

The best of two worlds



Photo Hugo Glendenning

Ismene Brown meets Shobana Jeyasingh, whose unique choreography fuses ancient Indian traditions with modern dance

SHOBANA Jeyasingh flexes a slender brown hand backwards into a saucer shape, and then bends down the tip, just the tip, of the ring finger. It's so weird that I squeak with protest. How does she do that? The secret, says Jeyasingh, is in eating habits.

The foundation of that hand virtuosity which one identifies instantly with Indian dancing, is the absence of a well-stocked cutlery drawer in Indian households. Eating with the fingers, mixing food with hands, even pleating the folds of a sari - tasks that Indian girls do from their infancy - develop an articulacy of hand that Europeans, with their mitts clamped round knives and forks, can only marvel at.

Jeyasingh, now 38, is one of Britain's outstanding contemporary choreographers, but all too many think that because she is Indian, because she uses the classical South Indian dance form, Bharatha Natyam, her company must be some kind of ethnic folk group.

In fact her rigorous yet exciting choreography - which can be seen at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London on Friday and Saturday - gets it in the neck from both sides. The idea of contemporary Indian work, she says, seems very hard for both Indian traditionalists and British progressives to accept.

"I think to be a woman and brown is probably an invitation to be misunderstood on a cosmic level. People here don't realise that countries like India have a classical culture and a contemporary culture. They assume that because you are Indian you are doing folk dance. And they often mistake contemporariness for Westernness."

Bharatha Natyam is India's equivalent of classical ballet, with just as rigorous a set of rules and terminology, but more ancient. Like ballet it uses 180-degree hip turnout (unlike Kathak, the other famous Indian dance form). The angular, faceted shapes, the frog's-leg knee bends, the flashing eyes, above all those kaleidoscopically expressive hands, can be seen carved on 11th-century temple sculptures.

It declined badly under the British Raj, and had to be saved with, as Jeyasingh says, "a lot of effort and a lot of love". She is sensitive to the complaints of Indian conservatives that she has jettisoned the dance's main element, its storytelling, its emotions and mythologies, and wrenched its dance element into a cool, abstract place that they can't understand. But,

she argues cheerfully, “there’s a time in history to conserve, and a time to have confidence and develop.”

IN some ways, she sees India as undergoing what Britain experienced 60 years ago, when modern dance ideas began to invade classical ballet. She quit an eight-year traditional career as a Bharatha Natyam soloist and started her company in 1988 because “well, it’s like in ballet - I got tired of being a swan, a patient maiden. I’m a very impatient maiden.”

Jeyasingh’s modernism lies in upending the solo tradition and using the marvellous body vocabulary in groups, fierce, casual, informal (her 1995 piece, *Raid*, is inspired by an Indian street game). She also makes great use of European composers and sound worlds (her new piece opening on Friday, *Lintu ja Tuuli* - “The Bird and the Wind” - is set to a cycle of Finnish and Indian songs).

She is isolated in her field. For one thing, neither in India nor here is there a professional training system to produce dancers able to meet her rigorous technical standards. In India, dancing is widely regarded as a children’s hobby, not a profession. Hence several of her dancers fly in from Madras, Bangalore and Toronto to work with her.

Her other millstone is being regarded as an upholder of Asian culture. She suspects that for a while the Arts Council funded her on that account. But it’s ironic, given her rather iconoclastic position.

“I’m only interested in expressing what comes naturally to me, and that has nothing to do with East and West,” she says. “I’m Shobana Jeyasingh, who lives in North London, and whose personal country has many different landscapes in which I feel at home. I’m a choreographer who was trained in a classical language, with all its attendant disadvantages and advantages, and I’m happy that I had this little prison for a while in my life. But it’s interesting breaking out.”