

Inspired by *Maharaja*

An Interview with Pandit Chitresh Das

Below: Chitresh Das. Opposite: Chitresh Das Dance Company dancers. Photos by Margo Moritz.

In association with the *Maharaja* exhibition, the Asian is excited to present the world premiere of *Darbar*, a work created, choreographed, and composed by kathak master Pandit Chitresh Das and performed by the internationally renowned all-female Chitresh Das Dance

Company. The work will be presented Thursday through Sunday, March 15–18, at 7:00 pm, with an additional performance on Sunday at 2:00 pm (for tickets visit asianart.org/performances.htm).

Darbar means “The Court.” It is a traditional kathak dance drama. Kathak, a classical dance form that combines Hindu and Muslim influences, was adopted by the Mughals when they ruled India.

The story is set in the court of the king Wajid Ali Shah, who represents an age of decadence. He is so distracted by his indulgences that he fails to notice that the British are trying to tempt his general into betraying

him. The work is a representation of the rich artistic and cultural legacy of the courts of North India as well as a statement about the responsibility of power and the risk of corruption—concepts still relevant today. Recently we had a chance to talk about this work with Pandit Chitresh Das.

Q. What was the genesis behind this new work, *Darbar*?

Darbar is based on a work I created in 1998, but I am re-imagining it in a new way. This time I have gained inspiration from the *Maharaja* exhibit, which is about power. Not just power within India, but British and colonial power as well. And there was another side of this dynamic in the court, the power of the courtesans. We are bringing forth the power of music, dance, and drama through a story line that combines the stories of several historical figures. The work explores the tensions between Indian rulers and generals and the British, with their strategy of divide and rule. In 1757 almost sixty miles from the city of Calcutta, where I grew up, under the mango grove of Palashi, the last Nawab of Bengal, Shiraj-ud-Dullah, was defeated by the British colonialist Robert Clive. In 1856 the Nawab, who was the patron king of kathak, was exiled to a suburb of Calcutta. His entire court moved with him, helping to establish Calcutta as a major seat of culture.

My parents’ performing arts institution, Nritya Bharati, was one of the

oldest and most established in Calcutta. They brought in the greatest gurus in the classical arts as well as leading painters, poets, and thinkers of the time. My father choreographed the first revolutionary dance drama before independence called *Abhudhoy*, meaning “The Dawn.” My guruji, Pandit Ram Narayan Mishra, used to live and teach in the quarters of Calcutta inhabited by descendants of courtesans from Lucknow, Jaipur, and Benares. As a child, I would accompany him there, and I would see him teaching my guru-sisters a form of kathak different from what I learned. These girls would later grow up to perform and entertain wealthy clients.

Despite the fact that society considered it taboo to go to the courtesan district, my mother was an independent woman and felt that I should accompany my guruji. So as a child I had the incredible experience of seeing this living history. The dance in this piece is a direct reflection of what I witnessed.

Q. How is Indian dance being changed by the globalization of our world?

The dance form is undergoing tremendous change. Thousands of years ago dance was performed by wandering minstrels in temples honoring the deities. Then kathak moved into the courts, where it was an important expression of the melding of Hindu and Muslim cultures. Today kathak has moved into the proscenium.

When I was growing up, kathak was a solo art, performed over two to three hours. There were no fancy lights, no costume changes, no sound checks, just

an audience who knew and appreciated the intricacies of a dancer who could perform with exceptional technique, rhythmic improvisation, poetic recitation, and storytelling from the great epics. Now, with the art form being performed for audiences who are mostly unfamiliar with its traditions, many artists are no longer learning or performing the traditional solos. To cater to Western audiences and an increasingly sound-bite fueled society, Western choreography and production have entered kathak. Classical Indian artistic expression is giving way to pop forms like Bollywood. But my company members are all aspiring soloists. Seema, who runs my school in Mumbai, is performing traditional solos in the heart of Bollywood and working hard to show the people of Mumbai how thrilling and rich the Indian classical tradition is.

No tradition is static. All traditions evolve. Dancers who take hold of these traditions only become important artists when they develop themselves within the art to the point of finding and expressing an original voice. I call this innovation within tradition. This is what makes these traditions universal and meaningful.

With *Darbar* I am able to talk about power, politics, and art through the tradition of kathak. In kathak lies the art of my message, of movement and dance, of costumes, of discovering what happened in India in the 1700s and 1800s that is relevant to modern audiences, whether they be in San Francisco or Mumbai. Just as the *Maharaja* exhibit explores the power and dynamics of the maharajas, so this art reflects that history and brings it alive for the modern day.

