

THE LIVING

Dance — a Shri Lankan Tradition

by Lita Samad Chowdhury



had years of it and is an evolution of rituals, ceremonial, exorcistic rites, demon cults, harvest festivities etc. It shares many common legends with those of South India due partly to the many invasions that took place throughout its history, although the founding father of the [Lion Race (Singha race) hence Sinhalal]. Prince Vijaya was supposed to have hailed from parts loosely ascribed at various times as Bengal/Orissa in fact, even what today constitutes Bogra District in North east Bangladesh.

Thus under the aegis of "Shadhma", the dance lovers of Dhaka will be able to witness the Chitrasena-Vajira Dance company perform at Osmani Memorial Auditorium on the 4th, 5th, 7th and 8th of February.

To me Shri Lankan dance was enigmatic, unlike the dance forms we were used to witnessing, the regal yet glamorous kathak court dance of the Mughals, the abhinaya of the bharata natyam, the grace of the Odissi, the drama of the kathakali, the languor of the manipuri or the joyous buoyancy of our simple folk dances. Shri Lankan dance was none of this and yet a part of all of it. As I became immersed in learning the history of the island, I discovered the history of its dance in particular Kandyan dance which is quite rightly its most exquisite offering.

Shri Lankan dance is rooted in antiquity, two thousand five

dancing maybe, the dynamism of Kandyan dancing is probably the "most magnificent movement" ever achieved.

The sheer aesthetic beauty of this unfettered dancing, spirit pulsing to the throb and percussion only of drums, the virility of its heroic masculine essence (tantrava) distilled into

"nritya", pure and perfect movement, with no vocal or instrumental support in Kandyan dance, there appeared to me a strong resemblance to African dance which I had witnessed a long time ago.

Increasingly women are dancing it today and bringing out its feminine lasya aspect

but the male Kandyan dancer resplendent in striking white dhoti trimmed in scarlet, with jingling silver headdress and breastplate of silver and cowrie shells, tassels flying in the air as he twirls and whirls to the rhythmic pounding of the drums brings to mind the striking plumage and strutting of a peacock amongst its lesser feathered friends.

Thus with the pounding of the drums feverishly ringing in my ears, bedazzled from the artistic costumes of the other dancers, the dark serpentine grace of uppeka now principal dancer at the ballet, we were introduced to Chitrasena the great guru himself. In fact we were touched to see how his shishyas revered him by saluting his feet as most gurus have always been revered in the Sub Continent for their practically magical talents. Bandula Jayawardhana, a critic, narrates what I deem the most important in Chitrasena's contribution to Shri Lankan dance for the last half a century - may fifty-eight years to be precise, although he has not danced for the last eight himself; to any dancer, this is a remarkable achievement, to a dancer, ballet master, theatre master like

Chitrasena. It has been a test of exceptional loyalty and dedication with such sureness and dexterity and synthesized tradition with modernity without sacreligious results to the art. Conservatism preservation of traditional dance norms by others, would certainly have seen the end of Shri Lankan dance if Chitrasena had not perpetuated it by creation and innovation, to make the elite be able to assimilate dance from the common folk and to sophisticate it before it returned to the masses of the future". He has been ably abetted and seconded all through by his wife Vajira, unique and inspired, his pupil and once prima dancer of compelling grace and technique, assured of star balance and an unequalled sense of rhythm.

In Shri Lankan cultural history, Chitrasena emerged in the middle of a most important epoch. In India, Tagore had already established his Shantiniketan. Tagore's lectures on his visit to Sri Lanka in 1934, had inspired a revolutionary change in the outlooks of many educated men and women, the kobi guru had stressed the need for a people to discover their own culture in order to assimilate fruitfully the best of other cultures.

The ballerina Pavlova had visited India and taken Uday Shankar to Europe where his performance was making a name for oriental dancing. Menaka and her kathak performances, Ram Gopal's bharat natyam were acquiring international repute. All these famous exponents of dance had visited Sri Lanka in the early part of this century. The upper echelons of Shri Lankan society with their highly anglicized backgrounds were abandoning the piano concerto and ballet, for

the perfection of his school of ballet and its executors, the dazzling sets, the humane touches the soaring leaps the pageantry, and color the unity of the tandava and the lasya the "marriage of sinewy steel with gossamer silk". I wished I could have seen Chitrasena and Vajira dance as in their youth for I had read somewhere, that to witness that spectacle was to see them "dancing not for men but for the gods."



"What's in a Name?"

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed

common knowledge that the so called "pizza" is certainly not the main attraction? A city restaurant is known as "Sicily Biriyani Ghar" one might wonder since when the Sicilians started eating "biriyani"? Also, so many cafes exists in the city, i. e. "Cafe Jheed", "Cafe Corner", "Cafe Madina", "Cafe Baghada", that it is not surprising that a person gets confused about what a cafe really is while a Frenchman might scream in outrage, "Mon Dieu, these Bangladeshis are crazy!"

Enough about eating places, let us switch over to shops and enterprises. Did you know that there is a shop dealing in imitation jewellery and cosmetics named "Honeymoon"? As if only women about to get married can shop there, if such was the case then, they would have lost a lot of their female clientele of all ages. There are at least two "Romeo

shop is called a "mansion" or a "palace" or a "department store", where shops with names like "Shoe Mansion", "Furniture Palace", or "Book Fair" have become a common sight these days.

Within the last few years or so hundreds of kindergartens, schools and coaching centres have suddenly sprung up welcoming the concerned ones with their long list of achievements and often with a weird name, "Evergreen", "Sure Success", "Confidence", "Green Way", "Green Gems", "Genuine" and Friends" are several among them. The "Oxford Coaching Home" probably guarantees to make all their students of the Oxford standard. Heaven knows, what to expect next from these money-grabbing commercial institutions. Pretty soon we might even see a "Harvard", a "MIT", "princeton", "Berkeley", "Cornell".

That is not all, just switch on the TV and you'll be entertained by a number of funny ads having names such as "Pancha" shoes and soap, "Prestige Lungi", "Sumoon Tailors", "Paradise Cables", "Postman Oil" and many more.

Some people complain that there should be Bengali comedies or sitcoms, but, then who needs comedies, when we have our ads? Most of you, have perhaps seen the ad of "Shampoo" cardigans and sweaters — the one, where a group of young people parade around, of course, wearing the warm clothes in question.

They look so happy and proud that they obviously could not bear to tear the tags off if saying "I'm the lucky owner of a 'Shampoo Sweater', don't you want to be one too?"

There are so many other preposterous and totally inappropriate names of shops and products, that if one wishes to conduct a research (just a thought) it will take him/her ages to invent them.

Yet made-up names are not unknown. Among them is the spoof "Letterbox" in Al Ain, a curtain shop "Skipper" or why a hospital situated here, in Dhaka, is called "Greenland"?

It is about time the people concerned gave it some thought, or used their grey cells like Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's favourite detective would say, before naming a certain thing.

Meanwhile, we the rest of us can enjoy all this, as there is a funny side. Only you need time, patience and not to mention a keen sense of humour for that.

Let us start with food joints. There is a typical snack bar in a city shopping mall called "Hiraman Snacks". Only the owner knows the relevance of such an absurd name or does he? Then, there is a Chinese restaurant called "MacDonalds", now, this could not be a feeble attempt to copy the name of one of the most well-known food chains throughout the world. If so, then why a "Chinese" restaurant? Honestly, do these people think we customers are that gullible? What about the chain of pizza joints all over the city with names like — "Piza Palace", "Piza Inn", "Piza Lake", "Piza Park", or whatever, where it is

enough castor sugar to sweeten the finished pudding — about 4 level tablespoonsfuls, but this depends on the sweetness of the apples.

Beat the eggs well, add the breadcrumbs and the prepared fruit, then the rind of lime and raisins. Beat all well together with a wooden spoon, turn into a buttered pie-dish, and bake in a hot oven for 15 minutes. Serve hot, with cream or custard.



Unofficial Aunts Advise the World

by Nicola Cole

THEIR advice is sought by millions, their sympathy by millions more. "Don't struggle on alone with your problem," urges one advice columnist, typical of many. "Share it with me...."

And a mass readership, of course. For the agony aunts who write such columns never reveal names, but nearly always reveal problems. It is what they have been doing for the last century, since they grew with the rise of cheap printing, increased literacy and demand for popular magazines.

The aunts are both praised for doing a huge amount of practical good and condemned as "well-meaning busy bodies," but they have become as indispensable to successful newspapers and women's periodicals as cartoons and crosswords.

The agony aunt is a sib-sister, mother, confidante, confessor, female Freud, sex consultant, marriage counsellor, health adviser and - on one memorable occasion - an expert on carpet underlay.

"Where can I get felt?" asked a worried questioner.

"You can get felt anywhere if you put your mind to it," replied Marie Proops gleefully, the advice columnist for Britain's Daily Mirror newspaper.

Then she added a note that gave the name of a department store and suggested questions about carpet felt should be more delicately phrased.

There is a popular belief that such agony column problems are specially devised by the aunts themselves. Their collective reply is that they are quite busy enough, thank you, with genuine letters - many of them seemingly beyond the scope of imagination - to need to invent them.

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'How big?'

Devonshire Pudding

4 apples
2 tablespoonsfuls butter
caster sugar to sweeten
grated rind of half a lime
3 tablespoonsfuls halved

stoned raisins
4 oz. breadcrumbs
2 eggs

cream or custard

Bake the apples until very soft, remove all the pulp and beat this in a basin until smooth. Add the butter, and

seem to write in with only three questions: "How big? How long? and How often?" This eagerness to air bedroom topics would have appalled Victorian-era readers, for whom open reference to sex was taboo.

"Preserve you dignity and womanly pride" was the council loftily dished out by The Woman At Home's columnist in 1897 to a young lady clearly desperate for a closer affair with her beau.

The ancestors of today's agony aunts really felt much more comfortable with "safe" domestic issues such as what to feed husbands for dinner, bringing up spirited children ("I think, my dear, that a little wholesome neglect would benefit both them and yourself"), and reassuring readers who fretted that "the female constitution will break down under the strain" of typing - a very real concern of New Yorkers in the 1880s.

Present-day aunts need the broadest of broad minds. "People write very intimate things - things which are often shocking, libelous, not to mention sometimes illegal," revealed Virginia Ironside in "Problems! Problems!" her tell-all book on advice columns.

"There are crazy letters in green ink from crazy people, there are shaky letters from the elderly and there are dreadfully wonky letters in uniform writing from people I always hope have not put their address at the top."

Wonky or well-balanced, the writers customarily receive a personal reply, even if their letters don't appear in print - it's one of the main reasons why people pour out their hearts.

"We will always be a joke," Marie Proops once wrote, "but who cares, really, as long as our readers continue to take us seriously and we are around when someone writes: 'I'm desperate and I don't know what to do or where to turn. Please, help me....'" (Gemm News)

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