INDIA CURRENTS
YOUR STORIES. YOUR COMMUNITY.

Preeti Vasudevan Dances Stories From Ethnic Folklore To Yo-Yo Ma's Cello

Share This Page:

More

Neha Kirpal | Mar 15, 2021

New York-based award-winning choreographer and performer Preeti Vasudevan is known for creating provocative contemporary works from Indian tradition. Founder and artistic director of the Thresh Performing Arts Collaborative, her mission is to create experimental productions that foster a provocative dialogue with identity, and our relationship with heritage cultures and contemporary life.

Preeti has been recognized by a number of prestigious institutions in the US for her outstanding contribution to dance. Cultural diplomacy is key to her work through education. As an artist alum of the US Department of State, she leads groundbreaking educational initiatives encouraging self-expression and artistic risk through cross-cultural creative exchange among artists and the community.

Preeti partners her educational and creative leadership with world-impacting organizations, such as Silkroad founded by legendary musician Yo-Yo Ma and the National Dance Institute founded by celebrated dancer Jacques D'Amboise. Recently, she started The Red Curtain Project (RCP), a new initiative from Thresh dedicated to sharing stories from around the world. Born during the NYC Covid lockdowns, RCP's innovative digital stories highlight universal tenets, inspiring children to see connection and unity between cultures, while also encouraging them to live by the principles featured.

In this exclusive interview, she talks among other things about her earliest influences, her new operatic musical theater production, and the process of presenting ancient, contemporary, and mythological digital stories through movement, theatrics, music, visual art, and a simple red curtain as a prop.

How did you get interested in Bharatnatyam, and who were your earliest influences?

I was always interested in dancing, any dance would motivate me. My mother always says that she saw me dancing even before walking! I had this high energy that would make me want to move all the time. As we are from the south of India, I think my mother wanted me to learn the culture from where we are. At that time, I was growing up in New Delhi. So, it was all the more reason not to lose the connection to one's roots.
My earliest influences were dances I saw through the cultural exchange programs between India and China and India and the USSR. Living in the capital, we were exposed to some of the most incredible dances, something I had never seen before. The dynamism and costumes all were mesmerizing. I grew up watching some of the Indian greats as well from Kelucharan Mohapatra to Birju Maharaj to the Jhaveri sisters, teachers from the Kalamandalam.

My first proper influence was my own teacher, the late Shri U.S. Krishna Rao who made me see dance for its own beauty and didn't make it over precious. He loved cricket and was a chemistry professor, so he put it all in perspective as something all humans must do – dance! My own gurus, the Dhananjayans, were like my second parents. I owe a lot to them beyond dancing. They taught me how to look at life and where movement can come from. These further opened my eyes to the world of human expression through movement.

How did your dance evolve with the influence of a western and eastern range of dance and theater forms while you were teaching in Japan?

Japan made me grow up! I was used to traveling by then, touring and performing a lot. But these were mostly in India or the west. The Far East was still a mystery to us in the 90s. When I got a cultural scholarship to go there, I was partly nervous and excited – I love adventures! Japanese dance, Nihon Buyo made me experience my own body differently. The kimono, which first confined my body, taught me how to use my spine to liberate myself from the inside; the fans held during dance taught me how to channel the energy of emotions through my fingers onto them as an extension of my body. Thus, when I did perform the

Bharatanatyam, I felt all these changes from the inside and made my dancing more three-dimensional and alive than before.

Prior to Japan, I was a cultural delegate at the India International Dance Festival where the American dance festival came to New Delhi for three weeks to teach Indian dancers modern dance. Almost everything was new for me – falling, lying down, and moving, touching another dancer…between giggles and shocks, I learned to open my eyes to see movement as one of the most amazing energies there is! After these two crucial influences, I felt it seamless to collaborate and continue investigating my own approach to dance. Over the years, I have cross-trained in various forms of movement, theater, and voice to keep searching for the next meaning.

Preeti Vasudevan Choreographing at the Joyce Lab.

What is the idea behind your company Thresh, and tell us about some of the work that you do with it?

Thresh is like the threshold – it is about the present – the now. We come with a past and we go into an unknown future. What's important is how we see and experience the present. It's the liminal zone. That's how Thresh came about in 2005 after I completed my Master's from

the Laban Centre in London. It's an experimental platform to bring international artists together to create a provocative dialogue on identity and our relationship between our contemporary lives and heritage cultures. It's about finding the universal experience and truth from the diverse voices as a collective.

Tell our readers about the Red Curtain Project, your recent initiative of sharing stories from around the world that was born during the NYC Covid lockdowns.

The Red Curtain Project (RCP) was born due to Covid. When all performances shut down, we had to find out what we stood for and what we could do for the larger society. Digital storytelling came out of this. My husband, Bruno Kavanagh, does online learning and therefore, he jumped in to help Thresh develop this amazing online platform. We have created 14 stories to date including one of our highlights with the legendary cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Through RCP, we have also done similar work for a Lebanese organization on stories from the war. Now, we are embarking on a new social impact venture called First Voices where we are working in partnership with the Indigenous people of Montana in the US to create a series on ancestral creation stories. This will lead into school workshops within the reservations to empower the youth with leadership skills through the arts.

Describe the process you use to present ancient, contemporary, and mythological digital stories through movement, theatrics, music, visual art, and a simple red curtain as a prop?

Thresh has a great network of artists globally who share a common mission of sharing a story. For RCP, we work with children's book publishers to select stories based on chosen themes and then license them. We then seek composer and visual artists to work alongside me as I do the choreography. This year, I have been the sole dancer due to distancing and restrictions. But from next year, I will be seeking other dancers who can be a part of this incredible sharing. The Red Curtain is a metaphor – in theater, we reveal everything once we open the curtain and the color red has multiple symbolisms the world over. In my apartment in New York, we have a red curtain. I simply used it, and it became the indicator for our project!

What are you working on next?

As mentioned, we have created our project First Voices. On December 10th, we launched the first performance online. We welcome everyone to come to see this and be part of our new adventure. Apart from this, we are also in residence creating a new operatic musical theater production called L'Orient: Search for the Real Lakme. This is a 21st-century take on the 19th-century French opera, Lakme. It looks at gender and Orientalism, and plays with Bharatanatyam, ballet, opera, and Carnatic music. It hopes to be a really fun production with a lively cast of unusual performers. We have received a residency commission from Works & Process at the Guggenheim Museum, NY.

Neha Kirpal *is a freelance writer and editor based in New Delhi. She is the author of Wanderlust for the Soul and Bombay Memory Box.*