



IN SEARCH OF

Sita

REVISITING MYTHOLOGY

Edited by
MALASHRI LAL &
NAMITA GOKHALE

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From the Diary of Sita:
An Exploration of Self in Dance, Drama and Music

Nilimma Devi is a noted dancer and choreographer who have devoted a lifetime to the elegant art form of Kuchipudi – a classical dance form originating in 17th century South India. Kuchipudi then was a caste and gender exclusive dance drama embedded in the regional ethos of Andhra Pradesh. She is one the first generation of women initiated into Kuchipudi. Her struggle against personal obstacles to master this art emerges as one of many strong metaphors in her work. A dancer of international repute who has garnered critical praise from India as well as the United States, where she is now based, Devi strives to transcend cultural boundaries and inform audiences. She works to dispel assumptions – “I have no wish to be viewed as an exotic or ethnic dancer” -- even as she brings the best of classical rigor and choreographic creativity to the Washington dance scene.

Her career has taken her to international shores, transnational communities and to some of the toughest questions of self possible. Her choreography has explored the universal feminine aspect where it appears in India; the Goddess Ganga, Queen Draupadi, saint Mahadevi Akka, and Meera Bai. Her choreography reflects to some degree a distillation of her identity – at once Indian and American – as well as her ideas – conveying social equity on a global stage for a diverse audience. Certainly delving into Sita’s myth has had an inherent logic and appeal for her. Devi dives into her most ambitious foray -- *From the Diary of Sita* – to confront what is core to a woman’s experience of personal anguish. She wields her tools expertly – theatre, dance, music, lighting – to re-create and re-tell the story of Sita as she might have described it in words of her own. Caught up in the whirlwind of creating, completing and premiering the work at Dance Place, Devi spoke about her latest venture only this week. What follows is a rare opportunity to talk to Devi and have her explain some of the choices she made as a choreographer as well as her thoughts about Sita.

Question: You say you have grown up with the epic Ramayana....how did this affect your decision to create *From the Diary of Sita*?

Answer: I have grown up hearing my own mother sing of Sita. And as child I embraced her reverence for the Rama and Sita without question. But when I approached my twenties and later thirties, I really began to ask what it meant to revere Sita. Yes I resonated with Sita’s radiance; her divinity as the daughter of mother earth.

Question: Did you ever resolve such visceral polemics – and if so how?

Answer: That’s one of the wonderful (unintentional) results of doing this production. I have found my peace with Sita of tradition. See, poets and storytellers rarely show women doing what is known as “heroic” (fighting, etc.). Rather they are abducted or pawned, or humiliated. So many women try to make Sita a source of strength by saying her silent stoic suffering is ‘strong.’ It is either that or rejects Sita. But now having done the research, thought about it, I see it another way. To read between the lines of Valmiki and Tulsi and understand Sita was making choices all along. It is fascinating how the village women of India have been doing precisely this for hundreds of years; singing songs telling of a powerful Sita in the various languages of Bengali Marathi, and Hindi.

Question: How did you diverge from the traditional story?

Answer: Actually I didn’t. The story remains. Only this time Sita speaks up. She describes exactly how she feels, what she thinks and in the end she makes her final choice. So for me the traditional narrative revealed a mother lode of feminine energy once I allowed the Sita of my creative imagination to speak.

Question: Was it hard to communicate this to your American audience?

Answer: Yes and no. I have always pulled in a diverse audience – non-Indian and Indian – so I had to assume that everyone was unfamiliar with the story of the Ramayana. While many may know of the Greek

Homer's Illiad, few would know that Valmiki's Ramayana is the most pervasive epic across not only India but much of Asia. I outlined the basic story in the program sheet. The dance itself is not weighed down with explicit narrative; instead I let viewers draw their own meaning.

I do highlight certain episodes because I think they were pivotal to Sita's character. Sita goes from a life of royal privilege to one of forest privation – a choice requiring courage and physical endurance. What happens later – the abduction by Ravana and Rama's demand of the fire test and abandonment – outside the realm of choice. Destiny brutalizes Sita yet it does not prove her helpless. When Rama gives in to political pressure and abandons Sita, she exercises her freedom to choose once again. She freely enters mother earth's arms.

Question: Yes, but can't that action be seen as a negative choice – a form of suicide to enter the earth?

Answer: I don't see it that way. From the beginning Sita is said to be the daughter of Mother Earth – she literally gives off the radiance associated with divinity. In the performance I convey this quality with a lit brass lamp borne by a dancer. Sita uses that shining consciousness to survive, endure and finally transcend her suffering. What could be more freeing? She goes back to the ultimate source – Devi, the Goddess.

Question: What was the most memorable part of the production?

Answer: The music and dance were both an opportunity to peel away the layers of Sita's persona. I was really challenged to merge the facets of dance, theater, martial arts, shadow puppetry, and music to convey the story I think my favorite moment emerged out of my own childhood memories coming alive with the research reading. It triggered this dream like inspiration of poetry which seemed perfect for Sita's voice. It was so perfect that I ended up recording it directly into the musical score.

*Born of Mother Earth
I dance to pulse of my gurus
Vast oceans, venerable trees,*

*Rama archer prince, pierced my heart
I followed him into exile
Abducted by Ravana
Rama came to rescue
Not me but his pride*

*I walked through flames to prove my chastity
But not my love*

Yet Rama abandoned me to the forest

*These mute memories
These tears of stone*

*Mother Earth called me
"Return Daughter"
I entered her depthless embrace*

*Everyone calls Sita
But I have other names too
Seema, Sara, Sophie*

*O my mother
I shall be born again and again*

*And in every breath
In every voice
In every woman
I manifest
For I am free.*

By Anila Kumari

Question: What made the poem mean so much to you?

Answer: The poem accomplished two goals: one it was condensed narrative; and two, it was a nuanced interpretation. The poem evolved into a writing process that took on a life of its own when my daughter Anila became intrigued. We argued and agreed and were caught up in the energy of Sita. What did Sita feel and think towards the end? Did she find solace in grief or did she make a choice to end the cycle of sorrow? What did her final destination mean? It was interesting to see how passionately Anila felt like Sita's advocate. Seeing this and the reaction of other women friends, I was doubly assured that Sita and her story had a message that transcended the limits of history. I have to say, however, that it didn't always transcend the limits of gender. Two male musicians objected to it saying: "but Rama is god; and he never meant to hurt Sita...why is this all about Rama's faults? Before I could explain, the vocalist – a quiet young Tamilian woman – spoke pointedly: "But it is not about Rama....it is about Sita; that is why it is called *From the Diary of Sita*...remember?"

Question: What about the dance, after all you are foremost a dancer?

Answer: As the poem took shape so did the dance movement. With the dance emerging in poetic/narrative episodes, I would see flashes mother earth coalescing in fluid lines or Sita passionately stamping out a jathi. Other sequences took – sometimes – agonizing work working on deadline to its debut I literally would fall into bed exhausted invoking Sita for my muse. The core dancers were pushed to execute kinetic dichotomies -- rapid fire rhythms, yielding yoga poses, and powerful jumps and unfurling leg extensions. My superb martial artist was challenged to adapt to the Kuchipudi form and rhythm.

In the meantime I conceived and had made, four white linen panels to be hung vertically from behind which dancers would fluidly emerge and retreat. I thought a large book was symbolic and connected both beginning and the end with layers of meaning. A lamp is held aloft by Sita as she glides from dancer formation of mother earth. Shadow puppets foreshadowed Rama's battle with Ravana – which was mesmerizing martial combat with swords.

Question: What was it like to make the music?

Answer: Out of all the many theatrical fronts needing attention, nothing was quite as absorbing and challenging as the music. I had a superb cadre of diverse musicians – veena, violin, mridangam, vocal and Koto (Japanese stringed instrument) who were classicists with a gusto for creativity. The striking, pure notes of the Koto became a haunting motif of Sita's voice. As the piece evolved, rich sounds of rhythm and song were poured into the mix. But it was hard work. The quotient was high: the music had to work for the dancers and yet sound good enough to stand on its own.

Question: How would you describe the performance in your words?

Answer: When all the elements came together the performance took on a soulful vitality that captured my original sense of Sita. The pure notes of the Koto had a quiet strength so I had them echo while the poem was read and the audience sat in a darkened auditorium. Next came the dramatic entrance of a dancer leaping into powerful jathi. The dancer ends with the statement: "My name is Sita" and retreats behind a panel. A second dancer eyes darts a glance through a small window in the panel. Elaborate eye play gives

way to another rapid jathi and the enunciation of "my name is Sita" in Hindi; "Mera naam sita hain" The third panel exposed dancing feet, and the statement of self in French. The Sita was the woman of the universe by making her speak different languages. The fourth dancer employs martial arts behind a backlit panel to create plunging shadows. The last dancer storms onto stage and culminates his set with lifting the book to the statement "she has other names too." I wanted to suggest that beyond geography and language Sita exists within every woman.

Question: What thoughts did you come away with after finishing the work and performing it at Dance Place?

Answer: In my work as a dancer and choreographer I wanted to use the tools I had honed over the years to explore Sita. She is, without a doubt, one of the most potent symbols of Indian womanhood, and I wanted to probe that; see it blossom. It was the extraordinary labor of creating this choreographic 'infant' that gave me insight into Sita beyond tradition. From the Diary of Sita offers a strong suggestion of a strong, eternal Sita; and the message seems to be so resonant for me personally. It is wonderful now to see how it all merges into a larger tapestry – my history as it connects to India, to womanhood, as a mother, as a daughter. I feel as though the layers of culture, time, language, are just peeled away; revealing what is truly underneath – this effulgent universal sisterhood.

You know just the other day I turned on the television and saw a group singing a beautiful African American spiritual (written in times of slavery). The words captured my heart; echoing what I had learned on this journey of Sita – "freedom never dies" Sita proclaims at the end of piece – "for I am free..." Then the spiritual exhorts to face suffering and look beneath it, to... "see sweet honey in the rock." It really struck me then how deep all of this goes. Sita is every woman who sees truth, light, and freedom underneath the shifting sands of life. The fierce courage of this divine daughter of earth who faces trial after trial and unimaginable heartbreak is ours. I truly believe this. After all, it is my story too.

By A.K. Ashby

Anila Kumari Ashby learned about dance under the tutelage of eminent gurus Padmashri Prahlada Vedantam, Padma Bhooshan Vempati Chinna Satyam, and Nilimma Devi. She is Associate Director of Sutradhar Institute of Dance & Related Arts (SIDRA) and a lead member of Devi Dance Theater. She was interviewed and filmed in 1995 for BBC series on world dance. An avid writer of poetry and cultural ethnography, Anila penned the key poem for "The Diary of Sita," a provocative choreographic work by Nilimma Devi. Nilimma Devi, an AIIS scholar and faculty member of George Washington University, continues to teach her course "Gender and Indian Classical Dance" to university students every year.