**Raka Maitra**

***Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes in Dance***

**Process and practice**

Raka Maitra’s work in May 2013 begins with a text - *Raga Khayyam's Rubaiyat* (see Appendix B).The artist is often inspired by literature and past work such as *The Hungry Stones* based on aspects ofNobel 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 – 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 has 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.

(Observations and report from Dr Stephanie Burridge - April 2013)