

Dialogues within and without: Journey of two sisters learning and performing Indian dance in Singapore and beyond

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This project dialogue is a continuation of many that spur the Indian (South Asian) diaspora in seeking and acknowledging identity through dance. Twin sisters Shubhra and Soumya, born and raised in Singapore to Indian parents, began their journey of learning dance at the age of four, and have pursued their interest by diligently learning and practicing Indian classical dance (Bharata Natyam) in Singapore. Now 14-years old, the twins have been learning dance outside of India, dealing with demands of the diaspora culture in Singapore, and performing in both Singapore and India. As their teacher, I have, over several months, conducted interviews with them in which interesting anecdotes about their journey of learning and performing have emerged. Knowing more about their experiences has had an influence on the way in which I approach my teaching.

When questioned early on about their experiences, the twins talked mostly of memorizing and memory games as the highlight of their learning process; in the early learning stages, memory games reflect what the teacher has taught. When talking to other dance teachers of Bharata Natyam in Singapore, I found that they often complained about their students' lack of facial expressions or acting ability (both integral to Indian dance) likely due to the fact that students are unable to focus on their facial expressions while memorizing and reflecting on what the teacher has taught them. A special feature of Bharata Natyam is that even though the students are taught by the same teacher, each student develops an individual interpretation of what is taught, which is seen after years of training and performing.

Soumya expressed her feelings of alienation, saying, "Sometimes when we get opportunities to perform at school, I feel really nervous and a little embarrassed, to be honest, because I know that some students will get bored watching us perform." In spite of Singapore having one of the most conducive environments for the dance style outside of India, the lack of serious interest by the twins' peers does affect the students. At the same time, the twins acknowledge the connection that they can establish with the cultural heritage of India via the cultural experience of dance. The process of learning dance together has led to minimal but obvious sibling rivalry among the twins, and eventually after years of teaching them to dance in sync, I took a different stance: I taught them a piece that showed the natural enmity between a snake and a peacock. The twins enjoyed performing this item, as it gave them an outlet to express their feelings and also to grow individually in the art form. They performed this piece in Singapore and India and received positive comments, which gave them the experience of presenting before diverse audiences.

Keywords: diaspora, transmission of culture, identity, performing spaces, Indian classical dance

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All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1