

## Dance Review:

# Indian Dance pulses with modern energy at Kalanidhi

Kalanidhi Fine Arts of Canada: Contemporary Choreography in Indian Dance

★★★★(out of 4)

Until Saturday; Fleck Dance Theatre, 207 Queens Quay West. 416-973-4000 or <http://tickets.harbourfrontcentre.com>

An Indian dance concert enlivened by club beats and the sounds of Ricky Martin? How about a dance-off between soccer and Bharatanatyam, India's hallowed classical dance form? What about a dance that celebrates the body electric, the male body electric? Well, just about anything is possible when Toronto-based Kalanidhi Fine Arts of Canada throws open its doors to fearless innovation.

This week, Kalanidhi, under the visionary direction of founder Sudha Khandwani, is hosting the second instalment of an international festival and symposium dedicated to exploring contemporary Indian dance. The first, in 2009, had its fair share of bracing modernity but also a good deal of argument about the very nature of Indian dance.

Does that umbrella term even have useful meaning?

There are still no conclusive answers to questions that implicitly challenge the role of tradition in the dancemaking practices of today's Indian choreographers, whether they're based in the motherland or lodged in its far-flung cultural diaspora. Judging by Wednesday's opening performance, however, most of these artists are more interested in action than arguing. Respect for cultural roots is one thing but enslavement to them another.

In *Quicksand*, a new work by Hari Krishnan, founder-director of Toronto company inDANCE, the very notion of cultural distinction is jettisoned as a multiracial cast of 10 bare-chested men – not a South Asian among them – mash the Navarasa, or nine archetypal moods popular in Indian dance, into a techno-hip, strutting declaration of freedom from the constraints of tradition and conventional sexuality.

Visual designer Boyd Bonitzke projects a video quicksand onto the stage. Ghostly images of a traditional Indian dancer morph into clouds and rippling water. Gestural motifs redolent of traditional Indian forms decorate a movement vocabulary that owes its alternating heft and buoyancy as much to Western contemporary dance as to lessons Krishnan learned from his guru.

Self-expression is the thematic link between *Quicksand's* cascade of bold, surging ensembles and more contemplative solos.

The same impetus towards self realization was apparent in Wednesday's opening solo, *Calm Abiding*, a collaboration between Montreal choreographer José Navas and Toronto dancer/choreographer Nova Bhattacharya. Yet, where Krishnan the maverick gadfly is aggressively iconoclastic, Bhattacharya is all finely calibrated physical discipline. Nothing is extravagant, nothing overplayed in a solo that seems to deconstruct and reinvent tradition into a new way of moving.

Superficially at least, celebrated Indian choreographer Padmavhusan Kumudini Lakhia's *Kathak Swaroop*, performed with charming vivacity by Sudeshna Maulik, was the only work at Wednesday's opening that delivered recognizable tradition. Even then, amidst the tinkling ankle bells and beautifully mimed story-telling, there was a tone and freshness that suggests it's not so much a question of old versus new as the spirit that infuses the movement.

And the spirit and energy were very much of today.

## **Dance: Interview**

### ***Sudha Khandwani: 'I wanted to show the magnificent evolution of Indian dance'***

***From Wednesday's Globe and Mail***

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At the age of 78, Sudha Khandwani – dancer, actor, filmmaker, teacher, researcher, curator and producer – has continually defied convention in both her professional and personal lives.

As artistic director of Kala Nidhi Fine Arts, which she founded in Toronto in 1991, she has become known internationally for her expertise in new directions in Indian dance. Now she is about to launch her 11th dance festival showcasing contemporary Indian choreography from three countries.

**You come from a family of high achievers, which includes your younger sister, famed Bharatanatyam dancer Menaka Thakkar. I understand it was your father who gave you and your five siblings the freedom to find your own paths.**

My father was a lawyer in Mumbai, but he was also a theosophist. Theosophists believe you should strive for perfection to bring yourself closer to your divine nature. For example, when

my parents married, my father was 17 and my mother was 12. He insisted that they live apart until she finished her education.

**What impact did his belief in theosophy have on you?**

Theosophy gave him a passion for the arts. In 1940, even though it meant a long commute to his law office, he moved the family to the [Mumbai] suburb of Santacruz, because it was a community where many artists lived. Our home became a centre for music salons and poetry recitals. He saw in me a potential for dance and drama, so he put me into classes. This created a lot of friction with our relatives because girls from good families did not pursue the arts. My father was my best audience.

**You also broke convention by marrying a Muslim. How did you meet your husband?**

Abdullah Khandwani was a well-known photographer who had graduated from the college of art. I met him when he took the pictures for Menaka's graduation dance performance. At this point in my life, I wanted to broaden my knowledge about Indian dance and theatre beyond Mumbai, and he shared this interest. For over seven years, we continually travelled around the country researching and documenting the traditional arts of India. We married after we immigrated to Canada. The family didn't want the wedding to take place in Mumbai. We had two ceremonies, one Hindu and one Muslim. In Canada, we became known for the exhibits, multimedia shows, and films that came out of our research.

**Why did you start producing Indian dance festivals?**

Because I realized that audiences and critics alike thought of Indian dance only in its traditional and classical forms. I wanted

I wanted to show the magnificent evolution of Indian dance into a broader spectrum.

**The festival that opens on Wednesday night is called Contemporary Choreography in Indian Dance – Part II. What is its focus?**

It's a continuation of the festival we first mounted in 2009. It carries on our interest in presenting choreography that is both fusion or completely new. The festival also includes a symposium to address issues related to contemporary Indian dance. For example, should the definition include dance of the diaspora as well as the homeland?

**You have companies coming from Toronto, Montreal and Edmonton, but there are also three international companies who have never appeared in Toronto before. Can you talk about them?**

There are two from India. Kadamb, based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is the company of Padma Bhushan Kumudini Lakhia, who is now 80 years old. She began as a classical Kathak dancer, but now uses traditional dance and thematic vocabulary in very innovative ways. New Delhi's Santosh Nair is a Chhau master. His company Sadhya performs works that incorporate both the martial art Chhau and the dance drama Kathakali. Srishti – Nina Rajarani Dance Creations is from London, England. The artistic director is a woman, but the company has only male

dancers. Their energy is driven by the live music of her husband. Her two pieces are about football players and office workers.

*Kala Nidhi's Spring Festival of Indian Dance – Contemporary Choreography in Indian Dance, Part II – runs at Harbourfront's Fleck Dance Theatre through Sunday (for details, see [www.kalanidhifinearts.org](http://www.kalanidhifinearts.org)).*