

MAGAZINE

Dancing for a decade

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Last week in Bangkok, Aditi Mangaldas staged the 58th show of 'Uncharted Seas', a performance that debuted in 2006. How hard is it to sustain a large-format show this long?



Seen through the wings of the massive stage at the Thailand Cultural Centre, Aditi Mangaldas is an elfin presence. As she takes position, looks up and utters the first instruction, the trance is broken. She is in command, sure of each detail. Seen from the wings, she is a bundle of energy, a master of space, a harbinger of innovation.

The 25-year-old Aditi Mangaldas Dance Company-Drishtikon Dance Foundation is at the forefront of taking cutting-edge Kathak around the world. Mangaldas challenges the boundaries of purist interpretations in content, choreography and costume. Her idea is to explore how Kathak can see the modern world both from inside and outside of content and form.

In 25 years, the company has produced 20 large and many smaller productions that include solos and ensemble pieces, both traditional and contemporary. 'Uncharted Seas' is the median of that journey. This classical Kathak production emerged a decade ago. "I had turned 46, and I suddenly felt the immensity of existence. I started asking questions about what I had left behind and was moving towards," says Mangaldas. She found her dilemma articulated in a J. Krishnamurti quote: 'We look for fixed points, but there are none, either in ourselves or outside in the universe. To live without these fixed points is our challenge.'

Kumudini Lakhia, acclaimed Kathak exponent and choreographer, Mangaldas' first guru and a key influence in her life, once said of Aditi, "Her concerns were of larger images outside her own little frail being." As Mangaldas stands alone, arched against a massive taut muslin cloth backdrop painted in stucco, one sees Lakhia's words come to life. From the wings of the massive stage that dwarfs our own concerns about life, we mirror Mangaldas' search with ours. The work espouses modern concerns and lets the audience be humbled by the sheer narrative virtuosity of Kathak, drown in its aesthetic accents, and identify with the content. First staged in 2006, the production was one of Mangaldas' many collaborations with musicians Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan, who composed the vocals for this ensemble performance with live music. In the coming decade, 'Uncharted Seas' was performed extensively in India and abroad to great critical acclaim for its light and sound design, unique aesthetics, and a Kathak that departs significantly from the usual classical framework.

In Bangkok, the 14-member troupe at the 18th International Festival of Dance and Music is one of the smallest in the mix of opera, music, ballet and dance groups from 11 countries. The venue in Thailand is equipped with the kind of facilities that allow for productions the size of 'Uncharted Seas'. Take, for instance, the stage at Thailand Cultural Centre. "There is so much space for each dancer to move – the only comparable places in India are NCPA in Mumbai and Kamani Auditorium in Delhi," says Mangaldas.

Light designer Govind Singh Yadav says: "The sheer number of lights I have at my disposal is unparalleled in India. Many venues will give you just one spot. Here, it is possible to push the envelope." AMDC principal dancer Gauri Diwakar talks of the detailing. "Each wing from where we enter has floor reflectors that make it easy for the dancer to pirouette onto the stage.

The stage hands and staff take care of every requirement. This kind of detailing allows us to focus only on the dance and nothing else.”

An international show brings significant revenue for a dance company. A quick glance at the ICCR website shows a 2010 fee of Rs. 50,000 for an ‘outstanding’ performance. In comparison, an international festival offers 10 times this amount. In India’s precarious arts ecosystem, the annual calendar of performances is a mix of shows inside the country, self-produced performances, corporate invitations (rare for classical dance), and foreign invites.

This explains why scaling up shows is such a slow process. The struggles start at a very basic level, right from insisting on an advertising-free backdrop while dancing in smaller venues. Says Mangaldas, “As a young dancer, I pushed whatever boundaries I could to ensure that organisers gave more than what *they* thought a production needed. Sometimes, all we’re given are two tube lights,” she says. Combined with generic auditoriums that pass off as arts venues, negligible patronage, and minimal state-created infrastructure, and dance companies are more accustomed to scaling down than up.

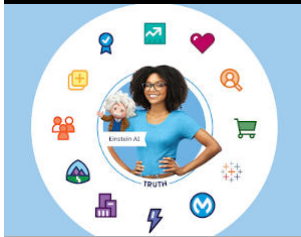
In fact, there aren’t enough Indian festivals of this scale. Says dancer-curator Ranjana Dave: “The absence of infrastructure dilutes the ability of dance organisations to develop high production values. Dancers start creating smaller productions, which are dancer-driven, require less production support, and can travel easily. Mangaldas is one of the few dancers to have consistently managed to sustain this scale.”

It doesn’t come easily. According to her business development and events coordinator, Arijeet Mukherjee, Mangaldas sometimes funds her own shows. “Our latest production ‘Interrupted’, was our first-ever commissioned work (partly commissioned by Dance Umbrella in the UK).” Mangaldas has worked with international light, set, graphic and stage designers, architects and sculptors; and on collaborations with international dancers and dance producers, stubbornly insisting on pushing the boundary with each show. In 2013, she turned down the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in the category of Creative and Experimental Dance. “Nearly 80 per cent of my work is in classical Kathak. My contemporary work emerges from within the broader parameters of Kathak. It’s like planting the seed of Kathak and watering it with contemporary sensibilities. So I chose not to accept an award that is not for my life’s work in Kathak,” she says.

Ten years of ‘Uncharted Seas’ have not been without their share of rough weather. But the storms have only weathered the wood fine, something that would have been difficult to achieve without Mangaldas’ persistence, vision and direction. The larger question, however, remains: in the absence of adequate arts infrastructure and a supportive ecosystem, how many dancers can stay afloat let alone achieve this kind of scale?

Rashmi Dhanwani is an independent arts consultant, curator and founder-creative producer of The Art X Company.

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