

## Negotiating Natyam

### Bharata Natyam – Practice, Performance, Perception

#### Rationale

Bharata Natyam has never been more popular. The classical performance art that developed in the context of the temples and courts of mediaeval South India is today practiced and performed all over the world – from the temple town of Tanjore to the suburbs of Manchester, from Durban in South Africa to Buenos Aires in Argentina. Its popularity has given it an almost iconic status, particularly in the diaspora, and it represents for many the essence of what constitutes Indian culture and heritage.

In the course of a century, Bharata Natyam has undergone two major upheavals, which have affected its technique, its intention and its perception as a form. The first of these was the transfer from a predominantly temple and religious/court context to performance on stage. The second has been the increasing practice and performance of Bharata Natyam in diaspora contexts very far removed from the language, the culture and the earth of its origins, and the impact in turn of the globalised world upon its practice within India.

In common with art forms across the world, Bharata Natyam now faces urgent and complex questions about how to retain its integrity without turning into a museum piece, about working with the form as accessible to all without compromising the cultural specificity that perhaps makes it what it is and about how a form that conventionally focused on the exploration of divine and erotic love makes sense in a world where these themes have very different associations.

In London today, while students continue to enroll on classes in their hundreds, teachers question how their students will portray images from a life style so different from their own; while audiences clamour for more classical work, dancers and choreographers increasingly explore the place of Bharata Natyam as a dance language, and how best to allow the style to speak from and to their current preoccupations and concerns. We are left with a host of questions, political, technical, cultural and aesthetic about what makes Bharata Natyam 'Bharata Natyam'; what is distinctive about and what is intrinsic to the form.

*Negotiating Natyam* will:

- inform and educate, looking at Bharata Natyam, its history and development from the 1900s to the present day
- challenge, explore and debate ideas about what constitutes Bharata Natyam, and how Bharata Natyam is practiced, performed and perceived in the contemporary world
- celebrate Bharata Natyam in all its forms