



“SUR LA GRÈVE EN FEU OU DORT LE
FLOT BLEU . . . DANSEZ JUSQU’AU SOIR.”

“ON THE BURNING SAND, WHERE
THE BLUE SEA SLEEPS . . . DANCE
UNTIL EVENING.”

ANURADHA NAIMPALLY

Anuradha Naimpally is considered to be one of Austin’s artistic icons. An acclaimed Bharata Natyam dance choreographer, soloist, collaborator and educator, she is originally from Canada, but has been Artistic Director of Austin Dance India since she founded the organization in 1989. She connects the ancient art of India to modern audiences of all ages wherever she can reach them best, from concert halls to school cafeterias, libraries to universities. She has received prestigious awards in Canada and India and has been named Best Dancer by the Austin Area Critics’ Circle numerous times. and her social practice projects aim to inspire girls’ empowerment and social change.

Annie Burrige talked to Anuradha about her dance career, and how important collaborations are to her artistic life.

Annie: Anu, we’re very excited to be collaborating with you and Austin Dance India on *The Pearl Fishers*. When did you know that dancing was to be your life?

Anuradha: I grew up in Edmonton in the 1960s for a few years, and I was taken to an event where a young woman danced with the lamps in her hands. I was fascinated, so my mom asked her to give me my first little dance lessons. That was when I was five years old, and I never looked back after that.

Throughout my childhood, I participated in multicultural festivals across Canada, performing in groups as well as solo. At that time I was dancing for fun as my goal then was to become a physician. However, when I was in my teens, as I watched a teacher of mine dance, the drum that was played as accompaniment hit me very deeply, resonating in my soul. That sound felt familiar like home, and that was Bharata Natyam.

Annie: You didn’t just study dance for performance though. You also studied it in theological and spiritual terms too.

Anuradha: For me, I can’t separate dance and spirituality. It’s all part of performing and being a practitioner of this art form. The traditional arts in India, whether it’s sculpture, fine art, or any kind of performing art, are always thought of as a Sadhana, or a path towards spiritual growth and enlightenment. I was very fortunate, growing up in my home with the experiences my parents gave me, and also being able to go to India for four years after university to study with my gurus, and absorb the way they teach and their whole attitude. It all happened organically for me.

Annie: And how, as a Canadian born of Indian parents, did you end up in Texas?

Anuradha: Love and marriage! My husband, Sadu, is from Mumbai, and we met when I was studying there. He came to UT Austin to do a masters degree and then when he got his first job here, I moved to join him. That was 34 years ago!

Annie: You have become such a cultural icon in this city since then, but was there much South Indian Dance here when you arrived?

Anuradha: There were two people that really paved the way for me, Gina Lalli and Vinitha Subramanian. Everybody in the Austin arts world knew Gina because she brought Indian dance to Austin, as a performer and a teacher. And of course, Vinitha still has a wonderful school and community here. But when I came, there was still a need for more teachers, so I started with a few students in my garage in Cedar Park. I didn’t set out to have a big school, but I realized that teaching was a really important way to create community which would help my artistic goals of performance and creativity, and also collaboration.

Annie: Why has collaboration always been so important to you?

Anuradha: Collaboration is vital, at least for me as an artist. It helps me grow and challenges me. Every collaboration I’ve done has brought a different perspective to my work, and sharing somebody else’s process often allows you to reach much more depth in your own. As an artist, one of my missions has been to

cross-pollinate audiences, to bring two artists' audiences together. Very often, my audience will see my collaborator's art for the first time and then they start to follow the other artist too. That's a wonderful, wonderful thing to happen, isn't it?

Annie: I agree. At Austin Opera too, collaboration is both a strategy and a strongly held value for us. The more people we work with, the more perspectives we're considering, then the stronger and more meaningful the art we create will be, and hopefully it will be more engaging to more people. Your expertise is offering such an incredible opportunity to our audiences. But even though you have such expertise in Bharata Natyam, I know you're also working with an expert in Sri Lankan dance, which differs stylistically.

Anuradha: That's right. There are so many specific styles in "South Asian dance," and I'm not an expert in Sri Lankan dance. Because I want to be truly authentic, I'm studying online with a wonderful teacher in Sri Lanka, Shamitha Hettige, who is a specialist in Kandyan dance—Kandy being a city in Sri Lanka. Even in the small island of Sri Lanka, there are at least five specific styles of dance and Kandyan is just one of them.

And wow! The online classes I've been doing with Shamitha have used a whole different set of muscles in my body, and this new style is really challenging my brain to switch movement languages. Without this collaboration, I never would have experienced it before. He's giving me the Sri Lankan dance vocabulary so that I can then respond to the different needs of the production.

Annie: How will you combine your own long standing knowledge of Bharata Natyam with your new Sri Lankan dance "vocabulary," as a dancer and when choreographing the other dancers. And will the singers also be learning from you?

Anuradha: The main dancing will be with three soloists, who include myself, my daughter, Purna, and my student, Soumya. We also have four ladies who will be the village dancers and five children who are the Priestess's Acolytes. I will choreograph for these three groups, and also look for some gestures or simple movements for the singers to do, particularly for Madison Leonard who plays Leila, the Priestess. Certainly, giving her some beautiful gestures will add a lot to the piece, and we'll find where to place those as we progress through rehearsals.

We will present dances that combine aspects of Indian Bharata Natyam with Sri Lankan Kandyan body language. We will be using our gestural vocabulary of Bharata Natyam to support the narrative aspect of the three main protagonists and combining it with the distinctive positions and movements of the Kandyan dance style. I think it'll be an interesting and very beautiful mix.

Annie: This sort of artistic and cultural cross-pollination allows us to approach a French opera written in 1863 with more modern sensitivities. Although it feels more like a fairytale place, it is set in Sri Lanka, so we're so pleased that you are helping us develop elements representative of that culture with respectful authenticity.

Anuradha: I very much appreciate that Austin Opera has extended this opportunity for me to help create a culturally authentic and integrated production. So often we see our cultures receive token



representation, see them appropriated, or even misrepresented. So I deeply appreciate that you are making such an effort to do it this way.

Of course, there will be challenges. After all, this is not the sort of music that we usually dance to. But I have extensive experience with this. I'm a part of a group called 'Cowboys and Indians', where I dance to American folk music, I've worked with Middle Eastern rhythms, and with the tap dancers of Tapestry Dance Company. Whatever genre of music it is, there's going to be some rhythmic element, and with the training I had, I know I can decipher any rhythm.

We'll also use lyrics as an anchor for the narration, and even the emotions behind the way the music is expressed melodically. All of those elements—rhythm, lyrics, and emotion—are universal, even if they're expressed differently. So while it will be challenging, once I find those anchors, I know that together we will all create something wonderful.

Find out more about Anuradha Naimpally and Austin Dance India at www.austindanceindia.com.

What should we look out for?

Anuradha suggests...

... the white costumes worn by the young dancers, which will be the sort of traditional Sri Lankan outfits always worn for special occasions by young girls.

... the wide and turned-out stance with accompanying squarish arm position which is specific to Kandyan dance.

... the hand symbols and gestures used by the soloists to express narratives and provide commentary for the main characters, which are specific to Bharata Natyam style of dance from India.