

CriticalDance

With “Stories by Hand,” Preeti Vasudevan Strives for the Intimacy of a Living Room

by [ELIZABETH ZIMMER](#)



Preeti Vasudevan tells “Stories by Hand” this week at New York Live Arts.PETER CUNNINGHAM

When Preeti Vasudevan, a native of Chennai (formerly Madras), India, who’s lived in the United States for more than twenty years, announced that she was presenting a solo performance on the huge New York Live Arts stage, I worried that she wouldn’t be able to command the enormous space all by herself. Her new *Stories by Hand* was not to be a full-fledged demonstration of Bharatanatyam, the dance form she’s studied and practiced since she was four. It was, rather, to be an experimental work closely focused on the hand gestures, or *mudra*, that animate her full-bodied dancing. (The advance press materials feature Peter Cunningham’s gorgeous photos of her hands, like the one at the top

of this article.) Then I heard that she was collaborating on the work with the digital artist and writer Paul Kaiser, who has worked with dance-world giants like Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, and Bill T. Jones, so of course I assumed there'd be large-scale video, maybe 3-D, maybe even virtual reality.

Well, no. Vasudevan, as a 2015–2017 Live Feed artist-in-residence at the Chelsea-based arts center, is on a very low budget. Though the original conception for the piece involved all that expensive digital stuff, the final version is plainer: Her secret theatrical weapons, during the three-day run at New York Live Arts (November 2–4), will be her wide, bright, expressive eyes, and her excellent brain. Though she narrates parts of the sixty-minute piece in Tamil, her native language, a monolingual observer somehow always knows what she's talking about; between those darting eyes and her articulate fingers, she makes herself perfectly clear. Kaiser's contribution, she says, was dramaturgical, not visual; it was to be the outside eye, "to take the largeness of the proscenium away from my life and restore the intimacy of the living room." Or as Kaiser puts it: "*Stories by Hand* is all on Preeti." Kaiser, who in other projects with his digitally focused OpenEndedGroup has developed museum installations and public art works often involving film, here concentrated on listening to Vasudevan and helping her open a window into her private space.

Vasudevan is a powerful mover; during a noon rehearsal in mid-October at which she displays a few moments of classic Bharatanatyam, her stomping is so powerful that it rattles the single piece of furniture on NYLA's dark, wide stage. (The finished *Stories by Hand* will incorporate a piano bench, a high chair, stools tall and small, and a regular chair.) Then she moves her fingers into the *mudra* for a woman holding a flower to her chest. (You know that emoji of the praying hands? It's kind of like that.) The piece is constructed in three sections. The first, very talky, is performed in simple black clothing. The second has her playing a temple dancer preparing for a performance that never quite happens. In the third, also simply clothed, she relates the story of a cousin who killed himself and his entire family, and the challenge of sharing this information with her seven-year-old daughter, Ambaalika Kavanagh.

With his longtime colleague Marc Downie, Kaiser has been working on a book called *Among Others* that, quoting their description, "interweaves the memories, observations, emotions, and reveries of more than a dozen people in an intricate counterpoint of texts." Vasudevan is one of those people, and the pair's partnership on *Stories by Hand* issued forth from that process. Together they designed "storytelling spaces." "There are only one or two areas [on the stage]

where I'm permitted to do full-bodied dancing," she explains of the New York Live Arts project.



Preeti Vasudevan performs "Waiting for the Fifth Arrow" in 2007 at Dance New Amsterdam in New York City. COURTESY THE ARTIST

In addition to performing, Vasudevan has been a dance instructor for decades. Instead of merely retailing the mythic stories that underlie most classical Indian dance, like Sita and Rama's marriage song — highly prized by Indian-diaspora parents who "wanted kids to have Indian values," in the artist's summation — Vasudevan in her late twenties began to rethink her intentions as a teacher. "I don't see myself as a torchbearer of my culture," she told me after the rehearsal. "I'm part of the evolutionary process of my culture."

When she first arrived in the States, Vasudevan and her first husband, also a dancer, based themselves in Indiana; he took an engineering job, while she continued to tour all over the world. At the state university in Bloomington, she met retired Balanchine ballerina Violette Verdy, who introduced her to the world of New York City Ballet; she also met and was mentored by Jacques d'Amboise and his child-centered National Dance Institute. Once in New York she started her own company, Thresh ("as in threshold"); she and her new husband, Bruno Kavanagh, started a multimedia website, Dancing for the Gods, that introduces

her classical form to young audiences. Her next project, workshopped during a recent residency at NYU's Center for Ballet and the Arts, is a duet, *Études*, with New York City Ballet dancer Amar Ramasar, expected to premiere in 2019. "We explore each other's classical languages," she says of *Études*.

Other collaborators on *Stories by Hand* include the lighting designer Robert Wierzel ("He's like a film editor in some ways"); the sound designer Paul Jacob, a composer also from Chennai; the Carnatic singer Roopa Mahadevan, from California but with roots in that south Indian tradition; and also a couple of assistants who move furniture, help Vasudevan dress, and provide atmospheric incense.

"I don't want to control all of it," Vasudevan says. "I want to retain a certain level of vulnerability. They're intimate stories. I want you to feel that I'm talking just to you."

Stories by Hand
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212-691-6500
newyorklivearts.org
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