

Transforming *La Bayadère*

(From *La Bayadère – the Temple Dancer*, 2002)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgFAiTNWqT8&t=3525s>

“Ballets passed down the generations like legends, acquire a patina of ritualism; but La Bayadère is a ritual, a poem about dancing and memory and time. Each dance seems to add something new to the previous one, like a language being learned.”

Arlene Croce, *The New Yorker*

Ballet and East Indian dance styles such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak embody the same classicism of technique, the same beauty of line and movement and rhythm used to convey emotion. Rarely, however, do they tell the same stories.

Like many good ideas before it, our *La Bayadère* project started as an image in a book, a photograph-filled “History of the Russian Ballet”, passed eagerly around after a particularly tiring company class. The captioned picture of a prima ballerina as “Nikiya, a bayadere” led to smiles and raised eyebrows – it was just not our mental image of a temple dancer. Yet the story of the ballet seemed both oddly familiar and not so, melodramatic but strangely poignant; especially the lovelorn heroine who was far removed from our modern ways and thinking, but whose character was strikingly similar to the traditional classical dance *nayika*, whose passionate search for love is danced in hundreds of poems in every Indian dance style, and whose quest can be metaphorically read as the Soul seeking the Divine. At that moment, we were hooked.

La Bayadère was choreographed by Marius Petipa, of *Swan Lake* and *Nutcracker* fame, to music by Leon Minkus. It was first performed at the Maryinsky Theater, St. Petersburg, in February 1877. *La Bayadère* epitomized the aesthetic of the Romantic movement in ballet, with its exotic locale and the incorporation of ethereal characters.

La Bayadère is the quintessential Petipa ballet – but it inhabits a world far from France and Russia. The mysterious East had only recently been unveiled to the Western eye; and all that appeared exotic, dramatic or strange to Petipa was recreated in a compelling vision of a world that he had actually never seen. Petipa based his ballet on the Indian classics *Shakuntala* by Kalidasa, and Bhasa’s *The Cart of Clay*.

The story was of a noble warrior, Solor, who falls in love with a ‘bayadère’, an Indian temple dancer, and swears fidelity to her. But then Solor is offered the hand of the Rajah’s daughter, and is unable to refuse. When the Princess learns of Solor’s affection for the bayadère, she plots to poison the dancer. What follows is a whirlwind of old-fashioned intrigue, dreams and hallucinations, relentless vengeance, and undying love.

In translating *La Bayadère* into the dance styles of Bharatanatyam and Kathak, Manohar adapted the story to stand closer to its source, the Indian temple dance tradition. Character names were altered

subtly to reflect their Indian origins; the story remained the same. In India, temple dancers, or *devadasis*, were dedicated to the temple at an early age and brought up within its walls, learning song, scripture and mythology as well as the physical art of dance. *Devadasis* had a high status in the society of the time.

However, with the rising pre-eminence of the royal courts, the importance of the temple gradually became diminished. Dance moved from the temple precincts to the palace, and took on a secular, albeit brilliant, performing style. Over time, the passage from temple to court, and the shift from performing for God to performing for man, resulted in a loss of innocence - not just for the character of the bayadère, but for all *devadasis* and that way of life.

As the function of classical dance in India evolved from ecstatic revelation and ceremonial ritual to public performance, its look and sound altered. The *Surya Namaskar*, the devotee's yogic obeisance to the rising sun, is unchanged over thousands of years. Original temple dances involved the retelling of Sanskrit hymns such as the *Mantra Pushpam* through the gesture language of *hastas*. Dances were embodied offerings to the deity, and often involved spiritually significant formations and offerings of flowers (*pushpanjali*).

In the medieval period, devotional songs in the vernacular were danced in rapid rhythmic patterns that drew inspiration from old folk traditions (Kathak *kavit toda*). Over the 12th to 16th centuries, musical forms such as the *kirtan* and the poet Jayadeva's *ashtapadis*, with their deeply emotional lyrics and melodies, created dances of expressive stylized mime and allusive subtlety (Bharatanatyam *padam*, Kathak *gat bhav*). As dance moved into the courts, emphasis shifted from lyric to rhythm, and the song became instead a vehicle for virtuosity in abstract or "pure" dance numbers of dazzling footwork and graceful poses (Kathak *tarana*, Bharatanatyam *thillana*).

Throughout this history moves the lonely figure of the bayadère, adapting to the dance of her time, yet always harking back to her earlier lineage.

Transforming a ballet starts with the music. We researched a compilation of historically accurate lyrics, ranging from temple verses of the 11th century to court ballads from the 1700's. Music was composed and arranged by renowned collaborating musicians, Sudhir Narain of Agra and B.V. Balasai of Chennai, India. The choreography by the Manohar collective reflects the disparate dance traditions of temple and court in ancient India, while at the same time paying homage to Petipa's hypnotic original. The historical accuracy of the music and choreography is the underpinning for our recreation of the world of *La Bayadère*, where temple and court vie for power.

This story of India, first told by a French choreographer to a Russian audience, is now presented by an Indian classical dance company in Canada – truly, the language of dance has come full circle.