

## Dancing Bodies: Culture and Modernity

If there is one adjective that describes the state of dance in Singapore, it would be “multicultural”. This was determined from the start by the diversity of the people who came from Britain, China, India and the Malay archipelago to settle here in 1819.

An Indian doctor, Chotta Singh, gave Indian music and dance classes here before the Second World War. Udaya Shankar, a dancer from India, performed in Singapore in 1935 with his troupe. A Caucasian lady named Angela De Martinez taught ballet in Capital flats in the 1930s. There were the halls where the Malays did the *joget*. Chinese dance was performed in Chinese operas, and the lion and dragon dances of the Chinese community. These examples from the early days attest to the diversity that marked Singapore’s state of dance nearly a century ago.

It is this multiculturalism that has characterized multiracial Singapore since it became independent in 1965. The ruling People’s Action Party had to espouse “multiculturalism” as the charter for various national policies. Thus, when national dance companies – People’s Association Dance Company and National Dance Company – were established, dancers performed typical Chinese, Malay and Indian dances, as well as Western mainstream dances such as ballet, modern and jazz to showcase Singapore’s culture. This led to the development of various ethnic dance groups such as the Malay Sriwana, Singapore Kemuning Society, Sri Warisan-Som Said Performing Arts, Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, Bhaskar’s Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts, Chin Kang Huay Kuan, Dance Ensemble Singapore and Chinese Dance Artistes Association.

The Western dance forms of ballet, jazz and tap have been popular for a long time. And since 1988, Singapore has boasted of a national ballet company – Singapore Dance Theatre – that prides itself in performing classics like *The Nutcracker* to renowned contemporary selections by Goh Choo San and George Balanchine. In the last decade, we have seen the births of a number of contemporary/modern dance groups, namely, Ecnad, formerly known as Dance Dimension Project (1996), The Arts Fission Company (1999), Tammy L Wong Dance Company (1998), Odyssey Dance Theatre (2000) and Jux3 (2000). Most of the practitioners are trained in Western modern dance techniques and engage in experimentation and innovation to push the boundaries of their art.

In this age of globalization, ballroom dancing, Texan line dancing, Afro-American lindy hop, Latin American salsa and tango, Spanish flamenco and even Middle Eastern belly-dancing are becoming increasingly common in dance studios all over the island alongside ballet, jazz, and tap. There is also the nightly motley crowd of clubbers who dance and sway to anything from funk to soul and rave.

Such a colourful scene has grown out of events like the now defunct Festival of Dance of the 1980s and the ongoing annual Singapore Arts Festival. The Arts Education Programme of the National Arts Council has raised awareness of dance among the young

through dance workshops and performances at schools. In addition, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts now offer full-time courses in contemporary dance leading to a diploma.

### **Singapore, Western or Global?**

Since the British founded Singapore, this island could not escape Western influences. After independence, in its march towards economic development, international trade and advances in science and technology, Singapore continued to be subject to Westernization.

Ballet is a prime example of a Western art that is significant in Singapore's cultural and artistic life. Since its introduction in the 1930s, it has become popular among Singaporeans as seen in the founding of the Singapore Dance Theatre in 1988 as well as rising enrolments in ballet classes and sell-out performances by international ballet companies like the American Ballet Theatre.

It is not only ballet that marks Singaporeans' preoccupation with Western dance forms. In the 1980s the break-dance craze, inspired by the street dancing of Afro-American working class youth, sent many Singaporean teens dancing in Orchard Road. Lindy hop, another Afro-American dance form, has also found followers here in two groups – the Jitterbugs and the Lindy Hop Ensemble – which offer classes and perform frequently.

There are the evergreen social dances, such as the cha-cha, the tango, Western line dancing and ballroom dancing, which attract mainly the older folk. Enthusiasts can take part in Dance Sport championships which are regulated by the Amateur Dance Sport Association. Lately, fashionable yuppies have been turning to the Spanish flamenco and Latin dances like the salsa.

With Singaporeans lapping up ballet, ballroom dancing and the salsa as easily as they consume Madonna and Hollywood, these imports are seen less as Western culture than “world heritage”. Singaporeans can now enjoy a diversity of dance styles because of globalization.

### **Exploring New Frontiers: Contemporary/Modern Dance in Singapore**

Though modern dance began in the West almost a century ago, its development in Singapore only become more definite in the 1980s when dancers like Lim Fei Shen, Goh Lay Kuan, Angela Liong and Tan How Choon returned from their training overseas.

In 1986 Goh Lay Kuan, after a stint at the Martha Graham School of Modern Dance and numerous research trips to China, staged *Nu Wa* – Singapore's first full-length modern dance production. *The Straits Times* called it Singapore's “most significant modern dance ever produced”. In 1994, after returning from Tisch College in New York, Lim Fei Shan staged *Homecoming*, a multidisciplinary production that wove visuals, sound and dance together. Lim dance in different parts of the Tan Swie Hian Art Museum, including on a floor engraved with calligraphy. It was one of the first dance productions in Singapore to

defy the convention of the proscenium stage. Instead, the audience followed the dancer as she moved from space to space. That same year, The Arts Fission Company by Angela Liong and visual artist Chandrasekaran performed *Mahabharata: A Grain of Rice*. It won acclaim for being a novel multimedia performance of dance, film, music and installation. In 1996, Dance Dimension Project (later renamed Ecnad – dance spelt backwards) was established by four dance enthusiasts who conceived dance from alternative viewpoints; they challenged existing dance perspectives by having dancers move freely around the courtyard of The Substation. Ecnad took its mission further by dancing at unconventional venues such as the Suntec City Fountain and hosting The Talking Dance Series in 1999, where the audience was invited to participate in the choreographic process. American-trained choreographer Tammy Wong had her dancers singing and speaking in *Child* (1998) and *Seven Deadly Sins* (1999). The use of voice also found resonance in Frontier Danceland's New Dance Lab Series.

These milestones punctuate the contemporary dance scene and represent the artistic tendencies towards interdisciplinary experiments, the use of alternative performance spaces and the incorporation of unusual resources in dance. They signify attempts to evoke fresh concepts, methods and meanings in their works. Themes expressed by these groups are also becoming more provocative and angst-ridden, as they comment on issues such as urban alienation, social conformity and oppression. Frontier Danceland's *Soulless Souls* (2000), for instance sought to “release the soul buried under the artificial world we have created”. Ecnad's *Underground Works* (2000) was staged at a discotheque to exemplify the urbanite's need to “wind down” from the pressures of modern society. Dance audiences are now calling these cutting-edge Singapore dance productions “avant-garde” and “postmodern”. To make matters more interesting, Zai Kuning, the controversial and unclassifiable visual artist, musician, dancer and choreographer, entered the scene. His *Noalibi* (1999) had dancers with white grease paint on their faces and clad only in G-string performing contorted and disturbing body gestures.

The audience response to these new approaches ranged from awe to curiosity to disdain. A few have walked out of performances which, perhaps, proved too “avant-garde” for the relatively unexposed and immature audience. Or it could have been the artists who, not having grasp the concepts behind their works, caused confusion and frustration in the audience. Nonetheless, contemporary dance groups have preserved despite financial difficulties and small audiences – and new groups continue to be formed. At the 2001 Singapore Arts Festival Late Night Series, Jux3 made its debut with *Thin Air: Minimalist Episode*.

The future of contemporary dance in Singapore embodies potential. But there is concern whether Singapore, with its current training facilities and socio-cultural environment, will be able to produce not only capable dancers, but intellectual, thinking artists who use avant-garde and postmodern concepts sensibly.

### **Traditional/Ethnic Dances: Of Marginality and Modernity**

For a young nation with a diverse immigrant population, the issue of “traditions” has always been a thorny one. By traditional dances of Singapore, one usually refers to the

generic and popular forms of Chinese, Malay and Indian dances from China, the Malay archipelago and India, where our forefathers hailed from. Since Independence in 1965, these dance forms have been institutionalized as Singapore's official "traditional" or "ethnic" dances.

Few Singaporeans, especially the young who are fed on MTV fare, are as familiar with these dance traditions as with ballet. It is therefore ironic that more attention is given to a national ballet company than to groups which sustain the traditional dance heritages. This situation has led some to feel that the ethnic dances have been marginalized in Singapore. Compared to the 1950s when these dances were the driving force behind a growing theatrical scene, their role in dance development is much less visible today.

Yet, these dance traditions have come a long way since the 1930s, thanks to individuals like Nongchik Ghani, Som Said, Lee Shu Fen, Yan Choong Lian, K P Bhaskar, Santha Bhaskar and Neila Sathyalingham who have contributed much to the development of their respective dance traditions. At the same time, the many associations offering traditional/ethnic dance, music and drama lessons have become more effective by the improvement of training programmes and structures.

Today, dance groups such as the Bhaskar Arts Academy, are beneficiaries of funding from the National Arts Council. With support from the Council, groups like Dance Ensemble Singapore have been encouraged to develop into semi-professional Chinese dance companies.

### Chinese Dance

The earliest Chinese dance activities in Singapore probably took place at the turn of the last century, subsumed under genres like the lion and dragon dances as part of religious rituals and Chinese operas, which combined singing with dancing and acrobatic and martial arts. These deeply entrenched traditional art forms are still practised during festive season and other auspicious occasions.

Chinese dance was introduced as a formal genre in the late 1920s and 1930s by visiting troupes from China. In the 1940s it was offered as an extra-curricular activity in Chinese schools in Singapore. In the 1960s, the arrival of Chinese dance doyenne Lee Shu Fen from Taiwan boosted the interest in, and standard of, Chinese dance here.

The past decades have seen the formation of several Chinese dance groups. Those that remain active today are the Chinese Dance Artistes Association, Dance Ensemble Singapore (formerly the Yan Choong Lian Dance Group), Frontier Danceland, Practice Performing Arts School, Tampines Arts Troupe and Theatre Arts Troupe. This list excludes schools and clan associations where Chinese dance is also being taught and performed, such as the Chin Kang Huay Kuan, Ann Kway Association and the Foochow Clan Association.

Chinese dance, as it is known in Singapore today, is a generic term that accommodates a wide variety of folk dances from the various ethnic Chinese minorities like the Han, Hui, Yi and Miao. However, in a typical Chinese dance performance here, one will notice the infusion of elements from ballet, modern dance and Chinese martial arts.

### Malay Dance

Malay dance in Singapore has roots from Indonesia and Malaysia, where many early Malay settlers hailed from. The dominant traditional Malay dances practised by the Malays in Singapore are the *joget*, *asli*, *zapin*, *masri* and *inang*. The earliest forms of Malay dance that was introduced in Singapore – such as *joget* – are said to come from Sumatra, and were taught by *bangsawan* performers during the late 1950s. Despite its Malaysian and Indonesia origins, *joget* shows the influence of Portugese folk dance while *zapin* has Arab roots. People also learnt the dances from Malay films.

The first organization to promote Malay drama, music and dance in Singapore was Sriwana, headed by Nongchik Ghani, followed by Perkumpulan Seni which came a few years later. Now there are Sri Warisan-Som Said Performing Arts, People's Association Malay Dance Group and the Singapore Kemuning Society. The Rina Dancers, founded by Naim Rani and Safarinah Abdul Rahim, was active during the 1970s but is unfortunately now defunct.

While Malay dances are typically performed in theatres, one may also catch *dikir barat*, a dance-music tradition from Malaysia, presented at public events. The Malay martial arts *silat* and *randai* may also be regarded as dance, if one stretches the definition, as some of their movements have found their way into Malay dance. Choreographer Osman Abdul Hamid in *Perjalanan* (2001), for instance, incorporated forms of *silat* and *randai* with *asli*, *zapin* and *inang* to further enliven his work.

In the 1950s Malay social dance such as *joget* were popular in dance halls among Malays and non-Malays in Singapore. Today, it is western funk, soul, rap and rave that have replaced them in modern-day discotheques. Like the Chinese, many Malay youths are also copying the styles of Michael Jackson and MC Hammer whilst head banging to heavy metal music by stars like Bon Jovi.

### Indian Dance

Among the communities of Singapore, the Indians have guarded their dance traditions most faithfully and reverently. A possible reason for this is that Indian dance has always been closely bound to the Indian gods, and dominant forms like the 3,000-year-old *bharatanatyam* originated in temples as a dedication to the gods.

Indian dance came to Singapore through visiting artists from India, some of whom eventually remained to make Singapore their home. The first association founded to teach Indian arts traditions was the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society established in 1949. The Bhaskar Academy of Arts came soon after in 1953. Later in the 1960s and 1970s, groups

such as Bengali Association, Ceylon Tamil Association, Gujarati Association and the Kerela Association also started offering Indian dance classes. Today, Indian dance groups include the People's Association Indian Dance Group, Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (formerly the Bhaskar Academy of Indian Dance), Kala Mandhir (Temple of Fine Arts) and Bhaskar's Arts Academy Ltd – a newly established Indian dance performing company. Groups like the Singapore Kathakali Yogam, which taught *kathakali* in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Kothari Dance Group, which made its mark during the early 1980s have now disbanded.

Indian dance schools in Singapore have come a long way since they started in the 1950s. Today, not only do many associations offer systematic training, they also engage professional teachers and examiners from abroad to conduct classes and hold examinations. The Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, for instance, puts students through a rigorous eight-year programme which leads students to a diploma in *bharatanatyam*. Examinations are held annually and students' progress are marked with ritual graduation performances called *arangetram* (literally "placing on stage").

Apart from revered traditional dance forms like *bharatanatyam*, *khatak*, *kuchipudi*, *odissi*, *manipuri* and *kathakali*, there is a popular Indian dance scene where Bollywood and *bhangra* rule. *Bhangra*, originally a song-music-dance tradition from Punjabi, is today a fusion of hip-hop, reggae and Hindi film music. A worldwide craze which first began in UK, its popularity has recently permeated Singapore clubs, reaching not just Indians, but also the Chinese and expatriates who readily take to this funky, modern dance-music "tradition". Today, *bhangra*, like modern dance and tango, is fast losing its cultural baggage as it is subsumed under a wider commercial pop culture market that is accessible to all.

### **Tradition and Modernity: Innovation and Tension**

It is interesting that while choreographers in China, Indonesia, Malaysia and India have been seeking to break out of their respective dance traditions by experimenting with contemporary expressions, their counterparts in Singapore have been less adventurous in this aspect. This is probably due to multiculturalism, which often heightens racial differences, resulting in confusion as to whether Singaporeans are just Singaporeans with tag hyphenated identities. There are often tensions between ethnic and national identities as pockets of individuals still hang on to their mother culture.

Most ethnic dance groups tend to be more concerned about the preservation of traditional dance forms. In Indian dance especially, contemporary works by Singaporean Indian choreographers have adhered most faithfully to traditional Indian dance aesthetics. This can be seen in *Sacred Journey* (1996), a dance choreographed by Priyalatha Arun, where she teamed up with Malaysian dancer Ajit Bhaskeran Dass to explore a Buddhist theme presented with English dialogue.

The Malay community, on the other hand, has been slightly more adventurous in seeking new forms of expression for its traditions. Says Osman Abdul Hamid, choreographer for

the People's Association Malay Dance Group, "I don't believe in repeating the dances the way they were 20 years ago. I know this is a sensitive point in the Malay community but I feel that traditional dance has to develop and change." *Perjalanan*, a new work by Osman who won the Singapore Young Artist Award, was performed in the 2001 Singapore Arts Festival. It brought him and Indonesian choreographer Bimo Wiwohatmo together in their search for a blend of modern and traditional forms.

Inherent in the search for contemporary expressions is the question of how much traditional baggage should be carried. In seeking modern expressions for their work, Malay choreographers like Zaini Mohd Tahir and Osman Abdul Hamid have travelled to Indonesia for a deeper understanding of their roots. At other times, this search can be difficult for Malay choreographers for religious reasons. As Som Said put it, "We want to move with the times, but we are also concerned about holding on to our roots and Islam."

The Chinese dance community is perhaps the most adventurous in its search for contemporary expression. The prolific Dance Ensemble Singapore has presented works, such as *Rhythm of the Dance: Tea, Ink and Blooms* (1994), which fuse ballet and Chinese classical folk dance to tell Asian or Chinese stories. In its determination to break new ground, the company has sent students to the Martha Graham School of Modern Dance and New York University, and invited experts from America and Taiwan to work with them. This desire to experiment has also led Low Mei Yoke of Frontier Danceland to move away from traditional Chinese dance to start her own contemporary dance group.

Modernization is not all about progress. It is also about tension and even discontent. It has profound effects on the notion of selfhood, as individuals deal with social changes and new cultural forces while maintaining a sense of balance with the past. Different communities and individuals react differently to these situations. How each of these traditional dance forms will evolve eventually remains to be seen.

### **The Singaporean Voice: Singaporean, Asian or Hybrid?**

What then in these dances can be called distinctly Singaporean? The popular conception of Singapore's multicultural dance heritage as comprising Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (CIMO) dances is problematic since these dances were only introduced as formal genres in Singapore and did not evolve in Singapore per se. Yet, it is inconceivable, as anthropologists may argue, for any enduring social group not to form its own particular dance culture. In this case, the classic fusion of the CIMO culture into a single entity, however synthetic, is perhaps one of the clearest and most resilient expressions of Singapore culture. Since the early days of the People's Association, there have been many "melting pot" or "salad bowl" attempts, like the offerings by the Singapore Multiethnic Dance Ensemble led by Yan Choong Lian, Neila Sathyalingham and Som Said, presented in Singapore and abroad as Singapore culture.

Following official expression of Singapore being an "Asian" city-state in the mid-1980s, more artists have also been consciously articulating their Asian identity as another basis of Singapore culture. In the ongoing East-meets-West and East-versus-West debates,

some practitioners reject Western forms like ballet in their choreography while others seek a harmonious blend of both Western and Asian dance elements. In any case, Singapore dancers have never stopped collaborating with western artists to expand their horizons. Ecnad has worked with Canadian Maxine Heppner and American Trina Eby, Odyssey Dance Theatre has collaborated with Australian professor Emeritus Susan Street in *Extreme* (2000) and *New Talent Presentation 1* (2000).

In recent years, many contemporary dance artists have tried to find a Singapore identity and a Singaporean voice in their works. Instead of duplicating what they have learnt from the West, they have been trying to reappropriate dance treatises in a Singaporean context. This has resulted in many hybrid forms that we see in contemporary Singapore's dance production where Western techniques are often fused with traditional Eastern elements. Hence, one might detect a *taiji* weight shift in modern dance, as in Lim Fei Shen's *Homecoming* (1994), or the traditional Chinese hand gestures blended with the pointe work of ballet and contemporary dance techniques in Odyssey Dance Theatre's *Origins* (2000).

What then makes a dance Singaporean? Could ballet be a national dance of Singapore? Or is it the Chinese, Malay and Indian dances introduced in the early 1900s? Those eager to discover the Singapore identity often hold the ideal that Singapore dance should be an utterly "pure" entity, untainted by foreign influences. Yet, in our survey of all the dances and dance aesthetics, we have come to realize that Singaporeans are essentially all cultural hybrids, having an Asian heritage and continuously exposed to foreign/Western influences. The clash between traditional Asian culture and modern Western influences is precisely what makes up the familiar fabric of Singapore society. Instead of trying to pin down that elusive Singaporean dance, let us be content and open to the different interpretations and formulations expressed by various artists. In that way, we can discover what dancers in the melting pot or salad bowl of Singapore society can achieve.

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*This version may differ slightly from the original due to minor edits made.*