

SREYASHI DEY, DANCING WITH TRADITION

Ishika and Kritika Rajan, depicting Kalki avatar, from an expressional dance piece, *Dasavatar*

“For me dance is a prayer, a meditation and an offering to the divine spirit. More than literally identifying with the gods and goddesses whose stories I am dancing, it is a personal connection with the divine principle.”

Recreating Ancient Indian Spiritual Dances for Modern Audiences

By Sandor Slomovits

Sreyashi Dey is head of Marketing and Communications at the University of Michigan's North Campus Research Complex, but she is also a highly skilled practitioner of Indian classical dance. With her dance company, Srishti Dances of India, she has performed around the area and across the country. Sandor Slomovits spoke with Sreyashi and her seventeen-year-old identical twin daughters, Kritika and Ishika — who are fine dancers in their own right — about this ancient art form and their personal connection to it.

Sreyashi Dey: The dance form that we perform is called Odissi, and it's one of eight styles of Indian classical dance. This dance style is from the eastern part of India, from a state called Orissa. The origins of this style can be traced back to two thousand years ago. That's not to say that what we see today is exactly how it was two thousand years ago. It's undergone many changes. Back then, it used to be performed in the temples, by women who were dedicated to the temples, to just sing and dance for the gods. It was a form of worship, and its roots were very deep, spiritual. There were rituals associated with symbolically waking up the gods by singing, and then during the meals that were offered, then during the evening worship, and finally at night, almost like singing the gods to sleep.

In parallel to this, especially during the colonial time, which was about two hundred years and ended in 1947, in that time these traditions came under a lot of negative attention, and got a bad name. In parallel there was this other tradition that came up, of young boys who dressed up as girls, and they performed this very acrobatic form of dance, outside of the temples, in a non-spiritual context.

Sandor Slomovits: As performance?

Sreyashi Dey: Yes, as performance.

Sandor Slomovits: Did the earlier form also have a performance aspect? Did worshippers watch the dancers?

Sreyashi Dey: No, it was inside the temples and it wasn't really for the public. So there were these two traditions and, after India's independence, the

teachers and dancers and scholars got together and wanted to cleanse the form of all the different elements that had crept into it because of neglect, and they wanted to recreate it and reconstruct it, based on the traditional texts. So they looked at the traditional texts, they looked at the temple sculptures and at the two remaining traditions, and they recreated the dance form that you see today.

Indian classical dance is very regional, which means that even though all the styles trace their origins to very ancient texts and techniques prescribed in those texts, they all have a very regional flavor and they're based on regional literature and poetry and language. Even in the body language, there is a very large variation in India from one region to another, and the regional styles are reflective of the culture of that region. Even though some of the mythology is common to all, and some of the older texts are common to all, the lyrics would be sung in a regional style of music and the movements would be reflective of the regional style.

In the 1950s, dance slowly became a performance art, it came more to the proscenium stage, and it became suitable for an evening-length performance.

Sandor Slomovits: Just women dancers, or women and men?

Sreyashi Dey: Women and men.

Sandor: Dancing together?

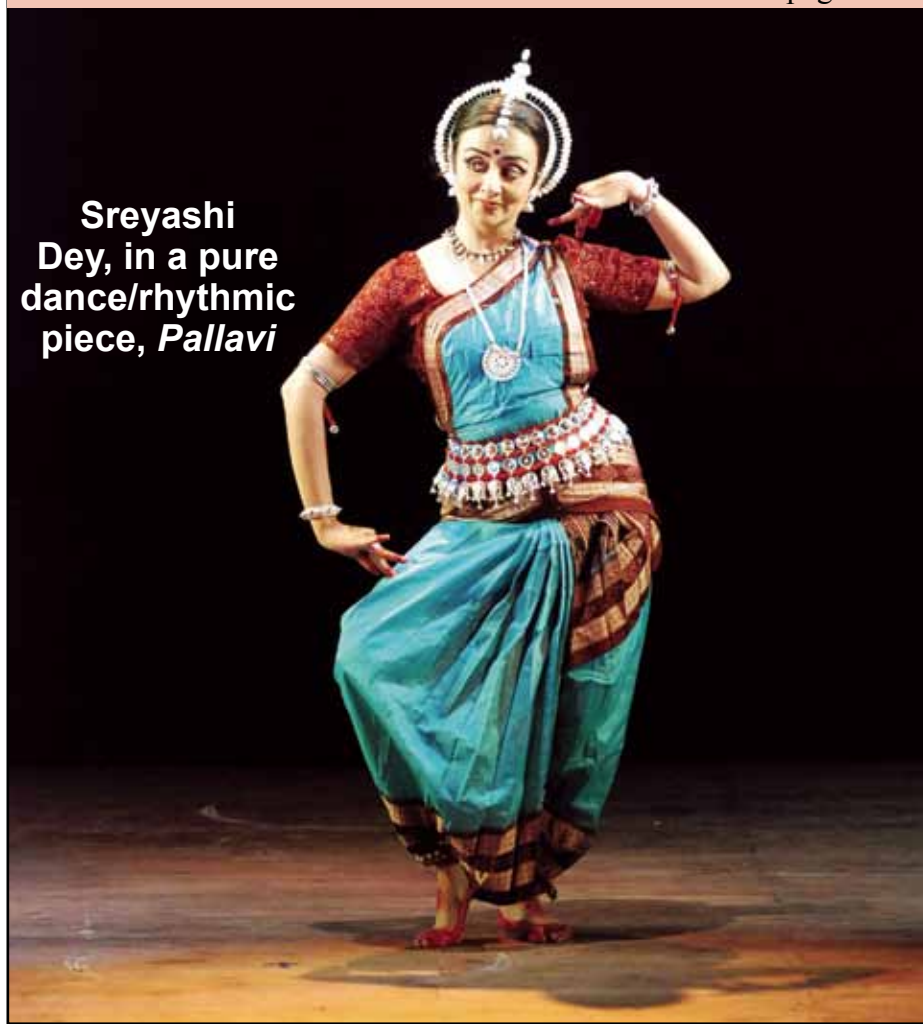
Sreyashi: Both. Dancing together and separately. More women than men, but in the case of Odissi that is something that has changed. There are more men in recent years, which is a very good trend because it used to be very difficult for men to support themselves as performing artists only. The teachers are almost always all men, but there was less support from the audiences for men as dancers. They wanted to see more women. Now that trend is changing. It's not equal yet, but there are definitely more men now who are dancers.

Initially, the whole repertoire was one long piece. In the 1950s, when it was first developed, the whole repertoire was one hour-long piece. Then, to accommodate the needs of the present times, and shorter audience attention spans, it was broken into shorter pieces, while still keeping the

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Sreyashi Dey, in a pure dance/rhythmic piece, *Pallavi*

worship for the gods. Elaborate temple rituals included dance as an offering to the divine. The themes used in classical dance are derived from religious and spiritual texts over the centuries. The lyrics for the songs that accompany the dances are based on spiritual literature. The narrative for the dances, the themes, the music and the movements all reflect spirituality, which can't be separated from the dance.

For me dance is a prayer, a meditation and an offering to the divine spirit. More than literally identifying with the gods and goddesses whose stories I am dancing, it is a personal connection with the divine principle. After all these years of immersion in dance, I cannot separate what is technique and what is spiritual. It is all a part of a larger whole that is deeply beautiful and joyous.

Sandor: You were born in India?

Sreyashi: Yes.

Sandor: And you learned this form as a child?

Sreyashi: I started when I was seven. I actually started with another form of dance from Southern India and, when I was about seventeen, I switched over to Odissi. Then, when I was twenty-one I came over to the U.S. for grad school, but I continued studying, practicing, performing, and teaching.

Sandor: What did you study in grad school?

Sreyashi: I came to do my Ph.D. in economics.

Sandor: Here at the UM?

Sreyashi: No, it was at Purdue. I finished a master's in economics there and later I did an M.B.A. Instead of one Ph.D., I ended up with two graduate degrees. *(Laughter)*

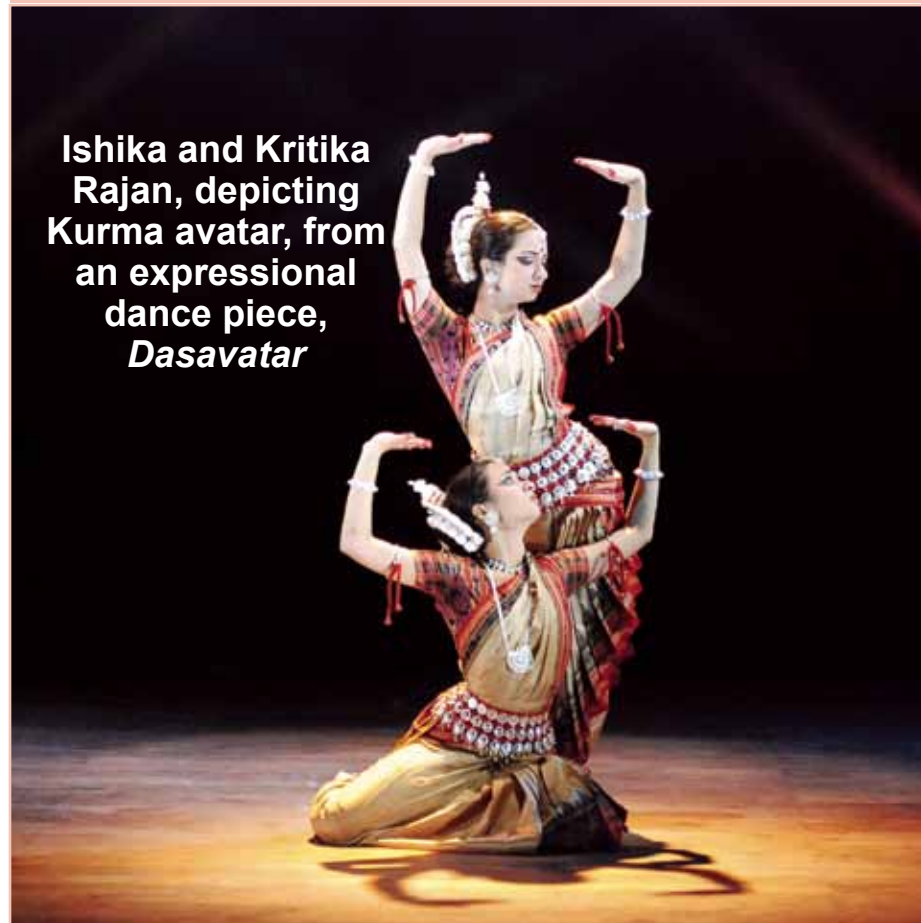
Sandor: Was there a history of dance in your family? Did either of your parents dance?

Sreyashi: No. I grew up in Delhi, and the kind of family background I came from, and in my circle of friends and family, nobody is into dance or music as a profession. I studied dance the way girls here would study ballet. Girls would go to classes, moms would take them, and they would have recitals every year.

Sandor: Did you ever have aspirations to be a dancer as your full-time work?

Sreyashi: Yes, I did actually. Around the time I was starting college, I was seriously thinking about being a professional dancer. But my parents kind of talked me out of that.

“...Even though all the styles trace their origins to very ancient texts and techniques prescribed in those texts, they all have a very regional flavor and they're based on regional literature and poetry and language.”



Ishika and Kritika Rajan, depicting Kurma avatar, from an expressional dance piece, *Dasavatar*

“The origins of [the Odissi dance] style can be traced back to two thousand years ago... There were rituals associated with symbolically waking up the gods by singing, and then during the meals that were offered, then during the evening worship, and finally at night, almost like singing the gods to sleep.”

traditional elements. One kind of dance is more rhythmic — what they call pure dance — which is based on the melody of the music, and is just reflective of the joy of movement and follows the structure of the melody, and the development of the song. The other kind is more storytelling, through facial expressions.

Sandor: Is it accurate to say that Odissi still has a spiritual component?

Sreyashi: Oh, definitely, because the texts that are used are still very ancient texts. One of the main texts that's used in Odissi for the storytelling pieces is from the twelfth century. The mythology is also very old. It's entirely spiritual.

Sandor: How is spirituality integrated into the dances?

Sreyashi: Spirituality is an essential element in Indian classical dance. Born out of spiritual impulses since ancient times, it was used as a means of



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“One kind of dance is more rhythmic — what they call pure dance — which is based on the melody of the music, and is just reflective of the joy of movement...The other kind is more storytelling, through facial expressions.”

Sandor: That was going to be my next question. *(Laughter)*

Sreyashi: Yes, they said, “Oh, we think you need to go to college.” Not that I wasn’t going to go to college. That was not an option, but they were talking beyond that. They said it was going to be hard to be just a performing artist, and why not think of it as a parallel thing that you do? I guess I let myself be persuaded by that.

At this point in our conversation, Sreyashi’s seventeen-year-old identical twin daughters, Kritika and Ishika, joined our conversation. They both graduated from Pioneer High School in 2011 and are now attending the University of Michigan.

Sandor: How long have you been dancing with your mom?

Kritika: *(Addressing her mother)* Since we were the same age you were, six or seven?

Sandor: Is it just the three of you who dance together?

Sreyashi: No, I do have a couple of other students who perform with us on a regular basis and we’ve also had visiting artists from India who I’ve performed and toured with.

Sandor: Are either of you interested in pursuing this as seriously as your mom has?

Kritika: It’s tough. I guess right now we want to pursue it as much as we can. We’ll have to see as we go forward, though, how much school is going to get in the way, or how jobs get in the way. But as of right now, we’re definitely interested in keeping up with it as much as we can.

Sandor: Some twins never want to be apart, while others want as much space as possible once they grow up. *(Laughter)* You see where I’m heading with this, right?

Ishika: I think we’re pretty close. Like any siblings, we have our moments. *(Laughter)*

Kritika: I think we’re both looking forward to college a little bit just because we’ll be separated a little more than we are already. We spend a lot of time together now and we both kind of want to see what it’s going to be like to not be together, like every moment. But at the same time, because we’re both going to the same school, the other person is still right there.

Sreyashi: They might actually end up being in the same dorm. But they won’t be in the same room.

Sandor: Where do you give performances these days?

Sreyashi: Actually, more often outside of Ann Arbor than locally. I used to have a pretty active touring schedule, performing all over the U.S. Every year it would be about ten to fifteen cities, and then we’d also perform in India and internationally, if not every year, then every other year.

The Ann Arbor community has great exposure to all kinds of art forms and the audiences here are really wonderful. Before moving to Ann Arbor, we lived in Pittsburgh and I had a more formal dance company, as a registered nonprofit organization, and it was much easier to get grants and get private foundation support and state support. That aspect pretty much went away when we moved here, because the state of Michigan is not supporting the arts anymore.

Sandor: How long have you lived in Ann Arbor?

Sreyashi: Since 2004.

Sandor: You didn’t come at a great time for Michigan. *(Laughter)*

Sreyashi: No. I think it’s difficult for a professional arts organization in

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Ann Arbor. There's this two-fold aspect. The audiences are great, they're very interested, and a lot of people are very knowledgeable not just about the art form, but also about the cultural context, because they're into different religions and spirituality, and yoga. I'm not talking just about India; it's that way with other cultures as well, with similar levels of interest and exposure. The audiences are very welcoming, so that aspect is great. At the same time, there isn't enough support. Especially after having moved to Ann Arbor, I'm very glad that this is not the only thing I do. Because if I was hoping to support myself or my organization through external support like that, it would be difficult here. Lately, rather than just traditional straight-up performances, I'm doing more work with other artists, with photographers and writers, in venues that are not just large theaters, such as the UM Museum of Art and the UM Lydia Mendelssohn Theater.

Sandor: You still have family in India.

Sreyashi: Yes. We've gone to India, if not every year, then every other year, for sure. My daughters have also studied dance in India. There's always been that connection.

Ishika: Dancing is definitely the biggest part of Indian culture we were immersed in, the biggest part of Indian

Sreyashi Dey in a rhythmic or pure dance piece called *Pallavi*. There is no story interpreted through this dance. However, the joy of movements and the accompanying music is apparent. Unfolding at a slower pace, it builds up to a fast paced climax at the end.



“...After India's independence, the teachers and dancers and scholars got together and wanted to cleanse the form of all the different elements that had crept into it because of neglect, and they wanted to recreate it and reconstruct it, based on the traditional texts.”

culture that we've been a part of.

Sandor: So if they said to you, “We want to dance professionally,” what would you say? (*Laughter*)

Ishika: You would actually say the same thing your parents did.

Sreyashi: Yes, I would say the same thing. (*Laughter*)

Kritika: But, I think if I wanted to take a year off and go to India and study and perform, you'd be OK with that.

Sreyashi: I'd be very happy with that.

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Sreyashi Dey, with Ishika and Kritika Rajan and Debnita Talapatra, will present the dance performance “Language of Mudra” as part of the U-M LSA Language theme semester at the U-M Residential College's Keene Theatre on Tuesday, January 10, 2012; it starts at 7 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, go to www.srishtidances.com. The website for the performance is: <http://language.lsa.umich.edu/event/language-of-mudra/>



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the pebble grows.



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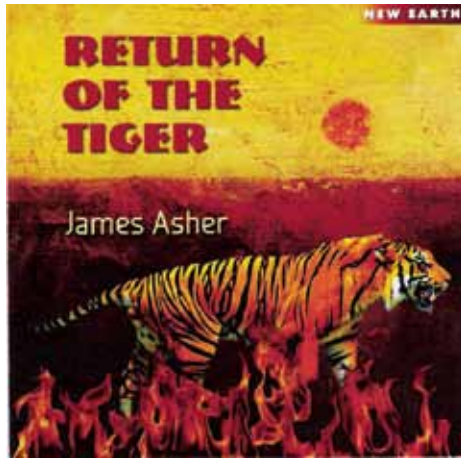
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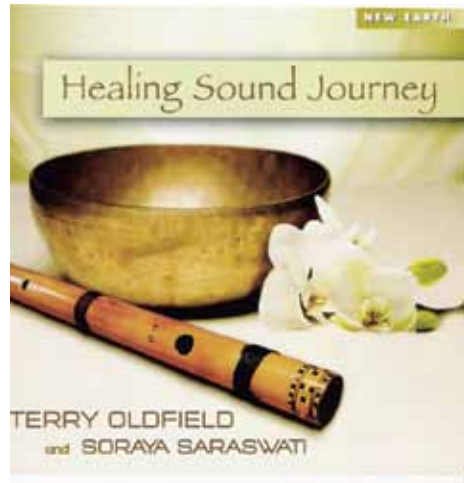
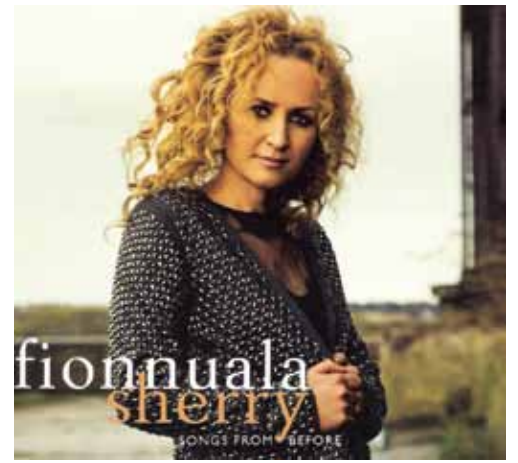
Return of the Tiger cd By James Asher

Asher returns with a wonderfully dynamic new drumming cd featuring rhythms of energy and celebration. Unifying these ten tracks is the power of the drum, creating a spiritual force and emotional depth – an intensity Asher has created in all his cds since being first produced by Pete Townshend in 1979. This music is a journey inviting trance and connection and includes didgeridoo, bells, acoustic guitar, and keyboards.
\$16.98 Shelved with Drumming Music.



Songs from Before cd By Fionnuala Sherry

This cd is a new recording from the violinist of the band Secret Garden. Her hope was to create a tribute to traditional Irish song, and includes many beautiful old airs – one dating from the 13th century. She worked with producer Kjetil Bjerkestrand to reflect the new and modern Ireland. While recording these songs, she discovered her grandfather was also a violinist and her mother still had copies of Irish folk tunes belonging to him. It is a lovely Celtic recording, primarily instrumental with some vocals.
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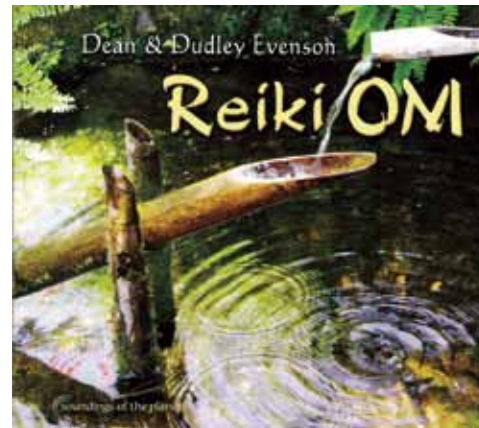


Healing Sound Journey cd By Terry Oldfield and Soraya Saraswati

This cd is a magical journey of healing sound and music. It is a rich tapestry with flute, crystal bowls, strings, symphonic gongs, percussion, and voice that is deeply relaxing and peaceful. Oldfield is well-known for his nature recordings, featured in this composition to give a deep and profound sense of connection to the planet. These musicians travel the world to offer Healing Sound Journey workshops. Guests are invited to lie

down and close their eyes, relax, and listen, experiencing directly the vibration of the music in a space of deep peace and relaxation. This form of music and sound healing is known to increase immune system activity, ease pain, lower blood pressure, reduce stress, and promote healing.

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Reiki Om cd By Dean and Dudley Evenson

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