

## Memories of Dancing

I have clear memories of first learning dance from my mother, in our home in Winnipeg. I'd have been four or five years old... I remember frost patterning the winter windows, and the living room furniture pulled aside; and my mother gently pressing my recalcitrant limbs into the opening shapes of the allarippu, asking me how long I thought I could hold the positions. That was fifty years ago. My limbs still hold these shapes.

My sister and I have been dancing since we were children. Dance is a huge, vital part of our lives, and an unspoken bond between us. I feel with each passing year I discover some new aspect; the physical downslope isn't palpable yet, though someday soon it surely will be.

Any dancer will tell you that rehearsal is no fun. Performance, now that's exhilarating. Rehearsal is just the painful coin with which you buy the opportunity to perform. But when I was growing up, I remember loving rehearsal for the amazing opportunities it brought. My sister and I found our best friends in dance class, the small sisterhood of shared experiences. We made trips to perform in small towns, in barns and community centers, streetcorner festivals and retirement homes. We performed somewhere almost every week. This was the breath of life. I remember laughing all the time.

After a few different visiting instructors, in 1980 the group of our parents settled on one brilliant dancer from Toronto – Menaka Thakkar, arguably the best Bharatanatyam teacher in Canada at that time. She would visit Winnipeg for a week at a time, twice or thrice a year, and her expectations were high. One chance to learn was all you got; so the dance students turned into blotting paper. We learned to imprint patterns upon first seeing, and music on first hearing. And once out of our guru's sight, to repeat every movement until perfect, so we could impress at the next visit. Eventually a small group of us started the Manohar collective in 1991, as a dance sisterhood. Manohar became an independent non-profit dance company in 1993. Our mother remained teacher and first critic, and our father the accounts department. It became a family responsibility; the garage was full of props, the basement awash with costumes, and if you reached for the scrap paper piled next to the phone, it was always an old ticket stub.

We wanted to create movement and tell stories. There was a magic about myth, and the more deeply, intellectually, we explored that magic, the more it opened a world for us. We began exploring the power of the spoken word, and the written word; our inspirations were from theatre and Broadway, and from the contemporary ballet. We started deconstructing myths and creating our own, drawing on our experiences more than on our heritage. We also started deconstructing the traditional movement vocabulary we'd originally learned. I loved the art of improvisation – it requires a kind of synaesthesia, where music acquires a palpable shape into which you fit your body.

Many years later, I read about the theory of multiple intelligences; that students of dance and music may be advantaged in learning other fields too. Perhaps that was so for the Manohar dance group, as many of us have gone into parallel professions which draw on these same skills. Storytelling and myth teach you philosophy and empathy. Physical memory and muscle control teach you procedural skills, to be precise with steady hands. Music reveals pattern and the mathematics of rhythm. Improvisation teaches you instant decision making and commitment. Overall, dance imparts a laser focus, the ability to live in the moment of the movement. To this day I believe everything I am, dance made me.