

Nala Najan: The Artist and his Art

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to bring to light Nala Najan, a lesser known American practitioner, choreographer and performer of Indian classical dance. Travelling to India in 1950 he trained in several Indian classical art forms from the grand masters of the art at a time when the abolition act of 1929 had shaken the foundations and practice and performing structures of Indian classical dance in India. The paper focuses on his learning the art form as well as imbibing with a great passion the culture and tradition that went with the art. The paper details his teaching methodology and his philosophy behind creating new choreographies basing them on a strong foundation of his learnings India. The paper also looks into the various dimensions Nala invented for documenting an oral tradition. It included the documentation of the dance itself, not excluding the documentation of the thought process before and after composition of a piece. At a time when non-Indian practitioners of the art were presenting Indian classical dance as “Exotic” Asian dance, here was an ardent disciple of Indian classical dance who propagated it in its most pristine form and also elevated it through his deep understanding of the Hindu thought and philosophy. The methodology for this research is qualitative. Phenomenological and participative methods of observation were involved. The phenomenological study involved systematic study and documentation of facts from a seven-volume publication by Nala’s disciple Padma Chittampalli, without any manipulation. The participative method was enabled by Nala Najan’s prime disciple Smt. Padma Chittampalli from New York, USA. She had learned Nala’s choreography directly from him for over 23 years. She did not travel or perform in India or elsewhere, thus preserving Nala’s choreographies in their most pristine form. The researcher’s interaction and learning from Ms. Chittampalli, enabled the participative methodology. Nala Najan is one of the pioneers in establishing what the diaspora and American’s understand as authentic Indian classical dance today. His documentation is a precise and exhaustive approach to the documentation of a purely oral tradition of dance.

Key Words: Bharatanatyam, Dance, Choreography, Composition, Documentation, Nala Najan

Introduction

At a time when Bharatanatyam was being reinvented as a classical art in the newly independent India, Nala Najan a young American travelled to India to learn Indian classical dance forms from the grand masters the art. Through this paper, the researcher intends to throw light the work of lesser-known choreographer and Guru, Nala Najan, of New York, USA. The paper explores Nala Najan’s journey of learning not only classical dances of India, but also incorporating into his learning the religious and cultural practices of the time. In his own words his main goal was to present “each song and dance as a definitive piece reflective of Hindu religious beliefs, origin of Hindu Philosophy, Hindu thought, Hindu mind, historical background, techniques of body movements, local and regional social customs

integrated into *Sancharibhavas* and of course, language and literary content including the composer's intention and life".

The researcher's extended residence in the USA while actively performing and teaching Bharatanatyam there, is the motivation behind bringing to light a choreographer and teacher of non-Indian origin. The research raises question of cultural appropriation of the art while also looking at the efforts of choreographers like Nala Najan who maintained the sanctity of the art. A study of how this was accomplished is one of the objectives of the research.

The researcher also thinks it is important to understand through Nala's teaching and performing techniques how Bharatanatyam was propagated and popularized among audiences and students of non-Indian origin in the USA, devoid of the technological advances of today.

Nala Najan arrived in India in 1950 on a scholarship to learn Indian classical dances. He trained in Bharatanatyam from Kattumanar Koil Muttukumaran Pillai. He was trained in the Mysore *Sampradaya* (exclusive Mysore tradition of dance) by Mysore *Vidushi's* (scholars of dance under royal patronage post- independence), *Sundaramma* and *Nagarathnamma*. By virtue of his noble birth, he was trained in *Chauu*, by the Prince of Saraikela himself. Nala also trained in *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* tradition from Bhrahmashri Balasubramanya Bhagavatar of Mellatur and Tandavapita Bharatam Narayanaswamy Iyer of Nallur. These Guru's transformed Roberto Revero (original name of the Artist), into Nala Najan.

Brief background of the social, cultural, political, ambience of the period of Nala's training.

India had just gained independence. Abolition of dance in temples and courts had driven practioners to move into cities to monetize their art. America was just coming out of world- war two and focusing on rebuilding manufacturing industries. As a well- known dancer La Marie quotes, America was a" ballet centric society", with no tolerance for any other forms of performing art. No financial support was extended to "Ethnic Dances" (dances from other countries). In an environment like this, Nala dared to pursue Indian classical dance forms. Anybody from an alien culture trying to imbibe Indian dance were labelled to be culturally appropriating the art. (Cultural appropriation is a post- colonial term popularly used in the academic circles by the 1980's. Cultural appropriation takes place when a majority group adapts cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitive or disrespectful way without understanding the cultural elements. It is to oversimplify a culture or profit from it financially or separate a cultural element from its original meaning all contribute to cultural appropriation.) (Britanica). Since the time period of Nala's travel to India was post- independence, it is compelling to discuss cultural appropriation. Rightfully so, because when Americans took pieces of this art form back

and presented their own choreographic works, they were described as temple dances, ethnic dances, dances of the Gods etc.,. The costuming and the movements were not authentic to the art form either.

While his contemporaries were presenting these dances as oriental dances, Nala used the appropriate verbiage. He announced Bharatanatyam as Bharatanatyam only. He used technical terminology appropriate for the art, like *teermanams*, *abhinaya*, *nritta* and so on to describe his dances to an American audience. His performances included traditional Margam pieces of the Tanjavur Parampara and the Mysore *Sampradaya*, beginning with an Alaripu or an Alari ending with a Tillana. Since Nala's teaching and presentations were authentic to the form it is clear that he had a deep respect and appreciation for the culture the art form was born from. Thus, in Nala's case it was more cultural appreciation as opposed to cultural appropriation.

Learning

Nala was one of the few foreign artists who sought to and had the good fortune of learning from more than one style of Bharatanatyam from the best Nattuvanar's.

Nala records learning 100 to 145 *adavu*'s from three different dance styles within Bharatanatyam.

These *Adavu*'s were practiced in three speeds and five *Nadai*'s daily. He placed emphasis on *Anga-Soushtawam*, *Araimandi*, *Alidha*, *Prtyalidha*, *Rechakas*, neck movements and *hastaprana* as taught to him by his Guru's. His repertoire from the Tanjavur Parampara included:

Four Alaripu's in different talas.

Jathiswarams in Kalyani, Bhairavi, Vasantha and Hamsanandi.

Four Shabdams, which included Nadumurugane which was a rare one.

Varnams in Todi, Kamach Shankarabharanam and Anandabhairavi.

About 40 padams and Vuiruttams.

The Mysore Sampradaya gifted him with a very different repertoire.

- The *laghu Pushpanjali* which is popular today, includes an offering of flowers and a little Nritta. This was usually the Rajadaasi's performing for royal courts.
- The *poorna Pushpanjali* which invoked the deities of the eight cardinal directions with small jathis along with the *sabhavandanasloka*. This was a rendition in temples rendered as *Navasandhi* worship for the protection of the deity and the temple.
- The Alari, a beautiful predecessor to the present day Alaripu representative of the *meyadavu*'s and *mandi adavu* practice of Mysore.
- Ramakarnamrutha Dashavatara slokam

- The Madana *javali*, performed in the Mysore palace during spring involving Madana the God of Love.

Nala's own work.

Of the *Adavus* learnt over the years, Nala through his creativity set these *adavus* to a background score of *Sarale varse*, *Janti varse* and *Geethams* from the Carnatic music repertoire. Every day's practice with students introduced to Bharatanatyam would be accompanied with this music to familiarize them to the music system as well.

Amalgamation of knowledge of Hindu mythology and thoughts from various philosophers, *Vidushis* and *Nattuvanars* brought out various combinations of *hastas* not exactly prescribed by his Guru's, but what Nala thought could be put together and successfully communicated an idea. He studied hand gestures of Chinese dance and incorporated it into his compositions. His popular one taught to us by Padma Chittampalli is the hasta to depict the auspicious. He drew inspiration from the *Kalasha*, that is worshipped before any auspicious event in Hindu culture. It is a pot of water with a coconut and fresh leaves placed over it. The holy rivers and oceans are invoked for blessing and the water is sprinkled on all the material used in worship including the person who worships. He used the *Mukula* hasta to denote the pot and *Kapitta* hasta with its fingers wrapped around the *Mukula* hasta to denote the coconut and fresh leaves. When this particular creation of Nala is used, there is barely anybody who does not understand what it signifies. He also researched and came up with *hastas* for the seven notes or swara's of Carnatic music. Nala researched to create appropriate hand gestures for each note of Carnatic music when he started the choreographing Muttuswamy Dixitar's "Swararagasudha", a well-known musical piece. He thought that if Dixitar integrated *Ragamudre* as a part of his compositions then it was important for a choreographer to honor his intentions regardless of whether the audience noticed it or not. He decided that each swara of a raga should have a hastamudra. He has put off this choreography until he found a *sloka* for *saptaswaras* that his teacher Bharatam had given him.

Shadjam - the sound of Sa, the note	Mayura, peacock in euphoria
Rishabam - the sound of Ri, the note	Vrishaba, mooing of a cow
Gandhara - the sound of Ga, the note	Goat, bleating
Madhyama - the sound of Ma, the note	Krouncha bird
Panchama - the sound of Pa, the note	Kokila bird
Dhaivatha - the sound of Da, the note	Horse Neighing
Nishada - the sound of Ni, the note	Elephant yelling

Corresponding to this information, *hastas* were created by Nala and used in the choreography to denote these swara's. He has also extensively used these *hastas* that he created in other

compositions. When he had to denote musical expertise of a King in a Varnam, he used these hasta's to denote the *arohanam* and *avarohanam* of the raga and then depicted the king being adept at it.

Nala did not modify or manipulate any of the choreographies taught to him by any of his Guru's. Instead, he used them as a prototype to enhance his own choreographies. The "Roopamu Choochi", varnam had been passed on to Nala by his Guru, exactly as it was danced by his Guru Tiruvalur Gnanam, who inherited it from her predecessor Kamalambal Ganika who was from the same temple and deity that the composer dedicated this composition to. These were treasures of deep thought and composition that were polished and presented for over four generations. Nala had an innate sense of gratitude for having received these and hence his philosophy of not changing anything with a composition of this nature. He passed the composition in its entirety to his disciples that included Padma Chittampalli.

Although he composed numerous dance numbers, he always believed there was nothing new to create, that it had all been done before. For example, he spoke of Muttuswamy Dixitar's Western notes in raga Shankarabharana which lend themselves very well to western classical music. This raga he says existed much before any western classical musicians. So, the western classical musicians or Nala could not lay claim that they were the first to use this raga.

Nala inherited a legacy of classical western records from his Adi-guru La-Marie. He set this music to Bharatanatyam, especially in the format of *Tillana's* and *Jathiswarams*. It is obvious from this that he identified a rhythm pattern close to or tala system rather than go with the Abhinaya and melody. He presented Bach-Bharatam all over the US and Europe to much critical acclaim. Some of the Western musician Nala worked with are:

- Johann Sebastian Bach
- Francois Couperin le Grand
- Maurice Ravel
- Ottorino Respighi
- Igor Stravinsky
- Antonio Vivaldi

When it came to Abhinaya, there are several important aspects that Nala brought to his own choreographies. First and foremost were the word for word meaning of the poetry. Following this was understanding the socio-political environment of the time the poet wrote the piece of poetry. He would

repeatedly seek out the vision and intent of the poet in creating this piece of literature. Most Indian compositions would be dedicated to a deity and a holy place called sthalam. He would do a detailed study of the deity, related stories and the sthalapuranam (history of why the temple and deity came to be in that particular location). These would be incorporated into the song on the expansion of a particular word. This idea of expansion he called “Abhinaya Dynamics” or Sanchari Bhavams. In Nala’s own words- **“Each dance must be a definitive piece on pure techniques (if and when applicable). Philosophy of the regional tradition, and the intention of the composer. Minutest attention must be paid to all aspects including use of the body and stances, combined with maximum background information on social customs, religious beliefs, origins, history along with literary details of word splitting, word to word transliteration, summary and hidden meanings and related legends. Swara notations and original language script of the composition is essential as much as possible”**. This whole retinue was followed by him just to decide where the key to the composition lie, and whether it was even worth composing a dance to. When he decided that it was dance worthy, he referred to calendar photos and other photographs collected in scrapbook over time to establish *sthanakas* and elaborate on the costuming and weapons of the particular characters or deities.

He had carefully observed the dance techniques of the Devadasi’s (dancers of the temple), and Rajadaasi’s (Court Dancers). He noticed that the devdaasi’s movements were restricted in nature due to space constraints within the temple. The Rajadaasi’s on the other hand used sweeping movements of the hands and feet. He combined these techniques in his own compositions. When the composition demanded intense *abhinaya*, or facial expressions such as sorrow or pathos he used devadasi techniques. The raajadaasi techniques of sweeping hand and feet movement and stretches were utilized in the Tillanas and other lighter *abhinaya* pieces, or when he portrayed Hanuman or Jatayu along with techniques from his ballet training. This is the reason he puts in parantheses in his quote “If and when applicable”.

Nala dared to choreograph some extremely philosophical pieces. He universalized Hindu philosophy easily through his dance. In the piece “*Idu bhagaya.....Padumanabhana pada bhajane sukha vaiyya*”.... The opening line *idu bhagaya* is repeated at least 60 times in one of Nala’s landmark choreographies. He picked the word “*Bhagya*” as the key word of the composition. He interpreted it in several ways. *Bhagya* is good fortune, and Nala chose it to say grace for the human life he had, wealth, health, five sensory organs that were healthy enough to savor the image of Padmanabha. He said it is my fortune (*Bhagya*) that I enjoy the light of the sun. This kind of offering of gratitude filled the 60 repetitions of the opening line of the song. Nala advised not to use footwork with such intense philosophical pieces, because they can be distracting. Any student of Indian dance who studies these

volumes, thanks to Nala's disciple Padma Chittampalli, will gain deep insights into a variety of compositions and a variety of methods to choreograph these.

Documentation:

Studying Nala's documentation was an eye-opener. In a strictly oral tradition, teachers of the art do not favor written documentation of compositions. They rather have an artist learn how to approach a piece and pull it apart and put it together, by the depth and breadth of their practice. At such a time Nala who was a foreigner and being American, himself agrees to this compulsive need to document anything and everything. He felt it necessary to document Indian life and lifestyle itself, as it had a pronounced influence on the art. Nala is a rare foreign student who had put in such great effort to understand the peripheral environment, culture and tradition that affect the arts. He has a documented collection of traditions like Rangoli (floor art), food, festivals, temple traditions, Hindu Samskara and innumerable other such topics.

He also collected several hundreds of photographs of Gods including calendar pictures to draw from for his choreographies. He observed young women braid their hair with "Talam Poovu", which is a sweet-smelling flower like leaf which leaves a pleasant smell in the hair. His teacher had told him that the fragrance of this flower also resembles that of a local garden snake. Putting these two facts together, Nala wove a beautiful sanchari for the Varnam Nee saati dora.... Where the heroine is braiding her hair with this flower, the hero afraid that there is a snake near her quarter's rushes in, while she chuckles about how easy it was to get him in her chambers with the flowers. Nala drew from every source possible for his dances.

He documented carefully meanings of words in several languages, when he found authentic sources to so. He also collected several compositions in the hope that he would find language translators, at some point.

Nala would document:

1. All the processes that indicated intent and vision of what was to be communicated through a piece. A key word to each composition was identified to maintain emotional equanimity through the piece.
2. The intent of the poet and every parallel interpretation of his would be carefully documented.
3. The opening of the piece, the foot movements, positions, *hastas*, their placements and facial expressions including how long to sustain them and why were documented and also based on point 1.

4. What was important in point 1 and unused in the choreography was saved into a scrap book for later use in other compositions.

Nala's documentation technique was expansive and eventually turned out to be a method of recordkeeping for future generations.

Practice with Padma Chittampalli

Padma Chittampalli was a prime disciple of Nala, from New York USA. She was introduced to the Bangalore dancing community by Senior exponent Smt Lalitha Srinivasan. Smt Lalitha Srinivasan's motivation for encouraging Smt Chittampalli to teach was because, Smt Chittampalli was a direct disciple of Nala for over two decades. She had never interacted with the dance community in India nor performed here. This led to choreographies she had learnt with Nala to sustain in their most pristine form, totally unadulterated. The researcher had the good fortune of being a part of this learning. The practice of the exercises that would train the body to execute the *mai adavus* involved a lot of unlearning from previously trained methods.

The training was very specific, to the point where each finger on a hasta was corrected, to maintain *hastaprana*. The dance form itself looked very different from the Bharatanatyam of today. The transitions from one movement to the next were very intentional and clear. The rhythm patterns were not very complicated, but extremely creative. One Varnam had the same *jathi*'s, repeated through the dance, but the footwork for each one was distinctly different from the other. So many times, when I performed this Varnam, the audience had not even realized it was the same *jathi* repeated several times. This is According to Smt. Chittampalli a tradition of the Mysore style of dancing. The music rendered for the teaching was in the original voices of the Mysore Vidushi's- Sundaramma and Nagarathnamma. We rarely get an opportunity, or even never, hear such renderings these days let alone performing to them. Smt. Chittampalli taught generously several pieces from Nala's Guru's repertoire and his own choreographies. The biggest gift to the dance community however is a seven-volume series on her guru Nala, his Guru's and their work, and his own choreographies that she released. This series although very informal has been the only source material for this paper, reflecting how much information is packed into this series of books.

Findings

It is clear from the study of Nala Najan's life and art, that it is immaterial where you come from. Intent to learn, vision for what you want to do with what you learn are extremely important to take any art form forward. At a time when Indian classical dances were just finding their foothold, Nala chose to

invest two decades of his life to imbibe Indian art, giving up on his family, food and culture. A testament to his longing and dedication.

His holistic approach to the learning Indian classical dance by adapting to and south Indian lifestyle, learning music, percussion, costuming and actively taking part in understanding Hindu philosophy and way of life stands as an example of what it takes to begin to master the art of Indian classical dancing. It sheds light on many aspects of an artist life that we take for granted just by living in India that we should be paying attention to like our temples, their traditions and Sthalapurana's. Since a large portion of our dances are based on literature of poets who dedicated their compositions to one deity or another, this aspect of understanding becomes singularly important.

Nala fused many dance forms and music other than Indian classical, in his pieces. The fusion is so carefully planned that if one does not know that he was trained in western art forms, one would not be able to separate these aspects in his choreography, showing the deep respect and boundaries, he maintained while representing an art form.

The fact that he allowed no changes to the original choreography of a Guru, to create a strong framework and foundation for further choreographies proves his implicit faith in his guru's which is singularly important in an oral tradition. When the guru feels the student has mastered a choreography, they raise the level of the choreography to challenge the student. These subtle changes are embedded and they reveal themselves to a student sometimes many years after the learning process. Thus. By keeping original choreographies intact it creates a strong base, a foundation and a framework for further works.

It is clear, that although we practice an oral tradition, documenting the thoughts and the choreographies are singularly important. After Nala taught Padma Chittampalli in the sixties. Five decades later, she taught a group of dancers in Bangalore. Today when we watch the videos of Nala's performance of some of these pieces, they are exactly the same barring what each person's body allows them to do. This has been possible only because of the detailed documentation of not only the dances but in longhand, the intent and the vision for each piece. Seven decades and four generations of dancers are able to carry on these choreographies that might have been lost otherwise. They are a glimpse into the history of the art, and when a dancer performs it today it becomes living history.

Conclusion

Nothing can take the place of Nala's own words in the conclusion to this paper. His philosophy for Indian art is universalized by him and can be unarguably accepted by every performer of Indian classical art.

“Unique contribution of Hinduism to humanity is the humanization of the Divine and divinization of human creativity”. Indian classical artists become mother to their gods like in a ‘Krishna nee begane Baaro’, they can be friends as in Sudhama and Krishna, they can be a teacher and Student like Krishna and Arjuna and Gods themselves can be the beloved. When you humanize gods, you learn from them for they experience what you do in everyday life. Their dealing with situations and coming out of them teaches you about their divinity.

“Emulate, do not imitate”, is the most powerful statement. It prevents dancers from becoming clones, sustains individuality and creativity. Nala a relatively unknown Indian classical dancer was a pioneer in creating a space for Indian classical dance in the diaspora. He was admired by his Guru La Marie and his contemporaries like Ted Shawn. He inspired his disciples to document him just as he did dance. Thank you, Nala Najan, for your contribution to Indian classical dance.

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