

Oddissi and Bharatanatyam: The Alchemy of Dance  
by Corinne L. Casazza

A creatrix stands before you dressed in a brightly colored costume, silver jewelry adorns her neck, wrists and ankles. She wears a headpiece of gold. Behind her is an ancient temple, stark and white in contrast to her colorful figure. As she begins to dance, you are enthralled. You take in her mudras – the delicate way her hands move, the emotions evoked by her face, the rhythm kept by her feet, the graceful poses she strikes. All your worries vanish. You are transported from moment to moment, living only in the now. In the sacred bliss of all that is.

This spiritual transformation is the goal of classical Indian dance – for the dancer to become her Divine Essence, and by so doing, bring the audience to theirs. It's a symbiotic sharing and flowing of sacred energy back and forth.

There are eight types of classical Indian dance. This article discusses two of them – Odissi dance and Bharatanatyam. An Indian dancer always begins her practice with prayer and a salutation to the gods. She connects with her breath, with the earth through the soles of her feet, with heaven through the crown of her head, and with all the space within and around her.

The dancer is seen as the creator of the universe, creating her own universe with her dance and letting creation flow through her while dancing. As she prepares to dance, she must view herself as the center axis between heaven and earth, and allow all manifestation to revolve around her. The most profound role of the dancer is her ability to transform her own reality and touch her audience deeply, offering the opportunity to transcend ordinary life moments into extraordinary spiritual ones.

Revital Carroll has been practicing Odissi dance for six years. “I always had the spirit of a dancer, and was interested in Indian spirituality since my childhood in Israel. I went to India when I was 20 and was immediately drawn to Yoga and meditation practice. While living in

India, I was introduced to several Classical Indian Dances, and when I saw Odissi, I knew it was my dance. It is both powerful and soft, expressing passion, beauty and strength. Odissi captures the spiritual aspect of life, as well as the emotional, and yet it is very physically complex and involved. It's based on the principles of Yoga, and I find in it all my loves merged in one! It is like a marriage between the ascetic and the erotic.”

The two main postures of Odissi dance are the chauka and tribhangi. Chauka is the more masculine position. It's the powerful, fundamental position that generates energy and strength. Tribhnagi (literally, three parts break) is the independent movement of head, chest and pelvis. This is more feminine in nature, generating grace and beauty. The tribhnagi position is very round and feminine and creates the round and curvaceous movements so indicative of Odissi dance.

This torso movement is unique to Odissi dance. The hips are open to collect energy, but instead of storing the primal (sexual) energy in the hips, the energy is built and carried up the erect spine toward the heart. Here the torso movement stirs the emotions in the heart. The result is connection to the audience from the heart (and not from the hips) and having the current of creative energy and emotions expressing through the face and the hand gestures.

In Indian dance, the emotions are conveyed mostly through facial expressions. For the dancer to truly connect with her emotions, and authentically express them, she must engage the whole body. The footwork creates connection with the earth, providing solid foundation, rooting, and “rhythm carriage” to bring the dancer into ecstatic state. The rhythm itself is the trance medium.

The lower body keeps time and rhythm, and is precise and powerful, while the upper body is fluid and graceful, expressing love and beauty. The whole spectrum of emotion is

expressed in Odissi, but love is the primary emotion and considered to be most divine. The famous love story of Krishna and Radha is the subject of the majority of Odissi Abhinayas. (Theatrical dances).

The repertoire of Odissi dance includes five sections:

- Mangala Charana -- a traditional invocation piece
- Batu Nrutya -- abstract dance with many sculptural poses
- Pallavi -- pure dance, lyrical variations of a musical raga
- Abhinaya -- theatrical, expressional dance form
- Mokshya -- concluding fast-tempo dance with peace prayer

A dancer is required to know at least one dance piece of each element of the repertoire in order to have her debut performance called mancha pravesh, or “to enter the stage.” According to Revital, dancers usually know several types of each, but may have more skill with Nritya (pure dance) or Nritya (theatrical dance).

“[This dance] touches every string in my soul, spirit and body. The spiritual aspect of this dance is what I found most unique and attractive about it. I never felt like other dance forms satisfied me as much, while with Odissi I feel transformation of my body, mind and spirit as a result of dancing. I love the music, I love the stunning postures, I love the round nature of the movement and also the intensity of the footwork. Perhaps what I love best is the way it delivers me into ecstatic trance like state and makes me feel so elated and happy.”

Srivani can relate. Her journey of Bharatanatyam dance began in her native Poland in 1991 when she witnessed Govardhana Devi Dasi dance the Bharatanatyam. Just before the dance

began, she felt a stirring in her heart. She knew something was coming to change her life forever. After only seconds of watching the dance, tears were streaming down her face.

“It was like finding secret treasure, very emotional, very deep and something similar to catharsis -- very purifying. All my uncertain goals, all my life problems disappeared. I discovered the goal and destiny of my life. Nothing is more important than that. I found my purpose in life, my religion and a path of self-realization through Bharatanatyam. Should I have asked for more?”

The name Bharatanatyam is translated as: Bharatha -- a combination of 'bha' for bhava meaning expression, 'ra' for raga, meaning music and 'tha' for thalam meaning rhythm. Natyam means dance. It's a lasya (feminine) dance which is tender and erotic. The basic theme is love. The dancers perform devotional dance; devotion to the Supreme Being, or the devotion of a mother to her child. Bharatanatyam also epitomizes the adoration of lovers separated and united. It's considered to be a fire dance, where there is a display of the element of fire in the dancer's body. Bharatanatyam is characterized by deep-seated positions which are difficult to execute.

Hidden in the symbolism of Bharatanatyam is a deep understanding of how the Universe works. “For me it means the unending dance of creation. Preservation and destruction is art, science and religion merged as one. When we behold the dance, the world is seen as it truly is: sacred. Every happening within it is Divine Will. Dance represents the cosmic circle: the perfect circle of creation and destruction,” says Srivani.

The repertoire of Bharatanatyam consists of three parts:

- Nritta is pure dance or sequences of non-interpretive dance. These steps, movements or gestures are not meant to convey any message or thought. They are primarily meant to add beauty to the dance form.

- Nritya is an interpretative dance and involves a lot of sentiment, emotion and description. The gestures convey messages of depicting a king, indicating that it's morning etc. The messages are conveyed via leg, hand, neck, head and eye movements.
- Natya is dance drama and its main technique is abhinaya. It involves acting out a story for the audience using expressions. The actors may dress like the character. Natya is usually performed with a mythological theme, like the stories of Ramayana or Krishnaleela.

Another very important aspect of Bharatanatyam movements is adavus. The simplest definition of adavus would be the basic unit of Bharathanatyam involving the whole body.

Interestingly, both Srivani and Revital said they had difficulty learning to use facial expressions. "It took me a long time not to be shy to express, and use my face more deliberately. As a westerner, the intimacy of expressing emotions is challenging at first," says Revital.

As it turns out, facial expression is very important to the spiritual transformation of the dancer. "Through the dance," says Revital, "energy is rising from the lower chakras to the upper chakras. Emotions naturally get released and translated into emotional expressions, so it's natural and authentic. The idea is that energy moves up the spine, is harmonized and released, so these emotions are the result of spiritual transformation: internal alchemy."

This alchemy is then transmitted to the audience. "The artist feeds off the audience," says Revital, "I feel moved to perform, the more energy I have from them, the more energy I have to dance fully. The audience reverberates what the dancer is experiencing so they can be in that pool of bliss too, sharing the energy, connecting and bathing in harmony."

Srivani agrees. “Bharatanatyam is a vehicle for all the emotions, and its message is to transcend above the lower and to keep the vibration of the higher. We dance with our bodies but we finally forget them and transform them. We dance the lives of Gods and Goddesses, and share this experience with the audience.”

So, when our colorful Creatrix has completed her dance, she has transformed her audience as well. The Goddess upon the stage looks out at the Gods and Goddesses in the crowd, all sharing the bliss of all that is in this moment.

Revital Carroll is an Odissi dance performer and teacher. Revital teaches workshops, privates, and intensives in Odissi Dance and Shakti Yoga Fusion, and is available for booking performances. [www.shaktibhakti.com](http://www.shaktibhakti.com) .

Corinne L. Casazza is a freelance writer and novelist based in Sedona, Arizona. Her latest novel, “Walk Like an Egyptian” is available online. You can reach Corinne at [ccaz67@yahoo.com](mailto:ccaz67@yahoo.com), or [www.CasazzaWriting.com](http://www.CasazzaWriting.com)