**Shankar, Uday (b. December 6, 1900, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India; d. September 26, 1977, Kolkata, West Bengal, India)**

**Summary**

A legendary dancer often credited as the father of Indian modern dance, Uday Shankar was a visual artist and an astute choreographer with a keen sense of stagecraft, light designs, and music. He was a largely self-taught performer whose stage presence as an ‘Oriental,’ masculine dancer in his starting years brought him the highest possible recognition as a dancer at home and abroad.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Arguably the first Indian dancer to think about choreography as a specific art, and called the Indian Cultural Ambassador at the height of his glory, Uday Shankar’s earliest encounter with dance may be described as a coincidence. After his training at J.J. School of Arts, Mumbai, Shankar travelled to England to study at the Royal college of Art in 1920. His chance introduction to ballerina Anna Pavlova and her invitation to him to choreograph two dance pieces for her company brought in a new and unexpected phase in Shankar’s life. He choreographed two pieces. The first was titled *Radha-Krishna*, and was a duet he danced with Pavlova. The second,*Hindu Wedding*, was performed as part of Pavlova’s 'Oriental Impressions' production, which was presented at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in London, in 1923. His experience of working with Anna Pavlova encouraged him to explore possibilities of creating and choreographing his own dance with the idea of presenting the ‘Orient’ to the West. Soon he was creating movements essentially belonging to the Indian tradition. His philosophy of choreography never remained contained by borders between the East and the West and constantly moved between the two to incorporate new ideas and images. From 1930 till 1942, Shankar and his troupe gave 889 performances all over Europe. He also visited America several times with his dancers. His last trip abroad was in 1968 where he fell ill and had to return home in the middle of the tour.

While being extremely popular and welcomed as the cultural ambassador of India in the West, Shankar received mixed reactions for his creative endeavours within India - receiving standing ovations in some places from an overwhelmed audience and facing severe criticisms in others from revivalists of classical traditions of dance. Given the anti-colonial, progressive movements of the time, the mix of dance choreographies, made up of everyday issues of human life and grand mythical themes, became popular among a huge audience. Poet, musician, and activist Rabindranath Tagore welcomed Shankar back in India and later in 1939, encouraged him to establish the Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre at Almora, in the foothills of the Himalayas. With an impressive list of patrons like Nehru, Gandhi, Tagore, and Elmhurst backing him, Shankar established the academy for excellence in performance arts. He invited the best of the master-teachers to work at the Centre including Amobi Singh for manipuri, Shankaran Nambudri for kathakali, Kandappa Pillai for bharata natyam, and Ustad Alauddin Khan for music. Shankar’s brothers, including Ravi Shankar, were trainees as well as troupe members at the Almora Centre, which soon became not only the meeting place for various forms of Indian dance and music, but also the base for the performing troupe of Shankar, which toured and performed extensively in India and abroad.

Shankar emphasized the need for a holistic training in art for the students at the Centre. His basic training programme was aimed at training the students in concentration, observation, imagination, improvisation, composition, and choreography.

After four years of operation, the Centre had to be closed down due to lack of funds. Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre trained and produced many great dancers, such as Sachin Shankar, Narendra Sharma, and Zohra Segal.

Shankar’s only directorial venture was in the film *Kalpana* (‘Imagination’), showcased many of his ideas, his views on life, and a lot of his choreography, and remains a document of his creative ability to transcend borders. Although his choreography was critiqued by classicists, his path of creativity has continued to empower and encourage Indian dancers to evolve their own dance vocabularies. Shankar’s dance vocabulary was born out of his encounter with India at many levels.

**Urmimala Sarkar Munsi**

List of Works:

*Indra*, *Shiva Tandava*, *Kartikeya*, *Rhythm of Life* (1930s)

*Ram Leela*, *Labour and Machinery*, *Kalpana* (Film) (1940s)

*The Great Renunciation*, *Lord Buddha*, *Assam Impressions* (1950s)

*Shamanya Kshati*, *Prakriti Ananda* (1960s)

*Shankarscope* (1970s)

**References and Further Reading**

Khokar, Mohan. 1983. *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar*. Himalayan Books: Delhi.

(This is Khokar’s biography of Shankar with photos and details about his dance productions.)

Erdman, Joan. Who Remembers Uday Shankar? [http://mukto-mona.net/new\_site/mukto-mona/Articles/jaffor/uday\_shanka2.htm . Accessed on 13/04/2012](http://mukto-mona.net/new_site/mukto-mona/Articles/jaffor/uday_shanka2.htm%20.%20Accessed%20on%2013/04/2012).

(The article is a critical take on India’s acceptance of Shankar and his dance, analyzing his position in the context of Indian dance history.)

Sarkar Munsi, Urmimala. 2009. Imag(in)ing the nation: Uday Shankar’s Kalpana in Urmimala Sarkar Munsi and Stephanie Burridge, eds. *Traversing Tradition: Celebrating Dance in India*, , Routledge: Delhi, London, New York.

(The article looks at Shankar’s only film, ‘Kalpana,’ to analyze his artistic representation and critical understanding of India as a nation.)

Jost, Diana Brenscheidt gen. 2011. *Shiva Onstage: Uday Shankar’s company of Hindu Dancers in Europe and the United States, 1931 – 1938*. LIT Verlag Münster: Zurich.

(The author brings together numerous reviews and early ethnographic writings on Uday Shankar’s dance during his extensive travels in the West.)

Jaffor Ullah, A.H. *Uday Shankar’s Short Biography* [1900-1977]

<http://mukto-mona.net/new_site/mukto-mona/Articles/jaffor/uday_shankar.htm>. Accessed 12/06/2012

(This online biography provides photographs and well as four short music recordings of Shankar’s choreographies.)