

Meet the Next Gen Dancers

Ranee Ramaswamy learned Bharatanatyam at an early age, but only found her destiny in it after migrating to the US and watching Alarmel Valli perform

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT A young aspiring dancer from Chennai would have to travel all the way to America to really understand the ancient Bharatanatyam dance form? This Dance of the Gods gives humans celestial power, beauty and joy, and also the strength to face the vicissitudes of life. Like a powerful wind on a sailing ship, it can propel you from one country to another on the other side of world. It can also serve as an anchor and bulwark to survive and flourish in a new world.

This is a love story of a family of devoted dancers—mother and daughters—and the dance guru who changed their lives. The guru is the legendary Indian dancer Alarmel Valli—one of India's greatest Bharatanatyam dancers, who has been conferred the Padma Bhushan by the President of India and the award of Chevalier of the Arts and Lettres by the French government. The dancers who are perpetuating her lineage in the West are a remarkable trio—mother Ranee Ramaswamy and daughters Aparna and Ashwini. These

three are the core of the Ragamala Dance Company, which has won accolades around the world.

Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy's Ragamala Dance Company, now in its 30th year, is an independent dance company based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Over the years it has had a dance dialogue with national and international artists and created many presentations, including *Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim* at the 45th Annual Soorya Festival in October 2022 at various locations in Kerala, India. This six-performance engagement is part of Ragamala's 2022/2023 season, which culminates with a 30th-anniversary gala celebration in July 2023.

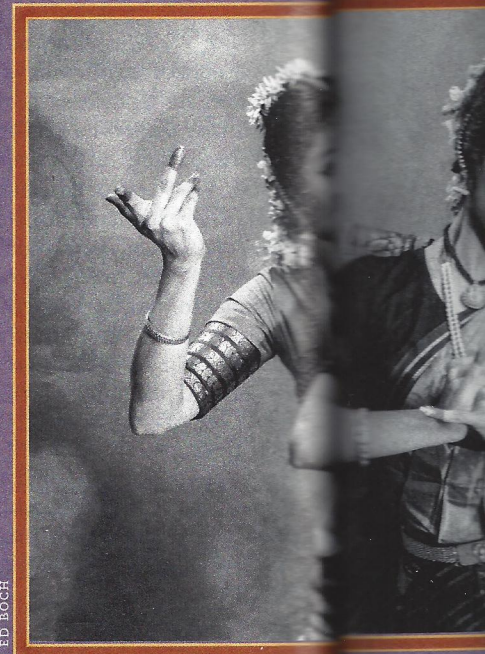
Ironically, Ranee, Aparna and Ashwini never encountered Alarmel Valli in India. This life-changing connection was made in America, after they had moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota and the great dancer came there on tour.

The story started decades ago with Ranee, the daughter of an entomologist father and a horsemaker mother, growing up in a very

traditional joint family of religious Iyer Hindu brahmins in Chennai, then called Madras. Ranee remembers learning slokas at a very early age, constantly visiting temples and also having her hair shaved in a Hindu ritual when she was a young girl.

Chennai may be the home of Bharatanatyam, but in this deeply religious family it was not given much importance. Ranee had never even seen a performance on stage. However, a class once taken at the age of five with a cousin opened her eyes to the magic of dance. Remembers Ranee, "I was so enthralled by the idea of imparting this gorgeous lesson through steps and movements with performances on stage that I begged my parents to get me classes. So when I was seven or eight, they found a teacher who had just started classes at a ladies club, and when those ended, the teacher came to teach me at home." Ranee learned dancing till the age of 15, but she never had an arangetram, a first formal performance, as her uncles and cousins did not approve of girls performing on stage—they felt the money was better saved

Our Ancient Temple Dance Meets the Future



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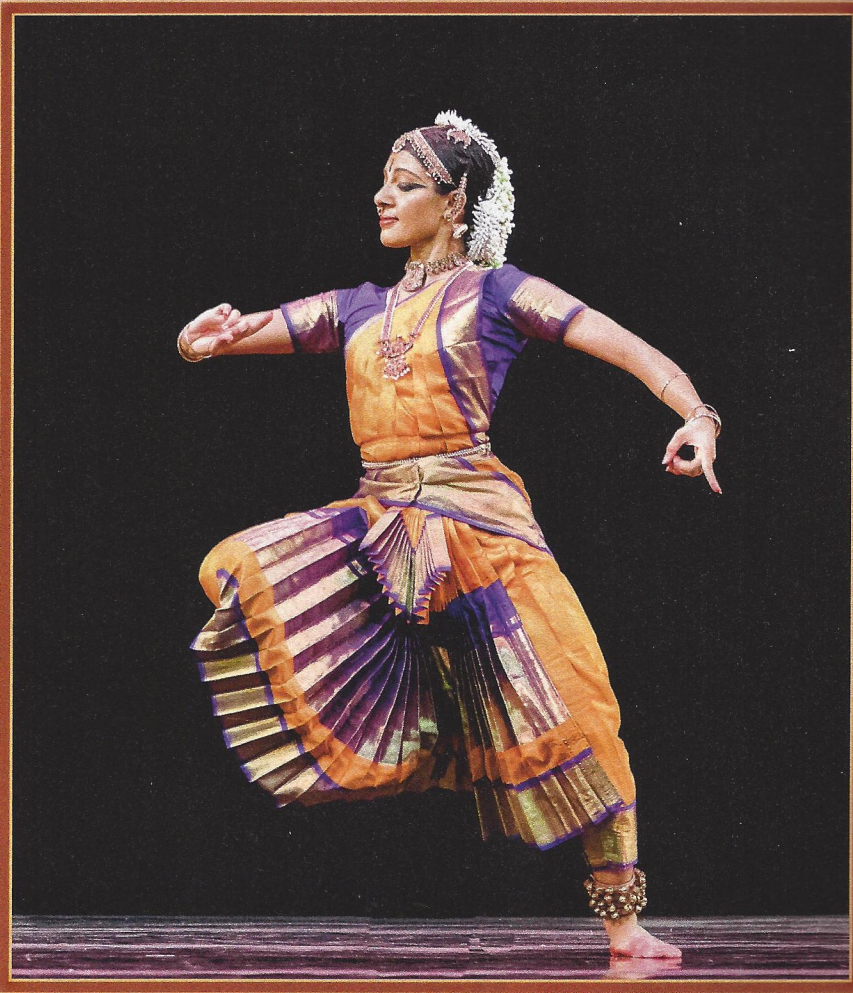
for her wedding and dowry!

And so, real life took over. Ranees recalls, "I had an arranged marriage at 20. By 23 I had my daughter Aparna, and by 26 I had left India. So my dance career ended like that—but then I came to Minneapolis and it flowered into something awesome and wonderful."

When she first came to Minneapolis, the Indian population (now 50,000) consisted of just 100 people. They embraced Ranees and her family as new immigrants. Social life revolved around the community and the Hindu temple. As a dancer, she was invited to perform at Diwali festivities. She recalls, "People around me really enjoyed it, and asked me if I would teach the kids, but I didn't know enough to teach them. So after a year and a half in Minneapolis I went back to India looking for teachers so that I could learn all the basics and come back." When she returned to her new adopted home, she became the dance teacher there.

When Alarmel Valli came to Minneapolis in 1978 for a performance, Ranees was mesmerized by her style of performing and took a two-week extensive residency with her. This was the teacher of her dreams, the dance training she never got, so Ranees wholeheartedly adopted her as her guru. Every year she and Aparna would travel to Chennai to study with Alarmel. That learning process has continued over the years.

"When I started learning from Valli, I saw Bharatanatyam as something amazing. It wasn't just the basic Bharatanatyam—it was so exquisite that I wanted the world to see it, not just the Indian community," says Ranees. She collaborated with American artists,



DARIAL SNEED

Dance in their genes: (Clockwise from above) Aparna Ramaswamy in "They Rose at Dawn," a solo performance at the Joyce Theater in New York in 2016; (below, right to left) Ranees Ramaswamy with daughters Aparna and Ashwini in the Ragamala studio in 2022; Ranees and Aparna Ramaswamy, Mirabai Versions, 1991; Alarmel Valli (center, with dance timing stick), Ranees and Aparna Ramaswamy in Valli's studio in Chennai, shortly after they met.



GRAHAM TOBERT





thereby making her performances more accessible to local audiences. The very first such production was held in 1994 at Great American History Theater with sitarist-composer David Whetstone, incorporating the dancers' movements to drumming and lines of poetry by Whetstone.

It was a labor of love. As co-artistic directors, the mother and daughter continued choreographing often with Alarmel Valli, to engage the American audiences. In the ensuing years, Ragamala became an American success story by putting together funding for collaborative works with various partners including Walker Art Center, Theater Mu, the Miami University Performing Arts Series, Arts Midwest, National Endowment for the Arts and the McKnight Foundation. In 2011 the company performed at the Maximum India Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

Younger daughter Ashwini joined the company after finishing college. Born and brought up in America, she brought her own perspectives to the company as choreographer associate, creating new works which took the dance story to a wider audience.

Over the years more dancers joined the company. Many ancient stories were presented with a contemporary spin, making old stories new and relevant again. *Sacred Earth*, which was presented in India while on tour, explored the relationship between nature and humans, and incorporated the philosophy and art of kolam chalk drawings on stage. *Fires of Varanasi* explores the sacred rituals around the city of Varanasi. *Written in Water* was created from Paramapadam, the original game that Snakes and Ladders is based on. Interwoven with that is a 12th-century Sufi poem about enlightenment called "The Conference of the Birds," which

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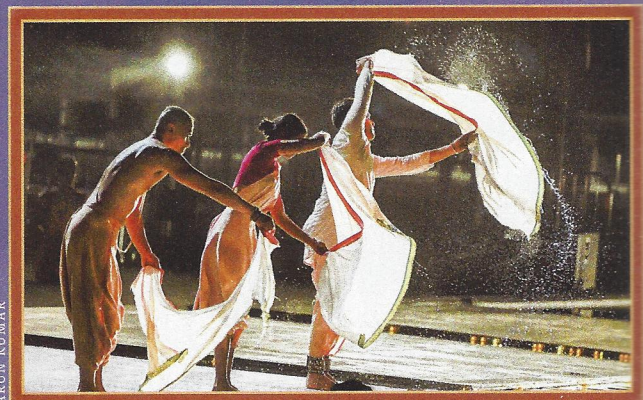
AMARULLA

Modern Touch...



ANTHONY DEBRILL

Continuing the art: (above left) Aparna performing a solo in Chennai, India in 2015; (above, right) a young Raneer Ramaswamy; (below, left to right) Ashwini (foreground) with the rest of the company performing in *Sacred Earth* at Celebrate Brooklyn! in 2022; world premiere of *Fires of Varanasi* at The Kennedy Center in Washington DC in 2021; Aparna rehearsing in the Ragamala studio in 2016; Ashwini and Aparna in *Fires of Varanasi* at the Joyce Theater in New York in 2021



ARUN KUMAR

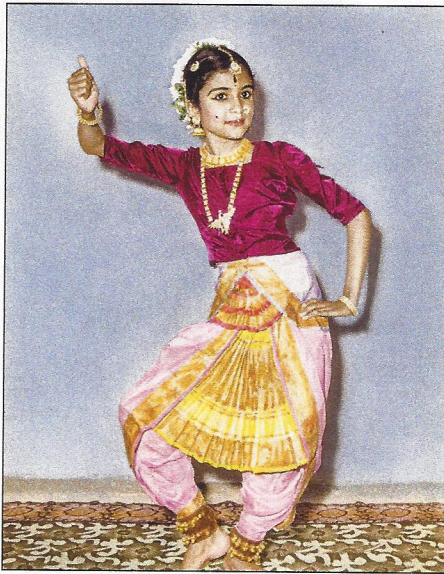
describes seven transitional states of being.

These ancient stories carry truths which are relevant in today's troubled times, from the crisis in Ukraine to the hard reality of climate change, says Aparna. "So we take it very much to heart and we try to bring the old to today's stage."

She herself started young: "I was drawn to it, and had a love for the dance and the music. Because I was a new immigrant, it was a way for me to connect, in perhaps ways I didn't understand, with my cultural roots. As I got slightly older, I was just always fascinated with watching dance and listening to classical Carnatic music."

For her the meeting with Alarmel Valli was life-changing. "I was eight or nine years old when we met our teacher. In that instant I was just floored, absolutely captivated by watching her perform. And she still continues to captivate me even more deeply after all these years. So for me, it was love at first sight. From then on, we spent four months every year in India with her. So it was a very focused time, and we were so fortunate to have time studying one-on-one with her."

For Ashwini, who was born and raised in America, dance was never the laser focus of life as it was for her mother and older sister. She says, "For the first many years it was more of a hobby for me. I took dance always as an activity to appease the family and keep in the loop basically with the culture." She was interested in trying what her friends were trying—gymnastics, ice skating, piano and flute, visual art and reading. All these different experiences were a part of her life.



COURTESY RAGAMALA DANCE COMPANY

She joined the company at the age of 12, participating in all the productions. After college, she came back to the dance world. "So I came home to try it out in reverse. I said if I didn't try it now it wasn't going to happen. I spent many years learning, then relearning; kind of re-shifting how I approach this art form that is so vast that you are forever a student."

Since then, Ashwini has spent a lot of time working on both the craft of

dance and choreography and is deeply involved in both fields. She had to figure out her own contribution, establishing an aesthetic within the Ragamala umbrella: "It's just through my perspective as someone who was born here and has had more influences from this country, and then kind of going back to exploring my Indian heritage through dance and through the themes I select." Indeed, Rane, Aparna and Ashwini have each had their own varied interactions with their two homelands, which further enriches their performances and world view.

The Bharatanatyam dance vehicle is immersed in spirituality, mythological stories and metaphysical concepts. Says Aparna, "I think this incredibly rich and complicated spiritual world is in some ways so open and just so incredibly accepting. It is all accessed through the dance and the music in a way that's very, very personal and very visceral."

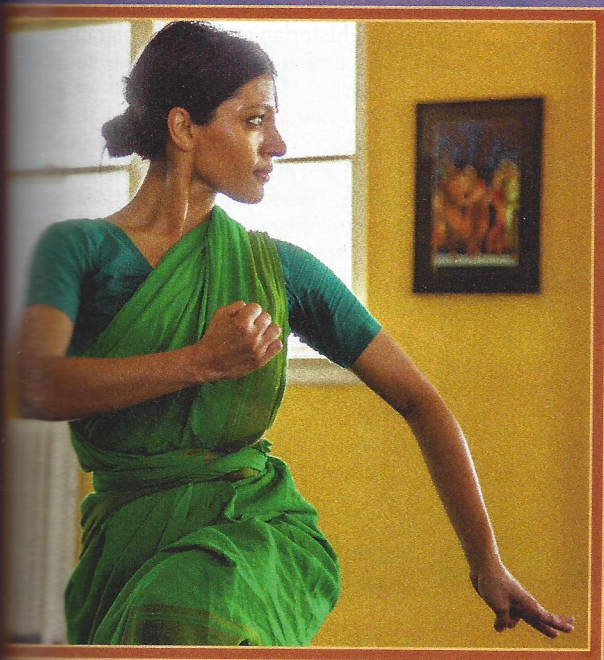
For mother and daughters, dance is so much more than just an incredible art form—it is as vital as a heartbeat, necessary as a breath. In the essence of living, it is, simply put, a form of prayer.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lavina Melwani is a New York-based journalist who has written on the arts, spirituality and life for several international publications. She is a columnist for CNBCTV18.com and is a co-founder of Children's Hope India. She blogs at www.lassiwithlavina.com. You can follow her @lassi_with_lavina

Traditional Sense



STEVEN PISANO