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PADMI & FLOAT

Edition #1, August 2014

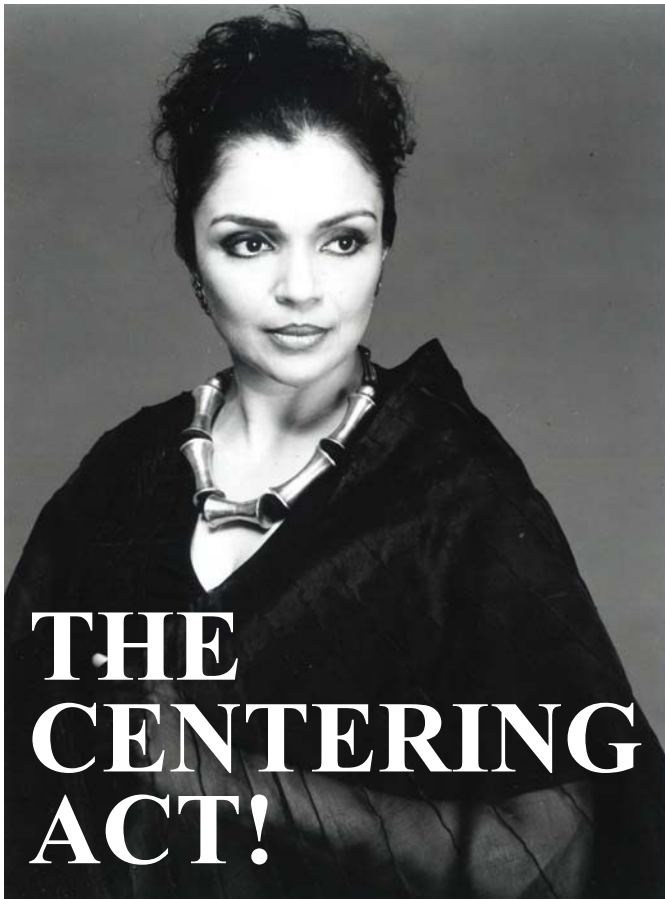


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The nucleus of the Padme Project is Dr Anita Ratnam: a Chennai-based dancer, choreographer, producer, arts administrator, teacher, writer, and commentator. The Padme Project is the first seed of a larger idea and a vision that intends to coalesce together a group of dancers from across streams and allow them an opportunity to learn, train, work and express together! In an interview with Team Aalaap, Anita states that Padme is the start of an ongoing journey where both the process and product are equally important...

Q: You are the Artistic Director/Producer of Padme; but Padme is more like a project, right? Tell us what projects like these mean for the artistic community.

A: I was principal choreographer, performer and artistic director of a 15 member dance ensemble for ten years between 1993 to 2003. Several successful productions and international tours later, I realised that I was playing den mother, psychologist and hand holder to dancers who were terribly insecure and unclear about their place in the ecosystem of the arts. I disbanded the group and developed my solo career, clarifying my own movement aesthetic that I have called Neo Bharatam. Sans clutter of too many bodies and minds to manage, I was able to observe the rapidly shifting sands of dance, performance, presentation and patronage. As ideator and curator of several international dance and academic events, I realised the lacunae that existed in Indian dance. Beyond the guru-sishya paradigm, there is little space for the independent and inquiring dancer to journey with his/her art. Process and the creative inquiry is less acknowledged than the final product. The Padme project is an attempt to create a small professional space where classical dancers can train in a truly professional way with a choreographer, good rehearsal spaces, costume lighting and a support system that acknowledges their artistic choices.

Q: How do you intend to make this happen?

A: Many years ago, I initiated a summer project called Tranz in which we invited three contemporary dance groups to bring their initial ideas to a nine day “dance crucible”. In Chennai, they interacted with choreographers, costume and lighting designers, theatre directors, musicians, composers and photographers. Their individual ideas flowered to full projects when they left the Tranz intensive. This time, the Padme project invited Belgian/Dutch choreographer Kalpana Raghuraman who is trained in Bharatanatyam and contemporary dance and who ideated Padme in Europe two years ago with Dutch dancers. The music and choreography have been licensed from Korzo productions in The Hague but Kalpana has re-set and re-framed her original concept onto the bodies of well-trained Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancers from Bangalore.

Q: What is the objective of this project?

A: The word professional is used too loosely in India. Dancers have little concept of what it truly means to be a full-blooded professional dancer. The Padme team came to rehearsal daily for each session, spending eight hours in the studio and working relentlessly with the material and retuning their minds to acknowledge themselves as dancers and not “serious hobbyists”. My idea is really to enable young dancers to think of themselves as dancers always. I have also envisioned an array of aspects that are crucial to manufacturing full-time dancers. They are cross-training and as part of the mentoring process, there is a great deal of exposure and experience that is provided to them.

Q: Padme then is among the first projects you are realizing, towards that vision. Tell us its genesis.

A: I’ve seen and known Kalpana, a dancer, choreographer from the Netherlands, for a while now. I watched Padme many years ago when Kalpana first imagined it. It stayed with me and when I visited the idea of starting a project, Padme was top-of-mind recall. It also worked because Kalpana is well-trained in Bharatanatyam and has the exposure of the multi-cultural world of her home in Amsterdam. It helps therefore that she understands the Bharatanatyam body and uses this knowledge in her choreography and teaching. Kalpana is very gentle with the dancers; she understands the conditioning of Bharatanatyam and knows how to re-condition the body for a contemporary piece without scaring off the learners.

Q: Did you also play a part in the re-imagining process of Padme for this new set of dancers?

A: Not really. I believe it is very important not to interfere in another choreographic vision. I’ve only given a few inputs whenever I believed a certain movement wasn’t happening on a certain body. It’s really her creation, in that sense.

Q: What sort of audiences do you have in mind for Padme?

A: Padme speaks to Urban India, a country of many born after 1980, for whom Starbucks means more than Saravana Bhavan or MTR Foods. An India that is vibrant, impatient and breathlessly embracing the world. Padme is a contemporary dance production that is flexible. It can play in art galleries, in the outdoors, in parks, gardens, forests, museums and shopping malls. However, it has been conceived as a proscenium indoor auditorium venture that can beautifully represent young India in dance festivals anywhere. It can speak to corporate, students, academics or seniors. I see it as a prism reflecting the many shades of modern India.

A Cross-Continental Collaboration

Kalpna Raghuraman tells Team Aalaap how she re-imagined Padme for a new set of dancers trained in the Indian classical form, and why the process was enriching



When developing the concept of Padme, I was looking into the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of today's youngsters. Are religious or spiritual practices part of their daily life or something that they only refer or are referring to in dance? Is it a family imposed activity that they execute obediently or does it actually fuel them, give them inspiration and courage? Is there actually a place for spirituality in today's life and if yes, how?

All these questions lead to interesting discussions. It became clear to me that today's younger generation has its own way of negotiating life, its deeper meaning and as a result, finding their own place in the larger picture

Padma, the lotus flower, is a familiar symbol in Hindu and Buddhist faiths. The lotus grows with its roots in the mud through a long stem from the water into the light. A better metaphor for human development is hardly imaginable, the growth being a symbol of spiritual awareness and enlightenment. So I discussed what this image meant to the dancers, what aspects of their own spiritual practice it touched and how it could inspire them to look at life in a different way.

When Dr Anita Ratnam asked me if I could set Padme to classically trained dancers in India, I was immediately interested. Providing a different way of creating a dance work, could be a very inspiring and useful experience for many dancers who want to make it their profession but cannot necessarily find their way or own voice in the maze of what is India's dance scene. I had invited dancers trained in any Indian form to come to the workshop-audition. When creating contemporary work, flexibility in mind and spirit is even more important to me than flexibility in body. The group of Padme dancers come from different dance backgrounds: Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and contemporary dance. Empowering them to step into what they know and for us to work from there has been a very interesting experience for all of them.



Less is More!

Anil Srinivasan, a Chennai-based classical-contemporary pianist, says the music of Float will be minimalist, and will surprise!

Q: *Float, you say, is a study in contrasts, minimalism and impressionism. Could you elaborate?*

Float works on the premise that there are essentially two concepts to music — sound and silence. Given the name, the music “floats”; it will resonate with ideas, colours and visual poetry that will match Padme's choreography punctuated by moments of stillness and quiet. For me, music works when it is simple, meditative and yet profound.

Q: *Allow us an insight into how you have constructed the music for Float? What can audiences expect?*

A: The piano is used in multiple ways - across genres and styles and yet an aesthetic of my own, created exclusively for this production. It will surprise, for sure.

Q: *Let us understand your thought process in the possibility of creating physical work from an abstract idea...*

A: That's a difficult question to answer. Any idea needs to be workshopped, created, destroyed a few times, and created again. I have my own idiosyncratic process like everyone else, and I'm fairly methodical. I also tend to listen to a lot of music and a lot of sound and then put myself into a quiet zone and strip away the complexity till I arrive at something bare, surprising and simple.

Q: *What was your brief for Float? How did it emerge?*

A: It emerged, as it always does, over multiple conversations with Anita (Ratnam), a friend and guide. It's also, in a sense, a reflection of where we both stand with respect to our art and life — looking at things from a distance, and yet being part of it all.

Q: *How is it connected with or inspired from Padme?*

A: Inspiration-wise, from the same source - personalized narratives and abstract expressions taking a physical form. Musically speaking, it is connected from the point of view of using pianistic elements and creative exploration. Otherwise, different.

Q: *You have collaborated with Anita before; you have also worked with many classical dancers. Compare and contrast the creative process of working with a classical dancer and a dancer like Anita who has a style and vision of her own?*

A: Each experience is rich in itself; people come with different perspectives, experiences, pain and joy. To understand this from their context, and use it to expand my own vision has been enriching.

A Collective!

Seven dancers from different genres (of dance), backgrounds and identities coalesced together for months to train and present Padme... They share their experiences of being part of this project!



The concept of Padme, in many ways, has been parallel to my own thinking and exploration of dance. In the light of my new-found joy with movement and allied training, I have been able to break my very rigid mould of body (and mind), and develop a better understanding of movement. In the beginning of the project, we were introduced to the lotus as being happy, overcoming its own struggle through the slush, and denoting spirituality. Through the course of Padme, I have been able to understand and feel these emotions around me. Padme is a cohesive and personal relationship with movement, synergy and energy shared.

Sukriti T



Padme is constituted in four parts; each of them very different from the other in style. The music for Padme is a combination of instruments, both slow and soft which provides that mild energy and beauty required for a flower. Though the dance movements are intense and have a lot of power, it seems to flow in a very delicate and subtle manner. Padme is an exploration of an entirely new look on dance, a blooming discovery of a bud; it is the unearthing of creativity and an opportunity to exhibit what I have previously learnt in dance.

Meghna Venkat



The lotus symbolises the union of the four elements — water, earth, air and fire. The roots are in the earth; it grows in and with the help of water; its leaves are nourished by air, and it blooms through the power of the sun's fire. I find this image most befitting, where all of us coming from different backgrounds, are bringing in our unique energies to build something special together. Kalpana (Akka) has a deep-rooted sense of spirituality, through which she not only keeps us grounded but also helps us grow as individuals with our own imagination.

Ashwini Raghupathy



Padme has been very special because it was an opportunity to improvise my contemporary dance with Anita Ratnam, whom I have a high regard for. I have been able to connect with the concept of Padme very well, so much that my 56-km journey to practise everyday seems insignificant. Each of the dancers brought in a different energy and, as a group, we combined it into something very beautiful. I am fortunate to have a solo piece which I enjoyed choreographing. I was also given the opportunity to choreograph a duet between Vandana and Ashwini; I put good use of my experience in contemporary dance and Kathakali to create interesting movements and sequences.

Sabyasachi Mukherjee



Padme has challenged my conditioning in aspects of form, approach and even costumes. As classical practitioners, we often bind ourselves down to the dogmatic approach to movement and our limited perception of what dance is ought to be! Padme has helped ease this conviction and, in a way, coerced me to be open to newness and embrace change, rather than be alarmed about it. The manner in which Kalpana (Akka) gradually pushed us to realise our body and capacity was organic and enjoyable. Anita (Akka's) energy, enthusiasm and attention to detail played an important role in the shaping of Padme.

Keerthana Ravi



Padme denotes beauty, fertility, prosperity, spirituality and eternity to me. The experience of Padme is unique and special because it has given me the opportunity to be a better dancer and acquire new techniques in dance. The concept is so beautiful that all the dancers have been able to connect with it, thus bringing us closer to each other. Padme has made me push myself to new levels and move in ways that were unknown to my body. Kalpana (Akka) has taught me not only to be unique in my dance but also in sync with the others in a team. The team work has been very rewarding as I have learnt from each dancer; something about dance; to be free and let my body move with the beat. The training has not only been enjoyable but also an experimental ground for me to explore dance beyond my limits; it is the most joyful feeling of experiencing something new everyday.

Vandana Supriya



The concept of Padme to me is as beautiful as the lotus itself: the energy, freshness and sense of sensuality that it radiates. It has been a very special experience to me as it has made me understand the various ways to connect with the body and the energy around it. Padme has been about learning, exploring a new form and trying to connect with the body in a way that I never did before.

Meenakshi