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[For Mythili Prakash, Bharatanatyam is Personal](#)

Squeezing in as much time as possible together in the dance studio, Mythili Prakash and her collaborating musicians are rehearsing their new work “Poo | Poo” for the Erasing Borders Dance Festival. Presented annually in New York City by the Indo-American Arts Council, the festival, this year, is celebrating India’s 75th anniversary of independence. Four days away from the premiere, Prakash and her musicians are still figuring out the ending. But that may be because of the collaborative nature of this endeavor (as well as the fact that half of them were stricken with Covid during one of their dedicated rehearsal periods). The role of this ensemble of four musicians is quite expanded from the usual Bharatanatyam (classical dance form from South India) set-up where the musicians sit in a row on the side of the stage and play music while the dancer dances. In a break with this classical aesthetic—these musicians are integral to the choreographic process, they move around onstage, and vocal artist Ganavya Doraiswamy even plays a double bass and dances. They are also some of the foremost virtuosos and emerging scholars in the field of boundary-pushing classical Indian music as well as close friends and family of the choreographer (her brother Aditya Prakash is a vocal force of nature).

Amidst the seemingly casual discussion, the group suddenly breaks into rapturous singing overwhelming the studio space with earthy rhythms and soaring vocal improvisations. Prakash too is part of the sonic tapestry that spirals upward and then finishes with a lingering “Om.” In this production, everyone sings and everyone moves. That’s what happens when an old story gets a rewrite—roles begin to change.



Mythili Prakash, Tarpan Festival, 2014. Photograph by Inni Singh

Mythili Prakash is a celebrated younger generation Bharatanatyam dancer/choreographer. As part of a second generation of diasporic Indian creatives who are carving their paths within the classical arts, she is exceptional in her questioning and pushing of boundaries of the accepted aesthetics and content. I wanted to learn more about the influences that shaped her, the issues she is wrestling with, and the work that is emerging

from this sensibility, so we spent several days together leading up to and including the Erasing Borders performance.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Prakash grew up in an immersive Indian classical arts household. Proudly claiming her lineage, she tells me, “My first teacher was my mom [Viji Prakash]. I grew up in the atmosphere of her dance school watching her dance. She went on tour when she was pregnant. She had me and went on tour again. She is just *crazy* about dance.” Prakash naturally absorbed her mother’s passion for dance along with her rigorous work ethic. At a young age, she was already gaining exposure to some of the finest dance gurus from India, invited by her mother to teach summer intensives at the school.

“I love narrative; that has always appealed to me,” Prakash disclosed. Thus, she has sought out mentors who could help deepen her skills of *abhinaya* (mimetic aspect used in classical Indian narrative dance)—an impressively nuanced capacity in her dancing. She began to study with iconic Bharatanatyam dancer Malavika Sarukkai in 2008, and Prakash related how Sarukkai has been a transformative influence—especially “her attention to detail in how you sensitize your mind when you’re doing something. What are those things that I’m holding in my mind as I do a pose?” Prakash continued, “If I’m showing a piece of fabric, she would ask, ‘Can you feel the material in your hands? What is it? How does it feel when you wrap it around you?’ She has this phrase, ‘Personalize it.’ It’s about what you are thinking and not about what you look like.”

Sarukkai’s charge to “personalize it” is something Prakash has taken to heart. Her interpretation of the Bharatanatyam dance form and content is excitingly

fresh, personal, and even daring. The work she is creating for Erasing Borders is one in a series of treatments she is currently percolating—a reimagining of the famous Hindu myth of *Ardhanari* (a composite form of the Hindu deity Shiva in which he is half male [himself] and half female [the Goddess]). She recently performed a short sketch of the myth “AR | DHA” commissioned for this summer’s Jacob’s Pillow Festival production of “America(na) to Me.” The program was conceived as an homage to the many voices that make up “American dance” today.



Mythili Prakash in “Poo | Poo.” Photograph by Sachyn Mittal, courtesy of Indo-American Arts

Another significant influence on Prakash is her ongoing association with noted British-Bengladeshi choreographer/dancer Akram Khan. They met in 2016 through her brother Aditya, who was collaborating with Akram on his production “Xenos.” A mentoring relationship naturally developed as Akram presented her highly praised solo “**Jwala**” as part of a festival he curated and later nominated her for a Dance Umbrella commission that yielded her piece “Here and Now.” He invited Prakash to be a cast-member and to participate in the creation process of his work “Outwitting the Devil.”

Prakash described the experience of working with Akram and his dancers, who come from many varied styles of training, as eye-opening and completely outside of her comfort zone:

I was taking ballet classes in the morning because that was company class, or Graham technique, or crump. There were weeks where I felt like this is not what I have trained my entire life to do. But I think everybody needs that—to shake it up.

Although they have different ways of creating work, Prakash acknowledged:

“I love the way Akram works. Everything is broken up, taken apart, and put back together. I love that there’s space for that, for interpretation. With Akram, there is so much R & D [research and development]. And I like that because we don’t work that way in Bharatanatyam. I like the play aspect of it. That’s different. Being in that process with him has definitely influenced me.”

Hence, Prakash incorporated a period of R & D during the early stages of creating her current work “Poo | Poo.”

The title of this piece is itself a negotiation of dual identities and a challenge to Bharatanatyam's hallmarks of beauty and refinement. Prakash explains that "poo" means flower in Tamizh (language of Tamil Nadu—state from where Bharatanatyam originated) while in English, "poo" is synonymous with excrement.

It should come as no surprise that this story involves a "dance-off" between gods—one of Shiva's epiphanies is the cosmic dancer. In the original telling, according to Prakash:

"Shiva invites his wife Kali to a dance competition. They are at an impasse and Kali is undefeatable, so Shiva creates the illusion of dropping his earring disrupting the competition. He lifts it with his toe, raises his leg to his ear replacing the earring, and remains in this formidable pose. Kali, though equally skilled, is bound by the constraints around femininity (a woman should not raise her leg) and surrenders. Thus, Shiva wins the competition."

Prakash writes in her program notes, "As artists of a classical tradition, we are inheritors of a form that is at once beautiful and oppressive, harmonious and conflicting. How can we negotiate the tension and fluidity of being at once this AND that?" In Prakash's rewrite, the story plays out differently:

Shiva lifts his leg. Kali lifts her leg too.

The competition continues. In fact, after some time there is no competition. They lose themselves in the dance, in each other. All boundaries fall away—they dance into each other becoming One. Not Shiva, not Kali, not *Ardha* (half) of anything. Just One fluid identity.



Mythili Prakash in “Poo | Poo.” Photograph by Sachyn Mittal, courtesy of Indo-American Arts

With this changed narrative, the creative process changes—as does the resulting work. In fact, Prakash acknowledges that the questions that emerged in the development phase of their process found their way into the content of the work. This comes to the fore during the fascinating opening scene as the artists, playing themselves, translate and discuss their personal understandings of the original text. As Prakash sits in an open-legged posture of authority while musing about what would have happened if Kali had lifted her leg, vocalist Sushma Somasekharan gently pushes one of Prakash’s legs across into a more culturally acceptable, “feminine” pose. This repeated,

natural, subconscious action reveals the inculcated and lived artifacts of this and so many cultural conventions. How many oppressions of this nature do we bend to?

The group discussion organically incorporates musical accents and more choreographed gestures, which Prakash develops into an elaborate gesture dance. The ensemble asks and encourages an audience response to their repeated refrain, “Can we rewrite the story?” until Prakash takes off into a fully danced evocation of the divine competition. Forming a wide square around her, the musicians sit and clap (with audience members joining) as if in the arena waiting for the dance-off to begin. Prakash deftly switches between dancing the roles of Shiva and Kali dignifying the characters with her authoritative foot slaps and fluid technical ease. The role-switching is echoed in the sung narrative—the male vocalist (Aditya) sings Shiva’s account while the female vocalist (Ganavya) sings Kali’s.

In the final tension-filled moments inside the ring, Prakash gives to Kali sensitively drawn metaphors for the leg that is not allowed to lift. Her arms momentarily flutter as she contemplates the sensation and imagined reality of that longed for leg-lift. But she swiftly brings these upper appendages down to the floor crossed and pinned like clipped wings. She strains to free them and upright herself, but merely manages to stand up on one leg sadly dangling the other like a useless limb. Throughout her effortful struggles and trembling deliberations, everyone in the Erasing Borders Festival audience was breathing as one with Prakash—especially as she decisively changed the story’s ending.



Mythili Prakash in "Here and Now." Photograph by Teresa Elwes

Speaking about her culture's myths, Prakash shares, "I grew up feeling like these characters were mine. I literally thought I *was* these characters. They feel personal to me. So now when I retell stories or challenge these things, it's because these are my people, and I'm interested in the mechanics of their relationships." For example in "She's Auspicious," her 80-minute solo created during the pandemic, Prakash inhabits the character of the fierce and violent goddess Durga. In her rendering, she pushes the emotional edge to challenge the accepted ideals of restraint, refinement, and beauty that characterize femininity in both classical Indian dance and society. And "Here and Now,"

with its formidable sequence of time-defying knee turns, spawned from another myth and eastern philosophy, explores our complex relationship with time, its mystifying relativity, and the struggle to be present.

From these works, it's clear Prakash is a bold and original artistic force. She is of the current generation, churning up work informed by open-minded curiosity and reflection, risk-taking, as well as seasoned artistry—always exuding fierce commitment to her art and culture.

“Poo | Poo” concludes with another meaningful gesture. Prakash removes her ankle bells (a dancer's most prized possession) and repurposes them as hand-held instruments. She then joins the musicians in singing an ecstatic group composition. Rajna Swaminathan returns to her *mridangam* (drum) and masterfully rumbles off a final coda—the reverberations gradually peter out like aftershocks once the earth has shifted.

Karen Greenspan

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