



Chandrabhanu: choreographer, dancer and anthropologist

Jack of many trades, and a master of dance

Chandrabhanu, director of the Bharatam Dance Company in Australia, recently visited Thailand, and agreed to remove his shoes to perform the Bharata-Natyam and Odissi at SPAFA centre

Born of Indian, Burmese, Chinese, Siamese and Arabic-Malay antecedents, choreographer and dancer Chandrabhanu (Chandra) grew up in Malaysia, where he absorbed the influences of traditional Malaysian and Indian dances; and experienced colonialism and various social changes.

Chandra was born and brought up in Perlis, North Malaysia. He went to the United States as an exchange student, and then studied Indian dance disciplines in Malaysia and India. In 1971, Chandra moved to Australia where he obtained a Doctorate of Philosophy in Social Anthropology from Monash University in 1980. Seven years later, he established the Bharatam Dance Company in Victoria. He has been involved in lobbying for

the support and development of Asian arts in Australia, and was appointed to several important positions on arts funding bodies including the Australia Council Dance Fund (1987-1991) and the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee for Multicultural Arts (1990-1991).

While Chandra has been described as a “charismatic and cathartic international performer of

Bharata-Natyam and Odissi Indian Classical Dance” (ancient dance forms that incorporate the art of the stage, drama, music, poetry and dance), he is also a scholar and researcher in Asian dance heritage and development, and travels widely in the region.

Despite his hectic schedule, Chandra managed to squeeze a dance demonstration into his brief visit to Bangkok in September, 1998.

He performed an Indian classical dance program titled ‘Chandrabhanu in Oddissi and Bharata Natyam’, and also spoke to a group of about sixty interested individuals, mostly students and dance teachers, at the Seameo Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA). A workshop held at the Patravadi Theatre later was attended by nearly 50 Thai dancers and students.

The teacher, performer and dancer enthralled his audience with his eloquence and his stomping, swirling and exhilarating dance movements during the two-hour demonstration.

Later, looking very comfortable back in his jeans and loose silk-shirt, Chandra talked with members of SPAFA in a street cafe.



Photographed by Nipon Sud-Ngam

When and how did you become interested in the art of dance?

Old Indian films. As a child, I watched a LOT of Malay, Hindi, Tamil, Chinese films at the cinema, and I was fascinated by the art of dance. Also when I was a young boy, I travelled to many places in Perlis with my father, who had to visit villages for his work. We walked for hours through rice fields, and sometimes we stayed in the communities. It was there that I became exposed to traditional music and dance. These trips were very crucial in my relationship with the common people of Perlis.

My father who was a State Financial Officer, was a well-cultured and knowledgeable person. He presented me the entire English encyclopaedia when I was seven years old. I’ll never forget that this man bought this whole set of books for me. He sang, acted, loved music and was a highly imaginative visionary who encouraged me to dance, because he was inspired by the fact that his grandmother was a dancer in India. When I was four,

I used to give performances at home. I still remember hearing him say, "You're putting your footwork wrong! You should put your feet like this." It's such a funny memory.

You must see dance in the daily movements of everyday life. Can you give some examples how they are expressed in your work?

My emphasis for my dances is to find a flow of movement and energy ... very much like what the Chinese call Chi, that flow of energy and movement - not to break it, not the structure, but the goal of it. I observe this motion very seriously in every culture: somebody stooping down to pick something, a turn of head, etc., finding for instance that one of the things I like about Asian culture is the many different ways of 'getting down to the ground' and 'getting up'; because of our concepts of the space above ground level, plus our respect for whom we're in front of: elderly, younger person...

These influences - do you make written notes or simply file them into your mental cabinet?

Usually, I concentrate on a series of thought patterns for half an hour on one concept; go back to the studio and develop it further, or think through the gestures of daily life. Sometimes, these ideas are put away, and a couple of years later, they surface, and you think "Oh God, I thought about this two years ago." It's always

a pleasure when that happens because it means that something quite important has been registered.

You have some intriguing titles - Stone the Crows, Corrugated - for your dances, do you think up a subject matter with a general title first before you set to work on a piece, or do you settle on the title near the completion of the creative process?

It depends. For **Stone the Crows**, we stumbled upon the title halfway through the project. **Corrugated** - we were observing the long houses while researching in Borneo during the beginning of the project, and decided on the title there and then.

Apart from dance, how do you best express yourself creatively?

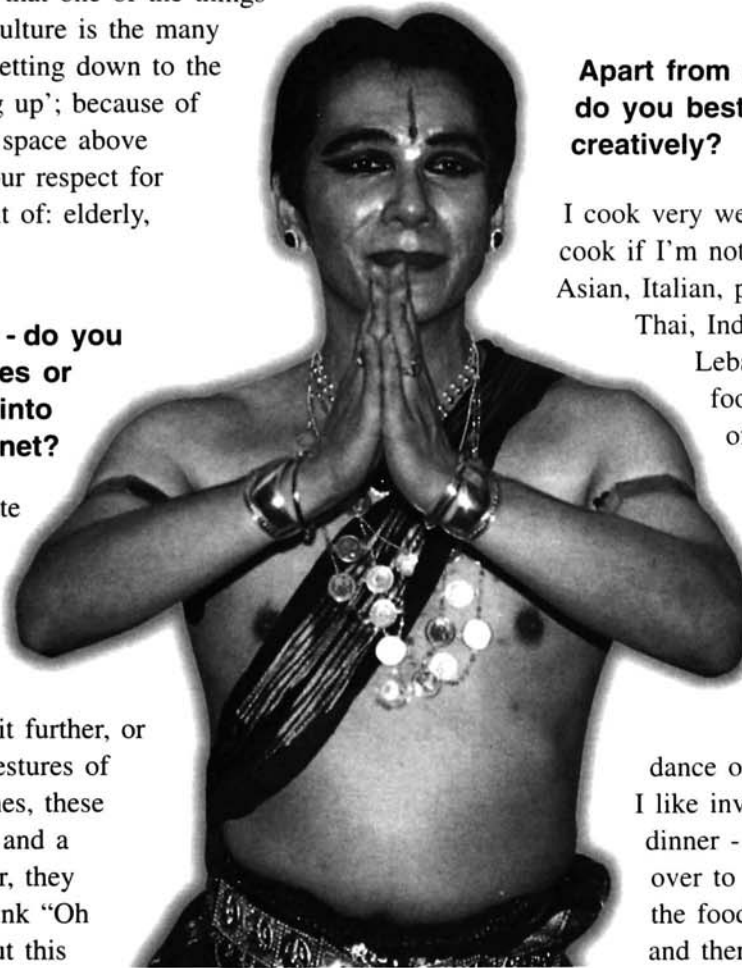
I cook very well (I would be a cook if I'm not a dancer); I do Asian, Italian, pseudo-French, Thai, Indonesian,

Lebanese ... I love food! It's another type of choreography.

I have a well-equipped kitchen, and would have to only take an hour to cook most days because I have to rush off to work teaching

dance or rehearsing.

I like inviting friends for dinner - they enjoy coming over to my house because the food is always creative and there is always wine on the table..



Photographed by Nipon Sud-Ngam

Your development of the onomatopoeic rhythm chants (*jathis*) - is it something original? Can you give a demonstration?

No, it is not, and yes it is. Onomatopoeic rhythm chants are very interesting because in Indian classical dance, *jathis* are used, and it sometimes sounds almost like a Perlis dialect. Where I come from, the Perlis dialect is also very onomatopoeic, meaning if you see people speak, they use hand gestures and make up words as they go along in conversation, off on a tangent at times, amazing ... from subject to subject, suddenly it becomes like a chant, with possibilities of new meanings. I have developed my own style of Indian *jathis*, and my rhythmic phrasing has been influenced by some of the onomatopoeic nature of Indian languages and the Perlis dialect.

At this point, Chandra broke into some imitation of chanting which sounded close to ethnic rap.

Do you have any mentors?

All my "gurus" are very important to me, but in terms of somebody as a mentor, my partner Geoffrey Goldie is probably the only mentor I have. I learnt a great deal from him particularly in the area of the visual arts, which I then applied to my dance. We function very well together: we talk a great deal about art and aesthetics. He is someone whom I can relate to in the mentor sense.

Which person/dancer do you most admire?

In my younger days, I was a great admirer of a woman dancer named Yamini Krishnamurthy. One of India's greatest dancers, she had a powerful style. She



has of course aged, but is still incredibly vibrant. I was very inspired by her.

Then there is the Balinese dancer, Oka Dalem – a dynamic, and imaginative artist. Another dancer whom I also greatly admired is Australian dancer Kelvin Coe, who has passed away.

You must have a very active life, so what bores you?

People with bad manners, bad taste, and bad style.

Do you have any major regret in your life?

That I never learnt to play the piano.

What has been the most consistent criticism of your work?

Number 1: Too long, and number 2: Syncretism - they find the links, the mixture of cultural diversity mind boggling. I always answer the criticism by saying that if the work requires the duration of three hours, then it shall be three hours. I mean, I've done short programmes, and I have complaints from some members of the audience who said ... you know, we're paying \$25, we only got 90 minutes. I also do pick up a fight quite quickly when the criticism contains racist undertones.

How many hours do you practice each day, and how do you relax, unwind from your work?

It depends. When I'm doing a show then I'll work out an average of between 3 to 5 hours. If there's no performance, I sometimes try to do an hour, or swim - because it helps my lower back.

I unwind by swimming, and cooking.



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Apart from a good lower back, what would singularly improve your life at present?

I would like an artistic director to take over my load of work, so I could concentrate on some other areas which I've always thought of covering, and [rather abruptly] I'D LIKE A BIGGER HOUSE! My house is a centre for dancers; a place for visitors, performers, artists, and friends to stay, and a larger one would do very well to accommodate all these activities.

Any secrets to share with aspiring young dancers?

I don't know [laugh]. Swim, stretch, I do a series of stretching and warm-ups upon waking everyday. I think all artists should follow their instincts.

Would you like to be remembered as the Nuyerev of Asia?

No way! I don't like the idea of the star image. I think, more than anything else, I'd like to be remembered for giving a lot of people the opportunity to learn, or to promote dance; touching people with my dancing. I don't have any worries about it because I know audiences are moved and touched and that's my major motivation, not stardom.

What in your opinion, is unique in Asian dance that set it apart from the others?

The spiritual depth and an ability to communicate inner space rather than mere physicalities.

What do you see as the most common point among the dance traditions of the East?

The ability to live ritual as part of life; the ability to find that inner space and to transcend the body,

to layer metaphors and symbols, and to connect with the natural world.

Where do you think the development of dance in Southeast Asia is going?

It will move into modernism, but with an Asian psyche. More and more dancers and choreographers are working in this field, using the Asian legacy but producing work with Asian themes and poignancy. However, we have to develop an audience who will value these developments.

How much longer do you intend to prance about before you decide to rest those bones and muscles of yours?

Who knows? As long as I am fit and have something to say through dance, I will continue to do so. After all, one of Asia's most famous dancer, Kazuo Ono, the Japanese Buto artist, is well over 80!

Chandra's Bharatam Dance Company mixes the innovative and classical that are challenging and mesmerising. The music used for its productions include Indian ragas to Tibetan opera. His latest work is Jadi Jadian, based on the legacy of British imperialism in Malaysia, and which is a study of Martinha Rizelles, the enigmatic wife of Captain Francis Light, who established Penang as a port. Martinha Rozelles. His wife is supposed to be part Thai and had come from Phuket.



Recent Choreographic and Performance Highlights

- 1997 *Darpana: The Mirror of Gesture*, new solo work in Bharata-Natyam, The National Theatre, St. Kilda
Odissi Odyssey, new work in Odissi for the Bharatam Dance Company, The National Theatre, St. Kilda
Old Wives Tales, experimental work for the Bharatam Dance Company, The Beckett at the CUB Malthouse, Melbourne, with Paul Carter and Tim Hook
- 1998 Jubilee, solo Bharata-Natyam recital in celebration of the 25th anniversary of Chandra's career in Australia, March, National Theatre, St. Kilda Savithri, Classical and contemporary work for the Bharatam Dance Company, music by Chitravina N. Ravikiran, May, National Theatre, St. Kilda. England Performance Tour, Bharata-Natyam Highlights, London, Wembley, Birmingham, with the Bharatam Dance Company, July/August
Jadi Jadian, for the Bharatam Dance Company, with Paul Carter and the Gendang Terinai Orchestra of Perlis, Kuala Lumpur premiere, Pangung Eksperimen, September, Melbourne season - October, The Beckett Theatre at the CUB Malthouse Artistic Director for the Broadmeadows Community Dance Project, November

Language, music, metaphors, consecration of space and time for performance, mythic images and the spirit, all come into play, to create depth. Throughout my career, I have repeatedly examined the outcome of the translations of these elements - firstly, in the process of the traditional methods that I was taught by my teachers; secondly, in the course of my interpretations of the traditions; thirdly, in presenting the works to audiences that may not have the frames of references to these traditions; fourthly, in presenting the works into a language understood by the majority of that audience (English); and fifthly, in consciously embarking on a course of finding new meanings, not only in the area of existing vocabularies, but in creating and finding new expressions. In this, the socio-cultural and the political environment of Australia have come into play, and one could say that there has been a creation of cross-cultural memory.

- Chandrabhanu

