Tension to Tranquility
The Photographs of
Aleksandar Antonijevic

Text by Kathleen Smith
I t’s no surprise that National Ballet of Canada Principal Dancer Aleksandar Antonijevic brings the same kind of intense focus and commitment to photography that he does to ballet – it’s what a real artist does. Even so, it’s startling to contemplate his distinctively rigorous photographic oeuvre and realize that he’s only been shooting pictures for three years. How did he get so good so fast?

“Being a classical dancer requires being okay with this idea that what you’re trying to achieve is almost impossible,” explains Antonijevic. “You’re aiming for the highest of the high. I feel I don’t have ten years to just experiment with photography – when I present myself as a photographer it has to be at the highest level … I don’t want people to think that I’m just playing around and that this is a hobby for me.”

Antonijevic got inspiration from former colleague Johan Persson, now a successful commercial photographer in the UK; lessons in technique from PIKTO Gallery in Toronto; and private tutoring from veteran photographer Markian Lozowchuk – all of this sandwiched between the ongoing responsibilities of a full-time dance artist. “I knew my angles already (after years watching other photographers and working with mirrors in the studio every day) – that was the easy part. The hard part was how to technically achieve the images I had in my head.”

It’s clear from the pictures Antonijevic presented in his first two solo shows, Human or Dancer and Secrets of the Flesh, that the dancer has learned fast and well – his best work has a minimalist, sculptural quality that can only be achieved with close attention paid to lighting, angles, mood and the subtle force fields of energy operating within his subjects. Antonijevic captures the humanity in his portraits of dancers even as they suggest classical statuary or beings from another planet. Yet for all his expertise in the mechanics of human locomotion, Antonijevic actually prefers not to shoot movement: “It’s the moments just before or just after movement occurs that intrigue me the most.”

Antonijevic will dance the White Rabbit in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Christopher Wheeldon, November 10th through 25th during The National Ballet of Canada’s (NBoC) winter season at the Four Seasons Centre for the Arts, Toronto.

Antonijevic also photographed the company’s principal dancers for the NBoC’s 2012/13 souvenir program and took the portrait of Greta Hodgkinson that graces our cover. Look for more of his photographic work at aleksandarantonijevic.com.
PHOTO ESSAY

Jiří Jelinek
Tanya Howard and Brendan Saye
Sarah Elena Wolff
Sashar Zarif
In Conversation with Elizabeth Langley

CHOREOGRAPHER Sashar Zarif has done extensive research into the ancient tradition of mugham, an art form adopted by different cultures from North Africa to North East Asia and North India. In contemporary times it has been associated mainly with music, but Zarif’s Mugham remembers its roots when music, poetry, philosophy and dance were integrated. Zarif and Montréal-based dramaturge Elizabeth Langley have been working and travelling together in Azerbaijan as part of Zarif’s latest research and creation process. One culmination of this shared journey will be presented December 21st at the George Weston Recital Hall in Toronto when Sashar Zarif Dance Theatre and DanceWorks Co-works present Sama-e Rast, a performance featuring Zarif and master singer Alim Qasimov with his ensemble.

What follows is an excerpt from their conversations while on the road. You can listen to Langley and Zarif’s entire interview at thedancecurrent.com.

Elizabeth Langley: I’d like to quote you to yourself at this point. You said, “Mugham produced poetry to convey thought; it used music to internalize it emotionally and employed dance to manifest it.” Could you please expand on this definition for me, and in what period of history did it originate?

Sashar Zarif: I don’t really think that I have found the answer to the exact date of the formation of mugham; I don’t think there is a date when it started really. I think mugham is part of human evolution. I think it started as soon as humans started communicating because it’s really the practice of expression and expressing the emotions. Now, when it comes to where it was originated, mugham expanded from western Mongolia, all across central Asia, even spread to north India, it crosses Iran and it included Azerbaijan… In central and western Asia at the arrival of organized religion, including Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam, the practice of mugham evolved into a trio of arts – poetry, music and dance. These arts were used to communicate thought. The Masters or Sufis or shamans or philosophers, or whatever you want to call them, used metaphors and rhythmical patterns to write their thoughts in the form of poetry.

EL: What period of history did mugham originate?

SZ: Every culture, every part of the world claims mugham to be originated in their land. If one wants to research, depending on where the material has come from, they might get different information about it. But I believe what is evident is that mugham is highly sensual and emotional, and is very organic despite the complexity of its structure. It’s very organic, and I think that it originated with human existence, with human evolution.

EL: Okay, what about the formative years of mugham?

SZ: I think that mugham had two major shifts. One was the shift from shamanism to other organized religions like Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity. After the arrival of Islam, it had another shift.

EL: What happened since those formative years, what has happened to the form?

SZ: Basically, the form has evolved to be more complex, because in the Caliph’s time, in the years of Islamic empire, Ottoman empire, or pre-Ottoman, the courts welcomed poets and artists and musicians – it was a flourishing time of civilization in Islamic cultures. So we have a lot of poetry, and books, and music, science, and philosophy work from different artists. Unfortunately, because they did not have the means to notate the music, we don’t have hard evidence of the music, but the music has an aural tradition. This aural tradition is coming from shamanism and its connection to nature, and the resistance to formalize it on paper, they have survived hand-in-hand, but they also have evolved. I think the beauty of mugham is that, because of these very reasons we get this amazing reflection of the whole history of human civilization.

EL: I believe that you’ve travelled extensively in western and in central Asia, and perhaps you could take me on a journey based on your travels. Where did you go and why?

SZ: Yes, my travels. I have travelled all my life. I was displaced even before I was one [year old].

EL: Where did you go and why? I’m trying to stick to mugham; I don’t want your life history.
In Conversation | Sashar Zarif and Elizabeth Langley

SZ: I travelled to learn all the forms that are still interconnected in central and western Asia. Central and western Asia are connected to each other through poetry very, very strongly. Poets from all over that area reference each other, they have been inspired by each other, they mention each other in their poetry.

EL: And what are those countries exactly, so that I can see them in my mind?

SZ: Starting from central Asia: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, part of Pakistan, northern India, Azerbaijan, Turkey. There are even Arabic countries all the way to North Africa, to Morocco, and the Andalucía empire.

EL: And did you mention once that you were in Mongolia?

SZ: Yes, western Mongolia.

EL: And is it true that the shadows of the traditions of mugham are still there?

SZ: The origins, the raw format of these traditions can be traced there, and that’s why I travelled that route.

EL: I’d like you to go back to your beginnings. How young were you when you began to practice some kind of traditional dance?

SZ: I don’t know. I think the earliest memories I have from my childhood are dancing around and singing, playing the drum with my grandmother. She was a beautiful storyteller, performer; she employed dance, music, poetry and storytelling all together in an integrated form to tell me about her world.

EL: Would you call her a mughamist?

SZ: Yes, in her own right. I think that the poetry the mughamists use – the content, the intention – is much more complex, deeper, more inclusive.

EL: Well, do you consider, or is it true that mughamists are mostly men?

SZ: No it’s not true, we have many mughamists that are women. In fact with shamanism, most of the shamans were female – they hold a very special place. Even in today’s society, taking Azerbaijan for example, when a female visits the grave of loved ones, they sing Saga-mugham to them, and they improvise poetry at the time, depending on who they’re singing it to. I don’t know about now, but until my great aunt’s time every woman had her own hand drum at home, and when everybody left, she would sit with her hand drum and sing whatever was in her heart. Life for a woman was much harder back then and sometimes they would say, “oh, such and such had such a hard life, that her drum exploded,” because the drum could not bear to hear anymore.

EL: At the age of what, five?

SZ: I know! Looking back at it now, I realize that what I took from her was my initial interaction with the performing arts and how to use them. The first time I saw this practice she was using it to transform a human need. It was definitely out of necessity for her and for me. It was very important for me to identify with her, and I did. Until the age of seven I really believed I was living in Baku not Tehran – they are two capitols of two different countries.

EL: So you were living in Iran, but she made you feel and believe that you lived in her home country of Azerbaijan?

SZ: Yes, and when I went to the preschool I was shocked. I used to come home and I’d talk to my mom and she’d try to explain it to me. What I loved about my parents is that they were not so uptight about things. I could do anything I wanted to be my room, paint every wall differently, take the furniture out, bring it back, become Christian today and Buddhist tomorrow – whatever I wanted to be. They would come and look, and

Because here we’re talking about a woman, and as far as my research has gone, most of the mughamists have been men.

SZ: The origins, the raw format of these traditions can be traced there, and that’s why I travelled that route.

EL: That’s very interesting. But let’s go back to your grandmother because there’s always one very important person in your life – and I’ve found this with most people I’ve met who are artists – there’s one person in their life that seems to put them on some kind of road that they never get off, and it sounds like maybe that your grandmother was that one for you.

SZ: I think that. I am so fascinated to reminisce. I tell people the story of me and my grandmother and how we used to dance, how she used to hire me to be her legs, because she couldn’t get up and dance. She employed me: she said for each dance I’ll give you a candy. So I think I enjoyed the profession of a dancer and the integrity.
they would never interfere or laugh at it. I think the combination of what I took from my grandmother and the freedom and the respect I got at home allowed me to be who I wanted to be and to be so intuitive, and so easily kneel in front of a cross after seeing the movie The Song of Bernadette, become so involved in Immaculate Conception and the Father and Son and look for this Holy Spirit and wonder what it was. And then the next day I’d be so into Buddhism, and then I’d pray five times a day like a hard-core Muslim. And all of that was okay.

EL: I think children have a tendency to try on things, you know to try on religions and politics, and I think they should be left alone, because some parents take it seriously and react in an adult way to them, and this is not right. So we have your beginnings with your grandmother, and with how you found the dancer in you. She literally permitted you to make that discovery. So what happened after your grandmother passed away?

SZ: She passed away when I was ten. Before I left my home (which was at thirteen), I had secret rituals and parties, and I say secret just because they were my thing. I would play the stereo and I would imagine a scenario. People would be in our house, and I’d be performing, things would be happening. So I started performing and I think I was so involved in it that it wasn’t performing really, I was embodying the moment. I was it and I think that gave me a backbone.

EL: Well, when children play, they do become what they are playing. Until adults disturb them. I think it’s very important if you can live a life where you are permitted to improvise your imagination into living form and not become self-conscious about it but are able to develop it.

EL: How do you choreograph?

SZ: I’m very intuitive. I’m a lot more confident now, but even when I started doing contemporary work, with all the self-consciousness that I had in me, the urge to do it was much stronger.

EL: Are you talking about contemporary work or your contemporary work?

SZ: My contemporary work. When I crossed that traditional line into the contemporary version, when I made that new tradition mine, the urge for it was much bigger than the fear of making a fool of myself. And I think I just went ahead. I had many challenges, but I had great results; I worked with great artists.

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EL: I have a question that relates to this. Because we’re talking about this really ancient form that you’ve researched and in a way made your own but also inherited from your grandmother, would you say that you contain a combination of that inherited eastern-ancient art form and perhaps extractions from that, from the twentieth-century possibilities of you expressing yourself in today’s world?

SZ: I don’t really; I came to the point that I don’t really believe in a past, a present and a future. I used to use those three words a lot and related to life in those terms. Now I think that life is a continuum, that the past, present, future don’t exist, and they’re all one life, and we have to kind of get over that. And that’s why I “dig” in the past; I dig into it because I want to be connected to it, to that time of my life, and connect that time to this time and the time that is coming. I want to be in a continuous connection. I want to understand this memory that is locked in my body, that is passed through generation, and generation, and generation through history to my body, and I want to make the best of that. I think that if we all think like that, a lot of conflicts and differences will fade out. We will come to understand that really the core is important. Maybe the symbols are different, but the gist of the stories are the same, we all want to live, we want to be happy, to seek the truth, doesn’t matter if we did it with an iPhone, or we did it with stones and rocks.

SZ: I think that as a person who is connected to both the east and the west – and I should say that I am as loyal as I can fairly be to both of them – I want these two to be connected as much as they can. I want the world to live a healthy chaos.

EL: Oh, that’s lovely – a healthy chaos. Because chaos is wonderful, but it can also be diabolical.

SZ: I believe that with a healthy chaos, if we can all be ourselves, our individual selves, our cultural selves, with respect and self-respect, that self-respect will bring self-respect to others.

EL: But not only are you connecting yourself to the history that is ingrained in all of us, but you’re also an intuitive person that is living today. So, if you’re going into your intuitiveness today, that twenty-first-century man has got to bring some of today into that ancient work.

SZ: Exactly, and I think that’s how I benefit from that research that I do, because I am here as much as I can be ‘with all my luggage open’ so when I want to “wear” something, I know I have it. Sometimes you don’t have to really invent. And I really don’t believe in discovery; I believe in uncovering. Not discovering, or not creation in that sense – you just uncover things and you really recognize what you have.

EL: I think there is a western ego that talks about creating and discovering as though the one personal creator is the one discoverer of something new. I think maybe people who live in the colonies like I do … we don’t have the traditional past that you have to draw upon. I think we have a tendency more to believe that it’s going to come out of us personally, because we don’t have the background that you have, we don’t have those hundred years to go research, to draw and collect into what you call your luggage. But you also live in the world today and view arts today, so there’s got to be some merging, some fusion. What do you want your research and performances in mugham to do for the survival of the form in the contemporary world?

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EL: Well I think the embodiment that you bring to your performance work, which I have been lucky to experience, it does transcend the language that you are using and it does project very human emotional states to me. It transcends the language and connects person to person, and in my personal experience with you at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, where we celebrated Iranian Heritage Day, I saw in the people there – the people that love you and kind of even touch you as you go by as though you’re bringing something really sacred to them – I saw in those people a really joyful connection, and how positive it was for them, and what joy came to them through your performances of mugham. That was really exciting for me.

EL: There’s one more thing that I really want to talk about, and that I’m kind of ignorant about. You do in your dancing something that I find so spectacular and that is your spinning. Most people in the world have seen photographs of dervishes spinning in their beautiful hats, with their skirts, and their hands going up and down to earth and to sky, so a lot of us are aware of that image, but most of us do not have information about how you spin, why you spin, and the interpretations of different kinds of spinning. I think we should touch on that definitely.

SZ: I think spinning generally gives me a sense of no direction, and that brings a sort of beautiful chaotic moment. Also maybe it reflects some sense of freedom. When you look at it with kids with their open arms and spinning, that’s the purest form, it’s so selfless, and so generous, so true, so real. But when it comes to the eastern concept of whirling and spinning, that’s the purest form of dance, and don’t forget that east to me is a curve and the west is more of a grid.

EL: East is a curve, and the west is a grid?

SZ: Yes, a spiral and a grid, and I think these two can complete each other, you know, when they merge. When they merge in a healthy way they can create something beautiful. And that spiral is not conscious, is not logical. This has been said over and over by poets like Rumi. But through history a lot of things have happened to Sufis’ movements, to shamans of course after the revival of these religions, and then to Sufis because they were the activists, the ones who were always questioning. The ones who were always proud of wondering, not believing in anything, but wondering about life, you know, not having a conclusion. So they were the targets of organized governments that employed religion to control people, so they were manipulated in so many ways, they were oppressed aggressively. What we see right now in Sufi practices, it has gone through a lot of turmoil, you know, and also along with the whole idea of colonialism and post-colonialism, it has been misunderstood, and misinterpreted, and misused in so many ways. The reality of this learning is about facing your chaos, to first know yourself, to get to that moment of no direction, or weightlessness.

EL: Is that what it means to you?

SZ: That’s what it means to me. It’s a moment that you have no direction, and you exist in that continuum. As I said before, I don’t believe in past, present, and future as entities, I believe in them as a continuum, I believe in life as a continuum, movement as a continuum. If you find that core that is connected to gravity as much as it is to anti-gravity, that it wants to embrace the earth as much as it wants to be part of the sky, you know if you long to get to that moment, then you’re learning. I don’t admit that I’ve felt it, that I’m there, but at least I’m intending to get there, that’s my intention, and that creates a very strong state. And I should say that I think that it’s very unfortunate, and I’m very sad to see that things like this have been misused and misinterpreted and exoticized.

EL: Well I think that’s happened to a lot of dance in the world. People are cashing in on dance because people love to see people dance, and people will pay to see people dance. Also I think the general public is becoming fearful of things that are too serious and too sacred, that’s part of what happens in culture. There’s only one thing that I would like to say in conclusion – it’s a great pleasure to work with you, and to learn new things all the time. I have not worked with anybody like you before in my life. I do admire your drive, your research, and your desire to seek dance in the purest form as you do.

SZ: Thank you. I think you’re being too kind and also humbling me. I think that it has been a great opportunity to start working with you earlier this year. It is because you carry a wisdom, but also you have a wondering mind. To be in the presence of each other creates a wonderful support for me. Because you might have a lot of wisdom and stop wondering and start believing.

EL: Never, never!

SZ: I think that idea of always wondering; it brings youth along with the wise in you, and I think that makes you timeless.

EL: Oh, thank you. So we’re both kind of timeless, and maybe we should now cut our time. I think we did fine.

Sommaire


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danceworks.ca; sashardance.com
Sashar Zarif is a multi-disciplinary performing artist, educator and researcher whose artistic practice invites a convergence of creative and cultural perspectives. His practice is steeped in the artistry and history of traditional, ritualistic and contemporary dance and music of the Near Eastern and Central Asian regions. He is the recipient of numerous national and international awards for his collaborations with outstanding Canadian artists, along with international icons such as Alim Qasimov. Zarif is a research associate at the York University Centre for Asian Studies, a sessional faculty member of York University’s Dance Department and on the board of directors of Dance Ontario and the World Dance Alliance – Americas.

Professor Elizabeth Langley has worked professionally in dance since 1953. Born in Australia in 1933, she spent her formative years performing, choreographing and teaching. She trained in the Martha Graham technique in New York before moving to Ottawa in 1965. In 1979 Langley moved to Montréal to design and develop the Contemporary Dance Degree Program at Concordia University. After studying in Amsterdam, she retired in 1997 to develop her own style of physical theatre in which she creates original one-woman shows while also working as a dramaturge for companies and solo artists in Canada.
ON MEN DANCING

by PHILIP SZPORER

“If you are serious about your work, you have to put it in front of the world, because it may create a great artist”

~ David Earle
When historians tackle the challenge of writing a definitive and exhaustive essay on the vast and diverse world of men dancing on our stages and streets, one thing will be clear: they will undoubtedly embrace an inclusive appreciation of the field. It’s important to look back at the past, and magnify the present, and reveal traits of those men manifesting versatility and unpredictability, some of the greatest virtues an artist can attain. My attempt, forthwith, to describe some of the individuals influencing the climate and the terrain in which we exist is far more modest in its scope.

Since the early part of the last century, a proliferation of figures in the Canadian dance world has altered people’s perception of the passionate and vital male in dance. In retrospect, there were the “fathers of Canadian ballet” – Boris Volkoff, Ezrauk Ruvenoff and Gérald Crévier, among others – who blazed trails and opened doors for young men entering the profession. Legendary dance artists later made their mark, such as David Adams, one of the founding dancers at The National Ballet of Canada, nicknamed “the forklift truck” for his ability to impressively lift his partners. His younger brother, the enterprising Lawrence, aside from a notable career as a choreographer and dancer developed a passionate interest in Canada’s dance heritage, transforming publication and conservation concerns in this country, thereby affecting generations to come.

Consider Jean-Pierre Perreault who touched audiences profoundly with his relentless quest to understand humanity. Equally, the creative force of Paul-André Fortier’s sustained oeuvre conjures up images of a solitary figure moving through space and time – the self-described “man who dances” grappling with this mortal coil. Watching Benoît Lachambre’s provocative and beguiling explorations, which reveal his interest in cross-breeding art forms, improvisation and body consciousness, leave you feeling anything but complacent. Improvisers Andrew de Lotbinière-Harwood, Marc Boivin, Peter Bingham and Chris Aiken have a long creative working history together. Their ability to convey brute physicality, explore degrees of sensitivity and evoke pliant maturity has sustained them and their ever-expanding audiences.

For a number of years, the Montréal dance space Tangente produced a Moment’homme series for male choreographers (inspired by Deiter Heitkamp’s MannTanz festival in Germany). It was later redubbed Moment’Homme: Danses Gaies to highlight a focus on gay dance. The event was a trigger for many, but for certain artists this kind of programming reduces life’s complexities. A person may be gay, but that doesn’t mean his work is about being gay. Some years ago, Montréal-based choreographer/performer George Stamos removed himself from the “gay dance” formula because he refused the narrow one-dimensional terms of identity politics. “Realizing separations and differences is less exciting to certain artists in a world that’s often obsessed in categorizing people into slots, in a need to make order of the chaos,” he said at the time.

José Navas, who exudes major doses of seductive and sensual charm, revealed in an interview with “Three Dollar Bill” writer Richard Burnett, “In the beginning, my sexuality was very out there. You have to go through it. You have to be loud, you have to be ‘in-your-face’, because once it’s out, you can go deeper in the real world. It’s also a reflection of your time and your age. But you have to do it.” Navas later remarked to me, “I like to be political. The gay issue is a big theme in my dance and I like it to be an issue for the public when they come to see my performances.”

I recall first watching Jeff Hall and Pierre-Paul Savoie in an early acrobatic work, Duodenum. There was an oddball mix between the two of them – one tall and strong, the other small and hyper nervous. Savoie, steeped in athletics and theatre, and Hall, an ex-jock, had an unstoppable energy in their creative bond, and a total confidence in working together, their physical prowess matched by their technical wizardry.
Byron Chief-Moon transcends cultural borderlines and delineates a process in which his male dancers are often reluctant to dance without the regalia instrumental in rites of passage ceremonies. “In the rehearsals and the improvisations they are very reluctant to emote,” he says. “I want them to get in touch with their feminine [spirit].”

And then there are informal or community groups such as Old Men Dancing, a concert dance troupe of men in their fifties or more based in Peterborough, Ontario. From a variety of backgrounds and with virtually no training, their performance work stems from a specifically male dedication to the expressive, emotional and spiritual dimensions realized through dance.

Bill James enlists a range of collaborators from other fields for his site-specific work and dance environments. John Alleyne, the former head of Ballet B.C., made his mark presenting “ballets of our time” and by consequence infusing Canadian dance-making with international signatures and vocabularies. And David Earle, who co-founded Toronto Dance Theatre, understands deeply the connection that can come about through performance to affect an assembled audience. He once said, “If you are serious about your work, you have to put it in front of the world, because it may create a great artist.”

That kind of revolution in dance evolves in different guises. There are the transformational efforts of Christopher House, whose intellectual force and expansive imagination not only drives his outstanding artistic stewardship of Toronto Dance Theatre, but also forges important links for the community. Brian Webb fields resistance in his work, noted for its queer philosophical/political bent, and he too has built a dynamic community base, both within the ranks of his own company, as well as during his tenure as head of the Canada Dance Festival for nearly a decade, forging engaged dialogue through dance.

Many men in dance have stories about the discouragement and the harassment they’ve experienced as well as the rewards a life in dance can provide. Nico Archambault, of So You Think You Can Dance Canada renown, uses his fame to speak about lack of training for men in dance, and the thornier topic of bullying, which he struggled with first-hand.

Just a few years ago, shortly after the success of the Billy Elliot movie, our film company was preparing the groundwork for a documentary series about “ballet boys”. We knew the statistics of men being in the minority in dance classes, and the desire to recruit young men into the field. And there was concern that there weren’t enough boys in Canadian ballet schools training for professional ballet in this country. So the focus of our proposal was to seek out courageous teenaged boys dancing and chart their pursuit of their as yet unarticulated passion, and how they challenge themselves physically and overcome stereotypes in their chosen profession. Fascinating subjects were found, and research proceeded around a few central questions concerning things such as physicality and how they saw themselves, and how others see the dancing boy. Other central issues included the teenagers’ motivations to dance, and what kept them dancing, as well as the pressure to conform. Sexuality was also front and centre in our interviews. As was education. We found a key ballet school in Montréal that was actively trying to change the frequently held perception of the public: that classical dance is a principally feminine avocation and is an inappropriate course of study for boys. In Vancouver, at the time, Edmond Kilpatrick was teaching a popular “Boys Only” program at Arts Umbrella (see page 11 for a brief profile of recent grad Scott Fowler). His approach created an environment where the boys, usually adolescents, could feel supported and affirmed, and the classes were geared to their wildly active energies, incorporating martial arts into the instructional scheme, for example. (Parenthetically, currently a number of dance schools country-wide now boast increases in boys enrolled in classes.)

As excited as we were about the subject, and our potential subjects, the project ultimately fizzled: broadcasters had had their fill of dance, and besides, a program about “ballet girls” had more legs than “ballet boys”. A friend was perplexed when I told him the outcome. He looked at me quizzically, “What’s not to like about a series about valet boys? I’d watch that.”
Hari Krishnan is a twenty-first-century triple threat – he's an academic, a historian and a dance artist. His choreographic discourse is deliciously embedded with a pursuit of individualism, and he has a keen ability to express his subversive voice. What distinguishes his creative output – a paean of sorts to thoughtful adventurousness and artistic integrity – is that he's articulating new paradigms, offering fresh approaches to gender and expressing strong political convictions that influence his engaging vision. As such, Krishnan ably flips postmodern considerations about deconstruction, crossing and blurring boundaries, connecting concepts and iconography in order to form new understandings of traditional forms through his gestures and attitudes.

At this past summer’s eightieth anniversary season of the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, the triumph of founder Ted Shawn and his company of male dancers’ achievement was celebrated. To honour their efforts, dance collaborators Tina Croll and Jamie Cunningham created The Men Dancers: From the Horse’s Mouth, a unique and rousing show featuring a “who’s who” parade of twenty male performers – ranging from Arthur Mitchell, Lar Lubovitch, and Gus Solomons jr, to Josh Beamish and Krishnan – with each participant executing original choreography as well as sharing brief personal anecdotes. Krishnan's layered solo about discrimination, the Other, and empowerment, Pissing off the Neighbours (2012), which had premiered a month prior at the Canada Dance Festival, was a standout.

In the bucolic splendour of the Pillow grounds, Krishnan revelled in his surroundings and spoke about the generosity and spirit of his “Horse’s Mouth” colleagues, Ted Shawn's legacy, and the important lineage of men in dance. The male dancer’s plight during Shawn's time (see sidebar on page 45) was to be considered “effeminate, trivial, and an unworthy occupation for the strapping and well-muscled male,” according to the modern dance pioneer. As a result he developed heroic, male body images for his company of Men Dancers.

Krishnan is able to honour Shawn's pioneering vision, but he also brings a contemporary understanding to the complexities implicit in the mystique of presenting men and dance on stage. Though he respects both tradition and the power of innovation, Krishnan states he doesn’t like to characterize his life or art in terms of compartments such as “traditional” and “contemporary”. The out and proud choreographer-scholar admits, “It’s about being in a danger zone, not knowing what’s next. I’m in perpetual flux. The diversity of ideas and people propels the landing, and then I’m off the cliff again.”

Krishnan was born in Singapore, part of the Indian minority in the city-state. He trained in dance in India before moving to Canada in 1991 to study. Linguistics and Asian studies were his undergraduate majors at the University of Manitoba and he later received his MA in dance at York University in his adopted Toronto. In 1999 he founded his own contemporary dance company inDANCE. Krishnan’s investigations in choreography and dance culture embrace contemporary, urban, postmodern traditions, and “communicate diverse aesthetic conversations and practices on the global stage,” he says. These dance creations, in which traditions blend seamlessly with the non-traditional, are far more than fusion. “What propels my work is ‘confusion’, a much more meaningful, realistic, nuanced and complex understanding of the world and
its revelation to cultural amalgamations and the diaspora,” he says.

As a dance-maker he finds himself “oscillating between past, present and future. I am very uncomfortable with ‘split personality’ art. I do what I do, but I don’t like to use labels like ‘East’ and ‘West.’” Krishnan says he is not interested in creating ‘South Asian dance for South Asians,’ a designation he feels is relative and mostly stifling. “I didn’t move to Canada to stay within my community.” And in fact, the strict bharatanatyam classical style in which he trained as a young man was “very frustrating” for Krishnan. “There was no freedom for me to express myself,” he says.

While he still calls Toronto home, over the last twelve years, during the academic year, he’s a professor at Wesleyan University’s department of dance, in Middleton, Connecticut, a place he refers to as an “oasis that nurtured my investigation.” The environment of the liberal arts university has “enabled me to better understand the DNA make-up of who I am as an artist working in tandem with multiple aesthetic styles,” he says. Over two decades Krishnan has documented, translated and analyzed the last vestiges of hereditary systems of dance in South India – “shaping my understanding of sexuality, eroticism and spirituality as a complex entity,” he says. This inquiry has informed his highly personal viewpoints, sensibilities and meditations on art and art-making. His larger oeuvre has rigorously interrogated, for instance, the parameters of South Asian dance and created an awareness of Indian classical dance in innovative and dynamic ways, as well as challenging and displacing the conventions of fixed, immutable gender identities. He reveals that he realized quite early on that, in order to function, labeling people and their ideas into categories was neither natural nor logical. “I’ve eschewed nationalist, religious, heritage-based interpretations of bharatanatyam in favour of an aesthetic based on the actual social history of the form,” he says.

In the richly textured Quicksand (2011) his interracial male cast of nine brashly commands the stage, investigating Navarasa, the nine emotions expressed in Indian classical dance forms (love, disgust, compassion, valour, humour, fear, wonder, anger and peace). Krishnan’s raucous, erotic and indulgent dance pulses, breaking through genres (Indian dance, techno, voguing) and the constraints of identity and sexuality. Making the work was a process of fluid empowerment, he says. “[It’s] important to showcase the gay male in all his strength and vulnerability and tenderness.” It’s this kind of bold juxtaposition that leads Pam Tatge, director of Wesleyan’s Center for the Arts, to call him “a maverick” and “an interdisciplinary thinker of the highest order.”

Indeed it is the fragmentation that interests Krishnan, and not the combining or blending, which tend to make performance more palatable, and ultimately, more bland. “I’m locating dance in the wider cultural sphere – in the midst of contested ideas of the body, sexuality, gender and class,” he indicates. What’s particularly compelling about Krishnan’s critical historical sensibility is that his reassessment does not yearn for an idealized representation of the past. “I do not, for example, run a community-based dance school that aims to inculcate teachings about Indian culture and morality to young Canadians of Indian origin,” he pointedly remarks.

Both as a scholar and practitioner Krishnan is one of the few people, in Canada or India, to articulate the quickly vanishing devadasi dance. Bharatanatyam stems/ruptures from devadasi and there is no real distinction of vocabulary between the two, he says. “The rather generic Sanskrit term devadasi (servant of god) refers to a multiplicity of female communities from South India, known by regional names such as tevaratiyal (slave of god), bhogam (embodiment of enjoyment), kalavati (receptacle of the arts) and gudisani (temple lady).” Devadasis performed in the temple, the court and at private gatherings, often held on occasions such as marriages. But beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, a series of social reforms dislodged devadasis from their traditional socio-cultural and religious roles.

Krishnan is interested in the histories and aesthetics that celebrate secular traditions of eroticism and the body. Devadasi dance is a prime example of this, he says. “I am a feminist and the identity of the devadasi is one of the few exceptions in colonial India where women were empowered, financially independent, educated, socially respected as equals to men and not relegated to domesticity.” What he’s attracted to and finds extremely meaningful and analogous to his contemporary reality is “their unapologetic and unabashed rendition of repertoire merging the sexual, erotic and spiritual as one complex, beautifully poetic and sophisticated entity.”

Properly harnessed, Krishnan strongly believes bharatanatyam’s larger vocabulary can be renewed as a current, accessible and dynamic performance culture, “retaining the aesthetic integrity of the form, allowing it to speak to a new contemporary audience.” His perspective suggests that lessons from the devadasi could assist in this renewal. “The important word here is could.”

Although Krishnan readily acknowledges that “bharatanatyam is one of the primary colours in [his]
choreographic palette,” his current process-driven work is informed by his North American context and modern sensibilities. As DanceWorks and CoWorks presenter Mini Beck points out, “He keeps challenging himself to stretch the boundaries of this form – looking at its earliest roots and propelling it into the future through multi-disciplinary collaborations.” Krishnan decisively brings together diverse dancers and collaborators, working with a plethora of information, whether it be drawn from research in Asian postmodern philosophy, Japanese classical dance, hip hop, martial arts, ballet and cabaret drag or more broad-based pop culture.

“More than ‘tradition’ and ‘contemporaneity’ or ‘innovation’, I am most committed to aesthetic exchange and dialogue,” he says, “[I want to] move audiences to think beyond these binaries and celebrate secular traditions of eroticism and the body.”

Krishnan grew up with dance and the arts. His mother is a classical Indian vocalist and his father proficient in an Indian theatrical form known as ottanthullal. This satirical solo dance-drama, from Kerala, on India’s west coast, is the prototype of kathakali. “This is similar to ballet being a derivative of baroque dance,” says Krishnan. Under the tutelage of his father, ottanthullal was young Krishnan’s initial foray into a physical discipline long before his training in bharatanatyam.

As he matured as an artist, Krishnan says the “pretty” or “technically perfect” dancing adopted in bharatanatyam training became meaningless for him after a few years of rote performance. “I became interested in producing meaning.” In service of that interest, Krishnan sought to build “transnational bridges drawing from the post-colonial South Asian experience (but not limited to it) and from multiple global influences.” He began to choreograph, and sought out teachers from other communities – the legendary Margie Gillis challenged him to think as a “global citizen”, and his aged South Indian village-based devadasi/courtesan teachers spoke with him about sex and love-making, and taught him their traditional repertoire of dances.

Wide-ranging artists have inspired him. Digging into his own past, he recalls the indelible image of a young Mikhail Baryshnikov at the barre in the film White Nights, leg up, in tights and leg warmers, a towel wrapped around his neck. It was a thrilling moment of reverie for an impressionable teenager. Krishnan became fixated and placed the movie poster on his wall when the film came out in 1985. “It was an idealized fantasy for the audience when Rudolf Nureyev was performing his last solo tour. In spite of the great dancer’s fragility, Krishnan saw his power and strength. “Coming from a disenfranchised community, and not being from the modern or ballet world, I saw so much hope and the possibility of what I could do.”

As he became immersed in the dance world, his infatuations and initial stirrings shifted. Pina Bausch, he says, affirms the “painful joy of existence and celebration of beauty and strength”. He was taken with Marcel Marceau, whose “Bib” character “transcends the pedestrian”; Ram Gopal and Uday Shankar, pioneers of Indian dance in the West; even Boy George with his unapologetic pop culture gender-bending and costuming fascinated him, as did other pop icons such as Cyndi Lauper, Annie Lennox, k.d. lang and David Bowie. “I am attracted to supremely confident people, who don’t shy away from whom they are, boldly wearing their politics on their sleeves,” he affirms.

Krishnan’s conviction takes “great delight subverting stereotype and cliché. The bizarre for me is the new normal.” In works such as Bollywood Hopscotch (2004) or Recipes for Curry (2007), he says “he’s exploring shades of being brown in this global world.” All these streams of information ripple through his dance discourse and performance and have determined his receptivity to transformation. “I am grateful that my art is wholly integrated into my personality,” says Krishnan who describes himself as “passionate and highly motivated, eccentric and very funny”. Gillis endorses Krishnan’s “strong vision” and his understanding of respect for the leaders of the past, the present and the future. “He is desiring but with hope, passion and care,” she says.

If at one time he felt caught between categories, this is not the case today. The truth is, “I need not ‘play a role’ when I create dance,” he says. Integrating his art into his life – socially, politically, culturally and aesthetically – Krishnan is much more engaged. “The imposed boxes [of race, exotica or the gay card] are loosening up

“I am most committed to aesthetic exchange and dialogue … [I want to] move audiences to think beyond … binaries and celebrate secular traditions of eroticism and the body” – Hari Krishnan

Hari Krishnan

the dance current JANUARY/FebrUARY 2013
feature

– I have many more questions now and fewer resolutions.”

Krishnan’s subverting of gender and identity is an extension of his being a gay man of colour. Yet he isn’t the poster child for the queer body politic, and he’s moved away from a fixed dichotomy of gender roles. Identity was demarcated to him as a child. “I love to play with androgyny, signalling femaleness and maleness. It goes back to the devadasi. I play with genderless neutrality then fill in. And I’m intrigued with hyper-masculinity and hyper-exaggeration,” he says. “I’m not trying to make contrived or forced dances. And I’m not waving the multicultural or gay card. I don’t believe in body types or gender types. My source material – what and whoever is in front of me – viscerally informs the process.”

Dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright in her book *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, argues that dance can comment upon socially constructed identities (racial, sexual, able-bodied, disabled) by mining the tension between the body as object/text and body as subject/author. It is in this “tension” implied by Albright that Krishnan sees great potential and possibility. When it comes to presenting experimental works, the choreographer intentionally moves away from simply presenting Indian dance in western costumes, preserving dialects or accents of the genre, or juxtaposing the two forms. It’s about elaborating a new language, pumping up a new syntax and an original movement vocabulary that he says are “radically post-structuralist, drawn from Indo-Canadian experiences of race, sexuality, multiculturalism and post-coloniality, and located in the company’s unique understanding of cultural hybridity and liminality.”

Krishnan’s keynote embrace of a saturated pluralism enhances the dialogue in question and new truths emerge for him, and his audiences, whether in the choreography, visual and lighting design, or music composition. Both Krishnan and inDANCE are draws on the lecture/conference circuit and at artistic venues internationally. Recent achievements include curating a series at New York’s 92nd Street Y highlighting choreographers who draw from classical dance tradition yet hone their craft with redefined hybrid abstractions, while keeping a sensitive eye on de/reconstructing tradition. And he is preparing a new Singapore/Canada international collaboration called “Cyclops” for the upcoming CanAsian International Dance Festival (May 1st and 2nd, 2013), loosely inspired by George Balanchine’s *Jewels* and based on visceral responses to movement observed while living in Singapore, India and Canada.

Krishnan believes that the idea of erasing cultural/racial specificities as in the historical “Orientalist dances” of artists such as Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis or Anna Pavlova, is potentially deeply destabilizing. Historians, including Krishnan, indicate that these dances are not simply “ethnic” indulgences. “[This dance-making] is part of a much larger Euro-American engagement with ‘the other’ – a discourse that must include critical reflections on race, religion, gender, colonialism and imperialism, early transnational flows of culture, and even North American immigration policy,” says Krishnan. His own methodology and artistic impulses often harness these reflections. Thus, in the solo *Mea Culpa* (2007), he embraces the idea of satire, subversion and irony, taking on, he says, “the troublesome registers” of Shawn’s *Cosmic Dance of Shiva* (1925/26) in an appropriation of an appropriation. The early modern dance pioneer’s passion for Lord Shiva is up-ended. In Krishnan’s fun riff on a riff, a Wall Street banker type misses his train, and shucks his suit for an unbuttoned gold silky shirt, g-string, and black fishnet stockings. Balletic connections and a strip-club booty shake, set to the cascading rhythms of Rossini’s *William Tell Overture* overlaid with random Indian percussion, is camp distraction, and as Krishnan says, “intentionally messed-up.” He adds, “To be sure, Shawn and St. Denis, and a number of others, have been uncritically co-opted into the Indian nationalist narrative about how forms like bharatanatyam came to be ‘gloriously revived’ for the Indian middle-class in the middle of the twentieth century.”

Krishnan’s fierce individualism and issues of cultural hybridity in his work are intimately linked and a direct response “to anxieties around art, race, immigrant experiences and diasporic >
We know that the male dancer pretty much disappeared from the ballet stage in the early nineteenth century. The era of Romantic ballet was representative of a “new moral and aesthetic canon,” suggests Lynn Garafola in her book *Rethinking the Sylph*. In the ensuing decades, few male dancers were of service; those who maintained a status did so mainly due to their technical abilities. The supposed effectiveness of the decorative European ballet tradition seemed to doom the male danseur. The arrival of the sexually ambiguous Nijinsky and the male dancers of the Ballets Russes in the early 1900s didn’t make audiences feel any less anxious, but a change did occur: female dancers, people soon realized, looked good when supported by the male. The rise of the ballerina, therefore, ensured that the male dancer was deployed as a prop. While many men performed in Russian ballet, men dancing, as seen in almost every culture in the West, was met with a rebuttal: that “that’s all right for Russians and pagans, but not for Americans”. The inference was, of course, that real men don’t dance.

Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers set out to change the way male dancers were perceived in the first half of the twentieth century. Shawn’s first public dance performances back in 1911 defied the prevailing attitude that dance was not a career for men. And by presenting an all-male dance company from 1933 to 1940, Shawn directly challenged audience prejudice. In *The Male Dancer*, a book of essays examining the representation of masculinity in twentieth-century dance, writer Ramsay Burt tracks how Shawn transformed the way American audiences appreciated male dancers. “Through Ted Shawn, a sort of masculine identity that can be described as western, Christian, Darwinian, pro-male and mythical became a norm of American modern dance,” he writes.

Essentially Shawn and his male group of dancers attempted to prove that, as one review noted, “dancing is not a sissy art”. He worked tirelessly to get his message across. His point that men can and should dance, and that they could have respectable careers as dancers was honed within a “robust” environment that included a considerable amount of manual labour and intensive training. At Jacob’s Pillow (the dance “colony” Shawn co-founded that is now the site of the prestigious annual festival), his group of male dancers could work and live without restrictions or hesitation. Not incidentally, Shawn’s heroic group of seven not only applied their strength to dance, but the Men Dancers also worked the land, building the cabins, dining hall and assorted other units still extant on the Pillow grounds. —
> cultural identities.” He continues, “Cultural familiarities collude with new challenges almost daily, and this is part of my social and aesthetic reality.” Dance reviewer Susan Walker writes that “he is a man with a vision that seems to extend beyond the theatre, to embrace life as it might be if people used art as a means to build communities.”

Affiliations and collaborations ground the continuous artistic imperative through which Krishnan restlessly challenges and reinvents himself. “The real core of my work lies in the ‘give and take’ – aesthetic, personal, social – that defines all of my undertakings.” In this intersection of worlds within worlds, this positioning and these strategies, he says, “continue to be a learning experience for me, indexing the national and global directions in which my work has expanded over the last few years.”

Of course, the idea that “men don’t dance” has moved mightily since Ted Shawn’s time. Today, stories such as Krishnan’s of identity and strength, sharing and inspiration, and thoughtful recollections about lives lived burn brightly, bolsters and represents the future that dance deserves.

Sommaire
Philip Szporer has been immersed in the Canadian dance world for the past thirty years. Currently, he teaches at Concordia University and is a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts. He is the recipient of the Jacqueline Lemieux Prize (2010) awarded by the Canada Council of the Arts, and a Pew Fellowship (National Dance/Media Project) at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 2001, Philip, along with Marlene Millar, co-founded the arts film production company Mouvement Perpétuel. Together they have co-directed and produced many arts documentaries and short dance films to great acclaim.

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