

CriticalDance

Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; April 26, 2015

Jerry Hochman



Veiled Moon.
Photo Ian Douglas

It's said that ignorance is bliss. It's not. Ignorance is ignorance. Until Sunday, what I knew of Indian culture and the history of the Indian subcontinent could be characterized by *Gunga Din*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, Gandhi and the Nehrus, and Indian food. Lots of Indian food. The current exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the 'other' Met), *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500-1700: Opulence and Fantasy*, and a lecture

by celebrated Indian historian William Dalrymple opened my mind, and reminded me how much I didn't know that I didn't know. And *Veiled Moon*, a dance choreographed by Preeti Vasudevan and performed by her company, Thresh, opened my eyes to Indian dance – albeit a form of Indian dance fusion.

Apparently, I may be the last person in New York not to have been exposed to Indian history or Indian dance. The museum exhibition, which took some ten years to put together, was crowded with both curious and obviously knowledgeable people, and The Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium, where the lecture and dance were presented, was filled to overflowing – and I understand, on good authority, that some 300 people had to be turned away.

Veiled Moon draws its inspiration from the life of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (1768-1824): poet, powerful politician, mystic, soldier (she reportedly was an excellent archer, javelin thrower, and horsewoman, and battled in three wars), and bewitching courtesan, who used her intelligence, skill and beauty to become a towering figure at the Nizam's court in Hyderabad and in the male-dominated world of South India. In his lecture, Dalrymple referenced this woman, and displayed a photograph of a piece of artwork that showed men in almost every inch of the piece...except there was one woman – Mah Laqa Bai Chanda – on a hilltop, sheltered from the sun; a revered goddess of sorts overlooking the assemblage below her.

Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (more frequently referred to as Mah Laqa or Chanda), was born as Chanda Bibi, and raised by an aunt under relatively privileged conditions. During her lifetime, she was honored in multiple ways theretofore unknown for a woman: awarded the highest rank of nobility, given property (land) of her own, allowed to wear men's clothes in battle, and honored with various

titles, including Mah Laqa, translated as “visage of the moon.” She wrote under the name ‘Chanda’, and her collection of Urdu poetry, published upon her death, was the first by any woman (the words are written on the page as if the letters alone were works of art).



Samita Sinha and Preeti Vasudevan in *Veiled Moon*.
Photo Ian Douglas

Perhaps none of this would have happened had she not been born into a family comfortable with the notion of being a courtesan, and a society that, to some extent, venerated it. But if you think she was the antithesis of another famous and revered Indian woman, Mother Theresa, that would be wrong. It is said that Mah Laqa provided assistance to underprivileged women

throughout her life, and upon her death her residence was converted into a college for girls, and she bequeathed her considerable wealth to support homeless women. And a memorial/tomb for her was constructed in Hyderabad – which was recently restored, reportedly with funds received from the United States. All this to honor a courtesan – albeit a courtesan who was also a sort of Indian Renaissance woman.

Obviously, there is a great deal in Mah Laqa’s life from which Vasudevan could draw inspiration. What she chose to do was to imagine the contradiction between Mah Laqa’s private and public life; between being a courtesan and being a poet. But *Veiled Moon* is not a dance biography. Rather, it is somewhat of a psychological study presented in a collection of moving images and extended snapshots in time, and music.

As a company, Thresh has been known and recognized for Vasudevan’s merging of Indian dance forms with more contemporary movement qualities that effectively liberate the story from formalism. *Veiled Moon* is an example.

While I am not familiar with the various styles of Indian dance, the movement quality looks essentially similar to the generic understanding of what Indian dance looks like, with legs, arms, fingers and feet moving from an inner core, as if each limb had an independent function. But more than that, Vasudevan’s choreography for *Veiled Moon* reflects the confluence of styles that might have been evident in the late 18th-century Deccan (southern) area of India, which was home to a mingling of traditions based on conquest, commerce, and creative/artistic interaction: a Persian/Moghul influence (evident in much of the artwork on display in the museum exhibition, and also apparent in the romantic scrolling and circularity of Mah Laqa’s poetry and calligraphy), and a native Hindu influence. The result is a visualization that is indebted to basic temple dance forms (demi-plié and body structure), but also features repetitive circling or spiraling by the dancers, individually or as a group, as the segments of the dance progress.

But *Veiled Moon* is more than a fusion of styles.

In addition to choreographing the piece, Vasudevan is also its lead dancer. However, this lead role is shared with Samita Sinha, who 'plays' a profound instrument during the course of the piece: her voice. The dancing and music (drums, played by Brian Chase), and vocalization (sung by Roopa Mahadevan, in addition to Sinha), are all intended not only to reflect the 18th-century confluence of styles, but also to capture Mah Laqa's multi-faceted personality and accomplishments; to embody her spirit. And the increasingly obvious meaning of the story Vasudevan weaves is revealed almost as the gradual removal of veils.



Preeti Vasudevan and Thresh dancers in *Veiled Moon*.

Photo Ian Douglas

The piece is divided into a sequence of related segments (I counted four, but there may have been more) of increasing tempo, transparency and power. As the pulsing music and at first gentle vocalization is heard, Vasudevan is joined by three other members of her company, Aditi Dhruv,

Deesha Narichania, and Nilaya Sabnis, dressed similarly in simple but alluring costumes (by Deanna Berg) and moving in tandem with her.

Although Vasudevan is the leader and most frequently downstage from the others, the four dancers' movements are essentially identical. If, collectively, they represented anything other than 'that's-the-way-its-usually-done', I surmised that the three other women were intended to represent other courtesans in the Nizam's court (effectively a chorus of courtesans, or perhaps the rough equivalent of ladies in waiting), or women that Mah Laqa was training. And the words of the haunting vocal music that Sinha is singing, which presented a rich variety of only vocalized sounds, are in fact words from Mah Laqa's poetry.

Regardless, after a while the movement repetition becomes almost hypnotic (trancelike; perhaps intended as a reflection of Bai Chanda's mysticism) – except there are subtle differences between the movement qualities, music tempo, or in facial gestures from one segment to another, becoming, toward the end, much more overtly seductive – as if the women were performing in public, or private, and putting on a public or private face as the case may be. But Vasudevan may be also be subtly drawing a distinction between the appearance of women in Mah Laqa's position in the 18th-century (understated sensuality), and the behavior of women in the same position if Mah Laqa had somehow been transported to the 21st-century (much more direct; with seductive intent clearly expressed).

The most interesting part of the piece is its concluding segment, which is presented with what appears as a more Westernized sensibility and theatricality. Vasudevan and Sinha separate

themselves from their ensembles and sit together, downstage center, on a bench. At first they sit with their backs to each other almost as Siamese twins, but the positions change – at times they sit adjacent to each other, or twist around each other like the interconnected twines of a vine.

Vasudevan, emotes through facial expressions and arm movement that become increasingly vehement, while Simha, vocalizes with increasingly powerful intensity: Mah Laqa's private side (courtesan, participant in political intrigue) and her public side (poet, musician) presented clearly as two sides of the same person, and Vasudevan challenging the viewer to accept her life as Mah Laqa lived it, with its inherent (or apparent) contradictions, and not to be judgmental. She was how, and who, she was; but she was more than who she appeared to be.

Veiled Moon was commissioned by the museum and, to my knowledge, this world premiere performance is not scheduled to be repeated. But Vasudevan and Thresh have presented dances worldwide, and I suspect will be in the New York area again in the near future. Like more familiar forms of Indian dance, the company's idiosyncratic style is worth seeing. And perhaps they'll open your eyes too.