

## *South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped*

*South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped* both followed a trend and offered fresh perspectives. It followed a trend in the sense that as a symposium it could be seen to go along the path taken by other art sponsored conferences such as, for example, *Reinventing Britain: Identity, Transnationalism and the Arts*, organised in 1997 by The British Council; *Whose heritage? The impact of cultural diversity on Britain's living heritage*, organised by The Arts Council of England in 1999; or, more specifically dealing with South Asian Dance, *Navadisha 2000*, organised by Sampad in 2000 and sponsored by the Arts Council and other arts funding bodies; and *Talam on the Thames*, organised by the SADiB team of Roehampton The University of Surrey and sponsored by the South Bank Centre. Indeed all five events shared participants both on stage and in the audience. What was fresh, however, was not only that practicing artists coming from a range of media led the day, but also that these practitioners rooted their practice into a solid theoretical debate.

During her welcome speech, dancer and choreographer, Chitra Sundaram, offered an alternative title to the event: *South Asian Aesthetics Unplugged*, a take on the MTV show that places musicians in a relatively informal setting, accompanied by acoustic rather than electric instruments. Whilst the setting of the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio Theatre immediately negated a sense of informality and up to date technology was in use, an underlying ethos linked the Akademi day to the MTV show: one of offering close access to South Asian artists. Although placed on a proscenium stage, the panels challenged the audience to engage in the dialogue and were occasionally interrupted by members of the public, eager to have their say.

Issues at the heart of contemporary theoretical and artistic debates were examined during the day: the relocation of the exotic, the traditional as progressive, the migrant as a creature of artifice, the slipperiness of essence, the confounding of the gaze, the polymorphous (and polysemous one may add) beings of the twenty first century, the creation of a modern sublime, essentialism as hybridity in denial, to cite a few.

For obvious reasons not all these themes were examined in the same depth, nor can they be investigated in details here. A number of issues, however, appeared in a number of guises and we will try here to unpack some of the discussion that went on during the day.

### The provisionality of labels

Whilst labels are probably necessary for communication, they are never innocent. They are always part of a discourse, i.e. a system of statements within which the world can be known, which is linked to a power structure. Participants articulated this in a number of ways. For choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh, for example, the term 'South Asia' sounds like a country but it draws together disparate countries, linked by geography but defined by difference. Her creative journeys these days generally start in a North that is 'post-most things' and is linked to a South that is 'post-nothing, except –colonial', yet whose population tends to 'be cleaners at the sophisticated airports of the north'. Visual artist Anish Kapoor, on the other hand, reflecting on the term 'South Asian aesthetic' accepted that there is a reality behind the term that people like himself can identify with, but that as one unwraps the package this reality becomes elusive.

Most, if not all, artists argued that while they did not want to deny their roots, or to stop drawing upon 'civilisational knowledge' as photographer Suran Goonatilake put it, they never wanted to be classed as 'Indian artists' since this usually led to exoticisation and to an engagement with the work that remained at surface level, forgetting the multiplicity of layers found in both cultural and artistic understanding. What came strongly was that one should always be wary of monoliths and of monolithical visions that erase individual choices. In this way the term South Asian could be seen almost like a prison and therefore more a hindrance than a support. Indeed, referring to the image of *South Asian Aesthetics Unplugged*, mentioned earlier, Kapoor argued that maybe we should unplug properly and let the South Asian flow out!

Issues of geography and boundaries, and the construction of identities to be negotiated were brought into the debate throughout the day. One can probably safely say that British Asians share an experience of relocation. This relocation, however, is multi-faceted and is not necessarily unique to them. London, after all, is known for being (and having been throughout its history) a city of migrants, whether coming from the Home Counties in the eighteenth century; the West of Ireland in the nineteenth; or colonies further a field in the twentieth. As Goonatilake mentioned, location matters, and London's unique characteristics has allowed for shaping a hybrid, thus making a new form rather than a fusion where the strands remain visibly separate. This is why for many artists London has acted as a kind of engine, which, as dance academic

Christopher Bannerman argued in his summary of the day, has provided a location where identities are up for a fluid understanding.

Whilst, as dance scholars and social scientists, we agree with the artists that linking artistic works to cultural domains is problematic, we would argue nevertheless that locating works culturally and geographically is not irrelevant. After all, artists are individuals with a past, and an understanding of this past may lead to a more sophisticated appreciation of their work. What is important, however, is that this 'cultural treatment' is given to all artistic, intellectual and any other types of production and is not used simply as a badge of convenience to fix some artists within the margins, away from mainstream productions.

In the cosmopolitan urban environment we live in, we all have access to multiple identities and our choices become part of a strategy for living, whether this is fully conscious or fully acknowledged or not. Since the last presidential election in the US, and especially in today's political situation, for example, one of us may choose to be 'Californian' more often than 'American' as a way of distancing herself from policies she is not necessarily supporting. Or the other may choose to present herself as a *montagnarde* (a mountain dweller in the Alps), in contrast to a centralised urban power, in order to acknowledge that 'Europe' too is multi layered, that power relationships are internal as well as external, and that being 'the other' does not always mean that one comes from far away.

What is important is not so much that labels be thrown away, but rather that we must accept, in writer and Arts Council Officer Naseem Khan's words, that all labels are provisional and that all categories need to be qualified. Furthermore we must also acknowledge that in some ways there is only modernism or post-modernism. We are relating to traditions but this is mediated through our contemporary perspectives and as Kapoor's argued, we need to 'step outside the circle of an inter-global forum'.

#### South Asian aesthetics, political aesthetics, and art unexplained

All the artists involved in the day argued strongly that they wanted to be perceived primarily as individual artists inspired by a variety of sources, whose aesthetics should not be pigeonholed. They did not want to be seen as carriers of traditions, as cultural brokers with a responsibility towards the recognition of these tradition within mainstream British culture. Their aim was to move beyond the category of South Asian/British Asian and to let their works stand on their own.

Philip Dodd, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, the facilitator on one of the panels, emphasised the need to separate identity and aesthetics. In his discussion he contrasted the concepts of 'Roots' and 'Routes'. Theatre director Jatinder Varma when discussing his new production *Journey to the West*, incidentally, also made this distinction, in a recent interview for *The Guardian* newspaper. According to Dodd, Salman Rushdie had linked 'Roots' to conservatism because it led backward and was therefore seen as binding, whilst 'Routes' was seen as progressive. Through the metaphor of a journey it could be perceived as leading to connections with others, resulting therefore in a more liberating concept. Dodd also cited Virginia Wolfe when she stated that she wanted to be perceived as a 'Writer' rather than a 'Female writer'.

Musician Mukul Patel echoed this by arguing that it was more important for him to look into what it means to be a musician than what it means to be South Asian. He added that he could not see his work in a dualist fashion where the British and the Asian came together to create a hybrid form. In his eyes his work is much more complex and owes to an immense multiplicity of sources. Theatre director Indhu Rubasingham, in a similar fashion, compared herself to a magpie in her artistic practice. Being able to make a living as a freelance director meant that she was not confined to a specific aesthetic linked to a building, to an institution. For her, what was significant was to look for collaborators coming from a variety of genres as well as cultural backgrounds. Since her training and education took place within a British context, she generally considers herself to be 'British' rather than 'British Asian'. She recognised, however, that she has often had to fight against the assumption that, as her family comes from Sri Lanka, she is supposedly equipped with a great deal of 'cultural expertise' on 'Asian theatre'. She also reflected that being able to tick the boxes of 'Female' and of 'Asian' in institutional paperwork, her entrance into a mainstream theatre practice came up against the double bind of gender and ethnicity. Ultimately, for her, however, issues of representation are critical and she revels in challenges of subtle confrontation, as in casting actors regardless of ethnicity so that they can play off viewer's prejudices in subversive ways. In keeping with her resistance to labels, Rubasingham also offered a different spin on Rushdie's confining concept of roots mentioned above, arguing that roots also help one to flourish through the nourishment they bring.

Many of the artists professed resisting intentions in the studio. Kapoor, for example, argued that he sets out 'with nothing to say as an artist, because having something to

say gets in the way of being an artist'. If the message becomes central, then the agenda provides a starting point that is 'over-formed'. Instead things should emerge through deeply contemplative play.

Dancer and choreographer Akram Khan endorsed this concern, arguing that creativity can be stifled by hyper-conceptualisation. He spoke of a body that can become confused through the over-intellectualising of the artistic process. In his view, it is important to allow the body to make its own decisions and he stressed his need to work intuitively. A showing of the film *Loose in Flight*, which he made for Channel 4 in INSERT DATE, illustrated his languages of dance - classical Kathak and Western contemporary - and the intersection of the two through a focus on structures, but also through an approach to the work that moved away from the clinical perspective found in much Western contemporary dance work. Technological elements of filmmaking acted as a commentary on the process of integrating the disparate elements of his upbringing both social and artistic.

Musician Talvin Singh, for his part, questioned the very enquiry into the issues at stake within creative processes, by asking 'What is the fuss?' Speaking of his own work he helped move the day further towards an unplugged ethos. His path as a tabla artist was one of 'learning rather than of being taught', invoking a sense of engagement, a seeking, rather than a less pro active role often perceived (wrongly in most cases) in the passing down of knowledge within the guru/sishia/parampara tradition. This journey for him was inextricably linked to another, grounded this time in the award-winning, technological world of dance music, where the drum 'n' bass provides the subdivision of sound. Tradition, in his view, is not something static confined to the past, but is also a dynamic, progressive phenomenon working in and on the present. In his make up as an artist, influences from growing up in Britain were combined with leaving school at 15 to study in India, because one could only get so far in Britain (a situation he considers still true in 2002), with western influences including club culture, raves and acid house music. Singh's vibrant contribution continued with an impromptu tabla performance, a brief and spell-binding journey into one aspect of his musical world which supported strongly his stated desire to see his music 'engender a new mechanism of hearing' comparable to Kapoor's works which make us experience the physical reality differently.

Along with Singh, Jeyasingh does not divorce the reality of everyday life from her artistic practice. She does not want to be perceived as 'having something profound to

say'. The narratives in her work are embodied by the dancers, thus in her eyes what she does is immensely practical. Her enquiries relate back to the body, in discourses where the limb that makes the straight line in the studio is the same one that runs for the bus. In her view, it is for the viewers to make up their mind about the nature of the body, rather than for her to begin with intention and conceptualisation in the studio.

Yet, whilst all agreed that artists should not be robbed of their individuality and that aesthetic choices are less aligned to nationality than to intuitive processes, mediated by the experiences of national, religious, ethnic and other identities, there was also a sense that aspects of their work were clearly not Western. This came out when, for example, Singh told of his teacher's comment after one of his performance where he had not used melodic instruments as accompaniment, that although beautiful, his playing without the surrounding melody was somehow 'homeless'; or when Kapoor spoke of a ritual of space and ultimately, a sense of wonder, a sense of awe emerging from a communication with space that manipulates the viewer into entering. Comments such as these reinforce a notion that there are indeed different sensibilities, different ways of making sense of the world, and that to talk about ethno-aesthetics, to utilise the term used in the 1960s within the ethno-scientific debates of anthropology, is not a waste of time. Once again, however, it must be stressed that this is useful only if it is applied to all artistic productions, since they are all ethnic in essence.

What is interesting too is that, despite the artist's view that works of art must step outside of the cultural circle and stand by themselves unexplained, issues of identity nevertheless dominated the discussion. None of the artists really embraced the question raised from the floor by dancer and academic Vena Ramphal, for example, when she asked whether only South Asian bodies could experience the aesthetic they were discussing, alluding possibly to the growing number of non South Asian practitioners of South Asian Dance. This highlighted the fact that ownership of heritage may well be a sensitive domain. It also demonstrated that aesthetics and identity can be confused, and that aesthetics and political concerns are interwoven and, in our views, should not be perceived as separate.

#### Cultural hegemony and economic power

Underlying the discussions throughout the day were issues of power, of cultural hegemony, and of access to resources. Whilst some artists like Jeyasingh and Kapoor have indeed received an accolade by the establishment, this does not mean that the field is wide open to new generations of artists. Similarly, although the symposium,

by taking place in the Royal Opera House, seems to have promulgated South Asian Dance into the bastion of Western High Art culture and placed it along the hegemonic dance form of ballet, this is not really the case, since the event was organised not by the Royal Opera House but by Akademi. Naseem Khan noted, for example, that within the field of South Asian Dance the infrastructure is poorer and the administrative knowledge is infinitely less than in the main fields of what we can broadly call Western theatre dance, and that we are not dealing with a level playing field. Participants, however, also acknowledged that over the past two decades shifts in mainstream culture have provided for a greater ease in making works where there is a broader awareness and appreciation of eastern influences. Kapoor noted that the artist's calibre of conversation, or relationship, with his/herself, determines whether 'South Asian' can be used as a badge of convenience. Yet access to resources remains a significant issue above a sense of taking advantage of the ability to tick a South Asian identity box.

Considering that the powers of today are more or less the same as the powers of the colonial era of the British Empire, it is well worth revisiting the colonial encounter in order to establish later in what way members of the diasporas of our contemporary world are transforming the West. Playwright and filmmaker Garish Karnad did this by providing an informative and critical commentary of the confrontation between British and Indian arts over the past 150 years. Two seminal aspects of the intersection between cultures were detailed as the introduction of English in 1835, which opened up new ways of thinking, and the creation of colonial cities (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras) where British values reigned supreme. The importation of British values contributed to the commodification of Indian theatre and changed the nature of theatrical practice, including legitimising acting as a career choice for the middle to upper classes. Dichotomies appeared in various artistic practices through the integration of outside elements. Chasms appeared: between folk and traditional theatre, or between a new class of gentlemen painters and artisans with an emphasis on craft, aligned to a working class legacy, for example. Karnad also highlighted the multiple character of Indian aesthetics. In addition to a colonial presence, the threads of Muslim and Parsi cultures and languages, for instance, had been evident for a long time in the artistic productions sponsored by the courts of Lucknow and Tanjore which established the rich foundations on which South Asian aesthetics are now based. Indeed we would argue that this blending of cultural traditions accepted and encouraged in earlier an era on the subcontinent is in sharp contrast to what is happening in contemporary Gujarat, for example.

On the other hand the (re)construction of an Indian heritage by an Indian intelligentsia in the light of British occupation is also worth considering and contrasting with similar grand narratives in British cultural history, where certain artists were endorsed whilst others were left out. From a contemporary perspective one may wonder, for example, how it was possible for someone of the intellectual calibre of Rabindranath Tagore to anoint American dancer Ruth St Denis and her orientalist dances. The colonising of art forms by the middle and upper classes and the rejection of the holders of the traditions within institutions such as Kalakshetra, also offers ground for reflection.

Karnad's blend of cultural history integrated a political commentary and offered a rich contextual summary of contemporary artistic practices. His formulation of modernist aesthetics highlighted tensions predicated upon Britain's impact on various Indian art forms that extended beyond a mere economic and class basis. Ultimately, technological influences must be considered, and they can be seen today in their pinnacle in Bollywood productions.

Within cultural hegemony, artists also discussed some of the advantages of marginalisation. Jeyasingh, for example, perceives herself as a creature of the margins. She feels drawn to the edges, away from the traditional narrative of the body in dance. For her, concepts of marginality are manifold: the physical margins of space through which she challenges the hierarchies and conventions of European stage space by resisting centre stage (literally revelling in the space near the wings), and her personal sense of marginality through a lifetime as a foreigner, for example. Various identities as 'other' stemmed from labels linked to nation, ethnicity or religion. A Christian in India, a Tamil in Sri Lanka, an Indian in East Malaysia, an Indian in Britain, Jeyasingh's pool of experience is a sophisticated, cosmopolitan and literary one, allowing for multiplicity of layers and the opportunity of creating choice at what is taken up within her work. Significantly, Jeyasingh's concepts of marginality echoed Kapoor's perspective that the label 'South Asian' comes into being through the viewing rather than the making.

Kapoor similarly appreciates the positive aspects of the margins. He discussed how he likes working simultaneously on a number of projects so that 'the work can permeate from the edges'. He also enjoyed early in his career the ambiguity offered by his name when he was often thought of as a female artist. His ability to confound expectations,

to integrate a ‘female-like delicacy’ within his work, helped him draw on traditions of the ritualised in Indian aesthetics. He articulated distinctions between traditional constructions of the sublime and his desire to ‘turn the world inside out’. Rather than the viewer standing in a moment of *rêverie* with the work, Kapoor’s art manipulates or allows the viewer to revel in the present, where the artistic form is related to the body’s response. Notions of a modern sublime reinforce a sense of the ‘eyes, body, here, now’, where the physical holds the key to something metaphysical in the artwork.

Other participants drew on the work and experience of migrant artists, those born in the geographical South Asia, and the underlying tensions of identity and difference from slightly different perspectives. Raminder Kaur’s offering from academia, for example, drew on popular cultural formats to illustrate the first and second generational difference. Two film excerpts highlighted tensions between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ raised earlier. A polished traveller metaphor was seen in *Bombay Boys* in a journey undertaken by descents from the diasporic generation, a return to the parental homeland. The American, British and Australian boys presented a hybrid identity, a new dynamics emergent from the old. The smooth edged, mongrelised identity of the visitor contrasted to the native Bombay boys, aware and confident of their identities. An opposite view appeared in the *Wild West* clip, where the visitors are in West London, negotiating their diasporic identities among the migrant communities. A challenge to boundaries was epitomised as two Pakistanis discuss barriers in their attempts to break into the country/western music scene. Two visions of the traveller emerged: the former a well-travelled cosmopolitan on a packaged tour; the latter, a backpacking traveller, rough edges showing.

#### Interdisciplinary hybridity versus cultural hybridity

Among the connecting points of reference for the panellists were the extents to which creative practices move towards interdisciplinary practice. Key concepts linked discussion of personal creativity in different forms, reinforcing the underpinning issues of aesthetic practice.

Jeyasingh’s keynote highlighted how individual practices transcend monolithic boundaries. Her personal aesthetic choices are made in the studio, with questions asked where the answers often appear years later in other dances. Her work challenges the classical quest to establish a consensus of beauty – instead Jeyasingh wanted to present her voice through the narrative of a body she recognised – one that draws on diverse threads of her life journeys. Among these threads, for example,

exists the day-to-day experience of street games – a narrative of the body in extreme contrast to the structures of the body invoked in the dance studio. *Raid*, created in 1995, integrates the two bodies – the studio and the street, through the classicism of Bharata Natyam and the street game Kabbadi.

Jeyasingh also questioned her relationship with the ‘classical’, offering up challenges to classicism’s oath of allegiance: ‘I swear to keep back straight, jump high’, etc. Instead, Jeyasingh takes pleasure in the messiness of mixing the classical and the Other. Forswearing classical allegiance, Jeyasingh proclaimed her commitment to untidiness and the notion of a polymorphous body of 21st century. Her newest work embraces the cyborg as a metaphor for a new way of conceptualising the body; the dancing physical body encountering the technologised body.

Patel’s sound sculptures similarly exemplify the interdisciplinary, rather than the cultural, hybridity wherein ‘science meets art’, his instrument a laptop computer. Offering a sound clip of influences -- reflections on space encompassed the work of Iranian musicians, Zakir Hussain’s soundscape on space, theoretician Marshall McLuan and DJ scratches of Indian time cycles - interdisciplinary hybridity took aural form. Moving from a sense of fusion, Patel’s concept of new music sets out to challenge the rules, explaining that there are no rules in his medium. His artistic process involves establishing own rules, in contrast to abiding by existing ones.

#### Performance as discourse

By grounding the day in artistic practice, the immediacy of theoretical discourses was brought to life. Although the artists resisted an intellectualised version of their art in the acts of creation, their ability to reflect on their work in highly articulate and accessible language constantly drew us back to the transformational quality of art. Where the language of aesthetics proved slippery at times, we were constantly re-confronted with the aesthetic experience firsthand.

Jeyasingh’s keynote address, for example, was extended/re-situated by excerpts from *Raid*. INSERT NAME OF DANCER’s body combined the taut awareness of the street game – where a heightened awareness is evident in the need to respond to opposing team’s move, with the rhythmic and linearity of Bharata Natyam. Mavin Khoo embodied other strands later: the classical bodies and structures of Bharata Natyam and Ballet. The verticality of ballet, with its held torso, rounded and contained arms atop floating bourrées, contrasted to the grounded and aurally

percussive footwork of South Asian classicism, where an impulse continued through the off-centre torso, ending in mudras.

Nahid Siddiqui, in performance with composer and vocalist Fahim Mazhar, demonstrated the collaborative process of improvisation between dancer and musician onstage. As Sundaram commented, because of Siddiqui's ability to transcend the classical Kathak technique, 'if you see her, you've missed the dance'. The mesmerising performance once again made the audience members question their own views on collaboration and about the relationship between artists and the art form they practice.

The rich day ended with Mavin Khoo's choreography *Obsessing in Line*, where tensions of theatre space, technique and limbs were evident. The work embodied the intersection between the classical dance forms of Ballet and Bharata Natyam. Iconic images of the Nataraja were interwoven with extended and strong arabesques as one extreme of the classical forms. The other extremes glimpsed in the slow *tendus* and held poses of the Nataraja form. Borders were crossed, both visible ones defined in the stage space by blue lighting, and those invisible in the aesthetics upon which the dance forms are drawn. Daniel Meja and Khoo made the crossover visual, embodying through rhythmic interchanges the strong linear forms, they emphasised different concepts of harmony and balance.

### Conclusion

The structure of the day offered an incredibly rich and accessible account of key issues concerning South Asian artistic practices as well as more general aesthetic issues valid for other genres. An intriguing blend of art forms was represented, with some key concerns recurring throughout the day. The decision to address the issues through practice was significant, providing a broad level of accessibility, enabling more academically formulated concepts to emerge in a non-exclusionary vocabulary. Looking around at various moments during the day, people were openly responding to the images, sounds and rhythmic structures in a physical sense (tapping foot or hands, moving forward in the seat). Thus one could relate to the debate on an individual aesthetic level, embodying the artistic practice through dance and tabla performances, slides and video clips.

While the focus on aesthetics may have seemed to be subsumed, intriguing elements of aesthetic concern emerged in discussions across the spectrum of art forms.

Jeyasingh's discussion of the conceptualisation of the body, and differing emphases on space and time undertaken in creative acts, for example, found resonance in Kapoor's reflections on his work. Aspects of space were conceptualised as the physical space of artistic practice and differences between eastern and western spatial constructs, reinforcing the extent of knowledge as socially constructed.

Issues of representation, and a third relationship within the artistic discourse was emphasised: in addition to the relationship between the viewer and the artistic object, the artists' relationship to their own work, the relationship of the artist to the self was also highlighted. Issues of exoticism and the foreign can feed into the process at this level, to the extent that one can question whether one has an exotic relation to one's self. Whilst Akademi's aim of unwrapping South Asian aesthetics advanced various debates, many layers are yet to be exposed.

Dr Andrée Grau  
Dr Stacey Prickett

**Andrée Grau F.I.Chor. MA PhD**, *Reader in Dance, Subject Leader for Dance, and Programme Convener for the MA in Ballet Studies*: is a Benesh choreologist and anthropologist. She has carried out fieldwork in Southern Africa, Aboriginal Australia, India, and London, looking at performance from cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives. She has published in many academic journals and encyclopaedias, and regularly contributes to international conferences. She is the author of Dorling Kindersley's *Eyewitness Dance* (1998) and co-edited with Stephanie Jordan, *Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre Dance and Cultural Identity* (2000). She is a co-director of the AHRB Centre for Cross-Cultural Music and Dance Performance, a collaboration between SOAS, UniS and Roehampton. She is director of the Leverhulme project 'South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating cultural identity through dance'. Her main teaching lies in the area of the anthropology of performance.

**Stacey Prickett BA Cum Laude, MA, Ph.D.**, *Lecturer in Dance*: teaches Integrated Studies and Dance Appreciation. She studied at the University of California at Riverside, where she received her BA with Honours (*Cum Laude*), and at the Laban Centre in London. She has lectured in world dance and dance history and theory in California and regularly contributes to international dance conferences and journals. Her writing has appeared in a number of international journals and she also contributed chapters to *Dance in the City* (1997) edited by Dr Helen Thomas and *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers* (1999) edited by M. Bremser. She is a past president of the Dance Critics Association. Her areas of interest are: sociology of dance, politics and art, cultural fusions in dance.