**Lakhia, Kumudini (b. 1930, Bombay, India – )**

**Summary**

Kumudini Lakhia was awarded India’s highest civilian honours, the [Padma Shri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padma_Shri), in 1987 and later the [Padma Bhushan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padma_Bhushan) in 2010. She received the [Sangeet Natak Akademi Award](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sangeet_Natak_Akademi_Award), India’s highest award for performers, in 1982, and numerous consequent awards. Her company performed in major festivals in Canada and Mexico, the Kremlin and India. Her services as guest-speaker, master-teacher, choreographer are very much in demand as she continues to travel worldwide from her home in Ahmedabad and the dance school Kadamb. During her career, which has spanned more than sixty years as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, Lakhia helped to modernize kathak. Although she has been criticized for her efforts because many proponents of kathak view it as a traditional art form, Lakhia has often stated the need to update kathak dance in response to its changed and metropolitan environment beyond the historical elite audiences of durbar (courtly and aristocratic salons) and temples. She has made it clear that she believes that her work is specific to her place; it is not intended merely to challenge tradition or pollute a dance heritage. In short, Lakhia manipulated existing structures in kathak at a time when this was both heretical to traditionalists and attractive to progressive nationals.

**Training and Early Career**

Lakhia’s training was with traditional (*gharanedar)* exponents of kathak in two dominant genres, starting with Jaipur gharana exponent Radhelal Misra, and later from the renowned Shambhu Maharaj of the Lucknow gharana. She went on to dance with Birju Maharaj (legendary living custodian of Lucknow Kathak legacy) in his early tours abroad (1958). She also trained in bharatanatyam, kathak and other Indian forms with Ram Gopal and toured with him to the UK (1949-1951and 1956-1957) and the USA. In reviews abroad, critics noticed the clarity of her lines, her strong presence, virtuosic spins, and subtle expressiveness. Lakhia credits these tours abroad as developmental in her awareness of the need to attend to the changed spatial demands of staged dance.

**Contribution to Modernism**

Lakhia shed kathak’s patriarchal idealized representations of saintly and mythological women, and connected instead with predicaments of middle-class urban women, while drawing on both the Muslim and the Hindu constructions of kathak so as to present a secular urban stage art. Kathak dancers had for years trained to perform as soloists having the freedom to dialogue with music and poetry in intimate spaces for elite dance lovers familiar with its poetic and visual images. To introduce a choral use of bodies performing kathak techniques on bare stages for lay audiences called for a radical retooling of the technique itself. Drawing from her deep traditional training with her contemporary analytic outlook, Lakhia attended to spatial and anatomic details of movement. For example, she imaginatively extended traditional techniques of eye-line focus, body line, to project across larger spaces. For her group dances she had to adjust and expand aerial trace patterns for the hands to which she added floor patterns along which they travelled. Thus she deployed a modernist analytic approach to inherited methods of performance and construction.

To orchestrate several dancers working simultaneously and in visual harmony, she combined alternating *(saval-javab)* synchronic or sequential rhythmic sequences. In narrative dances *(nrtya)* she often deployed the saval-javab structure to suggest a dialogue of rhythms between characters. She has varied the rhythm dynamics to express emotional changes, rather than conventional hasta and abhinaya.

Interestingly, her techniques involved ‘manipulations’ comparable to those described by Louis Horst in *Dance Forms in Relation to The Other Modern Arts* and with notions of contrast, harmony, abstraction, and so on as explicated in Doris Humphrey's *The Art of Making Dances*.

**Legacy**

In time, and especially after Birju Maharaj publicly endorsed her creative contributions to his own choreographies, her innovations have been appropriated into the general kathak repertory. Yet her choreography remains distinctive and her students have gone on to excel in their own interrogations of kathak to such an extent that her former student Aditi Mangaldas can today insists that she performs kathak albeit with a modernist sensibility learned from her teacher.

By focussing on the materials of the traditional form, but utilizing them in new and startling ways, by transferring narrative focus from religion and mythology to the secular concerns of everyday middle-class women and by her use of electronic music (composed primarily by Atul Desai) and costumes carefully designed to move fluidly with the dancers, Lakhia has modernized kathak, translating its parameters into accessible but nuanced contemporaneity.

**List of selected modernist works by Kumudini Lakhia (based on kathak vocabulary**).

*Duvidha* (1971)

*Yugal* (1978)

*Atah Kim* (1981)

*Kaleidoscope* (1983)

*Chharika (1984)*

*The Peg (1985)*

*Tarana (1985)*

*Hastak* (1986)

*Jantar Mantar* (1986)

*Setu  (*1987)

*Bhav Krida* (1999)

*Ruins* (2004)

*Mushti* (2005)

*Chakravuha, the story of Abhimanyu* for (2005)

*Anuma*  (2006)

*Hagoromo* (2006)

*Punarnava* (2009)

**References and Further Reading**

Chakravorty, P. (2009) *Bells of Change*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kothari, S. (1989) *Kathak. Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.

Lakhia, K. (2003) ‘Innovations in Kathak’. In *New Directions in Indian Dance*, S. Kothari, Ed. Mumbai: Marg Publications: 60-69.

Shah, R. (2005) *Movement in Stills: The Dance and Life of Kumudini Lakhia,* Ahmedabad: MapinLit.

**Paratextual Material**

Photos of Kumudini Lakhia have been sent under a separate cover.

1) Portrait of Kumudini Lakhia

2) Kumudhi Lakhia in Duvidha (her own choreography) 1973