

A Postmodern Passage

Still jetlagged and dreamlike, I am unpacking many things: a suitcase of brightly colored scarves, a mental album of arresting images, the convoluted body language of a stranger who is aware of being a stranger, and a gnawing sense of my own cultural specificity. I open my closet and rediscover the blue suede jacket and red cowboy boots of the “real” me, the post-Godard underpinnings of androgenous femininity, and a strong conviction that the avant-garde isn’t just half-baked classicism after all. I am home.

I am a choreographer and performer, a person whose life and expression revolve around movement, and I visited India as a physical tourist. I wanted to encounter the physical experiences and dance forms of a radically different culture, to alight in a new physicality and allow that experience to trickle into my movement language and improvisational process. As an invited guest of the Kri Foundation in New Delhi, I had the good fortune to sample Kathak and Bharat Natyam, engage in artistic dialogue and studio exploration with Bharat Natyam dancer Rama Vaidyanathan, perform at the American Center as a guest of the American Embassy, lecture on my work at the India Habitat Centre, and meet many wonderful artists, arts administrators, and cultural consumers.

It will take time to unpack such a packed five weeks, to discover how all the sights and sounds and unfamiliar movements will find their way into my choreographic work. But what struck me most about this postmodern passage is not what anyone expected to strike me, or presented to me as cultural offering. I was amazed by the theatricality of ordinary life—the Christmas lights blinking on three different tempos in a dimly lit Hindu temple, the Khajal-rimmed eyes of babies in starched lace bonnets and boys’ trousers, the street theater of tourist-trade holy men, the heightened reality of *poojas* and wedding processions...

I am fascinated by the superposition of performance and reality, the ways we are simultaneously performing and also “really there”, and how sometimes in moments of performance epiphany we choose to reveal that duality to our viewers. I was most recently reminded of this when I was injured a week before *Pulling the Wool* and proceeded to perform for two weekends on crutches. The crutches became a prop, an icon, a sinister device for underlining themes that were already present in my work. But they were also real; I couldn’t walk without them. And I was glad to share that duality with my viewers—to exist together in a charged space sharing that multi-layered awareness.

In India I saw performance everywhere: in the men singing “Chai—Chai Chai” up and down the aisles of the train; in the women in black crossing the open plaza of Agra’s Jami Masjid mosque; in the rowboats on the Ganga that reminded me of my own site-specific performance on Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal; and in the postmodern improvisations of entering and exiting, movement and stillness, of Hindu temple-goers.

I was looking through a different lens, and I was aware of how specific my lens was to what I am. I am an American, a New Yorker, a woman, an inheritor of 60’s ideals and experiments, a choreographer, a philosopher, an activist. I see structured movement

improvisation in people visiting temples. I see a theater set in Jaipur's Jantar Mantar astronomical observatory. I see sculptural installations in piles of vermilion. I see gender-bending cross-dressing in the outfits of kohl-eyed children. And I see the World Trade Center in the cremation fires of Varanasi's burning ghats. During my visit, I knew that what I was seeing was embedded in a completely different cultural context. And yet I was inextricably embedded in mine.

This became clear with regard to my artistic work. My ways of making and seeing dance were strange to people and the fingerprints of postmodern dance, pedestrianism, and experiment were invisible to them. My dances use a movement vocabulary which I invent. Their meaning is not connected to a text or story. They involve significant amounts of improvisation and chance. And they are more than just movement; they include their environments. Western culture may be ubiquitous, but it is not universal. My work was not transparent in India.

This, I realized, is what cross-cultural dialogue is all about. It is not simply looking with admiration at the offerings of another culture, admiring the diversity of things in the world. Rather, it is looking with curiosity and wonder at the lenses through which we *see* each other's offerings-- holding those lenses up to the light and watching how the world is refracted.

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