**Astad Deboo (b. 13 July, 1947, Jamshedpur, India – )**

**Summary**

Astad Deboo’s name is synonymous with Contemporary Indian Dance, a style that he pioneered at a time when innovations in Indian dance were not welcomed. Deboo’s work in the 1970s and 1980s was not accepted by Indians who critiqued it as ‘too western;’ likewise, many westerners judged it as ‘not Indian enough.’ By the 1990s, audiences in India and beyond grew receptive to new Indian dance idioms partly influenced by globalization, the internet and increased transnational travel. Deboo has received two prestigious awards from the government of India: in 1995, the Creative Dance Award from the government’s major arts organization, Sangeet Natak Akamedi, and in 2007, the Padma Shri, in recognition of his contributions as a pioneer in Contemporary Indian Dance.

**Deboo’s Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Deboo’s dynamic dance career of over forty years, with performances in over sixty countries, includes solo, group and collaborative choreography. He has collaborated with performing artists, including the late Pina Bausch, with musicians (Gundecha brothers), with *thang-ta* (sword and shield) martial artists of Manipur, and puppeteers such as Dadi Pudamjee.

Deboo describes his style as ‘contemporary in vocabulary and traditional in restraints.’ With a base in kathak – having studied with Guru Prahlad Das from a young age (and later having studied Kathakali with Guru E.K. Pannicker) – Deboo travelled to the United States, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Japan, observing and learning different dance vocabularies. His signature style is characterized by intense focus, concentration, and technical virtuosity along with a distinctively Indian aesthetic of evoking *rasa* (emotion*).*

Deboo collaboratively created *Rhythm Divine* (2007) with Manipuri martial artists, *thang-ta*, and drum dancers, *pung cholam*. Similar to Deboo’s energy in providing a platform for Manipuri artists from India’s largely neglected Northeast, his humanistic social vision with the highest aesthetic standards inspires his creative choreography over the past twenty years with the deaf—first with The Action Players (*Dancing Dolphins*) in Kolkata, then in Chennai with The Clarke School for the Deaf (*ContraPosition*)*. ContraPosition* opened the International Deaf Olympics (Melbourne, Australia, 2005). Since 2004, Deboo has led the Clarke School dancers in *ContraPositions* in seventy-five shows across India, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Australia. The Astad Deboo Foundation, formed in 2002, aims to provide creative training to able-bodied and disabled artists.

Astad’s deep humanity led to his evocative work, *Breaking Boundaries* (2009), with street children of Salaam Baalak Trust (established by filmmaker Mira Nair after *Salaam Bombay’s* success). As in his work with the deaf, Deboo challenges these youth (some coming from violent pasts) to achieve Deboo’s signature meditative and minimalist style. He recognizes them as artists and builds their self-confidence and group spirit through rigorous training. Deboo has presented them in various Indian cities.

**Legacy**

Contemporary Indian Dance has Deboo’s unique stamp on it. His significant legacy offers innovative models for younger Indian artists whom he exhorts with characteristic clarity: ‘to be contemporary Indian dancers, we must be Indian contemporary, not simply imitate the west.’ ‘Indian contemporary’ idioms evolve from India’s rich expressive traditions along with openness to intercultural and cross-disciplinary interactions in today’s globalized world.

**Ketu Katrak**

**List of Works**

*Interpreting Tagore* (2011)

*Breaking Boundaries* (2009)

*Rhythm Divine* (2007)

*ContraPosition* (2004)

*Celebrations* (1999)

**References and further reading**

Deboo, A. 2003. “Creating Endless Possibilities,” in Sunil Kothari, ed., *New Directions in Indian Dance*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.

(Deboo delineates his creative journey and its evolution over four decades.)

Ramanujan, R. 2008. “Waah Ustad Waah!” *India Perspectives* April–May 2008: 57–67.

(A comprehensive analysis of Deboo’s choreography in Contemporary Indian Dance)

Venkataraman, L. 2009. “Peerless” *The Hindu*, 1 May 2009.

(A positive review of Deboo’s choreography and training of street children of the Salaam Balak Trust, Delhi in *Breaking Boudaries*.)

Venkat, L. “Astad Deboo gives space a new dimension,” [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com). 19 August 2003.

(Discussion of Deboo’s work in Indonesia with local artists)

Interview with Lalitha Venkat, on [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com), 20 November 2001

(Covers many aspects of Deboo’s art and his collaborations with other performing

artists, musicians, and martial artists.)

**Paratextual Material**

Note: Author has requested photos and video from the choreographer