

## ABCD- ANYBODY CAN DANCE! BUT SHOULD THEY?

PUJITA KRISHNA JYOTI

University of California, Irvine, Founder and Artistic Director, Sainikpuri, Secunderabad, India

### ABSTRACT

Too much of a good thing can be...well, repetitive! There is so much dancing around us these days that being a dancer myself, frankly, at the risk of being frowned upon and booed, I have to say, I am a little weary of dancing. And I hasten to add, no, not the act of dancing per se, because that stems from a very visceral place, that anyone who enjoys dancing will attest to. No, I am just weary of the excessive visual representation of it in all manner and form at every flimsy opportunity, turning it into a well-worn cliché. And this is what I attempt to do in this article as I attempt to pin down some of the platitudes surrounding the world of dance, particularly in the Indian pop-cultural-classical context, that have unsettled me enough to rile a bit on paper. Unapologetically, I use the title of a Bollywood film that was released a few years ago, as the title of this article as it has piqued me since the day I set eyes on it. I write from the perspective of an Insider and so the article is based largely on personal experiences and observations. Also, as a self-absolving statement, I'd like to add that while I am all for the democracy of dancing, I am only wondering aloud for various reasons (that I will attempt to explain in the article) when I end with a tag question to the title: But Should They?

**KEYWORDS:** Frankly, Visceral Place, Indian Pop-Cultural-Classical Context & Democracy of Dancing

### INTRODUCTION

#### Platitude #1: Dance is Easy!

While attempting to highlight the challenges and struggles of dancing to a group of thirteen year old kids, I was hard pressed to explain to them what 'good dancing' was. Here's a conversation that took place between a student of my dance class in a school and myself:

**Me:** Dancing is not easy as it is often portrayed.

**Student:** Of course. It is the easiest thing to do.

**Me:** How is that?

**Student:** Haven't you seen the movie: Anybody Can Dance- ABCD?

**Me:** What does that prove?

**Student:** its true ma'm! Even a baby can move its arms and legs and dance to music.

As I swallowed my indignation at the suggestion that dance was merely 'moving one's arms and legs', I wondered where do I start with this group of people? How do I begin to explain to them the complexity of the whole package that is dancing? I wanted to tell them that the act of dance could be done in complete silence, without a 130 BPM soundtrack in the background and what's more without necessarily moving one's arms and legs-really, a trained dancer could simply stand on stage for a little longer than a heartbeat and express something so pure and profound that not a

million contortions of the arms and legs can accomplish. So there it is! To a large number of people out there, the act of dancing is not based on the level of challenge, say, Thai kickboxing or even a sport like hockey, because, ABCD: Anybody Can Dance unless you are dancing like a trapeze artist, who is so flexible. Every activity that has evolved and matured into something recognisable as a discrete skill has a technique embedded in it that is unique to it. There is a manner in which that particular act must be performed. Any departure from that technique makes it something else. Borrowing and exchange of ideas is part of the creative process of growth but in doing so, if one is sacrificing technique at the altar of experimentation or what is far worse, popular appeal and TRP ratings, then what you have left is a curiosity at best. A short lived effusion, if you will. A technique takes years of learning and perfection. Take the art of the Balinese dancers for instance; the intricate movement of their feet and their hands is unique to their dancing. The hyperextended fingers, the slow deliberate movement on the heels, the torso bends all of these little details, in different permutations and combinations, make up a complete image of a dance form that has had years of history, learning, tradition associated with it. Now, it would be sacrilegious, downright grotesque even, if one came along, and in the name of Balinese dancing, borrowed the clothing, added a bunch of quick pirouettes, some floor work, and then a little hastily learned, badly imitated Balinese-looking moves and got accolades for it.

People are quickly forgetting that dancing for camera and dancing on stage real time are entirely different things. Dancing for camera, especially for films, is make-believe. What you can't accomplish in say fifty takes, the editor will finally do it for you at the editing table. That is not to say that dancing for films is easy. It is not. But the challenges there are of the logistical kind. It is not about virtuosity. Very few filmmakers have really exploited the cinematic medium with apparent genius to make dance a spectacle for film. Busby Berkeley, a Hollywood filmmaker and choreographer from the 1940s, was perhaps an exception. Dancing on stage requires a skill, training and ability that are hard won. It takes constant practice, immense presence of mind, tremendous memory, and stamina to be on stage and hold the attention of an audience. And if we are talking Indian classical dance, hold the attention of an audience for well over an hour! All this, while infusing one's art with a dash of something more than just skill to make it truly memorable.

When actors are dancing on film, they couldn't be bothered with the unnecessary hassle of technique, form and craft. If something merely looks amazing and can be made to look amazing with some chintz, chiffon and cheating, then really, who cares? In the process what happens is that people who are watching are led to believe that dancing is easy!

I recall how in 2011 when the ballet-centric movie *Black Swan* was doing the rounds, a controversy erupted around how Natalie Portman, the lead star portraying the character of a ballerina, had struggled for an year and a half to learn ballet and had done most of the dancing herself in the movie when in fact, a body double called Sarah Lane, a professional dancer who had been training and dancing for 22 years, was used for most of the shots. A lot of the ballet dancing community was upset with the claims made by the lead star, because they felt that it belittled and downplayed the effort that a ballet dancer has to put in over years and years of training to be a full-fledged dancer. I cite this incident to indicate how easy it is to be misled by what one sees on screen and to assume that if it's being represented in a certain manner and if a non-dancer can make it look so easy and do it in a year, then, hey, it must be easy!

Well, it is not!

**Platitude #2: Dance is Acrobatic**

Exhibit A: The new age dance reality show. Three hideously attired celebrities whom one may have vaguely heard of and who, many a time, have nothing to do with dance sit god-like, passing judgement upon judgement on dances of all kinds. The dances are presented as a genre, say, Salsa or Jazz. The contestants appear from various parts of the country and proceed to present something that is simply neither Salsa nor Jazz. The music most certainly is neither Salsa nor Jazz. When you say Mercedes and present a Volvo, that would be objectionable would it not? You are not going to say: So what? They are both cars! This lack of respect for a genre that is claimed to be presented is a serious issue I have with contestants, organisers, judges and the entire rag tag bob-tail of the reality show. A dance form takes years to evolve and mature and very often, it is intrinsically linked to the music from which it springs and the music we all know emerges slowly and organically from cultural and historical moorings of a land. So this is serious and emotional turf. When you take the lemon away from lemonade all you are left with is, I guess, an empty glass! And that is my contention, that what we see these days is empty form a mere shell of something that appears promising but is really bereft of content.

These are, no doubt, skilled performers. I hesitate to call them dancers yet. They are performers because really, all we see them do is a series of improbable feats, a few gimmicky moves here and there, a splice of emotional drama in the form of a loose plot and lo and behold, we have a dance that everyone has standing on their feet and applauding to simply because the boy or the girl has been twisting herself or himself into jaw dropping configurations or hanging precariously by a rope. Dance is dance and sport is sport. Not even apples and oranges, but fruit and vegetable really! People seemed to have merged these two distinctly different activities into something that is barely recognisable. Gymnastics is a sport not an art form. How can a gymnast be hailed as a dancer?

There are more differences between Dance (as an art form) and Sport than similarities. In what ways are they similar? Well, for one thing, both rely on dexterous use of limbs. But the differences are many. Since the objective of this article is not to bear upon these differences, I will quickly make my point clear. The most essential difference between a sport and a dance is that the former is usually competitive and the latter is not. So what happens when you make the latter competitive? Are we turning it into a sport? And by doing that aren't we robbing it of its quintessence: Its art?

How would one define art? There could be various interpretations, but by and large, we are all agreed that it is the marriage of aesthetics with imaginative prowess. This marriage then yields a product that in turn produces a certain emotion or feeling in those who view that product. The tool that brings this marriage about is the skill buttressed by strong technique. Furthermore, while art may be either traditional or contemporary, it has to be the result of great individual effort that implies physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and spiritual churning. Only then will you have something that stands its ground. So, there you have it: Process and only then, Product. When you have choreographers and dancers who are only focused on getting into the next round, so they can be the next celebrity dancer who will then go on to win a few prizes, including cash awards, perhaps a few film offers, some ribbon-cutting opportunities, short-lived fame that may last just a little bit longer than a month, then who is really thinking about art? I may be old-fashioned, but once the primary motive of art becomes revenue generation, then it is no longer art, it becomes commerce because you have then sold yourself out to the market. Art needs money, yes, it needs patronage but on its own terms. That is why art thrived in India in the olden times when royalty sheltered, protected and generously funded art-in all forms. But therein hangs another tale, for another time.

Coming back to the question of quality, we have reality show judges speaking knowledgeably about dance forms that they clearly have no understanding of. And nothing gets my goat more than when I hear them speak loftily about Indian classical dance forms. One of these women in a recent reality show, I happened to chance upon a dull weeknight, surfing channels, applauded a young girl presenting Kathak. This young girl, while I marvel at her dexterity, revolved around the floor on her knees in rapid succession in full blown Kathak finery! The lady judge clapped enthusiastically in appreciation and remarked with great sagacity, 'yeh, kathak ka kafi ooncha level hai!' meaning, 'this is a very high level of Kathak.' So when did Kathak start importing knee-twirls into its technique? Would this learned judge have applauded the girl with same alacrity had she stuck to the traditional repertoire of Kathak, perhaps showcased a teen Taal or a thumri? No, because the reality-show judge was only capable of understanding knee-twirls.

I have no problem with knee-twirls per se. I only have a problem with knee twirls or head twirls or any kind of twirls for that matter if they appear out of context or are not in tandem with the genre of dance being presented. Let me bear out with an example. Igor Moiseyev, a celebrated Russian choreographer (1906-2007), created a whole body of work that thrived on acrobatic Russian dancing and elements of ballet. He is credited to have brought the folklore of Russia into the foreground and for making strong political statements. One look at his path breaking work like 'The Partisans' and one is left mesmerised by the sheer effort, thought and creativity that must have gone behind a product like that. Everything moves seamlessly, like a thread being unravelled from a fabric. The dazzling variety of acrobatic moves doesn't impinge on the senses, because they are built into the product without fuss. But how is one to expect that kind of finesse in something that lasts five minutes tops? Reality TV dance culture that sustains on eyeball-catching just doesn't encourage thought and process driven creativity. And why I think this is a grave problem is because this kind of mass popular culture is beginning to, nay, has set the markers for what is 'good' dancing in India. It has been monopolised by a model that is rooted and anchored in Bollywood's dubious sensibilities. Unfortunately, the rest of us in the dance world, are left trying to defend and legitimise what we do.

### **Platitude # 3: Classical Dance as Entertainment**

The impact of the reality show on the dance culture of India has been so pervasive and might I add, persuasive, that it has injected its dubious standards and enthusiasms into the hitherto rarefied world of Indian Classical Dance. Art can't stand apart in haughty silence. It is going to succumb to the age old demand and supply conundrum. The idea of entertainment cannot be applied without reservation to the institution of classical Indian dances. The origins of these dances were predominantly ritualistic in nature. Somewhere down the line, over the years, they have travelled from the precincts of the temple to the proscenium stage, shorn of their earlier purpose. However, given that in their current avatar as classical art forms, they are meant to 'entertain' the audiences, it is important to understand just what we mean by 'entertain'.

Entertainment happens at different levels. There is sensual entertainment, in the context of art, usually aural and visual in nature and then there is emotional and intellectual entertainment, the kind that is a little more elevated in that the aural and visual impulses prod the brain to do some thinking. There is spiritual entertainment, the kind that transports one to another dimension, the kind that is rare and only spotted in the truest, the sincerest and most virtuosic artists. And then, of course there is base entertainment-the one that titillates. Indian classical dance forms by the sheer dint of their original design and purpose aren't meant to titillate nor is their 'entertainment value' limited merely to their visual appeal.

However, the air surrounding the world of classical dance has gotten so murky that we have organisers, self-appointed custodians of culture and heritage, preferring group presentations over solo presentations because a group would be more 'entertaining' to watch than a lone figure on stage. I have had organisers asking me unabashedly, to present fast-paced items with 'mass appeal' so the audiences aren't bored! In yet another event, the organiser admiringly told me about a 'classical' dancer who had performed the previous evening with a hoop and how her unique display was such a hit! He proceeded to show me a picture in the local daily and I could all but shudder at the sight of this young girl in full Indian classical regalia sporting a hoop. I was so put off I didn't even belabour on the point of what she might have presented with the circular ring around her waist threatening to slip down any second! Extending the novelty factor to other appendages, there are classical dancers on skates, very soon they will be on stilts and skis and so on. I am not being facetious; I think it is a serious problem. Think of this. In the ancient times, belly dancing, known as the danse du ventre, was performed as a birthing ritual around a woman in labour in the Middle East and North Africa! Today, it is little more than an eroticised, exoticized cabaret, performed in restaurants in the Western world. My point being that the journey from ritual to titillation is not necessarily that unlikely.

This need for novelty, I think, is going to be the cause of death of beauty in dance. What is the next new thing? How can you dazzle me? I need to see something that makes my heart skip. That is the new age audience for you. One needs fancy Houdini type of tricks to catch its attention: death-defying, heart-racing, jaw-dropping spectacles. Not for them the tedium of watching an hour long recital in a language difficult to understand and actions that seems abstruse and foreign. After all, it is easier to appreciate a leap or a full split than a complicated footwork pattern set to intricate mathematical calculation, less brain work.

While all this may seem a bit extreme, hoops and skates (although I promise you, these are not isolated instances), there is another trend in classical dancing these days that is far more insidious and difficult to detect the trend of overarching physicality in everything being presented. Everything is about the body. Long drawn out, statuesque poses. If done well they look lovely, but my contention is, there is a time for everything. One can't be resorting to poses when a jatti is pounding away in the background with precise calculations designed for footwork. This obsession with the body and the physicality of a dancer is a dangerous concept, a lately Western import. I remember, when I was growing up, it didn't matter what size the dancer was, how old or young she was. People flocked to watch artists because they were really good at what they did.

Let me make myself clear, I am not saying that dancers should not take care of themselves or strive towards making themselves fitter and more agile. I am saying they should be doing all that but physical appeal cannot be their sole purpose. Nor should it be the centre of attraction in their performance. It ought to be backed up with real work. And sure as hell, there are many dancers out there who are fit, attractive and know what they are doing. I am only warning against a growing trend of replacing content and substance with visual appeal, as the emphasis is on 'entertaining'. Being sympathetic to the needs of the audience is fine, but settling for compromises that threaten one's art is something one might want to think about carefully.

As I see it, these problems in the dance world are symptomatic of a deeper malaise in the society. Let's look at some of the binaries that define our psychological framework in the modern day, mass culture set up. And let me qualify this by saying that I am fundamentally opposed to the binary model. I believe that there is always a plethora of possibilities to everything and nothing can be explained away in a simple 'black or white' archetype but for the purpose of brevity and

clarity, I will indulge myself a little.

### **# Subtlety Vs Obviousness**

Nothing sells more or catches more attention than the obvious. Everything's got to be eye-catching. And once it's caught, it nestles there, somewhere between the eyes and the brain. No one wants to tax their brains unless absolutely necessary. Whatever happened to the power of suggestion? Subtle sensibilities have become a casualty in this bid to reach the finish line with everything one has got and usually it is with shattering decibel levels of bad taste. In the context of dance, the subtle movements that require fine motor skills like most Indian classical dances do, are rarely acknowledged for the fine art they produce. Just like pun used to be considered the lowest form of literature or humour, there was a time in India, when socio-cultural life thrived around temples, performing feats, spectacles and circus acts were relegated outside of the temple precincts. Only highly trained and skilled dancers and musicians in the traditional idiom were allowed to perform within the premises. Agreed, cerebral art will always have only a few takers, but it breaks my heart when a classical artist has to literally beg people to attend shows, even though it is for free as opposed to when a film star or starlet attracts crowds by the thousands, where the price of the tickets runs to four digits.

### **# Complexity Vs Simplification**

Extending the earlier thought a little further, there is a tendency in our collective behaviour today to oversimplify everything. Once again, this goes against the grain of Indian culture and ethos. We are a culture that has historically celebrated complexity of every kind, gracefully accepting, celebrating even, the befuddling variety of everything amidst us, complementing and contradicting one another, simultaneously. Where does one see that complexity being reflected in our art? We like everything to neatly fit into existing paradigms so everything is slotted and easier to deal with. Take a look at the way the discourse on secularism is shaping up in the country; take a look at any discourse around any controversial subject and you will only find two primary views – Yes & No. It is this versus that. And somehow I think that percolates into our artistic mindset as well. It's a shame, because we didn't used to be this way!

### **# Physicality Vs Intellect**

When I was a kid, my mother would admonish me for standing in front of the mirror for too long. She said it bred vanity and conceit. Today I see parents often indulging their kids in self-love! In the Age of the Selfie craze, primary concerns are: how am I looking? How can I look better? It is not just celebrities who get to pose now on covers of magazines, but everyday folks. We pose for ourselves and for anyone who is watching or worse, stalking. We have become a nation that has become obsessed with the exterior. Sure, Intellect gets a nod now and then, but only to promote a design of narcissism. Knowledge is not sought for knowledge's sake. Art is not for Art's sake. Everything seeks to serve a purpose of self-aggrandisement. Not to be outdone, the dance world too has been subsumed by this hegemonic social media culture that is dominated by statuses, profile pictures and display pictures. You could be a dilettante performer, a novice learner, a seasoned award winning dancer, all that matters is how many 'friends' have you got on Facebook; how many likes have you received on your recent profile photo.

All is not lost. There are some exceptional artists out there who are committed to creating original, well researched, inspired work. They do put in their due diligence. But in this persistent cacophony of misguided art, it is sometimes hard to separate the Sheep from the Wolves. I mean Sheep are Sheep and Wolves are Wolves. You just have to know the difference. So to answer the tag question to the title of this article: Anybody could and can dance, but it is so

important to truly understand the what, why, how of it. Only then, I think, we would be successful in creating a culture of responsibility and respect towards one's art and consequently, another's. As a fitting conclusion, I would like to cite from Deidre Sklar's seminal paper 'Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance'. Her five premises are as follows:

- 'Movement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge'
- 'Movement knowledge is conceptual and emotional as well as kinesthetic'
- 'Movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge'
- 'One has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning'
- 'Movement is always an immediate corporeal experience'

## CONCLUSIONS

She concludes by saying, 'I am advocating an approach that considers movement performance not just as a visual spectacle but as a kinesthetic, conceptual, and emotional experience that depends upon cultural learning.'

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