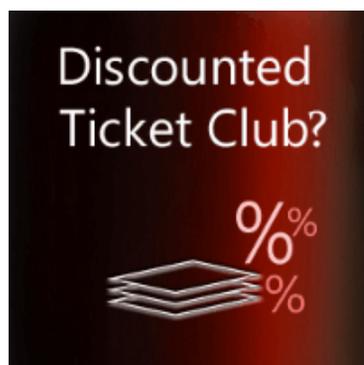


TUESDAY 14TH APRIL 2015, 7.30PM
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Unlocking new angles on a classic: Shobana Jeyasingh Dance's *Bayadère - The Ninth Life*



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★★★★☆ ?

By Graham Watts, 26 March 2015

Writing about *La Bayadère*. It's not only what I'm about to do but also the essence of Shobana Jeyasingh's new work, an enterprising commission by The Royal Ballet Studio Programme.



Shobana Jeyasingh's *Bayadere - The Ninth Life*

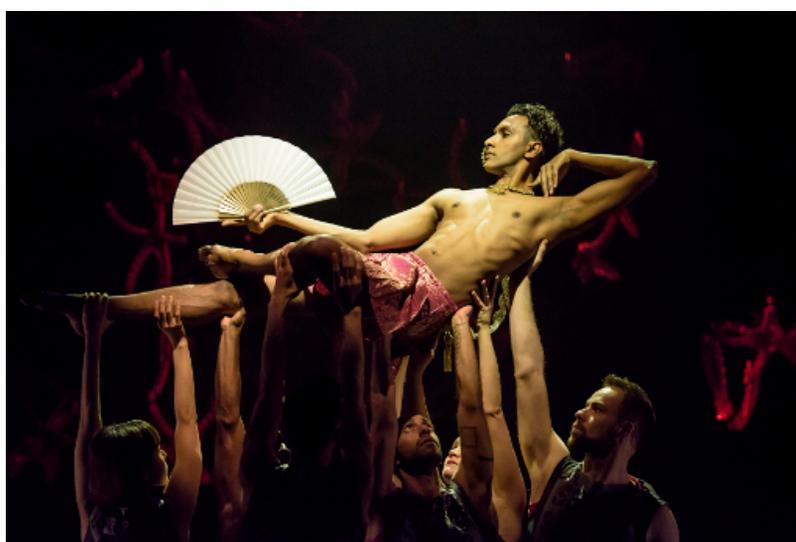
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Two centuries separate Jeyasingh's focus on this literary activity: beginning with her fictional account of Jas Gupta, a young British Indian of today, blogging his thoughts after seeing a performance of *La Bayadère*, that epitome of 19th century balletic classicism; and then there is the actual writing of French critic, Théophile Gautier, documenting his experience of the first group of bayadères to tour Europe, during their Parisian performances of 1838. Gautier was so obsessed by these temple dancers with their teeth and gums dyed blue, and ears studded with holes, that he was still writing about them 20 years' after they had gone. One, in particular – named Amany – was believed by Gautier (perhaps mistakenly) to have committed suicide during the ensemble's time in London and may have become the inspiration for Nikiya, the tragic heroine of *La Bayadère*.

Jeyasingh's target appears to be the cultural hotchpotch represented by an ancient Indian subject seen through a French lens in a product that is quintessentially Russian. Speaking

through Gupta's words, she makes the point that "bayadère" is merely a French word that has – through the ballet – come to signify the Hindu temple dancer (more accurately described, in the indigenous language, as a *devadasi*); and she pinpoints the precise location of events as being in Golconda, near Hyderabad.

This assertion of cultural ownership for the narrative of *La Bayadère* flows through Jeyasingh's choreography, a mix of contemporary and classical Bharatanatyam with the merest hint of a balletic sub-text. But, these claims are staked with good humour. The opening sequence has Gupta briefly describing the characters and quickly sketching the ballet's narrative, thereby providing an amusing riff on a well-loved story, linking ballet to Bollywood with Gupta declaring that the only authentic evocation of India is to be found in the long and opulent wedding ceremony!



Shobana Jeyasingh's *Bayadere - The Ninth Life*

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This opening was inventively designed by Adam Wiltshire, Fabiana Piccioli and Ravi Deepres with Gupta's blog-post appearing on a large video screen, fading to reveal the characters he describes dancing behind it. These tiny capsules of characterisation were deliciously portrayed, especially by Sunbee Han as Nikiya and in the withering, pointed finger of Avatâra Ayuso as "the scheming princess", Gamzatti. I was left wondering why no reference is made to the High Brahmin, such

a pivotal character in the plot's denouement.

Just as the warrior, Solor, succumbs to opium-induced dreams, so Gupta gently drifts into the ballet he is describing, entering the Kingdom of the Shades: Solor's vision of ghostly bayadères occasioned by mixing narcotics with his grief for Nikiya. Sooraj Subramaniam was so good as both Gupta – the quizzical, nerdy blogger – and his alter-ego of an exotic, bejewelled and mystical, male equivalent to the bayadère that I had to check to be sure that these were not two different performers. Although the dancers don't remain in character from the earlier account of *La Bayadère*, Noora Kela retained an aloof disdain that linked her spectral temple dancer back to the role of Gamzatti's maidservant (Aya).



Shobana Jeyasingh's *Bayadere - The Ninth Life*

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Piccioli's excellent lighting and Wiltshire's set and costume designs achieved a strong sense of mood with an impressive economy of means and the same minimalism was apparent in Gabriel Prokofiev's spartan and soporific score, which was the one element that worked less well for me, although it was well-matched to the dreamy haze of Gupta's fantasy. It was this long nebulous section that began to challenge my waning powers of concentration. Much more effective were the repetitive lines of Gautier's text (quoted from the translations in Ivor Guest's book, *Gautier On Dance*) praising the qualities of "sunshine, perfume and beauty" that had so beguiled him in the presence of Amany and the

other bayadères.

Jeyasingh has not so much deconstructed *La Bayadère*, as unlocked a fascinating new angle on the legend behind the ballet. This was a worthy initiative of The Royal Ballet, providing an excellent opportunity for the under-used and soon-to-be refurbished Linbury Studio Theatre. More of the same, please!

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**Reviewed at Royal Opera House:
Linbury Studio Theatre, London on 25
March 2015**

PROGRAMME

Bayadère - The Ninth Life (Shobana Jeyasingh)

PERFORMERS

Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company

Adam Wiltshire, *Set Designer*

Sunbee Han, *Dancer*

Avatâra Ayuso, *Dancer*

Sooraj Subramaniam, *Dancer*

Noora Kela, *Dancer*

Fabiana Piccioli, *Lighting Designer*

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Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
23	24	25	26	27	28	01
02	03	04	05	06	07	08
09	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22

APRIL 2015

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
30	31	01	02	03	04	05
06	07	08	09	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	01	02	03

 Evening performance

 Matinee performance

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Shobana Jeyasingh sets off 25th Anniversary Celebration with Classic Cut at the Royal Opera House

Erin Johnson, 17th March

Classic Cut at the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio Theatre is the first project in a three-year-long celebration to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Shobana Jeyasingh Dance. The evening contained one completely new work *Dev Kahn Hai?/Where is Dev?*, and a reworking of *Configurations*, one of Jeyasingh's first choreographic endeavours in the 1980s.



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Royal Ballet's young Choreographers

Shelley Pinto-Duschinsky, 26th February

Erico Montes' *Dances for 1,2,and 3* with Akane Takada dominates the evening, while Marcelino Sambe gives the audience a song to remember.



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Ballet Black

Rym Kechacha, 12th February

Ballet Black's dancers rise magnificently to the occasion again in this mixed bill of new and revived work.



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Foraging for sounds with John Cage

Mark Pullinger, 2nd February

A sense of exploration and fascination lay behind Zonzo Compagnie's "Listen to the Silence", an interactive musical experience – ostensibly aimed at children – which guided us into John Cage's sound world.

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Phoenix visits London

Laura Dodge, 27th November

Phoenix Dance Theatre's quadruple bill is a pleasing combination of excellent dancing and good choreography that left me smiling



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The Schubert Ensemble