

Proposal: Lecture Demonstration by Sandra Jasmin Schlage:

„Bharata Natyam – A Cultural Translation”

My lecture demonstration with the title “Bharata Natyam – A Cultural Translation” will consist of two parts. First I am going to explain and demonstrate the basic features of this classical dance from India. In the second part of my lecture demonstration I will present my adaptation of those features to Western performance concepts and music in a live performance. This “cultural translation” aims at deepening the Western audience’s understanding of this Indian art form.

I am a trained Bharata Natyam dancer. In the past I have undergone an extensive training in Oriental and Indian Dance (Classical, modern, as well as experimental) and I am performing in Germany and India as a member of different dance ensembles and as a solo dancer. The cooperation with other dancers, artists and live musicians are of special importance to me, as well as experimental and contemporary realization of Indian dance performances. Furthermore I have a broad theoretical knowledge on Indian Art in general, as well as Indian dance forms in particular, since I finished my MA-course in Asian and Islamic Art History at the University of Bonn with a thesis on dance sculptures of the Cōḷa-dynasty. Currently I am working as research associate and lecturer (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin) at the department for Asian and Oriental art history at the University of Bonn and researching on my doctoral topic, the relationship between dance and visual arts in South Asia.

Bharata Natyam is the most popular of the eight classical dances of India, which has gained its present form mainly during the so-called „revival“ throughout the middle of the 20th century. Other spellings, as Bharatanatyam or Bharatnayam are also found in literature. Indian dances are traditionally divided into three different types: Folk dance, ritual dance and classical dance. Each type is further subdivided into many different styles. There are eight recognized classical dance forms in India: Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Odissi, Sattriya and Mohiniyattam. While some of these dance forms are mainly of regional importance, especially Bharata Natyam has become popular all over India and world-wide.

All classical dances are based on the "Natya Shastra", a versed manual on performing arts, which was compiled by Bharata Muni between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. Therefore they share some basic principles which I am going to demonstrate by the example of Bharata Natyam. Those basic elements are *nṛtta*, *nṛtya*, *nāṭya* and *abhinaya*. Under the term *nṛtta*, abstract dance movements are subsumed. These rhythmical dance steps are arranged in symmetrical lines and geometric figures. They are purely decorative and the hand gestures used for it, convey no word to word meaning. At this point of my explanation, I am going to present a *nṛtta* sequence taken from a traditional Jatiswaram choreography (a rhythmical dance item from the Bharata Natyam repertoire).

Abhinaya is the opposite of *nṛtta*. In the *abhinaya* portion of the dance, different modes of expression are used to convey the meaning of the dance. Facial expressions and an alphabet consisting of single and double hand gestures are used to illustrate the narrative of the dance item. Of special importance in the *abhinaya* portion of the dance is the depiction of the nine different moods, the *navarasas*, which are love, valour, humour, astonishment, compassion, fear, anger, repugnance and serenity. Through the dancer’s facial expressions and gestures those nine different moods (rasas) get transmitted to the audience. My

explanation on *abhinaya* will be followed by a dance *abhinaya* sequence, which is taken from a Padam. Padams traditionally pick out the different conditions of lovers as a theme.

Nṛtya is a combination of pure dance and *abhinaya*. Rhythmical dance movements are combined with passages which convey a meaning or, for example, tell a story or describe a deity. As an example for a typical *nṛtya* choreography, I am going to dance a Viṣṇu Kauthuvam. This item, taken from the temple repertoire of the *Devadāsīs* (temple dancers) is dedicated to the Hindu deity Viṣṇu. Rhythmical dance portions alternate with *abhinaya* portions, which describe the iconography of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu.

Nāṭya is the term used for dance drama. In *nāṭya* traditional stories, as for example from the Ramayana or Mahabharata are performed and there is often an interaction between several dancers on stage. For this reason, as a single dancer, I am unable to give a practical demonstration of *nāṭya* in my lecture demonstration.

The second part of this programme is dedicated to the adaptation of those basic features to contemporary Western music, to enable the spectator to experience the effect of this dance form in a familiar context. I am going to present a Bharata Natyam choreography, including *nṛtta* and *abhinaya* sequences on one or more selected songs, depending on the available time for my lecture demonstration. Instrumental music will be used for rhythmical dance sequences (*nṛtta*), while the vocal parts are used for the *abhinaya* sequences. The audience will be able to observe the word to word translation of the lyrics to hand gestures and facial expressions. Besides this literal translation, the *abhinaya* parts also include a free interpretation of the meaning of the song, conveyed through body language. After my lecture demonstration I will be happy to discuss my concept of “Cultural translation” of Bharata Natyam with the conference participants.

Since Bharata Natyam is a more or less exotic art form in Europe, a lecture demonstration or similar formats are frequently used to present this dance to a Western audience and explain its structure and content. For example the dancer Madhavi Mandira from Cologne offers danced tours through the Hinduism department of the anthropological Rautenstrauch Joest Museum at Cologne, where she explains the basic features of Bharata Natyam, gives an introduction to Hinduism and dances short items. My “Cultural Translation” is a unique concept, since I am not only giving an explanation of Bharata Natyam, but also adapt it to Western music with English lyrics so that my audience can understand the narration of the dance. They will be able to follow the narration of the song in real time and get an idea of the aesthetic experience of Indian dance.

Because of the unfamiliar music, costumes and narratives, Bharata Natyam is often reduced to an exotic spectacle by an uninitiated audience or seen as a symbol for Indian culture/ethnicity. I will try to attenuate these factors by using Western music with its original English lyrics. I have also made some modifications of my dance costume. I am using plain material, tied as a dance *sari* for my self-designed costume. Since I am using elastic material, which sticks to my body, the audience will be able to see the different body movements more clearly.

My lecture demonstration “Bharata Natyam – A Cultural Translation” addresses all Western dancers and performers, who want to learn about Indian performing arts by the example of classical dance. By reflecting about earlier unknown art forms and contrasting it with familiar concepts, they will also deepen their understanding of their own performance

traditions. Furthermore this programme is also modelled for researchers and artists dealing with transcultural studies. My performance is a practical demonstration of a possible way to adapt some basic features of a dance from one culture (in this case Indian culture) to another (in my example Western/European).

The duration of this lecture demonstration is designed for approximately 30 minutes. According to the time slots available at the conference, the programme can as well be extended to 45 minutes or shortened to 20 minutes minimum. I can bring the songs for my dances either on an audio-CD or on a pen drive, therefore I would require a CD-player or computer with good audio-boxes to play my music. For my dances I need a minimum performance area of 5 square metre.

To give you an idea of traditional Bharata Natyam and my adaptation to Western music, feel free to watch some of my dance samples. I have uploaded a video-clip of a traditional Jatiswaram, a rhythmical dance item, on dropbox. This dance was performed at the “Lichterfest” at Leverkusen on 31st of January 2016:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/m07qyhna2u2m70l/00003.MTS?dl=0>

The second example is an earlier choreography on the German Christmas song “Kommet ihr Hirten”, where you can see my adaptation of Bharata Natyam to Western music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4d0HAbBW6Q>

I would be very happy if you could consider my performance for the SGEM conference. It would be a great pleasure for me to share some ideas of my artistic and academic work with the participants of this conference.



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