

VACUUM-PACKED PERFORMANCE  
“I’ll tell you what it is”, said S-di decisively. “It’s all about the packaging.”

I was standing in the lobby of The Park, Kolkata talking to a senior Odissi dancer about a performance she had just witnessed. We were waiting to attend a reception for the artist in question, and nobody at The Park seemed to know where this reception was – or that there was a reception at all. An internationally acclaimed choreographer on a much-hyped India tour, publicity designed to overwhelm audiences even before they had seen the production, local dancers starry-eyed enough to blur their vision...all culminating in a reception which no one knew anything about, a reception where the guest of honour was noticeably absent. Was the packaging coming undone?

The audience in Berlin where I saw the performance had responded with a standing ovation. But it had left us ten South Asians seated together unimpressed and even a little outraged – at least with the first hour-long section of classical Indian dance. It was not bad dance, but it was nowhere near the best kathak I had ever seen. But coupled with well-rehearsed musicians, an epic stage design, smoke and haze machines, lighting which created movement far better than the body it lit, and earnest communication from the dancer – “My dance is a combination of eastern spirituality and western science” – the performance created a very palatable view of exotic India for a European audience. Very well packaged, if a tad dishonest.



IN A WORLD OF HER OWN

With figures like Alarmel Valli, mystique is a constant companion. At first glance, the film **Lasya Kavya – The World of Alarmel Valli** seems willing to yield answers. The director, Sankalp Meshram, says that the self-produced film arose out of a personal desire to archive Valli’s dancing. In an earlier interview, he remarked that he saw Valli as a “thinking dancer”, one whose performance was best complemented by her ideas on dance. **Lasya Kavya** is hinged on this premise – contextualising Valli’s dancing within the frame of her ideas on dance and its history, periodically interspersed by cautious nuggets from the story of her life.

Meshram emphasises on the absence of the director’s hand – an ‘unseen hand’ crafting the film, that makes any barrier between Valli’s world and the audience vanish, even if it is a cinematic one. Eponymously so, the film is an entry point into the dancer’s world; yet, overwhelmed by her near-constant presence in the frame and her voice-overs, one feels blinded, and hence distanced, from her

“The best kathak dancer in the world today,” gushed the European director of a cultural house in Kolkata. “Perhaps you haven’t seen enough” was the mild response of my Bengali friend – his colleague – as she led him to dinner. Indeed, we can’t expect non-Indian audiences to have seen ‘enough’ kathak, any more than we can be said to have seen ‘enough’ western ballet. But the over-riding response of the Kolkata audience (who have seen ‘enough’ kathak) replicated – even surpassed – that in Berlin. Given the huge coverage by the tabloids in Kolkata for days on end – breathlessly expectant previews, orgasmic reviews, and lengthy interviews including the dancer’s (un-rebutted) comments on why it is impossible to produce quality dance work in India – I wondered whether I was reading about Akram Khan or Shah Rukh Khan. Like mass-produced, vacuum-packed snacks – promisingly plump unopened, but filled more with mildly offensive and wholly synthetic odours than edible content – Akram Khan’s **Gnosis** was devoured whole-heartedly and uncritically by Kolkata.

“The danger”, continued S-di as we loitered in the limbo-land of The Park lobby, “is that dancers here will aspire to that as the best possible dance.”

Are we responding to the performance, the packaging, or the publicity machine? What is the dance discourse we have in India? And is our response to art from the west coloured by a perception that they must know better, to the extent that we ignore the wealth of our own experience?

On the opening day of a festival that brings us so much highly acclaimed international performance, these are questions we must ask and explore. **Vikram Iyengar**

world. Could directorial intervention then have been deployed to offer the viewer the opportunity to observe detachedly, so as to better comprehend that world?

Through **Lasya Kavya**, there are scattered testimonials by those who have worked with Valli or observed her as contemporaries. Besides reiterating, almost with a tinge of desperation, that Valli’s work is meaningful and appreciated, they don’t seem to fulfil a greater purpose. That none of these testimonials are by dancers may point towards the highly polarised world of classical dance.

In some sense, **Lasya Kavya** presents a stilted world, nothing bridging the stories from Valli’s younger days to the dancer today, “someone of this time and age,” as Valli says. **Lasya Kavya** is like a well-rehearsed performance, sans the spontaneity. In its taut continuity, it weeds out its own ability to surprise. **Ranjana Dave**

**Lasya Kavya – The World of Alarmel Valli, is being screened at the session Tradition in Transition on Feb 2, between 10 am – 1 pm, at Max Mueller Bhavan, Indiranagar.**

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Hum musicians hain. Iss window mein hum to logon ko khush karna chahte hain. Hamara khush karne ka kya tarika hain unka kya tarika hain har ek ka apna apna. We are musicians. From this window, all we want to do is entertain our audience. We have our ways. They have theirs. To each their own.

WINDOW PLAYERS  
by Swar Thounaojam  
and Soumita Bhattacharya

The **Manganiyar Seduction** began its journey in the city of Delhi in 2006. Since then, the 43 Manganiyar musicians have travelled to more than 25 cities of the world.

For Khete Khan, Vienna is sabse beautiful city. He is the assistant tour manager of the troupe.

As the musicians were busy tuning their instruments for their first rehearsal in Bangalore and a bit shy to talk about their celebrated collaboration with Roysten Abel, we were mentally creating a backup plan when we saw Khete Khan waiting for somebody.

The musicians of **The Manganiyar Seduction** troupe come from Dedhaviyar, Siyani, Beshla, Barmer, Nembla, Satto, Mayoloor, Chhtangar, Barna, Dhoba, Deddha, Kanoi, Lanela, Khiya, Hamira, Keraliya, Sanawara, Arang, Kisshola, Bednova, Jodhpur, Janra, Sodhkar in Rajasthan and Khete Khan makes sure they return home safely after every tour. The troupe takes three cooks with them on tours abroad and he explains how the director Roysten Abel makes sure they get a kitchen at every country they travel to.

Only one show has been cancelled so far in their touring history of six years. Rain played foul in Paris. A group of Manganiyars, who started to open up after their rehearsal, claim that Paris is the city where one of Lord Indra’s Paris (fairly angel) created her home after she couldn’t find a place in Swarg Lok (heaven) and came down to Mrityu Lok (earth).

**Humko Amreeka sabse accha laga.** (We liked America the most.) Before rushing off to lunch, the two youngest musicians of the troupe, Butta Khan and Khete Khan, said that they became particularly fond of the monuments they saw in New York City and Washington DC.

Paris, London, Japan, Italy, Taiwan, Portugal, London, Berlin, Ireland, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore... Butta Khan rattles off the names of the places he’s travelled to.

In Iran, Mame Khan found that the musicians there use a version of Kamancha called Kamancheh which has four strings instead of the three strings the manganiyars use.

Has anybody been to Amsterdam?

Khete Khan, the assistant tour manager, has been to Amsterdam. He has visited its famous red light district which inspired the sets of **The Manganiyar Seduction**.

**Humko Roy Sir ne jaan buchke dikhaya. Hum log bhi gaye wahan. Sab log jaate hain mauj masti ke liye. Par hum log bhi gaye, udhar sab dekhke aayein. Aur jab humne dekha – ki hamara show yahan se toh nahin Roy Sir ne uthaya? Pehele hum log nahin samajhte the ki hamara naam manganiyar seduction kyun rakha. Humne pucha – Sir, yeh toh kuch log kehe rahe hain ki yahan pe kaam galat hota hain. Yeh toh woh jagah hain jismein**

**jaate hain log mauj masti ke liye ... manganiyar bhi mauj masti ka hi hain. Yahan musicians hain wahan kuch aur hain. Duniyaan mein sab hota hain. Hum log musicians hain, hum log usko ulta kyun samjhe? Hum jyada se jyada sochte hain ke audience ko kaise khush karein. Humne kabhi galat nahin socha. Humare kuch buzurg hain jo kehte hain ki hum log thodi aise hain. Kabhi kabhi woh log ulta bhi sochte hain, lekin hum unko samjhate hain: Hum musicians hain. Iss window mein hum to logon ko khush karna chahte hain. Hamara khush karne ka kya tarika hain unka kya tarika hain, har ek ka apna apna.** (Roysten Abel intentionally took me there. Many people go there for fun. When I saw the place, I wondered whether Roy sir got the concept from here. We didn’t know why we were named **The Manganiyar Seduction**. I asked him why, since some people had told us that it was the wrong kind of place. But then people go there for fun... and we Manganiyars are also for entertainment. We are musicians here and there – it is something else. Lot of things happen in this world. Why should we think wrongly about it. All we want to do is entertain our audience. Some of our elder musicians were skeptical and questioned the concept. But we explained to them: We are musicians. From this window, all we want to do is entertain our audience. We have our ways. They have theirs. To each their own.)





## “NOW IS A VERY LONG TIME”

Completing each other's sentences with a flow of shared looks, Kristina Sætorp (pronounced shtorp) and Elisabeth Breen Berger communicate with the efficiency of a couple in early love. The only duo among the 16 selected for the FACETS workshop for emerging choreographers, they worked with a team of mentors, primarily Australian choreographer and founder of festival act Chunky Move, Gideon Obarzanek, to create the *body is willing/flesh is weak*.

Seated with these two dance artists from Norway around the dining table at their flat in Richmond Town, you get a sense of their intense engagement with each other's work. Consider the fact that they began working with each other on a dance project that involved 200 eleven year olds, and you know that there are only two ways in which this relationship could have gone. Sætorp stretches her hand, flexes it into a fist and then releases into an upturned open palm to illustrate the responsive language system of strength and weakness in a communicating body.

Breen Berger and Sætorp expect their spectators to challenge themselves to receive their performance in the same way that they commit themselves to “humility to engage with audiences”.

“One of the ways Bangalore informed our work at FACETS is the way in which locals here seem to use time differently,” says Breen Berger referring to what they see as the unique ability of people here to calmly respond to traffic jams, and other obstructions to time-bound itineraries. “We would have driven ourselves into a state of panic if things didn't work on time in Oslo” adds Sætorp. As a response to this idea of cultural difference, they have slowed down the temporal ends of movement units to notice what was around them; glances and movement became less mechanical while simultaneously recording and measuring the performance space. It waits to be seen if they as artists and we as spectators figure these ideas together at the performance. What they have going for them definitely is the easy synchronicity of thought and expression that was displayed during this interview. *Nithin Manayath*

## “I FEEL LIKE KILLING MYSELF IF YOU RESPOND ONLY WITH ‘INTERESTING’”

“I want to have the luxury of not articulating”, says Leandro Kees of his choreographic work *Let me in* at FACETS. Kees sees himself as someone shifting from a concept driven practice to one that is more intuitive. Talking about the process involved in developing this piece, he says he focussed more on a ‘yes/no’ response to determine the choice of movement for this piece than on the ‘whys’. As an artist whose earlier work *Anthropomorphia* involved treating Darwin's natural history work *The expression of emotion in humans and animals* as a dance manual, this turn to intuitive physicality is quite a challenge to impose on oneself.

Kees is responding to the now dominant figure of the contemporary artist trawling the continental philosophies of Deleuze or Derrida for inspiration. This figure has perhaps become so dominant in contemporary

art spaces in general that he describes this state of affairs as one of inertia; one that is in need of a push to return to physical experience for fresh stimulation. Kees is clearly one of the angry young men and women of dance. His natural habitat is the place of crisis in the field of dance from where he wants to see the world afresh to build a critique.

In this Kuhnian vision he is the revolutionary. “This idea of moving from text to artistic practice doesn't include the audience. It only speaks to other artists in the field,” is his critique. “I want to discover what the public is seeing; I want that conversation to become central to my work.”

*Nithin Manayath*



The works of the duo Sætorp & Breen Berger and Kees will show on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January at Alliance Française along with Israeli Inbal Oshman's work *M\** performed by 4 Attakkalari dancers and American Isak Immanuel's *Aniconic - a quiet landscape*.



## IN CONVERSATION WITH MERYL TANKARD

Through the FACETS Choreography Residency, 16 young choreographers from around the world have been working for 6 weeks with an international team of mentors made up of 15 prominent choreographers, musicians, lighting designers, and theatre and media arts professionals. *Isabel Putinja* spoke with Meryl Tankard, a FACETS mentor and one of Australia's best known choreographers.

**Tell me about your experience of being a mentor during FACETS.**

These young choreographers are very keen and are eating up everything we have to offer. I find they tend to want to do many movements – they are dancers after all – but I try to get them to see how they can better articulate each movement. Many movements are not always necessary: you have to know why you're doing a certain movement. I tell them to

throw them out and choose the best ones because if there are too many, the good ones get lost.

Being a mentor makes you define your own practice. Even though you may be doing a different style, you can give them tips on dynamics, space and feeling. I've watched them develop in such a short time. They also have the opportunity to work with mentors in light design and music. This is an incredible luxury. I have never seen anything like this. Such a residency is not common in Australia, anyway.

**You're no stranger to cross-cultural work. You worked with Pina Bausch for many years as a leading performer. Her dancers came from several different countries and you yourself work with dance companies around the world. Does this present any challenges?**

No, I haven't come across any challenges. Cultural exchange is very enriching to the creative process. I've been working here with young choreographers from India, Israel, Mexico, Argentina, the United States, Australia and Indonesia. Dance is universal, so where they come from is not important, what's different is the style of dance or 'dance language'.

You know, in Australia we can only work with Australian dancers. We're not allowed to work with foreign artists because the theatrical union prohibits it. But I've worked with dancers from different cultures outside Australia: Sweden, with the Lyon Opera Ballet in France, and the Leipzig Ballet in Germany. So I'm used to working in a cross-cultural context.

I've also worked with a Kuchipudi dancer, Padma Menon. Indian dancers have a very strong classical technique. The rhythm is in their bodies and it has such a strong influence on their bodies. I made a piece called *Rasa* (1996) with one Indian dancer and 10 Australian dancers. I would love to do the opposite: work with 10 Indian and one Australian dancer.

**Does dance have to have a message?**

Sure, dance needs to communicate something to an audience, but sometimes I feel messages are forced out, or

are so big and complicated that the 'message' might be better read or spoken than danced. I don't think dance can be so clearly defined and that is its beauty, I guess. With dance, the audience will interpret what they feel, according to their own experiences. Dance can be interpreted in so many different ways. I find it very difficult to explain in words what dance is capable of.

**What was it like working with Pina Bausch and how did this influence your own work?**

Pina never explained anything. She would hardly talk! We just learned by immersing and feeling. I would say her work affected my whole life. She helped me find my voice. We gave and improvised. We were under her shadow. I loved creating characters during the improvisations.

**Tell me about your own choreographic work.**

After six years of working with Pina, I left and formed a small company of five women dancers in Australia. In Canberra there was so much space and I started to see life and nature, the earth, trees, sand, and this gave me another energy. Since I was working exclusively with women, I didn't have to deal with the gender divide thing which was so present in Pina's work.

One of my productions, *Songs with Mara* (1995), explored the use of voice. For this piece, I worked with a Bulgarian singer. She was an opera singer who gave us voice classes. I had heard her singing a song, and asked her to teach us it. None of us had ever sung before! It was very powerful because of the sound, power and volume of the voices. We learned to hear new tones we weren't even aware of. I found singing to be an empowering experience.

The whole piece was like an embroidered tablecloth; a big tapestry and the steps were like embroidery because we used them in patterns like the cross stitch, herringbone and zigzag. While we danced, we sang in 4-part harmony, in Bulgarian.