

Shobana Jeyasingh

Shobana Jeyasingh was born in Madras, India in 1957. After completing her formal education in Sri Lanka and East Malaysia, she came to England in 1981 and studied for an MA in Shakespeare Studies at the University of Sussex. As a child, the Jeyasingh family relocated frequently so recreating her sense of identity, belonging and home in a new country came naturally to Shobana Jeyasingh. In an interview with Anne Sacks in 'The Independent on Sunday' in 1993, Jeyasingh dismissed the idea of roots and of finding one place of belonging, deeming it old-fashioned. She said, "...one has to redefine this whole process, one can be multi rooted without feeling any conflict about it." This cultural hybridity would later become a prominent theme throughout Jeyasingh's choreographic practice.

Like most young girls from Tamil Nadu, Jeyasingh had begun taking Bharata Natyam classes as a young child. In London she began to perform as a solo classical dancer. However, Jeyasingh soon grew restless and dissatisfied with dancing to worn out cassettes of Indian classical music in small community centres. She reflected on the social implications of what she began to feel was as predictable performance style for the British audience: the presentation of a classical Indian dance, in bright traditional costumes with heavy make-up and jewellery.

Jeyasingh felt that a revolution in the presentation of South Asian dance in Britain was necessary. She began re-interpreting her classical training of Bharata Natyam through more contemporary dance methods. In 1988, Jeyasingh also began working with the principles and discipline of Bharata Natyam as a creator (choreographer), rather than an interpreter (dancer) and produced work about herself. In an interview with Anne Sacks in 'The Independent on Sunday' in 1993, Jeyasingh said of this transition, "*The work I wanted to do could not be done with one body and could not be done with me in it*". Jeyasingh felt it was imperative to redirect the presence and perceptions of classical Indian dance in Britain and to increase appreciation and audience enjoyment through the modern re-interpretation of a dance form steeped in tradition.

As part of the reinterpretation exercise, Jeyasingh believed specialist musicians and classically trained dancers from India were integral to translate the newly created dance vocabulary based on Bharata Natyam on stage. After an intense period of fundraising, later that year, Jeyasingh founded the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company.

Jeyasingh's choreography explored the use of innovative movements drawing on Bharata Natyam styles, to express change and continuity and resulted in a more fluid movement. Jeyasingh stripped away the characteristics of classical Bharata Natyam which included the hand gestures 'mudras', the facial expressions, 'mukha abhinaya' and the lyrics, 'sahitya', of the Bharata Natyam tradition. The remaining movements left simply the movement of the body, which for Jeyasingh, was pure dance.

Although her work was still rooted in the principles and techniques of Bharata Natyam, Jeyasingh's dance choreography was evolving. "*With classical vocabularies, their structure and sculptural qualities are more obvious; in contemporary dance it often isn't the shape that's important, but the energy. There is fluidity rather than geometry in the dance.*" (From an interview with Christopher Bowen, 'The Times', February 13 1998).

A unique element in Jeyasingh's modern Indian dance performance is her collaboration with contemporary choreographers and composers. Since her 1992 choreographic collaboration with Richard Alston, former head of 'Rambert', (a leading contemporary dance company) for

'Delicious Arbour', Jeyasingh has also collaborated with Laurie Booth and Wayne McGregor. The Company's first musical commission was to composer Michael Nyman. They have since worked with scores composed by Jocelyn Pook for 'Phantasmaton', Donnacha Dennehy for 'Hinterland', Kevin Volans for 'Correspondences' and 'Surface Tension', the late Orlando Gough, Christos Hatzis for 'Byzantium', Glyn Perrin for 'Romance...with Footnotes', and 'Raid', Graham Fitkin for 'Palimpsest', Michael Gordon for 'Intimacies of a Third Order' and Django Bates for 'Fine Frenzy'.

Jeyasingh's work is critically acclaimed; she and her company are the recipients of numerous awards including the London Dance and Performance award in 1998 and three Digital Dance Awards. In 1993, Jeyasingh received an Arts Council Women in the Arts Project Award in acknowledgement of her valuable contribution to the arts over the past decade. She has also been awarded two Time Out Dance Awards and in 1993, the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company was the overall winner of the Prudential Award for the Arts, one of the UK's most prestigious awards.

Shobana Jeyasingh has choreographed work in Canada and across Europe. In London, she has contributed to the Women's Playhouse Trust, by creating a dance piece for students from an East London school as part of the Trust's 'Life in the City' series. The company has produced work for television, including a BBC2 documentary about the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company, a 'Network East Dance Special' also for the BBC, 'Duets with Automobiles' for the BBC - Arts Council series, 'Map of Dreams' and 'Dancing by Numbers' for Channel 4. Shobana Jeyasingh has also produced dance pieces for theatre: 'Cyrano' ('Tara Arts' at the National Theatre), 'Twelfth Night' (Theatre Royal, Stratford East) and 'The Little Clay Cart' (the National Theatre).

The Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company also has an active education arm. The company offers workshops for schools, colleges and other educational institutions with a specially-designed resource pack focusing on the current touring production. The range of activities feature talks, lecture demonstrations and teachers' sessions which illuminate the themes and ideas that inspire the dance company's work. Long term dance residencies at art centres and educational institutions involve cross art form exploration which reflects the company's history of cross cultural collaborations with designers and composers.

The company tours extensively throughout Britain and has visited major European and North American festivals such as Springdance in Holland, Nova Danca Britanica in Lisbon, Jacob's Pillow Festival, Massachusetts, the Vienna Music Festival and the Jomba Festival, Durban, South Africa.

However some critics and audiences object to Jeyasingh's trademark reinterpretation of traditional Indian dance ideas reading it as a betrayal of Eastern culture. Jeyasingh believes passionately in redefining formal movements, layering traditions of old within the new and constantly re-contextualising the contemporary Indian dance for its environment. For Jeyasingh artistic languages of all cultures are available to those who want to use and reinterpret them. As Judith Mackrell says in her article for 'The Guardian' in 1995, "*...taking apart the language of Bharata Natyam, Jeyasingh has created beautiful, fascinating dances...and in doing this, she is like any important and interesting choreographer - simply enriching the common language of dance...*"

In January 1995, Shobana Jeyasingh was awarded an MBE for services to the arts. She holds an honorary MA from Surrey University and an honorary doctorate from De Montfort University, Leicester. She is currently a Research Associate at Middlesex University.

The Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company is on a UK-wide tour of 'Transtep', an exploration of the themes of distance and proximity. The production is a collaboration between Shobana Jeyasingh and guest choreographers, Filip Van Huffel from Belgium, Lisa Torun from Sweden and British born Indian, Rashpal Singh Bansal. The spring tour ended in March 2004 with a four-night performance at London's The Place Theatre.