

“UTTARAM YAT **sound affair**

HIMAADRAISHCHAIVA DAKSHINAM VARS

RASARANI AND VRAJA SUNDARI ARE THE TWO SISTERS WHO GREW UP WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF THE VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY. STRAINS OF MUSIC WERE IN THEIR VEINS AND SPARKS IN THEIR FEET. WITH THE IDEA OF UNDERSTANDING BOTH THE WESTERN WORLD AND THE EASTERN RELIGIO-CULTURAL NORMS AND VALUES THEY FOUNDED THE SAMADHI DANCE GROUP. SHARMILI MITRA KISHNA CHANTS THROUGH THEIR STEPS...



Light in her **feet**

Q Samadhi Dance group - how did it come into being?

My sisters and I (Rasarani, Vraja sundari) grew up with the principles of the Vedanta philosophy, as my parents are disciples from Srila Prabhupada and were wed after meeting each other in the Hare Krishna movement in the '70's. By the guru representing Srila Prabhupada my sisters and I were given Sanskrit names as is a custom in the Vaishnava culture.

Thereafter we went to school, college and professional dance school with 'normal' students, so we have always been between worlds. Our parents are artists; my mother (1951-2010) was a dancer and dance teacher and my father is a philosopher and musician. So it was but natural for us to develop artistic skills at home and combine our arts with the given philosophy as well as to merge aesthetics and certain elements of the Indian culture with our Western culture, as this felt completely natural being raised in an environment where we were always associating with both cultures. Through arts we always found freedom to express ourselves as well as to give a place to our struggles and confusion born from the differences in these worlds. Inspired by our mother we all turned out to be professional dancers, dance teachers and choreographers now specializing in fusing the best of these two worlds, without claiming to be Indian or traditional. This is another field that we highly respect and view as a strong source of inspiration.

As a student of the acclaimed dance performance department at Codarts in Rotterdam I started creating own work from 2001 as a means to express myself freely. This turned out to be successful and ever since then it became a habit with me to create. After graduating in 2004 I received many bookings as a soloist to perform my own choreography. Several young talented dancers became a fan of this work and wanted to study this style and technique under my guidance. This developed into a small group of dedicated and very talented dancers. When I was requested to create group work, it felt natural to create something with this group of dancers and myself. When asked what the name of our group would be in 2007, I immediately felt 'Samadhi' would be appropriate as the goal of our work is to be absorbed in the moment during a performance as well as to give our audience an experience where they could be fully absorbed in the moment, creating a meditation like collective emotion or collective 'rasa'. I never felt right naming the company the Vraja Sundari Company and through the years 'Samadhi Dance company' (SDC) developed in a steady and respected contemporary dance company, unique for its devotion to dance.

Of course 'Samadhi' is a Sanskrit word so naturally it has a clear connection with India. As we specialize in integrating elements from the science of dance and art originating in India (Bharata

natyam, Odissi, Navarasa) it felt appropriate to have a title that is easily associated with India.

Q The contents of your productions are characterized by fusing knowledge of the ancient Vedas with Western art and dance techniques...what makes you choose the teachings of Vedas and Indian music?

As I mentioned I grew up surrounded by the teachings of the Vedas, the fashion and colors of the Vaishnavism, the music (bhajan, kirtan) and poetry (sloka's, artiks), all originating in the Vedanta philosophy. So it has become very natural for me to bring these worlds together as my world has always consisted of these two cultures, supporting and enriching each other. It would be unnatural for me to only create Western dance or only Indian based work, it would feel like I am faking something. And to me the most important aspect is the integrity of an artist: no matter what the outcome is, I need to go to sleep at night with a feeling, that I am doing the right thing in my life and truly the best that I can do; that I believe in my art and that I believe it can inspire, touch and mean something for someone, even if its just me....

Q How do you train your students and what is the first lesson you teach them as a GURU, as the path to learning ballet is not that easy as it looks?

It is indeed a very long road full of trials and tribulations. The dancer is tested on many occasions. First thing I teach my students is that the only and real obligation a human has is to be responsible for their own happiness. And that dance, once lodged firmly in the heart, can be a great means to happiness: as a dancer we can share our 'diary' so to speak to our audience including the fragility, sincerity, humility and vulnerability, but it remains in 'code'; people can feel the emotion but they would never really know exactly, so the dancer's 'secrets' still stay safe. This way dance becomes something that no one can take away from them. This increases the trust in oneself (zelf - vertrouwen), which is essential in taking the next step in one's development. Second rule is that you can never EVER laugh at yourself or at others when learning or practicing, as this can form the biggest block in the development of an artist. It is always 'yes and' instead of 'NO.'

Boundaries, discipline and developing independence is crucial. Students and dancers learn that a compliment is as valuable as criticism as we need both to stay focused and inspired in order to keep learning: as an artist but especially as a human; we need to always be prepared for the fact that we will always make mistakes. And the harder the 'test', the more important the mission is! Finally we explain that the intention and essence of an emotion ('e' is Latin for 'exit' and 'motion' is Latin for 'movement', so dancing is literally 'emotion') or intention/story must start in the heart, then go to/is

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expressed through the eyes and the eyes then connect with the hands (mudras). Then from the mudra it comes back to the eyes to arrive again in the heart. This is continuously happening during a performance and if successful, will result in a collective 'rasa' or emotion, meaning that the audience and the performer experience the same emotion together, connecting them and truly making it a collaboration between the two. In the Samadhi dance technique the feet are simultaneously connected with the hands and once hands and feet are moving, the body follows. This idea originates from Bharata Natyam, and we followed several classes in this technique from various qualified teachers, just to strengthen the fusion of Indian dance into contemporary Western dance techniques. From contemporary dance the 'steering' of the back - an essential principle of modern dance - is implemented to expand the technical possibilities of the dancer. We call technique 'freedom of movement' and being professional means to be 'self-sufficient': i.e. if the choreographer gives the dancer the task to perform in a certain way, one can expect from a professional dancer that they will do so, so the choreographer can always count on the dancer. Reliability is essential. So these are some principles that we teach our students, from a very young age up to the professional and mature age.

Q Hanuman is your latest production, what is the message you have tried to convey through this production?

The story of ' Hanuman ' has many meanings

and depths and with this performance SDC wants to give her audience the opportunity to experience such depths and meanings through the art of dance and music. Underlying theme of 'Hanuman is "Force" or Strength.' Physical, but also inner strength and vigor. Think of the power of loyalty, perseverance, dedication, hope and faith. One of the quotes that was central to the creative process of 'Hanuman' is : "Darkness is the absence of light , but light is not the absence of darkness"; 'Light' or positive thoughts and a positive mindset will always "triumph" over dark and negative moods. The moment that "light" enters, darkness will increasingly disappear. The essence of 'Hanuman' is that even if something seems impossible, through dedication, humility, intelligence, perseverance and a positive attitude, one can reach unprecedented heights (to take a 'leap of faith') whenserving the right cause.

Q What is your perception about having a disciplined training when it comes to such kind of performing arts?

Art is relatively somewhat chaotic, unexpected, fleeting and fully based on inspiration, dedication, perseverance, chance and collaboration. Without this, it is less than a sport. So to reach the level of magic one must go deep, be open to learn at all times, remain humble and submissive when working together and remain fully dedicated. What you put into it, is what you will get out of it. Finally it is the personality and the mindset that determine the course and durance of ones career.

Ye Zindagi ke Mele



Milan Mela is one of the largest festivals to be introduced to the Netherlands by the post-colonial immigrants in this land. It's a yearly festival that takes place every year

in The Hague. Known to be the biggest outdoor Hindustani event in mainland Europe, it is organized largely by the Hindustani community. A fair where the Hindustani community celebrates its identity, it attracts at least 50,000 visitors each year. It is one of the most anticipated, most influential festivals of the year. This year the Milan Mela celebrates its 31st year and hopes to grace the occasion with fresh energy, innovative ideas and creative challenges.

The term 'Mela' was inspired by the melas in India which technically means 'a coming together of a large group of people.' 'Milan' means 'meeting together'. And it is indeed a meeting point, for people from various communities who come with friends and families to be a part of this colorful festivity. It is but also a merging point for the business professionals and companies to broaden their network. It was started in 1983 with the aim to establish a meeting place for all the citizens of Surinamese Descent and to provide a multicultural platform for all the citizens of The Hague.

The Milan festival is an Open-air event that takes place in The Hague's Zuiderpark with numerous food stalls selling Hindustani snacks, gorgeous costumes, Hindustani music Cd's. It is organised by the Stichting Interculturele Ontmoetingsmanifestatie (Foundation for Intercultural Interaction). The festival resembles a vibrant party a buzz with dazzling costumes, live music and dance, Bollywood especially, children's activities, funfair, sports and performances from almost all other ethnic groups in the Netherlands. Initially it was a free entry event, but slowly, to cover the costs the festival organizers introduced a small entry fee. Not only this, in the subsequent years the Mela also addressed many significant issues relevant to the Hindustani Community.

This mega cultural event is undergoing a metamorphosis this year. Milan Mela will come to be known as the Milan Summer festival. The main festival area will continue to be the central place which is getting ready to welcome the visitors amidst its grand bazar. This year the stage is set with new concepts, new ideas amidst a new setting and the 3 days from July 24 to July 26 promise to be exciting, as always.

In the maddeningly fast paced life in the Netherlands and despite all odds and struggles, Milan Mela has continued to grow and has

managed to build bridges between various ethnic groups in the Dutch society. It continues to be a setting where the immigrants come not only to assert and renew their collective cultural ties, but also to explore and celebrate their ethnic identities.

