

Listening to Padmini Chettur: Embodied Subversion Helly Minarti

In my (indeed, not so long)—15 years or so—involvement in the performing arts, it is not often that I have encountered an artist who is equally articulate both in his/her art form as in his/her words nor whose art and life are so aligned as Padmini Chettur. A new solo piece, *Philosophical Enactment 1&2* (henceforth *PE 1&2*) and the accompanied Lecture titled *A Thinking Body*—as transcribed in this space—at TPAM2020 allowed a glimpse into this notion.

As curator presenting this combo, I was curious how *PE 1&2* would be received by those audiences who were not so familiar with Padmini's almost twenty-year journey of making choreography. After all, the solo piece could be described as self-reflection on her animated artistic trajectory through the critical responses (of audiences or critics) to her work. At the core of such responses are this insistent impression that watching her work is not an 'easy' experience. It is something that Padmini has been aware of and in part such input has informed her choreography—making of later, as she explained in the lecture (her *Wall Dancing*, created in 2012, was a direct response to it a year after her arguably most difficult solo, *Beautiful Thing 2* that she jokingly described as 'her suicidal letter to curators', including those who commissioned her in previous years).

Indeed, watching Padmini's work does demand patience and observation, hence the allusion to 'not easy'; and most of all it requires an inquiry mind to enter a space of subversive subtlety as opposed to seductive spectacles that we have more accustomed to see or—at the other end of global dance performance spectrum—those works that could simply fall into blatantly cerebral such as those often categorised as anti-dance. I was aware that Padmini's take on slow movement and the overall choreographic language is challenging for most audiences. But, precisely her distinct slowness—performed in such intensity and yet delivered with such ease—that has been drawing me since my experience of watching her live in 2006, performing *3 Solos* (2003) in Jakarta. It is the particular way she occupies the space with such control of pacing as if the movement sculpting the time thus infusing the space with certain energy that pulls our senses—and/or our gaze—in.

I remember what a friend in Yogyakarta—a theatre-practitioner—said after watching Padmini perform her infamous solo, *Beautiful Thing 2* (2011). The piece was originally performed in a large proscenium with the latest lighting technology available, but then in 2018, was adapted in a basement gallery with minimum lighting. In a confined space that could accommodate roughly 70 people (some sitting on chairs, most on the floor mat), being in such proximity of each other and situated within the built intimacy of viewers vis-a-vis performer, this friend observed the audience's own embodiment as immediate response to the performance unfolding right before their eyes.

After few minutes into the piece, he described the slowing of each breath marked by a series of deeper sighs and the softening of shoulders' muscles and jaws of the audience members. This is precisely the quality that never ceases to astonish me, not only the slow movement does slow down the viewers, but somehow it also unlocks the space where subtlety and sensuality seeping in. In a world so filled with expression of ultra-masculinity and machismo—of contemporary dance in Asia included—this profound sensorial experience unfailingly nudges and ushers me to tap into the feminine energy-

the yin—which is thickly foiled in a sensibility that engages both the body and the intellect at the same time.

In her TPAM lecture, Padmini started by unraveling the work of Chandralekha (1928-2006), the radical modernist choreographer she danced for a bit over ten years (1990-2001). She often refers this pertinent period as her dance education. I wasn't fortunate enough to meet Chandralekha in person, only watched her *Sharira* (2001) posthumously ten years after its creation, but from reading and digging into the archives, I am just incredibly fascinated by this figure, both as a woman and an artist. It is impossible to sum her up within few sentences, but enough to say that she was head-on radical in its truest sense, both in life and in her arts. Now, working with Padmini for the past two years, I heard more about her from Padmini's casual stories in between our meetings.

These two women's connection—artistically and beyond—is another magnet for me. Chandralekha paved the way by declaring 'I felt that dance doesn't belong to the temple or to the court or even to one's country. It must go back to the people, to the body' (Bharucha, 1995: 52)*. She then proposed what Indian body could be within the language of dance and choreography, and this boiled down to her exploration of Indian multiple physical traditions such as Bharatanatyam, yoga, kalaripayattu (martial arts from Kerala, South India) and Chhau (described as a semi classical dance with martial, tribal and folk traditions). The historical context for Chandralekha's critical and artistic positioning was her response to the national discourse in Indian dance that privileged *Bharatanatyam* over other regional forms and more importantly, how this postcolonial narrative had resulted with uncritical if not degrading attitude within the practice of classical dance scene in India during her time which is how dance was simply so detached from the realities of the dancers' own lives.

* Bharucha, R., 1995. Chandralekha: Women Dance Resistance. New Delhi: HarpersCollins India.

Padmini often expresses that what Chandralekha did has freed her from having to deal with this postcolonial, identitarian questions, thus enabling her to tread on different path, responding to different questions particular of her time. Since her first choreography, *Fragility* (2001), Chandralekha was supportive. It was also the last year she danced for Chandralekha and a new chapter began.

Chandralekha was famous for not wanting to leave any legacy—part of her radical, recalcitrant personal traits. However, she passed on to Padmini the act of questioning, although the questions are now different. Both rooted in slow movement, although unlike Chandralekha, Padmini does not feel the need to impose an image or literally ground herself to a former known form. For her, the slow movement is simply fundamentally necessary for its intrinsic politics. Only by moving slowly, one can observe what is happening within the body, and technically, moving slowly is as difficult as moving fast—if not more, considering it is basically going against the stream of our daily modernity clock. Both women have taken the importance of the spine. However, Chandralekha once abandoned dance and making dance for 12 years before returning to it in 1985, whilst Padmini kept the flow going, transitioning from dancing for Chandralekha to choreographing. Such differences and trajectories resulted in distinct ways of investigating the materiality of the body.

As someone trained in chemistry and part of family of doctors, Padmini has been surrounded by discourse on health and the body. Her immersion to Iyengar yoga—the style that is known for its rigorous analytical approach on body alignment—has enriched this personal inquiry that ultimately feeds into her practice. In essence, she moves through her days—through life—as she does on stage. Life and arts are aligned in her body politics. The energy that flows in both is similar.

Such attitude profoundly resonates with Chandralekha's own life/arts trajectory albeit so different in the way each woman articulation. In her lecture, Padmini described how Chandralekha didn't only create a choreographer-dancer's relationship with her much younger dancers and other collaborators but how she simply shared her life in its totality, taking them to move along with her, including politically. I am most struck by this reflection for its ultimate subversive trait. In the world of global contemporary arts market, I treasure such moment when we are once again reminded that artistic exchange doesn't have to be dictated by capitalistic transaction. It once again reveals to me that artists who live their lives as they practice their arts are the boldest, most radical, subversive embodiment and more often than not, their works demand inquisitive engagement of one's critical mind and openness to different sensorial experiences.