

Ram Gopal

Dancer Ram Gopal first came to the UK to perform in 1939 as a young man. He and his company played to packed houses at the Aldwych and Vaudeville Theatres in London in July and November of that year, having appeared already in Warsaw, Paris and the USA. His performances gained glowing reviews in 'The Sunday Times', 'The Daily Telegraph', 'Cavalcade' and 'Ballet'. The audiences included the leading ballet dancers of the day, Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, as well as artists Kay Ambrose and Feliks Topolski, who sketched in the wings as Gopal danced.

Pandit Ram Gopal was born in Bangalore, India on 20 November 1912. The son of a Rajput lawyer father and a Burmese mother, Gopal was a natural dancer from an early age. As a young boy, he was mesmerised by the music at a Kathak performance in the local town hall where a troupe was performing. Although his father disapproved, the young Ram Gopal travelled to Kerala to undertake classical training in 'kathakali' at the Kerala Kalamandalam School under dance maestro, Guru Vallathol. Gopal's first public performance was at a party held by the Yuvaraja of Mysore at the Lalita Mahal, or palace, in front of a thousand guests including the British Viceroy. It was the Yuvaraja who later asked Gopal to join a troupe of classical dancers from Mysore State to tour Europe for the first time.

The performance at the palace marked the beginning of a life dedicated to dance. Gopal made an enviable reputation for himself through his god-like appearance and litheness. He replicated the dances of the Hindu gods and performed in local temples, street performances and participated in folk dancing in villages across the state. He had his costumes designed and tailored them in a similar style to those worn by the gods Shiva, Krishna and Vishnu.

Ram Gopal's pre-war tours in the UK demonstrated his immense prowess as a dancer in this classical style, and in addition, he brought with him dancers trained in both Kathakali and Kathak, as well as in Javanese and Balinese dance forms. His programmes of that time consisted of a variety of short items especially designed for Western audiences, with classical dance pieces, folk dances, creative dance choreography by Gopal and musical interludes. The musicians too were classically trained in India. By all accounts, the audiences were stunned with the beauty, grandeur, detail, costuming and dance technique which they saw. In 1956, dance historian and author Cyril Beaumont, wrote of these performances, "... *his initial London recitals in 1939 first opened our eyes to the varied styles and rich vocabulary of Indian dance...*".

After spending the war years in India, Ram Gopal returned to the UK in 1951 with a new company and further training in Kathak and the classical style of Ram Gopal Bharata Natyam. His performances were as popular with the audiences as before the war, and the company toured various venues in the UK in the early 1950s, and later performed in Wales and Ireland. Over the next fifteen years, Gopal and his company were in much demand throughout the world, and toured in Europe, the USA, and India.

Gopal had cherished a vision of East-West collaboration in dance since his first successful London performances in 1939, and spoke frequently of the ways he believed ballet and Indian dance could work together. Gopal's diverse cultural experiences enabled him to feel

content at being 'westernised'. He believed by having insight into both worlds, he bridged the gap between eastern and western knowledge and experiences. This gave him a sense of harmony of being a complete human being.

For many years, Gopal had hoped to establish a permanent centre for Indian dance and culture in London, and did work closely in the 1960s with the Harlequin Ballet Dance Company in London, teaching folk dances and training particular dancers. Gopal continued in his efforts to found a 'School of Classical Indian Dancing' in London, placing a full-page advertisement in 'The Dancing Times' each month between October 1962 and September 1963. However, nothing really came of it, as Gopal had no organisation or administrative base to back his efforts. However in 1960, Gopal was finally able to work with ballerina Alicia Markova, something they had both wanted to do since the early 1950s. Gopal choreographed a duet titled Radha-Krishna, and gave Markova lessons in Indian dance technique. They performed the duet as part of a longer Indian dance programme at the Prince's Theatre, London in March 1960, and then at Edinburgh Festival in the summer of that year. Gopal had made a decision in the early 1950s to settle in the UK and apart from tours and regular return visits to India; he remained here for the rest of his life.

There is no doubt that the explosion of both classical and contemporary Indian dance performance from the 1970s onward in the UK, and the availability of education in Indian dance that was beginning to grow owes a great debt to the paradigm that Gopal had established. Residual orientalism was disappearing and being replaced with a genuine interest in world culture. Due to his work and the fascination with this art form that he had created, the parameters of Indian cultural and artists expression were extended, and the UK welcomed artistes such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan in the musical world, and classical dancers Shanta Rao, US Krishna Rao and Chandrabhaga Devi, and Tara Rajkumar to name but a few. The expulsion of thousands of professional Indian peoples from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania in the later 1960s and early 1970s and their settlement in the UK brought a new and supportive audience for Indian arts, and created a community desirous of establishing their own culture.

The present climate of South Asian dance with its conflation of both old and new, has its roots in the dedicated work of Ram Gopal at the beginning and middle of the last century. More than sixty years on, his role within the Indian classical dance milieu has proved to be an innovative and influential one in challenging the tenants of colonialism and orientalism as they appeared in dance performance. Gopal played as key a figure on the world stage of dance during a period of enormous international and social change, and there is no doubt that the evidence of his influence can still be seen today.

Ram Gopal died in London, England on 12 October 2003, aged 90 years old.