RANEE RAMASWAMY and APARNA RAMASWAMY (Artistic Directors/Creators/Choreographers/Principal Dancers) explore the dynamic tension between the ancestral and the contemporary, highlighting the fluidity between the secular and the spiritual, the inner and the outer, the human and the natural. Working in an intergenerational partnership between mother and daughter, their creative vision merges the rich traditions and deep philosophical roots of their Indian heritage with their hybridic perspective as first generation Indian-Americans. As protégés and senior disciples of legendary dancer/choreographer Padma Bhushan Smt. Alarmél Valli, known as one of India’s greatest living masters, Ranee and Aparna’s training in the South Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam is the bedrock of their creative aesthetic.

Among their recent awards and honors are a Bogliasco Foundation Fellowship (Italy), Guggenheim Fellowships, and a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Research Fellowship (Italy). Their choreographic work has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center (Washington, D.C.), Lincoln Center (New York), American Dance Festival (Durham, NC), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), and the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), among others, and supporters of their work include the National Endowment for the Arts, National Dance Project, MAP Fund, and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. They have developed work in residence at MANCC (the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography), the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth, and during an NPN residency at The Yard.

Ranee currently serves on the National Council on the Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. She is a recipient of a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a United States Artists Fellowship, a McKnight Distinguished Artist Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and 15 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Choreography and Interdisciplinary Art, among others. (www.raneeramaswamy.com)

Aparna is recipient of a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a Joyce Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and four McKnight Artist Fellowships, among others. Described by The New York Times as “thrillingly three-dimensional… rapturous and profound,” she was selected as one of Dance Magazine’s 25 to Watch for 2010. She is an empaneled artist with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and her solo work, with live music, has toured the U.S. and India with support from the National Dance Project and USArtists International. In 2018, she premiered a new solo work commissioned by the American Dance Festival as part of Wondrous Women, featuring Aparna alongside Camille A. Brown, Michelle Dorrance, Rhapsody James, and Yabin Wang. In 2019, Aparna’s new work with composer/violinist Colin Jacobsen was commissioned by and for the Silk Road Ensemble. (www.aparnaramaswamy.net)
Driven by the artistic vision of mother and daughter Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy, Ragamala Dance Company is the embodiment of an immigrant story. Rooted in the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam, Ragamala—on stage, in the community, and educating the next generation—exemplifies the intercultural narratives of countless global citizens and evokes a shared sense of humanity.

Ragamala is a pioneering, woman-led, intergenerational, family-run organization. Founded in 1992 by Ranee Ramaswamy and under the leadership of Ranee, Aparna (Artistic Directors) and Ashwini Ramaswamy (Choreographic Associate), Ragamala is recognized by curators of the United States’ most prominent cultural institutions as this nation’s foremost Indian dance company. Ragamala is known for expansive work that extends beyond the stage to show a kindred relationship between ancient and contemporary within today’s world.

As first-generation, South Indian-American choreographers, creators, and cultural carriers, we (Ranee and Aparna) feel a substantial responsibility to honor the traditions and wisdom of our ancestors while evolving them to new circumstances and places. We received immersive and arduous training under the great master dancer/choreographer Alarmél Valli of Chennai, India (www.alarmelvalli.org). We approach our artistic lineage from the hybridic perspective of immigrants, with openness to the multiplicity of influences that surround us in the U.S. This expansive vision has led to a body of work recognized for boundless creative imagination, that transcends borders of language and culture to evoke feeling, soul, and emotion and lift and transport the viewer.

The hallmark of Ragamala is our embrace of the extensive convergent histories between dance, original music, theater, and the visual arts. Through meaningful collaborative relationships and multi-layered creative dialogue with composers, musicians, authors, scholars, designers, and visual artists, we create layers of metaphor that explore the saturation of the senses that occurs when these art forms come together.

Image by Steven Pisano
Fires of Varanasi: dance of the eternal pilgrim

Choreographers: Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy
Original Compositions: Prema Ramamurthy, Ranee Ramaswamy, S. Sakthivel Muruganantham, and Lalit Subramanian
Lighting And Scenic Design: Willy Cessa

“Fires of Varanasi’s narrative portrayal of life, death, and rebirth [is] at once solitary, celebratory and divine” — The New York Times

Fires of Varanasi opens at dusk with a ritual on the banks of the Ganges River, its sacred waters offering a purification for the living and salvation for the dead. For 85 minutes, eleven dancers undertake a sacred pilgrimage through shifting landscapes as they seek a mystical connection between the divine and the human. Ultimately the physical journey transforms into a psychic one.

French set and light designer Willy Cessa creates alternating spaces of reflection and grandeur—long pools of water with floating lamps invite dance and prayer performed in pairs and groups before breaking into solos and journeying alone. The sounds of suspended brass bells struck long ago hum, cascade, and shimmer.

What begins as a solitary and internalized ritual of sacred contemplation grows—by the end of the evening, the dancers are engrossed in an ecstatic and communal prayer that evokes energies of creation, preservation, destruction, illusion, and emancipation, celebrating the inevitable dissolution of all life, thereby the permanence of impermanence.
Press Highlights

“The eye often goes straight to [Aparna] Ramaswamy’s impeccable technique and incandescent beauty. Through her dancing, the music’s textures come into view.” — The New York Times

“Ragamala imbues the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam with a thoroughly contemporary exuberance… a visionary approach to an ancient art form.” — Dance Magazine

“Ragamala has become the standard bearer of a singularly successful kind of hybridity, merging ancient traditions into high-end productions that are hard to resist” — HuffPost

“Never before have I seen so many ritualistic staples revealed on stage with such grace and ease…Together both the audience and Ragamala Dance Company achieved something special... a gift of stellar completion, grievance and renewal.” — See Chicago Dance

“Ragamala shows how Indian forms can be some of the most transcendent experiences that dance has to offer. This is an excellent company.” — The New York Times

“The relationship between the music and dance is not only meant to be, it exemplifies what happens when artistic boundaries (real or artificial) are radically tested, if not knocked down all together.” — Minneapolis Star Tribune

“As Indian dancers based in the U.S., Ragamala’s works reflect the rich heritage and deep philosophical roots of India amalgamated with the inquisitiveness and creative liberty of the United States.” — The Hindu

“[Ranee Ramaswamy] is a master...her careful art glimmers with some of the magic of the divine.” — The New York Times

“A beautiful, meditative piece... its transportive qualities fulfilled my desire for immersive art in a way that I have been desperately missing.” — Broadway World
“Still living and reliving the beauty of it all… Truly ethereal, a prayer where for a few hours, time and place transformed.”

“ Took me to a different place… a place of artistry, peaceful and soothing”

“...for a few moments, time and place transcended to ancient rituals… there was magic in the air, and we were spellbound.”

“A stunning and surreal production on a perfect night.

“Exhilarating, superb, world-class, one-of-a-kind”

“Full of grace and perfection… Thank you for bringing Bharatanatyam and Indian culture to the mainstream in the U.S.”
DANCE
PLENTY OF CLASSICAL FORMS

For millennia, the sacred city of Varanasi in northern India has been the site of ceremonial cremations believed to release the deceased from the reincarnation cycle. In “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim,” the esteemed Ragamala Dance Company, led by the mother-daughter artistic directors Raneeswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy, evokes these rituals through the classical Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam. Though the work was conceived before the pandemic to honor the passing of the Ramaswamys’ father and grandfather, its narrative portrayal of life, death and rebirth — at once solemn, celebratory and sublime — is a fitting choice for the Joyce Theater’s first in-person shows since March 2020. “Fires of Varanasi” will be performed at 8 p.m. through Saturday and at 2 p.m. on Sunday. Tickets start at $26 and are available at joyce.org.

Additionally, the 14th edition of the Indo-American Arts Council’s Erasing Borders Dance Festival continues through Sunday with online performances by other acclaimed practitioners of Bharatanatyam and additional classical Indian dance forms, including Kathak, Kathakali and Odissi. For more information on the free livestreams, go to jace.us.

BRIAN SCHAEFER

Ashwini Ramaswamy, center, and Sri Guntipally, right, perform “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim,” at the Joyce Theatre in Manhattan.
TOP 10 MOMENTS FOR DANCE IN CHICAGO IN 2021: LIVE, ON A SCREEN AND BEHIND THE SCENES, CHICAGO DANCE FORGED AHEAD

By Lauren Warnecke

December 8, 2021

Ragamala Dance Company at the Harris Theater in December: Cathartic isn’t quite the right word but captures a smidgen of what it felt like to experience “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim” earlier this month. For its latest work, Minneapolis-based Ragamala drew inspiration from the holy city of Varanasi, India, where the faithful sojourn to convene with the divine and spread loved ones’ ashes along the Ganges River. Brimming with allegory, this relatively simple production points your eyes to the pops of color that show up in the dancers’ vibrant costumes and flower petals strewed into three shallow reflection pools decorated with tiny tea lights. Those pools frame crisp, perfect bharatanatyam phrases, while hanging above the stage, brass bells, tolled from time to time, call the elders to join. They were certainly among us.
Let's Dance

RAGAMALA DANCE COMPANY'S RANEE RAMASAMY, ALONG WITH HER DAUGHTERS, APARNA AND ASHWINI, ARE USING BHARATANATYAM, AN ANCIENT HINDU DANCE FORM, TO HELP US UNDERSTAND MODERN LIFE... AND DEATH. BY STEVE MARSH

Hindus believe that the first dancer was the god Shiva and that Shiva danced the world into existence—and can dance it right into oblivion—in a continuously spinning cosmic cycle of divine instruction. For 30 years, as the artistic director of the Ragamala Dance Company, Ranee Ramasamy (right) has been using the language of Bharatanatyam, one of the oldest Hindu dance forms bequeathed by the gods, to tell Minnesota stories—telling her own dancing daughters, Aparna (center) and Ashwini (left) —about how myth and art and ritual give meaning to every cycle of life. Ragamala's new show, Fires of Varanasi, which comes to Northrop on Feb. 26, explores an aspect of the cycle that all of the living will eventually experience: death. Read more about the family on page 34.

Succession

IT TURNS OUT THE MOST PROLIFIC AND INNOVATIVE MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY BUSINESS IN MINNESOTA SELLS A 2,000-YEAR-OLD DANCE STYLE, AND THE WHOLE WORLD IS BUYING IT.

BY STEVE MARSH

For a billion Hindus, the holy city of Varanasi, set on the banks of the Ganges River in northern India, is the ultimate bucket list destination. Literally. In fact, according to Ranee Ramasamy, the co-artistic director of world-renowned Ragamala Dance Company, the best time to make your pilgrimage is while your bucket is actually being kicked.

“Varanasi,” Ramasamy explains during our visit to her south Minneapolis studio, “Hindus believe Shiva himself whispers a mantra in your ear.”

Sitting in the Ragamala studios, offices, and talking about death and reincarnation with Ramasamy and her two daughters—eldest Aparna, co-artistic director with her mom, and youngest Ashwini, choreographic associate as well as in-house PR and content—isn't nearly as much of a downer as you might think. I mean, yes, the three of them are all wearing black blouses (Ranee is wearing hers with multicolored dresses. Aparna and Ashwini with blue jeans). And their new show, Fires of Varanasi, which debuted at the Kennedy Center
The Dangers of Teen Sexting

Chess Champ Wesley So

Halloween Fun

FAMILY DYNASTIES

DAYTON, BELLAMY, KLOBUCHAR, PARISE, PILLSBURY & MORE

make Minneapolis one of the world’s milling centers with its innovative tech-
niques and signature flour, “Pillsbury’s Best.” Over the years, Pillburys have
served as mayors, governors, senators, and congressmen, in addition to their
far-reaching philanthropy work. To-
day, the company’s brands are owned by
General Mills and Smucker’s, with Sally
Whitney Pillsbury (wife of the late George
Pillsbury, a grandson of Charles Alfred)
representing the last generation in the
Minnesota family business tree.

POHLAD
Carl Pohlad was born into a poor family
in Des Moines, Iowa. While serving World
War II, the budding entrepreneur ran a
loan business out of a mess tent. Afterward,
he got married, moved to Edina, and built
a banking empire. He owned the Twin City
Rapid Transit and the Minnesota Twins, as
well as controlling interests in PepsiAmer-
icas. Carl’s three sons have continued his
business legacy: Jim now owns the Twins,
Bob is the former president of PepsiA-
mericas, and Bill divides his time between
Minneapolis and Los Angeles, working as
a film producer (Brokeback Mountain, 12
Years a Slave) and director as well as lead-
ing the Pohlad Family Foundation.

RAMASWAMY
Dancer and choreographer Ranee Ra-
maswamy created a space for classical
Indian performance in Minnesota after
she moved here from India with her three-
year-old daughter, Aparna, in 1978. In the
mid ’80s, one of India’s premier dancers
visited the Twin Cities and took Ranee
and Aparna under her tutelage. Around
1992, the year she founded Minneapo-
lis’ Ragamala Dance Company, Ranee
started adapting her centuries-old art
for mainstream audiences. Since then, as
co-artistic director and artistic associate,
Aparna and her younger sister, Ashwini,
respectively, have worked alongside their
mother to maintain Indian cultural integ-
rity while achieving global accessibility.

APARNA RAMASWAMY
It’s hard for people to get their minds around the fact that we do cre-
ate work together. I think especially when it’s me and my mother,
people often think: Ranee started it, now Aparna’s throwing it on. But it’s only
when they hear our story that they understand how we are partners. She is
not grooming the next generation. We’ve always been one generation. And
I’ve been observing this my whole life, so it feels natural to slip into the mix.
And now Ashwini’s joining us. It’s a mother, one daughter, and then another
daughter...The fact that we have this perspective that comes from different
ages and different experiences and different immigrant stories is really valu-
able to our work.”

SILVA
Tomas and Maria Silva migrated from
Aguascalientes, Mexico, to St. Paul where,
in 1979, they transformed an 800-square-
foot space into what would become El
Burrito Mercado, with Tomas trekking
to Chicago every week to load up on au-
thentic goods for the Twin Cities’ best-
known Mexican market. Today, the Sibas’
daughter Milissa serves as CEO while her
sister Suzanne serves as head of HR, with
Suzanne’s daughter Analita overseeing
catering and events.
Dance connects me to my ancestry. Raised both in India and the U.S., I relish finding a balance between two cultures and feeling the irresistible pull of both countries. I see parallels between the evolution I have undergone as a dancer and choreographer, and the personal transitions I have experienced as a product of the diaspora.

For me, dance and family are inextricably linked. For the last three decades, I have worked in a collaborative partnership with my mother, Ramaswamy. It began in 1984, when we both started training with my guru—the legendary dancer/choreographer Alaréo Valli, in Chennai, India. When I first saw her perform, I was forever changed. I never knew that one person could embody a myriad of emotions with such grace and brilliance. I was a quiet, introspective child who felt much more at home conversing with adults than playing with children my own age. Bharatanatyam was my solace to focus my energy and express my emotions.

Rames and I—although from different generations—underwent intensive training side by side, living and breathing this timeless, poetic art form. We practiced together, challenging and supporting one another. Today, when we create a new work, our conversations are rapid-fire, fluid and undisguised. My younger sister, Ashwini, is a beautiful dancer in her own right and a key member of our company. I feel so proud that the three of us have recently begun to create work together.

Bharatanatyam holds a significant place in Indian culture, as it is a multi-dimensional art form, integrating elements of music, movement, theater, philosophy and psychology. I am committed to circumventing notions that culture-based forms are impenetrable. My form transcends classification to tap into an inner spirituality that is universal.

As a co-artistic director, choreographer and principal dancer with Ramaswamy Dance Company and the mother of twin 7-year-old boys—my life has always been rigorous. The balance of family, performing, running an organization and creating new works is joyful, exhausting and truly rewarding.

Dance has never been a job, not a hobby, but is intrinsically linked to who I am. My guru, a voracious reader, has taught me to look for inspiration in great works of literature. One of her favorite quotes, by William Butler Yeats, perfectly expresses how I feel: "O body, swayed to music, O lightning game, How can we know the dancer from the dance?"
DANCE
A SOLO HONORING A WOMEN’S WISDOM

GIA KOURLAS

In the classical South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam, the body is material — an interlocking puzzle of pieces assembled to create otherworldly grace. The fingers splay and stretch apart, the heels flex as a dancer hops from side to side, and the eyes flicker with lively vitality. Aparna Ramaswamy, an artistic director (with her mother, Ranee) of the much-respected Ragamala Dance Company in Minneapolis, is a vision of sculptural lucidity whose dancing brings a full-bodied awareness to complex rhythms and shifts of dynamics. All the while, the strength of her purity is second nature — both explicit and seemingly casual.

Ms. Ramaswamy will make her Joyce Theater debut in “They Rose at Dawn,” an evening-length solo that honors the wisdom of women, who are seen as the carriers of reverence and imagination. Settle back as Ms. Ramaswamy, accompanied by a Carnatic musical ensemble, unlocks mysteries of feminine mystique. (7:30 p.m., Tuesday and Wednesday, Oct. 6 and 7; 8 p.m., Thursday, Oct. 8, Joyce Theater, joyce.org.)
Like a lover yearning for her beloved, the human soul longs to unite with the divine. That idea comes into play in “Song of the Jasmine,” the bharatanatyam dance work scheduled to visit the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center on Feb. 7.

Choreographed by Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy of the Minneapolis-based Ragamala Dance Company, in collaboration with saxophonist-composer Rudresh Mahanthappa, the piece takes inspiration from the writings of the Tamil mystic poet Andal, known for her devotion to the god Krishna.

“In Andal’s poetry, and in bharatanatyam — and on a much deeper level as part of the Indian psyche — the sensual and the sacred are one. There doesn’t have to be a disconnect between those two concepts,” Aparna Ramaswamy said, speaking by phone from Minneapolis.

Aparna and her mother, Ranee, are co-artistic directors of Ragamala Dance, which Ranee founded in 1992. Both women were born in India; both have trained with Alarmél Valli, a celebrated performer and choreographer in the Indian classical dance form of bharatanatyam.

Mother and daughter are among the five dancers who interpret “Song of the Jasmine,” a roughly hour-long work set to music inflected with jazz and South Indian music. (Ashwini Ramaswamy, Aparna’s sister, is also among the dancers.) In a version of the piece performed at New York’s Lincoln Center last year, the dancers drew on bharatanatyam’s physical vocabulary in ways that seemed now seductive, now jaunty, now rapt.

One side of the stage featured the five-person band, including composer Mahanthappa on alto saxophone. Other instrumentalists played the guitar, the mridangam (a two-sided hand drum), the Carnatic (or southern Indian) flute and violin.

“Song of the Jasmine” began to bloom after the Ramaswamys attended a concert by Mahanthappa, who is known for fusing elements of South Indian music with jazz. Aparna Ramaswamy says she immediately connected with the musician’s sound.

She resolved to come up with a project that would involve the composer-saxophonist. Discussions about such a collaboration intensified in 2011, when Ragamala Dance performers and Mahanthappa were among the artists participating in the Kennedy Center’s Maximum India festival.

Eventually, the Ramaswamys proposed building a joint venture around the poetry of Andal, who lived in the 8th century or thereabouts. In India, Andal is “a household name,” Ranee said.

Ranee was raised in India. Aparna grew up primarily in the United States, but she spent a few months in India every year, and was familiar with Andal’s legacy. Mahanthappa, raised in Colorado, didn’t know Andal’s writing, but he found the source material fruitful. The Ramaswamys “would send me pages and pages of poetry and their thoughts about the direction of the piece,” he recalled, speaking by phone from his base in Montclair, N.J. Often, he “would latch on to two or three lines [of verse], and that would be the big inspiration for the musical narrative.”

Early on, the collaborators agreed on the instruments that would supply the accompaniment. Subsequently, the music and choreography fell into place roughly simultaneously: The Ramaswamys and Mahanthappa typically drafted sketches on their own, but then, in regular joint workshopping sessions, they significantly revised those drafts.

Mahanthappa, who had never collaborated with dancers previously, found the process exciting. “Dancers hear music differently,” he observes. The dancers’ needs, and the specifics of the ensemble, led him to an approach in which “it’s melody and rhythm that are the guiding forces, and not necessarily Western ideas of harmony and chord progression.”

Eventually the piece grew to encompass several sections based on different ragas (a raga is an Indian musical concept somewhat akin to a scale) and rhythmic structures.

As South Indian dancers, “it’s important that we have a raga-based music. It pushes the spirituality of the work,” says Ranee, whose credits include being appointed by President Obama to the National Council on the Arts.

Both score and choreography would ultimately include sections of improvisation, including sequences where the musicians and dancers are essentially reacting to each other.

“The was one of the intentions when we created the piece, to have that freedom on the stage between music and dance, and to really underscore that relationship,” says Aparna.

Co-commissioned by the Clarice Smith and other entities, “Song of the Jasmine” premiered last year at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

The collaboration with Mahanthappa was a new line of inquiry for Ragamala Dance, but the mystical motifs that surface in “Song of the Jasmine” speak to the company’s broader interests, Aparna Ramaswamy says.

“Dance and music evoke the feeling of transcendence and spirituality,” she says. “I’m very interested in weaving that thread through any work that we do.”
International Tour Highlights

- NYU Abu Dhabi Arts Center (Abu Dhabi, UAE)
- Music Academy (Chennai, India)
- Narada Gana Sabha (Chennai, India)
- Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India)
- Just Festival (Edinburgh, U.K.)
- Soorya Rasavikalpam Festival (Trivandrum, Trissur, Palakkad and Kozhikode)
- National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India)
- Soorya Festival (Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India)
- Iida Bunka Kaikan (Iida, Japan)
- Nagoya Kita Bunka Shogekiyō (Nagoya, Japan)
- Matsumoto Bunka Kaikan (Matsumoto, Japan)
- Bali Arts Festival (Bali, Indonesia)
- Festival of Spirituality and Peace (Edinburgh, Scotland)
- Open Look Dance Festival (St. Petersburg, Russia)
- Miao-Li International Festival (Miao Li, Taiwan)
- Mandapa (Paris, France)

United States Tour Highlights

- Joyce Theater (New York, NY)
- Lincoln Center Out of Doors (New York, NY)
- Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, D.C.)
- American Dance Festival (Durham, NC)
- International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT)
- The Harris Theater (Chicago, IL)
- Opening Nights at Florida State University (Tallahassee, FL)
- Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH)
- Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN)
- Clarice Smith Center for the Performing Arts (College Park, MA)
- Flynn Center (Burlington, VT)
- Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT)
- Hancher Auditorium (Iowa City, IA)
- Krannert Center (Urbana, IL)
- The Hopkins Center (Hanover, NH)
- The Soraya (Los Angeles, CA)
- Lied Center (Lawrence, KS)
- University Musical Society (Ann Arbor, MI)
- Zellerbach Playhouse - Cal Performances (Berkeley, CA)
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