

# Akādēmī

## South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped!

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2002, Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House.

*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, *Narvadisha 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.

South Asian Aesthetics - Unwrapped! was conceived this time last year, initially as a very modest proposal, to introduce some of the theory and the principles behind South Asian Dance to the as yet uninitiated, and to alert decision makers – critics and funders - to some of the complexities of the forms it comes under their remit to assess. The more we considered this idea, the more it became apparent that an introduction to South Asian dance forms demanded an assessment of what it means to be 'South Asian' – and more particularly, as to what constitutes 'South Asian aesthetics' in their contemporary expression, global location, hybrid reality and classical context.

In the wake of recent discussions about what shapes British identity, this symposium looks at the question of culture and nationality through the specific lens of aesthetics. If the 'life of nations is lived largely in the imagination', how far is the fabric of the British imagination now woven with a South Asian aesthetic thread? Or, in a world of constant trans-national translation between cultures and ideals, is the concept of a culturally specific aesthetic now redundant? Akademi believes that such questions lie at the heart of how art forms are perceived, developed, programmed and supported

In 2002 the picture of South Asian art forms in Britain presents a myriad of glittering possibilities. Each form revels in a diversity of influences and a complexity of inheritances that defy simplistic analysis. Akademi has for 22 years promoted the practice, understanding and appreciation of these art forms. This symposium reaches for a deeper understanding of the aesthetic behind these forms and through this asks a much wider question about the development of aesthetics in the twenty first century.

We are delighted to present today an extraordinary range and calibre of practitioners, to explode and explore the myths and the truths surrounding what makes an aesthetic and what makes it South Asian.