

Telling Stories Through Dance

Preeti Vasudevan helps build a cultural bridge between India and the United States using traditional and contemporary styles of performing arts.

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Preeti Vasudevan performed her solo work, “Stories by Hand,” in six Indian cities in 2018. Photograph by MARIA BARANOVA

Using dance to explore the potential and boundaries of art is not new. But with her latest production, “Stories by Hand,” New York City-based dancer and choreographer Preeti Vasudevan seeks to create an enduring dialogue between movement, art, culture and people. “It celebrates individuality through personal stories,” she says. Vasudevan is the recipient of the prestigious 2018 Lincoln Center Awards for Emerging Artists and the 2018 Dance Research Fellowship by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts’ Jerome Robbins Dance Division. The winners of the Lincoln awards receive \$7,500 (Rs. 5.5 lakh approximately), to be used for career advancement.

A stipend of the same amount is awarded to the Dance Research Fellows to complete their research work. Vasudevan, a certified movement analyst from the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in New York, was invited to choreographer Bill T. Jones’ New York Live Arts as a two-year Artist in Residence, which culminated in the commissioned work, “Stories by Hand,” in November 2017. A solo performance conceived and created by Vasudevan and multimedia artist Paul Kaiser, “Stories by Hand” combines theater and dance to tell personal stories from her life—as a child born in India and the woman living in New York. It recently debuted in six Indian cities and received critical acclaim.



In India, responses to Vasudevan's performances ranged from standing ovations to audience members coming forward to talk to her about their own lives. "This is what art is supposed to do," she says. "It is meant to encourage sharing and empathetic responses." For Vasudevan, India is always "home" and where her spiritual roots are. She lives in the United States now, being a part of the "larger immigrant artistic voice" and exploring her global identity. "I go back every year to India, and I am in touch with artistes and performing groups there," says Vasudevan.

She was selected for the DanceMotion USA 2018 Follow-On Professional Development Program of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, produced by BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music), to facilitate cultural exchange while showcasing the best in contemporary American dance abroad. She is also associated with Silkroad, an organization founded by renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma to promote cultural diplomacy through the arts.

Student of movement

Dance has always been a part of Vasudevan's life. "As a child I danced more than I walked," she says. Born in Chennai, she learned bharatanatyam from U.S. Krishna Rao, as well as V.P. Dhananjayan and his wife, Shanta Dhananjayan. Dance, to her, is a mode of centering and balancing. "Dance helps you focus and work on life skills from a very young age," she says. "This is something that dance and sports have in common. But, sports is more goal-oriented in nature, whereas dance is a unique means of self-expression. All my happy memories have something to do with dance."

Vasudevan describes herself as a student of movement. "It is not just about bharatanatyam or ballet," she says. "Dance is extremely dynamic, yet reflective and meditative." Believing in dance as "a dialogue, never a monologue," she founded Thresh, a performance arts collaborative that has earned international acclaim for its juxtaposition of traditional dance forms from India with modern theories of movement and expression.

"Thresh is based on the interesting concept of a threshold between the past and the future, where you cast off the trappings of the past and move toward an unknown future," explains Vasudevan. It was formed in 2004, toward the end of her master's degree in London.

Performing and teaching

Vasudevan's training in bharatanatyam ensures an appreciation of its storytelling ability. "As a dance form, it has both theater and abstract movement in it," she says. "It is an evolved form rather than a pure form." A passionate educator, Vasudevan created an interactive multimedia website, Dancing for the Gods, to teach bharatanatyam to the younger generation. It is the result of two years of intensive research in India with her husband, Bruno Kavanagh.



Designed for students and teachers, it is now offered in New York City public schools. “We are looking to revamp the website to bring it up to speed with new technology,” says Vasudevan. “We are looking for collaborators and partners.”

Meanwhile, another project by Thresh, in conjunction with DakshinaChitra, a heritage museum based in Chennai, and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, will work toward building a repository of endangered art forms and artistes from southern India for worldwide visibility. As Vasudevan explains, “People should be able to tell their own stories, and I am proud to be one of the conduits of this operation.”