

VOGUE

This new dance performance is based solely on hand gestures



BY RAJASHREE BALARAM 10 SEPTEMBER 2018

New York-based dancer Preeti Vasudevan is touring India with her show, Stories by Hand, this month © Vogue Images

Though Preeti Vasudevan has set up a home away from India for more than two decades now, the [New York](#)-based dancer and choreographer says her friends in Chennai are deeply disappointed in her for not having picked up an accent yet. “They wonder why I don’t dress differently now, but this is me and I’d rather be true to who I am,” she says.

“Instead of putting myself in a cultural bubble, I come to India every year and interact with people both professionally and personally. In a way, I feel that I have been part of the continuum of change in India, just as I am also a global citizen.”

Currently in India on a six-city tour, the way this world-renowned Bharatnatyam dancer and choreographer straddles the duality of her daughter-of-the-Indian-soil and American-citizen identity can only be described as amazingly purposeful. For instance, her massive online Bharatnatyam-based educational project, Dancing for the Gods, is used in

New York City public schools to show students and teachers how one can access culture through the performing arts.

However, nodding to two different cultures all the time has also resulted in her mind constantly investigating fresh questions on existentialism and personal identity. Her latest production, Stories by Hand, is born from such musings and is shaped by her memories, interactions and gestures. In a phone interview, Vasudevan tells us why Stories by Hand is a labour of love, passion and angst.

What inspired Stories by Hand?

It all started five years ago when my friend Paul Kaiser, a multimedia designer and writer, told me he wanted to film my mudras while I was telling stories, and convert them into a multimedia project. We had a long talk over this, and soon afterwards I received a prestigious two-year residency with New York Live Arts, one of the leading contemporary dance theatre organisations in the city. We then decided to do this project live, instead of making it an installation or a multimedia piece. The residency culminated into a commission for a world premiere in New York in November, 2017.

How have you layered the performance?

We all talk a lot with our hands, especially in India. Paul and I wanted to bring to the audience the way something like hand gestures are universal. But this time I felt like doing it differently. Typically, we take classical myths and put our bodies into the characters that inhabit them. But here, we wanted to make the person who is telling the story the myth herself. Having lived in so many countries over the years, there has been a certain narrative that has marked me individually and culturally. So I asked myself, what will happen if I remove

all these cloaks and stand naked, metaphorically speaking, on stage, and say this is who I am. That then becomes an identity based on memory, and therefore that also makes Stories by Hand an autobiographical piece.



How did your family react to such a personal and vulnerable performance?

When I am playing a part from an ancient myth, I always have someone to hide behind. Here, there's nobody. It's all [personal](#), so in a way I have taken a risk of affecting my whole family as well, because I have taken the decision to place them in a vulnerable space when I narrate my story publicly. At one point of time, my husband felt very unsettled and asked me why I need to talk about our life this way. I said I cannot cover it, and had to insist that he trust me and the process. We went through a very difficult time when I was doing this piece. But when he finally saw it, he understood why it was so vital to me. After all, if we don't share our truth, how can we be more empathetic?

Are you saying performances like these could knock down the barriers that are cropping up between people?

Many of us have married outside our [community](#), country and religion. We need to show our children the important role that diversity plays in today's

world. Whether it is in India or internationally, immigrant culture and the stories that they bring are creating an impact on a very large level. While social media paints everything in one colour, I still feel each one of us carries something very distinct in us. The more detailed we try to get about who we are and share that generously, we will find truly common things and we'll be able to grow in this complex network much more widely.



Will your next production aim for similar goals?

My next one is a close collaboration with a beautiful half-Indian half-Puerto Rican ballet dancer from New York. It is a deeply intimate duet expressed through the classical languages of ballet and Bharatnatyam. We are hoping to premiere it in 2019 or 2020. Next year, we will make a trip to India and

document that as a film, to show the journey of two artists who got to know each other and how their stories impact more than just the arts community.

What do you miss about India when you are back in the US?

I miss the railways! I miss looking out of the window at the changing landscapes, gorging on Indian snacks and the wonderful banter that one can have with unknown passengers. I bring my daughter to India every time, and make sure we travel a lot. I want her to see how these wonderful conversations that public transportations bring about sometimes have the power to change our lives.

Stories by Hand will showcase at Sri Ram Centre in Delhi on September 12, ICCR in Kolkata on September 14 and University of Hyderabad in Hyderabad on September 18, 2018. Book tickets [here](#)