

Contested identities: gaining credibility as a dancer

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Introduction

This presentation is part of a bigger research, which looks at dance and identity. The project's special emphasis is on South Asian Dance – dance genres that come out of the Indian subcontinent (mainly India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) and is primarily about the situation of the United Kingdom. It incorporates, however, elements of fieldwork in India and places South Asian Dance within a broader context of dance within local, translocal and transnational communities. When one starts investigating issues of identity one immediately opens many doors and the broader project tackles many questions. At a first level it differentiates between the identities of the dancers and the identities of the dance works - note here my use of the plural, I do not talk about single fixed identities but rather investigate identity constructions with their many facets and contradictory elements. The project therefore looks at both the dancers as agents within a global postcolonial world and at the aesthetics that underpin their dance production looking at the dialogue between the two. The focus on the paper today is on how dancers gain credibility and become accepted as dancers. Therefore it looks at the construction of authenticity. Examples to illustrate my discussion will come from South Asian Dance and from ballet.

The issues are twofold: dancers belong to dancing communities. They have grown out of distinctive social groups and their dance practice embody a number of values that are part of these groups. If I am born among the Australian Aboriginal people, the Tiwi, and I perform the dances that are part of Tiwi rituals, then I am a Tiwi dancer and my identity as such is not

contested. Similarly if I have trained at the Royal Ballet School in London and after graduation have joined the Royal Ballet, I am a ballet dancer and again this identity is not contested. The legitimacy of the dance practice therefore one could argue, resides in the dancers' bodies and whether or not these give a faithful rendition of a dance style that can be seen as representative of a distinct group of people. This seems pretty obvious and straightforward but it is in fact often rather more complex than that. What of the Tiwi dancer who has moved away from the islands? Or the Tiwi dancer brought up on the islands but who has one or more parents with origins somewhere else? What of the dancer of Indian origin who has never set foot in India yet performs dance genres from the subcontinent? What if the dancer's looks are not standard and do not conform to the norms of the dance genre? What if I am a brown swan among a flock of white swans? What if I am a white bharatanatyam dancer or a black kathak dancer?

Context-rich versus context poor

Before engaging in the discussion I want first to go back a little and talk about dance contexts and the importance they are seen to have – or not have – for our understanding of dance. As a social anthropologist I would generally argue that dance can only be fully understood in its varied socio-cultural contexts. I nevertheless also acknowledge that some dances are context-rich, whilst others are context-poor. The American anthropologists Edward Hall proposed these concepts in his book Beyond Culture in 1976 and saw them as the two ends of a communicative continuum. The idea is: how much context does one need to know in order to make sense of a situation? If we think of different dance genres there is no doubt that although context will always be significant and add to any comprehension of dance - indeed this is probably what most of us are advocating in this

room -, in some cases, however, it is also true one can also enjoy dance performances removed from their contexts.

Many people who attend 'art dance' concerts, for example, do not have an in depth understanding of the background, history and detailed aesthetics of the genres they are observing, and only a few will have any knowledge of the dancers' individual backgrounds and careers. Indeed it this ability to have an existence removed from its context of creation and representation that is one of the factors that will allow people to think of dances as 'art', as belonging to a 'great tradition' or to a 'learned/erudite' genres (the *traditions savantes*), whilst other dances will be perceived as 'non-art' because their whole reason to exist is rooted within specific contexts. In this kind of framework the dances of the Tiwi could be seen a context-rich, whilst Western classical ballet could be seen as being context-poor. Although both are underpinned by an aesthetic system, by a philosophy of dance so-to-speak, this is done in different ways. Ballet can belong to an 'art-for-art-sake' movement but Tiwi dance would have a harder time to situate itself in this way.

What about bharatanatyam, a dance genre originating in southern India that in the 20th century came to epitomise 'Indian' dance? In its 20th century concert tradition, it has many similarities to ballet. Whilst we may acknowledge that ballet is indeed an 'ethnic' dance, most of us would also recognise that when we see ballet we do not immediately think the Sun King, Versailles, 17th century France, quasi despotic aristocratic system. Rather the first images that come to our minds are likely to be tutu, point shoes, turn out and elongated lines. In its 300 years odd history the form somewhat moved away from its historical heritage and has come to be perceived by most of its audience as having a quasi a-cultural existence,

even though we as scholars know that this is not the case. Ballet thus is perceived as somewhat existing within a neutral, transnational space, a space that many contemporary bharatanatyam dancers and choreographers such as the British choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh, would like to be allowed to enter. They want to see their dance perceived by the audience and critics as an art form that is investigated in terms of its aesthetics rather than in terms of its ethnicity. They do not want their audiences to think of temple, exotic looking gods, or of arranged marriages. They want to be seen as contemporary dancers engaged in an artistic pursuit and not as cultural bearers responsible for giving an image of a whole community. Indeed most do not want to carry the burden of representation, 'to carry the flag for all brown persons' as I was told by a musician.

What quickly become evident in any investigation tackling these issues, however, is that non dance factors, such as skin colour, religion or class, often impinge on issues that are supposedly aesthetic and that one is entering a deeply political space where relationships of power and access to resources, whether cultural or financial, are at stake. Who is allowed to perform? Which techniques receive patronage? For what reasons? These are questions that need to be addressed. Here I will examine dancers crossing boundaries - the white bharatanatyam dancer, the non-white ballet dancer for example –and look at the issues they face when attempting to establish credibility.

Universality versus racialised marked bodies

Having investigated South Asian Dance in the UK for some years now, my findings have reinforced what had already been apparent to me when I researched the intercultural performance scene in London in the 1980s: audiences, sponsors and practitioners often use different parameters when

looking at dancers and choreographers of different origins.

The Amsterdam based Czech choreographer, Jirí Kilian, for example, was made much fuss of when, searching for inspiration for a new work, he observed Aboriginal dancers during a three days festival on Groote Eyland, Northern Australia in the early 1980s. A Dutch television crew followed him and the result was the documentary *On the Road to Stamping Ground*, which was broadcast in the United Kingdom to great acclaim. The programme highlighted Kilian's creativity and he became somehow a specialist on Aboriginal dance, his short experience giving him the authority to talk about it. To be fair, Kilian's remarks on the movement material he had observed were perceptive and he posited himself clearly as a Western artist in need of inspiration rather than an expert. My point is, however, that if an Aboriginal dancer had decided to spend three days at Covent Garden, people would probably accept with difficulty that he could make perceptive comments about ballet. If he then used his newly acquired knowledge to re-invigorate his artistic practice it is likely that he would be seen as 'borrowing', even possibly as corrupting his 'traditional' form, rather than as being creative.

What one needs to be aware of is that multiple standards may be held without the protagonists necessarily being aware that this is the case. This was clearly illustrated at the *Navadisha* conference held in Birmingham in 2000 when David Bintley, the artistic director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, pleaded against the erosion and extinction of cultures, and argued that 'we must retain our differences' He commented that he had always enjoyed South Asian dance as a form 'less polluted' than other art forms. I cannot imagine for one moment that he would talk in the same way when referring to ballet and his own company. In this rather romantic vision, South Asian

dance must remain 'pure' and become part of a museum culture for the enjoyment of people like him. So what we see here is a kind of ethnocentrism that is not derogatory on the surface, what some anthropologists call 'romantic ethnocentrism', in the sense that Bintley is genuinely interested and appreciative of the dance forms he is talking about. Deep down, however, he holds prejudices that set aside south Asian dance from the art dances of the West. As cultural theorist Sanjay Sharma argues 'one of the burden of being marked as 'ethnic' is that we are made particular; we can only speak from our own particular experiences from our particular, racialised marked bodies' (In Pinto ed. 2004:11).

In Sharma's word 'Orientalism harbours a racism of inclusion where otherness is integrated into a white norm and measured against to see how it deviates from it' (ibid). This is what the south Asian artists have to struggle with if they are to transcend the particular and claim universality. This is also what black ballet dancers have to face, and, interestingly enough, considering that they are perceived as somewhat belonging to the hegemonic power, it is also what white dancers have to face when they chose to perform dance genres other than those usually attributed to white traditions. It is this negotiation of identities underlying the artistic practices, which are of particular interest to me.

The issue of identity was especially poignant, for example, during my South Asian dance investigation when my research assistant, Magdalen Gorringe had her authenticity as a performer questioned by some of our informants. Although from her perspective the authenticity of a dance form resides in the body of the performer, and the extent to which this body transmits the aesthetic ideal embodied in the dance technique, some people, whites and browns, linked authenticity with skin colour. Before working

for my project Gorringer recalled that she had never really reflected on being a white dancer. The research, however, forced her to be more attentive to people's comments and reactions – and in fact to actively seek them out. An early piece of research work for the project occurred while Gorringer was dancing everyday for a month in an Indian restaurant in Edinburgh during the time of the international arts festival. As part of her data collecting she handed out questionnaires to try to get a sample of people's awareness and understanding of South Asian dance forms. She asked people to list the names of forms they knew about, to state whether they had seen any before, and asked them whether it met their expectations of what they considered to be 'Indian dance'. Several of the comments she got back gave her a rude awakening to people's perceptions of the genre, and, linked to this, her own performing of bharatanatyam. 'My children had hoped for an ethnic dancer' wrote one woman. 'We expected native dancers' complained another. Throughout the month she received a constant stream of jokes about which part of India she came from.

Other dancers experienced similar treatment. The Kathak dancer Noni Jenkyn Jones, was told once that she 'did not have the lovely brown eyes of an Indian dancer' and commented 'this idea of authenticity comes, a lot of the time, from a point of view of ignorance. ... [It's] as if the whole thing falls apart because you don't have a certain eye colour.' She also recalled a performance she was in, along with a number of British Asian dancers, within a community setting. At the end the organisers announced that the following year they would have 'real Indian dancers, from India, to take part in the event!' The fact that these dancers would probably perform very much the same repertoire as what had just been seen did not really enter the discussion

This issue of whether white dancers can perform south Asian dances has been with us for many years. Dancer Ram Gopal, who brought Indian dance to the UK before WWII employed white dancers in his company, yet he felt that he needed to raise the question:

Inevitably the question arises: can the British or the Europeans learn this art? Are they supple enough? And do they have the inner Indian feel of the dance for qualifying both professionally and amateur-wise for learning Indian classical and folk dancing?

(In M. Varadarajan ed. 1983: 58)

What is interesting is that most of the time, any issue with being the 'wrong' colour has come more often than not from audience members and dance funders, and not so much from other dancers. Many dancers would hold the view offered by Veena Ramphal, a bharatanatyam dancer when she argued:

An authentic dancer of any discipline is one who is dedicated to her art, strives to understand it, and can practice it as fully as possible. I don't think that authenticity is necessarily about lineage or some idea of a purity of a style. I think that those kinds of ideas can be very stultifying in themselves and can make an art form isolated and stagnate. —

Audience's expectations then, may have less to do with the inherent aesthetic quality of the dance and more to do with a supposedly cultural "authenticity". A performance can become the artistic representative of "Indian-ness", an ethnic display rather than a serious artistic product contributing to a larger framework of theatre dance within a culturally diverse society. The artists choosing to learn, assimilate and perform forms, which are seen as not belonging to their own heritage, therefore face a situation where their performances and teaching are perceived as lacking authenticity, not because they are not good at it but because they do not

have the right look or the right pedigree. This has artistic as well as financial consequences. According to our informants White south Asian dancers have generally more difficulties getting funding and finding venues than their British Asian counterparts, regardless of their quality as dancers, because there is an unvoiced policy that affirmative action means that British Asians must have priority. What is fascinating is that the very people, who deny them funding and therefore authenticity, would probably have acclaimed and funded Indian conductor Zubin Mehta, even though his music was, for him, out of another cultural heritage - though we must not forget imposed on him through colonialism. Again what are highlighted here are the different sets of criteria used to evaluate different artists and their practice. A number of UK trained South Asian Dance practitioners, British Asians as well as non-British Asians also pointed out to us that once they had a period of time in India, this somehow validated their practice, especially to the British Asian parents who then felt more comfortable to have their children taught by them.

In this way ethnic identity and aesthetic identity are linked as well as contrasted and few artists can avoid the tension between a desire to be seen as independent artists working in the 21st century, and using a variety of movement and musical vocabularies and on the other hand not wanting necessarily to deny their roots. What is important for us as scholars, however, when questions of identity and authenticity arise is to ask the question 'who is doing the asking and for what reasons?' because identity is ever shifting and exists only in context.