

Akademi

Akademi: South Asian Dance began life as The National Academy of Indian Dance, which was established by dancer Tara Rajkumar in London in 1979. The aim of the academy was to raise awareness of and increase accessibility to Indian dance as an art form that deserved to be shared and appreciated within contemporary British culture. By the 1970s, as communities of South Asian origin had settled in Britain, Rajkumar felt that there was a need to bring Indian dance, like other South Asian art forms, out of private homes and local community halls and into the public arena. Herself an internationally renowned performer, Rajkumar is a choreographer and teacher of the 'Kathakali' and 'Mohiniattam' forms of Indian dance. In 2001, she was awarded the Australian Roll of Honour of Women as part of 'women shaping the nation' for her work in arts and culture.

The history of Akademi can be charted into two main periods: the Beginnings, between 1979-1989, which highlight the pioneering activities of the Academy of Indian Dance and the Present, from 1990 to the present day, which marks a transitional period for the organisation and brings it to its contemporary shape.

Based in London, at its outset in 1979 the Academy of Indian Dance operated from the Commonwealth Institute. It then moved to the October Gallery until the mid-eighties and in 1986 to the Contemporary Dance Trust at The Place in Euston until 1999. Since its inception, the institution has been concerned with building audiences in the UK for South Asian dance. In its early years, the academy provided evening dance classes and functioned as a touring company presenting dance-drama productions, which brought dance artistes from all over the UK to perform professionally in a touring production. The Academy of Indian Dance also pioneered the way for thematic conferences and seminars, involving dance, arts and culture professionals from the UK. The conferences created a forum in which to discuss ways to integrate more Indian dance performances into UK public spaces, encourage the growth of Indian dance amongst South Asians in the UK and advance research into Indian dance training needs.

In the early 1990s, the extensive research into training needs led to the formulation of internationally recognised syllabi for 'Bharata Natyam' and 'Khatak' dance utilised at the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, London, the world's leading dance examinations board. During this period, the Academy organised several residencies, intensives and masterclasses. These workshops were theoretical lectures combined with practical dance sessions presented by visiting South Asian dance professionals from all over the world. The demo-lectures took place at the Commonwealth Institute as well as in other locations such as the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Centre, The Place, (home to the Contemporary Dance Trust, also known as the London Contemporary Dance School) in London, community centres in Oxford, Cambridge and other centres around the UK. In addition, four major classical Indian dance-drama productions toured the UK, which included 'The Adventures of Mowgli' in 1984 and 'The Return of Spring' in 1986-87.

Also during this period the leadership of the academy underwent several changes. Directors of the organisation have included Bharati Kansara and John Chapman, who held joint directorships from 1983 to 1985. Pushkala Gopal and Naseem Khan, who was also a founding member of the academy, held the shared post from 1985 to 1987 and the present Director, Mira Kaushik, was appointed in 1988. Under Kaushik's guidance, the organisation that was to become 'Akademi' was placed on a new, contemporary footing.

As such, 1988 to the early 1990s was a period of consolidation for the academy. The organisation's staff, new personnel, external consultants and dance professionals concentrated their efforts in financially and strategically strengthening the organisation. This was executed through establishing partnerships with other arts and dance organisations to enable the academy's own programmes to make the transition from local, community level projects to a more mainstream, London-focussed and professional level. This strategic approach facilitated the organisation in placing South Asian dance on the London cultural map. The new policy proved successful and the mid-1990s witnessed the growth of the academy of Indian dance into a well-known, fully fledged dance development organisation.

The academy's new direction included moving away from regular teaching and productions featuring pure classical dance dramas to a relatively new concept of hybrid movement: uniting dance movements from all over South Asia and the western world, fused with diverse musical influences. With this new agenda, an increasing number of professional dancers joined the organisation and the academy established several departments focussing on educational and community programmes; dance training; professional productions; and information, through the development of a South Asian dance resource centre.

A new road map was established for the organisation's outreach and education programme. The academy began taking South Asian dance to people, instead of existing solely as a resource for people to come to. Through the efforts of its education officers, the organisation introduced theme-based projects linked to the English National Curriculum which dealt with contemporary issues such as racism, bullying, sexual health and drugs awareness in secondary schools. Workshops were also designed for the primary school circuit, community centres, local boroughs, prisons and senior citizens homes.

Following a self-evaluation carried out by the organisation in 1997-98, The Academy of Indian Dance changed its name to 'Akademi: South Asian Dance'. It was perceived that the old name created a deception of grandeur, untrue to the realities of a small struggling charity. In addition, in the mid-1990s, Akademi was working with a large number of educational establishments and local boroughs in areas of London that were ethnically diverse. The organisation decided that the word 'Indian' was too limiting a term to encompass the various communities they were working with. Also, in taking dance to the people, Akademi were creating a freer dance language by including bhangra, western contemporary dance styles and Bollywood style dancing in their repertoire. In aspiring to reflect the diverse artistic styles of British Asians living in London, the organisation changed their use of the term 'Indian Dance' to 'South Asian Dance'.

The name change also paved the way to a new era in the organisation's work. Currently, Akademi is committed to creating a UK-based and trained South Asian dance profession. IT supports dance artists, teachers and a number of training initiatives and runs regular intensive courses, seminars, master classes, conferences and consultations on classical and contemporary artistic issues. It has expanded its education dance workshops to adults and children in hospitals and senior citizen groups. Akademi also acts as a centre for dance career advice for dancers who wish to pursue South Asian dance at a professional level.

More recently, several symposiums, workshops and large scale productions have taken place to ensure South Asian dance in Britain continuously evolves and that it is cultivated and promoted within British culture.

In 1999, Akademi staged 'Improv-Asians '99' at the South Bank Centre, London, where world-renowned choreographers held dance workshops for South Asian artists. Then in

August 2000, in celebration of Akademi's 21st birthday, 'Coming of Age' was produced. This outdoor production featured over seventy Indian dancers and was symbolic of the years Akademi had invested in raising awareness of South Asian dance and working for its increased accessibility in British culture. In March 2002, Akademi presented a symposium entitled 'South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped' which brought together a wide range of arts professionals to explore concepts of nationality and culture and question what constitutes South Asian aesthetics.

In August 2003, Akademi staged its second large-scale outdoor dance production entitled 'Escapade', where London is seen through South Asian eyes. The event comprised film, music, bhangra, hip-hop, Bollywood rhythms, western and classical dance styles and visual effects.

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