

Khayyam's Rubaiyat Echoes in Dance

Raka Maitra

3 & 4 May 2013, Esplanade Theatre Studio

In collaboration with Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay as part of an Esplanade Presents programme

Production information

Created and choreographed by Raka Maitra with 13 dancers, *Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance* draws from Edward Fitzgerald's famous 19th Century translation of the Persian quatrains attributed to Omar Khayyam.* With three Indian musicians playing live, and specially designed costumes also coming from India. Drawing mainly on students from her own dance school Chowk: A Centre for Dance, Raka Maitra trained her performers for twelve months under a special NAC grant to produce this work.

Using techniques of *Odissi*, *Chhau*, *Kalaripayattu* and contemporary vocabularies drawn from Indian movement traditions, the dancers manifest many reflections of the poetry through the body. Music - influenced by Sufism and inflected by Hindustani classicism - carries the journey of the dancer and the experience of the spectator. This is a yearning: a combination of movement, dance, music and the stirring imagination of a Persian mathematician who desired to be a poet.

(Synopsis and Theme)

More than ten centuries ago, an ageing astronomer and mathematician, Omar Khayyam, turned his existential anguish into poetry and composed over 1,000 four-line verses as a serenade to life and a lament on eternity. Raka drew on 16 of the 75 quatrains in Fitzgerald's illustrated first edition (1859) – see Process Notes for Raka Maitra's *Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance* Performance Text.

Khayyam's *The Rubaiyat* traverses the murky waters between life and afterlife, God and godlessness, doubt and mysticism, with the nimble feet of both the Sufi and the heretic. Its imagery summons the crimson of youth and the silver of cold moonlight, as if the poet was intoxicated by the pleasure of being alive, even as passing moments steal away the time that remains to enjoy it.

Fitzgerald's sensitive treatment of the material creates a mood of intense sensuality, rapture and urgency. In this production, the dancers' bodies converse with the sea of ideas that Khayyam sets adrift in his work.

*Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) was a Persian poet, mathematician and astronomer. From the Persian word *rubai*, for a double couplet, Fitzgerald chose 75 from a thousand extant Khayyam quatrains for his first edition (1859) on which this work is based; the second edition (1868) increased to 110, but the next three editions, the 5th being the most famous (1889), settled on 101 quatrains. Fitzgerald's version, using an AABA rhyming scheme, is a high point of 19th century English Literature and has been greatly influential.

CAST

Dancer	.....	Aparna Nambiar
Dancer	.....	Jayasri Narayanan
Dancer	.....	Pooja Parameswaran
Dancer	.....	Raka Maitra
Dancer	.....	Rithika Pahwa
Dancer	.....	Saranya Sundararajan
Dancer	.....	Shruthi Bhathina
Dancer	.....	Srilakshmi Raghunathan

PRODUCTION

Choreographer	.....	Raka Maitra
Dramaturgy	.....	T. Sasitharan
Stage Design	.....	Zai Kuning
Lighting Design	.....	Alberta Wileo
Costumes	.....	Gitanjali Kashyap
Narrator	.....	Georgia Simone
Music (Vocals)	.....	Saroj Mohanty
Music (Sitar)	.....	Subrata De
Music (Tabla)	.....	Nawaz Mirajkar

Photos of Cast and Production (appearing in the documentary photographs)



Shruthi Bathnia



Subrata De



Nina Mareta Kosasih



Zai Kuning



Raka Maitra



Nawaz Mirajkar



Saroj Mohanty



Aparna Nambiar



Jayasri Narayanan



Ritikah Pahwa



Pooja Parameswaran



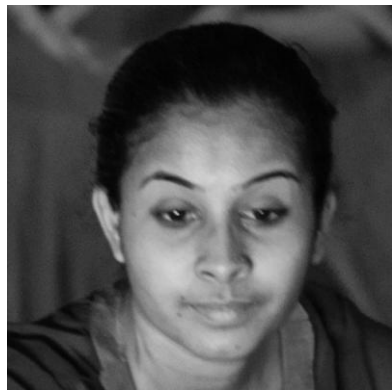
Srilakshmi Raghunathan



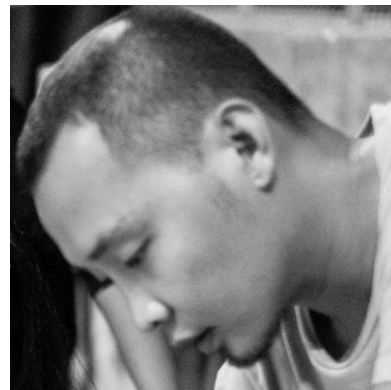
T. Sasitharan



Georgia Simone



Saranya Sundararajan



Alberta Wileo

PROCESS NOTES

Raka Maitra's *Raga Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance*, by Dr. Stephanie Burridge

Process and practice:

Raka Maitra's work in May 2013 begins with a text - *Raga Khayyam's Rubaiyat* (see Raka Maitra's *Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance Performance Text*). The artist is often inspired by literature and past work such as *The Hungry Stones* based on aspects of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Hungry Stone*, and Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges short story *Circular Ruins* are examples.

Another essential thread to her creativity is the movement language of Odissi – the Indian dance form she was trained in. Maitra seeks to work in Indian contemporary style that unites traditional dance training with contemporary dance movement vocabulary. She finds this appropriate vehicle for her dance choreographies that involve complex themes and images.

Often she works alone but this new work has enabled her to build a group of performers; some of whom will continue as the basis of a small company. The process for creating *Raga Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance* has also involved the process of training. Maitra has created a dance in seven sections to live music for six dancers including herself. There is also a small child as a guest artist.

Training:

Maitra assembled a group of 13 dancers to begin an intensive training programme based on Odissi dance in November 2012 – more than six months before the performance. Most had previous experience in the Bharatanatyam Indian classical style which is predominately gestural with the feet maintaining a strong rhythm. The hand and eye gestures tell the story as the dancers move through a range of postures – the centre of the body remains erect for most of the dance.

Maitra required a freer form of movement with strong leg work that enabled the dancer to move through the vertical space, rising and falling with ease. This required considerable training to develop the leg strength and flexibility in the centre of the body. Combined with some of the postures of Chhau, an Indian dance style based on martial arts that Raka is also trained in, they were required to take on an earthier, grounded approach. Some of the warm up exercises the group begin every session with include the Chhau fighting posture with one wrist bent down to denote a shield and the other arm free with a clenched fist; like fighting with a sword.

These components are melded with western contemporary dance movement that is initiated by the core of the body- it also spirals off a central axis. Elements that require this strong centre while the rest of the body is relaxed responding to gravity, or off-centre are unfamiliar in Indian classical dance but gives the choreography a sense of flow when it is incorporated with traditional material. Maitra works on core body alignment which supports shifts in dynamics like incorporating swinging movements for the arms, fast spiralling turns for the upper body, and sudden knee bend drops to the floor. Her centre of gravity is considerably lower than her other dancers and enables her to drop to the ground quickly or jump suddenly high into the air – at rehearsal; the dancers were challenged to achieve a similar look and dynamic.

Traditional Indian classical dance forms have always incorporated acting – storytelling and narrative are essential components that are strictly stylised within each dance. By using improvisation and naturalistic gestures and expression, Maitra's dancers make a radical departure from the normal constraints of the traditional form.

Training in all of these elements has required patience and commitment towards a vision that is radical in the context of the contexts the dancers have usually been working within. While it has been rewarding to watch the dancers grow through the process, she is aware of some technical shortcomings that must be made up through clever choreography and allowing the dancers to bring their own interpretation – she comments that they are 'intelligent dancers with open minds', who are eager to work with her on a new way of approaching Indian dance (Indian contemporary).

Choreographic process and Rehearsal practices:

Maitra first approached the text in a literal context – then abstracted the sensual components to create images the dancers can work with. Building on the imagery is an essential part of each rehearsal with the intention, and each moment, a concern for the choreographer. The dancers are constantly reminded of what they are portraying – whether it is looking at the stars, feeling the warmth of the sun, running their hands over the earth and so on. Larger physical imagery such as pulling on ropes, throwing a ball, opening the curtains at a window for instance, are also incorporated and form a structure for the choreography.

Maitra is constantly checking the focus of the eyes – ‘simple movement needs strong focus’ she says. These images are taken directly from the poems and offer a rich canvas of images to portray. On top of this imagery dance steps are layered – they are composed in this order. This is quite a different approach from classical Indian dance where specific gestures denote imagery (narrative) that is pre-set. This way the sense of the movement is paramount and by seeking to express the ideas and images in the poems, movement results.

Other sections are based on rhythmic movement and closely tied to the training practices of Odissi dance – for example various ways of stamping, placing the heels on the ground, passing a raised bent leg from front to back and deep knee bends. All of these elements can be found in an Odissi technique class; however again they are overlaid with meaning in this choreography. For instance, in one section the dancers are asked to think of mechanical actions depicting those of factory workers. In another section, they are asked to improvise around the concept of feeling the earth and the water.

Improvisation is also an innovation for dancers trained in classical Indian forms. The idea of contributing something that is a personal, creative response to an image is commonly unheard of in a strict guru/student scenario. At one point, three pairs of women improvise sensually on the idea of the comfort of waking up in the morning with someone – this involves touching that begins with the hands and progresses into caressing other parts of the body, or resting together in comfortable poses. Maitra has several sections of the new work devoted to improvisation, or at least, a reaction to something happening on stage by some dancers while others watch. Working with the dancers to explore dramatic possibilities through this approach is an important aspect of each rehearsal.

The dancers are also involved in the repetition of set steps and phrases to perfect each movement, synchronise when required and check musicality. Working on peripheral vision to sense each other’s movement is also important – many sections use repetition of set phrases and the dancers can perform these within their own time frames. But there are also moments when everyone ‘catches up’ and they need to be together - these are referred to as ‘felt’ movements and group co-ordination.

It is the combination of the set sections with freer, improvised ones that makes this an innovative work in its content and process. Maitra constantly refers the dancers back to the poems including reading them during coffee breaks and checking that everyone is clear on the meaning she wants from each part. She speaks of the energy needed for each section and the flow of feelings through the movement. The dancers are very involved in the process and their input is valued.

Production:

Raga Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance will be accompanied by live music with three musicians coming from India. In rehearsal, the dancers work to some of the music from the show; however, some is in the style of the section they are dancing but others will be finalised in rehearsal 3 days before the performance. Maitra has worked with the musicians before and is in constant correspondence with them to check the length of each part and the tone she requires to go with the imagery of the poems. The dancers have not worked with the musicians before and it will be challenging in the short rehearsal time to clarify the score and sounds for the performance.

Costumes are also coming from India designed in a stylised, simplified Indian form of pants and a tunic.

Researcher: Dr Stephanie Burrige, April 2013

General Editor: Aubrey Mellor, 20 August 2013

Raka Maitra's *Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance Performance Text*, by Raka Maitra

Note:

The Rubaiyat Of Omar Khayyam is used in this work as a source of images, moods and emotions inform the dancers' movements. The performance is intended both as a sensible and sensual experience partaken between the dancer and audience. The quatrains are not read as a conceptual resource, neither are they merely psychological or historical, or narrative or dramatic. They are an a corpus of embodied experientiality drawing together sensations of lightness, weight, water, sunlight, coldness, colors, smells, shapes and visions as they affect the body in space and time.

Prologue:

A lone child walks on stage. She sits down and begins a game by herself, of dice, of chess or of the five stones. She does not look at the audience. She symbolizes all of the dancers. And as they emerge on to stage, slowly from the darkness at the back, the child walks away..

Section 1

Music: Raga Bhairavi. Duration: 13 minutes

The Verses:

- [Awake! for the morning in the bowl of the night](#)
- [Has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight:](#)
- [And lo! The hunter of the East has caught](#)
- [The Sultan's Turret in a noose of Light.](#)

- [Before the phantom of false morning died.](#)
- [Me thought a voice within the tavern cried.](#)
- [When all the Temple is prepared within.](#)
- [Why nods the drowsy worshipper outside?](#)

Mood:

- A universal happiness that is shared by all that lives at the break of dawn
- This scene seeks to portray the joy of the morning.

Movements:

- Are languid, rested, fresh, youngness.
- When walking in, the walk has to be purposeful, determined, slow, steady and the gaze goes from down to looking up.
- The feel is joyous, languid, etc.
- Solo pieces of getting up in the morning.
- Rithika stay in place. She marks the point where we move towards.
- The second section, group, of dawn breaking starts.
- Sinuous quality.
- Ends with Shruti, throwing stone.

Section 2

Music: Raag: Malaya maarutham. Duration: 11 minutes

The Verses:

- [Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough](#)
- [A flask of wine, a book of verse- and though](#)

- Beside me singing I the Wilderness-
- And the Wilderness is Paradise now.
- Ah, my beloved, fill the cup that clears
- To-day of past Regrets and future Fears
- To-morrow?- Why, To-morrow I may be
- Myself with Yesterday's sev'n Thousand Years.

Mood:

- Moves from the more general feel of the first part, to a more *intimate movement between lovers* at dawn.
- This scene reflects the very private joy of waking up with a loved one.
- The mood summons the absent male presence among the female dancers on stage.

Movements:

- Slow, tactile.
- Heaviness of the weight of someone, and the weight of sleep after a long night.
- The lingering physical remnants of having spent a night with someone.
- Pedestrian movements, less dance, more authentic.

References:

- Poetic inspiration, Sangam literature

Poem 1

On his hills,
The mania creeper that usually sprawls
On large round stones
Sometimes takes to a sleeping elephant

At parting
His arms twined with mine
He gave me inviolable guarantees
That he would live in my heat
Without parting.

Friend why do you think
That is any reason for grieving?

Poem 2

My lover, capable of terrible lies,
At night lay close to me
In a dream
That lied like truth

I woke up still deceived
And caressed the bed
Thinking it my lover

It's terrible. I grow lean
In loneliness
Like a water lilly
Gnawed by a beetle.

Section 3

Music: Raag Bheem Palasi. Duration: 10 mins

The Verses:

- Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
 - Before we too into the Dust descend:
 - Dust into Dust, and Dust to lie,
 - Sans Wine, Sans song,
 - Sans singer, and –sans End.
-
- Myself when young did eagerly frequent
 - Doctor and saint, and heard great argument
 - About it and about: but evermore
 - Came out by the same door as in I went..
-
- With them the seed of wisdom did I sow.
 - And with my own hand Labour'd it to grow:
 - And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd-
 - I came like water, and like wind I go.
-
- Into this universe, and why not knowing,
 - Nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing:
 - And out of it, as wind along the waste
 - I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing

Mood:

- This scene is a reflection of the laborious day. There is vigor, energy, effort, mental constriction and physical taxation.

Movements:

- The movements are uniform and mechanistic, but not dull or lifeless.
- Foot, body and the orientation of the head are precisely defined.
- Face is expressionless.
- Footwork stomps loudly enough to “raise the dust off the ground”

Section 4

Music: Raag Megh. Duration: 7 minutes. 23 seconds.

The Verses:

- Up from the Earth's Centre
 - Through the seventh gate
 - I rose, and on the throne of Saturn sate.
 - And many knots unravel'd by the Road.
 - But not the knot of human death and fate.
-
- There was a door to which I found no key:
 - There was a veil past which I could not see:
 - Some little talk awhile of me and thee
 - There seem'd – and then no more of thee and me.
-
- When you and I behind the veil are past,
 - Oh, but the long, long, while the world shall last.
 - Which of our coming and departure heeds,
 - As the Sea's self should heed a pebble cast.
-
- A moment's halt- a momentary taste
 - Of being from the well amid the waste-
 - And Lo!- the phantom Caravan has reache'd
 - The nothing it set out from- Oh, make haste!

Mood:

- After the intense and vigorous work of the day, resting....it is in contrast to the previous section. The coffee-break.
- The companionship of friends and peers is to be brought out, and the sense of fellowship and containment that comes with it.
- Perhaps, sharing and talking about their homes and families and lives.
- We seek to evoke a sense of bonding as a group.

Movements:

- Reflective and slow.
- One dancer leads, and one by one the other dancers follow

Section 5

Music: Raag Yaman. Duration: 7 minutes. 30 seconds

The Verses:

- You know, my friends,
- With what a brave Carouse
- I made a second marriage in my house
- Divorced old barren reason from my bed.
- And took the daughter of vine to spouse.

- I sent my soul through the invisible,
- Some letter of that After-life to spell:
- And by and by my soul return'd to me,
- And answered I myself am Heav'n and Hell;

- The moving finger writes: and, having writ,
- Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit
- Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
- Nor all thy tears wash a word of it.

Mood:

- This section is a natural slide into playfulness and jolly abandon.
- Although the line about the moving finger can be interpreted as somber, it can also be viewed as a verse that offers the sight of freedom within the metaphysical boundaries of life, time and fate.
- Innovation, creativity, boundaries of group and individual are now established.

Movements:

- A chance to play around with the sets.
- Make this a place to interact with the sets and play with it.

Section 6

Music: Raag Bageswari. Duration: 6 minutes, 57 seconds.

The Verses:

- With the earth's first clay
- They did the last man's knead,
- And then of the last harvest sow'd the seed.
- Yea, the first morning of creation wrote
- What the last dawn of reckoning shall read.

- Listen again. One evening at the close
- Of Ramazan ere the better moon arose,
- In that old potter's shop I stood alone

- With the clay population round in Rows.
- And strange to tell, among that earthen lot
- Some could articulate, while others not:
- And suddenly one impatient cried-
- 'Who is the pttter, pray and who the pot!'
- none answer'd this:
- but after silence spake
- a vessel of a more ungainly make:
- 'they sneer at me for leaning awry:
- what! Did the hand then
- of the potter shake?

Mood:

- This is a reflective meditative state.
- The reflection is on inevitability, and circularity- that fate binds you and moves you at the same time.
- The music is also intended to be in circular and loops.

Movements:

- Two concentric circles are formed, each of three dancers and the seventh dancer stands in the centre of the two circles.
- The outer circle moves anti clockwise and the inner one moves clockwise.

Section 7

Music: Raag Bhairavi. Duration: 7 minutes, 23 seconds.

The Verses:

- Ah, moon of my delight who know'st no wane,
- The moon of heav'n is rising once again:
- How oft hereafter rising shall she look
- Through this same garden after me- in vain!
- And when thyself with shining foot shall pass
- Among the guests star-scattered on the grass
- And in the joyous errand reach the spot
- Where I made one-turn down an empty glass.

Mood:

- Tiredness, resignation, looking forwards...rest in the evening with someone you love.
- It is the relief of turning down the cup of life, after it has been fully drunk from and having enjoyed it thoroughly.
- This is quick and ends on a note joy.

Movements:

Reference:

- *He Wishes For The Cloths Of Heaven* by W.B. Yates.

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and the half-light,
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Epilogue:

The child re-enters the stage, and sits at exactly the same spot when the performance began. She resumes her game. She then pauses, looks up at the audience and smiles.

Lights dim and fade out.