

DANCE UMBRELLA PRESENTS



My Dance DNA

Shobana Jeyasingh in conversation with Nikki Bedi

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NB: Hello and welcome to Dance East in Ipswich. I'm Nikki Bedi and I'm delighted to be here to interview choreographer, artist and dance pioneer Shobana Jeyasingh for My Dance DNA.

Shobana Jeyasingh Dance company is 29 years old and she and the company continue to break new ground. Whether it's challenging Orientalism in her version of a classical ballet, or looking at the First World War and virology in her new work - 'Contagion'... more about that later. My love for Shobana's work comes from the fact she constantly surprises us.

Her hybrid language might incorporate Bharatanatyam, martial arts or an everyday move. And it might be performed over church pews or in the middle of a fountain. But her works make you think. They're never polemical but they can often be political with a small 'p'. Dance can tackle issues and I think perhaps dance can tackle everything.

So My Dance DNA is the new talk series from Dance Umbrella, it's presented in association with The Space across five venues in the UK. These events give us all a rare chance to hear leading choreographers discuss their influences and share moments of movement on film that have inspired them.

So this evening's talk is the fourth in the series and I know that Shobana is happy to be back in Ipswich where some of you probably saw her company perform *Material Men Redux* earlier this year.

So, Shobana, first of all hello to you, how rude of me not to say hello. Before we get to the in-depth talking let's have a look at some of your extraordinary works. We've put together a compilation of four recent pieces and they are *Just Add Water*, *Trespass*, *Counterpoint* and *Bruise Blood*, so you'll get a really good flavour of Shobana's unique choreography.

- **Compilation of Shobana Jeyasingh's work** –

NB: You get quite lost in that, couldn't you? It's quite sci-fi at the end and mesmeric. Shobana what's the first dance that you actually remember seeing?

SJ: I think it would have been a Tamil film because I'm from a Tamil background and even though I wasn't actually allowed to see *too* many films, but I think my mother kind of educated me in a lot of the sort of heroines of the Tamil films. So that would have been my first introduction to dance.

NB: And the first piece of choreography that you remember loving?

SJ: Probably it would be in London. Maybe in the late 80s. So, there's a couple of people whose choreography I really loved, I think one was Merce Cunningham, and the other is Chandralekha who's the choreographer from India.

NB: And can you remember the first moment when you actually felt like you were a choreographer?

SJ: I think it was probably the time when I stopped dancing. I mean, I didn't dance for long but I think in my very first piece I was also a dancer, which for me I just found incredibly difficult, because I really wanted to be at the back, and I found myself choreographing myself at the back of the stage so I could see what's happening, and that wasn't really a good move. So it was just like disengaging from dancing so I could actually be on the other side of the picture and see what it looked like.

NB: And how did that feel?

SJ: It felt very good.

NB: Let's go back then to your childhood - you mentioned watching Tamil films. Is that what magicked you away in to a world of dance?

SJ: Yes because obviously films were big in every Indian's life. And if you were a little girl growing up, the sort of models of beauty and accomplishment, the kind of things that your mum loved, were these Tamil heroines who are also very good classical dancers as it happens. So they're the ones that I saw on screen.

NB: So we've got a clip here of Patmini and Vyjayanthimala. This is two women having a total dance off, that's the only way I can describe it, in a 1958 film called Raj Tilak.

- Footage of Patmini and Vyjayanthimala -

NB: So dramatic! So explain to us what those two women were doing, what made that so excellent?

SJ: Well I saw many films like that with those actresses. And I think as a small child what really struck me was the close ups, because in Tamil movies they loved doing close ups of faces. And that's partly because the first actresses in Tamil cinemas were really drawn from classical dancers.

Actually what they're doing there is not strictly classical, though there are classical elements.

It's their skill as classical dancers that they're actually deploying, but there's a lot of folk movements, there's street theatre, so there are lots of elements there. But it's the way the film is edited, and also I think that sitting there as a child just having these huge images of faces... incredibly stylized, I think it made such a huge impression on me.

NB: So does an eye movement to the side speak volumes then? Is that what we have to understand?

SJ: I think it comes from Indian classical dance where the dancer's face was very important in the kind of storytelling way. So, you know, we do practice showing different emotions using details of the face, but of course you were never meant to see it amplified and magnified like that. Actually I think it just took it to another level. I think when you left the cinema you just kind of felt that your whole head is like being inhabited by these hugely surreal people. Also my mother used to collect pictures of these dancers in various magazines and there actually you saw them more in their kind of classical format, and I think that also really made me really want to do that.

NB: Bharatanatyam was also seen as a patriotic act wasn't it? Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

SJ: Yeah, I think the reason someone like myself from a middle class Indian family was sent to dance classes, not because my mother wanted me to end up in the cinema. I think she probably wouldn't... but I think when my mother was growing up in the 50s and 40s there was a great sort of movement in India called the Self-Respect Movement. I think all Indians were engaged in this huge exercise to show Britain that actually they weren't the keepers of classicism, it wasn't just about Rome and Greece but India also had this huge ancient culture that we want to be proud of.

I think what happened to Indian classical dance is that it was really in some ways taken over by intellectual people in cities and made to be part of the armoury of the fight against the British, and the fight for self-respect. So a lot of people like my mum thought it was their sort of patriotic duty really to send their daughters to learn Bharatanatyam which was considered a good thing.

NB: Can you tell us what age you were when you first went to your dance class then?

SJ: Well I think I was probably about six, or six and a half.

NB: And did you have little bells on your feet? I loved it because my little cousin Minakshi when I'd go to India I'd be so jealous. We'd go and sit cross-legged at the side of this room where all these beautiful... it was mostly girls I have to say... these beautiful little girls had bells round their feet and then they were doing all these amazing things with their hands... we didn't have the vocabulary, but it looked so magical.

SJ: Well, I suppose dance attracts little girls for the same reason all over the world, and probably for ballet as well. You know it's a wonderful excuse to dress up, to put makeup on and put lots and jewelry and bells on your feet and do wonderful things.

NB: Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes...
Can you tell us Shobana what or who was the biggest influence for you early in your professional life, moving forward a little bit.

SJ: I think when I started thinking about dance seriously as a profession, again this happened in London and there's a couple of things that I saw on stage. I think I saw Rambert Dance very early on, and there was this beautiful... I really don't remember what the title was or who was dancing in it, but I was just amazed that there was dance which didn't have a story or a narrative but yet the body could be incredibly eloquent, and moving. And for the same reason I loved Merce Cunningham's work because I think it really sort of opened my eyes to how the human body could move and, again, be very eloquent, and be free of all the ties that historically it's had to be part of...

NB: Because Merce Cunningham of course, and we'll talk about this in a moment, slightly removed the traditional way of using music as well. We've got a clip here from a 1986 piece called *Points in Space* - Merce Cunningham.

- Footage of *Points in Space* by Merce Cunningham -

NB: We are so used to sound aren't we, that that's almost slightly uncomfortable when you don't have anything going on. Not even a sound.

SJ: That's really what I liked about it! Actually, for me, what I found interesting and useful for me as a choreographer is that the first thing I noticed about his bodies, I found them culturally very neutral, which I found really useful for me as a person in London with an Indian dance background. I found that really liberating.

And I know that in fact I can recognize ballet, but obviously it isn't ballet. It was how he had taken something historical but made it completely his own. And I found that as a kind of like a pointer for myself in the future, and also I just found it so liberating that you could see the body without any music, because I just spent most of my dancing life up to there being an absolute slave to the music, and being incredibly... well, where dance is made to the rhythm, it's sitting very comfortably with the music. So, here was someone... I mean there are two things, one is this separation of body from music. Which I found very liberating. And also I think when you come from a classical tradition you kind of see hierarchy in the space where the centre of the stage is the most important. And the audience sees you in a very particular way, like a set perspective. And so suddenly to have something where the dance was again free in the space in terms of perspective. Because for a very different political reasons, I've never really been very fond of the centre of the stage. So those are the two things that I found really interesting, which kind of spoke to me.

NB: That's so interesting because as I was watching that - and I've seen that a few times now - but seeing it on the big screen and may be sitting at this angle, I don't know, I was thinking, I wonder who Shobana is watching? Is it the blue couple who is still on the side? What are the different reasons that you don't like the political centre then?

SJ: Well, I think that's partly because when I, for a little while, was doing Indian classical dance in Britain, actually what it taught me was that when you have a classical dance like Bharatanatyam, which in the context of India is very much in the centre because it's a classical dance, it's really fought for that place, and there's a consensus that that's where it belongs. When you take that to another country it's quite a disorientating experience, because suddenly this dance which was centre stage obviously can't be centre stage because it's another country. It's a bit like if you took ballet and showed it in a village temple in South India. It'll be a different experience, because when you see ballet, the audience brings to the

theatre the history and the context in which you see ballet.

So, Bharatanatyam, I found, didn't have that in Britain, so that's why I had to kind of re-order, I thought as a British Asian if I was going to dance in a theatre and on a stage which had a particular history, then I had to really rethink where I was going to put my dance. So I began to look at the edges of the stage near the wings and the back, and sometimes my dancers would think I didn't really like them because I put them near the wings. But then I had to explain that that was my favourite place, so that's why I'm putting them there.

NB: Well, let's talk a bit about your own work, a 2007 piece first of all- *Fault Line*. What was the inspiration behind this?

SJ: There were a couple of things and they all kind of collided together. One with me reading this book called *Londonstani* by Gautam Malkani, and then also it was the time of the London tube bombings. And particularly afterwards there was a great kind of unease about young Asians in Britain. There was a particular case where there was an incident where these two brothers, it looked as if they might be the next sort of terror cell, but in the end they weren't, but the house where they lived was raided. But actually it was, I think what was quite strange is, it was a normal looking terraced house in west London. I think there was a feeling of, gosh... behind this normality there's something lurking which might be a threat. So there was this kind of sense of unease and, at the same time, when I was reading Gautam's book I found that really, I mean a bit like when I saw Cunningham's work - I found that really it's something that I connected to, for the simple reason that he created these characters, but he also kind of created a vernacular, so actually the language was the character. So the language is like a mix of texting, or like Punjabi slang.

NB: And you have got a bit to read to us, haven't you?

SJ: I really wouldn't be able to read it well because I haven't got the right accent, but it was the characters. For example, ... the book opens with a very violent scene. There's a guy called Harjit, but he called himself Hardjit. Just because he thought that's much better for him: *Hardjit always knew exactly how to tell others it just weren't right to describe all Desi boys as Pakis, regarding it as some kind of civic duty to educate others in this basic social etiquette. So he continued kicking the white kid in the face, each kick carefully planted so he didn't get blood on his Nike Air Force 1s.*

So, that's the kind of image that he created. They're not real because the way he describes it, they're kind of surreal constructed images, but at the same time the same guy and one of his gang members, the next thing is he's ringing up his mother - which is very Indian, and he kind of says: *Theek Hai ma, yes I'll buy some free range eggs... OK. I'll get that Mama. All right.* So you know there are some sort of cultural markers that never leave despite the fact that he wants to be this macho guy kicking people's faces in. And then the women in the book also I found really fascinating because the first woman who appears... There's a guy watching her and she's called Samira, she's a young Muslim woman. So, he says: *Whenever Samira takes a jump shot at the basket, her black sleeveless shirt rides up a bit and shows me her full midriff,* and then he goes on to kind of fantasize about her midriff and whether she's wearing a bra or not, and then suddenly this lady says: *I see I'm distracting you Jess, she goes to me suddenly. Na Na you're not. Hello, I am not blind Jess I can see where your attention is focused. Then she says: I thought I'd just be straight and say I know I'm distracting you, but it's okay for you to carry on.* And I just thought this portrayal of young Asians in West London...

They are not real life portraits, they are not kind of psychologically-dependent portraits. They're kind of surreal, larger than life, almost kind of like cartoonish characters. So it was that and quite frightening, a bit like, you know that sort of connects to the unease that people felt about young Indians at that point. And also the fact that these characters are made out of a very hybrid language that he creates with them.

NB: And how did you then translate that into your work- *Fault Line*? In fact we should see a clip of it and then you can talk us through. This is *Fault Line*.

- Footage of *Fault Line* by Shobana Jeyasingh –

NB: Talk us through what you were saying in parts of that?

SJ: There was actually like a compilation, but I think it sort of gives you a little bit of flavour of the piece. I think it was about constructing things because I knew musically I wanted these two elements. I had a soprano voice and I had this electronic score. We had two composers, Errollyn Wallen and Scanner. And the soprano was Patricia Rozario, who is a British Asian Soprano singer. So that was one aspect, and the other in terms of the vocabulary. There were lots of things which are very gesture led. So I suppose that's a bit like the telephone call to the mother. There are also movements which are very fast, very furious, and we worked a lot with posing because actually the whole of *Londonstani* is a bit to do with young men and young women posturing, and we had this whole kind of sequence which we called a strut. It wasn't completely based on *Londonstani*, but it played a huge role in the way I looked at the characters, and the characters were created larger than life, very stylized, almost cartoon-like figures.

NB: I could be wrong but I think you were one of the first choreographers who did take away a traditional music sound, and you know, forget the fact that you might not be doing something with a linear narrative, you took away what you were used to in terms of music, and did these soundscapes. I don't know back in Merce Cunningham's day what you would have called the music he was making with John Cage, would you call it music? Would you say soundscape? But you also work with very different composers. How do you choose your composer?

SJ: That's always the most difficult choice actually, who to use as a composer. For me I've been really privileged and lucky because I've commissioned various composers to write pieces for dance. It's very rarely that I've actually found an existing piece of music, and even when I have I've remixed it. So for me it's important that the composer and myself kind of share the same slice of history, if you like. And the choice of composer really depends on the piece itself. So for *Fault Line* I just knew it had to be electronic score. But I wanted this incredibly human emotional element as part of it. So I knew there has to be a voice. So, it's that mixture and it really came from me thinking about, you know, the singer was in a Sari and obviously the dancers weren't. I think for me also visually that sort of juxtaposition of someone who looked very traditionally Indian but clearly they weren't singing or making Indian music. So it's a kind of extremes. But, for me extremes aren't to do with polarization. Extremes are there because you can actually go from one to another. That's what I like about extremes and differences, that actually... it's a bit like being a windscreen wiper. So you can go to one extreme and go to the other, you can always go back and you have the whole range in between.

NB: Nice analogy. You've also picked for us your piece *Too Mortal*, I mentioned church pews a little bit earlier. Let's talk a little bit about *Too Mortal* and then see a clip. How did this piece come about?

SJ: I used to live in Hackney many years ago, and in Hackney there was a very old Elizabethan church, which someone was trying to raise money for to actually change it into an arts centre. So they asked me if I would do a fundraising event. I think they had about 50 pounds which just paid for a dancer's bus fare. So I went to this church, it was an old church and it had these beautiful boxed pews which meant you know there were doors, and you went and sat in there. Different people just had their own family pews, and it was like a little part of your home probably. And I just loved the box pews and the possibilities they gave me choreographically, because obviously when you're working on a stage you see the whole body, obviously you can have your lighting designer to cover everyone in darkness, but, you know...

Anyway, the box pews were amazing because when I saw the dancers in it I could see the whole body if she stood on the edge of the pew, or she could just disappear if she dropped down and went to the floor. So it was really the kind of editing possibility that I really loved. But of course the church was a huge factor in the whole thing, so it's a mixture between what the building brought and what the physical limits of the pew are.

NB: So the clip that we're going to see was filmed where?

SJ: That was filmed in Worcester as far as I remember, because we went to many, many churches including in Belgrade.

NB: More of that in a minute, here's the clip from *Too Mortal*.

- Footage of *Too Mortal* by Shobana Jeyasingh -

NB: All women, Shobana. Is that a deliberate choice?

SJ: For that particular venue it was, because the church, especially those kind of old gothic churches where I wanted this to be performed, was quite masculine. I mean there were very rational spaces and obviously with the history of the church you know that everything, all the decisions about the building, probably would have been made by men. So to me it seems fitting to put female bodies because they've got a bit more ambiguity I find in these kind of situations. So it was very clear for me that it had to be all women.

NB: And if you watch that you've got to wonder to yourself where could an audience who were in the church see it, or were they never invited when the film was made, how did it work?

SJ: No, actually it looks very different live, because the dancers wore a very bright red which you can't quite see. No, actually I put the audience where the priest usually stands, by the chancel in front of the altar, it's between the altar and the first pew. So it meant that we had always a small audience because people would come into the church and the dancers were actually lying on the floor, so they wouldn't really know where the dance was going to happen. Then they would be shown to where they were going to be and they would look out on a totally empty church, and then suddenly these dancers would appear which is part of the surprise. That's a piece I really enjoyed making because it was such an amazing thing to have these choreographic possibilities of that very particular kind of space. And also these

pews for me and the kind of whole choreography of the church, the pews were a bit like cradles. They were a bit like coffins. They were a bit like boats. And of course the centre part of the church is called the nave, which is really named after naval, that's the root of the boat, and this whole kind of journey that people used to do. So all of that fed into the choreography. But there's this one particular story that I found in Genesis which I found, I think it's shared between the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths, which is a very unusual meeting of the human and the divine. It's where Jacob battles all night with this angel. It's kind of a godlike being, and it's quite interesting because actually neither of them win. But at the end I think Jacob asks the angel to let him go, but not before the angel breaks his hip bone. So he always has a limp. But I just thought that's sort of fight as a metaphor for a contact between the sacred and the human. I just thought it was such a fascinating concept, and I know that many, many artists including Albert Durer have made beautiful pictures and etchings of that story. That's where all the fighting and the energy and the aggression comes from.

NB: Now bringing us bang up to date. I mentioned this in my introduction. *Contagion* is a piece that you're working on, is it ready? and virology in the First World War... Tell us more.

SJ: Yes it's a piece that I'm working on currently, and I was thinking about events in the First World War because as you know we're at the moment living through the anniversary of the four years of the First World War, so one of the things that I found quite interesting was the fact that it was during wartime that a lot of advances in medicine happened. So I was thinking about, you know, medicine and medical history, but then I came across the fact that just as the war was ending they had a huge pandemic which affected everyone in the world, and more people died in this so-called Spanish flu than in the First World War. And because the First World War was the first war where the powers had so many colonies, it was the first time that people from all over the world came to fight in the western front. Indians, Indonesians, Chinese, Africans... So it was a total, global war. But, as all these soldiers went back they carried the virus with them. So it was rather ironic that as man was fighting man actually inside them were fighting a much greater enemy which was the virus.

NB: We've got a clip here. What are we going to see, is it a piece of rehearsal?

SJ: Well, I did a small research and development phase because as you can imagine it's a huge subject. First of all I had to educate myself about virology, which is a bit difficult.

NB: That's a massive subject!

SJ: It is a massive subject. And then also I found out that one of my favourite painters, Egon Schiele, who is an Austrian painter, he actually died of the Spanish flu. In his paintings he really seemed to presage the human body, the suffering and the pain, in the way he portrayed people in his own bodies and his paintings. We had this research stage, so what we are going to see is actually what I presented a very small group of invited audience, not the final piece by any means, but just the kind of first thinking.

NB: Fantastic. Let's have a look.

- Footage of Research & Development of *Contagion* by Shobana Jeyasingh –

SJ: These are just ideas.

NB: I feel so privileged that we have a little sense of where this might be going. So what are we thinking 2018?

SJ: Yes.

NB: Fantastic, that's *Contagion*. Final question - I can't believe this time is going too quickly - If you had to choose, Shobana, a single choreographic moment that holds a special place in your heart, what would it be?

SJ: It probably wouldn't be anything from dance. It will be something outside dance. Actually I've got two, there are films I found really interesting, recently I was watching *The Bridge of Spies*, there's a brilliant moment where the camera follows those agents who are chasing Mark Rylance, but just the way the whole thing is edited, is kind of multi-perspective thing that I just loved. But if I had to choose one thing I would choose Diego Velázquez's painting, it's called *Las Meninas*. It translates as *Ladies in Waiting*. I just think it is a brilliant use of space. Because the painter is looking at you, and obviously he's the painter, then you wonder what's the picture he is painting. It could be that he's painting the two figures you see in the mirror which is part of the king and the queen. In my opinion though he's looking at you, he's actually looking at something else. I think what he does with perspective and space, the way he opens up the space and really tests your intelligence and your imaginative powers, then I think that would be my goal as a choreographer.

NB: Brilliant note to end on. That's we've got time for today. A huge thank you to Dance Umbrella, and the staff here at Dance East for bringing all this together. Thank you to the Space for their support on this series. And as I mentioned, this is our fourth talk and the artists already interviewed are Kate Prince, Akram Khan and Siobhan Davies. And coming up later this month, the final interview in the series with Wayne McGregor.

Finally a huge thank you to you, Shobana Jeyasingh.

SJ: Thank you.

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