

YATRA

From Kathakali pandal to contemporary stage

Annette Leday



1978 Annette Leday in Kerala ©Keli

1978. A dry track, palm trees on the horizon, and an invisible scorching sun in this hot part of Kerala. A black Ambassador taxi: heavy, noisy, comfort in discomfort. A few bumpy kilometers bordered by clusters of yellow flowers braving the January drought. Destination: Ghandi Seva Sadanam, a small traditional Kathakali institution hidden in the depths of Kerala.

In the kalari there is revelation through movement. Sure, there will be an “after”, a different way of writing these bodies; but first I must analyze, observe, experience, and feel everything in the bones.

I will go around too, collecting the flavours of life in the land of coconuts.

Years pass. Focused, painful, beautiful with the harmonies of another time. Larger, fuller, slower. The bodies at work, the explosion of joy in difficulty. Hours every day, under the keen eye of Keezhpadam Kumaran Nair Ashan. Performances in temple courtyards, on simple stages covered with rough tarpaulins under coconut-leaf canopies in newly-harvested, prickly rice fields.



Keezhpadam Kumaran Nair©Keli

More years pass. It has been ten years! Now comes the “after”, the time to innovate.

1988. Kathakali - King-Lear.



Kathakali-King Lear©Keli

“Start with the best!”, says my husband David McRuvie, “Adapt Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to Kathakali!”. I first approach my second Kathakali master, Padmanabhan Nair Ashan, the head of Kalamandalam, to seek approval for the project. While reaching Ashan’s house I am nervous. Will he like the project? Will he allow the students of the institution to participate in the adventure? Sitting over a cup of tea, with David’s help I begin to tell the story of Lear in my imperfect Malayalam. Ashan listens carefully. Gradually the atmosphere thickens with growing interest. Questions throng. By the last drop of the many cups of tea, Padmanabhan Ashan will play King Lear!

The project acquires an unhopd-for dimension. Soon everyone wants to be included in the project; quietly, almost without seeming, the biggest names in Kathakali are candidates. We will have a troupe of all the talents. Unique. The adapted text soon circulates in the offices of Kalamandalam and a Malayalam translation is on its way, but it will be fourteen long months of work before the production is ready.



KM Gopi, KM Padmanabhan Nair, Appukutty Poduval, Krishnankutty Poduval, K. Kumaran Nair, Madambit: discussions on music for Kathakali King Lear © Keli

Kathakali-King Lear will tour the world from 1989 to 1999.

1991. *La Sensitive*.



La Sensitive ©Claude Giger

Time to be more adventurous. How can I maintain the link with Kathakali while exploring other movement and other subjects? Inspiration comes from a reading of Shelley's poem, *The Sensitive Plant* (composed 1820; French translation: *La Sensitive*), which describes a garden tended by a mysterious lady who gives life and strength to the flowers and particularly to the sensitive plant, *mimosa pudica*, a discreet and shy flower that opens and retracts to the touch. Suddenly, without explanation, the lady dies, provoking the destruction of the garden. This strange, haunting poem reminded me of a ritual I

had seen many times in Kerala: the *kalam ezhuttu*. An artist spends many hours creating extraordinary figures on the ground with various coloured powders. Once the beautiful design is accomplished, it is ritually destroyed by the priests or devotees.

With these two sources in mind I began a creative journey with five of the younger Kathakali dancers who had participated in the *Kathakali-King Lear*. My formal aim was to build on elements from the Kathakali and Kalarippayat techniques. We organized classes of Kalarippayat for the dancers who were happy to discover the cousinage between their style and the martial art techniques. We also attended a number of classes by the Krishna Attam artists at Guruvayur. We conducted several months of research workshops and rehearsals from 1989 to 1991. For the dancers all was new. The body vocabulary in Kathakali is set and is learnt over many years of training, the only scope for improvisation lies in hand gestures and facial expressions; I wanted to stress the body movements. Movement in space was also to be re-thought. Space in Kathakali is generally restricted to the square areas of temporary stages outside temples, and the performance is mostly frontal. I wanted to open the space, explore it in all its directions, go to any corner and use all possibilities.

For four hours leading up to a performance of *La Sensitive*, a Kalam artist creates a design on the stage with coloured rice powders. During the performance the garden is recreated by the dancers and finally destroyed in a spectacular finale.

On the analogy of the transition from European classical ballet to European modern dance, I was seeking a transition from classical Kathakali to a Kathakali-based Keralan contemporary dance.

1994-1995. *Trans-Malabar*.



Trans-Malabar©Hugo Glendinning

This was a time when I could no longer ignore the fact that India was not all beauty, spirituality and tolerance. The newspapers were reporting cases of dowry-deaths and bride-burning in many parts of India. I wanted to explore social and particularly gender tensions in a dance piece. After much discussion with the team as to the relevance of such a project, we started exploring the possibilities. For a distinctive movement style I thought of the powerful folk art of Theyyam. We invited a Theyyam artist to instruct us in some of the specific movements, and we went to the region of Kannur to see Theyyam performances in their traditional ritual context. This trip became a moment of revelation when I learnt that Theyyams were sometimes associated with acts of violence against women in real life! Theyyam was not only an extraordinary art-form, it was also a tool for the Dalit communities to protest against unfair infringements of upper castes and power authorities. It was said that men killed or women raped or abused by upper castes became gods and goddesses embodied by the Theyyam performers. Theyyams are beautiful and intricate forms of all sizes, shapes and power. They seem to come to us unchanged from the depths of ancient times. But what struck me in those performances was the interesting aesthetic clash between their archaic appearance and the surroundings covered with the newly fashionable “running-lights” decorations all over the temple façades and festival grounds.

I drew from all these elements to construct my choreography which I wanted to be a voyage from tradition to modernity. It was structured as an ordinary Dalit village day, going from early morning intimacy to night performance of the ritual. In the middle, the aggression of a woman was evoked. One of the villagers was then dressed and made up in the form of a Theyyam on stage by the women and empowered to revenge her.



Trans-Malabar©Hugo Glendinning

1996-1997. *Cinderella Otherwise*.

Work on *Trans-Malabar* had been quite taxing both for me and the dancers and I thought we needed to explore another, lighter register. Here again David came up with a simple but

brilliant idea: adapt the story of *Cinderella*, a universal story which many scholars think originated in India; a story with subterranean links to our starting point in *King Lear*! In terms of choreography, I needed a new challenge. I decided to include two French dancers, the two Hélènes, who had never been in contact with Indian techniques. We embarked on a dialogue between two very different domains of dance and it was exhilarating! Unnikrishnan and Manoj Kumar used the highly comical elements of cross-dressing Kathakali to play the two wicked sisters. Hélène Courvoisier became their horrid mother. Cinderella was performed by Hélène Maillou and Krishnadas took the shape of a “Manipuri” fairy god-mother. The Prince was performed by the dignified and classical Kathakali Manikandan.



Cinderella Otherwise ©Keli

It was great fun and we all thoroughly enjoyed the many performances given in France and all over India with the Alliances Françaises network.

1998.

As our different productions continued touring here and there, I organized a series of workshops in different cities in India with Hélène Courvoisier. We went to Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore and Ahmedabad, conducting laboratories on creativity in Indian dance techniques. It was a very interesting process and I particularly remember the quality of involvement of the group of students at the Kadamb institution directed by Kumudhini Lakya in Ahmedabad. One of the most striking features for the students was the idea of breaking the notion of symmetry in space and movement design.

2000. *The Tempest*.



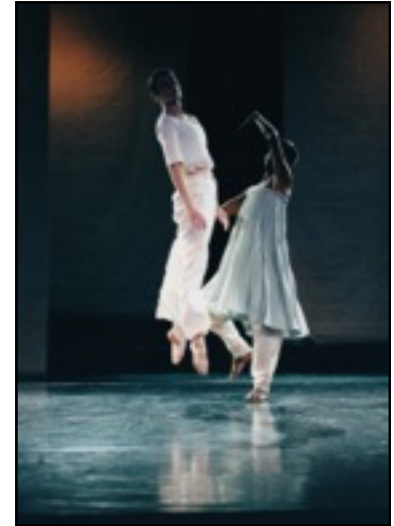
The Tempest ©Marianne Menke

This was a complex collaborative project with a German theatre company based in Bremen which specializes in Shakespearean productions. The cast was distributed between the German actors who enacted the text in German and five Indian dancers who played Ariel and the spirits of Prospero’s island. The choreography, the sophisticated dance lighting and the work of a Kalam artist, gave a unique atmosphere for this great play. The production was

performed in Germany many times and toured all over India thanks to the Max Muller Bhavan. It was a fantastic human and artistic encounter between performers from very different backgrounds who forged a long-lasting friendship.

2001-2004. *The Stuff of Dreams.*

Work on *The Tempest* had opened many new avenues for investigation, and I decided to take time with my dancers to further explore some of the issues arising from Shakespeare's text. I was particularly interested in the problems of encounter between different worlds, the question of power games between genders, and the notion of illusion that we had already approached in *La Sensitive* and that is so present in Indian philosophy. I included the two French dancers in the project and we embarked on a thorough laboratory approach of improvisation. We conducted research workshops in Bremen, Germany, in Alwaye and Trichur, India, in Paris, France and wherever we had the chance to get a proper place to work. It was a long and deeply emotional process where we explored the different atmospheres inspired by *The Tempest*. Through this piece, the creativity of the Indian dancers blossomed and there were memorable improvisations that became powerful bases for the choreographic design.



The Stuff of Dreams ©Marianne

2005. *BigBang.org.*



BigBang.org ©Bernard François

Rig Veda Book 10 Hymn 129

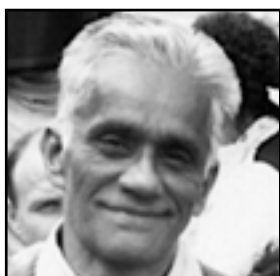
There was neither non-existence nor existence then.
There was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is
beyond.
What stirred?
Where?
In whose protection?
Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

(Translation by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty)

Having explored creation and destruction in *La Sensitive*, and the notion of illusion in *The Stuff of Dreams* and, in humorous mode, in *Cinderella*, I thought I should continue investigating - at my humble level - the domain of metaphysics through the question of the origins of the universe and life! I had always been inspired by texts and my new subject would lead me to study many sources from esoteric mythological views of creation to more scientific discoveries of the present time. With humour and a necessary distance, *BigBang.org* would try to interrogate that “*eternal silence of the infinite spaces*” that so frightened Blaise Pascal. In terms of dance vocabulary the piece went a step further in understanding between dancers. We particularly explored the notion of dance contact that led to an enhanced trust between them.

From 2006 to 2010.

A period of research and questioning for myself. Back to theatre acting in France. Travel to Japan to study the art of Kyogen. Worked on *A.Ware* a duo piece with a Japanese dancer. Choreographed *Si-lent Solo* for me. Realized the film *I Have Fallen In Love With Somebody Else* in a Kerala temple with three of my regular dancers.



Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair ©Keli

I also visited my two Ashans in their homes a few days before each passed away. Both Shri Keezhpadam Kumaran Nair and Shri Padmanabhan Nair had played the King to my Cordelia in *Kathakali-King Lear* and I felt an almost filial relation to them. The confidence they often expressed in me and my work has always filled me with pride, determination and energy.

From 2010 onwards.

I had so far been particularly interested in highly stylized, classical art forms of traditional India. I now decided to embark on a survey of contemporary theatre in India. It was fascinating to explore this lively area which was more closely related to the present realities of the country. As part of a project called *India Scene* I began a process of selection and translation of contemporary Indian playwrights. So far seven plays have been translated into French. A first *India Scene* event took place in Paris in April 2015 where three of the translated plays were read in public. A second edition of *India Scene* is planned at the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris in November 2016 as part of the *Namaste France* festival. Two of the translated plays will be published in January 2016 in a special issue of the *Théâtre/Public* journal dedicated to Indian contemporary theatre.

2015. Mithuna.

As the years passed and my dancers continued flourishing careers, they yet pressed me often to start a new work. I thought about it for sometime. They all had families now, children, grey hair. They all had acquired an assured stage-presence that comes only with age and experience. Some of them had been with me from the very beginning of my choreographic explorations in 1988. They had traveled with me extensively over the years and we all felt a deep bond of love and trust. I wanted a new piece that would somehow pay tribute to the maturity of the dancers and to our long-lasting artistic and creative friendship.



Many years before, I had attended a conference by a famous French scholar on the sanskrit notion of Mithuna. In my understanding, Mithuna is the conjunction of diversities, the jolting confrontation and contagion of differences, their fertile and creative seeding. I had found the concept very beautiful and I now felt it could apply to the work we had produced over the years. Mithuna also means forming a pair, and that inspired me to revisit many of the duets in our repertoire as a basis for this new search. I also wanted to work with the special talents of each performer not only as a dancer but also as a person. It would be a pairing of man and woman, a pairing of techniques and cultures, a pairing of youth and age, and a pairing of

fictional and real personalities. The result was premiered in January 2015 in Delhi at the IGNITE! contemporary dance festival. It was then performed in Paris at the Théâtre du Soleil. I had feared that the idea of the company reflecting upon itself might not greatly interest an audience, and yet the themes brought out something very special from the performers and something no less special from the audiences.

The dancers of the company.

It is not possible to name all the dancers who have worked with the company during its almost thirty-year history, but I may mention some of them: Kalamandalam Unnikrishnan Nair, Sadanam Manikandan, Sadanam Krishnadas and H  l  ne Courvoisier participated in almost all productions. Other regular participants were Sadanam Bhassi, Kalmandalam Manoj Kumar, Hari Das Kurup and H  l  ne Maillou. The chenda percussion of Kalamandalam Unnikrishnan has also been a constant feature of performances. All these artists were professionally trained in prestigious institutions: Kerala Kalamandalam and Gandhi Seva Sadanam for the Kathakali performers; the Dance School of Geneva and the CNDC in Angers for the French contemporary dancers. All continue performing in their respective countries in different groups in addition to their involvement with the company. Mention may also be made of Killimangalam Kunju Vasudevan who has been a facilitator for many human and logistical aspects of productions and has often accompanied us on tour.

Today.

I have often dreamt of having a permanent location for the company. But where could it be? I was very insistent that the Indian performers maintain their engagement in the classical Kathakali field in Kerala. Being in France would mean a break from their roots and I had seen too many sad and destructive results of such a break to even contemplate the possibility. On the other hand it had become crucial for me that the creative dialogue include French contemporary dancers. There was thus only one possibility: nomadism. Our creative laboratory-sessions were held either in remote Kerala or in Europe according

to our partnerships and funding. We were neither here nor there, which made it difficult to impose an image anywhere, but left us with a total freedom of creation. Critically, the company has worked with more or less the same group of dancers from the very beginning. This has allowed a common progression in the projects and a deep understanding between us. Even though we have never had either a regular place or regular funding, we have managed to produce some dozen major choreographic pieces together.

I have sometimes been told - usually as a compliment! - that my work is ahead of its time. In a way this has been an exciting pioneer position, but it has meant also a lack of public stimulation and feedback and regular marginalization as a curiosity. When I started my creative journey in the late 1980s, India was still very much entrenched in its diverse classical dance forms, innovative projects were scarce and limited to major urban centres such as Delhi and Chennai, and there was often strong opposition to novelty from powerful conservative forces. Today, happily, the situation in India has opened radically and there is a whole emerging field of choreographic innovation. It was a great joy for us when the Delhi IGNITE! contemporary dance festival committee selected *Mithuna* for its 2015 programming. It was exhilarating to be part of the young dance community of India and we were all very moved to premiere the piece on the Meghdoot open air stage on a chilly January evening as the sunlight vanished at the end of the day. Our journey is not over and we will continue our creative encounters and dialogue in a world that desperately needs creativity, poetry and love.



KM Unnikrishnan Nair, Annette Leday, Hélène Courvoisier, Sadanam Manikandan ©Keli

Director and choreographer Annette Leday has developed a unique approach to inter-cultural contemporary creation. After training as an actress in France she went to India in 1978, and passed a year in Madras studying Bharata Natyam with the Dhananjayans and Kathakali at Kalakshetra with Djanardhanan Sir. She then spent several years in Kerala studying Kathakali at the Sadanam and Kalamandalam institutions, participating in performances of the two troupes in India as well as abroad. A graduate from the Institut des Langues Orientales in Paris, she speaks fluent Malayalam. Since 1988 she has directed and choreographed performances for both Indian and Western dancers, actors, musicians and plasticians.

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