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Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company: Bayadère – The Ninth Life

Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London, UK; March 25, 2015

Maggie Foyer

La Bayadère is an evocative name in the ballet world and eminently suitable for cultural re-appropriation by Shobana Jeyasingh, a choreographer who references dance from ballet to Bharatanatyam. Her *Bayadère* draws together many strands, the Petipa ballet, the visit by a group of

devadasi, or temple dancers, to Paris in 1838 and Théophile Gautier’s vivid recount of the event, before moving into the contemporary dance world.

Gautier, a prolific man of letters, was a major influence on ballet in the nineteenth century. His wild romantic imagination was fired by his meeting with a *devadasi*. The voice over reveals the depth of his observations: “skin tawny as the coat of a deer” and even the unusual division between her toes. In the creation of his ballet Petipa, too, was inspired inventing steps and exotic gestures. It came as something of a shock to realise that the gracious gesture: the lunge with one palm on the breast and the other across the forehead, is not Indian. How authentic it seemed in the ballet!

Jeyasingh has assembled an international group of dancers. Sooraj Subramaniam leads the action first as the blogger, recounting his visit to the ballet and noting the glaring cultural mismatch – “pure Bollywood,” he taps out on the computer. The dancers illustrate his writing, presenting the characters and the narrative and moving



Sooraj Subramaniam and company in Bayadère – The Ninth Life.
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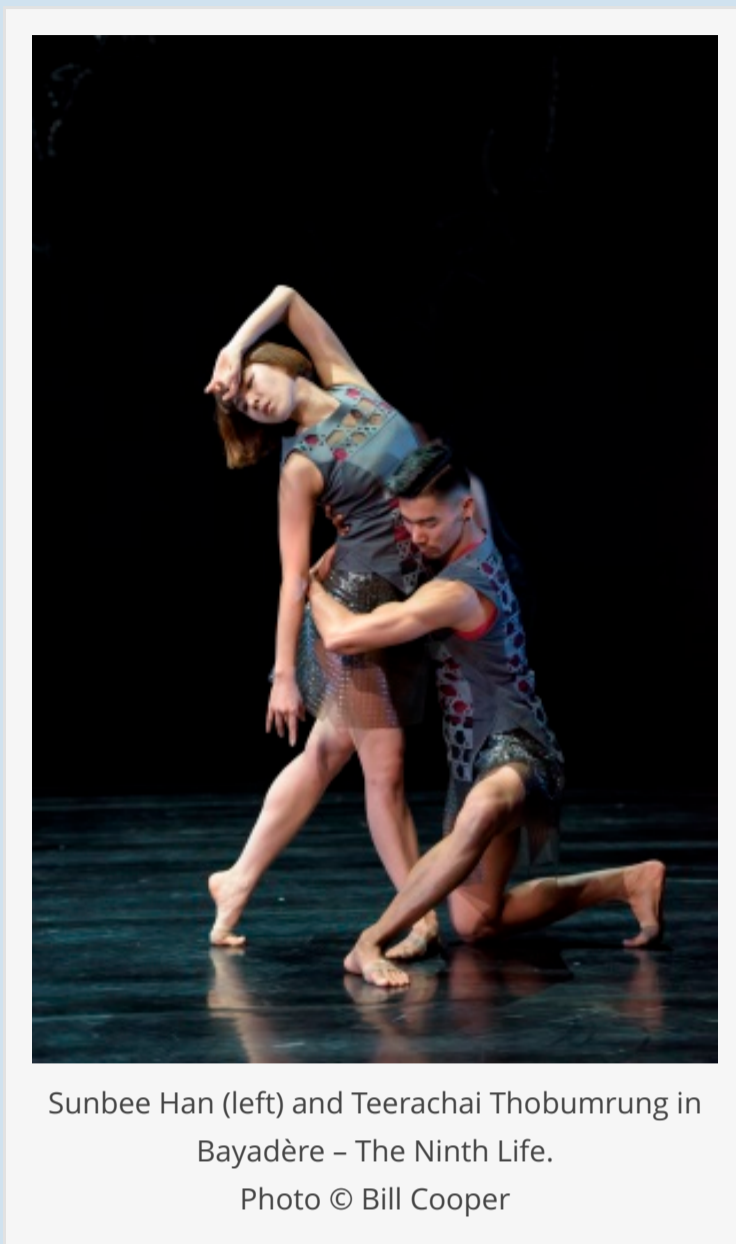
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the action moves forward through quasi-ballet to enter the mystic realms of his fantasy.

In this strange other-world of dappled light created by Fabiana Piccioli to haunting sounds from Gabriel Prokofiev, Jeyasingh choreographs her own bayadère to magical effect. Subramaniam takes centre stage, a charismatic performer who effortlessly holds the audience's attention. His dance is riveting while the detail, particularly his sinuous hand gestures, cross gender divides to create moments of luminous beauty.

Emerging into a brighter contemporary domain, the dance becomes more abstract but the invention remains. Jeyasingh's has a distinctive approach to partnering that discovers untrammelled paths. The compositions, three men and a woman, or a trio of two and one result in unconventional holds and lifts. Sunbee Han was notable in a strong and versatile cast. The work finds closure when the slightly bemused Subramaniam, clutching his laptop and in street clothes, returns to the present.

The video projection were somewhat mundane considering the power of the technology however Adam Wiltshire's costumes introduce fantasy and allow freedom in the right proportions. The show may prove to be one of Jeyasingh's most successful yet: she has conjured scenes of extraordinary sensory delight that fire the imagination and leaves a lingering aftertaste, elusive and very pleasant. When the narrative thread recedes the impact wanes but Jeyasingh's choreography, powerful and inventive, is consistent throughout.



Sunbee Han (left) and Teerachai Thobumrung in Bayadère – The Ninth Life.
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