World Dance
Bharatanatyam: A Revived Art Form Transcending Time and Geographic Boundaries
by Anisha Rajeev Kumar

She hears the curtains drawn open as she waits backstage. From the side of the stage, the accompanying orchestra members hold their respective instruments in proper position. In a loud, clear voice, the singer begins the invocation hymn, and the audience is silent. The dancer, dressed in a tailored silk sari and adorned with jewels and flowers, gracefully walks onto the stage. After approximately 10 years of continuous training, this Bharatanatyam dancer ascends the stage for her arangetram, a two-hour-long solo debut performance where the dancer exhibits her mastery of various dance repertoires. This dancer is a 20-year-old young woman living in Chennai, India, in 1935, and this dancer is also a 12-year-old girl living in New York, United States, in 2002. This dancer is timeless, but her style of dance, her reasons to dance, and the impact of dance in her life have evolved during the centuries that Bharatanatyam evolved in South Indian civilization.

Bharatanatyam, originating from the Southern state of Tamil Nadu, is one of the eight classical dance forms of India. In technique, Bharatanatyam combines two basic elements: Nritya (pure abstract dance emphasizing footwork) and Nritya (interpretive and narrative elements). The music employs variations in melody and meter in the South Indian Carnatic music style. The live orchestra that accompanies the dancer consists of Natuvangam (syllabic rhythm setting), the mridangam (percussion drum), and the vocal singer. Other instruments such as the violin, Veena, and bamboo flute contribute to the melody.

In the 17th century, Bharatanatyam prevailed in the southern states of India under the devadasi system. Devadasi, or a “servant of God,” was a class of females who dedicated themselves to the temple deities. Only the devadasi danced the form of Bharatanatyam known as sodir (solo, graceful variation), and the devadasi performed in the temple and in the homes of wealthy patron men. The devadasi would remain unmarried while dancing and performing duties for the temple, and she was often expected to attain the patronage of upper-caste married men in the community, who would financially support her and the temple while maintaining sexual relations with the devadasi (Srinivasan 1985). The devadasi system was instated to benefit the society rather than the dancer as an individual. Though she was respected in the community, the devadasi lost the right to a secure, married life while the temple benefitted financially and the upper-caste patriarchy benefited as patrons of the art. However, in the late 18th century and early 19th century, the colonial British influences and Indian communal reformers heavily criticized the devadasi system and the affiliated prostitution that seemed to be condoned by the leaders of those communities (Rangashree 2010). In 1947, the Indian government banned all ceremonies where young girls were dedicated to temples (Srinivasan 1985:1870).

The art of Bharatanatyam was almost completely wiped out until reformists such as Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi, advocated the need to preserve the ancient art form while emphasizing different aspects of the devadasi traditions—such as the spirituality, the local regional influences, or the style of performance. Because Bharatanatyam was revived by several distinct individuals with unique backgrounds and goals, the art form was developed in different directions as it was carried beyond the Indian subcontinent to other parts of Asia and to the Western world.
performs the grand finale of her Bharatanatyam arangetram known the “Thillana.” She begins the piece in an aesthetic pose similar to the hand-carved statues in South Indian temples. In a display of intricate footwork, the dancer coordinates her body and eye movements as the tempo quickens and the melody gradually builds up to a brilliant crescendo. All of her physical and mental training have prepared her for these final moments. She closes her eyes as her body moves—almost by instinct—and her breathing synchronizes with the beat of the drum. As the devotional verse marks the completion of the arangetram, that same dancer opens her eyes as an individual transformed by this experience—an individual whose identity is shaped by this ancient art form.

REFERENCES CITED

Hemisphere. For example, Balasaraswati sought to preserve the art form within the devadasi community in India; on the other hand, Rukmini Devi reformed the costumes and the underlying content of the dances while shaping her style of Bharatanatyam through her training in ballet (Meduri 2004).

Ultimately, the numerous pioneers in the revived field of Bharatanatyam contributed to the concept that the art form was not only for the benefit of the society but also for the aesthetic creativity and development of the individual dancer.

For young adults around the world, Bharatanatyam has become more than a mere extracurricular activity—it has been a decisive factor in shaping the dancer’s life. I began learning Bharatanatyam at the age of five, yet only as a young adult did I realize its importance in my life. Bharatanatyam has allowed me to enter a world of detail and precision, self-discipline, and spirituality. Furthermore, this dance form has engendered great respect for my culture and encouraged my desire to share its meaning with the greater community.

Every Bharatanatyam dancer, including myself, learns the following Sanskrit verse: “yatho hasta thato drishti, yatho drishti thato manah, yatho manah thato bhaava, yatho bhaava, thato rasa” [Where the hand goes, the eye follows; where the eye goes, the mind follows; where the mind goes, the expressions follow; where the expressions go, there arises emotion]. Remembering these words, the dancer