



BRINGING INDIAN ARTS TO NEW YORKERS

Aseem Chhabra reports from the Erasing Borders Dance Festival.

Photographs: Darial Sneed



On the evening of August 15 it rained a little bit in New York City giving relief to millions of residents of the city and especially to the dancers who were performing in the open air in Manhattan's downtown Battery Park area at the Erasing Borders Dance Festival along with the performers of the Battery Dance Company's 35th annual dance event.

Started by the Indo American Arts Council nine years ago, the Erasing Borders event (the council also uses the same title for its paintings show) is the brainchild of Aroon Shivdasani, the artistic and executive director of the organization. And it was curated by a small team of New York-based dancers and choreographers — Rajika Puri, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Parul Shah and Rashi Varma.

"Erasing Borders was started to give platform to people who are erasing the borders between contemporary and traditional dance form," Puri said.

And perhaps for that reason the indoor concert held on evening of August 13 at Pace University's Schimmel Auditorium was titled *Playing with Tradition*.

Rain is considered good luck in the Indian context, and the three-day festival needed a lot of that, given that a couple of dancers were not able to reach the United States due to visa issues. But the spirits of the organizers and the dancers were not affected and they put on a spectacular show.

Revanta Sarabhai (Mallika Sarabhai's son) was supposed to perform a duet with a Sri Lankan partner who could not arrive in the US. And so Sarabhai stepped in to perform a solo show — a Padam in Bharata Natyam, using a love poem he had composed. The classical dance has a contemporary twist, set in our world of virtual communications and reflecting the lives of women who are career motivated.

Clockwise from top, Avijit Das, Pandit Krishan Mohan Mishra, Sumeet Nagdev, Surabhi Bharadwaj at the Erasing Borders Dance Festival in Battery Park, Manhattan, August 15.



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And Avijit Das, who was scheduled to only perform in the outdoor show, stepped in to showcase a widely appreciated Kuchipudi dance — *Dashavtara Shabdam*, exploring the 10 earthly forms taken by Lord Vishnu to fight evil.

This as well as the last piece of the indoor show — Rama Vaidynathan's stunning Bharata Natyam recital — were the two classical traditional performances of the evening, while other dancers played with the theme of erasing the borders.

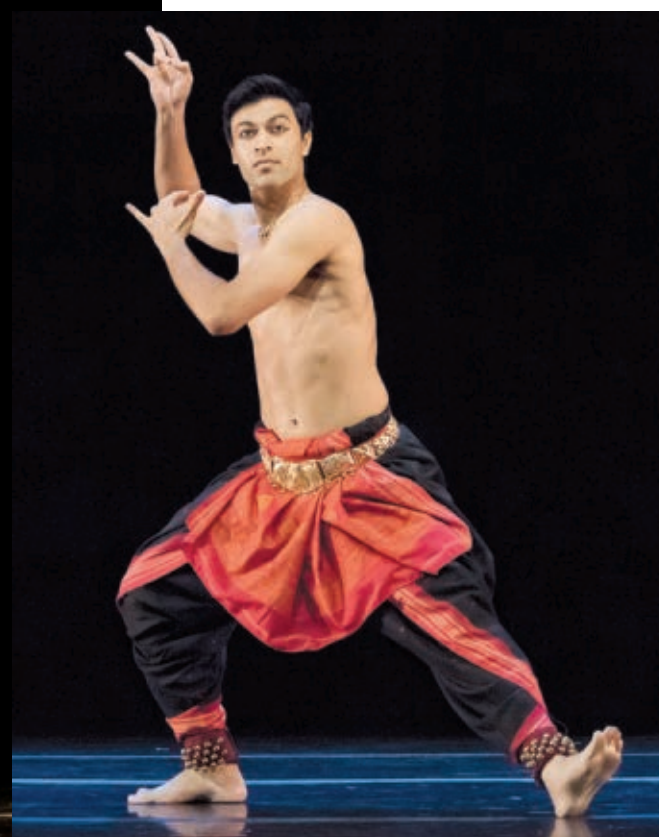
Malaysia-born and United Kingdom-based Sooraj Subramaniam performed *Noc-turne* — a contemporary dance piece he first composed in 2011. In the piece, dressed just in a pajama, he portrayed himself as a man who has a troubled sleep with dreams that he danced to express.

Using a wide range of music — from L Shanker's violin piece to Abida Parveen Saz-e-Ishq, he performed a show, borrowing from his training in Kathak, Odissi and even Bharata Natyam.

His dance vocabulary, he later said was similar to languages he spoke: "I consider myself to be fluid in two and possibly in three languages. I can switch back and forth and I don't even think of them as different forms. I use whichever word is required from whichever language to express the most appropriate thing at that moment."

Subramaniam added the same held true when he choreographing. "I don't think right now I am going to do Odissi and next I will add Kathak," he said.

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PHOTOGRAPHS: DARIAL SNEED



Clockwise from left, Sooraj Subramaniam, Rama Vaidyanathan, Cynthia Ling Lee, Revanta Sarabhai and Eriko Sugimura. The open air finale was preceded by indoor performances and workshops

Taiwanese American dancer Cynthia Ling Lee, gave a gender twist to her piece — *rapture/rupture*, where a Kathak dancer sheds her outfit and switches into clothes that better define her. California-based Lee, a member of the Post Natyam Collective, was trained in Kathak in India and then here in the US.

Describing her dance, which was choreographed by Shyamala Moorty, she later said that there is a burden for dancers — especially women who perform Kathak — to display the traditional Indian sense of femininity in their performances. Her act she said was to break from that traditional view to one that better defined her gender identity.

And another performance of Padam was displayed by the Japanese dancer Eriko Sugimura, who used Western ballet form and absorbing within it the traditional courtesan dance from South India. Sugimura worked with her choreographer Shreenath Muthyala (the two met as students at New York's Peridance School of Contemporary

and Ballet) to create a beautiful universal form of dance.

The indoor performances were followed by day-long workshops looking at the martial arts dance Chhau (Latin American dancer Carolina Prada); Yokayam, which incorporated, Bharata Natyam, yoga and Kalari (dancer Surabhi Bharadwaj); and contemporary dance by Mumbai-based Sumeet Nagdev.

The final day's performances in the open air incorporated works by Nagdev and his dance company; *Sthai*, a traditional Odissi performance by Subramaniam; and a remarkable Kathak piece by the senior dancer Pandit Kishan Mohan Mishra who is from Delhi.

The free open air concert against the backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean and grey clouds — that eventually led to rain — entertained thousands of New Yorkers who gathered in downtown Manhattan.

And that is the main goal of IAAC — bringing Indian arts to New Yorkers.

