

## REVIEW: SHOBANA JEYASINGH - BAYADÈRE – THE NINTH LIFE - LINBURY STUDIO THEATRE, ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

- THURSDAY 26 MARCH 2015



**Marius Petipa's** 1877 ballet *La Bayadère* is loved among balletomanes for its stunning variations and mesmerising ensemble work, especially in the famous Act 2 Kingdom of the Shades. It's also very recognisably a product of the problematic 19th-century orientalising instinct, filled with exotic visions of otherness that bears little relation to any historical (or even mythical) India. Most stagings present a hotchpotch of traditions drawn from somewhere east of Suez; what a Sufi fakir is doing in a Hindu temple has always been beyond me, as has the regular costuming choice of Turkish harem pants for Indian temple dancers.

All in all, it's easy to see why this much-loved oriental fantasy of a ballet might create conflict within the hearts and minds of Indian audiences, and it's this conflict (rather than Petipa's narrative) that is the subject of **Shobana Jeyasingh's** exciting new work, *Bayadère – The Ninth Life*.

The stage opens on a young man (**Sooraj Subramaniam**) blogging about his amusement and bafflement at a viewing of the classical ballet, enacted by members of the company as he types his responses ("pure Bollywood!" "LOL") on a projected screen. The scene shifts to 19th-century Paris where the arrival of devadasis, 'real bayadères', causes a stir among the intelligentsia of the day. With a swift costume change, the long-limbed, doe-eyed Subramaniam is transformed into a gender-flipped 'bayadère', reclining on the floor as a pack of Parisians inspect with wonder the delicately alien features of this new arrival.

Jeyasingh does not so much recreate the story of Bayadère as draw a loose parallel between devadasi Amany, as documented by the 19th century writer and librettist **Théophile Gautier** (whose narrated words form part of the soundscape), and the doomed bayadère Nikiya in Petipa's work. Amany is exhibited, admired, even imitated by members of the company who swarm

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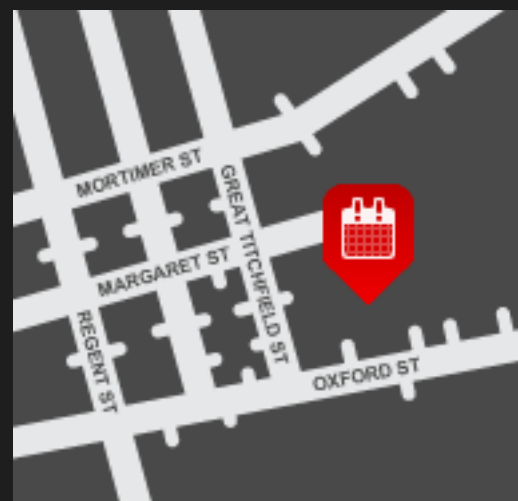
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around her elegantly sculpted features; then, as Nikiya is abandoned by her lover Solor and left to die, Amany is forgotten by her erstwhile admirers and rumored to have committed suicide in London.

Jeyasingh has lost none of her choreographic inventiveness, adding notes of Russian-style ballet to her signature mix of high-impact contemporary movement and vibrant bharatanatyam. Subramaniam is a fine devadasi with long, elegant lines exploding into sudden bursts of furious footwork and a supple, expressive torso. (Not without reason did the enthusiastic American patron near me declare that the show ought to feature less shirt and more torso).

The structure of the work as a whole is slightly puzzling, however; the blog seen in the opening scenes, a potentially useful framing device, is never returned to and so towards the end of the piece we lose the sense of where – and when – we are in history. The parallel drawn between Amany and Nikiya is present but slight; perhaps more could be suggested about the loss of an admirer driving each character to despair. In Amany's case, the cruel irony of the 'real bayadère' being replaced in the public's affections by exotic fictional counterparts (danced by slender white women) could be drawn out much more. The deaths of Amany and Nikiya are blink-and-you-miss-it brief, with Amany promptly leaping up off the stage to join the procession of Shades lunging in a penchée-like fashion. Amany's death is followed by a long section of exquisitely-dance but largely abstract material that might be better located earlier in the piece, perhaps breaking up Gaudier's narrations and suggesting a pull away in the public imagination from the authentic devadasis and a move towards their fictional representations. As it currently stands, the final sequence seems to exist in its own bubble, not particularly related to anything that comes before it.

*Bayadère – The Ninth Life* is an interesting work overall, and very nearly a brilliant one. There's much to be admired, as usual, about Jeyasingh's command of material and her company's excellent performers. The structure, however, leaves me puzzling over the relationships between sections – and between history and fiction – and not in the intriguingly thought-provoked way but simply in the muddled one.

**Continues at Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House until Saturday. Return tickets only**

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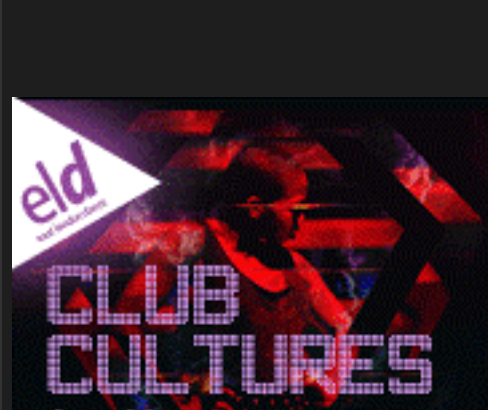
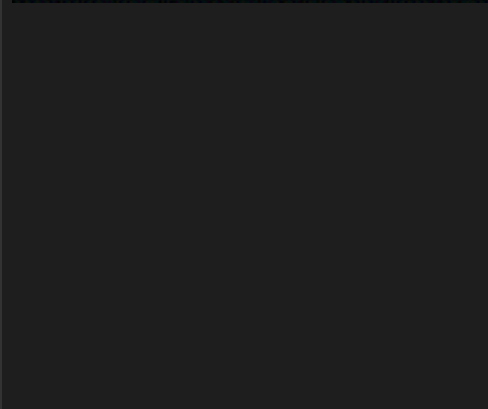
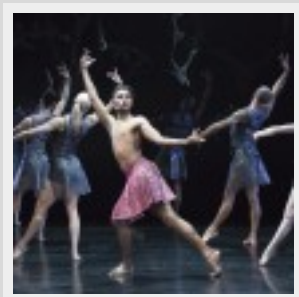
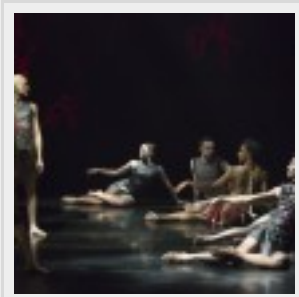
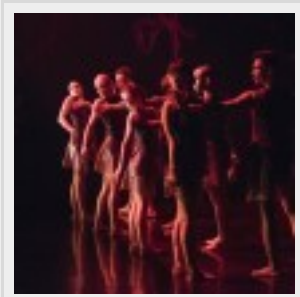
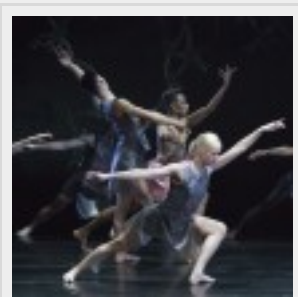
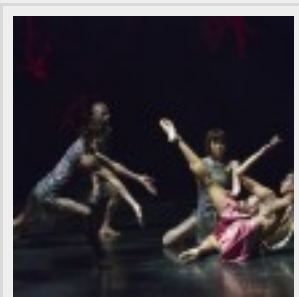
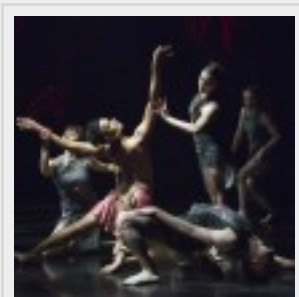
**Photos: Bettina Strenske**

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