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| Devi, Ragini (1893-1982) |
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| Ragini Devi (née Esther Luella Sherman) was a white American dancer and ethnographer who devoted her life to studying and preserving Indian classical dance. In doing so, she contributed to the effort to revive—or, more accurately, to reimagine—Indian classical dance in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, and to invent, in the U.S., the idea of ‘ethnic’ or ‘world’ dance. Born in the Midwest in 1893, Devi was raised in Minneapolis to be a proper, middle-class, white, American lady. But in the early 1920s, she cultivated a richly detailed, thoroughly fictional identity as a ‘high caste Oriental woman’ who had learned to perform so-called ‘Hindu’ dances in the caves of Tibet. Her *New York Times* obituary (January 26, 1982) noted that Devi’s greatest achievement was that she ‘was instrumental in introducing dances of India to US.’ But, looking back, it is clear that in addition to her artistic and ethnographic achievements, Ragini Devi’s life is notable for its demonstration of key elements in the history of Americans’ fascination with the East, and the exotic longings that reside at the heart of American whiteness. |
| Summary  Ragini Devi (née Esther Luella Sherman) was a white American dancer and ethnographer who devoted her life to studying and preserving Indian classical dance. In doing so, she contributed to the effort to revive—or, more accurately, to reimagine—Indian classical dance in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, and to invent, in the U.S., the idea of ‘ethnic’ or ‘world’ dance. Born in the Midwest in 1893, Devi was raised in Minneapolis to be a proper, middle-class, white, American lady. But in the early 1920s, she cultivated a richly detailed, thoroughly fictional identity as a ‘high caste Oriental woman’ who had learned to perform so-called ‘Hindu’ dances in the caves of Tibet. Her *New York Times* obituary (January 26, 1982) noted that Devi’s greatest achievement was that she ‘was instrumental in introducing dances of India to US.’ But, looking back, it is clear that in addition to her artistic and ethnographic achievements, Ragini Devi’s life is notable for its demonstration of key elements in the history of Americans’ fascination with the East, and the exotic longings that reside at the heart of American whiteness. Training and Contributions to the Field Devi studied ballet as a teenager and experimented with a range of dance forms before finding her true passion. In the late 1910s, she began to develop a series of dances—which she called Hindu dances—based principally on her study of Ananda Coomaraswamy’s *The Mirror of Gesture* (1917). She made her debut dancing these items as Ragini Devi (a ‘Kashmiri Hindu’ supposedly born and raised in India) in 1922 at Manhattan’s Greenwich Village Theater and gained acclaim over the subsequent decade, dancing what the *New York Times* called ‘authentic Indian entertainments’ (a ‘Nautch dance,’ an ‘Ecstatic Dance of Krishna,’ a ‘Celestial Nymph Dance,’ among others). In 1928, she published *Nritanjali,* an ‘introduction to Hindu dancing’ for American readers (New York: Hari G. Govil).  In 1930 she left New York for India. There she studied *sadir* (which later transformed into Bharata Natyam) with famed ex-devadasi Mylapore Gouri Amma. Travelling to the southwestern coastal state of Kerala, she became the first woman to study Kathakali at the legendary Kerala Kalamandalam. There, Devi met a youthful Kathakali master, Gopinath, and persuaded him to partner her on a national tour aimed at introducing audiences in the rest of India to Kathakali. Devi and Gopinath gained prominence by shortening the length of the dances, streamlining the costumes, and staging them on an indoor, proscenium stage —transforming Kathakali into evening entertainment for urban theatregoers. From 1933 to 1936, they presented these adapted ‘dance dramas’ to audiences across South Asia. In 1948, she won a Rockefeller Foundation grant to support an ethnographic survey of local and regional Indian dances. In 1972, she published the results of this research as *Dance Dialects of India* (Delhi: Vikas Publications). Devi’s Work and Modernism Devi’s initial interest in Indian culture drew from—and spoke to—many of the ideas that characterised modernist art of this period. Seeing unbridgeable, embodied differences between East and West, she found in Hindu dance a powerful antidote to what she saw as the industrial discipline that stripped the passionate and the holy from daily life in the West. In her view, whereas modern American life offered ‘no opportunity for intimacy, authenticity or simplicity,’ the ‘Hindu attitude toward art’ fostered ‘an expression of the Inner Beauty or Divine in man.’ Whereas Western forms of dance had become ‘a pre-dominantly secular art-expression . . . pander[ing] to a restless, pleasure-seeking public,’ in Hindu dance ‘every gesture… literally links the dancer and his emotion to larger vibrations of…the universe.’ Legacy Never the pristine cultural artifacts she claimed they were, Devi’s dances—and her ideas about dance—were always stories about the world she inhabited. There was, indeed, no such thing as Hindu dances in India; local dances in India were called by specific, descriptive names—such as the *sadir* Devi studied in South India, or Kerala’s Kathakali. Indeed, the very notion of something that could be called a Hindu dance was a Western invention, and was intimately connected to white Americans’ sustained confusion about South Asians’ racial and religious constitution. Although her work did, in practice, contribute to the preservation of Indian classical dance, it also made visible the contradictions in Americans’ ideas about capitalism and ‘progress,’ and the persistence of white Americans’ anti-modern fantasies.  File: RaginiDevi.jpg  Figure Ragini Devi photographed by Sunil Janah, India, early 1950s.  Source: Copyright: Sunil Janah/Swaraj Art Archive. See [http://www.criticalcollective.in/ArtistInner2.aspx?Aid=0&Eid=280](http://www.criticalcollective.in/ArtistInner2.aspx?Aid=0&Eid=280" \t "_blank); [http://www.criticalcollective.in/Images/Essay/Big/00012187\_342332564\_366.jpg](http://www.criticalcollective.in/Images/Essay/Big/00012187_342332564_366.jpg" \t "_blank)  File: Lakshmi\_Narayan.jpg  Figure Ragini Devi and Guru Gopinath perform the Takshmi Narayan Dance, Bombay, India, 1933.  Source: Courtesy of the Collection of Sukanya Rahman/Ram Rahman; [http://www.meridian.org/kindrednations/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/25b.jpg](http://www.meridian.org/kindrednations/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/25b.jpg" \t "_blank)  File: Wedding.jpg  Figure Ragini Devi with her daughter Indrani, son-in-law Habib Rahman, and the Reverend John Haynes Holmes at Indrani and Habib's wedding, New York, 1945.  Source: Courtesy of the Collection of Sukanya Rahman/Ram Rahman; [http://sukanyarahman.com/wp-content/uploads/wppa/4.jpg](http://sukanyarahman.com/wp-content/uploads/wppa/4.jpg" \t "_blank) List of Publications: Devi, Ragini (1928). *Nritanjali* (New York: Hari Govil, Inc.)  In seven short chapters, this book introduced several aspects of ‘Hindu Dancing.’ The text also features an introduction by the activist Mary Das and reproductions of photographs in which Devi demonstrates elements of the movements that her writing described.    Devi, Ragini (1972). *Dance Dialects* *of India*  (Delhi: Vikas Publications)  This book showcased the results of Devi’s several decades of ethnographic research into a range of dances from regions across India. The book also features a short autobiographical introduction by the author. List of Choreographic Works: *Spring Festival* (1922)  *Temple Nautch* (1922)  *The Water Carrier* (1922)  *Ecstatic Dance of Krishna* (1927)  *Elegy* (1927)  *Fakir’s Song* (1927)  *The Ascetic* (1927)  *Celestial Nymph Dance* (1927)  *The Vamp* (1927)  *Boat of Lige* (1931)  *Dance of Krishna* (1931)  *Rhythm of Youth* (1932)  *At the well* (1933)  *The Kite Dance (Patang)* (1933)  *Radha Krishna* (1933)  *Hunter Dance* (1933)  *Garuda Dance* (1933)  *Shiva Parvati* (1933)  *Marwari Dance/Festival Dance of North India* (1939)  *Death and Destruction* (1939)  *Mayura Nrittam/Peacock Dance* (1939)  *Naga Tala/Cobra Rhythm* (1939/40)  *Chara/Gypsy Dance*  *Kali Samhara Tandava*  *Parvati Lasya Nrittam* (1940)  *Sword Dance* (1945) |
| Further reading:  (Mattson)  (Misra)  (O’Shea)  (Prashad)  (Rahman) |