



2011
DISTINGUISHED *ARTIST*

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

RANEE RAMASWAMY

2011



ON BHARATANATYAM

Bharatanatyam is a dynamic, evolving dance tradition from southern India—an evocative language in which the dancer who has mastered and internalized the idiom can write her personal dance-poetry. The dance was never meant to be just entertainment; it is also meant to enlighten the performer and the viewer through the underlying spirituality that forms its core.

With a history that goes back more than 2,000 years to the ancient temples of southern India, Bharatanatyam has come down through the centuries integrating elements of music, theater, poetry, sculpture, and literature. This multidimensional art offers an infinite scope for understanding and exploring the body, mind, and spirit.

While the vocabulary of Bharatanatyam is highly structured, the beauty, vitality, stunning physicality, and emotional depth of the form offer infinite freedom for self-expression. It is these qualities that have allowed the form to survive through the years as a tradition that has the potential to convey both timeless themes and contemporary ideas.



“We couldn’t be more fortunate that she decided to stay, and that she accepted that long-ago invitation to dance.”



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RAMASWAMY

INTRODUCTION

Robert J. Struyk
Chair, The McKnight Foundation

Ranee Ramaswamy loved to dance from the moment she took her first lesson as a little girl in India—but she was 26 years old before she truly became a dancer.

Ranee was a young wife and mother, a new immigrant from India to the Minneapolis suburbs, when the Tamil Association of Minnesota asked her to perform at a Diwali festival. Even though she hadn't danced in nearly 10 years, Ranee eagerly said yes. The experience inspired her to begin teaching and to resume her own dance studies, and—just as important—it started her on a journey toward thinking of herself as an artist.

Ranee's life hasn't been the same since that invitation, and neither has the Minnesota

arts landscape. Over the last three decades, Ranee has introduced thousands of Minnesota audiences to the classical Indian dance form Bharatanatyam. “This has been my life’s work, spreading the greatness of this dance form all throughout Minnesota for the last 30 years,” she told Minnesota Public Radio earlier this year. “I was looking at a map of Minnesota the other day, and I couldn’t find a town that I haven’t visited!”

Ranee is a supremely gifted dancer and choreographer, but she is equally gifted as an ambassador. She has built a Minnesota dance company that tours nationally and internationally and is now world-renowned. She has broadened her reach artistically as well, expanding the dance form beyond its traditional boundaries. Her fearless, innovative collaborations with non-Indian musicians, artists, writers, and

performers have brought people together around ancient stories whose resonance becomes deeper when they're told through the lenses of many different cultures.

A lifelong learner herself, Ranee has always considered community and education to be just as important as art. It's impossible to know exactly how many Minnesota schoolchildren have learned something new about the world from Ranee during the workshops and residencies she's created to bring Bharatanatyam into every corner of our state.

Ranee may have landed in Minnesota by chance in 1978, but she remains here by choice. We couldn't be more fortunate that she decided to stay, and that she accepted that long-ago invitation to **dance**.

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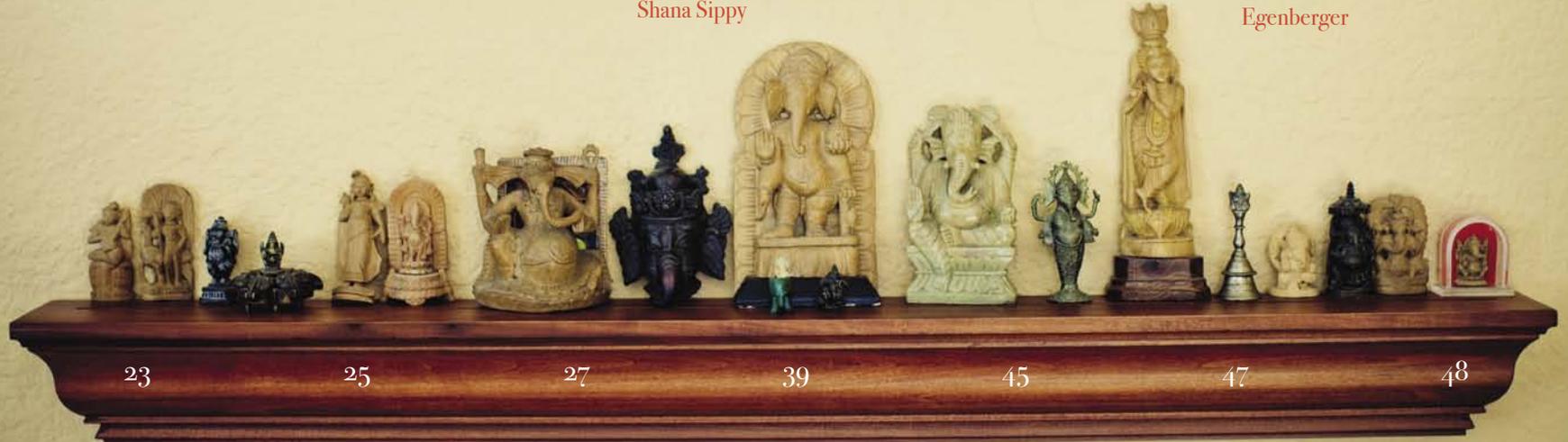
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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My parents believe in horoscopes. Since I was born, everything about my life was planned according to what the astrologer predicted. “She will get married young,” he said, seated in a small hut in Kerala, reading from palm leaves as he chewed tobacco. My father the scientist and my grandfather the medical doctor made an annual trip: waking up at four a.m., traveling by *jutka* (a horse cart), then a bus, and after that a boat to get to the village of Aroor, where the family astrologer lived.

He planned my entire life. He read the name of my husband-to-be, his career, how many children we would have, all the problems and good-luck periods in my life, when I would die, what I would die of. According to him, I am supposed to die at 64.

All that he said came true until my husband and I came to the United States. I was 26 and we had a three-year-old daughter.

Then America took over. The astrologer's predictions seemed to disappear into the background and I appeared.

If someone had told me and my parents 30 years ago that I would be dancing all over the globe with my daughters in tow, that I would have this amazing dance company, that I would be recognized for my work, we would have laughed our heads off.

My favorite quote comes to mind:

Yesterday is history,
Tomorrow a mystery,
Today is a gift,
That's why it's called the present!

I am no longer married to the man the astrologer predicted, but I have the companionship and love of the one I chose here in Minnesota. The astrologer said I would have a son and a daughter, as having two daughters would be considered a curse in India. I have two beautiful and amazing daughters who are my two hands.

I have the best teacher in the world, the best dancers in my company, the best in-laws, the most amazing friends. My parents, who gave me everything so I could practice my art, are healthy and are living with me.

So what if I die at 64? I am already in Heaven!

MANY LIVES ONSTAGE

by Linda Shapiro

At a rehearsal in Ragamala Dance's Uptown Minneapolis studio, Raneé Ramaswamy sits alert and cross-legged in a black wicker chair as five women rest tranquilly in a deep knee bend, ready to perform the first part of *Ihrah: Sacred Waters*, a hymn to the Ganges. The work brings together music by American composer Marc Anderson and Indian composer Raman Kalyan, and poems by Minnesota writer Jim Moore; it was inspired by Raneé's experience of observing 40,000 people gathered on the shore of the Ganges, launching lotus flowers embedded in small lamps onto the sacred waters.

“Valli says a practice should be your religion,” Raneé tells them, referring to her longtime teacher, Alarmel Valli. As the dancers begin to make gestures of scooping water and bringing it up to their faces with

rippling fingers, they engage in what looks like a communal ritual. While they move through space, their meticulously precise gestures and rhythms throb with a sense of joy and release. It's like a display of cascading fireworks—geometric patterns filled with volatile explosions of light.



For more than three decades, Raneé Ramaswamy has been revealing the vitality of Bharatanatyam to Western audiences by paying meticulous attention to its classical form while reinventing the substance of what this ancient art can tell us about ourselves and our world. Creating dances that pulsate with rhythmic excitement and the visceral narration of stories both ancient and modern, Raneé and her

Ragamala Dance company have imbued the precision and sculptural clarity of Bharatanatyam with a thoroughly contemporary exuberance. Raneé has collaborated with composers, poets, visual artists, photographers, and artists in other dance styles—from flamenco to Balinese to Western modern dance—creating what she calls “conversations with other forms.” Through her willingness to embrace new ideas, she has created works where cultural and aesthetic traditions infiltrate one another with élan.

This work is not something for which Raneé was groomed. She fell in love with the dance classes she took as a child, but her parents' expectation was that she would eventually quit dancing, get married, and become a housewife. Very few middle-class Indian girls became professional dancers. The



long process of study that ends with a solo *début* concert, an *arengetram*, involves large fees and expenses for costumes. Ranee's father, the well-known entomologist Dr. T.N. Ananthakrishnan, wanted to save the money and put it toward her dowry.

“In those days,” Ranee says, **“in my family it was not considered proper for a woman to dance onstage.”**

In ancient Hindu temples, female dancers spoke directly and personally to the gods—who also danced—through a highly coded gestural language. Perhaps this helps to explain the vibrant tensions that animate a form where the dancing body can be both a zone of sensual experience and a vehicle of worship. Unlike the dichotomy between body and soul, sacred and secular, flesh and the spirit often found in Western culture, Hindu philosophy embraces a range of what has traditionally been seen

in the West as conflicting and contradictory points of view.

Audiences new to Bharatanatyam are often seduced by the fluidity with which the dancers transform themselves from one deity, character, or emotional state into another. It is the very nature of the technique that informs this kind of protean presence. The dancers embroider rhythmic strands through slapping feet, pliant torsos, highly articulated hands, arms, even faces (there is a whole vocabulary of gestures for the eyes alone). And each part of the body is moving in a different rhythm, with a different quality.

Ragamala's dancers alter the very textures of their bodies as they shift registers from fierce to fragile, stately to ebullient, spiritual to erotic. While the Hindu legends and the gestures, or *hastas*, that are used to illustrate them may not be familiar to

contemporary Western audiences, the sense of one body containing diverse (and often dueling) obligations and desires most certainly is—as is the need to reconcile these opposing forces into a state of harmony.



There is a saying in India that dancers are not reincarnated because they live so many lives onstage. Ranee has also lived her share of varied and demanding lives offstage. After an arranged marriage in India in which she was engaged at 17 and married at 20, she faced the situation of living in a joint family where her in-laws moved in permanently. “If there is compatibility between family members, this can be a great way to live, with relatives who help you out,” she explains. “But I was not the kind of daughter-in-law they wanted—a serious woman who was only

interested in housework. Even a tiny thing such as humming was looked down upon. **I was afraid I would be smothered and lose myself.”**

When the opportunity arose for Raneer and her then-husband, an engineer, to emigrate to the United States, Raneer’s mother, Menaka, encouraged her to go to a place where she could have more freedom than her living situation in India allowed. As the only daughter, Raneer found it difficult to move so far away, but in 1978 the family (which now included daughter Aparna) moved to Minnesota with just \$400, the maximum exchange the Indian government allowed.

The couple found community in the Twin Cities by joining the Tamil Association and other organizations for Indian expatriates. Raneer had not danced in 10 years when the president of the Tamil Association asked her to perform at a festival at the University of Minnesota. Friends of hers, the Reddys, found

her a tape of classical Indian dance music, so she bought a \$25 tape recorder and choreographed two dances. Not only did Raneer enjoy performing after so many years, but she was asked by several people in the audience if she would teach dance to their children. That inspired her to begin making annual trips to India to study with her teacher, Chamundeswari. Back in Minnesota, Raneer taught the dances to her students (including Aparna) and performed them at Indian community gatherings.

Most Bharatanatyam dancers study for a lifetime with one teacher, or guru, to whom they owe complete respect and allegiance; they often work one-on-one with the guru for years before being considered even minimally proficient. Raneer found her guru in 1983 when she saw the soloist Alarmer Valli perform in Minneapolis—and she was hooked. “I had never seen anyone dance Bharatanatyam like she did,” Raneer remembers. **“Valli’s dancing was brilliant and soul-stirring.”**



Raneer registered herself and Aparna for the classes Valli was teaching during her two-week residency in Minnesota. After the first class, Valli phoned Raneer and asked her to perform a piece—the first dance Bharatanatyam students learn—for a lecture and demonstration Valli was offering. “To me it was as if I’d been asked to dance at the Kennedy Center!” she remembers. “I performed *Alarippu* that night three times on stage for her. Valli chose eight-year-old Aparna to be one of her disciples, but I asked if I could also study with her.”

At the time Raneer didn’t know what made Valli, then in her early 20s, so compelling. **“I was a puddle and she made me realize that this art form was an ocean,”** she says. “Every time I study with her I take a small part away, and I can see that the ocean is deeper than I thought. **That’s what a teacher is supposed to**

be—someone you can never learn enough from.”

Over the years Ranee has been analyzing Valli’s style, which she says “**combines aestheticism and athleticism—beautiful lines through the body, perfect control, subtlety, and amazing musicality.**” She has tremendous expressiveness that reaches out and grabs people’s hearts. Through her complete understanding of the art form, knowledge of Indian literature, and brilliant choreography, she has shown the world that one does not have to abandon the classical arts to be contemporary.”

During four-month trips to study in India each year, Aparna soaked up Valli’s teaching like the young and eager sponge she was, while Ranee had to start all over again. There are several schools of Bharatanatyam, and Valli’s style was very different from the one she had

studied as a girl. “I was out dancing six hours a day in the heat,” Ranee says. “It was not the custom for women in my family to work outside the home, let alone dance! Family and friends in India thought I was crazy.”

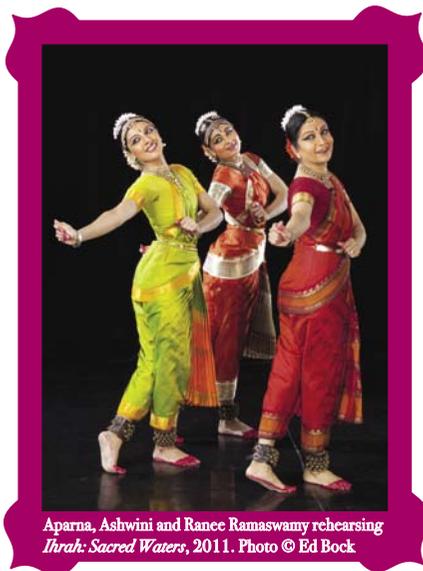
From 1983 to 1987, Ranee continued her annual studies with Valli while establishing herself in the Twin Cities dance community: She performed three times with Aparna at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul, and in collaborations with flamenco artist Susana di Palma and Middle Eastern dance artist Cassandra Shore. She was awarded the first of the 13 McKnight Foundation Artist Fellowships that she would eventually receive, as well as a National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Apprenticeship grant.

As Ranee began to identify herself as a dancer, she also began to meet Minnesotans who not only helped her advance her career, but also widened her circle of friends beyond

the Indian community. “When I first met Cliff Sloane, an ethnomusicologist interested in Indian music, I didn’t trust him because he was a man and he had long hair,” she remembers. “Cliff got me my first paid performing job in Marshall, Minnesota. I took my whole family, as I was afraid to travel on my own. And It was Cliff who helped me to write my first résumé.” Other early supporters included Louise Robinson, now Ragamala’s managing director, and the late Sarah Burstein, then at the Jerome Foundation.

In 1987 Ranee’s husband got a job in St. Louis and the family, which by then included two-year-old Ashwini, moved there. But Ranee soon became frustrated with the lack of opportunities to teach or perform. “I lasted a month. When I found myself ironing a piece of wrapping paper one day, I called Valli and asked her if I could bring Aparna to India for further studies to prepare for her début recital.” While Ranee’s parents looked after Ashwini,

Ranee and Aparna worked intensively with Valli. Twelve-year-old Aparna made her debut, funded by her grandfather, in Chennai. It was a rigorous two-hour ordeal that she passed to Valli's satisfaction (not an easy task). When Ranee returned to the United States, she moved with her family back to Minnesota.



Aparna, Ashwini and Ranee Ramaswamy rehearsing *Ibrahim: Sacred Waters*, 2011. Photo © Ed Bock

Ranee's work underwent a transformation when she met the poet Robert Bly in 1990. She had read Bly's translation of some poems by Mirabai, a legendary Indian princess who believed that the god Krishna was her husband and refused to consider herself married to the man her family had chosen. Ranee was struck by Bly's image of Mirabai as a strong and independent woman, and by his dynamic English translation of the poems. "One day I simply called this world-

famous poet on the phone and asked if he would read the poems as I danced," Ranee says.

"Amazingly, he said yes." Through Bly, she met musicians Marcus Wise and David Whetstone, who collaborated with her on *Mirabai Versions*.

The *Mirabai Versions* premiere in 1991 was a turning point in Ranee's career. "For the first time, I felt like I was really doing my own work," she says.

"And the poems in English and music by

local musicians made Indian dance more accessible to audiences outside of the Indian community." Ranee and David Whetstone founded Ragamala Music and Dance Theater in 1992. She credits Whetstone with introducing her to the work of artists like George Balanchine, Martha Graham, and Philip Glass. "I was excited to collaborate with other cultures that had something in common and to use my dance language to communicate," Ranee says.

"Fusion" has been a buzzword in the arts for some time, but it often involves a sort of grafting of forms that goes about as skin-deep as Botox. For Ranee, cross-cultural collaboration has always been a deeply personal expedition into herself and her tradition. For example, in 1998 she embarked on a collaboration with photographer Marc Norberg, jazz composer/musician Howard Levy, and six contemporary poets including Bly, Jim Moore, and Mary

Easter. Norberg created photographs that captured Rancee's interpretation of Bly's *Mirabai Versions*. The photographs were sent to the writers, who used them as the inspiration for poems. Rancee then used the poems to choreograph *Where the Hands Go the Eyes Follow*, a solo work that explored the expressive and explosive gestures of Bharatanatyam through a completely different prism.

Another collaboration that crossed cultural boundaries was Rancee's 2003 work *Body & Soul: A Tribute to Billie Holiday*, created with jazz vocalist Charmin Michelle and the Twin Cities Seven. Holiday's music reminded Rancee of a form of Indian music called Tamil padams, which she describes as "songs about love, loss, anger, and jealousy." And indeed, the bouncy walks, syncopations, and sharply focused gestures of Bharatanatyam create a sly synergy with Holiday's soulful music.

As a dancer, Rancee is adept at transmuting technical prowess into a stirring emotional experience. A reviewer at the Edinburgh Festival in 2008 described her as "an awe-inspiring performer. Her ease of movement and faultless transitions from one position to another have a timeless quality which allows her to capture eternity in her flow.... She becomes more than a storyteller—she realizes her calling as a priestess or enchantress."

It is this sense of the sublime—the going beyond technique and storytelling to something so viscerally charged that it ignites an audience—that makes Ragamala's work so compelling. In every performance of Bharatanatyam there is a palpable intermingling of history, drama, ritual, and spirituality as the dancers interact with live music that incorporates a *mélange* of rhythmic patterns through singing, musical instruments, and spoken syllables.



Some critics have compared Rancee's achievements in expanding the boundaries of a classical form while adhering to its traditions to George Balanchine's development of neoclassical ballet. Poet and dance writer Lightsey Darst says, "Rancee and Aparna are strong personalities, forceful people. They have qualities that we prize in American women—perhaps even some of the same qualities that Balanchine tried to convey about Americans." She goes on to describe the immediacy of the experience for her: "When I'm at a Ragamala concert, what's happening onstage seems to break ground not just for American-Indian women, but for me too. The shows are full of fusion, most of the dancers aren't Indian, but actually I think their approach to Bharatanatyam is what does it—how they've created this style of *intense, fierce dance that still has moments of lightness and play.*"

Ragamala's innovative work drew enthusiastic responses during the company's first tour to India in October 2010. Indian audiences and critics were, as Ranee puts it, "blown away."

"The American artists sang with their bodies," enthused one reviewer. Another wrote, "The divine elements *Prakriti* (primal matter or nature) and *Shakti* (sacred force or empowerment) converge in the deeply involved performance, offering a sublime, all-encompassing experience." Perhaps most important, Valli was pleased with the company, and especially with her three Ramaswamy disciples: Ranee, Aparna, and now Ashwini, who has recently begun to study with Valli.

Since 2002, Aparna has been Ranee's co-artistic director and co-choreographer at Ragamala, as well as a principal dancer who has received international accolades. In a review of Ragamala during the Maximum India festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in May 2011, *New York Times* dance critic Alastair Macaulay wrote that Aparna "seems



With Ragamala Dance company members, Kerala, India, 2010.
Photo by Godan Nambudiripad

continually to move between different kinds of being and of thought, and the Western observer is aware of many layers of mystery." Ranee's already luminous brown eyes positively shoot sparks when she talks about her partnership with Aparna, whom she calls "my dance mate, my friend, and now my co-artistic director." According to Ranee, Aparna has brought a renewed vision to the company, and has been the detail person who allows Ranee to think big and behave "like an enthusiastic teenager."



The quality of dancing Ragamala exhibits as a matter of course these days has been

accomplished through an intensive regime of classes, rehearsals, and performances. Ranee emphasizes Valli's influence on the company. "Before every rehearsal we warm up by doing some of Valli's dances. When the dancers learned these pieces, everyone was lifted up to another level." Their artistry involves much more than technical virtuosity; in Ranee's company, the expressive aspect is equally critical. Even when they are performing the same movements, each dancer is encouraged by Ranee to find her own path into and through the material.

It is more than what happens in the studio that makes Ragamala a close-knit unit. The company's artists are involved in all aspects of the business, from marketing (Ashwini's purview) to grantwriting (handled by Tamara Nadel). Most important, they are included in the everyday rituals and traditions of Indian life.

"In order to do Bharatanatyam, you need to understand the culture, traditions, and mannerisms of the Indian people."

Ranee is always giving us that,” says Nadel, a dancer of Cuban and Jewish descent.

She recalls Ranee taking her to a temple in India to watch a group of women weaving jasmine garlands: “I had learned the *hasta* for that from Ranee, but had never actually seen how it was done.” Each year Ragamala takes over Al’s Breakfast in Minneapolis for a meal of home-cooked Indian food prepared by the company, inviting Ragamala fans and supporters to become part of the extended family.

Artists who have collaborated with Ranee speak of her generosity of spirit and the warmth with which she brings them into the Ragamala fold. “Ranee is the most amazing collaborator because she is so open,” says actor/writer/director Zaraqwar Mistry, who has worked with her on several dance/theater pieces. “We may be heading into the most unknown territory and she’ll say ‘Sounds great!’” Dancer/choreographer Wynn Fricke recalls Ranee

walking into her first rehearsal with the Zenon Dance Company—a modern- and jazz-based troupe—and saying, “I have no idea what I’m going to do!”

Philip Bither, McGuire senior curator of performing arts at the Walker Art Center, has commissioned and presented three projects with Ranee, including *Sethu* (Bridge) in 2004, a large-scale collaboration with master artist I Dewa Putu Berata and his Çudamani Ensemble from Bali. The performance, which included more than 50 artists, took place outdoors in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden.

“This was a huge project involving drastically different forms of music, a fire pit, a procession across the bridge from Loring Park to the garden, and a group of local men, most of them non-dancers, performing the Keçak Monkey Chant,” says Bither. The performance drew nearly 6,000 people over two nights and introduced Ragamala to a new audience. “The

difficulties of presenting such a huge event are usually cause for angst and anxiety, but I had the utmost faith that Ranee knew what she was doing,” Bither continues. “She makes the unlikely and irreconcilable possible and beautiful.”

“Everything I wanted in India, I have found here in Minnesota,” insists Ranee. She recounts how Valli lived only a few miles away from her home in India, but she actually met her in Minneapolis. The companionship she was seeking has come from her second husband, Dave McKay, whom she married in 2002. Ranee has journeyed from one home to another, one life to another, without losing the essence of who she is. With her daughters, she has created a legacy to her art form, and to the city that has allowed her to go deeper into her own traditions while reaching out to a wider world. As the great dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov puts it,

“Exceptional dancers are also exceptional people, with an *attitude* toward life, a kind of quest, and an internal quality. They know who they are, and they show this to you, willingly.”



Later in the rehearsal of *Ihrah: Sacred Waters*, Ashwini performs a remarkable solo. As Ashwini’s eyebrows dance and her hands flutter rapidly, Rancee explains that she is cremating a corpse. Her animated abstraction of grief brings the work full circle: the water that sustains life now receives the ashes of the dead.

The moment is a snapshot of fruitful collaboration among the three Ramaswamy women. Ashwini is skillfully dancing a solo in a work beautifully co-choreographed by Rancee



Ashwini Ramaswamy performing *Yatra* (Journey), 2011. Photo © Bonnie-Jean MacKay

and Aparna, who suggested that the dance’s reverence for water as a life-sustaining force was relevant to contemporary environmental concerns. “In the Hindu religion, people believe that the gods will take care of everything,” Rancee says, “but today there is a philosophy of personal responsibility.” There could be no more telling comment from a woman who has been making her own way, creating her own art, and building her own wide-ranging community for more than 30 years.



Linda Shapiro was a choreographer and co-founder of the New Dance Ensemble. She is currently a freelance writer who writes about dance, performance, and numerous other topics.

TRANSLATION, TRANSFORMATION, TRANSCENDENCE

by Shana Sippy

I. A translation has to be true to the translator no less than to the originals. ~ A.K. Ramanujan

Translation is one of the most significant and fundamental of our human practices, and Rance Ramaswamy is a master translator.

The great scholar of Indian poetry A.K. Ramanujan wrote that translation is always a choice and an interpretation and must “be true to the translator no less than to the originals.” Ramanujan did not presume that there was a single original from which a translator worked. Even before the translator’s encounter with the subject, it has multiple iterations—personal, oral, musical, dramatic, textual, theological, psychological, architectural, philosophical. The translator seeks to convey the many valences of these originals, all the while conscious that he or she is creating something else altogether new: a new original through translation. Rance’s

language is Bharatanatyam, and she mines the poetics and metaphors of Bharatanatyam’s lexicon for riches.

We might understand every utterance or gesture shared between two human beings to be a type of translation: an attempt to convey one’s deepest sentiments, the intricacies of a concept, or even the simplest of commands to another in a language that the other can understand. While I have known Rance for only a short time, I have seen her move with tremendous joy and ease as she communicates and translates. Not only does she translate through the body of her work as she engages and teaches the dancers in her company, but she also translates for communities and a range of publics.

Rance moves, in the course of a given day, from translating stories, emotions, and gestures to a 12-year-old student striving to embody her heritage through dance, to animated

collaborations with artists and scholars from across the country and world. In a single day, she might share her love of Indian art forms with young children—painting pictures with rice flour, moving her fingers back and forth with a deceptive ease as she creates complex *kolam* patterns to welcome auspiciousness—and then move on to thoughtful study of the philosophical texts and artistic traditions that will be incorporated into her next piece.

II. Tamil Sangam poetry classifies five different landscapes: mountains, forests, fields, seashores, and deserts. Each place is associated with specific moods and seasons, crops and flora, relationships and devotion.

In classical Tamil philosophy, one’s location is significant and symbolic. The places where one works and sings, dances and

prays, are believed to both affect and mirror one's relationships and experiences. Raneé's life is testament to the idea that individuals are continually transformed by their environments.

Until the late 1960s, Bharatanatyam was virtually unheard of outside India, and it was not until the 1980s that Indian children living in places like London and California began to take classes as a means of cultural instruction and preservation. To this day, however, very few Bharatanatyam artists have opened up this dance form to non-Indian audiences and artists, and even fewer have taken it onto center stage in the contemporary arts world. Raneé has truly brought Bharatanatyam to new heights and venues.

Like those of other artists working outside of South Asia, Raneé's performances have come to be seen as de facto representatives of all that is Indian. To be an "ethnic" artist in America involves a tremendous responsibility—one that

is not always sought out, but is felt nonetheless. The task of representation can be daunting; it is both a burden and a gift. It can constrain and liberate. One is not simply allowed to be an artist, but becomes a cultural ambassador subject to the scrutiny of multiple (and often contradictory) worlds. Raneé assumes this role of representative with humility and care. It is always dangerous when people take the part for the whole, when they see the single Indian woman or dance company as representative of all Indian traditions, cultures, and politics. Raneé's vision as a dancer and choreographer makes these simplified receptions virtually impossible.

Americans who encounter south Indian dance often assume it to be a reproduction of a tradition that was carried across the ocean by immigrants. Of course, there is no such thing as a fixed tradition anywhere; traditions are always evolving, drawing new into old and

old into new. Nowhere is this relationship between present and past more evident than it is in Bharatanatyam. Modern Bharatanatyam has been fashioned through the lens of history. It is both classical and contemporary, shaped in conversations among the ancient, medieval, colonial, and modern.

The form that we find today emerged most directly out of a revival of south Indian dance traditions that occurred in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Raneé's contribution to the long, sometimes circuitous and ruptured conversation that is Bharatanatyam truly represents a significant turn only possible in our globalized present. Ironically, Raneé's awakening in Bharatanatyam happened here in Minnesota when she saw her now-guru Alarmel Valli perform. While she was familiar with Bharatanatyam from her upbringing in India, it was here—in a diasporic context—that Raneé began an ongoing transnational exchange with her teacher and

other artists. She has brought the richness of that dialogue to Minnesota in the ways she has shaped Ragamala.

Ranee's vision has both delicately preserved and radically transformed Bharatanatyam dance. Customarily, Bharatanatyam is a solo dance form; Ranee has re-visioned it as an ensemble. Traditionally, the study of Bharatanatyam was exclusive not just to Indians but to members of specific castes. Ranee has opened the form beyond the provincial, training devoted, serious, and accomplished dancers of all backgrounds to study and perform what she holds as a sacred art. While it may not seem notable in our modern multicultural milieu, the ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of Ragamala, in light of Bharatanatyam's history, is truly significant.

In addition to drawing others into the rich world of Bharatanatyam and the study of Indian artistic, mythological, and philosophical traditions more generally, Ranee has allowed herself to be drawn into the worlds of other artists: Minnesotan, Japanese, Indonesian, and

indigenous north Indian, to name only a few. She is continually expanding her field of vision and the boundaries of the stages upon which she creates. She makes connections and finds collaborators in the most unlikely places, allowing environments and relationships to transform her conceptions. And yet, as an artist tied to the landscape of southern India, she always returns to the soil, texts, poems, and gestures of her traditions to find her ground, ensure her footing, and shape her interpretations.

As a result of Ranee's ever-expanding vision, the landscape of Minnesota dance has been transformed, and so too have the contours of Bharatanatyam.

III. Not all art is beautiful, nor need it be. Not all art seeks to inspire the feeling of awe that is best described in language most commonly associated with religious experience. Ranee, however, strives for beauty and seeks to

bring her audiences into a state of transcendence. Transcendence itself does not require a denial of the mundane—but Ranee's work promises that productions can elevate the entire collective of performers and audience members alike. The beauty and lyricism of the movement, the music, the costumes, and the poetics invite transcendence and awaken the sublime.

Because Ragamala is a company performing south Indian dance primarily in the West, there is always the possibility that an effect of transcendence is evoked through an encounter with "otherness"—the exoticism of an Asian mystique. But Ranee's gift as a translator has meant that rather than capitalizing on the mystery of otherness, she creates bridges, striving to make accessible, human, and personal the stories, music, and experiences that might otherwise seem foreign. And for those from the Indian community, to whom Bharatanatyam is familiar, associated with home and tradition, Ranee's



work pushes the edges of expectation and expands the horizons of what south Indian dance conveys.

The beauty that Raneer crafts so carefully is not solely an expression of conventional aesthetics or the display of a simple conception of joy or love. Through sympathetic portraits and beautiful renderings of emotions, Raneer's work also probes the depths of pain and injustice. The range of her work is well described through the south Indian trope of *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior), which animates Tamil poetics. Akam—the interior, private emotions that map the domestic landscapes of lovers and the self—is both mirrored by and contrasted with puram, the

public declarations and disputations that are mapped onto political and military landscapes. In Hindu devotional poetry and theology, the relationship between lovers is often metaphorical, symbolizing the desire of the devotee for the divine. Even within love itself, poet-theologians discuss the spectrum of emotions, from honeyed sweetness to jealousy and rage, from ecstasy to devastation.

In many of Raneer's works, the personal, complex psychological narratives of individuals, told in ancient mythological and poetic traditions, provide entry points for the audience to see perspectives that are not always immediately in view. Through dancing the beauty in emotions and landscapes, Raneer allows her audience to transcend their own lives and perspectives. Yet, in this transcendence, her work is always deeply immanent, both in and of this world. Through movement, not only is the spectrum of people's emotional lives brought into relief, but nature, plants, trees, the earth itself, are also animated and made

palpable. **Raneer's dance is a prayer, asking us to see the beauty in every being and to preserve the sacredness of the earth.** While not didactic, her work opens minds and hearts to see the personal and the public, the self and the world, in new and profound ways.



Shana Sippy teaches in the Department of Religion at Carleton College. She holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from Harvard Divinity School and is a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University.



SHARED VISION

by Aparna Ramaswamy

In 1985 my mother and I performed at the Ordway's McKnight Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, under the auspices of the Minnesota Dance Alliance. We marveled at the professionalism of the whole endeavor—the stage, the lights, a lighting designer! Until that moment, we had performed at every community festival and celebration one could imagine: in parks, temples, rec centers, libraries, state fairs, on the back of a truck. For us, the Ordway was the big time.

Even at the age of 10, I was in awe not only that my mother would dare to try to familiarize people with an unfamiliar dance form, going so far as to perform it at the Ordway, but that she was willing to share the stage and her passion with her young daughter as if we were partners. **It takes equal parts determination, bravery, and generosity to do both of those things. What I did not know**

back then was that my mother had a never-ending supply of all three.

In the years that have followed, my mother has taken me on a journey that I will never forget. She not only built a world for me filled with creativity, beauty, dedication, and determination, but she jumped into that world *with* me. We hear all the time about mothers who push their children to become the next best, the next No. 1, the next winner. You don't often hear about a mother who carefully nurtures a love for an art form within a young child, then accompanies that child in experiencing the wonders and struggles that the art form brings.

Led by her single-minded drive, her love for Bharatanatyam, her belief in me, and her confidence in her audiences, we traveled over and over again to India to study with the best; we traveled far, wide, and around the corner so

that every single person, young and old, could be educated about this poetic, rich dance form from India; we met and worked with artists from different genres and backgrounds. I trusted her instincts to succeed in these endeavors because I was young and I loved her. Now, I trust her instincts because I know they are correct. It is not often that a mother and daughter can work side by side, arm in arm, to create an artistic product, to run a business, to achieve a vision. We are excited each day to see each other and follow our dreams together. It is only a visionary and an extraordinary person and mother who can make this life our reality.

Aparna Ramaswamy is the co-artistic director of Ragamala Dance and a principal dancer with the company.



Ashwini Ramaswamy performing *Sacred Earth*, 2011. Photo © Ed Bock

अनिलमंडल

SUPERHERO

by Ashwini Ramaswamy

Superheroes are in style. Hollywood spits out a new superhero franchise every few months, and audiences line up to see what cool new power is on display.

I'm no different. I love the flying, shape-shifting, spider web-weaving, fire-wielding, mind-reading—pretty much all of it. I was thinking about what to write in this essay and my mind wandered to thoughts of seeing a movie, when I had my aha! moment:

How does my mother, Raneé Ramaswamy, manage to cook exquisite food for the entire day, choreograph a dance piece, go to yoga, grocery shop, and balance her checkbook, all by 10 a.m.? **She is a superhero!**

How does she manage to come up with a brilliant idea for a grant proposal while simultaneously listening to music by her next dream collaborator and reading ancient Indian poetry in its original language? Superhero!

She's a magician who makes things happen: performing with world-renowned poets (Robert Bly, Coleman Barks, Jane Hirshfield); collaborating with musicians of the highest caliber (Dr. L. Subramaniam, Howard Levy, Shubhendra Rao, Saskia Rao); bringing Ragamala to audiences around the world (40 states and 10 countries on three continents). She does everything she sets her mind to.

Even her origin story fits the superhero mold—an ordinary girl from ordinary circumstances turns out to be extraordinary.

She came to the United States from India expecting to be a wife and mother and nothing else, but extraordinary people can't be bound by convention. Most people wouldn't be able to build an internationally regarded dance company from nothing and still manage to be an incredibly present and engaging parent, but my mom did. She would wake me up for school

every day with hot chocolate; make me breakfast, lunch, and dinner; drive me to all my before- and after-school activities; and take me on wonderful trips within the United States and abroad, while at the same time creating some of the most original and moving art in the Twin Cities.

Even now, when Ragamala is busier than ever, she finds time to take care of her parents and, when needed, my sister's two-year-old twin sons. I am absolutely in awe of her, as a mother, a teacher, a colleague, a friend, and an artist. She created Ragamala and, led by her incredible ambition, unparalleled creativity, and amazing artistic partnership with my sister, Aparna, took it from a Burnsville, Minnesota, basement to a *New York Times*-reviewed performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

If she's not a superhero, I don't know who is.

Ashwini Ramaswamy is Ragamala Dance's director of publicity and marketing, and is also a dancer with the company.

ONE-WOMAN TOUR de FORCE

by Catherine Egenberger

We are in the Asian galleries at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. It is late 1994. As we lean in together to view the Indian miniature painting, I am distracted by Ranees's gestures, enthralled by the precise and elegant movements of this tiny yet powerful woman with her boundless energy and her thick, dark hair.

This is my first memory of Ranees Ramaswamy. I had arranged to meet Ranees at the MIA to discuss a potential partnership between Ragamala and the Byron, Minnesota, public schools. That auspicious meeting at the museum marked the beginning of a rich collaboration and friendship that is now nearly two decades strong.

Over the five years following that day, the partnership between Ragamala and the Byron schools grew to include residencies,

performances, curriculum development, educational opportunities for teachers and administrators, and museum visits. In February 1997, Ranees and I returned to the MIA, this time accompanied by 120 excited second-graders. In small groups, with Ranees as our very animated guide, we were ushered into a locked room full of archived Indian miniatures housed in pristine glass cases. While we admired the miniatures, Ranees enchanted us with stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Gita Govinda*, the epics they illustrated. The next week Ranees and several Ragamala dancers visited our school, teaching those same second-graders the gestures and movements that so precisely expressed the lively stories we had discovered in the miniatures at the museum.

We were so fortunate our funders understood that to be meaningful, artist-school partnerships require time (Ragamala was in residence in Byron for a full month in both 1997 and 1999), must provide multiple learning experiences, and must also actively engage the community. During Ragamala's residencies, Byron students, teachers, and community members were captivated by Ranees's stories, the intricate patterns of the *kolams* she drew on the gymnasium floor, her beautifully colored garments, her magical laugh, the rhythmic stomping of her feet, and the smell and taste of the samosas we ate with our fingers while seated cross-legged on the tile flooring. **Anyone who knows Ranees understands that she is a one-woman multisensory tour de force.**

Indeed, during her time in our community, Raneer transported us from the comfortable familiarity of Byron to the alluring sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of southern India.



Recently, Raneer spent an entire day cleaning and organizing her small home office. That evening, in her living room, we laughed together at an old, somewhat faded photograph Raneer had discovered earlier in the day, that of a young, blond-haired boy with a red sash tied around his waist and a microphone in his raised hand. The boy in the photograph was Colin, my now-grown son. It was February 1997. Colin, then a fourth-grader, was onstage at the culminating performance of one of Ragamala's artist-residency programs. Two years later, my

daughter, Annaliese, was hoisted onto the stage at another Ragamala performance, providing her with one of her most vivid, joyful childhood memories. How do we measure the importance of such events in the lives of our children, in our schools, in our communities?

Part of Raneer's genius lies in her ability to create powerful collaborations, as was illustrated beautifully in Ragamala's daring work with artists such as I Dewa Putu Berata of Bali and the Milwaukee-based Ko-Thi Dance Company. Raneer's collaborative brilliance extends also to her work as a teacher. For the past 20 years—with love and a ferocious spirit—Raneer has worked tirelessly in residency programs throughout Minnesota. Through her passionate commitment to teaching as well as to performance, **Raneer Ramaswamy has profoundly enriched our lives.**



Catherine Egenberger teaches art at Rochester Community and Technical College in Rochester, Minnesota.

MASTERFUL MERGING

by Dr. Sunil Kothari

I owe thanks to Dipankar Mukherjee, artistic director of Pangea World Theater, who took me to Rance Ramaswamy's Ragamala Dance studio during my visit to Minneapolis in 2005.

Rancee showed me a DVD of *Sethu*, her 2004 collaboration with master artist I Dewa Putu Berata of Bali, commissioned and co-produced by the Walker Art Center. With the help of more than 50 other artists, Rancee had created an amazing confluence of the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana* with the Balinese version of the text. I was bowled over. Since then, I have been following Rancee's and Ragamala's activities with great interest.

At the Bali Arts Festival in 2010, I saw *Dhvee*, the second collaboration between Rancee and Berata's Çudamani dance and gamelan ensemble—another imaginative merging of Bharatanatyam with Balinese dance traditions to explore scenes from *Ramayana*.

Rancee used the Sanskrit text of the great 19th-century musician, author, and king Swathi Thirunal, keeping the text and Bharatanatyam technique intact while incorporating episodes from the Balinese *Ramayana*. In one episode, Sita, wife of the epic's hero Rama, is kidnapped by the Sri Lankan king Ravana and held captive in his palace garden before being rescued by the monkey warrior Hanuman. In Rancee's imaginative choreography, monkeys turn into trees beneath which the Balinese actress playing Sita sits. In both *Sethu* and *Dhvee*, Rancee presents two different traditions of *Ramayana* storytelling in a single work; in the latter, her use of Keçak dance was particularly fascinating. To both Balinese and Indian audiences, this presentation appeared seamless—an illustration of one of Rancee's great gifts as a choreographer.

As a member of the Indian diaspora, Rancee has made a

significant contribution to the international dance scene. Her sound training in Bharatanatyam and her mastery of the form mean that she is deeply respected in India. She does not compromise the technique, does not water it down because she insists on maintaining a very high standard. Her respect for classical Indian dance traditions means that gurus, exponents, and Indian audiences alike appreciate and value her work.

Her choreography retains the Indian character of classical Bharatanatyam but also bridges the cultures of West and East by extending its boundaries through meaningful collaborative works and by employing both Indian and non-Indian dancers. One of her most memorable creations is *Body & Soul*, a tribute to Billie Holiday, who is well known in India. The piece combines music sung by jazz musician Charmin Michelle



with narration using the language of hand gestures, the *hastas-mudras* of Bharatanatyam. I have also enjoyed Ranees choreography of *The Transposed Heads* with Deaf actress Nicole Zapko, which combined Bharatanatyam with American Sign Language; and *Return of the Rainseed*, a modern folktale of India that combined theater, dance, and music. Through works like these, Ranees reveals the universal power of communication.

Whether the music is opera or the thundering Taiko drums of Japan, whether the dance springs from modern-dance movements or from Bharatanatyam, **Ranees reaches out to diverse audiences the world over, displaying the vitality of the respective arts her works encompass.** Her dedication, vision, and desire to explore diverse forms while retaining the essential core of classical Bharatanatyam have contributed to the formidable reputation (and the vast repertoire) she has built over the years. I have followed her career as part of my studies of the contribution of Indian-diaspora dancers in the United States, and during my illustrated talks on dance in India and abroad I invariably include excerpts of her diverse choreographic works to emphasize how Ranees—

with her innumerable outreach programs and through consistently excellent performances by her, her daughter Aparna, and members of her company—has set very high standards.

In March 2011, I saw Ragamala's performance at the Maximum India festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., which won them high praise not only from American audiences but also from the members of the Indian diaspora who flocked to the festival. This was no mean achievement. No wonder Ranees Ramaswamy has been given such a prestigious award. One looks forward to seeing her scaling even greater artistic heights.

Dr. Sunil Kothari is a dance historian, scholar, and critic who has written numerous books about Indian dance and has held positions that include membership on the executive committee of the International Dance Council of UNESCO. He lives in New Delhi.

BEYOND THE BOX

by Louise Robinson

In 1984, I answered the phone when Ranee Ramaswamy called the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. Still a relatively new immigrant to Minnesota with two young daughters, Ranee had reignited her interest in dance after attending a local performance by Alarmel Valli. She was studying with Valli, offering classes to the local Indian community, and starting to perform. And in her signature fashion, she was looking for ways to expand her horizons.

I was able to direct her to the Minnesota Dance Alliance, which was just beginning to wrestle with how to incorporate non-Western, non-modern dance forms into its programming. Ranee was one of the first to push those boundaries. **She did it in her unique way, which is simply to assume that something is possible, to be**

persistent, and to find a way to make things happen.

A few years later, I accepted a position at the Dance Alliance, and Ranee and I had many chances to work together. By 1991, the Alliance had converted Studio 6A in the Hennepin Center for the Arts to a 120-seat performing space and started curating several performance series. Ranee proposed a collaboration with Robert Bly and two north Indian musicians for inclusion in one of the early seasons.

For the performance, Robert Bly would read several of his translations of Indian poetry from his book entitled *Mirabai Versions* to accompany Ranee's choreography. It was a rather gutsy proposal, and a terrifically successful production. It was so well received, and such a rewarding experience for Ranee,

that it provided the impetus for her company, Ragamala Dance, which is now entering its 20th season and continues this tradition of innovative, bold collaborations.

All of this illustrates Ranee's instinct to push her perceived boundaries, to seek new ideas, and to head in unexpected directions. One might say that she is good at thinking outside the box.

But Ranee's genius lies not in thinking outside the box as much as in her innate ability to expand the box. Her work is firmly rooted in a traditional form. She is thoroughly knowledgeable about her form, its history, and its lineage. And she wholly believes in her form and all of the cultural constructs that accompany it.

So when she pushes the parameters of the box—usually through collaboration with other artists—she does so from a position of respect and strength. She is not trying to leave her form behind or reject it in any way. She believes it can embrace numerous forms of outside stimulus, maintain its own integrity, and produce works of art of infinite beauty and immediate relevance. Her history of more than 20 years of producing work illustrates the truth of her belief.

The McKnight Distinguished Artist Award is meant to recognize many aspects of the recipient's work. Among them is sustained and integral impact upon one's community. It's

hard to imagine a more important legacy in these times than **an artist's ability to believe so wholly in her own traditions that she is willing to incorporate elements of other ones, confident that something beautiful will emerge.**



Louise Robinson is the managing director of Ragamala Dance.



With Robert Bly, 1998. Photo by Ann Rosenwald

GESTURES

Notes from Ranee's guru, family, friends, and colleagues



With poster for Alarmel Valli's 2002 performance in Paris.
Photo by Dave McKay



Alarmel Valli, 2002



Ranee, Valli, and Aparna, Madras, India, 1984

*Alarmel Valli
Dancer/choreographer
Recipient of India's Padma Shree and Padma Bhushan
awards for distinguished service in the arts, and France's
Chevalier des Artes et des Lettres award for contributions
to French culture*

I met Ranee Ramaswamy in Minneapolis in 1983 when she signed up for a dance workshop I was conducting at the University of Minnesota. Even in those early days, she stood out as a dancer of exceptional sensitivity and commitment, with an ardent passion for learning the finer nuances of the art, which I found very touching. Her daughter Aparna, who was then a tiny eight-year-old with a superb memory, never forgot even a single step of the dance I taught, and endeared herself to all the older students by helping them recall the movement sequences. Mother and daughter were a joy to teach. **Ranee was the ideal student, constantly seeking to grow, every fiber of her being directed toward polishing and honing her skills.** Over the decades, I have, with a deep sense of fulfillment, watched her deepening her understanding and experience of the poetic, richly textured dance language of Bharatanatyam.

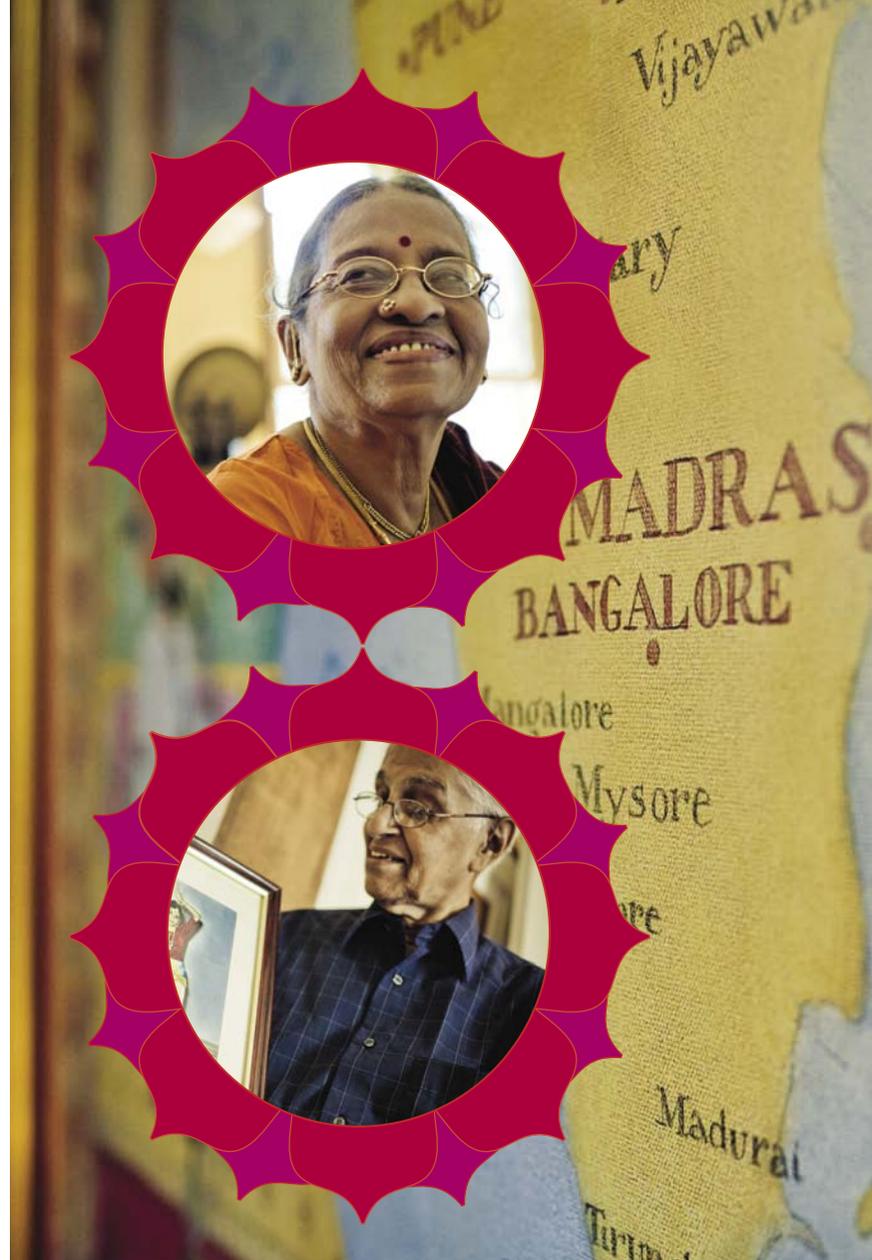
Today, Ranee Ramaswamy is a creative artist who is able to weave the strands of her great dance tradition into a fabric that is multicultural and contemporary—but without compromising the core values of her inherited form. I also know what a very fine teacher she is, **shaping her students with integrity, dedication, and generosity.** Over the years, it is with much joy that I have seen Ragamala, under the guidance of Ranee and Aparna, grow into a dance company that stands for excellence—constantly exploring new horizons and creating a deeper awareness of the many dimensions of Indian dance. Most of all, I cherish Ranee's commitment and ceaseless efforts to share her experience of dance and Indian culture, to enrich students and diverse audiences across the United States. I have seen, time and again, how the arts help build bridges between cultures and foster harmony and understanding between people.

Ranee was a very affectionate and loving child whose hobbies were drawing, music, and dance. We sent her to the best school in Madras, Good Shepherd Convent, so she could speak fluent English. During summer vacations, she used to visit her grandparents in Kerala; seeing her cousin dance, she got interested in Bharatanatyam.

We found her a local dance teacher in Chennai. After school and on Sundays, she used to rush to dance class chaperoned by her brother, Ramdas (who is five years younger). At the time, we took it as a hobby and never thought of making her a professional dancer. Ranee's hard work and mental strength made her achieve what she desired.

Now, to our delight, we have two granddaughters dancing with her. As parents and grandparents, we are their best audience, and are happy and excited at their continued successes.

Dr. T.N. Ananthkrishnan and Menaka Ananthkrishnan
Chennai, India



I was introduced to Ragamala Dance while serving on the National Dance Project. The quality and brilliance of the company were extolled for years around the table by my colleagues. I then saw videotapes of the company and was also very impressed, though it is sometimes difficult to know the work through this medium. Needless to say, Ragamala became one of the companies funded for their work several times during my tenure on NDP because of their excellence. I was in Edinburgh where I first saw them perform live (and remarkably well) in an unconventional space and decided then that I would invite them to participate in the Maximum India festival. The performances given by the company for the festival were **extraordinary and beautiful, reaching way beyond my expectation and living up to the incredibly high standard set by the best classical Indian dancers from the subcontinent.** The company was a personal high point for me and a highlight of the festival this past March, which included 600 artists participating (primarily from India). Raneer and Aparna have done a superb job of contemporizing and at the same time sustaining the art of classical Indian dance through their brilliant company.

Alicia Adams

Vice president of international programming and dance
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

I met Raneer Ramaswamy in 2008 when I interviewed her to write a profile for *Mpls.St. Paul Magazine*. She's one of the most animated people I've ever met—quick, birdlike gestures, eyes so bright you get dazed, and mile-a-minute, generous, impulsive talking about anything and everything. It was like sitting across the table from a hurricane.

The profile wound up making much of Raneer's caste-breaking choice to become a choreographer, how her love of dance and the sheer force of her personality led her on a very American path toward a life no one could have foreseen for her. Now that seems a bit beside the point. Rather, it seems like the error of mistaking a dance's subject or occasion for the dance itself—an error you would never make watching Ragamala's pure fervor. And Raneer is the company's root: the dancers' attack, the way nothing is mere detail for them, the onslaught of their attention—all of that derives from Raneer's own passion for the whole of life.

Today I'm thinking instead of how one of the Ramaswamys described their teacher, Alarmel Valli: she called her "a diamond." That **SENSE of a natural but rare beauty, from which now one facet shines out**, now another—that's what I'd like to convey about Raneer Ramaswamy.

Lightsey Darst
Dancer/critic/writer
Minneapolis



But it is when it comes to meaning that we see differences between Indian and Western dance theater yet greater than those between Indian and Western music. In this solo about the Ganges, [Aparna] Ramaswamy seems now to embody the river, now to indicate it, now to worship it; and the forms of expression alternated between detailed mime gestures to the kinds of pure dance that seem as abstract and as impersonal as a human being can ever achieve. The dancer seems continually to move between different kinds of being and of thought, and the Western observer is aware of many layers of mystery....

*This is an excellent company;
Ms. Ramaswamy is an enchantingly beautiful dancer.*

Ranee Ramaswamy and I met at an arts dinner party. Guests spent a course together, then moved to another seating to meet new people. Once we met, we did not move. A world of dance and ideas opened before us, as well as a new friendship.

After that dinner I began to follow Ragamala Dance more closely. I was amazed by the **beauty, expressiveness, discipline, and creativity** that Ranee brought to her choreography. Her ability to collaborate across cultures and generations blended the traditional Bharatanatyam she studied with her guru, Alarmel Valli, with multiple collaborations with American and international artists. Her work with Taiko drummers from Japan and musicians and dancers from Bali demonstrates Ranee's collaborative spirit. Ranee and Aparna enhance the traditional dance of India for their extraordinary dancers and their audiences with their interest in all forms of art: performing, visual, and music. Their work is **a feast for the eye, the mind, and the soul.**

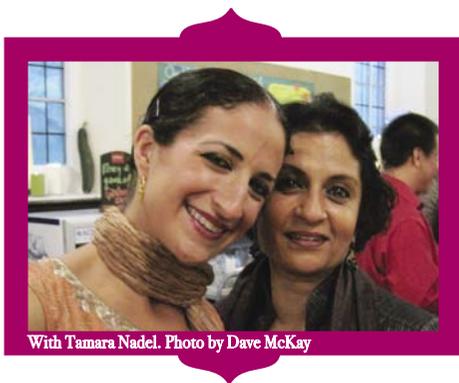
In 2010, I traveled with Ranee to Kerala, India, for Ragamala's first tour of India. I was an eyewitness to the excitement of the audiences of nine villages and cities over this exquisite dance company of Indian and American dancers trained in the beauty, rigor, and tradition of Bharatanatyam.

Ranee's capacity to include new people in her Ragamala Dance family and her life echoes a collaborative and inclusive spirit that also impacts her work. Ranee and I met at a dinner party; since then, our growing and deepening friendship has been the most precious gift of all.

Emily Maltz
Arts patron and former senior advisor at Arts Midwest
Minneapolis



When I first started studying with Raneé, I went to Burnsville to take class in a small studio in her house. After class, she would invite us to eat with her, teaching us to eat *sambar* and *rasam* with our hands. Faced with a handful of students who had no connection to India other than our excitement about an Indian dance form, she welcomed us into her life and her family, taking us to India and helping us immerse ourselves in the south Indian culture, traditions, mythology, and philosophies that underlie Bharatanatyam. She recognized that **Bharatanatyam comes not in the DNA, but in the love of the form and a deep desire to dedicate oneself to its study.**



As a teacher, a choreographer, a director, and a person, Raneé is magnetic. When she is creating new work in the studio, the inspiration flows out of her and we can feel it washing over us. When she and Aparna volley ideas back and forth, it is electric. Her passion is inspiring, and makes us want to commit our bodies and souls to the task of bringing her

vision to life. The long days in the studio, spending hours perfecting one line of choreography, are nothing compared with the vastness of the art form and the breadth of Raneé's vision.

When Raneé dances, that energy flows out of every pore. I felt it the first time I saw her perform, and after 17 years as her student and company member, I still feel it.

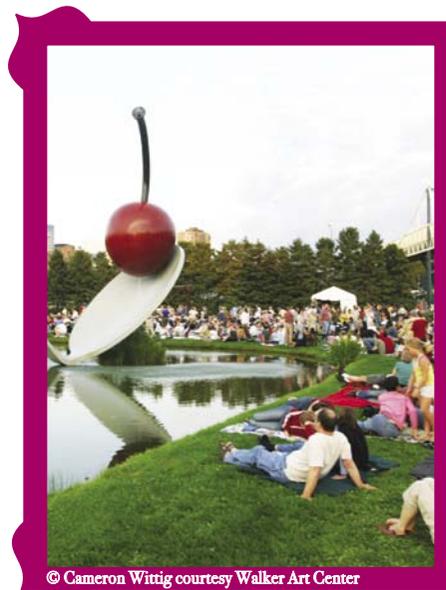
Tamara Nadel
Ragamala Dance company member and
Development and Outreach Director
Minneapolis

"I have an idea I would very much like to speak with you about that I am sure will be of great interest to the Walker," said the voice on the phone in summer 1997, just months after I arrived in Minnesota. When Raneé appeared in my office to meet, dark eyes burning bright, her old-school formality and slight awkwardness melted away as soon as she began to explain her complex vision: she would use portrait photography of her hands (a central mode of expression in Bharatanatyam) to inspire new poems by leading Minnesota poets which in turn would feed an acclaimed Chicago-based newgrass/jazz composer to write a series of compositions for new solo dance works she would create and perform.

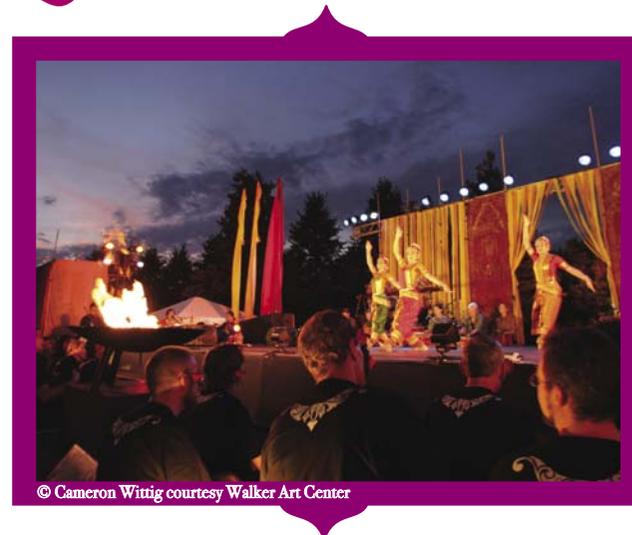
“Could you run that by me one more time?” I asked.

As we talked, she politely implied that compared with her job, mine was actually quite simple—find some commissioning funds, secure an empty gallery at the Walker, and essentially build a theater within it and present these collaborative works in two separate programs over a week. Fighting back more than a few doubts then, I now realize it was the **confidence and vision that Ranee exuded that pulled me in**. Many months later, *Where the Hands Go the Eyes Follow* premiered, and all that Ranee imagined came to pass. Coleman Barks, Jim Moore, Janet Holmes, Mary Easter, even Robert Bly, really did write new poems for her, and turned up to read them live. Howard Levy really wrote some great new compositions and put together a killer band to perform them live. At the center, Ranee’s new solo dance pieces, danced in front of Marc Norberg’s exquisite photographs, were expressively riveting, refracting aspects of the photographs, the poems, and the music in nuanced, unexpected ways. It would not be the first time **Ranee, an artistic force of nature, would make the seemingly impossible come to vivid life.**

Philip Bither
McGuire Senior Curator, Performing Arts
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis



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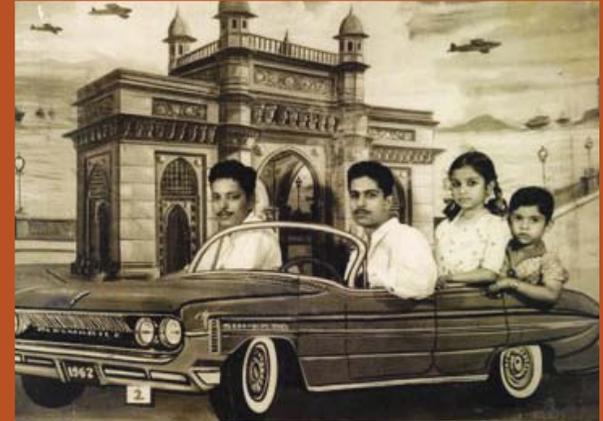


© Cameron Wittig courtesy Walker Art Center

Growing up in Madras, India, I wondered at the tender age of eight why accompanying my sister to her dance lessons was more important than my playing cricket every Sunday morning. Were my parents putting me through this grind just to package my sister with a college education and performing-arts training for a life of eternal arranged-marriage bliss? This troubling question traveled through my brain when I was woken up very early with a sprinkle of water to chaperone Ranece to Bharatanatyam classes that were conducted a couple of miles away from home. The long early-morning walk, the slow passage of time watching limbs flutter in poor harmony with the cacophonous singing of ancient tunes . . . this nightmare pervaded my youthful existence. Despite these hardships endured by me, Ranece—my sister and the beneficiary of my noblesse oblige—is now indeed a recognized virtuoso. While my squarecut* suffered and I was unable to make my mark on the world stage of cricket, I am certainly glad that my efforts have given thousands of Americans and global citizens the fruits of my sacrifice. **Thank you very much for appreciating my efforts. I accept this award without any further ado.**

Ramdass Iyer
Randolph, New Jersey

*an aggressive cricket shot



Ranece and Ramdas, back seat, at exhibition in Madras, India, 1963



Ramdass Iyer, 2011. Photo by Dave McKay

When I first invited Ranee Ramaswamy to my Asian theater class 20 years ago, I had no idea I was opening a door that would transform my life. Ranee performed a powerful piece narrated by Robert Bly, and I was deeply moved by **her beautiful artistry**. In the dressing room afterward, we started talking about dance and theater, and we've never stopped meeting and talking since, becoming devoted friends, helping each other through life's sorrows and celebrating life's joys—especially the joys of dance and theater. We've collaborated many times, integrating dance and theater in very personal expressions of our lives. Witnessing the amazing evolution of Ragamala Dance and Ranee's extraordinary work as brilliant choreographer, dancer, and visionary artist over the years has been one of the greatest treasures in my life.

Martha Johnson

Professor of theater arts, Augsburg College; stage director;
founding member of Mu Performing Arts
Minneapolis

Our family has lived in half a dozen cities around the world. Before we moved to the Twin Cities, we were concerned about finding a “qualified” Indian dance school for our daughter, Meera. We found the best in the world in Ragamala. Rather quickly, my initial intimidation at Ranee's virtuosity blossomed into being humbled by her **patience** (which never stands in for lowered expectations), her **unequaled energy and**

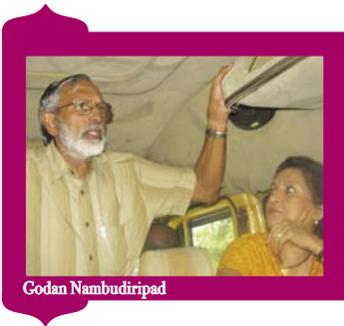
commitment to perfecting just one dance step, and her **strength of conviction coupled with genuine humility**. Working with Ranee and the Ragamala team for seven years had such a positive influence on our family's lives that we didn't want to move, deliberating for a full year before finally deciding to move to Boston (but only after Ranee promised to teach Meera dance via Skype). We miss Ranee and Ragamala and are shamelessly jealous of those who get to be in close proximity to them. If there is one thing that will lure us back to Minnesota, it will be Ranee.

Shanthi Ramakrishnan
Boston, Massachusetts

Thirty years ago, when I met Ranee, we Indians were a newer group of immigrants making Minnesota our home. **There was an excitement that earlier pioneers must have felt, trying to weave into the local fabric cultural threads brought from far shores**. We were neighbors and had a ball working on projects with the India Association and the School of India for Languages and Culture. One project we collaborated on was the cultural exhibit at the Festival of Nations in St. Paul. The theme was “Immigration.” Ranee created a Statue of Liberty, wrapped her in a blue sari (a garment worn by women in India), and adorned her forehead with a *bindi* (red dot).

Soon I was witnessing Ranee getting more dedicated to dance and to her interest in bringing Bharatanatyam to an American audience. I volunteered on Ragamala's board and also found myself onstage with her in bit parts. What made it interesting and always exciting was not only the dedication that both Ranee and later her daughter Aparna brought to the effort, but also the creativity with which Ranee approached the projects, building bridges between an ancient, stylized system of dance and the sensibilities of the modern Western audience.

Last year, I traveled with Ranee in India where Ragamala was presenting a dance created around a south Indian legend. The audience reaction to this production shows the universality of appeal of Ranee's creativity—and at each presentation, the artists who were not onstage were observing from the sidelines and later discussing how a movement, a way of holding the hand, or the body positioning could be improved.



Godan Nambudiripad
Burnsville, Minnesota

In 1996, a magazine called *The World and I* commissioned me to write a feature article on a fledgling Twin Cities dance company then called Ragamala Music and Dance Theater. The hook? Founder Ranee Ramaswamy had started a company that blended the classical tradition of Bharatanatyam, a temple dance of southern India, with music from north India. And she had innovated a form of presentation that expanded the solo dance form into ensemble work. In Minnesota.

For a fledgling dance critic, the article was a coup. But far more significant were the profound gifts Ranee was beginning to bestow on the worlds of art, dance, and creativity. The illustrative beauty of her dancing inspired a now often-used phrase, “poetry in motion,” while her boldly innovative collaborations—with poets, musicians, a sign-language interpreter, painters and photographers, saints and singers—illuminated the ways in which an ancient art form could not only possess contemporary relevance, but change lives.

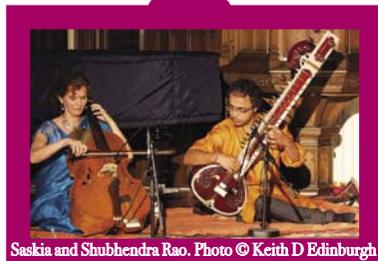
If Bharatanatyam is a form of worship, Ranee has been the kinetic articulation, bearer, and interpreter of its prayers—a gift she's bestowed on her daughters, who bring their own singular beauty and ideas to the creative legacy she began.

Camille LeFevre
Journalist, communications strategist, and professor
Minneapolis

I presented Ragamala Dance in my early days at The Music Hall in Portsmouth, N.H. Ranee’s gracious, open, and engaging spirit captivated me then as she brought her work for the first time to a small New Hampshire town. It is with great pleasure that through my work at the National Dance Project, I also now know her as a colleague, mentor, and advisor. Her work is always **inquisitive, rooted in tradition yet with a refreshing relevance that speaks to audiences young and old.** As an advisor for NDP, she has brought her wisdom and her deep knowledge of a traditional form along with her experience of the challenges facing today’s dance artists.

Jane Forde
Consultant, National Dance Project
New York, New York

Ranee’s contribution to the dance world is immense: for example, in an art form where choreography is so often solo-oriented, Ranee has taken giant steps in group choreography. Through educating the audiences about Bharatanatyam, she has created a platform where people from



Saskia and Shubhendra Rao. Photo © Keith D Edinburgh

different backgrounds can enjoy this ancient art form, and she has trained many wonderful dancers, many of whom are now part of the company. What we love in Ranee is her great zest for learning and

adapting new ideas in her projects. **(And we love her great sense of humor, wicked though it sometimes may be.)**

Shubhendra Rao, sitarist, and Saskia Rao, cellist
New Delhi, India

Earlier this year I was conducting a series of interviews with choreographers, arts presenters, and other “people in the know” for a lengthy *StarTribune* article on the Twin Cities dance scene. It was remarkable how often Ragamala Dance came up.

Ranee arrived in Minnesota as a young mother with few relationships to other dancers; nonetheless, she started to make connections and soon found herself collaborating with a wide range of artists in unexpected ways. Ragamala became known not only for bringing more visibility to Bharatanatyam but also for Ranee’s willingness to cross genres and cultures to foster new perspectives on her art form. Her commitment to tradition and experimentation continues to keep Ragamala’s work vibrant. That vibrancy also shows in her artistic partnership with Aparna, in the dedication of the company members, and in the training of new dancers at the Ragamala school. Ranee’s persistence, courage, and ingenuity as an artist are admirable, but so is her personal strength as a woman who never stops working to bring her dreams to fruition.

Caroline Palmer, dance writer and critic
Minneapolis



RANCEE RAMASWAMY:
AN ARTIST'S LIFE

1952

Born Rance
Ananthakrishnan
in Kerala, India,
to Dr. T.N.
Ananthakrishnan, a
prominent entomologist,
and Menaka
Ananthakrishnan,
a homemaker



1957 - 1969

Attends convent school
in Madras, India, and
studies Bharatanatyam



1969 - 1972

Attends Stella Maris College
in Madras, graduating
with a degree in fine art

1972

Marries Raj
Ramaswamy
in Madras



1972 - 1975

Lives in Chandanagore, India; daughter Aparna born in 1975



1978

Family emigrates to Burnsville, Minnesota; joins Tamil Association, Indo-American Association, the India Association of Minnesota, and other organizations for Indian expatriates. Dances before an audience for the first time at a festival at the University of Minnesota

1978 - 1980

Works as file clerk, portrait painter, and other odd jobs; teaches first dance class in 1980

1981

Daughter Ashwini born in Burnsville



1983

Begins teaching weekly Bharatanatyam classes in the Twin Cities. Meets Alarmel Valli when Valli comes to the University of Minnesota for a residency; with Aparna, begins to travel annually to India to study with Valli



1985

Takes part in Minnesota Dance Alliance showcase at Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in St. Paul; receives National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Apprenticeship grant—the first of 16 NEA grants

1986

Receives the first of 12 McKnight Foundation Artist Fellowships



1991

Premieres *Mirabai Versions*, with text translated and read by Robert Bly; begins teaching at institutions that include Augsburg College, the University of Minnesota, and Macalester College

1992

Founds Ragamala Music and Dance Theater with sitarist David Whetstone; *Ragamala: A Painting in Motion* premieres at Southern Theater in Minneapolis in collaboration with Whetstone and visual artist William Stille

1995 - 1996

Wonderwall, *Asoka*, and *Goddess Songs* all premiere in the Twin Cities

1997

Inaugurates Minnesota State Arts Board's Arts Across Minnesota Program with a weeklong residency in Crookston that includes dance classes, community workshops, K-12 classroom visits, cooking classes, and public performance

1994

Performs with Aparna and teacher Alarmel Valli on nine-city tour of Japan. Premieres *Canticle of Mary*, an exploration of the stories of Mary, Isis, and ancient goddesses; named Artist of the Year by Minneapolis *City Pages*



© P.J. Bock



© Marc Vorberg



1998

Multiple collaborations premiere in the Twin Cities: *Tree Tales*, with African choreographer Morris Johnson's Dancers and Drummers of Langa; *Chaturam*, with composers Nirmala Rajasekar, Gao Hong, Armando Gutierrez and Gustavo Lira, and Rick Shiomi; *Where the Hands Go the Eyes Follow*, with photographer Marc Norberg, composer/musician Howard Levy, and six contemporary poets



© Marc Norberg

1999 – 2001

Premieres include *From Temple to Theater* (with commissioned score by New Delhi-based sitarist Shubhendra Rao), *Wordance* (collaboration with Milwaukee-based African troupe Ko-Thi Dance Company), *Guggun-ku-thakku*, *Ze-Natyam* (commissioned by Zenon Dance Company), and *The Transposed Heads* (directed by Zaraawar Mistry)

2002

Marries Dr. David McKay. Ragamala Dance travels to St. Petersburg, Russia, to appear in Open Look Contemporary Dance Festival



2003

Completes a 10-day residency in New Jersey, teaching workshops at 25 sites that include K–12 schools, senior citizens' homes, and workplaces

2004

Walker Art Center commissions *Sethu*, a work combining Bharatanatyam with gamelan music and vocals by Balinese composer I Dewa Putu Berata and his Çudamani ensemble. Premiere in Minneapolis Sculpture Garden includes 50 artists and draws an audience of nearly 6,000



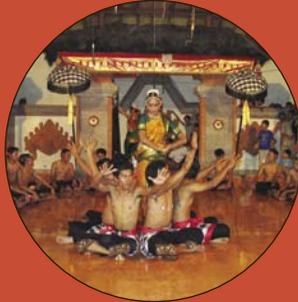
© Cameron Wright, courtesy Walker Art Center

2006

Ragamala Dance performs in Bali, Indonesia; U.S. tour stops range from New York City to Pullman, Washington

2007

Receives first National Dance Project production grant; also named the winner of an Achievement Award from the India Association of Minnesota



2008

Ragamala Dance tours Japan, appearing in Iida City, Nagoya, and Matsumoto; also makes the first of three appearances at the Edinburgh Festival of Spirituality and Peace in Scotland

2010

Ihrah: Sacred Waters premieres in Minneapolis, featuring commissioned music by Marc Anderson of Minneapolis and Prema Ramamurthy of Hyderabad, India. Choreographs *The Iron Ring* for Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis



© Keith D Edinburg

2011

Lives in Minneapolis with husband, David McKay. *Yathra*, a collaboration with Aparna Ramaswamy and New Delhi-based composers Shubhendra Rao and Saskia Rao, premieres at Maximum India festival, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.



© Ed Bock



SELECTED
PERFORMANCES

2011	<i>Sacred Earth</i> *	Cowles Center for Dance & the Performing Arts, Minneapolis
	<i>Yathra</i> (Journey) *	Maximum India festival, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.
2010	<i>Ihrah: Sacred Waters</i> *	Southern Theater, Minneapolis
	<i>The Iron Ring</i>	Children's Theatre Company, Minneapolis
2009	<i>Dhvee</i> (Duality) *	McGuire Theater, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
	<i>Sthree</i> *	Southern Theater
2008	<i>Yathra</i> (Journey) *	Southern Theater
2007	<i>Sva</i> (Vital Force) *	The New Victory Theater, New York, New York
2005	<i>Devi</i> (Goddess) *	Southern Theater
2004	<i>Sethu</i> (Bridge)	Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Walker Art Center
	<i>Kathambam</i>	O'Shaughnessy Auditorium, St. Paul
2003	<i>Body & Soul: A Tribute to Billie Holiday</i>	Southern Theater
	<i>Aavya</i> (Meeting)	Ted Mann Concert Hall, Minneapolis
2002	<i>Kolam</i>	Intermedia Arts, Minneapolis
2001	<i>The Transposed Heads</i>	Southern Theater
	<i>Ze-Natyam</i>	Janet Wallace Auditorium, St. Paul
2000	<i>Guggun-ku-thakku</i>	Southern Theater
1999	<i>Wordance</i>	Pabst Theater, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

* Co-choreographed with Aparna Ramaswamy



SELECTED
PERFORMANCES

	<i>From Temple to Theater</i>	O'Shaughnessy Auditorium
1998	<i>Where the Hands Go the Eyes Follow</i>	Walker Art Center Gallery
	<i>Chaturam</i>	O'Shaughnessy Auditorium
	<i>Tree Tales</i>	Southern Theater
	Solo performance of Indian classical dance	Fudan University, Shanghai, China
1997	<i>Return of the Rainseed</i>	Southern Theater
	<i>Way of Heaven</i>	Ted Mann Concert Hall
	<i>The Wedding of Valli</i>	Southern Theater
1996	Choreography to music by Antonín Dvořák	Duluth Performing Arts Center, Duluth, Minnesota
	<i>Goddess Songs</i>	Southern Theater
	<i>Asoka</i>	O'Shaughnessy Auditorium
1995	<i>Wonderwall</i>	Southern Theater
1994	<i>Canticle of Mary</i>	Southern Theater and O'Shaughnessy Auditorium
1993	<i>World of Glass</i>	Southern Theater
	<i>Ten Incarnations</i>	Studio 6A, Minneapolis
	<i>Dawn</i>	Southern Theater
1992	<i>Ragamala: A Painting in Motion</i>	Southern Theater
	<i>Puppet Master</i>	Minneapolis Institute of Arts Theater
1991	<i>Mirabai Versions</i>	Studio 6A



McKnight *DISTINGUISHED ARTISTS*

1998 Dominick Argento

1999 Warren MacKenzie

2000 Robert Bly

2001 Dale Warland

2002 Emilie Buchwald

2003 Mike Lynch

2004 Stanislaw Skrowaczewski

2005 Judy Onofrio

2006 Lou Bellamy

2007 Kinji Akagawa

2008 Bill Holm

2009 Bain Boehlke

2010 Siah Armajani

ABOUT THE AWARD

Vickie Benson

Arts Program Director, The McKnight Foundation

The Distinguished Artist Award recognizes artists who, like Ranee Ramaswamy, have chosen to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they have the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists have chosen to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, and attracted audiences and patrons. Best of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.

McKnight is committed to fostering an environment in which all artists are valued leaders in our community, with access to the resources and opportunities they need to

succeed. Ranee's life as an artist and a leader brilliantly illustrates the power of such creative vision. In a career highlighted by deep partnerships with creators and performers of diverse aesthetics and approaches, her singular talents both embrace and transcend tradition.

This award, which includes a \$50,000 stipend, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of five people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Philip Bither, McGuire senior curator of performing arts at the Walker Art Center; Graydon Royce, theater

critic at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*; Stewart Turnquist, former coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; 2001 McKnight Distinguished Artist Dale Warland, founder of the Dale Warland Singers; and 2002 McKnight Distinguished Artist Emilie Buchwald, founder of Milkweed Editions. Their high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota's most influential artists.

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ABOUT THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, the Foundation uses its resources to attend, unite, and empower those it serves. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Foundation had assets of approximately \$1.9 billion and granted about \$96 million in 2010, of which about 9% was directed to support an environment in which artists are valued leaders in our community, with access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

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With twin grandsons, Ajahil and Kieran

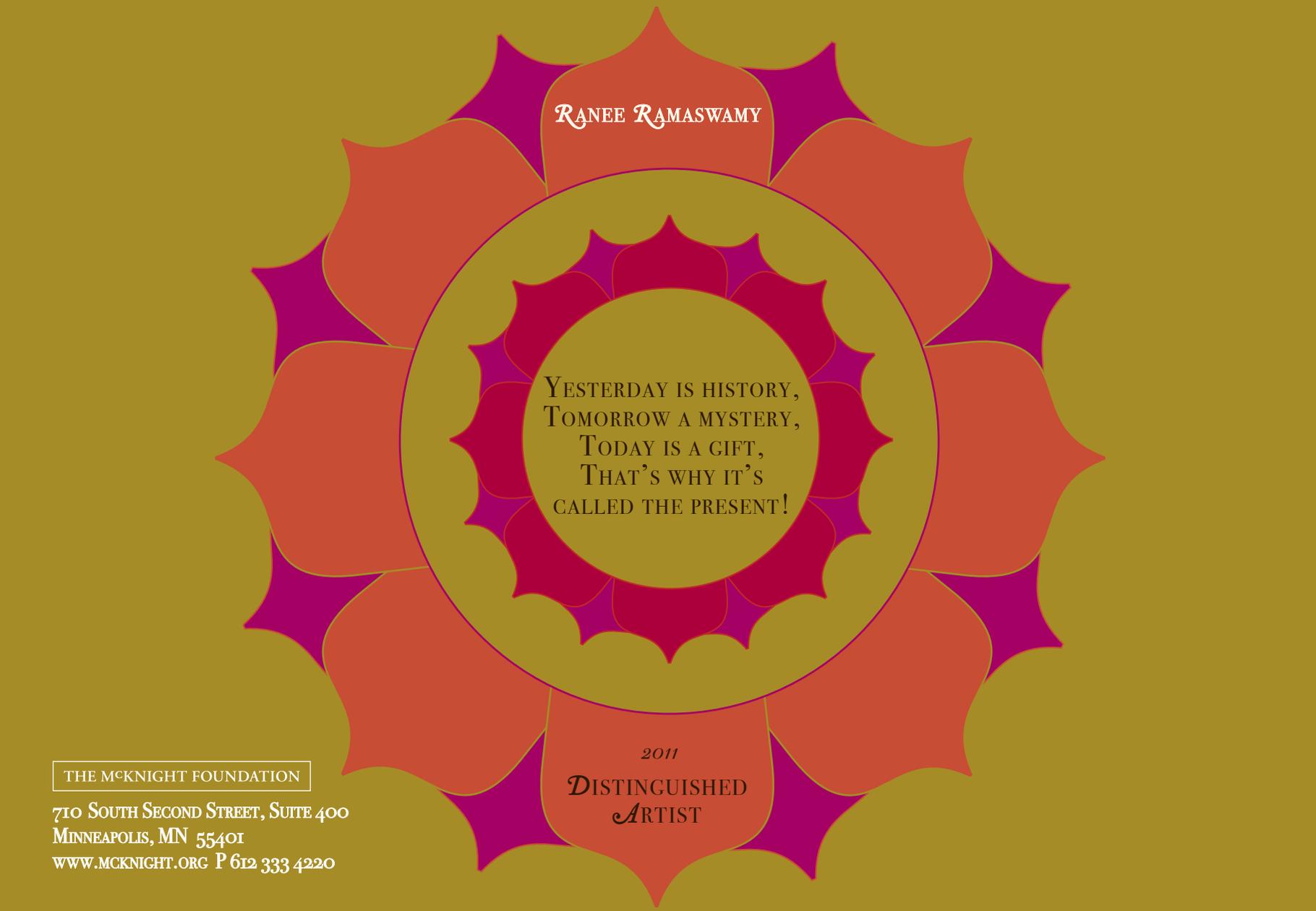




2011

*R*ANEE *R*AMASWAMY

*D*ISTINGUISHED
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RANEE RAMASWAMY

YESTERDAY IS HISTORY,
TOMORROW A MYSTERY,
TODAY IS A GIFT,
THAT'S WHY IT'S
CALLED THE PRESENT!

2011

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