

# Interview in Mingpao

Bharatanatyam expert, Oxana: from Kazakhstan to Hong Kong, reviving a lost Indian dance

The photographer cannot hide in the studio of mirrors. So he turns the brightest light on the dancer, lowers the exposure in his camera, and everything around becomes dark, including himself. The entire studio falls into darkness, only one person is dancing alone, and she is like the light of the infinite universe.

There is also a universe in the eye of the dancer. In the mythology of Hinduism, Nataraja is one of Shiva's forms. The small drum in his right-hand symbolises the heartbeat of the universe, the fire in his left hand turns everything into ashes. Both hands working together in a beautiful dance, everything in the universe follows the cycle of change, constantly being created and being destroyed.

Cosmic Dance is the name of Oxana Banskikova's dance group. She teaches one of the eight Indian classical dance forms in a Jordan dance studio: Bha is emotion, Ra is melody, Ta is rhythm, Naytam is dance, and all four elements combine into one in Bharatanatyam. The first part of the dance is Nritta - technical movement without religious meaning - the purpose of which is to warm up the body. The upper body movement increases, and the feet pound the floor with force, ta ta ta ta! All the sounds focus your concentration on the dancer, her beautiful nose below her bindi, two diamond-like blue eyes either side, the white skin under the sari. Oxana is not Indian, she is a Russian woman who comes from Kazakhstan, but she has dived deep into the world of Bharatanatyam.

One costume, one performer, many roles

Her expression changes suddenly. "The second part of the dance is Natya, and for this we need to change our facial expression, let go of our emotions. Because the dance is telling a story; it is not only performing, but also feeling, and connecting, with the audience so they also feel it." Oxana tells us about a difference between western theatre and Indian art. In Indian classical dance, solo performance is quite usual - the dancer tells the whole story alone, and plays every character in the story. The dancer is both Romeo and Juliet; the dancer is Shiva, and also Parvati. All the love, hate, joy, anger, sadness and happiness in the story are portrayed by the solo dancer. "We don't change costume - we dance for an hour, moving from one character to another. Everything depends on expression, posture, and movement of the hands to tell the story."

After the performance of Nritta and Natya, we come to the third part - Nritya.

The dance of god enters the secular realm

"Bharatanatyam originally belongs in the temple, and most of its stories are about mythology. Girls around 12-13 years old would devote themselves to the temple, and become to some extent a 'wife of God'. They would not interact with other people, but spend their whole life dancing in the temple. The oldest records go way back to AD100, in Southern India. But the devotion didn't last, the temple doesn't have the same glory as before, and the dancers lost their financial support. They had to go forth from the temples, maybe go to the palace and become a dancer for a Maharaja. Thus secular elements came into the sacred dance, the halo fades, it turns into lower-class entertainment. People begin to lose respect for it. Ultimately, parents stop sending their children to learn dance."

"The problem is the time, the system, instead of the dance itself. The posture of bent knees in a squatting position is a tradition of Southern Indian dance. It imitates the posture of the Gods on the stone carvings in the temples, like for example at Meenakshi. In this legend, the king who ruled Pandya had no son to continue the dynasty, he asked God for help. Then his wife gave birth

to a girl who with three breasts. This girl grew up to be the ruler and won many wars, and she became a warrior goddess that her people looked up too. Women in mythology were confident and had attitude, but in reality, the Bharatanatyam dancer became an entertainment, paid for by wealthy people. When India was under British colonization, the British government even banned all Bharatanatyam performances in public, and now the dance is almost extinct.”

Reviving an almost extinct dance, by imitating the temple art

In the 1930s, a dancer, Rukmini Devi, broke the taboo: "She was brave, especially as she was coming from an upper caste family - that takes a lot of bravery." At that time, Chennai, a southern city in India, was still under the rule of Madras. People carried stones to the performance venue and prepared to throw them at the dancer when they heard someone was daring to perform the forbidden dance in public. But they were captured by her dance, and Bharatanatyam began to become famous again.

Rukmini Devi then established a dance college called Kalakshetra, and began her journey of reviving the classical dance. Many generations of artists had preserved the paintings and stone statues from ancient temples and that allowed people to recreate all the forms of Shiva's Cosmic dance. With the national revival movement forming after India's independence, the long-lost Bharatanatyam is reappearing. All the dance techniques Oxana has mastered, were learned from Kalakshetra.

Learning dance, you have to learn to be an Indian first

After all the reference information about Bharatanatyam, I realized Oxana's knowledge about Indian culture is way more than most Indians. Without all the cultural meaning of gods, Bharatanatyam is just dance moves. That is why before learning the dance, Oxana had to start learning from the basics: the language, culture, and religion of southern Indian. Learning for five years often felt like a reincarnation, a rebirth as an Indian: "Not everything is as easy as I now imagine. At first, they treated me as a foreigner, and said if I had to learn there, I had to live like an Indian, and let go of everything I used to believe." Take off the T-shirt and jeans, wear the colourful sari, and you have to be as humble as the locals, respect people according to ages. All students have to bow down deep on the floor to their guru and touch the guru's feet after class. This felt difficult for Oxana on her first day: " I kept going back to the end of the queue so many times"

And she bowed in the end. "That was my breakthrough. Because I didn't want to quit. I couldn't go back anymore. I went to India even though my parents didn't want me to." Oxana studied International relations in the University in Kazakhstan. Her parents wanted her to get a good job in the embassy, but her heart is deeply in love with the exotic culture.

Where do you come from?

"The identity issue confuses me a lot." When she was 11 years old, the Soviet regime collapsed over night. The fall of the iron curtain let a little girl see how wide the world was, but didn't tell her where she belongs: "I was born in Kazakhstan, I know all the local traditions. But at the same time, I am also a Russian, and I can't resonate with the Russian culture: I grew up under the Soviet communist government, and they erased every traditional and religious culture on purpose." To fill the emptiness of identity, she fell in love with the Indian singing and dancing in the black and white movies she saw when she was small. When she grew up, she was determined to leave her home, and search for the second identity in India. Spending five years of her youth, learning an exotic dance, and then she came to HK with her Scottish husband, and started teaching Indian dance in a studio on Austin Road.

"After coming to HK 13 years ago, when people ask me where I come from, I still don't know how to answer." Do you miss home? "not really, but I miss the people I left behind. Normal people won't show off loudly and say "Hey! I am a Russian.", but they would say: "I am just a

Russian, right?"

"I related very deeply to Indian culture, since I spent so much time to learn it." And she says calmly: "This is an identity I acquired. In front of the gods and the audience - this is who I am"

Oxana has no religion, but she believes in spirituality. Dance is her universe. There are rules and reasons, there is order among the stars. There is a story in Bharatanatyam: Although the gods live longer than humans, they still get sick and die. Many gods worked on this problem and they found a solution to it. They used the Serpent god Vasuki's body for their churning-string to churn the ocean in order to obtain an amazing medicine which would guarantee them immortality. But Vasuki couldn't take such huge pain, and he released poison from his mouth into the ocean. Shiva swallowed the poison to save all living beings in the world. "Isn't it just like the climate change problem we are facing now?" Humans destroy the environment for convenience, the ice melts, but one day the earth will be covered.

"All stories you can feel with your heart, just like the passing on of ancient wisdom." The dancer opens themselves unconditionally in the melody: "In front of the gods and the audience, this is who I am. Because you are free when you see your inner self. Just like the way you see me when you come into this studio." I recalled when I saw her through the glass door: she was dancing in the dark to the strong rhythmic music, she put her hands back, walked in a circle with big steps, she doesn't notice we are already there. She is dancing beautifully with the universe.