

PULSE

DANCE

newsviewsreviews



Framing him/her/it

gender & sexuality in dance

inside
drag queens and nayika-s
a history of crossgendered performance
the troubled tale of a 'third gender' dancer
prize-winning dance and dancers

plus
odissi and the shifting torso
postnatal yoga



Sujata Mohapatra
Photo: Simon Richardson
Seeta Patel
Photo: Eric Richmond
Jacqui Chan
Photo: Vipul Sangoi
Kali Dass/Rathimalar
Govindarajoo
Photo: Simon Richardson

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Photo: Eric Richmond.

Inset:

Shruti Raut. Arangetram completed in September 2006.

Photo: Simon Richardson

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Veiling the 'S' -word



Gender and Sexuality.¹ "What has it got to do with south asian dance?" I have already heard the inevitable question, inevitable because of the S-word – and possibly, our particular dance history in India?

Far from being irrelevant, "unnecessary" or "provocative", I submit that gender and sexuality have always been part of dance; it is not raised often enough in serious yet non-academic south asian dance writing. (Complaining that a dancer's nayika-s are getting too sexual or sexy doesn't count!) Because performance is delivered through the body of the performer who is a gendered and sexual being, academic researchers have thought gender/sexuality pertinent to reading constructions of performance. And for us, in south asian dance, at the very least, we should ask what role gender/sexuality play in form-based history and practice, and then perhaps, in their subtext. (We merely cherry-pick here a couple of interesting angles from vast area of scholarship).

The dance from the subcontinent becomes a ripe candidate with its history of erotically-charged poetic imagery, and courtesans whose "prerogative" was to forge a "romantic" link with the sponsor argues **Aniruddh Vasudevan** [see page 14]. For various reasons, mostly historical and cultural, we may find it hard to see that "normal" male/female classical dance, and how dancers portray themselves or the other sex, raises gender/sexuality questions – though the oft-quoted *Natyasastra* divides along gender faultlines, and categorises heroines by how they engage in lovemaking!

Perhaps we more readily recognise that cross-gender performance concerns itself with notions about sex and self, even if only to subvert them. Here, typically, men dressed as women impersonate women – not just portray them, as in the conventional solo abhinaya. India has a long, layered history of impersonation; it is alive today in several 'classical' and 'folk' forms, even enjoying resurgence. The 19th century Tanjore court repertoire, which solo bharatanatyam invokes as its inheritance from courtesans was danced by men writes **Hari Krishnan** [see page 18]. And not surprisingly, finds **Tim Tubbs**, Indian dance's crossgender performance history is shared across the globe and through the times [see page 8].

Poignantly though, noted 'third gender' or hermaphrodite bharatanatyam dancer **Narthaki** found that, for decades, the heterosexual binaries of 'male/female' had no room for her. She did not want her dance to be seen as crossgender performance or gay work [see her profile on page 32] as her sexuality, she asserts, has always been fully female.

If sexuality is deeper and broader, a defining element of personality and about "how we give and receive love"², it must surely beat at the heart of these dance arts, with their endless, crafted delineations of intimacy in relationships. Our abiding interest in a love-torn padam or thumri – or in *Sex and the City* or *Friends* – is really about portrayal of human intimacy: with the unseen friend/hero/god-lover/child; intimacy even with the music and lyrics; and surely, intimacy with the audience and the performing self. And, because dance is embodied, rendered through the physicality of the performer, in experiencing *rasa* we necessarily, even if unconsciously, respond to how the sexuality of the performer feeds the character, and either charges or saps the performance.

Having sexuality i.e. being a sexual being, is not equal to *being* "sexy". Expectedly, it is in the portrayal of romantic love and sensuality that questions commonly arise. We seem to know intuitively, either as groups or as individuals, when sexuality illuminates humanity within classical structures or transgresses them; we also know when it is the performative message and the mode (as in the recent 'pole dancing' in Mumbai bars). A dance's artistic expressions/perceptions, as much as the dancer's, are forged in a cultural ethos; these are nevertheless filtered through a personal, gender-sexuality inclusive lens or 'optic'.³ They all shift with time and place, and the dancer's maturity as actor.

Perception, alas, is paramount, in life as in *rasa* theory; and the audience is critical. Scary, though, if what you conjure up as art is thought to be all you, even if it is some part of you, as it must be. It surely matters for whom you dance, as Uttara Coorlawala has written. Still, dancers sometimes blithely say they "become" the nayika – when they should be 'creating' the nayika for us to see. Our theoretical texts speak of 'aesthetic distance' between the 'created' and the 'creator'. The point, accordingly, is to create a performance, which, while it may carry an imprint of the performer, must stand alone. Art is about craft, as Indonesian crossgender performer Didik tells **Alessandra Lopez y Royo** [see page 16]. Authenticity is born of your authorship and embodiment, and thrives in making the viewer believe your 'reality' – not necessarily in making you the story.

Thinking back, I was perhaps being disingenuous when I sent around an email to several established south asian performers asking: "Whose sexuality do you portray?" Giving them overnight to reply probably let them off the hook, for only two answered [see page 15]. One of them replied: "Theirs!" pointing towards the audience.

Do read on. I believe you will be engaged.

Chitra Sundaram

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¹ For those who are unclear about the terms: let's most simply understand that 'gender' is about the physical/biological body makeup, and 'sexuality' is about the psycho-emotional makeup of a person. Thus we may know 'male' and 'female' in both; in majority, they are aligned (whether or not because of socio-cultural conditioning) and are certainly represented stereotypically or as 'archetypes' in traditional art.

² According to public health websites 'sexuality' includes: being male or female; the life span from infancy to old age; physical and emotional needs; love, affection, intimacy, belonging; attitudes, feelings, expression; reproduction, pleasure; cultural/religious influences; self image/respect.

³ Amia Srinivasan coins 'optic' as a short form for "a world view, a perspective, complete and integral to itself, with its own internal logic of sorting, deducing, inducing, and understanding." *Robinson Crusoe, Optics, and the Purpose of Art: In Defense of Literary Analysis* (2003) unpublished paper.