

in through the audience. Thevarajah, who has a ready rapport with the young audience members, brings a jocular, blokey appeal to his regal role and encourages plenty of interaction. He greets his loyal subjects in the auditorium with waves and high-fives; takes a refreshing mimed bath in the river with lots of characterful scrubbing and gargling; and (later in the show) holds the young viewers rapt with his rhythmic mridangam playing.

Lovers of Indian myth will already know how the story continues: Manu finds a magical speaking fish in his bathing water one morning, and promises to save the fish from predators in the river by taking him home to his palace. Overnight, thanks to the magic of theatre and large swathes of fabric, the fish grows immense (accompanied, in this version, by high-pitched shouts of “fish behind you!”) and reveals itself to be Vishnu, transformed into fish form to fight the demon No-Knowledge.

Manu, of course, has to build a ship to keep the subjects of his kingdom safe, and here the ship is interactively formed from young audience members invited to the stage to create the bow, stern and mast with their own bodies. The number of eager volunteers arriving on stage to help with this part of the story illustrates the engaging nature of the show and it was great to see that even the younger children in the audience were not too shy to participate. Fortunately, Manu’s plan works, the ship reaches the Himalayas, and everyone’s suggested treasures are distributed among the people to start a new society. Cue a feelgood ending and happy smiles all around.

If there’s a small criticism to be made about *The Magic Fish*, it’s that the advertised running time of forty minutes feels far more suited to the target age range than the nearly hour-long performance that actually took place. If Boonham can find a way to move the show along at a more child-friendly lick without losing the playfulness and interactivity – and if someone in the crew can find a slightly nicer piece of set to represent the Kritamala river than the length of plastic sheeting that looked like it might have come in a hurry from Homebase – she’ll have a winner on her hands.

## ***A double bill: Rouh, Spoken Word and Ghazal*** **3 July 2016**

**Natalia Hildner & Hauz Khas  
Connection with Arunima Kumar  
Cecil Sharp House, London  
Reviewed by Sushma Mehta**

**N**atalia Hildner – a dancer with the *nazāka* (delicacy, elegance) and *adā* (grace) of the Lucknow gharana of kathak and yet with a very contemporary feel – performed in a double bill presented by Sama Arts Network in a delightful and evocative



Natalia Hildner | Photo: Amit Mahendru

afternoon of poetry, music and dance as part of the Mystic Voices Festival at a *mehfil*-style concert (one in an intimate setting) in Cecil Sharp House.

The concert started with a presentation by Hauz Khas Connection – a world music group – of a sarangi solo by the celebrated Suhail Yusuf Khan accompanied by Vishal Nagar on the tabla. With shawls draped over their knees in the true *darbār* (court) style, the duo exhibited a great rapport with each other and the audience. Suhail began with *rāg Saugandh* in *vilambit*, *madhya* and *drut laya* (slow, medium and fast tempo), followed by a *thumri dhun* (melody) in *rāg Misra Maaru Bihag*. A catchy melody beautifully executed drew an involuntary ‘aa-ha’ straight from the heart from the audience. In the final section, Vishal Nagar in his tabla solo recited exciting *bols* (syllables) of compositions, with their various arrangements and permutations that got the kathak dance artists tapping their hands and feet and exclaiming ‘wah wah’ (bravo).

The audience was then in for a

surprise when Arunima Kumar – a talented kuchipudi dancer – took us on a journey into the culture, social etiquette and aesthetics of life in Avadh during the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab of Avadh. Expressing in dance through spoken word with ghazal and Sufi compositions sung beautifully by Suhail Yusuf Khan, the ambience of Shan-e-Avadh was effectively created.

After a short interval Natalia began her performance. She started with a *thumri*, *Mora Man Liye Jaye*, blending *nritya* (abstract) and *nritya* (expressional) dance, using the

diverse languages through the universal language of dance and music. Much of the music was improvised and again Natalia’s expression through lyrics and exploration of rhythm was palpable, her body syncing with the music and responding to the musicality of the various instruments accompanying her.

However, the piece felt very rushed and somehow unfinished. Natalia moved rather hurriedly from a ghazal in one language to the next, with the result that unfortunately the audience was not given a chance to get into the spirit of the piece as a whole. She needs to develop it further and elaborate each ghazal as a part of the aggregate so that in its entirety it does touch the *rouh* (soul). Then, as in the words of Parveen Shakir, we will reach our ultimate goal, *rouh tak a gai tasir masihai ki* – ‘My soul has been reached and healed by this Jesus-like touch.’

Natalia has started this soulful journey and we look forward to its completion.

## ***Staycation/Vacation***

**15 July 2016**

**Akademi  
Rich Mix, London  
Reviewed by Nicholas Minns**

**I**t is an evening of two separate performances and many contrasts: between student and professional dancers, classical Indian dance and contemporary dance, narrative and abstract forms, and context and style.

*Staycation* is a performance devised by Akademi for two schools in the Tower Hamlets area. Choreographed by Kamala Devam and Honey Kalaria for George Green’s School and by Elena Catalano (assisted by Maryam Shakiba) for Langdon Park School, it is a project in which the performance reveals the value of the steps taken to achieve it. These are the kinds of projects that can change a life, and as such are vital to the development of the arts and education. One of the girls reveals a natural grasp of performing, while one of the boys is clearly thrilled at the opportunity to pursue his sense of self.

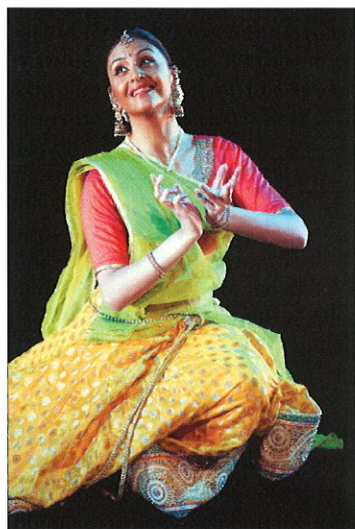
On the professional side the contrasts constantly illumine the transformation of classical Indian dance within contemporary

lyrics and adding *bols* of abstract kathak compositions to interpret and elaborate the lyrics and the mood of the piece with exquisite *abhinaya* (expressive technique). This technique was pioneered by Lacchu Maharaj – a doyen of the Lucknow gharana who, by placing images on the mnemonic syllables of pure dance, created snippets of visual imagery. It is used freely by kathak dancers nowadays and Natalia’s use of this technique was superb. The performance ended with a joyous *tarana* choreographed by her guru Pandit Birju Maharaj in *rāga Bhopali* and *tal Rupak*.

Between the two recorded items, Natalia presented the experimental piece which incorporated ghazals in four languages: Arabic, Spanish, Farsi and Urdu, taking two *shers* (couplets) in each language. Love – human and divine – in its complexity and ambiguity makes the common element in all the four ghazals. It was performed with live music by Milad Yusoufi who played an array of instruments – oud, guitar, cajon, rubab and santoor. The piece aimed to transcend



society. Keshha Raithatha presents the traditional form of Indian dance in a narrative work, *Ashtapadi – Lalita Lavang*, in kathak style with the delight



Keshha Raithatha | Photo: Simon Richardson

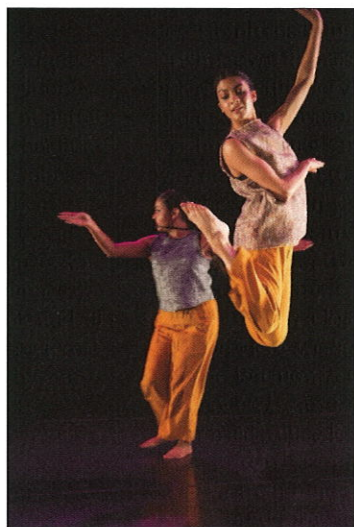
and precision of her gesture, posture, rhythm and her storytelling eyes. Yet in the final work of the evening, *Traces*, Raithatha sets aside tradition to reveal a quite different dramatic presence, one that evolves out of a contemporary existential philosophy that demands its own expression. *Traces* is the result of a 2015 Choreogata commission from Akademi that allowed Raithatha to choose a choreographic mentor (Eva Recacha). Launching bravely into unfamiliar territory with no narrative and an aural environment of powerful prayer chant, a lot of silence and some recorded sounds, *Traces* is a journey in which Raithatha's body becomes her eyes as she searches for expression within a fortress of her imagination. There are moments of great beauty and force in which her classical technique sustains her, but it is her choreographic approach and her innate sense of drama that takes her and *Traces* into exciting, uncharted territory.

Archana Ballal does not entirely leave behind her classical Indian training in *As Small as a World and as Large as Alone*, but she changes the context to a contemporary narrative on agoraphobia affecting a young woman planning to go on holiday. Using text and a contemporary musical context – including a sultry *Pharaoh's Dance* by Miles Davis – Ballal represents herself as she is: a contemporary woman in a contemporary environment. She is dressed as she might be in her own flat, surrounded by



Archana Ballal | Photo: Simon Richardson

a table with flowers in a vase, a couple of chairs, a suitcase and a wastepaper basket full of crumpled plans. She translates her text into gestures that avoid any literal relationship; they are a parallel physical expression with which she builds her dance. She spends a little too much time with the single idea of unpacking and repacking, losing the careful construction of the opening, but she finishes strongly where she began, with



Jaina Modasia & Vidya Patel | Photo: Simon Richardson

her indecision only delayed.

In *Two by Two*, choreographer Hari Krishnan casts aside both the classical movement and the context. I am perhaps the only person not to have seen Vidya Patel in *BBC Young Dancer* 2015, so when I see her natural ability in Krishnan's work alongside Jaina Modasia I wonder who this extraordinary young woman is. First you notice the commanding eyes, and then she begins to move. Krishnan's use of the thrust and parry gestures of a boxing match is a beautiful example of Patel's flow extruded through a lyrical body, though it is also apparent in her effortless opening jumps. Krishnan's

vehicle is a witty and rhythmical abstraction of episodes that seem to wander in and out of classical dance with a sly and knowing grin. Modasia is a perfect foil for Patel, creating a harmony between the two that makes them and the choreography look as refreshing as a choreographic... vacation.

## ARDRA – Impassioned Moods

22 July 2016

Payal Ramchandani

Nehru Centre, London

Reviewed by Annapoorna  
Kuppuswamy

Payal Ramchandani, an accomplished and elegant kuchipudi dancer from Newcastle, delighted the audience with some beautiful, well-executed kuchipudi on a hot Friday evening in London. The evening's theme was *aarudhra* (impassioned moods), and the artist chose a selection of four pieces, all focused on the god Krishna, the most popular protagonist in Indian classical dances.

Payal started with *Madhava Panchaksham*, a composition describing the resplendent nature of Krishna and his many qualities by Oothukkadu Venkatasubba Iyer, choreographed by her gurus Raja and Radha Reddy. Interspersed with slow-paced *theermanams* (step sequences), Krishna the incomparable and all his adornments were depicted. Payal's command over rhythm and quiet confidence were highlighted in sections where

Payal then launched straight into a *javali* – a light-hearted, racy, pure expression-based piece, *Samayamide ra ra*, a popular number by Patnam Subramania Iyer. 'The time is right, please come, my Lord,' says the heroine, who is a *parakiya nayika* – a heroine who is married to one man and in love with another. The husband leaves home on business and the heroine takes this opportunity to invite her lover home. Payal was adept at effortlessly portraying the glee of the heroine on her husband's departure, her annoyance with the reluctant lover and the numerous ways in which she cajoles him to accept her invitation. However, her choice of *sancharis* (elaborations) could have been better. Too much time was spent on describing the elderly disabled in-laws who were mere props for the main story line and not the focus – although it certainly did introduce some humour, albeit unconventional.

The third piece was another classic: *Rusli Radha Rusla Madhav*, a Marathi composition describing the tiff between Krishna and Radha. Radha is tired of Krishna flirting with the gopis and decides enough is enough. Krishna tries his best to talk his way out of it and win her back, but she stubbornly stays angry. This angers Krishna and both their anger rubs off on all of nature: trees start to wither, birds stop singing, peacocks stop dancing and even Krishna's flute refuses to play. With some excellent choreography and perfectly-composed music Payal brought



Photo: Sharad Sharma

she chose to concentrate only on the head and neck movements and accomplishing it with ease. Filled with classic kuchipudi-style Krishna postures, the first item, though sedate, was a good introduction for what was to come.

the nature sequences alive. Finally Krishna gives in and apologises and all is right with the world again; however, this sequence could have been shorter.

The final piece was from the famous *Krishna Leela*