**East West Dance Encounter (1984, Bombay, India)**

**Summary**

The East West Dance Encounter 1984 Bombay, consisted of a week of presentations and discussion among selected performers and critics[[1]](#endnote-1) representing a range of styles, forms, and theories of dance and committed to inter-cultural exchange. In the evenings were public performances. Despite a long history of transformation, Indian dance in the 1980s was known more for adherence to tradition than for innovation. The East West Dance Encounter represented an early effort to acknowledge and celebrate choreographic experimentation. It highlighted projects that contended with the demands of a recently reformed tradition and those that engaged with modernist aesthetics, including expressionism and minimalism alongside postmodern initiatives like parody. This event set the stage for subsequent Dance Encounter events that continued to support modernist work in India.

**Contribution to Modernism**

The East-West Encounters were conceived by Dr. Georg Lechner, sponsored by The Max Mueller Bhavan,[[2]](#endnote-2) and hosted at The National Center for Performing Arts, which at that time was a complex of workspaces and theaters for various arts. From a present-day perspective, the title of this event evokes binaries and essentialized thinking, despite its attempt to include multiple perspectives, including that of colonials talking back. Yet, this event marked a watershed in the approach of audiences and the governmental official approach to dance. Until this time, primarily the classical dance forms were exported as examples of an ancient and complex Indian culture. There was only one government-owned television channel and punitive import duties on all electronic equipment. News in different languages, and local theatre and dance productions were broadcast from videotapes that were erased and reused. So visibility and longevity in artistic careers were predominantly contingent on state recognition[[3]](#endnote-3)- Since the 1991 ‘liberalisation’ of the Indian economy, the introduction of cable with multiple channels and the internet, public choice, local and international corporate sponsors have determined content. With that, the bodily representations in Indian film have become internationalized. In Indian television channels today, dance competitions have proliferated, and innovative moves are celebrated. In art dance, the classicists are now choreographers, and the moderns continue to educate their audiences.

B. Malchow-Tayebi, in 1984 wrote:

What really took place was a meeting of extraordinary human beings and artists…Confrontation and companionship were not determined by forms and techniques of their different dance styles, but by the differing motivations and driving forces behind the creative process. … Vulnerability, anxiety, uncertainty, and failure no longer remained feelings to be hidden. Honesty, compassion and love not longer seemed an impossible dream. (65)

It was here that a new community of dancers committed to exploring New Directions came to coalesce, where Chandralekha was first recognised as the explosive, passionate icon for change that she was; where Kumudini Lakhia’s call to contemporize the content of Kathak was cheered;[[4]](#endnote-4) where Sonal Mansingh eloquently resisted pressures to depict the terrors of the holocaust and said clearly ‘I want to make Pools of light;[[5]](#endnote-5)’ where Igor Wakhevitch and I ventured into unknown territory of exploring cosmic Time, and the safer space of shape transformations of bharatanatyam adavus; Astad Deboo regaled the audience with his satire of Bollywood.

From the literature produced by Dr. Georg Lechner after the event, one adduces that the western dancers were presented as examples to be emulated. This was resisted by many dancers present adding to the turmoil of that week. Lechner scathingly castigated Bombay audiences and the press for their responses to the performances. ‘Dear audience’ he wrote, ‘study the art of fishing and cast the right net…’ In defence of the performances of Gerhard Bohner and other western dancers, whose work the Bombay audience had apparently found incomprehensible, he launched on a historical summary of the changes in dance in Europe (particularly Germany) with references to the USA. Indian dance (he explained) was still mired in ‘a solid pact between dancer, *guru* and *rasika* (knowledgeable member of the audience,) guided by age-honoured set rules…codification, sublimation…’ Of the Indian dancers, he lauded Chandralekha, ignoring all others but Deboo and myself, who served as fodder for his angst.[[6]](#endnote-6) On Carmen DeLavallade’s exquisite and beloved performance, he reserved judgment- somewhat patronizingly. Georg Lechner went on to organize several follow up Dance Encounters in India in the following years. The high profile 10th anniversary in 1993 was renamed New Directions in Indian dance, and encountered a hostile press in Delhi where it was held.

Some ‘Western’ dancers, sensitive to the colonial implications of their presence but eager to fulfill their obligations to the East, offered gentle mentorship. The legacy of this exchange continued for many years as a dialogue between Susanne Linke, Pina Bausch and Chandralekha, and as lifelong dialogues for others[[7]](#endnote-7). Chris Lechner, former dancer at the Stuttgart Ballet, and Georg’s son, still works with Indian contemporary dancers. Most importantly the event legitimized innovation for dancers from and within India. (Previously, only non-Indian dancers were expected to innovate beyond tradition.) Also, the gatekeeping notion of authenticity -- which had hitherto meant a demand for unchanged tradition -- was recast as a demand for individual artistic integrity. This watershed event officially opened the door for new choreographies not only in modernist and post traditional choreographies, but also within the classical forms.

**Further Reading:**

The East West Dance Encounter, 1984 Program lists the following participants:

France:

Dominique Bagouet - Choreographer, modern dance, Montpellier, (danced with Maurice Bejart)

Andreine Bel -Kathak(Birju Maharaj- New Delhi) Free dance (Francois Malkovsky)

Elizabeth Mauger (Cunningham technique) from France,

From FRG or Federal Republic of Germany, as West Germany was then known:

Gerhard Bohner, Choreographer-dancer Folkwang Ballet, Netherlands-Dans-Theatre.

Susanne Linke, Freelance Choreographer of Tanztheater, and Contemporary dance.

Italy:

Patrizia Cerroni,(Choreographer: *I Danzatori Scalzi*)

Ileana Citaristi,(Odissi- Kelucharan Mahapatra) from Italy,

USA:  
Carmen DeLavallade, Freelance modern dancer. (Lester Horton, Alvin Ailey etc)

Ritha Devi, (Mahari style Odissi-Pankaj Charan Das)

Leslie Friedman, (Fulbright fellow– listed but did not participate.)

Canada:

Anne Marie Gaston Dancer-Indologist-Bharata Natyam

UK:

James Kippen- Ethnomusicologist, (tabla-Lucknow tradition) Belfast UK

Stephen Long (London Festival Ballet)

India:

Chandralekha,(Contemporary bharatanatyam)

Uttara Asha Coorlawala, (modern- Pearl Lang, Ballet Hispanico, Yvonne Rainer, Sun Ock Lee )

Astad Deboo, (Modern)

Sunil Kothari, (critic and writer)

Yamini Krishnamurti Then one of India’s leading exponents of Classical dance, -Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam, and Sanskrit scholar)

Kumudini Lakhia, (Contemporary kathak)

Sonal Mansingh,(Odissi and Bharata Natyam)

Dr. Narayana Menon, (Musicologist and then Chairman, for Sangeet Natak Akademi. )

Mallika Sarabhai, (dancer, Producer, activist)

Mrinalini Sarabhai,(contemporary Indian dance drama and bharatanatyam)

Bharat Sharma, (modern dance, Narendra Sharma troupe- Uday Shankar lineage)

Shanta Serbjeet Singh,(modern art and dnace critic)

Shirin Vazifdar, (art and dance connoisseur and writer)

Igor Wakhevitch (composer of electronic music in the tradition of Olivier Messaien, trained in Paris Conservatory of Music, living in Auroville, Tamilnadu) Wakhevitch and Coorlawala were commissioned to create a new work for the East –West Dance Encounter by the Max Mueller Bhavan.

The selected participants not listed in the program included:

Tushna Dallas (ballet, Royal Accademy of Dance, London)

Devissaro- Composer, (Australia and India)

Damayanti Joshi (Kathakali, Bombay)

Ram Gopal (UK)

Sadanand Menon, critic, scholar, designer

Avanthi Medhuri, (Kuchipudi)

Dasharath Patel, Artist, designer

Satyavati, (Dancer)

Chitra Sundaram (UK and India)

Shirin Vajifdar-Anand ( dance reporter and connoisseur)

References and further reading:

*The NCPA Quarterly Journal* Vol XII, No. 2. June 1984.

Gokhale, V. The Forever Old and the Ever New. *Bombay* 7-21 Feb.1984 Pp 51-55.

Ookerjee, Sheryar. Meeting of Minds. *Sunday Observer* 29 Jan.1984. (Reviews of performances by Linke, Bohner, Sundaram, Sharma, De Lavallade, Sarabhai, Coorlawala, Chandralekha.)

Singh, Shanta Serbjeet. Rare Configuration of Dance Talent. *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi.

Uttara Asha Coorlawala

1. Some of the participants from “the West” were funded by their governments, while some participants applied to participate as they were travelling in the vicinity. All participants were carefully screened for the quality of their work, and for their willingness to dialogue across traditions. See list of participants. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Germany had no colonial relations with India, but years of cultural interaction since the arrival of German missionaries to Tamilnadu in the 18th century (as cited by Walter Liefer, *India and the Germans* [1969]).

   The Goethe Institutes in India are re-named The Max Muller Bhavans after the German philologist Max Muller who argued for the relationship between languages and the religions that they spoke for. They encourage interactions in the arts, worldwide and promulgate the study of German and German culture abroad. Dr. Georg Lechner, (himself a scholar of romance languages, literature and philosophy) had directed programs of the Goethe institute, in Rangoon, Calcutta, New Delhi, Montreal, Seoul, Bombay. He lived in India for about 20 years. He is most known for the series of cultural encounters (1982-87) that he conducted in initially Mumbai, and later in Delhi in disciplines such as philosophy, theatre and dance.

   In 1983, after my performance at the Tata theatre, I first met Dr. Lechner. He was already exceptionally well-versed in dance -- his two earlier wives had been dancers, one a ballet dancer in the Stutgart ballet, and the other, Sonal Mansingh, a leading lady of Indian classical dance. Yet, we met for several discussions, on issues, the conditions of dance in India, and regarding the artists and critics who would be interested in change, and contribute to the 1984 Dance Encounter. He also invited me to collaborate with avant garde composer Igor Wakhevich on a new work for the event. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A few corporate sponsors from the tobacco (who were forbidden to advertise their products) and hotel industries sponsored the performing arts for a few years until the media explosion of the 90s when they found it more profitable to sponsor televised sports as cricket. The individuals who dispensed these funds were longterm connoisseurs themselves deeply committed to the arts. In Bombay, the Time & Talents Club, an organization of volunteers, sponsored many significant cultural events to fundraise for underwriting treatment costs for cancer patients and for other local charities. They sponsored Marcel Marceau, Kalakshetra, the Joffrey, Murray Louis, Dan Wagonner, Dior, Cardin fashion shows, Zubin Mehta, and other local and international performers. Similarly the sabhas sponsored festivals of local performers that often started in the evenings and ran until sunrise. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Including her famous statement: ‘I want a divorce from Krishna.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dr. Georg Lechner moderated all the presentations. He would ask participants how they might choreograph a dance about the holocaust. I think this query was intended to raise issues about content and its relationship to form and ofcourse it was significant for his generation and place. After the definitive response from Sonal Mansingh to his challenge, it remained a recurring theme issue but in the background. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. As a result of the 84 conference, I was invited by the ICCR to perform in the USSR and GDR (East Germany) and am still on their list of empanelled artsts. To Astad Deboo, my colleague and friend, I bow my head in deep admiration and respect for how he just keeps going and remains in love with dancing. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Daksha Sheth met her husband the composer, Devissaro, at this event. Their daughter Isha Sharvani is not only a phenomenal dancer, but also a Bollywood star. Similarly, Lechner introduced me to Haresh Lalvani, now my husband. Lalvani would later contribute his computer-generated visuals of a 16 dimensional star to the new work that I had premiered at the 1984 Encounter. Young dancers in the companies who performed at the event, would return to later Encounters as choreographers of new directions. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)