographer and principal dancer with Ragamala Dance Company — and the mother of twin 7-year-old boys — my life has always been rigorous. The balance of family, performing, running an organization and creating new works is joyful, exhausting and truly rewarding.

Dance has never been a job, not a hobby, but is intrinsically linked to who I am. My guru, a voracious reader, has taught me to look for inspiration in great works of literature. One of her favorite quotes, by William Butler Yeats, perfectly expresses how I feel: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?” ■

“For me, dance and family are inextricably linked.”



Ramaswamy first started training in India, alongside her mother.

JANUARY 29, 2017

RAGAMALA DANCE EVOKES SOLIDARITY WITH BANNED IMMIGRANTS

SHEILA REGAN

“Written in Water,” by Ragamala Dance Company, is not intended to be a political work, but the latest actions by our new president make it political. In the piece, which was performed at the Cowles Center this weekend, ancient Hindu and Persian traditions were woven into a fabric that illuminated their similarities and brought out the beauty of each, with music blending Indian and Iraqi sounds with hints of jazz.

In light of President Donald Trump’s executive order (which was immediately stayed) banning even those with green cards and valid visas from seven Middle Eastern countries from entering the United States, Ragamala’s gesture of collaborative art- making with Middle Eastern aesthetics evoked a meaningful gesture of solidarity with those communities.

A projection of the board game “Snakes and Ladders” grounded the work, literally. Projected onto the floor, cleverly designed by Nathan Christopher, the board game provided a structure on which the dance unfolded. As the piece began, the five dancers appeared to be like live board game pieces, journeying along the board squares, all the while executing the intricate movements of the Bharatanatyam dance form.

Later, the “Snakes and Ladders” board changed into its earlier iteration, the ancient Hindu game of Paramapadam, which, unlike the modern version, is black and white. Meanwhile dancers carried out the emotional journeys that resulted from their moral choices symbolized in the game. The impassioned moments were contained within the dance’s overall precision, even at their most heightened demonstration. A gesture of despair, a body fallen to the ground and hands clenching the face in grief, were all done with absolute control.

Woven into the journey of the board game was imagery drawn from the ancient Sufi poem “The Conference of the Birds,” through the choreography as well as a series of colorful paintings by the Chennai-based artist, Keshav. The movement, created by mother and daughter team Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy, along with choreographic associate Ashwini Ramaswamy (Aparna’s sister), conjured the flight of birds through the flourishing movements of the dancers’ arms, hands and fingers. The way that the Ramaswamys were able to intertwine the abstraction of the fluttering wings within the tight architecture of the Bharatanatyam form was truly magical. Sheila Regan is a Minneapolis arts writer.



SEPTEMBER 14, 2017

GURU OF A 2,000-YEAR-OLD INDIAN DANCE TRADITION RETURNS TO MPLS.

MARIANNE COMBS

Ranee Ramaswamy, Alarmél Valli and Aparna Ramaswamy in Valli's studio in Chennai, India, soon after they first met. Courtesy of the Ramaswamy family

Without Alarmél Valli, renowned Twin Cities-based Ragamala Dance Company probably would not exist.

Valli is a preeminent choreographer and performer of Bharatanatyam, the 2,000-year-old classical dance of southeast India that began in Hindu temples as a form of worship. Even though the dance is now performed on stage, it is still a deeply spiritual practice.

In Hinduism there is an adage: "Mother, Father, Guru, God."

"Guru is the one that shows you the realization of the final understanding of life — so the teacher is even higher than your mother and father," said Ranee Ramaswamy, who co-founded Ragamala Dance Company in Minneapolis with her daughter Aparna. Another daughter, Ashwini, dances with the company.

For Ramaswamy and her daughters, Alarmél Valli is their guru.

Aparna Ramaswamy said Valli's performances are the product of her vast knowledge of poetry, literature, music and philosophy. "She will describe a longing for union with your lover. But that is an allegory for the soul's yearning to unite with the divine. That idea of the sacred and the sensual — she portrays that with so much depth and richness but also a universality that everybody can understand," Aparna Ramaswamy said.

Valli rejects the title of "guru." She prefers teacher. But in describing the gurus who taught her the art form, she may well be describing herself.

"The true guru in our tradition was one who imparts the knowledge, who opens up your mind, who illuminates, but then allows you to take wings and fly," Valli said. "And I think the best metaphor of all is that of the banyan tree. The tree is the tradition and the branches are the gurus, and each one lets down roots. Each root becomes a tree and then the tree spreads and grows and becomes a thing of beauty."



To understand how the tree took root in Minneapolis, you need to go back to the 1980s. Ranee Ramaswamy was living there when a University of Minnesota professor invited Valli to teach and perform over the course of two weeks.

"The very first day I watched her on stage, the first minute, I knew I had never in my life seen something that has moved me so much," Ramaswamy said. "It was unbelievable the power she had."

That next year, Ramaswamy and her then 9-year-old daughter Aparna spent four months in India, studying with Valli. Ranee had studied dance previously but she started over, learning alongside her daughter.

And they kept coming back, year after year, for months at a time.

Inspired by what they were learning, the Ramaswamy family founded Ragamala Dance Company. Now in its 25th year, Ragamala earns regular rave reviews from national press and numerous awards for its excellence. But Ranee Ramaswamy said there's only one person they're really working to please.

"When we create work for Ragamala we have a standard and the standard is, 'will Valli like it?'"

To Valli, the Ramaswamys are her students and she sees them as her children:

"To think that they have built up this company which has made its mark in the mainstream in America — it makes me very proud, like a proud parent."

Valli performs Saturday night at the Cowles Center in Minneapolis.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2015

The Week Ahead

A SURVEY OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

DANCE A SOLO HONORING A WOMEN'S WISDOM

GIA KOURLAS

In the classical South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam, the body is material — an interlocking puzzle of pieces assembled to create otherworldly grace. The fingers splay and stretch apart, the heels flex as a dancer hops from side to side, and the eyes flicker with lively vitality. Aparna Ramaswamy, an artistic director (with her mother, Raneé) of the much-respected Ragamala Dance Company in Minneapolis, is a vision of sculptural lucidity whose dancing brings a full-bodied awareness to complex rhythms and shifts of dynamics. All the while, the strength of her purity is second nature — both explicit and seemingly casual.

Ms. Ramaswamy will make her Joyce Theater debut in “They Rose at Dawn,” an evening-length solo that honors the wisdom of women, who are seen as the carriers of reverence and imagination. Settle back as Ms. Ramaswamy, accompanied by a Carnatic musical ensemble, unlocks mysteries of feminine mystique. (7:30 p.m., Tuesday and Wednesday, Oct. 6 and 7; 8 p.m., Thursday, Oct. 8, Joyce Theater, joyce.org.)



Narendra Dangiya

A DIVINE BLEND OF MOVEMENTS AND SOUTH INDIAN MELODIES

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2015

CELIA WREN

Like a lover yearning for her beloved, the human soul longs to unite with the divine. That idea comes into play in “Song of the Jasmine,” the bharatanatyam dance work scheduled to visit the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center on Feb. 7.

Choreographed by Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy of the Minneapolis-based Ragamala Dance Company, in collaboration with saxophonist-composer Rudresh Mahanthappa, the piece takes inspiration from the writings of the Tamil mystic poet Andal, known for her devotion to the god Krishna.

“In Andal’s poetry, and in bharatanatyam — and on a much deeper level as part of the Indian psyche — the sensual and the sacred are one. There doesn’t have to be a disconnect between those two concepts,” Aparna Ramaswamy said, speaking by phone from Minneapolis.

Aparna and her mother, Ranee, are co-artistic directors of Ragamala Dance, which Ranee founded in 1992. Both women were born in India; both have trained with Alarmél Valli, a celebrated performer and choreographer

in the Indian classical dance form of bharatanatyam.

Mother and daughter are among the five dancers who interpret “Song of the Jasmine,” a roughly hour-long work set to music inflected with jazz and South Indian music. (Ashwini Ramaswamy, Aparna’s sister, is also among the dancers.) In a version of the piece performed at New York’s Lincoln Center last year, the dancers drew on bharatanatyam’s physical vocabulary in ways that seemed now seductive, now jaunty, now rapt.

One side of the stage featured the five-person band, including composer Mahanthappa on alto saxophone. Other instrumentalists played the guitar, the mridangam (a two-sided hand drum), the Carnatic (or southern Indian) flute and violin.

“Song of the Jasmine” began to bloom after the Ramaswamys attended a concert by Mahanthappa, who is known for fusing elements of South Indian music with jazz. Aparna Ramaswamy says she immediately connected with the musician’s sound.

She resolved to come up with a project that would involve the composer-saxophonist. Discussions about such a collaboration intensified in 2011, when Ragamala Dance performers and Mahanthappa were among the artists participating in the Kennedy Center’s Maximum India festival.

Eventually, the Ramaswamys pro-

posed building a joint venture around the poetry of Andal, who lived in the 8th century or thereabouts. In India, Andal is “a household name,” Ranee said.

Ranee was raised in India. Aparna grew up primarily in the United States, but she spent a few months in India every year, and was familiar with Andal’s legacy. Mahanthappa, raised in Colorado, didn’t know Andal’s writing, but he found the source material fruitful. The Ramaswamys “would send me pages and pages of poetry and their thoughts about the direction of the piece,” he recalled, speaking by phone from his base in Montclair, N.J. Often, he “would latch on to two or three lines [of verse], and that would be the big inspiration for the musical narrative.”

Early on, the collaborators agreed on the instruments that would supply the accompaniment. Subsequently, the music and choreography fell into place roughly simultaneously: The Ramaswamys and Mahanthappa typically drafted sketches on their own, but then, in regular joint workshop sessions, they significantly revised those drafts.

Mahanthappa, who had never collaborated with dancers previously, found the process exciting. “Dancers hear music differently,” he observes. The dancers’ needs, and the specifics of the ensemble, led him to an



Alice Gebura

approach in which “it’s melody and rhythm that are the guiding forces, and not necessarily Western ideas of harmony and chord progression.”

Eventually the piece grew to encompass several sections based on different ragas (a raga is an Indian musical concept somewhat akin to a scale) and rhythmic structures.

As South Indian dancers, “it’s important that we have a raga-based music. It pushes the spirituality of the work,” says Ranee, whose credits include being appointed by President Obama to the National Council on the Arts.

Both score and choreography would ultimately include sections of improvisation, including sequences where the musicians and dancers are essentially reacting to each other.

“That was one of the intentions when we created the piece, to have that freedom on the stage between music and dance, and to really underscore that relationship,” says Aparna.

Co-commissioned by the Clarice Smith and other entities, “Song of the Jasmine” premiered last year at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

The collaboration with Mahanthappa was a new line of inquiry for Ragamala Dance, but the mystical motifs that surface in “Song of the Jasmine” speak to the company’s broader interests, Aparna Ramaswamy says.

“Dance and music evoke the feeling of transcendence and spirituality,” she says. “I’m very interested in weaving that thread through any work that we do.”

Sacred Music and Movement, With an Infectious Beat

The New York Times

SATURDAY, AUGUST 9, 2014

You don't generally go to a performance of Bharatanatyam, the classical South Indian dance style, expecting to want to get up and dance. The form inspires a more removed kind of reverence, as something to be admired

from afar, like a sacred object.

SIOBHAN BURKE
DANCE REVIEW
But on Thursday at Lincoln Center Out of Doors, Ragamala

Dance, a Bharatanatyam company from Minneapolis, upended that expectation with the New York premiere of "Song of the Jasmine," a soulful, imaginative and rhythmically contagious collaboration with the superb jazz composer and alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa. It was the main event on an otherwise tepid program shared with the Chinese American Arts Council and Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers, a group based in Philadelphia.

Mr. Mahanthappa and the artistic directors of Ragamala, Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy — they are mother and daughter, as well as the troupe's principal dancers — approach their art forms with a similar eye (or ear) toward blending old and new. Mr. Ma-



Musicians: Rudresh Mahanthappa, Raman Kalyan, and Anjna Swaminathan; Dancer: Aparna Ramaswamy

hanthappa's composition, played live, oscillated between warbling, wailing improvisations and tightly structured rhythmic cycles for alto sax, guitar, mridangam (two-sided hand drum) and Carnatic flute and violin.

The meeting of jazz and South Indian Carnatic traditions was startlingly seamless and marvelously danceable in the hands of the Ramaswamys, who choreographed "Song of the Jasmine" for themselves and three other danc-

ers, Ashwini Ramaswamy (Aparna's sister), Tamara Nadel and Jessica Fiala.

A program note elaborated on their inspiration: the eighth-century musings of the Tamil poet Andal, known for her expressions of "deep longing" and "the desire to merge the soul with the Supreme Consciousness." Vague though that may be, it captures the emotional landscape of "Jasmine," where every gesture radiates joy or

generosity or a sense of striving toward some higher form of being.

Those gestures ranged from bold, daggerlike strokes of the arms, shooting out from the chest, to a fragile, quivering lexicon of the hands that suggested stitching, caressing, planting, gathering and other tender actions. At one point, resolving from appealingly asymmetrical arrangements into a more cohesive group, the five women performed a kind of

sewing motion to all four corners of the stage, as if mending the space in front of them.

Though the sightlines at the Damarosch Park Bandshell often masked their pattering feet and bell-clad ankles — a persistent shortcoming of that stage — the specificity of their painted hands, particularly Aparna Ramaswamy's, was breathtaking.

Darial Sneed

INTERNATIONAL TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- NYU Abu Dhabi Arts Center (Abu Dhabi, UAE)
- Music Academy (Chennai, India)
- Narada Gana Sabha (Chennai, India)
- Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India)
- Just Festival (Edinburgh, U.K.)
- Soorya Rasavikalpam Festival (Trivandrum, Trissur, Palakkad and Kozhikode)
- National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India)
- Soorya Festival (Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India)
- Iida Bunka Kaikan (Iida, Japan)
- Nagoya Kita Bunka Shogekijyo (Nagoya, Japan)
- Matsumoto Bunka Kaikan (Matsumoto, Japan)
- Bali Arts Festival (Bali, Indonesia)
- Festival of Spirituality and Peace (Edinburgh, Scotland)
- Open Look Dance Festival (St. Petersburg, Russia)
- Miao-Li International Festival (Miao Li, Taiwan)
- Mandapa (Paris, France)



UNITED STATES TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- Joyce Theater (New York, NY)
- Lincoln Center Out of Doors (New York, NY)
- Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, D.C.)
- American Dance Festival (Durham, NC)
- International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT)
- Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, IL)
- Opening Nights at Florida State University (Tallahassee, FL)
- Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH)
- Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN)
- Clarice Smith Center for the Performing Arts (College Park, MA)
- Flynn Center (Burlington, VT)
- Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT)
- Hancher Auditorium (Iowa City, IA)
- Krannert Center (Urbana, IL)
- Phillips Center (Gainesville, FL)
- The Music Center of Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA)
- Lied Center (Lawrence, KS)
- University Musical Society (Ann Arbor, MI)
- Zellerbach Playhouse - Cal Performances (Berkeley, CA)



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