

Sreyashi Dey: Indian Goddess in Human Form

By Gina Mazza

If the elegant goddesses depicted in the great, ancient temples of India could break free of their stone internment and leap into being, what form would their human expressions take?

It's easy to imagine divine sculptures springing to life while in the presence of classical Indian dancer Sreyashi Dey. Replete with captivating physical beauty, a serenity that hints of mythical legends, and a lifetime of dance training and accomplishments, Dey is the embodiment of all the tradition and wisdom behind Odissi, a classical Indian dance style originally performed in 2nd century BC as a sacred ritual dedicated to the Gods.

"I saw many temples while growing up in eastern India and they were very inspiring," Dey says, reflecting on the origins of her fascination with dance. "The part of India I come from, Bengal, has a strong tradition of Goddess worship, and the Goddesses Durga and Kali have always inspired me due to their power and intensity."

Power and intensity are evident in performances by Srishti Dances of India, Dey's Pittsburgh-based dance company (Srishti means "best" in Sanskrit). She moved to Pittsburgh in 1995 when her husband joined the faculty at Carnegie-Mellon University. Back then, Dey was working full time as a market researcher and raising three children, yet found time to teach dance in her spare time.

“Even though dance has been with me forever, somehow it never got importance in terms of a career. After working [in marketing] for several years, I wanted to do something more creative. Gradually, I realized that dance was what I wanted to spend my time on.”

Upon founding Srishti Dances of India in 2000, Dey began to gather other Indian artists in Pittsburgh and train them to be part of her company’s performances. Then, she put together performances that included some of her students, as well as professional artists that she sponsored from India.

Almost immediately, people began to take notice—including members of the press. In 2001, she was honored with the Harry Schwalb Excellence in the Arts Award in WQED’s *Pittsburgh Magazine*. Accolades from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* followed in 2002 when it named her a “Top 50 Cultural Force in Pittsburgh.”

“Both awards were quite a surprise, actually,” she remembers. “The recognition was encouraging and helped me feel like I’d made the right decision.”

With an MBA to back her dance talent, Dey adeptly manages both artistic and organizational roles. The company applied for and received grants and sponsorships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, the Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative, local universities, and private funders such as The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation.

From the outset, Dey envisioned her company as a bridge between the traditions of India and other cultures.

“One of the main objectives from the beginning was to reach beyond the Indian immigrant population to mainstream Pittsburgh audiences,” she comments. “It would have been an easy option for us to perform only at Indian temples, but we wanted to reach audiences who are interested in other forms of dance. Of course we draw from the Indian population [according to the 2000 Census, 7,550 people in Allegheny County are of Indian descent], but one of the things we noted from early performances was that people from multiple generations were in the audience: children, parents, grandparents. It wasn’t just a certain segment of the population.”

The company’s mission to integrate cultures has led to collaborations with not only Pittsburgh-based artists – such as The Dance Alloy modern dance company, storyteller Alison Babusci and The University of Pittsburgh’s Sundanese Gamelan Musical Ensemble – but also artists from New York (Mary Miller Dance Company and poet/writer Andrea Read), Uganda, Africa, and, of course, India. Shristi has performed at mainstream venues such as the Kelly Strayhorn Theatre in East Liberty, Chatham College’s Eddy Theatre and CMU’s Phillip Chosky Theater.

Dey notes that “other dancers seem to have an admiration for the tradition and spiritual depth of Odissi dance—that’s what strikes people the most.” Indeed, India’s oldest dance form and is steeped in thematic references to literature, art, and the spiritual movements of the Vaishnava sect (worshippers of Vishnu) of Hinduism.

“The origins of Indian dance are in the temple, so the dance is a form of worship, really, the whole idea being that we as individuals are yearning to unite with the absolute soul. The philosophical text that underlies the dance is the idea of humility, completely dedicating oneself to that higher spirit, and recognizing how small we really are in the scheme of things. What we portray through the dance is that sense of surrender and the joy of connectedness with the absolute.”

More than Dance: A Feast for the Senses

Observing Odissi awakes all the senses. Performances intertwine drama and storytelling, hypnotic music, richly hued silk costumes and, of course, the intricacies of the dance itself—a panoply of hand and eye gestures, facial expressions, rhythmic footwork and soft, sensual body movements. With so much going on, how is an audience to fully absorb and appreciate the art form?

“Watch visually and on an instinctive level, without intellectualizing it,” Dey recommends. “The main thing is to realize that Odissi is an ancient tradition that has evolved along with the traditions of visual art, music, theatre and literature. The song lyrics are themselves great pieces of literature. The music is classical. Everything that contributes to the dance is valid and strong in its [respective] traditions. Realize the interconnectedness—that it’s not just about dance, even though it is dance.”

“The other thing to realize is that classical Indian dance works on two levels. The dances are told through stories that could be about human beings or about Gods, but its always symbolic and always about fundamental philosophical truths that come from ancient texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads. We draw on sacred texts to create the basis for the dance. So, realize it’s not just about what a particular choreographer or dancer feels like portraying, and usually it’s not about commonplace things. There are many layers.”

To help audiences grasp all the layers, Dey provides program notes and explanations before each piece.

“You may not be able to appreciate all the layers at first, but it’s alright because even at a basic level, there is visual beauty that gives enjoyment. As you watch more and more and get used to what it is visually, you’ll be able to grasp more of the deeper layers.”

The Discipline of Odissi

Odissi derives from the temple sculptures and, as such, its style is sculptural in nature.

Typically, the upper body is fluid and graceful, and moves in isolation to the lower body, which is strongly rooted to the earth. Because of the sophisticated array of precise techniques for virtually every part of the body, it takes years of intensive training just to learn the fundamentals.

“Then, it all has to come together: the hands, arms, legs, head, facial expressions, torso, hips, each part of the body,” Dey explains. “There are thousands of movements, each with a different name. There is a systematic learning process. We start with body conditioning exercises, everything from eyebrows to neck to lips. Each focuses on a different aspect of what is to come later—basic steps, hand gestures, eye gestures, hip positions, ways of moving the feet, using facial muscles to express different emotions. There are specific ways to learn each of these things.”

“If you want to learn Odissi, keep in mind that it takes four to five years before you can do anything meaningful, not to say that you cannot enjoy the process and do it for pleasure. But it’s not true that you can take a few classes and start performing. You have to give it time and dedication.”

As one of Dey’s students, Lisa DiGioia-Nutini can attest to the level of commitment required to fully learn the art of Odissi.

“It’s taken me two and a half years to learn the postures and build up strength to feel comfortable doing them,” DiGioia-Nutini comments. “It’s a lot to absorb, but for me, it has a healing aspect, whether or not I’m good at it. Odissi is not just a dance. Every movement is a sacred language unto itself.”