

feature

# SACRED DANCE

*in Singapore*

by JACQUELINE ELIZABETH FISHER



**DESPITE THE AGE-OLD PROTEST OF TWO LEFT FEET,** when it comes down to it – who can resist the lure of dance? Whether it be a little shimmy to a song on the radio, a sudden urge to lift up your kids and twirl them around, or the more subtle thrill of watching some real pros hit the dance floor or take to the stage – dance has power.

Dance is a powerful form of communication. In fact, it is said that 90% or more of our communication is non-verbal which means that most of the time we are communicating through movement, and we understand this non-verbal language perhaps even more

viscerally than words. So when it comes to us in a concentrated form, with intention, like dance often does – the meaning can be even more pronounced and its effect more profound.

Of course, much of dance is not at all spiritual or divine. Just like every other form of communication, dance can be used for many diverse purposes – as a narcissistic form of flirtation, as an escape from reality or as a way to release aggression – just think of headbangers with fists raised and pounding.

But not all dance is like this. It could be that we are drawn to dance because it can allow us to communicate in an entirely different way – a way that lets us transcend our mundane selves and reach out to something or someone higher, or even become that higher being for a while.

The notion of dance as a spiritual practice is nothing new but surprisingly, you do not necessarily have to become a whirling Dervish, or put yourself in a trance to seek out sacred dance. You can explore it right here in Singapore and at the library.



## feature

Perhaps the most direct way to delve into spiritual dance is to learn a traditional sacred or devotional dance form and perhaps the oldest dance form of this type on offer is Odissi Temple Dance.

### ODISSI TEMPLE DANCE

#### What is it?

Odissi is often considered the oldest form of classical dance still surviving. Originating more than 2,000 years ago in India's Orissa state, it rates a mention in the *Natya Shastra*, the world's oldest surviving text on stagecraft. It evolved purely as a devotional dance form performed daily as part of temple ritual by highly trained dancers called Maharis who were attached to the temple complex. Odissi reached its pinnacle between the 12<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries AD before decline set in. The dance form faced extinction in the British colonial period when Maharis were banned from dancing, but in the wake of independence the dance form was painstakingly reconstructed from the remaining Maharis' accounts, and from temple sculptures, paintings and manuscripts.



The late Asako Takami, an Odissi dancer, embodies the refinement made famous by her teacher, the legendary Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra

#### What is it like?

Odissi is considered the most lyrical and sensuous of the Indian classical dances. It is sculptural in style and its most striking feature is the combination of flowing and graceful upper body movements with a strong, grounded often stamping lower body. These supposedly symbolise the fluidity of the waves combined with the heartbeat of mother earth. The dance is also characterised by the *tribanghi* (3 bends) a posture often seen in Indian temple figures where the body creates an S shape formed by head, torso and hip. Odissi is an extremely challenging art form. It feels like each part of the body does its own thing – torso, hands, neck, and eyes combined with complex

foot patterns – a bit like divine breakdancing. The dance uses a series of mudras or hand movements, combined with steps to convey religious narratives.

#### Why is it a spiritual practice?

Traditionally, Odissi dance was exclusively devotional. Nowadays, sadly, it is rarely performed in temples and is seen as a classical performance art. However, Odissi themes

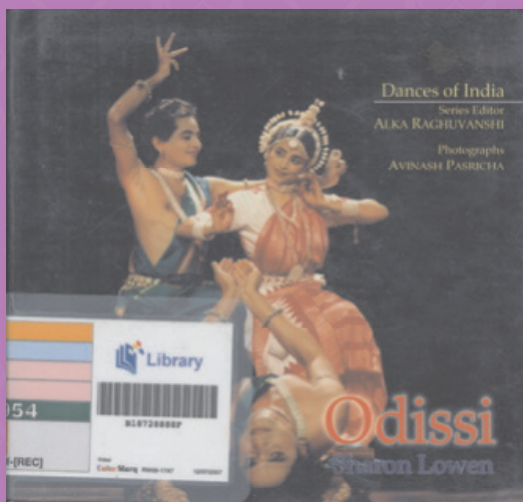
## ODISSI ON THE SHELVES

### Odissi

Lowen, Sharon

New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2004

Call no.: 793.31954 LOW



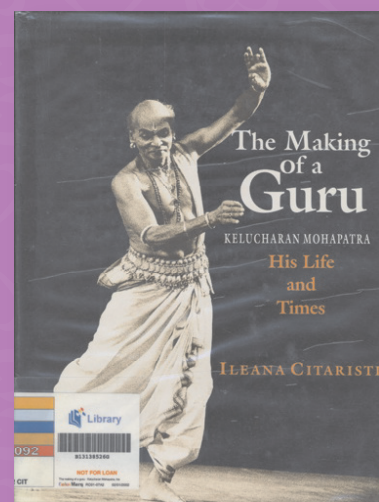
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### The Making of a Guru: Kelucharan Mohapatra, His Life and Times

Citaristi, Ileana

New Delhi: Manohar, 2001

Call no.: 792.8028092 CIT



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## feature

still come primarily from Hindu epics, often elaborating the devotion of the milkmaid Radha to the God Krishna. Underlying the dance is an ongoing sense of yearning to unite with the absolute and surrender to something higher.

In addition to this, it could be that the dance is inherently spiritual because it is so fiendishly difficult and many times you have to just transcend your normal way of being to even attempt the steps!

### BALLET

While ballet seems to be all about pretty fairies and painful toe dancing, surprisingly it is becoming to be seen more and more as Western culture's most spiritual dance form.

#### What is it?

Ballet was born in Renaissance Italy where it emerged as part of elaborate court extravaganzas combining dancing, singing, music and lavish sets. However, it came to full bloom in France under King Louis XIV who codified the steps and used it as a means of controlling his rebellious aristocracy. Hierarchy at court was determined by how well one performed on the dance floor, and Louis made the routines so complex that hours which could have been spent scheming and plotting were spent practising dance steps.

Ballet as we know it today, literally took flight in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century in the age of the ballerina when tutus, pointe shoes and ethereal, otherworldly dancers seemed to float on air.

#### What is it like?

For a beginner, ballet is mostly about exercises and ones with a very strict form. It is more like doing a gruelling yoga work out as your body strains to incorporate a very different way of moving and every muscle seems to be engaged. However, beyond this intensity, even the rawest of beginners cannot fail to experience an inkling of the grace and lyricism which flows through each (sometimes agonising) movement. Unique to ballet (as opposed to most other dance forms) is the fundamental emphasis on a symmetrical "turning-outwards" of the whole body from the hips. Every class in any part of the world is founded on a similar sequence of exercises at the *barre* (where dancers hold on to a wooden rail for support), followed by a repetition of these in the centre with no support, then ending with jumps and turns.

#### Why is it a spiritual practice?

Ballet can be seen as a spiritual practice on a number of levels. Perhaps most obviously, dancers themselves seem beyond human, almost like the closest examples we have of Angels or Holy Beings. Thus, by learning their dance, we in turn are being brought closer to a state of grace.

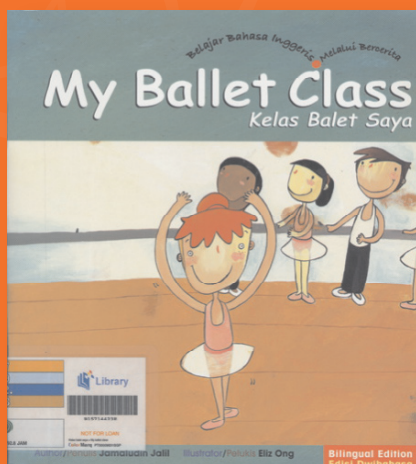
## BALLET ON THE SHELVES

### My Ballet Class

Jamaludin Jalil

Singapore: Times Editions, c2003

Call no.: English 792.8 JAM



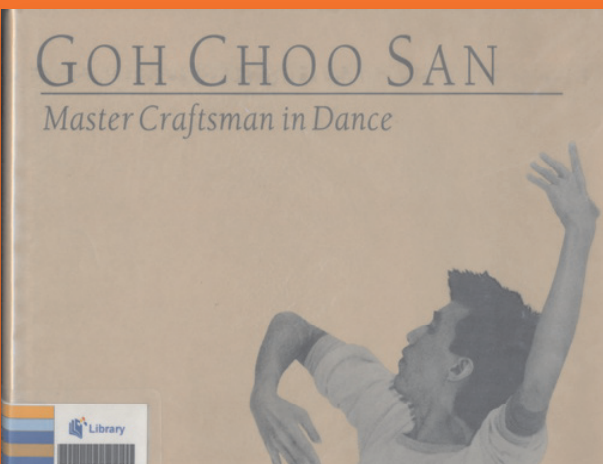
All rights reserved, Times Edition, 1987

### Goh Choo San: Master Craftsman in Dance

Schergen, Janek

Singapore: Singapore Dance Theatre, c1997

Call no.: English 792.82 SCH



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### Rethinking Dance History: A Reader

Carter, Alexandra (ed.)

London; New York:

Routledge, 2004

Call no.: English 792.809 RET



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Ballet's emphasis on lifting out of the body and transcending the earth also makes it a good vehicle for trying to leave the mundane behind.

Eva Natanya, who danced professionally for nine years, first at the New York City Ballet and then at the Royal Ballet of London, also believes that ballet's turned out body position makes it especially conducive to the mental practice of sending spiritual gifts to others while dancing.

Natanya, who is currently completing a Masters Degree in Theology, and has also practised yoga and meditation for many years also sees a connection between yoga and ballet, with regard to what is called the 'inner body' – the series of inner channels and chakras, or energy centres, which carry *chi* or *prana* through the body, and which it is believed will lead the practitioner to Enlightenment if they are opened fully.

In addition, she draws a parallel between the use of the legs at the *barre*, where the first one is used as a powerful and stable support whilst the other works, creating beautiful, delicate and refined patterns. This, she says is perhaps not unlike maintaining the balance of calm stability and analytical insight in meditation.

### AWARENESS MOVEMENT

Dance can also be explored as a form of meditation and a made-in Singapore spiritual dance practice is a perfect vehicle for this.

### What is it?

Awareness Movement is a moving meditation, which encourages participants to heighten their awareness and focus by learning sets of rhythmic movements that require coordination in diverse spatial directions.

The movement form was created by Low Yuen Wei who is the Artistic Director of InSource Theatre, a Buddhist-influenced modern dance company. Low, who trained in Singapore and Italy and has been a dancer and theatre practitioner for more than 10 years, constantly looks to Buddhist philosophy for artistic inspiration.

Awareness Movement is primarily influenced by the sacred dances of G.I Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff was a Greek-Armenian philosopher who collected what he called 'awareness dances' from Sufi Masters, Christian and Tibetan temples and from desert dwelling tribes to form what he called the Gurdjieff Movements. Low and her dance team have blended these movements into a fusion of traditional forms, modern dance and meditation, which works holistically to develop the body, heart and mind.

### What is it like?

Awareness Movement is like a very complicated walking meditation. Participants begin with a rhythmic bounce in time to verbal cues from the instructor and from here a series of

Singapore dance company InSource Theatre has pioneered a new form of dance as a spiritual practice called Awareness Meditation  
Courtesy of InSource Theatre





precise, directional arm and head movements are added. The various combinations are challenging enough that you need to bring your attention sharply into the present moment, and this feeling remains after the class has finished.

**Why is it a spiritual practice?**

According to Low, the aim of the practice is to expand the awareness of *being* and *presence* and integrate heart, body and mind energy. The movements are used for self-observation and to increase awareness of what each part of the body is doing at any time. She added that the various abstract geometric shapes created through the dance also generate a constantly flowing awakening energy.

**THE SACRED DANCE OF LIFE ITSELF**

If a formal dance class does not hold much appeal but dance as a spiritual practice does - it is also interesting to consider that since dance is actually movement with intention, then perhaps all our movements could become a kind of sacred dance – if we think the right thoughts.

Perhaps, if we moved with light and fluid movements, then maybe we had seen more gentle people in our lives.

And if dance has power because it involves concentrated intention, we could even consciously structure our daily activities as a devotional dance – washing our face as a purifying dance, serving food as an offering dance, even walking on the earth as a dance of thankfulness – and we might just be able to dance our way to a perfect world.

**MODERN SACRED DANCE ON THE SHELVES**

**Gurdjieff: The Key Concepts**

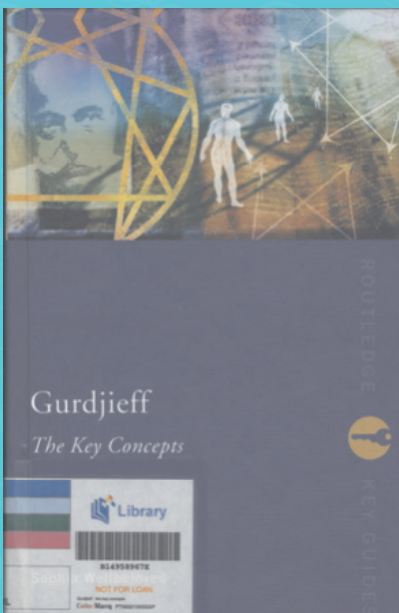
Wellbeloved, Sophia  
London: Routledge, 2003  
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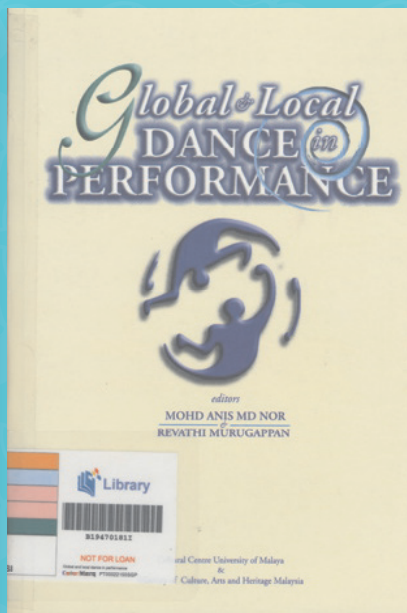
Mohd Anis Md Nor, Revathi Murugappan  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Cultural Centre, University of Malaya; Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia, 2005  
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**Sacred Woman, Sacred Dance: Awakening Spirituality Through Movement and Ritual**

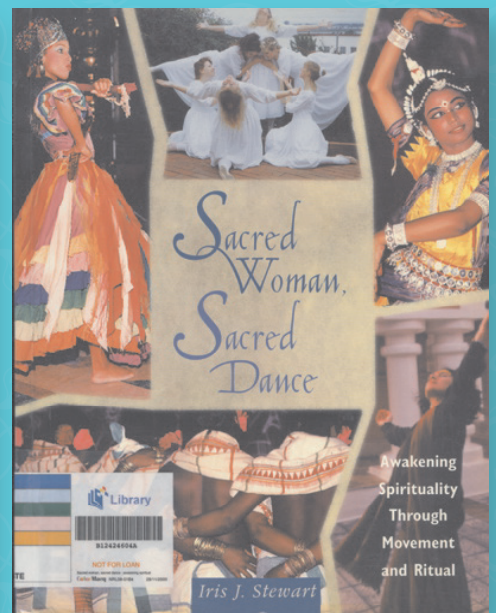
Stewart, Iris J.  
Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, c2000  
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