

DANCE

# Stringing together the nine rasas of life



## Ranjana Dave

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### Dancer-choreographer, motivational speaker and cancer survivor, Ananda Shankar Jayant's work is inspired by her personal story and primal instinct says Ranjana Dave

A lone dancer is enveloped in a grey stole, the choice of colour representing the cloud of sorrow that looms around him. Soon, the stole becomes a human being he cradles in his arms, his limbs heavy, as other dancers join him in a lament of sorrow and grief. In choreographer Ananda Shankar Jayant's *Navarasa: Expressions of Life*, colours are semantic and narrative devices. Jayant will perform *Navarasa* with dancers from her school, Shankarananda Kalakshetra, at the NCPA this weekend. Jayant also dances *Simhanandini*, a traditional Kuchipudi piece where the dancer traces a lion – the mount of the goddess Durga – using her feet.

#### Mime and movement

When she made *Navarasa* for the National Choreography Festival in 2003, Jayant chose to move away from myth and lyric. She believed that emotion could exist in isolation – that people could be happy, sad or angry without a particular reason. Instead of using the navarasa sloka from the 17th century text *Ramakarnamritam*, a common choice, Jayant chose to create her own sequential logic for the nine rasas. She started with *raudra rasa* (anger), an emotion that is quick to manifest and develop. As a counterpoint to anger, she continued with *bhayanaka rasa* (fear). This was followed by *adbhuta rasa* (wonder), and *bibhatsa rasa* (disgust), with each rasa taking off from the previous one. A team of eight dancers appearing at different points in the choreography incorporate mime and movements from Bharatanatyam and even yoga, to elaborate on each of the emotions. In keeping with the dramaturgical text *Natyasastra*, each emotion is associated with a colour, represented by stoles that accumulate on a rack in one corner of the stage as the performance progresses. *Navarasa* is danced to a score by the Carnatic musician Prema Ramamurthy.

In another scene from *Navarasa*, *bhayanaka rasa* or fear is represented by a black stole, wrapped tightly around a dancer's fist. The dancers use outstretched palms to shield themselves from the object of their fear. The palms tighten into fists as they curl up into a ball, cowering in fear. Probing the space around them as they move, they peer out from the shelter of their bent arms as they survey and watch out for what they fear. In the music, the emotion manifests itself as an eerie and relentless use of the violin.

#### In praise of Durga

While *Navarasa* is a group work, *Simhanandini*, the second component of Jayant's performance, is performed solo. The *simhanandini* tradition is peculiar to Kuchipudi, and

particularly to the East Godavari region of Andhra Pradesh, where it was part of ritual temple practices. Other terms for the practice include *chitra natyam* or *tala chitram*, all referring to the act of drawing placed within a performative framework of time. In her research on *Simhanandini*, Jayant discovered that worshippers drew the picture of a lion – the vehicle of the goddess Durga – in front of the temple chariot on the day of Vijayadasami or Dussehra.

Jayant chose verses that describe Durga prepared to enter the battlefield, fully armed and ready to mount her lion. After an initial description of the goddess in expressive dance, the dancer pays final obeisance to Durga by drawing a picture of her mount. Describing this technique of drawing, Jayant said, “The Kuchipudi guru C.R. Acharya adapted *simhanandini* to the stage. A canvas frame or tarpaulin sheet sprinkled with colour is laid out on the floor. A frame of thin white cloth is stretched out over this and is sprinkled with water. When you get on the frame and move your feet, a picture begins to emerge as your feet imprint the powder on the cloth.”

### Nimble footwork

Precision is of great importance in *Simhanandini*; one miscalculated footstep could result in a picture gone awry. As a concession to neatness, Jayant prefers to draw only the face of the lion. Unlike dancing on plain ground, where footwork often serves to establish percussive time, in *Simhanandini*, time must be established and manifested visually. The footwork used whilst drawing the picture brings the sides of the foot, the heel, and the toes into play. It mobilises the entire foot with great attention to the pressure and nuance each part of the foot is capable of delivering. Once the picture is drawn, the dancer steps off the frame. The frame is then held up for the audience to see what the dancer has created.

For Jayant, dancing *Simhanandini* also epitomises a personal battle against breast cancer, with which she was diagnosed with in 2008. Using dance as an anchor through the endless cycles of chemotherapy and radiation, she began to see Durga as a symbol of fearless creative feminine energy. Challenging cancer in the vein of mythical stories, she made a conscious choice of referring to her struggle with cancer as ‘conquering cancer’, as opposed to merely ‘surviving’ it.

Navarasa: Expressions of Life and *Simhanandini* *will be performed at the Experimental Theatre, NCPA on August 20 at 7 p.m. See [ncpa.com](http://ncpa.com) for details*

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