

ROEHAMPTON UNIVERSITY

**SCHOOL OF ARTS
MA DANCE CLUSTER**

**Looking at Dance
DAN030L702**

Choose one dance and analyse it integrating two or more perspectives introduced during the course and reflecting upon the problems and issues that arise as you apply these perspectives to the work.

Words: 5055

**Shalini Bhalla © 2006
Student No: 05149737**

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Introduction

Shobana's current concerns move beyond theatre space, disrupting the perspective and role of the spectator while revealing new insights into and through the dancing body.

Coldman, 2005

Slowly, sinuously, the dancers grow out of the building, flowing movements as if underwater, they twist and turn, shrinking and then growing. The specially mixed electronic soundscape and the growing digital frondescence creating a wintry, electric environment for the movement of dancing bodies.

Foliage Chorus was a site-specific work choreographed by Shobana Jeyasingh for the opening of the new *artsdepot* building in north London in 2004.

The local community of Barnet conceived *artsdepot* in 1996. They wanted to see more professional arts facilities in the area. The site on which *artsdepot* was built had been empty, for over twenty years. In December 2001 the project was officially launched and building works began and the name, *artsdepot*, was unveiled. *artsdepot* finally opened to the public for the first time on an autumn's day in October 2004.

Although there were two pieces made for the evening – both with the same name – it is the first piece, choreographed for the balcony, that is the main subject of this essay. The second piece, made for the foyer, will be briefly mentioned when comparing or contrasting the two pieces.

In the balcony piece, four dancers (Saju Hari, Rathimalar Govindarajoo, Navala Chaudahri and Kamala Devam), filmed on a balcony above the foyer area in the *artsdepot* building, perform Jeyasingh's choreography. The predominant vocabulary used is contemporary, with some distinct phrases from Bharata Natyam movement as well.

First the essay starts with an overview on the choreographer. With her interesting background, this gives a deeper insight into why Jeyasingh choreographs the way she does.

The essay then looks at the piece on the balcony from two perspectives – firstly, the Choreographic Intention of the choreographer, and secondly, the Choreographic Process that was taken. Also, to add another dimension, as a site-specific piece, *Foliage Chorus* is a good starting place to discuss the use of alternative spaces.

The Choreographer

Born in India, Shobana Jeyasingh now lives and works in London and is the Artistic Director of the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company which she founded in 1988. She trained in Bharata Natyam in India and Malaysia and toured for several years as a solo performer.

Parental pressure is the main reason that young children join classical dance classes. Determined to maintain their cultural heritage and to reinforce their identity, both teachers and parents agree that it is important to introduce children to the culture of their homeland, giving them a sense of belonging, inadvertently making Bharata Natyam an icon of Indian

heritage (Chatterjee 2004; Niyogi-Nakra 2003). Many mothers who may not have had the opportunity themselves as children also encourage their daughters to start dancing. David (2005) whose research involved the Tamil community in London, found that Bharata Natyam plays a big part in the cultural activities for young people in the temples, acting as a “perfect carrier of tradition”.

As a child, Jeyasingh was encouraged to go to dance classes by her mother. According to Jeyasingh this was because her mother wanted to learn dance at a time when all middle class women were learning Indian classical dance as a result of a move towards Indian political dependence. Her mother didn't have the opportunity, so she made her daughter go instead. At the same time, Jeyasingh was fascinated by the Indian film industry, and many of the dancers in the films were classical dancers – and this motivated her to continue learning (Watt, 2004a).

In the late 1980s Jeyasingh turned her focus to choreography. She has since produced numerous works for stage, theatre and television.

Roy (1997) identifies three distinct phases in Jeyasingh's choreographing career to date. Her earlier works included *Configurations* (1988), *Correspondences* (1990) and *Palimpsest* (1996). Her initial experiments were with ensemble forms and structures (Roy, 2003). In *Configurations*, her first dancework which was based on the *nritta* aspect, she experimented with group formations, with what was essentially a solo movement vocabulary. Jeyasingh's, dance movements in this stage as a whole, were largely from the *nritta* aspect of Bharata Natyam, and although the choreography was questioning and examining this form in these early stages, it remained closely tied to it (Roy 1997).

Jeyasingh was particularly drawn to Bharata Natyam *nritta*, the pure dance movements, which she suggests “creates meaning through obeying the grammatical rules of dance”. Where some people may find a whole evening of *nritta* unemotional or mechanical, she does not think that this has to be necessarily true. In fact, she feels that “so called ‘abstract’ initiatives of the body speak with an eloquence all of their own and can assist in developing a dance narrative that does not have to come from outside itself” (Jeyasingh, no date). Taking the classical dance language, she began to pick at its structure and experiment with it compositionally. Although she had decided to work with *nritta*, she began to try and extract emotion from it (Anon, 2003). According to Roy (1997), Jeyasingh’s abstract choreography can evoke and suggest many meanings – but rarely specifies them. He suggests that by looking at the form of the movement, it may be possible to look beyond the crude dichotomies of East and West or Indian and modern.

It was in her production of *Making of Maps* that Jeyasingh moved away from the codified, rigidity of Bharata Natyam into a more personal arena. Although Bharata Natyam was still her overriding point of reference, she had now begun to “mould it to her own concerns”. This was the second phase (Roy 1997, 6).

In the third phase, Bharata Natyam becomes less of the feature point, but more of a resource that she could draw from when she needed to – or wanted to. This phase probably started with the piece *Palimpsest* – which won the Time Out Award for Best Choreography. Although Bharata Natyam was used here, several other movement sources were used and these included *chhau*, *kalaripayattu*, and some *abhinaya* (the dramatic, expressive aspect of Bharata Natyam) as well (Roy, 1997). One Company dancer said that the movement began with Bharata Natyam, extending beyond it and

using Indian martial art forms as well as contemporary – “often unnamed” ways of making movement (Bakht, 1997).

...in Jeyasingh’s work, which addresses a broad audience, and not the South Asian community in particular, she has developed from classical tradition, has opened up the vocabulary, developing the movement in space, group work, contact between dancers, concentrating largely on ‘nritta’ – pure dance aspects.

Jordan, 1999, 115

Recent choreography for the company includes *Exit No Exit* (2006), *Flicker* (2005), *Transtep* (2004), *[h]Interland* (2002) and *Surface Tension* (2000). Her work today may have the distinct use of Bharata Natyam hand gestures and footwork, but essentially, she has developed her own movement vocabulary.

At a ResCen seminar (The Motivation of the Artist) Jeyasingh divided her motivation to create work today in to two layers. The first layer is concerned with the short-term outlook. Her interest at the time, ideas that spring up, deadlines thrust upon her – all motivational factors. The second layer is more retrospective. Her main motivation over the years of choreographing have been about “translating the politics of the body in a way that history has made it visible to me”. As a person from a colonised country, with a classical dance vocabulary, Jeyasingh found herself in a very “political situation” and a “language that seemed to be going in the opposite direction”. She said that there was a “tension” in using a language that was “ahistoric” to say something “historic”. Being a British Asian has motivated her to “explain the migrant’s culture, the politics of the migrant body through dance” (Watt, 2004a).

Dance, created by a choreographer, will be the result of the selection, manipulation, combination and structuring of a set of components. The choreographer's interpretation of an idea, a belief or a story, amongst other things, is presented through movement – through dance. This act of interpretation can be influenced by several factors which may place limitations on the final product. The time, the place, the socio-cultural setting, the dancers, the audience – all are factors which influence the making and performing of dance. Materials of dance are not neutral, and so dances set within a social and cultural arena will relate to the beliefs and values predominant at that particular time and place. Basic movement material of the dance will carry meanings or significances which the choreographer must deal with (Hodgens, 1988).

Jeyasingh's work often provokes reactions focussing on cultural issues. Although these may be perfectly valid, they neglect other issues that are key to her artistic vision. All too often, when engaging in questions of migration, diasporas, traditions and so on, Jeyasingh, the Indian woman living in London overshadows Jeyasingh the choreographer (Roy, 1997).

Another issue with Jeyasingh's work is that because she is of Indian origin, many people who first come to see her work may think they are going to see Indian dance. They would be sorely disappointed. Jeyasingh is billed as a British Asian choreographer of contemporary dance. One dancer said that as a company, what they found difficult wasn't the cultural polarities or hierarchies, but the fight against the stereotypes thrust upon them and modes of behaviour expected from them. One main stereotype was that the dancers would be "pretty ethnic dancers performing ritualistic forms of worship through exotic movements that have a deep spiritual meaning" (Bakht, 1997).

Jeyasingh has won many awards including the Arts Council Women in the Arts Project award (1993) in acknowledgement of her valuable contribution to the arts over the past decade. She was awarded an MBE in January 1995 for services to dance.

It is interesting to note that following the award for *Palimpsest* in 1996, Jeyasingh has not won any more awards for her choreography. It is at this same time that Roy (1997) suggested that Jeyasingh had entered her third phase of choreography – moving away from Bharata Natyam vocabulary. Ironically, even today, she is invited to talk at seminars on Indian dance and Bharata Natyam in particular. For many years she was the most prominent artist in the Indian contemporary field in the UK – a powerful source to be reckoned with and well respected in the dance community as a pioneer for British Asian dance.

Site-specific dance

For years now dance has been practised and performed in conditions that have not been ideal. In fact, its survival, let alone growth, shows the strength, passion and determination of the dance community to continue creating dance even when faced with adversity. In the Arts Council of England's 1996 *Policy for Dance* a commitment was made to improve building resources for dance (Willmore, 2002).

So, until now dance has been living in a less than ideal space. But the question then is 'What is an ideal space?' Is it not possible to make dance anywhere? According to the architect of the DanceEast building, John Lyall, dance can be made anywhere "but the quality of dance can either be inspired or hampered by the character of the space" (Willmore, 2002).

Dance has usually been performed within specific venues. In a theatre space it is taken for granted that the performance will take place in a designated area – usually a stage, and the audience will be seated in the auditorium watching the performers. Take dance out of this context, and it becomes an entirely different entity (Harper, 2005).

Some choreographers prefer creating new pieces for non-traditional or alternate spaces – non-proscenium choreography – and whilst this can make the choreography more complicated or very challenging – or both – many dancers and choreographers value these spaces (Armstrong and Morgan, 1984).

Since the mid-1990s, conventional theatre and dance performance spaces seem to have lost their appeal to dance makers. Site-specific performance is a new phenomenon whose rise in the British scene may be connected with the blurring of the boundaries between art genres and how they are traditionally represented. Each time a site-specific piece is performed in a new space, there is a process of rediscovery, trying to bring together performer and audience in situations of contact, challenge and intimacy (Von Held, 2002). So, taking dance outside the traditional theatre space into a public arena – a very current trend – gives dancers the opportunity, and challenges them, to change the normal function of a space (Harper 2005).

Recent examples of taking dance out into the public arena include the festival Urban Moves held in Manchester in the summer of 2005. This festival boasted unusual dance performances which were performed in places as varied as a swimming pool, a car park and a scaffold. The purpose of the festival was to explore the relationship between the moving body and the city's unique architecture and cityscape.

Also in 2005, Rambert Dance Company, were the first dance company to perform on the London's underground tube network. Canary Wharf, Waterloo, even on the tube carriages, the dancers performed ten-minute snippets of choreographer Mark Baldwin's new piece *Constant Speed* (Winship, 2005).

Jeyasingh's experience of space has greatly influenced her choreography. With regards to the conventional theatre, she was acutely aware of the "politics of the theatre space" and felt that as a "diasporic person", a "marginal person", she wanted to challenge the hierarchical acceptance of the powerful centre stage and was more attracted to using the space near the wings – the "marginal space" (Watt 2005). Taking her work out of the theatre space enables her to challenge the perspective of the spectators whilst pushing the dancers, as well as her own choreographic abilities to new limits (Coldman, 2005).

Aside from *Foliage Chorus* other site specific performances she has created have been for The Greenwich Borough Hall (with a live webcast from Bangalore, India), the café at Waterman's Arts and for The City Hall, London.

The stage version of *[h]Interland* was developed out of the site-specific performance at the Greenwich Borough Hall in 2003. There were three dancers – two in the actual space and one webcast live from Bangalore. Jeyasingh felt that this was probably one of the most complicated pieces she had created. She said, "In this space choreography was not just about what one does with bodies. Choreography, light, screens, building – they were all equally important" (Anon. 2003).

Choreographic Intention of *Foliage Chorus*

In an interview with Shobana Jeyasingh about *Foliage Chorus*, writer and journalist Sanjoy Roy identified that there were two unusual aspects about this dance piece. Firstly that it was made specifically for a new building and secondly it was made for a launch event which involved the movement of other people within the building, at the time the piece would be performed (Coldman, 2005).

Architect John Thornberry, had a very interactive space in mind when designing the *artsdepot* foyer area which acts as a central space for the building. He envisaged many people in the building using space for different reasons – animating the spaces, changing them to suit their needs. Neutral, uninterrupted walls are a feature of the building, upon which Thornberry could see different projections, or backdrops to performances (Coldman, 2005).

If architects don't only consider the practical aspects of size and facilities, but contribute to the buildings as artists themselves, this can be extremely exciting. Those who have commissioned and designed spaces where creativity can flourish, suggest that these spaces allow one to look both internally – to harness the creative process – and externally – to connect with an audience (Willmore, 2002).

Lefebvre (1974, 391) suggests that space is not determined by a system already existing within it. Instead, the energy of a group could change the space to suit their own purpose, and hence a “theatricalized or dramatized space” can emerge.

As the *artsdepot* building hadn't been built, the first ideas were generated as a result of looking at plans of the building. From the plans, Jeyasingh envisaged a beautifully constructed theatre set, with the foyer area below and above that a glass balcony with stairs and lifts on either side. Originally the ideas involved using lifts and stairwells making a fluent space, using intermediary spaces and not one set space. However, on closer examination of the plans, Jeyasingh realised that this would not be possible as the audience wouldn't be able to see what the dancers were doing due to restricted visibility (Coldman, 2005).

However, on seeing the building in the summer of 2004, Jeyasingh could see the potential of using a balcony on the second floor for the first piece and the café area for the second piece. According to Jeyasingh, the architectural feature is a very strong starting point for making a piece of work. The unmoveable elements of the building were what she began with. In this case she was working on the balcony, which she felt was a "very bounded space". Features of this balcony included a carpeted floor. A temporary wooden floor had to be built over this as the dancers would be dancing barefoot and would not be able to execute the movements on carpet. The transparent glass panels were a main feature - through which the audience would view the piece. An oak railing across the panels would cut the dancers bodies and Jeyasingh had to bear this in mind when making the movement. And finally, there was a rectangular-shaped, transparent window ledge on the wall at the back of the balcony (Coldman, 2005).

Jeyasingh was also struck by the light in the building, and the large amount of glass that was used in the whole building, which gave it a feeling of "letting the outside in and the inside out". She had a feeling of transparency (in fact, the working title of the piece was Transparency), and a sense that there was no ending to the building – different

perspectives gave you something else to look at (Coldman, 2005). She was very inspired by the building.

Choreographer Susanne Thomas talks of having a “definite relation with an environment, be it found or created” when discussing her site-specific work. She bases her site-specific creations on either having a fascination with a site that she wants to create a piece based at that site, or having a theme that she doesn’t want to put on in a theatre, “mainly for reasons of representation and the audience set-up” (Von Held, 2002).

Choreographic Process of Foliage Chorus

At the Mis-seeing: Vision, Experience and Prejudice in the Creative Process Seminar run by ResCen on 17 November 2004, Jeyasingh, when talking about her choreography, was quick to point out that she never really knows what a piece is going to be about. Of all the movement choices she could make, she starts with ‘signposts’ – possibly five at the beginning of the process. Whilst working on these in the studio, others may emerge. And from then, the process of creation continues. Dancers bring different qualities to the dance too – and depending on how tired they are, the chemistry between them, the dance takes on a different quality. However, there have been times when Jeyasingh hasn’t felt she has known what the piece was about until the end of the touring season. She suggests that the work also takes on a different quality and meaning once leaving the studio and entering the theatre arena (Watt, 2004b).

Hodgens (1988, 77) suggests that “all dances are ‘about’, ‘related to’ or ‘concerned with’ something” and interestingly, Jeyasingh describes how she looks for “a metaphor” in a dance piece. The earlier she gets the metaphor, the easier it is to create the dance. “An

aspect of aesthetic intent” that a dancer will deal with is the idea or metaphor – the motivational source behind the movement (Fraleigh, 1998, 141). For *Foliage Chorus*, Jeyasingh’s initial thoughts were about the concept of transparency as a result of the design of the building. Eventually, her thoughts turned to plant life and the type of foliage that a building like the *artsdepot* would generate - “give birth to”. This notion of foliage is what Jeyasingh worked with through the piece. It determined the “dynamic of the movement”. She constantly had a picture of foliage moving slowly as if underwater. In fact, to her the balcony resembled a goldfish bowl through which the audience could see all the dancers – together – plant like. Hence the name *Foliage Chorus* (Coldman, 2005).

The first thing that Jeyasingh did when she went back to the studio was to make movement phrases, bearing in mind the wall at the back of the balcony and the oak bar across the panels at the front of the balcony. She then put her dancers against a wall and gave them these phrases to work with (Coldman, 2005).

The journey from sequence to phrase is a long one for Jeyasingh. She needs to see the dancers doing a movement again and again for it to settle and enter into their bodies before she can then manipulate it in anyway. By taking something and changing it in a number of places, a new piece is developed. “Suddenly it’s dance, it’s choreography” (Roy, 2002, 2).

Jeyasingh has always been fascinated with changing things. She likes getting the body to take “different routes”. In classical dance the rules of how a dancer moves are to do with shapes and regular pathways. She has an eye for the movements which are not symmetrical, but have a uniqueness or “strangeness” to them (Roy, 2002, 4). She would set the dancers tasks like “no matter what you do with the phrase your head and your hip

must always be in contact with the wall". In this way Jeyasingh was able to see how the wall altered the movement (Coldman, 2005).

As Jeyasingh said in an interview with Hannah Bruce in 2002:

It's just about finding a coherence really, it's like arranging the words to make a sentence, but trying to find the grammar of a sentence, so that actually the whole thing becomes coherent and believable.

Roy, 2002, 1

Eventually Jeyasingh and her dancers felt they could do no more in the studio and had to begin working on-site on the balcony itself. The piece really began to come together and was essentially made on the balcony. In a conventional theatre space, although the extreme boundaries of stage left or right may be of restricted viewing to some members of the audience, up, centre and down stage are in full view. This was not the case with the balcony space. Due to the audience's perspective of the balcony from their vantage point below in the foyer area, the front part was very visible. People further back in the café area could also see the window ledge on the back wall. However, the floor at the back against the wall could only be visible to anyone looking at the balcony from the same or higher height. This meant that when the dancers fell to the floor at the back of the balcony the audience below could not see them. It was as if the floor was sloping towards the back wall. Jeyasingh discovered this during one of her rehearsals and found this to be a very exciting aspect. She used this quite a lot in the piece, making the dancers crawl right against the back wall and then appearing in different parts of the balcony (Coldman, 2005).

Jeyasingh technique of making the dancers fall to floor, roll around, crawl, goes back to her fascination with the floor. As she puts it, "In the area of emotion, the floor seemed to

beckon me in a very passionate manner”. She continues to say that the floor is very important to a Bharata Natyam dancer as eighty per cent of the work is done in a demi-plie position with the hips turned out and the pull of gravity is very significant. However, this relation to the floor is very formal and contained. Jeyasingh wanted to make more use of the floor and so she made her dancers touch it more with other parts of the body by making them roll around on it (Jeyasingh, 1998). This is very apparent in *Foliage Chorus*, with dancers falling on the floor from the oak railing, rolling towards the back – as if going downhill, disappearing and then appearing again.

When Jeyasingh originally started working on the piece, she took on board the very geometric space of the balcony, with its square glass panels, and long rectangle window, and so the movement was also quite geometric. However, the end result was a movement vocabulary that was quite curvy – almost plant shaped – in its execution. The piece doesn’t start with a bang, but instead the dancers creep onto the balcony, their movement slow and contained (Coldman, 2005). This is hugely in contrast with her latest works *Flicker* (2005) and *Exit No Exit* (2006), both of which feature sharp, jagged movements, that are fast becoming her trademark.

In conversation with Christopher Bannerman in 2002, Jeyasingh said that there were periods when she would think nothing was working. For her the composition part of the choreography really came into being in the last week – usually the last three days. She pointed out that she never made endings until the day before the preview, sometimes not even then! (Roy, 2002). This is interesting in *Foliage Chorus*, because the balcony piece sort of fades away with the dancers creeping out – whilst in contrast in the foyer piece the dance comes to a natural halt almost led by the dancers. Endings are the one thing that Jeyasingh grapples with and as Times critic Debra Craine (2005) wrote of *Flicker* “...

suddenly – dance and music are abruptly terminated, leaving us with the unsatisfying feeling that it has been a journey without destination”. Incidentally, her new piece *Exit No Exit* (2006) is about entrances and exits or endings.

In the second piece of *Foliage Chorus*, the positions of the dancers and the audience was reversed – with the dancers performing in the foyer below and the audience watched from the balcony above. Because of the larger space that the dancers had, the dance movement was a lot less contained and there was a strong sense of release, with big movements, jumps and leaps. Where as the movement here seemed more three dimensional, the movement on the balcony was more one dimensional – flatter as it was only from the one perspective (Coldman, 2005).

Jeyasingh has been known to work with many collaborators from varied backgrounds and disciplines. About working with collaborators she says that she finds it an exciting and yet enjoyable experience to have different inputs from various people. Taking on board everything they say, she then pieces it altogether to make a “final script” (Roy, 2002).

Long-tem artistic partner Ursula Bombshell who has worked with Jeyasingh for numerous productions designed the costumes in *Foliage Chorus*. For the balcony piece she designed silvery, shiny costumes in keeping with the cool, electric theme. In contrast, the costumes in the foyer piece were a bold, bright red which gave the large space a sense of colour, and made the dancers stand out, rather than get lost in the space.

The music for the balcony piece is an electronic score, produced by DJ Mukul Patel who produced electronic birds chirping away in the background and used loops to create a soundscape that together with the design and the building created an environment for the

movement. The music ran parallel to the dance - the movement wasn't made to the music and the dancers didn't pick up any cue points from the music (Coldman, 2005). The music for the foyer piece was in keeping with the movement, and more of a Bollywood style, fast paced piece of music.

The digital design for *Foliage Chorus* was by Lars Jessen from Digit a company that specialises in interactive experiences and aims to use technology in new ways. Jessen worked closely with Jeyasingh to create a digital dimension, which closely related to the dance.

They used a system called the Lindenmayer system or L-system for short, which is a mathematical theory of plant growth and development. It was proposed by Aristid Lindenmayer in 1968. Recently there has been some development in a set of related plant modelling software (Ochoa, 1998). This was used to design images that would look like foliage – fronds, leaves, branches, growing very slowly along the walls and from the ceiling (Coldman, 2005). Even before the dancers come on stage, the audience can hear the electronic birds and see the digital branches growing. On two occasions, Jeyasingh gets the group to pose whilst there is a digital effect around them. At other times, the dancers have individual laser streaks coming down to them from the ceiling, and then the fronds growing out in front of them. At one point, whilst the dancers are crawling around and into the window ledge, like a plant creeper grasping the walls and taking hold, the digital design becomes stronger and stronger, almost eclipsing the dancers.

John Thornberry on seeing the performance was particularly struck by the projection on the white walls. He felt that the walls themselves became part of the performance with the

movement of the projections working together with movement of the dance (Coldman, 2005).

Conclusion

This essay has looked at the site-specific work *Foliage Chorus* choreographed by British Asian choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh. The two perspectives that have been explored in relation to this piece have been her Choreographic Intention and the Choreographic Process whilst creating the piece. The reason the piece was chosen was that much of the work Jeyasingh does is for the conventional theatre, and only occasionally does she do site-specific work. Her thoughts behind the process were fascinating, and having had to begin the process of creation without even seeing the piece made it even more challenging and intriguing.

A limitation of choosing this piece to analyse it is that not much has been written about *Foliage Chorus*, and so finding any information on it was nearly impossible.

Foliage Chorus was recently adapted for the White Christmas production at The Place in December 2005. Taking what was a site-specific work into a theatre space brought with it many challenges, and although the piece was well received, it had lost some of its charm and *raison d'être* – but then that is a whole other discussion.

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