Creating Multivalent Danced Narratives in Contemporary and Odissi Dance: The Power of Mythology and Storytelling in an Abstract Art Form

What is a myth or powerful narrative? What is the power of it?

Joseph Campbell, esteemed Western mythologist, spent his life discovering and explaining how the universality of themes in world myths points to a common human need for centering in terms of deep life concepts (Campbell, Moyers xvi). What all humans seek is the experience of being alive, and for ages the act of engaging with tales of the human experience and the mystery of this world’s creation have provided this experience of knowing what it is to be alive. Myths are clues to the potentiality of human life because they are founded on commonly felt psychological desires, aversions, and sense perceptions.

However, myths and spiritual tales or depictions are often grounded in symbolic images that have deeper meanings than just the image alone. In Christianity, a dove symbolizes peace, and in Hinduism, a lotus symbolizes purity and transcendence. Myths are grounded in culturally specific terms. Although most myths contain archetypal characters and are founded on universal themes and emotions that can be recognized by diverse peoples, they are intimately bound to cultural, temporal, and geographical symbolic iconography. Thus, although the tone of a story may be readily perceived by most individuals, unless the symbols, metaphors and vocabulary of a certain traditional tale are kept alive by constant repetition and recreation through the arts, the characteristic flavor of the work may dissipate. In a rapidly changing technological world, particularly in Western society in which tradition and respect for one’s ancestry is not often valued as strongly as in Eastern cultures, symbolism in myths that used to be relevant no longer hold as much relevance for today’s population. There are new metaphors and icons in contemporary art, but in a world of such proliferation, these new metaphors have not yet reached
“mythological status,” in terms of being digestible and affective to a large audience (e.g. entire communities or nations).

In ancient societies, religious or spiritual shamans educated their community on the ways of the world via mythological renditions of the experience of life. A shaman is a “socially designated spiritual practitioner who obtains information in ways not available to the shaman’s community through the voluntary regulation of the shaman’s own attention, which is used for the benefit of the shaman’s community and its members” (Benyshek 3). Shamans, in addition to enjoying spiritual esteem, were the original artists, intellectuals, and entertainers (2). In contemporary life, artists have begun to replace shamans in various ways for many individuals (Arya). Perhaps the artist has become the shaman in an effort to exercise creative license in the recreation of seemingly arcane renditions of the cosmological and natural world. Or perhaps, individuals today no longer respond to older myths in this fast-paced, technological world, so that artists and new storytellers now enjoy the place in society that shamans once did.

Spiritualism and an interest in the mystery of life appears not to have declined in society, but to have shifted in terms of its practice, moving away from traditional religious worship and towards alternative ways of recognizing higher creative forces (Arya). Regardless of the intent, it is common in art traditions of many cultures for artists to be valued, much as a shaman may have been valued in the past, for the stylized ways in which they present the world. The most affective art is that which abstracts or embellishes the real, revealing truths cloaked in metaphor and mystery, and encouraging audiences to engage through using their own imaginations. Artists become shamans even if only partially fulfilling the requirements of the definition of “shaman,” as they “obtain information in ways not available to [their] community” by training in art technique, which disciplines and at the same time liberates the mind, eye, body, and soul to
creative modes not readily accessible to those involved in professions more related to the “secular realm”.

In regards to artists serving as new shamans, I am most interested in how the dancer and dance choreographer in two different traditions can serve as shaman or partial shaman. Specifically, I have sought to discover how classical Odissi Indian dance, a style developed in the region Orissa in Eastern India, presents traditional spiritual tales and how contemporary Western concert dance presents personally inspired novel portrayals of the mystery of human life. Both forms present their “mythologies” through the artist’s lens rather than from the mouth of the spiritual seer.

**Why dance? What is unique or important about this particular format?**

We have a visceral response to representations of life, both literal and symbolic, in myths and spiritually imbued narratives. I believe that dance most dramatically elicits this visceral response as when we watch others dance, we recognize that the vehicle of the art being presented is none other than the human body, a form of flesh and blood that we all share and that we empathetically respond to. To experience dance as an audience member is to experience our own living substance in an “aesthetic (affective), [stylistically transposed] transformation” (Fraleigh xvi). Viewers of dance may relive memories reminiscent of the actions performed in a dance; they may learn interpersonal, intrapersonal and emotional intelligence by perceiving examples of how to interact with others.

Dance existentialist and phenomenologist Sondra Horton Fraleigh asserts that “the art of dance draws upon both the personal and the universal body… as it becomes a source for communion, testifying to our bodily lived existence, our mutual grounding in nature, and our
shared bodily acculturations” (xvi). Dance is unique in that it incorporates dramatic and symbolic storytelling elements just as a written or oral story would, but it goes further in presenting the drama of the body itself—the body that has its own individual nuances derived from lived experiences, its universal basic capacities shared by the majority of the population, its sometimes virtuosic propensities that speak to emotions transcendent of the spoken word, and its culturally specific attitudes of being and doing. In dance, it is important to disavow a dualist approach to mythology, as the body/the dancer both represents and simultaneously is the myth or story. Thus, “…the observer cannot separate himself from the world” and thus, neither can he separate himself from the dance, and neither can the dancer separate herself from the subject and content of the dance (8). Also, as I mentioned earlier, what is affective in myths is the fact that they are stylized representations of life; they are not simple iterations of the mundane. A danced narrative involves stylized movement. What is danced is not literal; it is abstract, even if it may contain quotidian movement as well.

Why Indian & Contemporary Dance?

I have chosen to study the effectiveness of Indian dance, specifically classical Odissi dance, and Western contemporary dance, specifically contemporary dance as practiced by choreographer Doug Varone and as developed by myself with my own eclectic training and idiosyncratic personal style. I have chosen Odissi and contemporary dance because of their capacity to kinesthetically relate to mythology, and because they are distinct forms that I have studied during my undergraduate career. I have perceived differences in the traditional and cultural roots of these forms and differences in the vocabularies and codified or lack of codified techniques. I am interested in how, despite these foundational differences, both Odissi and the styles of contemporary I have studied can achieve similar ends of enacting myths with artist
and/or performer in the role of “shaman,” communicating with an audience universal themes.

With Odissi, I have explored the ways in which the dance artist creates and performs danced versions of age old religious tales and myths, while with contemporary dance, I am exploring the ways in which the dance artist creates and performs totally new stories or myths that begin from a personal place but are universal in theme. Odissi is a very culturally specific form that is rooted in tradition, whereas contemporary dance is a style that has sought to largely break with tradition and overt relationships to specifically encoded Western cultural symbolism. I predict that in presenting Odissi dance to non-Indians, the archetypal emotions and universal themes may be readable, but the precise symbolism will be lost on those not familiar with Indian culture.

Methods of Researching Questions of Dance Artist as Shaman or New Myth Creator

In order to directly experience the ways in which mythologies are created and enacted in Odissi dance, I learned and performed an expressive dance called an abhinaya. My mentor and guru Ph.D. candidate Kaustavi Sarkar choreographed this piece, which she based on ancient Hindu poems from the book the Gītagovinda by the sage and poet Jayadeva. (This is a commonly referenced text in Indian dance). This abhinaya piece, entitled Radhike, served as a culmination of my studies in Odissi over the course of four years, which consisted of taking continuous technique classes from Kaustavi, reading various texts on the history and technique of Odissi, and traveling to Eastern India for three and a half weeks to more directly experience the culture in which this form developed. In order to experience the ways in which mythologies are created and enacted in a specific model of contemporary dance, I choreographed and performed a group piece, entitled Beneath the Shimmering Plane, loosely basing the piece on a
parable-like story written by my father. This piece served as a culmination of my studies under Doug Varone during his winter and summer dance workshops and under former Doug Varone and Dancers company member Edward Taketa. My method of choreography was inspired by Varone’s and Taketa’s methods of choreography.

To be clear, I have not sought to actively *create* a spiritual experience for audiences. Their experiences are completely what they make them to be, and although I have asked certain questions of my audience members, I decided not to ask them potentially restrictive questions such as, “did you experience a spiritual or religious sensation?” I have been more invested in researching how two specific forms of dance can *possess* spiritual elements using traditional and contemporary devices of creation. I have also been invested in exploring how the narratives I tell through dance are multidimensional in that they are abstract renditions of text reshaped according to the dance choreographer’s and performers’ imaginations and then interpreted by spectators.

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I consider contemporary dance to be an example of a style that has arisen from the need for individuals to find new ways of relating to the world, with contemporary dance artists
creating and presenting new symbols to present their systems of belief. I predicted that in creating my contemporary group piece, I would find myself creating a new dance vocabulary in my work and unique ways of abstracting the story that my father wrote. I also predicted that the dancers in my piece and my audience for Beneath the Shimmering Plane would be more familiar with the stylistic components of my piece, but as contemporary dance is typically more abstract than a more codified and strictly narrative style like Odissi or even ballet, I think that they will interpret their own meanings.

**Brief history of development of Indian dance in terms of spiritual implications**

In order to understand the parameters of my Odissi solo performance, I find it helpful to briefly recount the history of Odissi classical dance as it relates to Hindu themes and to explain the significance of the technique. According to the authoritative treatise on Indian classical dance, the *Nātyaśāstra*, in ancient times the emperor Bharata visualized Indian drama as emerging from the four existing sacred texts, the *Vedas*. This fifth *Veda* was called the *Nātya-Veda*, and it drew upon elements from the other four *Vedas*: *pāthya* or recitative elements were borrowed from *Rgveda* (the dialogue or plot of the story); *gīta* or musical elements were borrowed from *Sāmaveda*; *abhinaya* or histrionic/dramatic elements were borrowed from *Yajurveda*; and *rasa* or sentiment was borrowed from *Atharvaveda* (Pandya 1). “*Nātya*” as in means drama, signifying that this newest *Veda* details the importance of the expression of emotions in mythopoetic performances.

In the early era of Indian religion, the Vedic Age (circa 1500-500 B.C.E.), Vedic art was essentially practical. Ancient Indians recited Vedic hymns and danced to them in order to persuade their gods to deal generously with them. This early poetry and movement mimicked
Later, during the age of the *Upanishads*, another collection of sacred texts (circa 800 B.C.E.), and during the development of Pali Buddhism (circa 500 B.C.E.), Indian people became more invested in a search for the “truth” through art and dance (Coomeraswamy 23).

During the development of the Buddhist religion, Indian people began to view art as a type of yoga or unifying practice. People valued the work of artists as seers with one-pointed attention and the capacity to reveal the mysteries of life. Artists, like spiritual seers or yogis, were expected to pray to the gods to help them realize their dreams or visions, transforming these dreams or visions into physical manifestations. The impulse for iconolatry in Indian art was derived from the spirit of adoration for the higher Self or the divine. This form of devotion is known as *bhakti*. At this time, the intellectual tradition of Buddhism was joined by the more florid and symbol-laden Hindu religion. Artists were expected, like religious individuals, to understand the *Atharvaveda* and the Vedic mantras by which the deities were invoked (31). The earlier secular and practical impulses of Indian art began to give way to *bhakti* spiritual devotion in an effort to attain *moksha* or liberation.

**Codified vocabulary as it relates to deific themes, and the significance of music, literature and sculpture as it influences Odissi Indian Dance**

With the development of Sanskrit poetry and epics such as the *Gītagovinda*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Bhagavad Gīta*, came a true outpouring of devotional dance in relation to these Hindu epics which depict the struggles of the gods and goddesses (Vatsyayan 161). Although the narratives depicted in Hindu texts and Indian dances are the narratives of supernatural beings, the Indian classical performer still draws upon human experiences in order to evoke realistic emotions, thus portraying a stylized representation of life and human existence.
Indian classical dance fuses the lyricism of the Sanskrit language and the beautiful images of temple sculptures, merging religious, spiritual, and symbolic elements with aesthetic and secular sub-themes. Indian dance has both been influenced by and has exercised influence upon classical literature as it serves as a major spiritual and mythological conduit. Literature and oral tales give to dance its themes (such as the theme of divine love between a devotee like Rādhā and a god like Krishna) and conversely dance inspires the imaginations of the poet and dramatist as he mimics the fluidity of the moving body in his mellifluous language and as he compares events and objects in nature to the dancer’s body (Vatsyayan 165). In the Yajurveda, we learn about the purest essence and motive of the classical Indian dancer as both mythologist and myth herself. According to the Yajurveda, the dancer devotes herself to the Universal Self, with the ritual Hindu practices involving rhythmic mantras and gestures which denote meaning and significance to then be elaborated upon in music and dance. Indian art scholar Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan alleges that, it is the reverence for the dancing body as an instrument of sacrifice and worship that gives Indian dance its sanctified character (177).

Odissi dance, one of eight classical Indian dance forms, adheres to this tradition of devotion to the Universal Self, being delineated from the ancient dance text, the Nātyaśāstra, and having developed from and at the same time having influenced inscriptions and temple carvings dating back to the 6th and 9th centuries C.E. Devadasis, temple dancers, devoted themselves and their art to the Hindu deities they portrayed and embodied in their dances.

One of the primary types of dances in the Odissi style is abhinaya, which is an expressive, highly emotive style. “Abhinaya” means “carrying forwards” because it explains the meaning of events and “carries forward” the plot of a narrative by means of the comportment of the major limbs (angas, i.e. the head, hands, feet, legs, etc.); the minor limbs (upāngas, i.e. the eyes,
eyebrows, lips, nose, etc.); and gestures or flourishing articulations (śākhā) (Pandya 3). The four tenets of abhinaya are angika-gestures of the limbs and body; vācika-use of movement, intonation, and inflection; ahārya-makeup, costumes, and scenery; and sāttvika-representation of temperament.

The technique of Odissi dance and thus abhinaya within Odissi is almost scientific in its attempt to present both an arresting, beautiful aesthetic rendition of the body and in its attempt to dramatically exemplify an extensive range of emotions or rasas. The Odissi dancer pays attention to the joints and bone structure of the body rather than to the musculature and arc of movement through space. This enables the dancer to represent an abstract form, both recognizable as human but ornamented and stylized in a way different from quotidian life.

In Odissi, although the body and limbs can express sentiment, they are more ornamental and descriptive, while the face and eyes are more emotive and expressive. There are 13 basic movements of the head (śirobheda). The gestures of the hands (hastas) or mudras are divided into three broad categories: asamyuta (one hand), samyuta (two hands), and nrttahasta (fingers and arm movements) of which there are 11 used when denoting relationships such as dampati (depicting a couple) or mātr (depicting a mother), and 15 used when denoting the different gods and goddesses such as Brahmā or Viśnu. There are also ten different gestures to indicate the avatars or manifestations of Viśnu, nine to symbolize the planets, and four to represent the four Hindu castes. This last categorization of hand gestures relating to the depictions of the Hindu deities (nrttahasta) coupled with mukhajabhinaya (facial expressions) is probably the most instrumental method of invoking and embodying divine beings in Odissi abhinaya. Frequently, in abhinaya, the dancer assumes different roles within one continuous performance, at times dancing as one deity and then dancing as another deity describing the other through the use of
facial expressions and mudras. In this way, the dancer is the both the narrator and the story itself (personal and universal), encompassing all possible roles (her own dancing self, the omniscient narrator, and the various characters within the tale). In opposition to the rhythmic musical accompaniment of nṛtta Odissi dance (pure, unexpressive dance which is merely aesthetic in its intent) the music of abhinaya is poetic, lyrical, and narrative in nature. Abhinaya music replaces theatrical speech to accompany the dancer, with the singer typically singing the poetry that the dancer is embodying.

**Thematic/textual basis for my Odissi solo, Radhike**

In keeping with the abhinaya tradition of composing a dance to text, especially a text that is so famous and widely recognized in India like the book of poems the Gītagovinda, my teacher Kaustavi Sarkar choreographed an abhinaya solo based on several poems from this text. The entire text is dedicated in devotion to the god Krishna, concentrating on his love with his consort, the cowherdess Rādhā. By performing a story of Rādhā and Krishna, my solo is speaking to culturally specific mythological and religious figures and stories. The love story of these two beings is one that is recognized by virtually all Hindus, as Krishna is one of the avatars of the high god Vishnu and as Rādhā is believed to be the original gopi or divine personality who participates in rasa dance (or devotional, emotive dance). All tales of devotional love and passion originate with Rādhā and Krishna as the duo (Rādhākrishna) are perceived as embodying the feminine and masculine sides of God combined in one figure, despite at times appearing as separate physical entities. The love between Rādhā and Krishna represents a recognition of the beauty of the Higher Self (atman) or a communion with the divine, and stories of their love teach devotees how to practice their own compassionate, passionate, and worshipping sentiments.
In the introduction to the Sanskrit version of the text, translator Barbara Stoler Miller states that “intense earthly passion is the example [the poet] Jayadeva uses to express the complexities of divine and human love” (ix). Written in the 12th century in Eastern India, Jayadeva’s poems spread throughout India, becoming an essential component of Odissi dance, which developed through the tradition of temple devadasis or Maharis who danced and still dance Gītagovinda dances as a form of religious devotion at the Jagannātha Temple. The overall tone of the work is devotional, and yet it takes place when Rādhā and Krishna are both young, fervent lovers, and so the substance of the work deals with bodily responses to erotic passion including all of the complex emotions that accompany this passion. Stoler states, “Rādhā and Krishna are vehicles (vibhāva) for the universalization of erotic emotion,” and thus I am also a vehicle for the universalization of amorous emotion replete with its archetypal themes and symbols as I embody both Rādhā and Krishna at varying points throughout my solo, represent the universal dancing figure, and draw upon my own experiences of love and passion.

Examples of technique used to shape the narrative

The portion of the Gītagovinda that Kaustavi choreographed my solo to details the budding of Rādhā’s and Krishna’s romance which was originally encouraged by Nanda, Krishna’s father. My solo continues on to the portion of the tale that describes Rādhā’s jealousy when she learns of Krishna’s adolescent dalliances with other women. Next, there is an interlude in which I represent Krishna as both an amorous, albeit promiscuous lover but also a benign protector of the peace for the Hindu people. I finish the solo by representing Rādhā’s sorrowful search for Krishna, her friend’s encouragement and consolation, and Rādhā’s and Krishna’s reunion in a moment of moksha or release.
Thematically, this solo encompasses a wide range of emotions including the *rasas* (sentiments) of *rati* (love), *soka* (sorrow), *krodha* (anger), and *vismaya* (astonishment), amongst other permutations of these overarching moods. One of the clearest places in which I portray amorous love is when I position my fingers in the *vbhayakartari* mudra which denotes kissing- (the ring finger, thumb, and pinky fingers of both hands join together and “kiss” those of the other hand)-and I smile pleasantly as I lean my upper body toward my hands as if sipping in a delectable perfume. Following this moment of embracing and kissing, I as Rādhā quickly cover my hands with my eyes and then shyly peek out from behind them, denoting that the love the two share is new but exciting. Later in the piece, my (Rādhā’s) joy transforms to jealousy. My character is tormented by bees that symbolize Krishna with his worrisome habits of intermittently abandoning her. I furrow my brow to denote distress and position my hands in a shaking hand mudra (*bhramara*) which symbolizes a bee. Although my positioning of the body (*bhangas* and *abhangas*) contribute to the telling of the narrative, my face and hands are the predominant vehicle for portraying the emotions Rādhā and Krishna experience and for symbolically representing each character.

**Process of Creation (Traditional and Contemporary Elements of the Piece) and My Experience of Enacting Personal and Universal Roles Simultaneously**

One thing that I learned from this process is that in retelling a story, it is not necessary to directly replicate each segment of the actual *Gītagovinda*. It is not necessary to *literally* tell the story as a theatrical enactment of the text. Dance differs from theater performance in that it is typically more abstract, and it becomes important for a choreographer to discriminatingly choose what is most relevant to her artistic vision. The Odissi choreographer becomes a storyteller in her own right, and she is the one who chooses in what way she wants to keep these Hindu stories
alive. It also becomes unimportant to attempt to keep every word and line written in the text in chronological order when transferred to dance; it is more interesting to expand upon those words or emotions most central to the poem and to let peripheral sections become incidental to the danced narrative. In reading about Jayadeva’s *Gītāgovinda*, I picked up on the concept that “words derive meaning from the contexts in which they occur…word and feeling are interlinked so closely that to dissect one from the other is a perilous operation” (Miller 8). If this is so with the writing of the *Gītāgovinda*-this indivisibility of word and feeling—it is also so with the dance. The way I move my body to express certain emotions in one section is contextualized by how I perform the previous and succeeding sections. The florid language used in the text can be seen in the ornate articulations of the body chosen for my solo. Just as Jayadeva’s words mimic the dancer, the choreography in my solo mimics the lilting poetic language of the poems, as each portion of the solo is broken into stanzas or paragraphs with short “breaths” in between akin to the structure of the poetry. Above all, the choreography evokes the mood or *bhava* of the poetry, which is evident in both the movements of the body and the articulations of my facial expressions.

Vatsyayan asserts that “the human form, the particular attitude (*bhanga, āsana, mudra*) is but the vehicle of a soul-meaning, a concrete embodiment of a great spiritual power…” (13). It is one thing to read about how the body is supposed to contribute to the dominant and subtle moods in a piece, but it is another to experience how these techniques of *nātyadharma* (assuming different roles without changing costume), *hastābhinaya* (hand articulations), and *mukhajābhinaya* (facial articulations) shape the danced narrative. I think that in many ways, as both the vehicle for and the sole enactor of Rādhā’s and Krishna’s amorous exploits, it is more affective to dance the complex feelings of love, erotic sentiment, jealousy, and finally comfort,
than it is to merely read about these moods. As Miller states Rādhā’s “culminating emotional intensity of her divine love with Krishna is not effected through psychological depth. It is effected through the accumulation of sensuous details expressing the chaos of feeling and fantasy a deserted woman suffers” (37). The choreography of my solo is obviously in the classical technique of Odissi vocabulary, but it goes further than just dogmatically and pedagogically following what *mudras* or facial expressions *would* (technically speaking) depict certain archetypal emotions or situations. The piece mimics the emotional peaks in Rādhā’s and Krishna’s story, evoking the “chaos of feeling and fantasy” Rādhā experiences. The portion at the end of the solo in which I fall to the floor in exhaustion after being intensely reminded of Krishna’s rapacious tendencies by a swarm of bees is one strong example of this accumulation of the senses, culminating in a kind of emotional stupor.

In accomplishing the feat of actually *feeling* these emotions, it has been important for me to know the background of the story in the *Gītagovinda*. However, it has also been essential for me to invoke experiences and emotions of my own in order to empathize with the characters of Rādhā and Krishna. My dancer’s body is both universal and personal. There is something personal in me dancing the beginning of *Rādhike* as an amorous woman, remembering my own experiences in love, but this also becomes an archetype, as I emote to audiences full of people who have likely felt romantic love at some point in their lifetimes. In learning and performing this solo, it became important for me to study Eastern Indian body language to understand why certain movements of the body are so affective to an Indian audience. Although I began to feel and be able to accurately perform the emotions of the piece more vividly as I continued the process, initially, when I knew very little about the background story, I found myself merely performing steps. As a non-Indian, I know that I have a different relationship to this rendition of
Rādhā’s and Krishna’s love story than does someone like Kaustavi who was raised in India as a Hindu. Despite this, once I learned the English translation of the poetry, the archetypal themes and emotions had the same power for me as they would for any Indian dancer.

**Findings: Fluidity of Meaning & Contemporary Elements**

In regards to audience reception of Odissi abhinaya, one could believe that only individuals raised in or familiar with Indian culture and art would be able to understand or receive any sort of “meaning” from such a performance. One might also be inclined to think that in such a codified form as Odissi there is little room for creative license, or freedom for the performer and audience to interpret the dancer’s story.

In talking to Kaustavi about her creative process, she told me that in Odissi abhinaya, “it is never the realistic being portrayed. It is always a stylized version” of the imagined real object. In dancing *Radhika*, I am never “just” a literal character. In creating my “character,” Kaustavi left room for me to be the narrator, Rādhā, Krishna, myself, and also pure emotion. Kaustavi and I both agreed that realism could not be pertinent in this piece as it is not pertinent in Odissi dance in general; the real is only hinted at. Instead, the dancing primarily communicates something within the soul—that which cannot be directly mimed or expressed in thought or words.

Kaustavi also told me that as an expert in her field, she gave herself creative license in my piece to incorporate some more contemporary elements. Although the vocabulary of the piece remained classical throughout, the way in which we paired the music with the dancing and the way in which Kaustavi chose to make this piece less chronologically driven than other typical abhinayas was contemporary. Usually the music for an abhinaya dance is composed first and the dancer must strictly follow the intonations and rhythms of the music. The use of music for my piece is less traditional than in typical abhinaya performances as Kaustavi sings the lyrics
to the poems while I dance, but I set the tempo for each performance. We also commissioned different musicians to accompany each performance by improvising to my movement. This improvisational musical accompaniment is used in place of the usual prerecorded sitar and mardala (drum) composition. Typically, an abhinaya is a much longer piece than my solo (ten to fifteen minutes compared to my seven or eight), and it follows more of a linear model. For the performance of my solo, Kaustavi choreographed the movement first, focusing on certain excerpts from the Gītagovinda and at times mixing and reversing the orders of certain parts of the story as they appear in the text, thus making the piece less linearly narrative and more immersively mood and relationship driven.

Although some of the specific symbolism within Radhike is more readily recognized and understood by other Odissi dancers familiar with the esoteric technique and by Indians who are familiar with the various hand symbols and body language, I found it intriguing to find that my non-Indian audience members still derived emotional meaning from the work. Some “understood” certain portions based on the emotions I portrayed, and others divined their own meanings of the work that were different than what was originally intended.

I collected answers to survey questions I distributed to audience members prior to watching one of my solo performances. These audience members were all non-dancers and non-Indians who were largely unfamiliar with Indian dance and culture. They were attendees of a multicultural dance event. None of them could discern the fact that I was embodying Rādhā and Krishna, and many reported recognizing that I was portraying specific icons but wishing that they knew what these icons meant. However, most of these respondents recognized the emotions of happiness, sorrow, and fear, could distinguish that my character was struggling to overcome obstacles. Another respondent recognized emotions and actions of joy, curiosity, anger,
desperation, and pondering, all of which are indeed characteristic of the work, in addition to accurately recognizing when I was representing conversations with others.

**Overview of Varone’s Works as “New Myths”**

Since in my studies of Odissi dance as a form of danced mythology I was interested in how the form largely has maintained its traditional roots throughout the centuries, I found it necessary to give some historical background. However, for my study of contemporary dance, I am interested in how Doug Varone as an exponent of contemporary dance is an example of an individual who creates his own “new myths” and narratives and also how I, as a student eclectically trained in both Odissi, Doug Varone’s brand of contemporary, and a number of other styles have created my own danced myths and narratives. Thus, I will not delve into the history of contemporary dance and the entire field’s possible spiritual implications, but will focus on how Doug Varone has crafted narratives with spiritual flavor.

Many contemporary dance artists have striven to almost dogmatically dissociate themselves from Western traditions such as classically valued and culturally recognizable representations of fairy-tales and religious stories. I believe that this is due to the fact that many of those older tales no longer have much relevance to the problems, experiences, desires, and imaginations of 20th and 21st century people. Dancers and their audiences desire new stories. Contemporary choreographer Doug Varone is an individual whose work is in keeping with the stylistic elements of contemporary dance as a form that seeks to continuously discover new modes of movement and as it amalgamates a plethora of body expressions from other dance forms and from all sorts of human and non-human movement practices. Yet, he is an example of a choreographer who incorporates traditionally and evolutionarily valued concepts of nature, human vulnerability and visceral emotions, forming his own “new mythology” as his work
presents danced human experiences in a stylized manner with abstract body “symbols”.

Doug Varone has described himself as a fabulist. He believes in drawing inspiration from the past in order to make work in the present and in order to “figure out the future.” In his valuation of history and stories, Varone has studied the myths of our time in order to gain a fuller idea of the scope of life and to then create his own myths. Varone has described his work as telling stories that comes from an internal, intuitive place. This relates to the idea of artist as “seer” or shaman-one who allows himself to be a conduit of a higher truth or beauty that comes from some perhaps unknowable or invisible source and that at the same time feels deeply personal. Although he may and often does utilize other media such as visual artwork, architecture or novels for inspiration, he does not depend on these sources to enhance what he sees as already richly self-supporting in the architecture of bodies in space telling a story through eye contact, physical touch, and the sharing of space with one another.

**Choreographic Process**

Throughout most of his body of work, Varone constantly juggles the abstract and the narrative, the brain and the heart, the commonplace or quotidian and the miraculous. His work is driven by a sense of humanity, presenting universal themes like love, fraternity, finding solace, and searching for truth, but often he begins his process of creation with a sort of pragmatic game or device. For instance, he may begin a process by giving his dancers “suggestions.” A suggestion may be a simple phrase like “unfinished ground,” and it is the dancer’s job to instinctively and quickly create a succinct movement inspired by this phrase. Varone may give his dancers 15 to 20 suggestions that are seemingly meaningless, but as the dancers often unwittingly apply meaning to a seemingly abstract game, the piece starts to take shape. Once
Varone sees movement before him, he is then able to create his danced narrative as the movements of a dancer’s body and the chance interactions between dancers (in the case of giving suggestions to multiple dancers at once) begin to present possibilities for emotionally infused situations and relationships. Although Varone designs his choreographic devices often with certain moods or emotions in mind and perhaps even with a particular piece of music or vague narrative in mind, when he presents them, the devices are open enough to allow his dancers the freedom to create situations that give the work a more individualized feel and that Varone by himself may not have been able to envision. Unlike Odissi which is extremely codified, Varone’s work is technical in that it is virtuosic, intricate, and athletically demanding, but it is idiosyncratic with few to none of the steps belonging to a codified technique. His style is characterized by explosive bursts of energy, fantastic lifts, arcing swings and throws of the arms, rapid alternations between internal and external rotation of the limbs, expressive use of the eyes and hands during more tender and contemplative moments, and a sweeping usage of stage space.

Study of Doug Varone’s Possession as an Example of a Loosely Text-Based Narrative

Many contemporary dancers have chosen to completely break with the tradition of basing choreography on text (as used to be the mold for court dance and ballet), but Doug Varone is, as I proclaim him to be, a dance “new mythologist.” He creates his own narratives, and sometimes they happen to be loosely based on written stories. This is the case with his work Possession named after the book Possession by A.S. Byatt. The novel follows the love affair of two researchers who fall in love while researching the life and love affair of two Victorian Era poets. The dance has several sections, but perhaps the most emotionally affective section is the slow quartet for two couples in which the couples begin dancing as distinct couples before becoming intricately intertwined, mimicking the way in which the love affairs of the two couples in the
book become intertwined. This section of the dance is stirringly intimate with the couples lovingly caressing one another’s faces and gently and with almost painstaking care manipulating one another’s limbs. When the two couples first meet, it is as if the respective couples both see into and beyond the other, looking from glazed, half-closed eyes that exude a certain type of yearning. This speaks to the fact that the couples in the novel lived in different times but affected one another’s legacies and emotions cross-temporally. As the music for the piece (Phillip Glass’s *Violin Concerto II*) rises in pitch, evoking a mood of desperation, one couple advances toward the other. All four begin to push, pull, console, search for, search beyond, and manipulate one another, confusing their original roles and contributing to the nonlinearity of the danced narrative and to the essential theme of the complication of love affairs.

*Possession* is affective on an emotional level, and clear relationships persist throughout the work in a way that is recognizable to a wide range of audiences. However, whenever asked which couple is supposed to be which (in relation to the novel), Varone refrains from answering, preferring the work to be open to interpretation and leaving room for the audience members to empathize with the “characters” and to interpolate their own stories. Varone’s work comes from a personal place, and he allows it to become personal for each viewer as it is almost impossible to have preconceived notions about what the work is “supposed” to mean.

**My Own Experience of Creating a Danced Narrative, a “New Myth”**

As I am not yet an expert in Odissi, I chose to learn a solo that my mentor choreographed especially for me. For my contemporary dance component of this project, I decided to choreograph and perform in a group piece as this is the style of dance I am most fluent in, and as my aim with this component of the project was to experience my own creation of a “new myth.”
I based my piece, *Beneath the Shimmering Plane*, loosely on a short parable-like story written by my father, Kurt Ayau. Having attended several Doug Varone and Dancers intensives in which I had the opportunity to view Varone’s work multiple times and during which I took his course in choreographic devices, I was able to create my piece using some of his devices such as the “suggestions” device I described previously. In choreographing *Beneath the Shimmering Plane*, I focused on evoking the overall tone and structure of the text rather than assigning specific characters and literally retelling the story. Thus, the story took on new meaning for me, and I reshaped it according to my own experiences and creative interpretation.

My father’s story is initially characterized by the lonesome, disconsolate circumstances of an old man at the end of his life, but the tale ends with the transformation and renewal of the man’s life force. This story was highly metaphorical on its own with the old man (who at the end of the story has become a dying stick that is then watered and blossoms into a flourishing tree) representing the continuity and mystery of all life. I chose to focus on emulating this overarching theme of renewal and mystery in my choreography, with the name of the piece speaking to the fact that life has evident forms and appearance yet is elusive in its core essence. I mimicked the structure of the story, transposing into the dance the energetic qualities embodied in the story: the story begins with the old man living an integrated and satisfying family life, it follows the ups and downs of the middle portion of his life, and it ends with conceptions of existence being challenged as the man appears to shapeshift and find a new purpose in life as a benevolent force of nature.

Although I maintained an overall mood of uplifting optimism throughout my work, choosing not to embody in my dancing the more desperate portions of the text, I did mimic the rise and fall of action. The piece begins with a seemingly complacent trio of dancers (myself,
Marissa Thomas, and Kali Czekaj). We three dance with slow, sinuous movements, following the percussive, echoing metal sounds of the music made for the piece. We intermittently look at one another, calmly moving in our own small circle of space in the upstage left corner of the stage space. This portion feels introspective to me. The music builds with shakers and bells announcing the entrance of a faster duet (Anthony Milian and Emily Jones) who dance twice as quickly as the trio, sweeping horizontally across the space and then sweeping around the trio. We begin to dance as a quintet, the action developing from there, driven by various group configurations of what seem like chance meetings between various “characters.”

What I think of as the turning point of the piece is a moment of ebullient unison characterized by arcing uplifted motions of the arms and hands, connoting a sense of searching for and exulting in a source of inspiration or salvation. This unison then devolves into more athletic and emotionally expressive sections than those which preceded the unison section. Included in these succeeding sections is a trio that Anthony, Marissa and I perform in which we push and pull one another in different directions, evoking a sense of playful competitiveness and a duet between Emily and Kali in which at the end, Emily, after dropping Kali to the floor, tenderly nuzzles her head against Kali’s back in a tender, sisterly fashion. Moments of slowness in the work relate to themes of contemplation and mystery as when the five of us slowly advance on a low level towards upstage center, looking at our own arms and around us in a searching, awed manner before the faster unison finale. The piece culminates in a final circle in which we as a quintet improvisationally pass our hands across our mouths and torsos in a stylized representation of breathing and coming to a place of rejuvenation.

In choreographing this piece, I began by using the “suggestions” choreographic device I mentioned previously. I came up with several phrases that felt evocative of the story my father
wrote and that I felt were ambiguous and yet emotional enough to elicit interesting
choreographic material. I had each of my dancers, myself included, develop a short dance
sequence to the written phrases, and then I combined all of these mini dances in order to make a
section of the piece in which we all advance from upstage left to downstage center.

In regards to the music for the piece, I largely choreographed the material prior to setting
music to the movement. Although I knew how long I wanted each section to be, what time
signatures I wanted (4/4 and 6/8) and what overall mood I wanted to evoke, I also wanted my
composer (Brian Rhodus) to create the music based on the movement, thus making the
movement primary in the finished product. Brian composed a piece of music characterized by
echoing metal, marimba-like sounds, a low bassline to enhance the mysterious tone of the work,
and a very uplifting and expansive overall sound which in the end influenced the way in which
we performed the dance. I think that by incorporating the music late in the rehearsal process, we
were able to maintain our conceptions of the movement’s origin as it developed from the
narrative and from my own imagination, but the music enhanced our performance style and our
connections to one another in our last few weeks of creation and rehearsal.

**Findings in Terms of My Dancers’ and My Own Relation to the Work as Personal and
Universalized Figures and Others’ Responses**

I intentionally did not reveal to my dancers the story my father wrote until the end of our
process. I gave them just enough information for them to stay true to the vision I had for the
piece because I wanted them to also find their own interpretations of the work, to relate to one
another organically as the material developed, and to experience what the work actually was
from a dance perspective rather than as it related to something else.
Although I began creating this piece with the interest of discovering how my piece could serve to communicate with audiences as a “new myth,” I think that the responses I received from my dancers are perhaps more valuable evidence of how *Beneath the Shimmering Plane* became a new myth for ourselves. For although myths and stories are recorded and performed for audiences, it is of the utmost importance to feel a connection to the work and to the messages being transmitted as the creator and/or performer. The “shaman” is the one who experiences and then tells or who experiences through creating and telling. Without having the experience of inspiration, the myth has no substance; it has no heart. The dance must be felt on a personal, individual scale first, before it can be appreciated by a larger audience on a more universal scale. As I was creating this piece with my own dance proclivities, the movement and the themes and moods I portrayed felt more readily available to me and more immediately authentic and familiar than during my process of learning *Radhike*.

I asked my dancers several questions about how they relate to ideas of the role of dancer as simultaneously universal and individual and artist/dancer as shaman. I also asked them how they made the piece their own and what their own spiritual affiliation is. I found that my dancers all felt that they were able to, as the process went on, dance uniquely and individually, performing my idiosyncratic movement with their own personal flair, and they felt interconnected to one another as dancers. Although none of them said this explicitly, I believe that once we began performing for others, we all felt this tension between the individual and universal dance figure more distinctly as we related to each other and to our audience on multiple levels. We presented ourselves, but we also presented a whole work with its various relationships, we danced unique steps particular to my own eclectic style, but we also danced
steps that may be familiar to those who have seen contemporary dance before. In regards to the artist/dancer as shaman question, one of my dancers responded saying,

> I think that within a lot of modern artists’ works, there are many concepts that are very deep or touch people, especially the dancers who have been given the task of embodying the concepts…Through the narrative that this piece was based off of, I found a sense of what the story embodied for me...

Other dancers felt that there was no concrete or obvious narrative being told, so that they felt more readily able to craft their own experiences and “narratives.” For instance, one dancer said:

> I am sharing my personal history, emotions, and relationships through my movement…There are no explicit gestures or concrete narration to the piece, and it is available to interpretation of the viewer.

In communicating with my dancers, I found that the process I used of letting some pieces fall into place later on in the process, of using devices that at first seemed ambiguous, and of only giving as much background information as was necessary to shaping the mood of the piece, we were all able to use our unique experiences to create a work that allowed us to more distinctly sense ourselves as individuals and yet as humans that connect to a greater whole. I felt that my father’s story also left a fair bit to be filled in and imagined. I was able to draw on both my emotional and physical experiences to create a dance that felt personal and unique; my dancers did the same. We as dancers connected to my father by reading his story and in an abstract way portraying his experiences and imagination through our dance, we connected physically, spatially, and mentally with one another as we rehearsed and performed, and we connected with audiences, perhaps inspiring them, perhaps confusing them, perhaps reminding them of their own physical bodies, perhaps causing them to see a myriad of things we never could have
imagined they would see. As my piece was not based on a traditional or culturally specific story, the meaning of my piece for individuals within my own culture is more ambiguous than the meaning of Radhike is for members of Indian culture.

**Final Results and Conclusion**

I began this project with an interest in the fact that although many members of society are still spiritual, many have also sought alternative modes of worship apart from institutionalized religion. Art may be spiritual in a multitude of ways, even if the themes presented may not seem overtly spiritual. What is important is that the creator and the viewer feels a stirring within them that may cause them to reflect on life and their own experiences within the world. Authentic feeling is what holds important for myths and danced “myths.”

More than seeking or specifically creating a religious or spiritual experience, artists strive to connect to themselves, to their collaborators, to their audiences, to the world and the universe in ways that religion may not be able to. I found that with Odissi abhinaya, creation begins with a story and a technique that is traditional and cultural, but the emotions and themes portrayed are universal like any myth or religious tale. In the performance of the dance, the dance maintains its cultural specificity and its universal themes, but it becomes more personal as the dancer grows to understand her own relationship to the story being evoked and as the audience relates the emotions evoked in the dance to his or her own experiences. I found that the more I rehearsed and performed Radhike, the more I was able to internalize the codified technique, and I was able to connect to my own emotions as one who has felt jealousy, love, bewilderment, anger and passion. I learned how the movement has different meanings for Indian audiences versed in the cultural significance of the symbols I portrayed than for Euro American audiences who
responded almost exclusively to the emotions I embodied. Radhike is traditional thematically, but contemporary and original in that I as a non-Indian performed this Odissi abhinaya and in that the music followed my movement instead of the more traditional role reversal. I realized that this solo and this form can be powerful for audiences who are not familiar with Indian culture on an emotional and aesthetic level and powerful on a religious, cultural, emotional, and aesthetic level for audiences who are familiar with Indian dance and culture.

Beneath the Shimmering Plane also embodies multiple levels of narrative (the narrative my father wrote, the narrative I created and that my dancers interpreted, and the narrative or mood that my audience intuited). I was able to connect to myself as dancer and human in this piece, and I more distinctly and immediately felt the personal aspects of this work than I did with Radhike, as the material was coming directly from me. This piece is less culturally rooted than is Radhike. Audience members related to the playfulness and the themes of continuity, renewal, and optimism my dancers and I portrayed, but even though many of these audience members were part of my own culture, they had to create their own nuanced interpretations since my piece was not a recreation of a commonly known tale. As Radhike has some traditional and contemporary elements, so too does Beneath the Shimmering Plane. Beneath the Shimmering Plane is primarily contemporary in its vocabulary and technique, and the story it is loosely based on is original. However, the theme of renewal and the ways in which we as dancers related to one another are elemental and timeless. This dance is an example of a personal myth which can be enjoyed by all audiences, but it has not reached true mythological status as it does not retell a commonly known tale with commonly known figures.

Ultimately, the power of myths, narratives, and art is that by engaging in the creation, the performance, and the consumption of them, we learn more about ourselves. Myths and
stories are not doctrine and may not even present “truth,” depending on how one perceives truth, but through this project, I discovered more about myself as a creator and a performer. I was able to discover new ways of remembering previous experiences through movement and to speak to others’ experiences through movement and facial expression. I believe I inspired the dancers who danced with me and the audiences who watched me perform to delve into the memories and sensations of their own lived bodies. Abstracted dance narratives may not read as narratives in the typical sense of the word, but as our brains and bodies are not strictly linear in structure, nonlinear, abstract dance “narratives” have the ability to elicit visceral responses in ways that more straightforward formats such as text or theatrical performances cannot always achieve. Dance can speak within and beyond cultural bounds, and it allows audiences to relate to narratives in a unique way as danced narratives are nonlinear and abstract, mimicking thought and emotion and other wordless but just as valuable things.

I also learned through this project that cultural storytelling is changing just as the world is rapidly changing and, some may argue, entering a new age. I believe we are in search of a new “universal mythology”—one that can remain rich while absolving itself of sometimes outdated or restrictively esoteric temporally, geographically, and culturally specific situations and symbols. I do not think we have reached this point yet of a “universal mythology,” and perhaps it is impossible to reach that point. In the meantime, though, I plan to work towards the creation of my own universal mythology: working with diverse people to create dances that are informed by the stories, emotions, and practices of many traditions but that can dissolve preconceived notions and cultural boundaries. To relate to audiences regardless of cultural background, I will fuse traditional, non-traditional, personal and universal elements in my forthcoming work. It is
important to create, perform, and engage with narratives that are more than just information but that are inspired representations of life in its ephemerality and perpetual metamorphosing.
Works Cited


