

# Preeti Vasudevan: Stories by Hand, Heart, and Soul

**Preeti Vasudevan**  
New York Live Arts  
New York, New York

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*Stories by Hand*

**Jerry Hochman**

*Stories by Hand*, Preeti Vasudevan's solo show at New York Live Arts, opened last night, and runs through Saturday. Counting tonight, that gives you only two more performances to see it. Run. My only criticism: it ended too soon.

Even though I thoroughly enjoyed the only other performance by Vasudevan that I've seen (*Veiled Moon*, a piece of dance/theater that had been commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in conjunction with its April, 2015 exhibition of Deccan India from 1500-1700), that was an ensemble dance. I had more difficulty accepting the notion that a solo dance can command and retain an audience's attention for an evening of stories told by hand gestures – which is what I anticipated Vasudevan's presentation to be. Successfully executing a relatively brief solo dance is one thing: but an evening-length program of hand gestures?

Not only was I wrong (both on the nature of the piece and on Vasudevan's ability to carry it off), I was seriously wrong. I can't recall a theatrical experience quite like *Stories by Hand*, and I certainly don't believe I've previously seen any performance that's kept me literally on the edge of my seat waiting to see what would come next. I must admit that part of my excitement was an effort to comprehend what Vasudevan was saying and doing, but the sensation wasn't confusion – it was intellectual and visual curiosity.

Before I begin briefly discussing what *Stories by Hand* is, I must acknowledge that it could not be what it is without the meticulous care that Vasudevan and her collaborators put into it. This was opening night of a world premiere presentation, but there were no rough edges (well, at one point Vasudevan seemed to have a bit of difficulty removing part of a costume that only a perfectionist with binoculars might have noticed): it ran like a Swiss watch. Aside from the execution by Vasudevan (collaboratively refined with Paul Kaiser), there was impeccably executed lighting that was played like a visual instrument (which, of course, lighting is, but it's rarely thought of that way). No lighting credit was given, so I must assume it's part of the production design (which itself is visually intriguing – like looking at the perfectly functioning

interior of that Swiss watch ... or the caverns of a mind) by Robert Wierzel, and appropriately understated sound design by Paul Jacob.

Vasudevan's stories are a tapestry of selected memories, woven, not merely told. Of course, we all have memories: images of events that the mind retains for each of our lifetimes and that make us who we are, as opposed to who we might want to be: little things, or major things, or even invented things that have long since become real, that we remember when the spirit moves us or the mind wanders that remain as vivid as the moment they happened and that can be shaken and stirred and released and relived in our minds when we want or need them, or that materialize when we no longer want to remember them. They're a part of us. The difference between the memories displayed in *Stories by Hand* and those most of us see in our mind's eye daily, besides the fact that they're hers, is that Vasudevan (and Kaiser) has put them in an accessible, intelligent, educational, and entertaining theatrical form (qualities not often found in the same piece at the same time), concurrently making the fact that they exist universal, but never losing the sense of intimacy that makes her memories hers alone. In its theatrical incarnation, these memories are worth sharing and knowing, and are important beyond the fact that they're hers.

But *Stories by Hand* isn't "just" a tapestry of stories, although that's the essential theatrical vehicle: it's an interweaving of cultures, of speech, and of movement. Vasudevan tells her stories by incorporating Indian, Tamil, and Hindu references seamlessly, similar to the way people fluent in multiple languages can move from one to another and back without hesitation. And her language skills are other-worldly: she speaks English better than those born to it, with a lilting refinement that's not so much patrician as pleasantly eloquent. She jokes about how she learned English early in the piece, but her tone, diction, and language attitude is part of what makes *Stories by Hand* as engaging as it is.

Vasudevan is a highly accomplished classical Indian dancer (Bharatanatyum), which her performance in *Veiled Moon* demonstrated. *Stories by Hand* isn't an Indian dance, but it incorporates Indian dance into the story, and along the way Vasudevan seamlessly translates traditional Indian-dance story-telling hand gestures. Hand gestures are by no means exclusive to Indian dance – talking with one's hands is common to many cultures, and telling stories with one's hands is, surprise, something that happens in ballet routinely, although the Indian form of it is much more refined and is an enhancement / replacement of speech rather than a substitute for it. [When I assumed incorrectly that this piece was to be exclusively finger / hand gestures, my first thought was of the Vulcan sign for "be fruitful and multiply." □ Don't ask. After I quickly got that out of my head, I thought of ballet mime, but also of other less obvious forms of ballet replacement speech, and kept seeing in my mind Balanchine's *Duo Concertant*, particularly the illuminated arms and hands as that dance ends. Sure enough, Vasudevan echoes that image early in this piece, and references her having had a mesmerizing mind meld meeting with a dancer from New York City Ballet (more on that below).]

Structurally, *Stories by Hand* is divided into three interconnected stories (called "clusters"• ), and Vasudevan provides in the program a "conceptual story map" that shows the interconnections, the "threads,"• that lead from one scene to the next and that cross-pollinate the

clusters. It's a fascinating intellectual puzzle (part choreograph diagram, part narrative illustration, part poem) that becomes much more clear after the piece ends. She also provides "Background Notes"□ that give an entirely new meaning to the word "footnotes" [foot ... notes].

*Stories by Hand* is funny, tragic, simple, complex, detached, intimate, and one of the most stimulating evening's I can recall seeing. Tonight or tomorrow, if you're flying between Los Angeles and Bombay, take a detour to see it. It's worth it. But I suspect it will be performed again at some point in the future. Also in the future, I understand from Vasudevan's web site, is a collaboration with NYCB Principal dancer Amar Ramasar (who attended last night's performance and must be the dancer that Vasudevan referenced in the piece), currently in development as an evening-length work (presently titled "Etudes") and tentatively set to be completed in 2018. NYCB has a history of collaborating with artists from outside typical ballet boundaries. Sight unseen, this collaboration belongs on the NYCB stage. Regardless, wherever it beams down, it promises to be a must see – like *Stories by Hand*.