

Menaka Thakkar in conversation with Rosemary Jeanes Antze  
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This fall Menaka Thakkar, who was recently honoured with a honorary doctorate from York University, tours Western Canada with her Company, guest modern dancers and musicians invited from India. Six of her students, in Winnipeg, Regina and Toronto, will perform their arangetrum, the traditional solo performance that marks the completion of training. Her company performs in Toronto at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, November 18-21.

R. When you look back over your 20 years as an Indian dancer based in Canada, and how do you see your place and role here?

M. Actually I am really grateful to my immigration officer! Four months after I came I went for a work permit, and the immigration officer said "Why don't you apply for the landed immigration; Canada needs people like you." Well, I wasn't convinced, and I was a little bit angry with him. When I finally accepted that, it was flattering, but I realized that it was a big responsibility. As the Indian community grows, it becomes more and more difficult to keep the standard of something that is very deep rooted. In India if somebody does a little watered down technique, there are masters of it also. So people know what is good, what is bad. There are two ways that I feel my responsibility: one towards my art form and my own culture, one towards my own community here whose children are deprived of their own culture. Art brings a different kind of discipline. When children come to me they should learn that kind of discipline that is useful for everything.

R. You are in a very special position, because you are in both cultures, very comfortable and at home in both Canadian and Indian contexts. It opens up many possibilities.

M. Exactly. I have to hold so strongly my own belief. Its hard because children and parents go out in a different surrounding all the time. They come to me once in a week to learn culture. And in that time I have to give them that discipline, where to sit and how to move. For that kind of discipline you have to go to one teacher for a long time. You can't just start learning today and three months time you come on the stage, it doesn't work that way. In school you go from kindergarten to grade 13 to university. That is so established, no one asks questions. But in dance it's very hard for them to understand. That kind of discipline is very hard to insert in children, I'm sure in ballet it must be the same problem because that is not established universally. Any classical dance or music takes years and years. Look at some of my students, how beautifully they have come up, and that discipline carries over into their homework, they are so good in their studies. They really live in two full careers, University, you know how demanding that is. At the same time they give me full time in dance. All weekends and three full hours in evenings.

R. That's interesting. That is the way my childhood was as a ballet student in Ottawa.

M. Now they're getting impatient. Still people don't consider this a profession because they go to the university. But here they are, 15 years into it, Natasha, since childhood. But I still think all dancers should have another degree.

R. For the past 20 years you have grown as an artist, in between cultures. Could you describe some of the landmarks in your development?

M. In India when I was a child I wanted to be a dancer. But as my father said you should have some kind of degree, I wanted to become a doctor. When I see these girls it doesn't surprise me their passion for both things. Sudha was in the house. My father encouraged her. In fact my grandparents and uncles were not happy at all in those days, to encourage the dance. But Rukmini Devi's influence and that of the Theosophists, (my father was a Theosophist) was so strong in our family. My father said it doesn't matter if my daughters don't go on the stage, but they will learn dance as an art form. So in that way it came to our family. I remember at the age of 2 1/2 when I was watching Anjali-Ben coming to the house and teaching Sudha and other girls. I used to go and collect all the neighbours' children and teach them! I know that it was so much an obsession for me to be a dancer. I remember how I did my aramandi practice. Between two beds, in that little space, I used to stand so my knees would go completely side, and do "theya they".

R. And did you practise every day?

M. For 2 1/2 years I did that one step. I remember that Sudha taught me that one step and said when this is done I will teach you again. She did not get time and did not want to teach me until I was four. So I practised that one step every day. I had that feeling that unless I do that perfectly I am not going to learn another. It was so strong in me that I want to be perfect, I want to be best dancer, I want to be dancer. There were some phases of frustration, but my family was wonderful at that time, to bring me back to the spirit. But everybody passes through that.

R. When you came to Canada, How did you feel about bringing your traditional dance here?

M. I did come here to see other dance forms, because in India in those days, except for one style, you don't learn that many other styles. Ritha Devi, Yamani Krishnmurthi, Indrani Rehman, these are the three dancers who learned more styles. Otherwise there wasn't that kind of openness. But Sudha was very open. She had been teaching at Bombay University for 10 years, dance and theatre. She had brought many styles and had done a lot of

experimentation in the dance dramas. I was her assistant, so I learned all those things, because I was her book. I was like her storage. I learned a lot of other things in my body.

Then I went to art school. Six hours practical there everyday and homework and all. I was a bit sick. So my father said both are demanding, you select one. I was very good in art, so I went three years to art school, then I did my B.A. in fine arts. In fine arts I had to learn anatomy. While learning that, I realized if you keep control over your body, if you know your body properly, then ten styles you can do.

R. So it was the study of anatomy that opened you to the possibility of doing other kinds of dance?

M. Exactly. Because how you use your body, that's so important, to know exactly where to bend. In Bharata Natyam it's always from here, from the pelvic joint, the hip socket you open up. And in Odissi it's this bend [from the ribs]. These are two different bends one can keep control over. There's a different neck movement that you can use. So if you know all your joints, and have control over them, you can do anything.

R. That's interesting. Sometimes people get inspired to learn other kinds of dance from seeing the external form, but you seem to be moving more from the inside, from the potential of the human body.

M. My father had loved Odissi and urged us to learn, but we were not prepared, mentally or physically. Then when I went to art school it started making more sense to me. So we invited Ramani-Babu (Odissi guru) to come to Bombay. And for 6 months I stopped Bharata Natyam to concentrate on that. Sudha was in the house to check.

Then I was lucky to go to Nana-ji, a wonderful teacher. What he brought into my body was a little different from the Kalakshetra style, which Sudha also did and which is now the main style in the world. But then Nana-ji was very much into yoga. When I went everyday morning we had to do surya namaskar [salute to the sun] and exercises. No other school was giving that kind of training at that time, including breathing exercise and eye exercises, the breathing and spine, and meditation.

R. I am very interested in your opening up from the anatomical possibilities to other styles, to a different way of learning with your guru. When did you first see a Western dance form?

M. I didn't see much until I went to the university. The first performance I remember was on ice, ballet on ice, It's called Ice Capades. It had come to Bombay. And we thought, Oh, you can slide so much in ballet! for that variety, for that newness of it we had gone. Then I remember the Romanian dance company came. There I saw Petre [Bodeut]. I remember him as a very young child and he was jumping and going in Romanian folk dance, and they did some ballet also. Then when I saw him here [in

Regina], I said I remember you, you came to India. He was a wonderful dancer and a very young man. My eyes kept looking at nobody else but Petre.

R. What was it about him?

M. Oh the way he was dancing the Romanian folk dances. They had brought very colourful, very energetic dances. Then when he was doing ballet, I thought, " Oh how wonderful!" So to Western or European dance that was my first introduction. Still I see Petre in my mind.

R. Then when you came here...?

M. I came here actually to see Western dance. Because in those days western dance came very seldom to India. (In the meanwhile I also learned Kuchipudi.) In the meanwhile a very strange/sad thing happened. Rasesh-Bai came as a Fullbright scholar to Rochester and in six months time my father passed away. He wanted to come back to look after us. But we thought if he stays there it is better for us. I was about 16 at the time. He took promise from us over the phone that then in that case you are all going to come here. So that is the reason that we are here, that promise my brother made in '64. Rasesh came here to Canada because York University had a beautiful Fine Arts department. All three sisters were interested in fine arts and we all could come here. He had met Jim Beveridge whom he showed Sudha's work. And Pragna wanted to do a Ph.D. in Sanskrit drama, Kuttiyattam, and the University of Toronto had a very good Sanskrit department. So for his three sisters he moved to Canada.

I came in 1972. Rasesh-bai told me if you really want to see Western dance, then you bring your costumes, music, and things. Then you will be able to talk to them on a different level. My first show was at the University of Toronto Playhouse Theatre. That night I got four professional engagements to perform. Many students came up to me and said they wanted to learn. And there was the Indian Festival at York University in 1974.

R. You have had a real challenge to maintain your tradition while being open to what you saw here. You went to Dance in Canada Conferences right from the beginning. How did you see your place in the Canadian dance scene?

M. I was very sure about my own dance. At Dance in Canada, I thought it was give and take. I danced in the International Year of Women, as the only Indian dancer. I felt that I was showing my culture and getting the chance to see other cultures. It was so overwhelming for me. At York I got a lot of chances to see classes. At art school we had to do a lot of sculpture, and I realized the same clay could be used in different ways to make a beautiful shape. The body was for me clay.

R. In those early years did you ever take ballet or modern classes?

M. No. I enjoyed watching. and I was trying to see what are the principles. We use the same instrument, but Indian dance has missed out some of the parts. We haven't used the body in that elaborate way. And Western dance has left out many of the things that Indian dance has. In Indian dance the pelvis has been used very little. There is holding in the lower chakra, [below the navel] but we haven't the strength to hold a leg up.

R. The lower abdomen is weak and yet you have to be still, you have to be centered there.

M. Nana-Ji has said the centre is a pendulum, and gravity has to be down. That centeredness comes, but it doesn't bring the strength. So I looked at the exercises Western dancers do. I wanted my students to learn those things. I have created a whole work-out for them adding all those things. I have always believed the body is like clay. First they have to learn Bharata Natyam. Then I wanted to bring my openness out in then, but with understanding. I invited some modern dancers to give workshops. From a number of different styles I have created this work-out we do everyday in the summer.

R. You have been innovative in your way of teaching. What about your choreography? When did you first make something new and different from the dance items you had received from your teachers?

M. First the need arose for the group. Then the proscenium was always my canvas. Looking at Rukmini Devi's dance dramas, I saw she was like a painter, in her choreography in her costuming and design. Always I thought the stage was a beautiful canvas; one can paint on that.

Because my audience was different here, we started doing demonstrations so the audience can understand more. This was need here.

Then in 1982 I asked Grant [Strate] to create a piece for me. Quite a few dancers said to me, "Menaka, you will spoil your style". But I said, no, let me see how my body reacts. And I enjoyed working with Grant. He did something keeping me in mind, yet he was still a ballet person. I learnt a few exercises and tried to bring out his movements. Later I added those to my work-out.

R. What was your first dance drama with a group?

M. Sitaswayamvaram. It was in the tradition of Rukmini Devi's dance dramas, but the emphasis was different. I always believed that Sita was victimized to make Rama the ideal king. Nothing against Rama, he is a god. But I felt, if Sita was not there, the story would not have a mood. Everything is happening because

of her. I thought the main heroine was more important than the main hero. Ramayana is a beautiful Indian epic which really embraces the whole of Indian culture.

At that time I had mostly non-Indian students, mostly they were students from York. To them I had to justify parts of the story -- such as the custom of arranged marriage -- using explanations that were convincing to me.

R. In your own life you must have at some point made a decision you were going to dance and not going to marry.

M. In fact I wanted my whole family not to get married! Indian custom was that once you get married, everything closes down. At that time I thought my whole family should do art, dance, music. That's very important. My main concern was that they would get married and leave it. But nobody listened to me!

R. You could have had a marriage arranged for you at any point.

M. Oh sure, absolutely. But from the childhood I knew I'm not going to get married. I am just going to dance. That much obsession I had for the dance.

R. Also you have been so fortunate to have Rasesh to help you.

M. In the beginning he was great. He loved to help me for the art. He brought me to my independence, where I can really look after myself and do my own thing. I am so grateful to him. He was like a father to us; he took instantly my father's place.

R. This year has been very exciting for Indian dance with the New Directions Festival and Conference last February, as well as you own work with Robert Desrosiers and with the dancers of Groupe de la Place Royale. What is happening now?

M. I think that now, in Canada, Indian dance is going in two channels, the creative work and the traditional work. Now we have a generation of Indian children who live literally in two cultures. They have to understand our own roots and culture, but they live here, as do my audiences. So the Indian dance and culture becomes is a base.

So in my performances I would first like to do a traditional solo dance. Then I will do traditional dance in choreography for a group, nothing related to Indian culture or Indian religion, so that it's a universal story, perhaps Karna-Kunti, a mother and son story, from the Mahabharata. But for the audience it could be any mother and son, something that every body can relate to. Then I would like to work on -- not fusion -- but a new alphabet which can be meaningful to everyone. It's not that I just want variety in my program. It's that we can use the body in a variety of ways, and show a wider range of choreography.

R. What can you imagine as some of the possibilities for your

students, who are so Canadian, and yet have learnt so deeply about their roots through their training with you?

M. I encourage them in both directions. Now Natasha is working with Roger Singha at present. I said sure, go ahead, but keep coming here and don't loose out these things. I keep my eye on them and they show me what they are doing. Now she is entering the Tamil competition in New York and doing varnam [a challenging traditional item] there, so practising that, and coming with me on tour. She was doing different arms with Roger and I said, sure, try to feel that in your body. But just don't do it for the sake of newness. Roger's main background is in modern and Natasha has a strong foundation in Indian dance. His way of looking is as a modern dancer looking at Indian dance. That kind of experimentation is wonderful.

Also I will keep inviting teachers and performers from India. So they are getting from that side also. The same way my teachers were keeping an eye on me when I was learning Odissi, that I didn't loose out my Bharata Natyam, the same way I would like my students to be.

Ling Li, a student of Mme. Shu, gave a workshop to my students in Chinese dance. I thought that was good because Chinese dancers have a different kind of delicacy, even in doing ballet exercises. Those kinds of things I will keep doing but under my guidance.

In fact Shobana [Jeyasingh] liked my dancers so much. She called so many times to Natasha to come and join her company.

R. How would you feel if one of your dancers left for a time?

M. That's fine, I told Natasha, sure, but not this year because our commitments are fixed. In future, go ahead, and come back to our company and it will be richer. One day you girls will have to take over my company and school.

R. So you see your dance going on in your students.

M. Oh yes, very much. I have told them that in Canada we have to establish Indian dance company. This is the first Indian dance company. It has taken me 20 years. What Shobana does is to go to India and bring dancers [back to England]. I don't believe in that. I want to create my own dancers here. It took 20 years; now you are all here. And the Canada Council has started to understand what is Indian dance. If you all go away I will be left with only junior dancers and people will say, oh it's an amateurish company. Once we have established that there can be an Indian dance company, then you all can go. But then the other junior group will have come up.

R. What about non-Indian students?

M. If someone would like to take Indian dance as a profession, that's wonderful. Otherwise, take Joan Phillips, she comes to learn, to take a few workshops with my summer students. But I

know her main interest is not to become an Indian dancer, but to make use of that in her choreography. And that's wonderful. Roger also wanted to come this time for the same reason. And Genevieve Dussault had another idea, to do a comparison between Baroque dance and Allarippu. But that was fine. That is one level.

Now I don't have any non-Indian student who would like to become an Indian dancer. I had one who was a beautiful actress, but at a certain age she could not maintain that discipline.

R. All young people grow up looking for an identity. When I studied Indian dance [in India], there was somewhere in me that felt it completely right for me. But another part of me said, I love it, but I would be fooling myself to pretend that could express the culture.

M. Both my western students and first generation Indian children have a conflict in their minds. Outside they're Canadian, whereas in Indian dance there's a different kind of discipline, a different way of dealing with things. If your want to become an Indian dancer, it's very important that you become a part of the whole thing. With these girls I sometimes have to go more into the traditional aspects, then they understand. Then the way opens up and they get the Indian flavour. Of course, some students study just as a dear hobby. But it's different if they want to come as a professional and to perform. For those it is my responsibility to keep professional standards.

My older group has passed through that. Now it doesn't matter at all to them. When they go outside, they are absolutely Canadian, in their behaviour and their talk. They are so at home there. Then they come to Indian culture, they come to me. When we are doing Indian stories, they are fine with me. It takes time to come to the point of confidently merging two cultures together.

When you are walking on new ground, the path narrows and then it is dangerous. If you pass through that you are fine. So my students, some of them pass through, some remain behind.

R. So in your company you have a group that has passed through?

M. Yes. And they are now becoming role models for the younger ones.

R. Then this is truly a generation of dance that has gone by.

M. Those children were looking at me as a role model, and still I am one in a certain way. They were not listening to their parents, they were listening to me. Because they were Indian dancers, very traditional but very open -- travelling, performing, not getting married. But I still believe they should go to university, that they should have a degree in case something should go wrong ... just as the Dancer's Transition Centre encourages.



R. Let me ask you one more thing. We have been talking about the past 20 years. What do you hope for the next 20? What are your dreams.

M. Indian dance has still not gone 100% into the mainstream.

R. Do you mean the mainstream of dance culture or of Canadian culture itself?

M. Actually in dance culture it is accepted, and people have appreciated it. Only with that give and take have I been able to do this much. But in general, by audiences, I really want it to be seen as a beautiful art form. When I do a progression of three different levels in my performance, it opens the door.

When I worked with Robert, a lot of other people came, because it was mixed with modern dance. Many who saw Bharata Natyam for the first time said that it is such a beautiful art form. The same way my Indian audience loved "Moods of Morning." I was a little bit worried for the parents, that generation, because Robert's dancers were all in body suits and tights. Because they also live in two cultures, they have certain problems with their children: sometimes they have to give freedom, sometimes they have to pull reins back. So if you can merge the best of two cultures, that's wonderful. So many young people came to see that program again and again, because they found they could relate to those things. My dancers brought their university friends. When it's only Bharata Natyam, our Indian children are shy. Oh I love that, but I don't know that my friends will. So that way its opening up and both societies get to see the other's culture.

I would like to do more collaborative work. I would like to create more dancers -- like Natasha, Krishna, Meera -- who can confidently live in these two cultures. In that way I grow myself. In these 20 years I have grown even technically, understanding why I do certain moves and how to do them. In choreography I have developed my sense of space, the entry, exit, the groupings, the paint on the canvas. Unconsciously so much has happened through working with others, that opens a certain kind of visual awareness that gives a spark to my choreography.