

CHAPTER NINE

London

I ARRIVED in London for the first time one wet, cold, foggy spring day in 1939. How sad and desolate everything looked; so different from Paris, I thought. I felt uneasy and unhappy. I had arrived to make my *début* at the Aldwych Theatre in the Strand, and had carelessly forgotten to pack my little lucky charm, my 'remover of obstacles'—Ganesa, the little Elephant God I had always carried with me.

"Either you get my Elephant by plane, or I leave immediately for Paris. I couldn't dance in this great strange city without him. I would never be a success. Besides I don't see how you can be so optimistic; why should they like Indian dancing?" I said to John Gadsby. I was depressed and I sounded that way.

"Well, Ram, I'll certainly telephone your hotel in Paris and you'll get your Elephant by all means. But come on, snap out of it. The London public are sure to like you. What makes you sound so gloomy?" asked my manager.

"Oh, I don't know. I am not so certain . . . somehow. . . . Oh, well never mind. Do you think the weather is going to be like this all the time?"

Sensing that that was what depressed me, Gadsby replied:

"Well, the weather here is pretty awful. Very unpredictable . . . but don't worry, I am sure it will change tomorrow. However, take some rest to soothe your nerves. A good night's rest, and tomorrow the sun will shine for you, I promise," he said smiling.

Oddly enough, the next morning the sun did shine. It was as bright as Paris. Instead of arriving at the theatre at nine that morning, I decided to leave my hotel and drive around the parks, and look at the Palace and take my first glimpse of London. What an experience that was! It did not captivate me immediately like Paris. Instead, I was impressed with the solidness of everything. Hyde Park looked like a Turner landscape, with the willows 'weeping over the Serpentine,' and when the taxi drove along the Embankment, I realised how important it was for all great cities to have water running through them. It purified everything, cleansed everything. London was impregnated by the spirit of Man; Paris, that of Woman. After getting my first glimpse of the Palace and Marlborough House, the car sped along towards Trafalgar Square and up the Strand, past India House, to the Aldwych stage door.

It was a strenuous day, with the reporters, press, rehearsals of lights and costumes, but when I sat down to dinner that night in a quiet flat in Pall Mall, which a friend had rented for me, I felt less depressed than the day before. I realised that London did not 'embrace' one with its atmosphere and spirit the way Paris did.

As the evening approached, I felt terribly nervous. What would the people say, and how would the critics like my dancing? Surely this thought must be the most recurrent one to occupy the dancer! Since, I have been told of two very famous ballerinas, one English, the other Continental, who sit back and devour every word the critics say about them from their bedside scrapbooks. Vain? I do not think so. It

serves as a stimulant to try and do better next time. Do not authors, however famous, do the same when their book reviews come out? And painters? I felt that even Shakespeare must have often read and enjoyed and been amused by what a lot of people said about his works. And I thought again. Would the press and public alike understand this remote art of Indian dancing?

The curtain went up and I danced. There was a 'House Full' sign outside the theatre. By the time my turn came to perform, which was about a quarter of an hour after the curtain had gone up, I was filled with terror. I could not possibly dance. I would forget everything. But I danced!

I remember nothing more from that moment. Certainly the applause was great, and hundreds flocked backstage.

Lord Lloyd, who was Governor in some part of India—Bengal I think—sent for me shortly after my first appearance. I arrived one afternoon at his office. "My wife and I were in India for several years. But I have never seen anything like your interpretation of Hindu dancing. . . . I must say we intend coming often during your season here. I really wanted to see you because Her Majesty, Queen Mary, who is very interested in things Indian, would like me to take you along to Marlborough House for tea. Wednesday afternoon? Would that be all right?"

"Of course, I am honoured. Yes, Wednesday afternoon."

And then I met Queen Mary. Lord Lloyd walked a little ahead of me, leading the way. "This way, sir, please," said a gracious lady-in-waiting.

We were led into a warm, carpeted room, and through the windows I could see a beautifully kept garden. The whole atmosphere of the place had a magic about it that was hard to describe. Everything carried an air of individual elegance. But what impressed me most was the great taste and individual arrangement of every single item of furniture

and the antique cases that filled this ancient house. Of course only a Queen could live in so perfect a place. But to me Queen Mary was more than just that. Her spirit went far beyond the confines of being a Queen; it reached out and touched beauty in everything that was created and fashioned by the world's greatest craftsmen and artists. And the atmosphere? One could feel her presence everywhere. I had the feeling that it was similar to something I felt on a summer's day in Kashmir, many summers ago, when I first caught a glimpse of the Himalayas. It was grandeur. And all these feelings came upon my young mind before being ushered into the actual presence of Her Majesty.

"She is human and warm and kindly . . ." Lord Lloyd said to me. But even though he said it, I thought he looked a little flushed in the face and certainly was exerting all of his English control and detachment to look calm and quiet. The air was charged with an electric expectancy.

Another gracious lady-in-waiting, this time a silver-haired person, nodded to us. We followed. And there, standing by a table in her reception-room was Queen Mary, her hand extended in greeting. Lord Lloyd greeted her very shakily, followed by me. For a moment I forgot whether to do as he had instructed me or to curtsy like a *débutante*! I was nervous and pale with awe. After she had taken her seat, we both sat down and tea was served. There was, in spite of everything, an air of simplicity about her, and perhaps it was that that made one feel so awed by her very presence.

"It was the most colourful Durbar I have ever been through," she said, referring to her coronation in Delhi. "We were very generously entertained by the Maharajas there. The picture I had of Northern India is something that I carry in my memory as the most beautiful and touching that I have ever known. We saw many pageants, but I don't think I remember having seen any dancing, certainly not the

sort my friend here tells me you are going to show us."

The hovering ladies-in-waiting emerged like white moths from the background and we were given more tea and offered more delicacies. There is a lot in the old belief that good things taste better when eaten off the finest made porcelain. But tasty as were those cakes, it was that great spirit that sat before me, embodied as one of the great Queens of history, that drew my attention.

"I may come and see you at the Aldwych. Do you like ballet, Russian ballet, I mean? De Basil's ballet is appearing here. I have not yet seen it."

She beckoned to one of the white shadows that always hovered around, who noiselessly, lovingly came forward at her bidding. Queen Mary turned her head in profile and spoke to the lady-in-waiting. I did not hear what she said. I looked instead at her profile. It was not Grecian, or even Roman, but there was a certain line and curve of beauty in it that had the strength of Rodin's 'The Kiss'. The female figure's head is turned upwards. And there was that wonderful cluster of pearls that clung closely to her neck. Aphrodite! that is who she reminded me of, the Mother of Aphrodite! And that immaculately groomed silver hair which shone like platinum, with a slight blue tint in it. Her eyes were a penetrating grey-green.

Presently, the hovering spirit returned, holding in its hands a silver satin programme.

"This is a souvenir programme of the Gala given to us on the Coronation of my husband, the late King George V. Look at the pictures," she went on. "We are not likely ever again to see anything approaching that Gala."

Slowly turning these pages, Lord Lloyd and I glimpsed into another day and age, an age of elegance, in manners, dress and taste. The programme notes contained the title of one of the ballets *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, I remember the names of

some opera singers who were at the top of their glory at the time. But it was that fading gold lettering of the name of Nijinsky that caught my eye. There were, I remember, Karavina and Cecchetti too.

"I said to King George, as we entered the Royal Box that the whole of Covent Garden looked more like something in India. All your Maharajas were there, blazing with jewels and gold and their maharanis in *saris*. My husband remarked to me that the artists who were to perform that night would certainly have a great feat to perform in equalling the splendour that scintillated below and around us. Nothing has equalled that Gala since. . . ."

She gazed out of the window at the garden. Her expression convinced me that she was recollecting across that span, how times had since changed. All that disappearing aristocracy; perhaps there would never be such a collection of titled people from the East and the West as was gathered together that night for the Gala Coronation.

"Ballet is a very arduous profession. But my friend here tells me that your dancing exceeds the training required for the ballet. It takes seven or eight years to be proficient in your style? Has it anything to do with *Yoga*?"

"Yes, Your Majesty . . ." and briefly, I outlined what the authentic Hindu dancer attempted to convey.

"I have a collection of some antiques that may interest you. A few pieces of jade and jewellery. . . ." She was sitting like Isis, the Egyptian Goddess, absolutely erect. Never once did she slump or lose that poise or balance. And the grace of her gloved hands, the manner in which that neck held the head, with the expression of stern kindness and sparkle in her incredibly beautiful, glowing eyes, were something that I could not help noticing as a dancer. When she rose from her seat, there was no hurried motion, no moment of awkwardness; she rose as gracefully as she had been sitting. She rose

like a cloud going up to a peak. It was breath-taking. I remember, too, the subtle perfume that clung around her. It was something of an English wood, filled with lilies of the valley, lavender and rose . . . and yet it was her aura that impregnated and charged the whole atmosphere around her with that of a queen. When she walked, with us following, I noticed that her heels were not very high. A Swan Queen, I thought.

The antiques turned out to be a priceless collection, gathered over a period, that only one who had known the best could afford. I could not attempt to describe them. Shortly after our privileged view of one of the world's greatest collections by one of the world's greatest women of the twentieth century, or any other century, we departed.

That afternoon, when I danced, I was suffused with the emanation of this wonderful Queen whose dignity, with its kindness and royalty blended into my dance. I have never seen her like, anywhere in this world. But since then, as a great admirer of this great lady, I have never failed to go often, both before and after the war, to the museum in Kensington, at the far end of Hyde Park, and gaze into the glass cases, and see all the beautiful creations specially made for her. Her dress, her bags, her shoes and even the fans she used. How great a tribute it was for that other great Queen, Pavlova, Queen of the Dance, to have a small glass case allotted to her with her White Swan costume there for all to see. Of the many ballet dancers I have met, I find that few, if any, had even heard of this dedication to Pavlova, and of those who have, even fewer have cared to pay a visit to see it!

I met many interesting people in London, but after the Queen most of the other English personalities I met seemed an anti-climax. It was after meeting her that I realised what duty meant and service and suffering. The words 'dedication' and 'royalty' became synonymous to me. My art took on a

greater sense of dedication than I had ever felt before ; since then I have, from a distance, admired and loved the great service and love that the British Royal Family give to their Empire. However hard a ballet dancer of Eastern or Western style may work, or for that matter, a Welsh coal miner, it must still take nerves of steel to combat the varying and complicated system of service demanded of royalty. That this great institution has survived only goes to prove how well disciplined, selfless and utterly devoted they are to the ideals to which the British Nation so ardently clings. I feel from that lesson alone, the whole world and every individual watching royalty, both on the newsreels and perhaps in person, can learn to smile and serve ; for however dark the times or however bright, that service and those smiles, like the smile and selfless service of the present Queen Mother, must inevitably turn the darkest moments into glory and success. Queen Mary and the Royal Family ever remain to me the symbols of everything that is elevating, dedicated and selfless. They are what the great wise masters and sages of India would call 'Enlightened Karma Yogins' which means 'Enlightened Spirits of Destiny'.

During my performances at this time every evening two artists sat like ghosts in the wings, one on the right side of the stage, the other on the left. The one on the right was a young English artist, Kay Ambrose, who did some amazing sketches of ballet dancers in action and had illustrated the books of Arnold Haskell. She was an artist in pen and ink, of the ballet and its life. The other? Alexander Janta had taken me to have lunch with a countryman of his, a Pole, who was introduced to me as Felix Topolski. This great artist was uncanny in capturing the very spirit of the times, situations and people, whether from the streets or among the Members of Parliament. Felix did some sketches of me which are unique. We have become very good friends since, and I am

one of his greatest admirers. A *News Chronicle* supplement carried an interesting sketch made by Topoloski. The article is amusing; it read:

East is East

"And West is West, and never the Twain shall meet," sang Slogger Kipling, who evidently knew little of the London tailoring trade, to begin with. But his axiom would seem to fit the situation Topolski has depicted snugly enough.

"Lithe, brown, graceful, weaving delicate arabesques or assuming hieratic poses pregnant with hidden symbolism, the dancer Ram Gopal brings to the London stage the enigmatic and disturbing East. Under his feet the lotus springs from the dusty boards. Behind him the painted canvas and batons dissolve and vanish into the dusky blue magic of the night, in which strange Gods walk and brood, many-armed and Elephant-headed, to the throb of strings and drums and soft pipes discoursing elusive music, clear and cool and translucent as water dropping from a jungle spring. . . ."

"Ram, read this and this and this," my excited manager had told me. "And you remember you liked the books of Haskell, Arnold Haskell, the English critic?" He was more excited than I was.

"Oh yes, I remember. I like the way he writes about these great artists of the ballet. Why? What has he said?" I enquired.

"Don't be silly, he has not said anything. He has written you a letter, read it."

It was a very enthusiastic letter and enclosed within it was the following notice he was posting to some ballet magazine:

"I pretend to no knowledge of Eastern dancing. In this case it is not necessary. Whatever the tradition, it is obvious that Ram Gopal is a great artist and as such his appeal is universal. He has technique, beauty, subtlety and with it all an extreme simplicity in his relations with his audience. Rarest gift of all, when alone on the stage, he is able to make us visualise a whole frieze, a Living Ajanta.

"I repeat, I do not understand Eastern dancing: Ram Gopal gave me exquisite pleasure as he must to all who love the dance of whatever tradition. . . ."—Arnold Haskell.

"You see, Ram, that is very high praise from so distinguished a critic. Aren't you happy?" His face searched my eyes for an expression.

"Don't get so excited. I am not happy. I am grateful, deeply grateful, for this praise," I added.

"Mr. Gopal, with his unearthly physical control, his lithe remote, yet ominous grace, held the audience transfixed. . . . Mr. Uday Shankar introduced us to Indian dancing, but it must be admitted that, ungrateful though it may seem, he has been surpassed. Mr. Gopal's art is so inspired and so finished that it is as if one were observing the dances of Siva and Krishna themselves. . . ."

This was in the *New Statesman*. The notice was handed to me by Janta. "It's the most important literary paper and to get that . . ." he exclaimed. "Well, God knows, you've worked for it. Perhaps you deserve it. If only the public knew what you have suffered and been through in your Far East travels and the way you were left penniless in Tokyo. Yet they rave about your dancing. How much of an artist's sufferings does any public ever see or remotely guess, I wonder? When Pavlova danced in Tokyo, I remember,

how often she would break down crying . . . the tensions, the strain of dancing and the heavy demands made upon her. And here you are, young and with your life ahead of you. . . . I wonder if I would say that you were lucky?" He looked grave.

"You sound as if war were declared and you were pronouncing some terrible prediction," I said. "Personally, I am grateful for all this. But I know exactly what I am putting in and what I have been through. Whatever happens, at least I can say that I have been lucky to get all the experience that God has given me in exchange for whatever I have suffered," I quickly replied.

An artist needs a great deal of encouragement and constructive criticism, and being the giver, has to know how the public reacts. Dynely Hussey added to my pleasure when I read another distinguished paper which is read by most of the literary and scholarly of the vast public in London. . . .

"Ram Gopal's wonderful supple body, his sensuous arms and athletic grace all combine to make his dances as Siva, fierce creator and destroyer, Indra fingering his flute and Garuda the great Golden Eagle, unforgettable experiences. The Eagle dance, with its realisation in human movements of the flight of a bird, made Mlle. Riabouchinska's 'Golden Cockerel' seem for all its brilliant execution a mere child's imitation. Yet in none of these things—the flute playing, the love making or the bird movements—is there anything approaching realism. The real has been translated into the terms of a highly conventional, sophisticated and stylised language of movement."

I met Markova backstage during this season. She was in black and reminded me of Pavlova. "Do you try hard to look like her?" I asked.

"I don't try. I do look like Pavlova. That's the way I always looked. You see, I was the youngest English girl in Diaghilev's ballet. And I have worked so hard always. Always will. But after Pavlova's death I made a promise to myself to try and dance like her, be like her, and devote all of myself to the ballet. And you, Ram Gopal? Are you pleased with your success here? What rave notices! You should be pleased. I love reading my notices. Over and over again. If they admitted it, all dancers, all artists and I am sure politicians also, love reading what they, the public, or the papers say, think and write about them. You are pleased?" Alicia smiled.

"Now come on, Alicia," said Anton Dolin, "Ram must be tired after these two performances today. Some day you must come out to Beatrice Lillie's place, Ram. We'll drive over and play tennis. Do you play?" "A little," I replied. "I won a few cups, all junior trophies, of course. It is good relaxation and gets one's thoughts away from the Dance. One needs to get perspective. When can we play?" I asked.

"Tomorrow noon? Will that do? All right, I'll pick you up at your flat in Pall Mall."

The next day Anton Dolin and I played tennis. I remember he played the best he could. He was obviously out of practice. But so was I. "I am going to win this set six-love, Anton. And the next, and the next . . . all six-love . . . and then watch you tease me that you're a champion. And I'll tell everybody I thrashed you," I laughed.

"Don't you dare tell anybody . . . I'll strangle you, Ram. You little devil, you must have been playing tennis as long as you have been dancing!"

That night, Alicia and Pat came again backstage. "We had to come, we love your dancing, admire it so much."

"Alicia, do you wear jewellery?" I asked. "Yes? Well, please take this little souvenir." I took one of those Mysore

gold-washed, silver necklaces and put it around her neck. How girlish and shy and utterly happy she looked. She kissed me.

During this tour, there was a dark-skinned girl appearing with us from Old Delhi, called Maya Rani. She was jealous of Retna's success. She said to me, eyes glinting with anger: "Retna has swollen eyes like those of a goldfish. Why don't you tell her to make-up properly?"

"You go tell her yourself," I replied; "besides she looks wonderful from the front of the house. Haven't you read what the press think about her? She is Javanese and she cannot have the eyes or looks of a Hindu."

Like some Javanese Peri emerging from the dark depths backstage, Retna Mohini had heard everything. Calmly and quietly she came forward. I thought we were now to have a scene. I should have known better.

"Maya, I like soooo much your Peacock Dance, such a lovely bird. So vain and colourful. Maya, is it your birthday today? I have a little present for you. I think you like it. You watch me from the wings when I dance, I do the same when you dance. We both see things, we both perhaps have opinions, yes? Here take this," Retna added, and quick as a Javanese clown, she vanished into the blackness of the stage afterwards.

Maya was in tears. Her dark, over-powdered mother consoled her and said: "Retna made a mistake. How could she have given you that Gillette set? It's for a man to shave his moustache and beard. Of course she made a mistake. Don't be silly, come on now, get out of that crying and temperament. . . ."

That night Retna and I laughed as we have seldom laughed before or since. I understood her sly 'passive' humour and always loved her the more for it.

And that briefly summed up the thrill of dancing in

wonderful London town. The privilege of meeting one of the greatest Queens, the joy of reading those critics, and the drama of backstage. Then we left for Paris . . . and more engagements.



(photo : Angus McBane)

In traditional Kathakali costume and make-up

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Return to America

AFTER my first impact with the Swedish public, and a public which saw me in 1948, not only in Stockholm but all the major cities of Sweden, I toured Oslo and the rugged beauty of the countryside towns in Norway, followed by Finland, which still had an air of romantic Czarist Russia clinging about it, especially Helsinki. Here was one of the most colourful, remote and picturesque towns I had ever seen. Those cold sapphire blue Northern Lights, the churches and houses, the cobbled streets, and the Svensk Teatern where we danced, with the unbelievable enthusiasm of the public there for the remote dances of India, all these were an unforgettable experience.

Since that first tour in those northern countries, I have danced there many times, each occasion confirming the first impression made on me of great friendliness and hospitality and genuine interest to know something of mysterious India and her peoples and arts through our Indian dances.

In Copenhagen, too, I had wandered all over the city. In the museum attached to the great Opera Dance Theatre I found memories of Lucille Grahn and Taglioni. In the theatre,

more alive than ever today is the very spirit of the Romantic Ballet in its purest tradition. I saw *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, and *La Sylphide*.

After a tour of Scandinavia and Switzerland, we were invited to represent our own country at the request of Nehru the Prime Minister of India, at an international festival in America. We opened at the New York City Centre in October, and gave a series of performances which were presented by the great Sol Hurok, whose name was often more exciting to the public than the performances, in that Hurok, having presented Pavlova, Duncan, Chaliapine and other great artists down to Shankar before and after the war, was the undisputed king of ballet impresarios, both from the West and East. Memorable from that 1948 visit to America is the review of Cecil Smith of the *Daily Express*. He wrote at that time for *Musical America* and later came over to London where he wrote some of the most constructively critical reviews I have ever read.

"Ram Gopal's appearances were arranged under the auspices of the Government of India. . . . Our only other distinguished visitor from India has been Uday Shankar, whose dances, however beautiful they may have been, were scarcely more representative of traditional Indian art than, say, Gustav Holst's choral settings of texts from the *Rig Veda*. Because Shankar developed a style which was artificially restrained, small in scope and limited in vocabulary, the assumption has been widespread in the United States that Indian dancing is a careful, almost a precious, form of art with little theatrical flair, and virtually no element of exhibition. The falsity of this assumption was demonstrated from the start by the vigour and dramatic impact of Ram Gopal and his dancers, their magnificent, wide use of space, and their unhesitating use of devices to startle the

observer, to move his emotions, and to keep his attention fresh. . . . With no adequate standard of comparison, it might seem difficult at first glance to assess the quality of Ram Gopal's dancing and that of his company. But great dancing is unmistakable whatever its idiom. There is nothing esoteric or withdrawn about Ram Gopal; he is not afraid to establish a rapport with his audience, or to let them see the technical difficulty as well as beauty of his art and nobody left the City Centre without realising that he had seen a practitioner supreme in his field. Ram Gopal has opened a tremendous new world of dance and music to us and he is sure to develop a large and permanent following in this country."

So tempered and seasoned a review coming from *Musical America*, written by a connoisseur of music and dance, both in London and New York, only gave me one further ambition, and that was to carry the art from the fields of Europe to the vast continent of America and spread a further love and understanding of my country. I visited America later in 1954, to attend the summer session of Jacob's Pillow, invited by the great pioneer of American dance, Ted Shawn, who with Ruth St. Denis, had done so much to further the cause of concert dancing in the States. Jacob's Pillow was a revelation of concentrated work, in an ideal woodland setting, with the white spirit of Shawn. Here dancers of all the known and created styles taught, learned, danced and lectured, side by side. The green lawns were filled with Russian, Spanish, Hindu, Modern American and Mexican dance groups and artists. The air of informality, the cabin huts of the students, and the whole atmosphere in 1954 were pervaded for me with an atmosphere of devotion. Ted Shawn always spoke to the vast audiences who filled the theatre that year, and alongside my appearances there, the Celtic Ballet Group from

Scotland scored a sensational success. Shawn in his talk before the curtain rose, when he spoke all dressed in white, became a mixture of Peter Pan, Nijinsky and the youthful spirit of America. What an invaluable contribution this great pioneer and artist is making to the dance-loving public of the world. All nationalities mingle, all arts are seen, discussed and dissected, and all in the friendly, natural setting of the unforgettable Jacob's Pillow.

The only places, after America, to move me with their age-old traditions and beauty were Istanbul and Ankara. In 1949 Turkey was as beautiful as a fairy-tale city and our ballet made there a deeper impression than in any other country in the Middle East. Unfortunately, after Turkey I returned to India, and instead of concentrating on renovating costumes, dances and technique, I was tempted to embark on a catastrophic tour that included South India and Ceylon. The 'business partners' of the business deal vanished with large slices of the box office takings, and in the end I was, as so often in India, left without financial resources. In 1950, I was back again in London. A little later, I had seasons at the Adelphi and the Cambridge theatres which were very successful.

In all these tours I had seen a lot of Russian, Spanish and European ballet. But the most vivid American dance personality was Martha Graham, who looked like an Earth Goddess with fierce and yet kindly eyes, and a face of unusual strength, bone structure and depth. Her style incorporated Russian, Wigman and Kathakali in its violence and gave me the impression of roots that were violently seeking an outlet. As a scientist, experimenting with new forms of rhythmic dance, she is supreme; supreme that is, outside the traditional perfection of the Russian ballet and the still greater traditions of Hindu dancing. But each age has its chosen high priests and priestesses. Perhaps Graham is carrying the torch

of Isadora Duncan. Perhaps, too, she is representative of the restless, generous, sexual American spirit of passion and childlike innocence, for to me her style is the reflection of the spirit of the New World.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

My Troupe and My Work

ORGANISING a troupe in India presents many difficulties. First the Indian dancer and musician is a highly individual personality: tense, moody, difficult, jealous and often unco-operative in the extreme, yet demanding and lazy in turn. I was very fortunate when selecting my present company, composed from among the greatest available talent in India today, in finding not only first-rate technicians but also educated men and women to work with.

Shevanti, that exquisite dancer of great beauty and a fluid grace so very pronounced in her Manipuri and Kathak dances, was one of my first pupils and partners. Arnold Haskell recounts how Menaka introduced Shevanti to him like some priceless jewel during his visit to India before the war on his way to Australia. He spent a brief time there where Madam Menaka, a pioneer of Hindu dancing, entertained Haskell and members of the Russian Ballet in Bombay. Shevanti was Menaka's favourite dancer, and later, when she joined me and I personally trained her in her Tanjore temple dances and other items, she became not only my favourite pupil but from 1944 onwards my leading partner and soloist. She has a superb technique, with an unbroken fluidity of movement I

have not seen equalled. In her Tanjore dances she has a bewitching grace and charm that captivate. Now she is happily married to Rajeshwar Rao, a lithe, panther-like pupil of mine from Secunderabad. They live in a miniature palace in Hyderabad and are noted for their generous hospitality and kindness to all their friends. Shevanti in 1956 was eager to return to Europe, where I had previously introduced her and to appear with my new company at the Edinburgh Festival. She made a great success dancing the role of the Empress Mumtaz Mahall alternately with Kumudini.

Kumudini was a little slip of a girl when she joined me in 1948 in London. She is married now to Rajanai Lakhia, a musician with a great knowledge of Hindu music. They both met through me, and are now happily blessed with a beautiful young son, Shri Raj, whom I have nicknamed 'the Prince'.

I have seen the dance of Sitara the popular Indian film star. I remember seeing her films from my childhood and admired this Indian actress's vivacity on films. Having retired from films in India, where she has been a star for nearly thirty years, she has now devoted much time to Kathak dancing and is popular with dance audiences in India and London. But after seeing the superb line, lightning spins and great purity of Kumudini's Kathak dancing, and her strict adherence to the Jylal and Radhelal (leading maestros) schools of Kathak dancing, I could never appreciate or tolerate the modernised and adulterated versions of Sitara by comparison with the matchless Kumudini.

Technically superior to Kumudini was Jai Kumari, a tornado of rhythm and speed, the like of which I have never seen in this style of dancing anywhere in the world. But she danced like a perfected machine, soulless and expressionless. And it is these very qualities of soul and expression that make Kumudini a great dancer. She is one of the foremost dancers of the younger generation of India today and should she stay

the cruel course of a dancer's life, she should be one of the greatest in India.

Now I come to Satyavati. I have not seen any female dancer in South India who possessed the grace, expression and plastic line of movement, aided by a vivid personality, to approach Satyavati. She learnt under the great Shankaran Namboodri, the master of Uday Shankar, and even under Shankar himself. From Namboodri she learned his most treasured secrets of expression and rhythm in Kathakali dancing, all the *lasya* (feminine) expressions. From Shankar she learned much of his own style of sinuous and graceful folk and other dances. Combining the two, Satyavati is a poem of grace on the stage, and in her *Sita Apaharan*, the Abduction of Sita, has scored a great success with Namboodri at the Edinburgh Festival and London seasons. Immaculate in person and dress, she has a considerable following of young pupils in Bombay, and is herself a writer of talent.

With Shevanti, Kumudini and Satyavati, three of India's greatest female dancers, I was indeed very lucky and happy to work so long and hard all those months in Bombay during my recent visit there, and then in London prior to our dancing at the Edinburgh Festival.

I had on the male side a strongly representative group of artists: Yogen Desai, that highly skilled choreographer and dancer whom I had met in 1938, now came to work with me as choreographer. He is the resident teacher at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Bombay, a theatre devoted to staging plays and dance dramas with local talent. Raman Lal, the Kathak teacher and dancer, Surendra for Manipuri dancing, Satyavan for folk dancing and Namboodri the Brahmin, from Malabar and a great actor-dancer in Kathakali dancing. I was fortunate to get Rajani Lakhia as musical director. His genius in creating the most lyrical and exquisite melodies always surprised me, and the music he created for the Taj Mahal

Ballet, the first full-length two-hour ballet ever to come out of India is a masterpiece of Indian music, in mood, theme and rhythm. Rajani can capture in a few minutes the intention of the choreographer, the rhythm of the dancers and the mood of the scene for any group or solo dance and create, almost instantly, the most beautiful music from his inexhaustible knowledge of classical Hindustani music.

I think I had best conclude this short chapter, in which I have given an outline of some of the outstanding artists who have worked with me in creating my two latest programmes *Dances of India* and *The Legend of the Taj Mahal*, by quoting from a talk I gave recently in Bombay and London, and which prefaces what I have attempted to do. Here it is:

"India has a tradition of dancing that is today, perhaps the oldest and most detailed of all existing techniques. Japan, where I had the privilege of learning from Koshiro Matsumoto for a year shortly before the war, has its gloriously preserved Kabuki. Here I discovered that Japan has some of the most sacred temple dances, originally from India, but preserved only in Japan. In the Chinese Theatre there is much in its character, make-up and style of dancing strongly reminiscent of the Kathakali dance-drama of Malabar. Bali and Java are strongly influenced by the dance of India in the enacted dramas of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, with a style of gesture and rhythmic control very similar to that in the Indian dance. Of the two, the dance dramas of Bali, where I have been are perhaps nearer in dynamism and movement, to the Kathakali of Malabar than those of any other country in the East.

"In my programme *Dances of India* you will see extracts of the four great dance schools, authentic in costume, music and style, and performed by outstanding artists. Very strongly in evidence, too, are colourful and exciting

folk dances, such as the 'Rabari Ras' from Gugerat, a highly skilful dance that marks time with sticks in an ever quickening tempo. Also the 'Katchi Gori', horse dances of the north.

"On my recent tour of India, I discovered that the robust, earthy, vital and colourful folk dances have swept the cities of Delhi and Bombay with festivals of folk dancing lasting for weeks. Troupes of folk dancers and musicians, numbering as many as fifty in each group, gave some of the most wonderful dances I have yet seen. There are hundreds of folk dancing groups from all the various provinces of India, and still many more yet to be discovered, and they depict an aspect of the colour and beauty of India that equals or even surpasses, some of the classical dance styles of that ancient land.

"It was evident to me during my 1956 tour of India that the Indian public of today, used to the colourful films of the West and of India, will not support the purely technical or acrobatic feats of either the egotistic solo dancer imposing him or herself on the public for hours, or the rather slipshod groups that perform in the name of Hindu ballet. What is true of the twentieth century public in India is true of the great dance-loving public of the West, and that is that the dance, be its style Russian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese or Hindu, has to be vital, authentic, edited and artistically presented. This I have attempted in my programme *Dances of India*.

"In my ballet *The Legend of the Taj Mahal*, I have used the classical and folk dance techniques for clothing a love story, in my opinion one of the most moving and tragic in the world of drama, and using the authentic costumes and background from the Rajput and Moghul paintings of the time, for which I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. William Archer of the Victoria and Albert Museum,

in giving me access to the superb collection of pictures and material from that era of Shah Jehan.

“After having studied the traditional technique for several years with the great acknowledged masters of the Hindu Dance, Meenakshisundaram Pillai of Tanjore, and Kunju Kurup of Malabar, I find that the Hindu Dance is in danger of becoming a ‘Museum Piece’ rather than the means of giving beauty and truth to the world which was, and is, the main object of the Hindu Dance according to ancient treatises in Sanskrit. And it is in the ‘giving’ of truth and beauty, and by the using of traditional and authentic styles, that one can preserve the old and also create the new, and thus keep the Dance of India, not thousands of years old, but thousands of years young, within the tempo of life and the understanding of the people of today. And in both my programmes, *Dances of India*, and *The Legend of the Taj Mahal*, I feel I have justified the past while keeping in touch with the present.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dance of Siva

HIGH up on a peak in the Himalayas one evening I sat in complete solitude. In such a calm and peaceful atmosphere my brain was assailed by many thoughts. What is the secret of Life? Why is it that one is never taught the simple truths of the Masters and *Yogis* whose teachings would do so much to help the young avoid the great sufferings brought upon themselves in adult life?

The Great Ones about whom I have read so much and, luckier still, those few I had been privileged to meet, how near the secret of Truth and Beauty and God have they got? My thoughts continued. I was awake and yet in a trance. I could see and feel everything, but somehow it was some other spirit, from within myself that dominated me. This happens to most of us when we allow ourselves to be induced by Nature and solitude to relax in the fullest sense of that word. I looked around me at the surrounding peaks, mists and valleys, far, far below me. I heard the copper tinkle of bells, always attached to the necks of the herds, as the beasts were driven home for the approaching evening, and the blare of trumpets announcing the time for prayer and worship in the wooden temples.

Below, ahead, and above me, everything made me seem small, insignificant, nothing. And then I noticed that the immaculate white of the snow against the turquoise of the sky was beginning to take on varying and subtle changes and tones. And it was there, standing on that peak in the failing colours of dusk, as Orion, that magical star, became visible to my eyes, that my thoughts were carried to that supreme peak of this world, Mount Kailasa, abode of Shiva. That great God, the White *Yogi*, must be about to perform his sacred evening dance, the Dance of the Cosmic Rhythm of Nature, Life itself, which all the ancient Indian mystics, *rishis* and *devas*, divine beings, knew so well. Ask as I would, none of my dance teachers could tell me anything about this particular dance; and I wanted to learn how to dance it. I wanted the dance to express all the flowing, ceaseless grace of the elements of Fire, Air, Earth and Water, and somehow to convey the spirit of God in His divine mercy, taking into His arms all of the sorrow of humanity and lifting them up to heaven, restoring them to their final purity and peace.

And then, as if in a flash, I was transported, in my mind, to Mount Kailasa itself, and with a sense of exaltation, in my inner vision, or with my third eye of intuition (said to be situated in the middle of the forehead) I witnessed, amid the grandeur of the sunset in the Himalayas, this mystic dance. An old Sanskrit text says, "The Supreme intelligence dances within the Soul." That great orb of fire was sinking fast into the mists of the Cosmos, and the clouds and the mountains. The snow grew deep purple. Shaking myself out of the exalted mood that had come upon me, I walked down the pathway to my abode, situated half-way down that mountain-side, in a beautiful orchard of cherry and apple trees. And that was how I created my Dance of the Setting Sun, feeling a 'presence' descend upon me, the presence of that Great *Yogi*, Siva himself, perhaps at that very moment meditating in

Kailasa itself. And when I dance the 'Sandhya Nritta Murti' The Dance of the Setting Sun, I try to reveal visibly the moments of truth that these great sages have realised. Let me tell you what a member of 'that great dark mass', the audience wrote of this dance :

"A stage muffled in black velvet, the pearl glow of one soft light . . . and within its gleam . . . his body taut with quivering muscles and lithe sinuous movements. . . . The Great Lord Siva, the Creator, at the peaceful close of the day, amidst the harmony of the sea and its waves, the four winds and the stars, arises and performs his Dance of the Setting Sun in all its fiery glory.

"A sobbing flute stirs the vapours of time. Soft, sad, insistent. From deep shadows the melody steals, its sadness a living thing. Clutching the meshes of Time it gently rolls back the æons of Time . . . fold upon fold. The melody lingers . . . it rises and it falls in rhythm with the heart beats of all time. Softly the haunting strain lingers . . . quivers as it floats into a diminuendo of tenderness. . . far, far away, it lingers . . . beyond Space, at the edge of Time.

'There was neither Existence nor non-Existence,
The Kingdom of Air nor the Sky beyond.
What was there to contain, to cover in—
Was it but vast unfathomed depths of water?

There was no death there, nor Immortality,
No Sun was there, dividing Day from Night.
Then was there only THAT, resting within Itself?
Apart from IT there was not anything.

At first within the Darkness, veiled in Darkness,
Chaos unknowable, the All lay hid,

Till straight away from formless void, made manifest
 By the great Power of Heat, was born that germ.'
 Rig Veda XI, 29. Hymn of Creation

"Silence . . . mists . . . vapours, shadows, formless and dark. A tremor and shudder—a vibrating crash . . . the dancer, the dance and the melody fuse into the Eternal Flame hiding within its white heat, the glow and the germ of Life. The music pours in a torrent, it becomes the rushing River of Life with its throbbing story of Birth, Fulfilment and Death. Crimson and gold, life quickens and pulsates. The elements leave . . . waters flow, petals unfurl and far up in the Heavens shines a lone star . . . iron-red. Fantasy, movement and colour, the dancer spins into the beat and the rhythm of the moods. Ecstasy . . . passion . . . enchantment . . . the smouldering movements glow. Relentlessly the thin silver melody pierces in a thousand different angles . . . pouring in livid streaks the red flame of love and the white pain of life. A movement ablaze with Light. Around the fire whirl the forces of life. Elemental in their fury, unharnessed, unchecked, they hurl themselves out from the bottomless depths. The winds scream, the Waters crash in mighty waves. Leaping and swirling, they spring into space, tearing the very heavens down to their tempestuous bosom. The music sweeps on up . . . up into a tornado of victory.

"All is calm, the storm has passed . . . the waters subside. The rhapsody in amber and gold fades away into the dim velvety shadows. Silently the mists rise and vapours melt. Far up in the sky the star is dead. On the river of life no ripples caress the waters . . . no marks are left of storms and tempests or Victory. LIFE IS ILLUSION . . . LOVE . . . Fulfilment and Death . . . but a dream within a dream.

"A sobbing flute pours out its melody . . . its sweetness lingers, rising and falling in rhythm with the heartbeats of all time. Softly its haunting strain follows . . . sadly it quivers as it dies away into a diminuendo of exquisite tenderness . . . far, far away it flows to the edge of time . . . to the ETERNAL SUNSET."

Who wrote these impressions? A lady in Colombo, Mrs. Frieda Fernando.

Heinrich Zimmer, in his *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation* expresses very clearly the image of Siva's dances. As in all the main schools of Indian dancing there are pure rhythmic and symbolic dances of Siva I feel that this great Occidental scholar's observations simply convey the meaning of Siva's sacred dances. Zimmer says:

"Dancing is an ancient form of magic. The dancer becomes amplified into a being endowed with supra-normal powers. His personality is transformed. Like *Yoga*, the dance induces trance, ecstasy, the experience of the Divine, the realisation of one's own secret nature, and finally, mergence into the Divine essence. In India, consequently, the dance has flourished side by side with the terrific austerities of the meditating grove-fasting, breathing exercises, absolute introversion. To work magic, to put enchantments upon others, one has first to put enchantment on oneself. And this is effective as well by the dance as by prayer, fasting and meditation. Siva, therefore, the Arch *Yogi* of the Gods, is necessarily also the Master of the Dance.

"The dance is an act of creation. It brings about a new situation and summons into the dancer a new and higher personality. It has a cosmogenic function, in that it arouses dormant energies which then may shape the world.

On a universal scale, Siva is the Cosmic Dancer; in his 'Dancing Manifestation' (Nritya-murti) he embodies in himself and simultaneously gives manifestation to eternal energy. The forces gathered and projected in his frantic, ever-enduring gyration, are the powers of the volition, maintenance and dissolution of the world. Nature and all its creatures are the effect of his eternal dance. Fire is the element of the destruction of the world. At the close of the 'Kali Yuga' fire will annihilate the body of creation, to be itself then quenched by the ocean of the void."

And so the Dance of Life moves on. All of life is effort and concentration and ideals achieved with no little difficulty.

I had felt this so strongly when I made a final tour of India in 1946-47. Restlessness was again upon me like a goad, compelling me to move on, to 'give' through the dance what I must to fulfil myself as an artist, as all artists must at some time or another. The dark lights had now lifted from the world, destruction was over and Mars, the War God, had retired to his spoils. This was Siva, life itself, for from that destruction a new order of life would come into being. There would be a new creation of life in the world. But somehow, beautiful as was the first spring after the war in India, my heart had known of death and loss and tragedy, and the fickleness of friendship and trust, and happy as I was, nothing could ever be the same. I was growing, all of life is growth, and the war had prematurely aged so much in the hearts of its living victims. All perhaps a process and pattern of God, in which Time alone would reveal the reasons of why and when and how?

India was moving into a new age, her age. The right to freedom Gandhi had proved at last, so that love could triumph over arms. He won his war with the spirit of love. The West had technically 'won' its war with arms, but sank deeper into

further frustration and distrust, because her methods of 'winning' her wars, unlike those of Gandhi, had only set the chess-board of politics for further wars at some time to come, because her whole principle was wrong. Personally, I had won the love of that great public in my country by dancing and working for them through the medium of the Dance resurrected from a deep sleep of oblivion. But I had my enemies.

I heard so many stories about myself spread by rivals, even from some of the female pupils I had taken such pains to make into dancers. And then, too, there was a section of the public whom every artist finds is always ready to believe the worst. When all these 'stories' were repeated so often to me by my friends I would always remember the great words of the masters, the great philosophies of the *Gita*, that Song of God, and ignore them all. Every man of the theatre has enemies and friends. But is it really important what one's detractors say? Perhaps they can teach one many truths in their own way. After all, a few of the world's greatest masters and redeemers from Lord Jesus Christ down to Gandhi, in our own time, have all had their full share and sacrifice at man's hands.

If I had to live my life all over again, I think I would still like to be a dancer and 'give' that beauty that overwhelms me when I dance. Up till now the Dance of Life, the theatre and beauty, have been my life-long purpose for living and working and learning and creating through the medium of my dance: not only a repetition of mere technique, devoid of 'inner realisation', but also to seek new avenues for using that technique in telling stories and dances and creating ballets that are something more than just a mere repetition of the past. Every creative artist has to contribute, recreating from old forms, new patterns, based on the old but living with the Truth of the present. That very same intensity of feeling for the Dance was what drove me then, so long ago as

a little boy, and drives me, now, as a man, to "remind the whole world by my dance" of the truths hidden within the soul of man and revealed to him by the vision of beauty which I have glimpsed within my own soul.

India, Burma, Malaya, Java, China, the Phillipines and Japan and Hawaii, what a glorious memory the mention of those countries invokes within my mind. How much beauty and art was revealed to me by their temples, books and philosophies; and how I danced with all the fire and energy of my whole body to give them the best within myself through the dance.

"Giving is getting, my son"—said my mother. "Remember that when one dies, it's what one has given away in beauty and love that one takes with oneself, for these are incorruptible and eternal."

My tours of India and the Far East, enriched me beyond words in spirit and vision. And the East being one half of this world's circle, it was completed only when I toured so widely in England, America, France, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Finland and Norway, as also Switzerland and Turkey. Ireland has always held a special place in my heart, for it was Annie Besant, a spirited young woman from there, who taught India to be spiritually free.

Seasons of dance in London, New York, Paris. How filled with enriching experiences I was. Of course, what the public does not see are the hazards, untold physical fatigue involved in these world tours, and what the lack of finance can mean to an artist. From out front the picture has to be perfect. Indeed, it is only in the 'backstage' of life that the tremendous suffering and trials are seen by the few, misunderstood by the many, and sanctified by the 'elect', those wonderful friends who, because of their Belief in what one is trying to do, help unselfishly.

All my tours after the war in the great countries of the

West have only confirmed my belief that the role of the dancer is an even more vital and important one than ever before. For the Mirror of Gestures that an audience sees in the dance is a medium far more potent because of its visual appeal to the heart and mind of man. And it is there that the artist can make an appeal to man's highest nature, to turn from the darker instincts of war and hate, which seem to engulf and confuse so much of the world with a suspicion and evil that must inevitably bring destruction. In London, Paris and New York, and in all the great countries of this world, groups of dancers, visiting one another's countries from the East and the West, can do so much more than mere politicians who, try as they may, never seem to solve the problems of the world because of their ignorance of spiritual values and truth. If only they would read the old texts of God's chosen men on earth. If only . . . if only. . . . That is why it is in the Dance of Life, the Dance of Siva, that the world reflecting itself in a mirror, as it were, can, through the Dance, find one unerring medium of bringing about a universal sympathy and admiration, and that is a beginning. . . .

The soul of man is eternal, but to manifest the eternal principle, it has to keep reincarnating in a physical body. Christ, the divine spirit, said: "I come as the example for all men, and not an exception, which is often forgotten." But the soul of mankind has to learn its own lessons and so before each reincarnation it is given the earthly path it must take in order to continue its development.

There are no 'accidents' in life. How little this is understood when so constantly is heard 'if' one had done something, or 'if' something had happened. One has to use one's resources, naturally, but no man can prevent the hour when his soul is withdrawn from the earth or when it chooses to reincarnate. Christ said: "The Kingdom of Heaven is within" and those two great sages of India, Ramana Maharishi and Sri

Aurobindo, said the same thing. Then there is that wonderful statement Jesus made at the Last Supper: "I shall not drink again of the fruit of the Vine until I drink it anew with you in the Kingdom of Heaven."

The only true artist, whether in dance, drama, music, literature or painting, is the 'religious' artist, and in my dictionary it would mean the artist wholly dedicated to God's teaching, whether it comes from the East or the West. For it is then, and only then, that the artist transcends nationality and reminds the world of the immortality of beauty, which is Truth and God. Perhaps the great dance traditions of Japan, Bali, Java, Tibet and India have survived throughout the centuries, because they used a formalised technique for expressing the written truths of the great philosophers who wrote the 'Words of Commandments'. The great tradition of the ballet in Europe has yet to use its form for clothing old truths and expressing them in dance dramas.