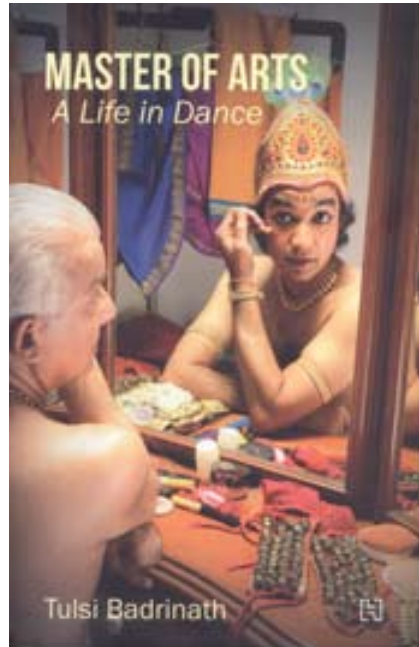


Rhythm of life



Master of Arts: A Life in Dance

By Tulsi Badrinath

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P R A V E E N A S H I V R A M

As a reader of writer and dancer Tulsi Badrinath's *Master of Arts: A Life in Dance*, two very distinct things happen to you. One, you suddenly become very aware of your body. You worry about your posture, you wonder if your hands are too stiff or too loose, you begin to listen to the pull of your muscles and the snap of your joints, and you discover the cadence of your breath.

His disembodied voice snapped from somewhere behind me. 'Sit! And do not get up until I say so!' I could not see him, but I felt the tip of his fingers pressing my shoulders, pushing me down down, down into the hell of a beautiful araimandi, holding me there in the burning fire of loaded muscles, until he was satisfied.

But when you stop reading, the second thing happens to you. You, just as suddenly, forget this newfound awareness. It disappears like superfluous thoughts swimming in purgatory till they are called upon action, in this case, reading the book again. Badrinath, for all her passion for dance and surrender to its many nuances, is unable to sustain the world of rhythm beyond the physicality of the page. It reads like an exciting dance performance hyped beyond the substance it offers, leaving you with a tantalising whiff of the heights it could have reached, given the immense potential of the subject.

The problem here isn't the craft, as Badrinath evokes a sense of almost surreal surrender through some of her passages, especially those that spring from depths of her own sentient experiences...

Somewhere in the juncture between music and mood, words and meaning, there was a space for me to dance with all my being, combining all those energies in one purposeful flow until it streamed from my face towards the invisible audience.

Sir's face was my only means of reckoning, the mirror that reflected his reactions to my valiant efforts. Seated in front of me, his hair just a tad tousled, his eyes spoke. As he frowned, scowled, knit his eyebrows, hit the stick sharply to draw my attention to a mistake, yelled at me, was impassive, withdrawn, let slip the rare glimmer of a smile, I sight-read my way to accomplishment.

The problem is more to do with the actual intent of this book: is it the life of the legendary dance couple the Dhananjayans, is it about male dancers in general, is it about the author and her relationship with the art form, or is it about the evolution of Bharata Natyam itself? It could certainly be all, ambitious as that might be, and we get a sense that that is what the author was aiming for, but it falls short of that lofty ideal as Badrinath is unable to distance herself from her interconnectedness to dance, leaving her always conscious of its legacy but never of the many paths that make it so. The result is an almost hurried account of Bharata Natyam's history, a majority of which is squeezed into an Introduction, a cursory glance at a handful of male dancers that are too broad a representation at best, a rich and languid account of the Dhananjayans' incredible journey in dance, sometimes

beautifully juxtaposed with Badrinath's personal encounters with her gurus, and sometimes striking an odd note in its placement or even requirement. In fact, barring a few chapters, the continuity feels like independent narrative pieces as they might have appeared in a column. The ideas too, especially towards the end when Badrinath chronicles the life of some other male dancers, are too deep to fit into a single chapter, almost as if the word count was a deterrent. For instance, dancer Navjet Singh Johar's forthright statement alone could make for a separate dialogue and book on dance.

Bharata Natyam expresses the feminine voice of the human

condition in the most beautiful manner possible. Sufism expresses it one way. Vaishnava poetry of all kinds, Gurbani expresses it, folk songs, folk tales... they all do. If you are a make expressing it, then your identification is with that voice. It's not the form, the costume, the jewellery, that's all secondary... the core is the *voice* of this dance. Which is that of beauty, longing, eroticism, human incompleteness. If you don't get that and say I will only do this as a man or not, then stay at home.

Even the entire discourse on the Sabha culture in Chennai seems misplaced in its touch-and-go appeal.

There is soul in this book, no doubt

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about that. Every page that recounts the story of Dhananjayan and Shanta is replete with such innocence and poignancy that despite the often clunky bits of real conversation, especially that entire chapter on the Dhananjayans regaling a bunch of excited students during a train journey with their story of courtship, romance and marriage, you feel suffused with a strange undercurrent of warmth, of fullness, like the parched earth after the first rains. You willingly get drenched and allow yourself to travel with a confused teenager as he leaves his home in Kerala for Madras; you allow yourself to feel the rebelliousness of this boy and his nostalgia for home; you allow yourself to wish fervently that his guru, the legendary Asan Chandu Panicker, a 70-year-old martinet at the time, would eat his lunch just so young Dhananjayan could too and not have to dance on an empty stomach; you allow yourself to feel pride at Dhananjayan's obvious talent and his enthusiasm to flow with his creativity that, even now, in his 73rd year, is yet to wane; you allow yourself to silently cheer when Rukmini Devi Arundale gives him a back-handed compliment; you feel his rancour when misguided circumstances lead to his exit from Kalakshetra; you feel his passion and commitment as he plunges feet-first into iconic collaborations from dance productions with the late Pandit Ravi Shankar to a radical adaptation of *Jungle Book*; you feel his disappointment when his dream of creating another Kalakshetra-styled campus, Bhaskara, in Kerala disintegrates; and you feel, most of all, his absolute power on stage, of the craft and melody of dance, of his body and rhythm, and his unshakable confidence in the medium. When Badrinath says in the end, "This is my continual good fortune; *that* lord of dance whom I beheld yesterday is my guru", you feel just a little bereft of something that you wish you had in your life too.

That is probably the success of Badrinath as a writer, as she sprinkles this entire world of dance with a necessary element of human-ness. You understand Rukmini Devi's insecurities and her fragile ego; you understand Shanta's behind-the-scenes diligence and the exasperation this sometimes leads to; you understand their second son, Satyajit's need, today, to be around his child at all times, or the first, Sanjay's petulant plea on his brother's behalf when rehearsals continue into the night, "Stop it! It's late, he needs to sleep, he has school tomorrow." You understand why Satyajit gave up dance for photography; you understand why Dhananjayan and his forays into the cinema were jinxed. You understand how behind the excitement of performing abroad comes the harsh everyday reality of the lack of home food! You see the humour of life, in dance class, on the train, in production and on stage. You understand his life, not as an artist alone, but as a human being too, with all its frailties and arrogance and wisdom. And you forgive it all, as you do too the author, because "The minute the first beat struck on the drum and the cymbals provided an aural tightrope, the rhythm held us safe within it. Then on, the single high purpose was that of the immediate art spun by a joyous spirit in a dancing body."