Culture: How India Inspired a Dance Pioneer
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How India Inspired a Dance Pioneer

With little exposure to the real thing, Ruth St. Denis dazzled audiences across America and Europe with her creation of "Radha" and other Indian dances

In our January, 2009, issue, Dr. Joshi recounted Europe's introduction to Indian dance, the 1838 debut of the bayaderes, a South Indian troop of temple dancers or devadasis. In this article, she tells the story of Ruth St. Denis, one of the founding artists of modern dance, whose popular "Indian" dances of the early 20th century redefined the art as an expression of mysticism and spirituality.

By Dr. Kusum Pant Joshi, London

After first appearing on the western stage in 1838, Indian dance once again surfaced prominently in the early 20th century. As with the bayaderes in 1838, the performers of the troupe in 1906 were of Indian origin. This time, however, their lead dancer and choreographer was not an Indian, but a young American named Ruth St. Denis.

St. Denis' Indian dance pieces were attempts to convey Hindu philosophical ideas to Western audiences in a manner that would be intelligible to them. These were not authentic Indian dances, as were those of the bayaderes, but were inspired by Indian themes and included the sinuous and rippling arm motions and graceful body movements and postures of classical Indian dances. St. Denis abundantly used Indian dress materials and jewelry and designed and wore long flowing costumes. To create an Eastern ambience, she used Indian brassware, ornate columns, flowers, incense and other creative stage props.

St. Denis was a gifted dancer whose artistic creations demonstrated how to relink dance with spiritualism at a time when Western dancers had generally cut themselves off from its religious and spiritual origins. She had studied and was deeply inspired by non-Western and especially Indian civilization at a time when a tendency--much later dubbed as "Orientalism" by Edward Said--prompted her contemporaries to look upon non-Western people as inferior, backward and static or even weird and animalistic. Ruth St. Denis's relative open-mindedness was thus a fresh departure that helped free Western dance from its shackles, elevated it onto a higher plane and placed important and even profound facets of Indian culture before Western audiences.

A Family Inheritance

Born January 20, 1879, Ruth St. Denis's uninhibited self-expression as a young girl and her life-long pioneering spirit was largely inspired by her nonconformist mother and inventor father. One of the first American women to venture to train and practice as a doctor, Ruth's mother, though deeply spiritual, was also progressive in her personal perspective and given to taking recourse to unconventional ways of thought and action.

Referring with pride to her parents, Ruth wrote fondly in her autobiography: "I feel that my urge for pushing forward into new fields of vision and scaling far mountains of thought derived largely from these two who were so near the pioneer stages of our American life. Father, not long from the Civil War, married mother as a doctor, a profession very little invaded by women. My mother was a woman about fifty years ahead of her time. She sensed life in an infinitely more intense way than any of the people in our neighborhood."

The American Dance Scene

American popular dance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was performed in vaudeville shows, where it was part of a medley of comic acts, live music and circus-style acts performed by men and animals. Having nothing to do with aesthetics, a higher purpose or refined thought, it was merely physical, resembling the antics of circus performers. In Ruth's own words: "To be a dancer in those days was like entering an artistic vacuum. Dancing consisted solely in the number of cartwheels, roll-overs and splits, kicks and other agilities that a dancer could achieve. The poetry and philosophy of the dance had yet to be born."

Ruth found inspiration in the positive developments in the performing arts wafting in from Europe, such as the Delsarte technique of acting. Stressing the link between an artist's inner emotional experience and gestures and movements derived from personal observation of human interactions, Delsarte's novel style won many followers in America.

Artistic Awakening

Despite her high artistic ambitions, young Ruth was pushed by her family's financial straits in 1892 to launch herself into skirt dancing. This was a slightly risque form of entertainment popular in dime museums and vaudeville shows. Luckily, she was soon able to move on to acting small parts in the famous theatre company of David Belasco and toured America and Europe.

Her final transformation from an actress into an artist with a vision, purpose and inspiration was sudden. The unlikely catalyst was an image of the Egyptian Goddess Isis in a cigarette poster that happened to catch her eyes in a Buffalo drugstore in 1904. Having finally awakened to the realization that her vocation lay in being a dancer with a mission and not a mere public entertainer, Ruth swiftly embarked on a new path. She determined to become a universal instrument of spiritual revelation and reflect man's eternal search for beauty and grandeur. However, what made Ruth St. Denis unique was that while her earlier contemporaries, such as Isadora Duncan, had drawn inspiration from ancient Greece, Ruth was pulled via Egyptian culture towards India.

Ironically, Ruth St Denis became linked to India's culture and thought when she made a trip to that most flamboyant and extravagant centre of Western consumerism: New York's Coney Island. It was described in a 1904 publication as a pleasure resort unsurpassed "in the world in its elaborateness or ingenuity to wheedle away dimes and despondency." Coney Island was home to Luna Park, one of the most dazzling amusement or theme parks of its time.

In the summer of 1904, when Ruth visited Coney Island, Luna Park's major draw was the "Streets of Delhi," a grandiose effort to duplicate the pageantry and drama of Lord Curzon's Coronation, that Durbar held at Delhi in January 1903. It offered a grand spectacle of "gilded chariots and prancing horses, and trained elephants and dancing girls, regiments of soldiers and an astonishing number of real Eastern people and animals in gay and stately trappings. The magnificence of the scene was such as to make those who witnessed it imagine they were in a genuine Oriental

city." It was in this oriental wonderland that Ruth St. Denis first spotted the East Indian dancers, fakirs (mendicants), snake charmers and others from whom she drew inspiration for her Indian dances.

Studying the East

Though fired by the "Streets of Delhi" to develop a vaudeville act made up of three Indian dances before a temple murti (enshrined form) of Radha, Indian dancing was initially not her goal. Her aim was to simply generate enough income to fund her Egypt-inspired dances by cashing in on the then current craze for Eastern exotica. But her plan changed when a turn towards Indian dancing started her on a journey to increase her knowledge about India, and especially Hindu culture. As she went about extracting information from the East Indian dancers she met in Luna Park, lapping up knowledge about India from books in the Indian section of Astor Library and seeking help from experts such as the extraordinary Indophile Edmund Russell, she became aware of the wonder that was India. She was particularly fascinated by the Hindu temple dancers, devadasis; and she felt she had hit upon a universal fundamental truth in the Bhagavad Gita's declaration that inner peace and freedom from sorrow lay not in the bottomless whirlpool of worldly pleasures, but in shaking off the yoke of the flesh and performing one's duty with detachment.

The Indian dances that Ruth had contemplated as a commercial exercise turned into a project with a serious and long-term personal purpose. Eager to make her dance a vehicle to convey universal truths, she discarded her original concept. Instead of dancing before the murti of Radha, she would dance as Radha Herself, developing Her as a distinct entity in order to depict the human soul's eternal quest and yearning for union with the Infinite.

The Royalty and the Rabble

St. Denis now needed a place to perform. Fortunately, her sincere interest in India won her the support of Jal Bhumgara, whose father was an affluent New York-based Indian importer of remarkable generosity. Bhumgara invited Ruth for a private performance at the opening of one of his stores; in return, the Bhumgaras offered to let Ruth take her pick from their rich stock of oriental dress material, jewelry and Indian art products to create her dance costumes and stage props. The performance won the admiration of the Bhumgaras' guests, a special audience that included dignitaries such as the Maharaja of Baroda.

Henry B. Harris, manager of the Hudson Theatre, financed a matinee of "Radha" for the benefit of seven other New York theatre managers in January 1906. But the managers' verdict was disappointing. "This kind of thing might go for Paris," they said, "but frankly, it will never do for New York." The genius of "Radha," and St. Denis' career, could well have died there; but in a stroke of luck, the sudden cancellation of a vaudeville performance created an unexpected emergency. Pushed to find a quick replacement, the manager decided to give Ruth's Hindu dancing a spot for one night.

She took up the offer, despite the incongruity of presenting a serious dance piece like "Radha" as an evening performance in a vaudeville theatre famed for its "Sunday Night Smoking Concerts." Ruth later recalled, "All questions of pride, the fitness of things, prestige, went completely by the board. Here was a job. It took some fortitude to expose the little Goddess to that Sunday-night, rollicking crowd. The air was filled with tobacco smoke. It was principally a men's audience, and I imagine that many of the turns that followed me were concerned with ribaldry, not art."

On that night, the audience joked, laughed and poked fun at the performance. Ruth kept her poise while the Hindu extras performing as priests stiffened under the ridicule. But then, something miraculous happened. In the words of Ted Shawn, who would later become her pupil and husband, "When the curtain rose, there was much laughter and talk. But when the blue lights changed to amber, and the Goddess stepped from Her shrine, silence reigned until the curtain fell, when sincere and heavy applause broke forth. And so, even in the face of the most difficult obstacles and before the most unsympathetic audience that could have been found, 'Radha' triumphed completely in this, the first of over fifteen hundred performances of a production which marked an epoch in the world of dance, a work of art which is immortal."

"Radha's" success at the New York Theatre Roof Garden led to more bookings; still, the dance remained confined to the vaudeville circuit. It was squashed between a boxing show and a group of trained monkeys. Rather than being defeated by the surroundings, the spectacle began to change the audience of the vaudeville theater, attracting people from outside its usual circle. Reviewers wrote in the Dancing Times and Dancers Today, "In each audience were a few who responded unreservedly to the beauty of the appeal, who went out and told others of the rare vision they had seen. These, in turn, spread the good news, until the manager was surprised to find at each performance a stream of people of a type not usually seen at a vaudeville performance, who came just before Radha's

appearance and hurried away as soon as the curtain fell, and who came again and again."

One such trespasser, Mrs Orlando Rouland, helped Ruth graduate to a better place. Convinced of the need to arrange a matinee for the show in a "proper uptown theatre," Mrs. Rouland gathered a group of about 25 like-minded ladies who contributed to book the Hudson Theater.

Her Career Takes Off

Dancing at the Hudson on March 22, 1906, proved a landmark in Ruth's career. In addition to presenting "Radha," she added three more Indian-inspired performances, "The Cobra," "The Incense" and "Nautch." Finally, her dances won conspicuous critical acclaim. "Radha" became the talk of the town.

Ruth's breakthrough in America paved the way for her passage to England in 1906. A performance before King Edward VII himself and his Queen, Alexandra, launched her career in London and set in motion social engagements that introduced her dancing to the upper crust of English society.

Ruth's matinees at the London Aldwych Theatre were attended by local and foreign celebrities. These included the flamboyant Maharaja of Kapurthala, who went backstage to congratulate Ruth. But Radha was not a commercial success in London, perhaps suffering from the British feeling of superiority over India's culture. The Daily Telegraph's review decried the "austere symbolism" and suggested the dancer keep to the more physical moves (see review on opposite page).

The reception of Ruth's work in London would be much different later, when she returned to the British capital after a gloriously successful European tour. The citizens of the German Empire looked upon her work with special regard. Ruth wrote of the experience, "I suddenly found I was not merely an entertainer, not merely a glamorous dancer or exotic novelty; I was an artist in the deepest sense of the word and the subject of earnest and critical analysis."

She returned to the US soon afterward, taking her Indian dances all over the

country. The general response of her countrymen was positive, and in her homeland she impressed art historian Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Indian poetess Sarojini Naidu. She also met Indian Sufi mystic and musician Hazrat Inayat Khan, with whom she partnered for a tour. For the first time, the moves of her ascetic yoga undulated to the real ragas of India.

Denishawn and the Later Years

After 1911, the vogue for solo dancers on the professional stage died down, and Ruth St. Denis began to accept students to increase her income. Also, she began adding other performers to her touring productions. In 1914 she hired--and later married--Ted Shawn, a stage dancer with strong Delsartean leanings who was 13 years her junior.

This new chapter in her life would have a lasting impact. The company Ruth St. Denis and the energetic Ted Shawn formed, called Denishawn, became the most influential school of modern dance in America in the first half of the 20th century.

In 1926, Ruth, now age 47, and the Denishaw company traveled to India. She was not shy about her "Indian" dance inventions. Boldly, she led performances not only in the metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras but also in smaller cities and towns, including Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, Kanpur, Lucknow and Allahabad.

Presenting a wide array of Indian dances to Indians--Ted Shawn had created a performance called "The Cosmic Dance of Shiva"--could have resulted in rejection. Not being strictly based on any specific Indian style or school of dancing, they were inauthentic, despite the Indian inspiration. The music of these dances was even less Indian. But, as Uttara Corlawala reported, "There is no question that the Denishawn tour of India was successful and popular. It was extended considerably beyond their expectations, and they returned to cities they had already visited. [Ruth's] Dance of the Black and Gold Sari provoked virtual riots." Even Rabindranath Tagore was sufficiently impressed to request St. Denis to stay on and teach dance at Viswa-Bharati University in Shantiniketan.

Though their company (and marriage) folded in 1931, it produced a string of outstanding creative dancers that included Martha Graham, Doris Humphreys, Charles Weidman and Jack Cole.

Legacy

Evaluating the impact of her many tours, or "journeys," St. Denis wrote: "It took many years to realize the full effect of the pioneering work on these journeys. I have been told by Hindus that the value of these early tours, when their Hindu culture was introduced through the dance, can scarcely be overestimated. Until the appearance of 'Radha,' our national conception of Oriental dancing brought images of the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 Chicago Fair, which was not discussed in polite society. And in literature the Oriental, be he Indian, Japanese or Chinese, was, as a general rule, the villain of the piece. We were not only crude but vicious in our attitudes towards the Orient, and with infinite gratitude I can say very humbly that I believe these early dances of mine helped to lay the groundwork for a better appreciation of Eastern culture and beauty. The rhythms, the costuming, and the constant suggestions of Oriental philosophy implicit in the performance, caused discussions and research that have subtly penetrated the whole of America."PIpi

Braving British Skepticism

The review from The Telegraph, both praiseful and critical of "Radha" in London, brings to life how a British gentleman felt when contemplating the unexpected depths of the East as depicted in Ruth St. Denis' performance. As re-published by the New York Times, 1906.

At one moment we see the purdah dividing to let a slim figure come out to light the incense bowls; at another moment we are in a street with jugglers, merchants, water-carriers, each busily occupied with their respective trades. Now we are in the gorgeous palace of some raja with the nautch girl pirouetting before the stately throne; and anon we are in a densely matted jungle, where in a cleated space a Hindu saint or "yogi" is renouncing in his own fashion the world.

And then comes a still more grandiose spectacle, in which the service of a temple is performed before our eyes, and Radha, wife of Krishna, instructs her priests in the great lessons of self-sacrifice.

It was a spectacle full of symbolism and suggestion, replete with mystical significance, which, over and over again, deliberately sacrificed charm to accuracy and beauty to unflinching realism.

Perhaps if a criticism may be passed on it, it was too symbolic. The exact meaning of the rapt ecstasy of a "yogi" and his solemn acts of abnegation might be lost to an occidental audience; and the dance of the five senses, where Radha abjures them all to achieve the peace of true saintship, might fail to carry its message to men impervious to allegory and ignorant of Nirvana. The most popular, perhaps, was the nautch dance in the palace, because the lithe gyrations and sudden abrupt turns and twists needed no commentary or interpretation.

We have rarely seen anything which more clearly suggests the languorous passion and sentiment of the Indian peninsula. There is much in the evening's entertainment which is curiously interesting, a keen esoteric flavor of barbaric crudity and sensuousness, aptly symbolized by the acrid smell of those fumes of incense which cling to the walls of the theatre like a strange and penetrating atmosphere.