

Exploring queer spaces in and through the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam

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ABSTRACT: in the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam, dancers use their body as a means to tell stories. In particular, *Abhinaya*, the narrative technique featured in this choreutic form, provides performers with codified series of bodily attitudes, hand gestures and facial expressions through which they become any character of their epic and mythological narrations, flowing between age, class and gender differences. From a mainstream perspective, this play of impersonations is largely considered – among dancers and observers – as a mere matter of acting. However, by exploring the peculiar artistic and activist activities of a number LGBTIQ Indian dancers encountered by Sara during her ethnographic research in Tamil Nadu, as well as by reflecting on our own work – which has been partly shared with the Cirque Conference’s Audience who have attended our performance – we aim to recount the marginal perspective of a minority of dancers, including ourselves, who find, in – and through – this dance form, multiple spaces of agency, inclusive zones of unstable, changing identities and desires, queer spaces.

KEYWORDS: performance studies; Bharatanatyam; Abhinaya; gender; queerness; agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

‘The Indian classical performer is a “perhapsers”, a self-styled magician playing at everything without inhabiting any one space exclusively’.

Avanthi Meduri (2003: 191)

Entering the dance space set up for us within the performative section of the first Cirque’s conference in L’Aquila, we both knew that we would have become – transiently – warriors, princesses, goddesses and kings and that we would have loved, desired, courted, hated and challenged each other. This is what *bharatanatyam* dancers do: they flow throughout attitudes and feelings, without remaining in any precise role and space exclusively. *Abhinaya* – the narrative technique featured in this choreutic style – provides performers with a variegated vocabulary of bodily attitudes, hand gestures and facial expressions by means of which they can enact any character of their narrations, thus becoming “perhapsers” and moving across boundaries of several kinds – in particular, across the boundaries of

gender, sexuality and desire. While from a mainstream point of view, this play of impersonations is a mere matter of acting, our performative and ethnographic experiences have allowed us to explore a different modality of approaching *bharatanatyam*'s fluidity – which highlights the social, cultural and political value this aspect of the form can have. Through our regular study and practice of the dance and through Sara's researches in the academic field of Dance Anthropology,¹ we have observed and experienced how the choreutic possibilities provided by *abhinaya* can become a modality of exploring and expressing identities and behaviours which are frequently socially perceived – both in Indian and Western contexts – as “non-normative”. At the same time, we have noticed the potential of this dance form as a tool to show how intrinsically constructed and unstable identities and roles are.

Through this paper, we aim to recount a marginal, less popular *bharatanatyam*, which constitutes, nonetheless, a space in – and through – which social actors can incessantly re-invent themselves and their social worlds; an inclusive zone of multiple, unstable, changing identities and desires; in one word, a queer space.²

We will first explore what *bharatanatyam* represents nowadays in India, giving an historical account of its relatively recent construction. By exploring the relevant changes that the Indian context undergone during colonial and post-colonial period, both in terms of approach to performing arts and in terms of gender and sexuality categories and norms, we will give the readership a sense of the peculiar experiences which Sara's collaborators – namely, a number of dancers part of the LGBTIQ communities of Chennai and Bangalore (South India), had and have through dance. In 2013-14 Sara conducted an ethnographic fieldwork in the region of Tamil Nadu – while creating connections with other groups all around India – in order to produce appropriate material to write her Master thesis in Dance Anthropology. She has investigated “non-mainstream” approaches

¹ Academic discipline that sheds light on the social, cultural, political relevance of performing arts and on human beings' possibility of signifying and re-signifying them in order to strengthen, challenge or transform social structures.

² The choice of using the concept of “queer” and “queerness” reflects both our perspective as well as Sara's collaborators' one. The conceptual openness provided by this Western concept and theory is indeed perceived by several South Asian scholars, artists and activists as a significant space for acknowledging, representing, and rebuilding pre-colonial (more fluid) gender and sexuality categories.

to the fluidity of *abhinaya*, collaborating with three main social groups: on the one hand, she established connections with the non-normative Indian culturally recognised group of *Aravanis* (men who change their sex from male to female through a ritual emasculation) and *kothis* (men who engage regularly in cross-dressing practices) – who identify themselves through traditional indigenous categories; on the other hand, she engaged in a choreutic and ethnographic exchange with homosexual and bisexual male dancers – who build their identities through Western conceptualisations on alternate sexualities and regularly involve dance in their political activism. These experiences display precise modalities of questioning and subverting – personally or explicitly – fixed roles and categories through *bharatanatyam* and have encouraged us to deepen our practical and theoretical research on the potential of *abhinaya* as a queer space and tool.³ The possibility to use *bharatanatyam* as a means to share reflections on normative and non-normative social constructions has then become – for both of us – an essential component of our dance research, practice and performance activity. Thus, after having gone through their stories, we will reflect on our own experiences, re-thinking the performative work we presented during the conference, which represents an attempt at extending the artistic and activist work conducted by some of Sara’s collaborators to a different cultural context, as well as at giving our own voice to it.

2. DANCING THE *ILLICIT* THROUGH THE *LEGITIMATE*: QUEER DANCING SPACES IN SOUTH INDIA

If on a choreutic level *abhinaya* allows dancers to flow across social boundaries, Sara’s fieldwork has highlighted another essential feature which makes *bharatanatyam* a relevant space of action in Indian context: its social *status* of Indian classical dance *par excellence*, symbol of Indianness on both a national and a transnational level (O’SHEA 2007: 93). In several Indian cities – and especially in Chennai (capital of Tamil Nadu) – this dance form is at the heart of upper and middle class’ aspiration and consumption: it is

³ Our contributions to this exploration are distinct inasmuch Sara is a Dance Anthropologist and has conducted ethnographic fieldworks approaching *bharatanatyam* also from an academic perspective, while Giuditta is first of all a dancer and teacher and approaches the dance mainly from a practical point of view. Grounding on Sara’s theoretical researches, we have started to reflect on gender and sexuality issues also in our social context and to include them in our practice and performative work.

the art to which a respectable young girl should commit before marrying as well as the only choreutic entertainment which is commonly perceived as classical, traditional and sacred at the same time and to which an entire theatre season is dedicated. Sara's collaborators' experiences – although quite different in their purposes and actualization – are indeed all legitimated by the elevate *status* of this dance form. In Sara's research, *bharatanatyam* is therefore perceived as a legitimate space which allows social actors to explore and express illicit identities, behaviours, desires and feelings not simply from a choreutic but also from a social, political point of view, a double space of agency:⁴ choreutic as well as political.

2.1. CONSTRUCTING A LEGITIMATE DANCE FORM, IMAGINING LEGITIMATE DANCERS

Ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom proposes the dichotomical terms *legitimate* and *illicit* to indicate two main realms of dance characterising contemporary India – classical, traditional choreutic styles on the one hand and folk, popular dances on the other hand – and marks colonial and post-colonial periods as the historical moments during which this dichotomical separation have been constructed and fixed (2013: 16). *Bharatanatyam* is the outcome of a codification process actualised during the first half of the 20th century in the attempt to shape a prestigious art form – symbol of the emergent Indian nation. Its more ancient predecessor, a choreutic form called *sadir*, which was used to be learnt and performed exclusively by the members of a social group known as *devadasi*,⁵ had been declared immoral and stigmatized during colonialism, since it had been associated with the non-domestic life style of *devadasi*, largely considered as prostitution (O'SHEA 2007: 4). *Bharatanatyam* is the result of Indian upper castes' attempt to re-establish *sadir*'s dignity, dissociating it from the ritual dancers' system and connecting it to the ancient period that Orientalists considered

⁴ The post-structuralist theory of agency refers to people's generativity, to 'their capacities – embedded always in collective meanings and social relations – to imagine and create new ways of beings' (CAIN, HOLLAND, LACHICOTTE, SKINNER 1998: 5):

⁵ Social groups of women who used to live in temples and considered to be married with specific gods or goddesses. Their ritual marriage used to be seen as a legitimate mark of their celibate or unmarried social status. Unlike most Indian women in that specific context, they had considerable economic and sexual autonomy (VANITA 2005: 76). They were, at that time, together with the male exponents of their social group, the only subjects who had access to the knowledge and the practice of the *Sadir Kacheri*. In addition to their ritual activity in the temple, their performances were often required at the courts or within private celebrations.

as the cultural culmination of Indian civilization: the age of Veda and big dramas treatises.⁶ As historian Daves Soneji puts it, ‘the invention of South Indian heritage is both seen and told through *bharatanatyam* [and] the gestures of every dancer seem loaded with political significance’ (2012: 222). The figure whom, as scholars generally propose, we may identify as the main actor in this project of “purification” and reconstruction is a high-class Indian woman, the well-known Rukmini Arundale Devi (ALLEN 1997; Krishnan, 2009; Meduri, 2004; O’Shea, 2007). who learnt the dance from some *devadasi* she managed to connect with and re-modelled it stressing the technical component, the perfection of the shape and the lines of the body (O’SHEA 2007: 40). By contrast, while reshaping the narrative, expressive component of the dance, the *abhinaya*, she attempted to remove the erotic attitude that characterised it. Even if some hereditary styles continued somehow to be practised and transmitted by family groups, like the Pillai lineage from the Tanjavur district, represented by the well-known figure of the dancer Balasaraswati, her daughter, and her grand-son Anirudh Knight, the form created and spread by Rukmini Devi has become the mainstream style currently known as Kalakshetra and taught both on a national and a transnational level (O’Shea, 2007; Meduri, 2008).

While the historical pattern of inclusion/exclusion touching different social groups of women in relation to this dance has been largely explored and investigated, what still remains generally untold is how colonial reforms changed the dynamics of male participation in the performance and transmission of *Sadir Kacheri/bharatanatyam*. As reported by several scholars (Srinivasan, 1985; Allen, 1997; Krishnan, 2009; Marcom, 2013), men used to have an important role within the performance and transmission of what was known as *Sadir Kacheri*. In pre-colonial settings, when the *devadasi* were still the main bearers of the choreutic form, the male members of their same social group were normally trained as musicians, dance-masters and teachers (*nattuvanars*). They were thus responsible for the transmission and the preservation of the form, but they also had a role as actual performers. The silence related to their figures is probably

⁶ We mainly refer here to indigenous Orientalism, that is, how Orientalist ideas of Indianness have been adapted to the self-identities of Indians. This seems to be partly due to the British educational system but also to the prestige that British ideas have held among the Indian gentility and academic elite. Ideas like Vedic times as the golden age, spiritual India, caste-centricity and Hinduism as one religion were, at least to some extent, Orientalist inventions and more or less as such largely accepted by educated Indians and/or reworked to serve Indian nationalism.

connected to the fact that, as the scholar points out, ‘the dance style repertoire itself was gendered and male performers usually employed the modality of gynemimesis in their performances’ (2009: 378). This specific feature seems to be something not really proper to associate with a prestigious classical style like *bharatanatyam*. The ideal of female grace and male national strength that the dance was supposed to embody after the revival, was probably not well represented by the liminal figure of the female impersonator, who was – sometimes only on stage, sometimes also in daily life – between the culturally recognised, acceptable, “natural” categories of male and female.

At the time of the anti-nauch campaigns – a series of movements and legal acts declaring the devadasi system and their dance practice as immoral and illegal –, while men’s role as musicians and teachers remained almost unchanged, the figure of the male dancers in female clothes was officially declared inappropriate for the form. As Marcom suggests, while nationalist discourses directly stigmatised the *devadasis* as prostitutes and therefore not performers, the sexuality of female impersonators was far too taboo to be attacked. This is the reason why nationalists appealed to discourses of “realism” of the enactment, instead of directly expressing the actual homophobic idea of “naturalness” to which they associated those subjects (2013: 16). They became, however, like the *devadasi*, part of an illicit sphere of performing arts, as well as an illicit social group. Their place in the performance of the dance form was replaced by the new ‘figure of the male dancer as a hypermasculine, spiritual and patriotic icon for the emergent new nation’ (Krishnan, 2009: 378). This was the image of the nation that *bharatanatyam* should have transmitted, and not the one of effeminacy, that, as historian Mrinalini Sinhal maintains, ‘embodied these notions about the decline and degeneration of contemporary India’ (1995: 20). In this context, *Abhinaya* traditional pieces expressing erotic love (*shringara*) for male subjects began to be performed only by female dancers. Kalakshetra style male dancers were instead expected to perform exclusively devotional *Abhinaya* pieces, as men who express, through dance, their devotional desire of becoming one with god. As Sara had the opportunity to observe during her fieldwork experience in Chennai, it is still nowadays really unlikely for male dancers to perform traditional *Shringara* (erotic) *Abhinaya* pieces. It would be seen as an expression of non-normative, illicit gender and sexual behaviours. It often happens therefore, especially among the homosexual and bisexual

group she met, that dancers choose to detach themselves from the mainstream Kalakshetra style and the related expectations that teachers and audience have on them. At the same time, in the contemporary field of Indian performing arts, female impersonators, associated with the social figures of *Hijra* or *Aravanis* and *Kothis*, are not considered as part of the classical, legitimate realm of dance, but only of the low, folk or popular ones. From their social realities, these subjects rarely have the opportunity to access a classical dance such as bharatanatyam.

2.2. NORMATIVE AND NON-NORMATIVE GENDER IDENTITIES, MORAL AND IMMORAL SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS

As the construction of a fixed ideal of Indian man and woman by colonial, nationalist discourses established the clear-cut dichotomy male/female as the only “natural” acceptable possibilities in terms of gender identity, traditionally recognised social subjects like *Aravanis* began to be marked as cultural “unnatural” exceptions. Psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy not only connects these changes to colonial policy but maintains that pre-colonial India was characterised by a more fluid organisation in terms of gender and sexuality, represented by the concept of “gender fluidity” (1988: 35). While the perfect images of womanliness and manhood were depicted as the only natural gender categories within the parameters of acceptability of Indian culture, also their union was established as the only possibility of human erotic relationship. In 1860, British colonialists introduced Section 377⁷ in the Indian Penal code, a set of laws that criminalised any type of consensual sex acts other than penile-vagina penetrative sex, as ‘carnal intercourses against the order of nature’ (Indian Penal Code, 1860). Even if the section potentially penalised also non-penetrative sexual practices among heterosexual couples, it has been mainly connected to same-sex relationships (Misra, 2009: 21). Although this set of laws, as the executive director of the activist group CREA⁸ Gitanjali Misra observes, did not act practically on these sexual minorities, it implicitly influenced the way in

⁷ Section 377 of the Penal Code has been overturned in July 2009, in response to years of political activism and protests all over the country and especially by the Naz Foundation India Trust (Misra, 2009), but promptly re-introduced 3 years later (ORINAM, 2013). It has been declared (this time permanently?) unconstitutional only in September 2018, but at the time of Sara’s fieldwork (2013-14), it was still active.

⁸ Founded in 2000, CREA, is a feminist human rights organization based in New Delhi, India.

which they were marginalized in society (2009: 21). The introduction of section 377, can therefore be considered as part of that colonial and post-colonial process that established a dichotomy between legitimate and illicit sexual behaviours. The colonial introduction of section 377 under British Victorian morality, created the ground for the adoption by Indian subjects of the Western concept of homosexuality as an identity mark. As Misra points out, it inspired debates and discussions among Indians who had no previously considered sexuality issues and a consequent network of LGBT activist across the country (2009: 20). These dynamics contributed to the development of the common consideration, still popular nowadays, of same-sex relationships as a western import, that was not present in pre-colonial India. As feminist scholar and activist Ruth Vanita underlines, the lack of South Asian pre-modern history of persecuting people for same-sex relationships (2005: 11), has been largely translated in the nonexistence of actual homoerotic behaviours in the past. By opposite, the scholar marks the 19th century as the period in which homophobia and not homosexuality was introduced (2005: 30). Although in the field of academia and LGBTIQ rights we can currently find general agreement about the existence of queer dynamics in pre-colonial India, even if with different forms or names (Vanita, 2001: 1), these behaviours are still largely considered as immoral, unnatural, western phenomena.

2.3. RE-INVENTING WORLDS THROUGH DANCE: THE PECULIAR EXPERIENCES OF PONNY AND ANJALI – *ARAVANI BHARATANATYAM* DANCERS

The social group known in Tamil Nadu as *Aravanis* (and as *Hijra* in other parts of India) is constituted of men who change their sex from male to female, usually during their first teen years. These individuals, who mainly identify themselves as female, have occupied a specific place in Indian society for a long period of time. Traditionally considered as bearers of good luck, because – from a Hindu popular perspective – they embody both maleness and femaleness while transcending gender at the same time, they used to have an important role in several kinds of ritual, where their main functions were related to different types of folk dances (NANDA 1999: 9). They have traditionally organised themselves in communes, usually called *jamaats*, matriarchal structures that feature a leader (*guru*) and her initiated students (*chelas*) (GOVINDAN, VASUDEVAN 2008: 8). When someone joins these groups, they effectively leave the mainstream society and many

of its norms. They then become part of the community through a ritual emasculation and begin being subjected to the rules of the group (MORCOM 2013: 90). As Morcom reminds us, colonial and post-colonial discourses of sexual morality put this social group in an illicit social and choreutic space (2013: 89). Although their ritual role is still alive in Indian society, they are today placed mainly out of the caste system and, in order to earn a living, are obliged to engage in a variety of jobs, often including prostitution. The opportunity of learning *bharatanatyam* – in the rare case they have the chance to access it, exclusively depending on teachers’ openness and intentions – opens up a double space of agency for them: the fluidity of *abhinaya* allow them to flow across gender boundaries more easily than they can do in daily life and explore forbidden things such as marrying; at the same time the practice of a high level, “traditional”, “devotional” dance style such as *bharatanatyam* can contribute to a real, concrete change in their social position and therefore in their life.

During her fieldwork Sara met several *Aravanis* who happened to learn – and even perform and teach – *bharatanatyam*. Two of them, Ponni and Anjali live in a slum on the outskirts of Chennai, where they teach this style to “unprivileged” children and other *aravanis*. Moreover, in the attempt to legitimate their illicit gender identity, they emphasise the spiritual/philosophical concept of oneness or non-duality embedded in the large corpus of Hindu epic and mythology which is depicted through dance. Thus, in their performances, they highlights the multiple modalities by which Shiva, essential divinity to whom the dance is addressed, merges in a fluid manner with other deities, both male and female. They often display the pre-vedic form of Lord Shiva, the god Ardhanariswara, an androgynous divinity who reveals a seemingly perfect, indissoluble unity, complete in himself/herself (GOLDBERG 2000: 8) in their dance. The performance of these queer spiritual figures and stories, actuated through a classical and sacred dance, become a tool to legitimate their illicit identities, associating them with a sacred, divine fluidity. However, as they told Sara, the most important and tangible change that *bharatanatyam* made in their lives, is related to the way people treat and consider them. ‘*bharatanatyam* was like a rebirth for me’ – Anjali told Sara – ‘I was an alcoholic and prostitute rejected by society and now I am considered as a guru and I am thanked everyday for sharing my dance knowledge’ (07/08/13). Before meeting Ponni and Anjali, Sara had the chance to spend some time with a

commune of Aravanis, whose members engage only in folk dance, and live together in a very poor slum of Chennai. Since she knew that the people of this community could not speak English, she went to the place with some of my Tamil friends, so they could help them to communicate. The attitude and behaviours of her friends in that context, their distance from – and fear of – “these people”, as some of them used to call this social group, strongly impressed her. After that, she met Ponni and Anjali and she went to visit them on a day they were giving class to the children living around. The respectful way in which both the children and their parents were treating them surprised her at first, compared with what she had experienced so far. There was a moment, in particular, that was very meaningful in expressing this feeling of respectfulness. Traditionally, before and after a *bharatanatyam* class, the students sing *slokham* for thanking the divinities, they engage in a salutation to thank the sacred earth and finally bow at the guru’s feet and devotionally touch them as the means through which divine knowledge is transmitted. When the children began touching Ponni’s feet as she was blessing them putting her hand on their heads, she deeply understood what Anjali meant when talking of Bharatanatyam as a re-birth. This dance legitimises who they are, practically changing in one instance the place they occupy in society as well as the modality in which people engage with them. Through *bharatanatyam*, a limited number of *aravanis*, who are generally perceived as outcasts, are now treated as *gurus*, and – as usual before and after a *bharatanatyam* class – their students devotionally touch their sacred feet. Through *bharatanatyam*, they re-invented their world.

2.4. A NETWORK OF QUEER DANCING ACTIVISM

For the dancers part of Indian queer activist groups, generally coming from a quite privileged social environment both in terms of caste level and educational background, the process of queering *abhinaya* has a specific theoretical basis and precise political purposes. Having access to contemporary studies on gender and sexuality and thus being aware of the relevant role of performing arts as a locus to explore, express and question normative categories (BUTLER 1988; SENELICK 1992; BURT 2001; DESMOND 2001; SHECHNER 2002; FRALEIGH 2004; FISHER, SHAY 2009), they aim to use *abhinaya* to share a horizon of non-normative, unconsidered possibilities with the Indian audience. In their activist performances, they mainly

involve *shringara* (erotic) pieces, such as *padam* or *javali*. These types of pieces generally consist of expressions of erotic love by a *nayaki* (female devotee) to her beloved *nayaka* (male deity or human patron) (PURI 2011: 79). As aforementioned, male dancers have been – and still are – expected to enact female roles and to express love for same-sex subjects, maintaining their masculinity and without any use of costumes, make up, props or technical effects. In such an ambivalent and contradictory position, the majority of male dancers in Indian context tend to favour pure devotional pieces, avoiding to dance erotic and passionate desire addressed to male subjects. By contrast, Sara’s collaborators explicitly choose to perform *shringara* based pieces, transforming them in powerful expressions of homosexual love, as well as in political tools to stimulate people reflections on the constructed nature of the normative/non-normative dichotomy in terms of desire and relationships. Their specific decision to favour *bharatanatyam* over any other dance form is related, moreover, to the elevate social status given to this dance form in Indian society, which is perceived as strengthening and legitimating its already powerful choreutic possibilities (Masoom, Queer Arts Movement India’s director and main performer, 12/03/2013). Non-normative behaviours in terms of gender and sexuality, as many of Sara’s collaborators have explained, are largely considered among Indian society as Western, as a colonial import, which have never been part of Indian culture. *Bharatanatyam*, conversely, is perceived as the ancient, pure, classical Indian dance *par excellence*, which tells stories from the past. One of the most relevant performances Sara had the opportunity to discuss deeply about with the performer is “Queering My Mudra”, by Masoom Parmar, founder of the Queer Arts Movement. It took place in November 2013, the month before the final verdict of the Supreme Court of India on homosexual sexual acts was declared, in occasion of the Bangalore Queer Pride, in a room at the University of Bangalore. In that period, LGBT activist groups were aware of the potential re-activation of section 377 and the performance has to be, therefore, contextualised in this collective feeling of opposition (Azzarelli, 2014: 8). His performance was a bodily narration through *Abhinaya* of these lyrics:

‘The Lord who always slept with his head on my breasts
Is – *ayyayyo!*– now sick of me.
His eyes fixed, unblinking on my face, he would say:

“When dusk falls, your face, alas, will be hidden in the dark”.
And then asked me in broad daylight, for a lamp.
Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.
Biting my mouth in love play, since to talk would be to let go,
My lord would speak only with his hands,
Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.
Lest in sleep his embrace should loosen,
he will ask me to tie down the four corners of our blanket.
Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.’
(*Paiyada*, XVI century’s Telugu poem)⁹

These moving lines tell the story of a passionate, painful love. The person who is talking seems to be moved by an inner, struggling desire. According to my collaborator Masoom, this *padam* was written by a *devadasi* for her beloved Krishna, but where, in the text, is underlined that the person speaking is a woman? Realising that nowhere it is clearly stated that the writer is female, Masoom decided to perform this *padam*, *Paiyada*, as a man, who is struggling against the indifference of his male lover. There was no reason, as he told me, to suppose that Krishna, the god known for being the beloved of many women, would not have been the beloved of a young man this time (Masoom, 12/03/13). He created his own choreography, as dancers usually do with *padams*, drawing from the set of gestures *abhinaya* provides them with. He realised the piece thinking of himself as a young boy who used to meet secretly Krishna every night. In a very simple way on a choreutic level, Masoom made this piece become queer, showing how this does not change, in any way, its emotional intensity. Minimal details distinguished this queer performance from a traditional one. The dancer emphasised these details in the attempt to make his male gender evident and to describe the particular features of love between two men. Translating the first two lines of the *padam* in movement, ‘*The Lord who always slept with his head on my breasts, Is – ayyayyo!- now sick of me*’, he did not use two *alapadma*,¹⁰ *mudra* traditionally used to indicate a female prosperous breast, but a *pataka11*

⁹ This poem, and all of the information about it, have been given to me directly by Masoom, through our electronic exchange.

¹⁰ Hand gesture characterized by the palm facing upward and all of the fingers separated and extended. It has a multitude of meanings, such as the lotus flower, the female breast, the full-moon, a beautiful form.. etc.

¹¹ Hand gesture characterized by flat palm, finger extended and touching each other and the thumb slightly bent. This *mudra* is largely used in *Bharatanatyam* for its adaptability to a large

showing the perfect line of a male one. Similarly, in the narration of playful moments between the two characters he uses specific bodily movements that he associates to the love making between two men: ‘the hickeys on the neck, the sliding of hand below the waist’ (Masoom, 12/03/13).

As Sara discuss elsewhere, paradoxically, the dance that, in colonial period, was re-invented and purified in order to be disassociated with an illicit world, is now used by the non-normative to perform illicit behaviours, in the attempt to legitimise them (2014: 7). Through the power of tradition thus, these social actors aim to reach the mainstream, and to show people that an alternative to mainstream structures has always been there and is hence always possible.

3. DANCING OUR OWN QUEER SPACE

Inspired by the work and the experiences of the social actors involved in Sara’s ethnography – as well as by other international artists mainly based in the USA – such as Hari Khrishnan, Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Aarthi Sundar and the Post Natyam Collective – we have gradually undertaken a similar theoretical/choreutic research, firmly persuaded that *bharatanatyam* may be an effective tool to share queer thoughts and emotions in the Western context as well. From our perspective, the fluidity characterising *abhinaya* makes it particularly appropriate to perform and disseminate the concept of queerness, academically and politically perceived as ‘an horizon of possibilities whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be defined in advance’ (HALPERIN 1995: 62). Thus, through the performance presented within the first Cirque conference, we have attempted to show multiple modalities for queering – or for emphasising the queerness embedded in – this choreutic form, partly re-creating Sara’s collaborators works and partly giving space to new and different ones.

Our performance started with *Devi Neeye Thunai*,¹² a classic piece which displays the typical gender fluidity of *bharatanatyam* within its traditional framework. We did not modify the piece at all for the occasion – if not in the splitting of the soloist version into a duet. Both of us enacted multiple characters on stage – female and male as well. Giuditta impersonated Lord Shiva and queen Kanchenna, while Sara impersonated Goddess Meenakshi

number of meanings.

¹² *Kritti* dedicated to Goddess Meenakshi, coreographed by the Dananjayan couple.

and king Malayadwajan. At this stage, we simply aimed to show how gender roles can be easily changed in *abhinaya*, assuming that the possibility to perform gender in dance could reveal the performative nature of gender itself, as well as its instability and its changeability.

The second piece we presented is the outcome of a deeper and more complex research. If the first choreography had a quite descriptive structure, with *Raja Rajeswari*¹³ we entered the emotional core of Bharatanatyam: the evocation of *rasas*. Literally meaning “juice”, “flavour”, the *rasa* is the specific type of aesthetic pleasure that penetrates the spectator when the performer expresses the appropriate emotional state (*bhava*) (HANNA 1988: 102). Suscribing Masoom’s statement, according to which, the evocation of *rasas* through the expression of queer feelings could become ‘a modality of creating empathy with the audience on emotions related to non-normative love, pleasure and desire’ (12/03/2013), we attempted to re-create his activist performances and share homoerotic love with the audience, giving, however, a female voice to it. The social actors met by Sara during her fieldwork are, in fact, exclusively homosexual and bisexual men or transgender MtoF: she never encountered an expression of lesbian desire through *bharatanatyam*. While some of them use *abhinaya* as a means to speak of love between men, we attempted to convey the devotional/erotic desire of union addressed to *Raja Rajeswari*, one of the forms of the goddess. Once more, we performed together what is meant to be a soloist piece, one of us impersonating the goddess, and the other becoming her devotee/lover, in order to stress the homoerotic potential power of the piece. Since within the type of devotion characterizing Hindu religion, the *Bhakti*, what a devotee feels and expresses for a deity is an intimate and erotic form of love (HANNA 1988: 105), our dancing dialogue was meant to be both a metaphor of the desire of union with the divine and an expression of a female, lesbian erotic desire. The entire scenario was evoked by the devotee (Sara) through her passionate invocation of the Goddess (Giuditta). In her mind and heart, being so near to her beloved Devi will not only let her go of many fears, but will also allow her to fight side by side with the Goddess herself, look at her and even touch her. Through this piece we aimed not just to show how *abhinaya* allows dancers to freely explore emotions and feelings but also to share with the Cirque

¹³ *Amba Stuthi* to Raja Rajeswari, choreographed by Smt. Saroja

conference's audience a different manner of speak about the desire of union between two women.

The last piece, entirely choreographed by us on one of Sheela Chandra's songs, was dedicated to different Hindu deities who embody – in our opinion as well as Sara's collaborators' one – the indefiniteness and changeability characterising the concept of queerness. The first part of the piece was a fluid representation of *Ardhanariswara*, androgynous form of Shiva who represents through his half male half female body, the unity that lies beyond duality. We then shifted to *Harihara*, a combination of two male deities: the ascetic *Shiva* – his beautiful body smeared in white ashes, and the mundane *Visnu*, with his elegantly adorned blue body; we showed them dancing, fighting and playing and finally sleeping together surrounded by serpents. Afterwards, we narrated the aforementioned marriage of *Krishna* and *Aravan*, the latter being a hero of the great Indian epic *Mahabarata* who accepts to commit self-sacrifice to ensure the victory of his faction. In order to fulfil *Aravan*'s request of being married before the sacrifice, that will take place the next day, a spouse is to be found. However, no woman wants to marry *Aravan*, fearing the inevitable doom of widowhood. *Krishna* solves this dilemma by adorning his enchanting frame with a female attire, thus marrying *Aravan*, and spending a last passionate night with him. Finally, our piece gave voice to the missing union between two female deities, one of the least explored blending in the remarkably multi-coloured hindu pantheon.

As “perhapsers”, we perceive our bodies as sites of unfinished possibilities. The conceptual openness and the inclusiveness characterizing queerness, as well as its attempt of detaching love and desire from identity categories and its proposition ‘not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable’ (YEP 2004: 4) are, theoretically, what we believe can be conveyed and made concrete through bharatanatyam's movement and emotions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Although the Indian classical dance *bharatanatyam* is nowadays largely investigated and explored, taught and performed, shared and discussed among performers and scholars – on both a national and a transnational level – all this is mainly related to a mainstream realm, while minor experiences remain unseen. Our choreutic research and Sara's ethnographic exploration

attempt to reveal – and construct – non-mainstream *bharatanatyam* spaces. Spaces to act, to shape and re-shape one’s identity, to invent and re-invent one’s world. Spaces of agency – choreutic and political. Queer spaces.

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