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What We Bring:

Storytelling, Theater, and the Traditional Arts

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Malini Srinivasan dances across the stage. With movement, hand gestures, and facial expressions, the traditional art of Bharatanatyam dance comes alive in graceful motion, bringing to life tales of the *Ramayana*. The dance tells a story, but Malini also has her own story to tell:

What my parents brought to America was dance, a family of three children, and a strong will to bring India with them to America. My mother studied Bharatanatyam dance in India from a young age; she learned from her mother. Ironically, though this art was passed on from mother to daughter, neither woman called herself a “dancer.” They were “dance teachers,” because women of their community were forbidden from dancing after puberty; it was considered obscene for a woman to show herself on stage. My mother and grandmother gave all the children in our family the gift of Bharatanatyam dance: the stories, the music, the colorful costumes, and, of course, the ankle bells that keep the rhythm. But more than anything, this gift of dance gave us a vibrant experience of being in our bodies. My mother and grandmother were subversively conscious we should feel proud of this gift, and unafraid to dance. I am the first woman of my family to become a professional dancer, who experienced none of the approbation formerly attached to the act of dancing. Sometimes, the most beautiful gift also comes with the heavy weight of the past; and sometimes, it brings with it the possibility of liberation. And sometimes, the gift carries both.



Malini Srinivasan with her ankle bells. All photos by Tom Pich Photography/NYC.

Bharatanatyam dance is beautiful, and yet, integrated with Malini's story, the performance is enhanced. For the performances curated to accompany the *What We Bring: New Immigrant Gifts* exhibition, Malini broke her dance into sections and between them, told dramatic moments from her powerful life story. The stories, like the dance, were rehearsed, so the pieces fit seamlessly together. The public programming, developed in concert with the exhibit, gave the curators and artists the chance to experiment with a new way of presenting tradition.

When general audiences watch a performance of traditional arts, they are most often engaging in an unfamiliar cultural experience. Folklorists have often served as interlocutors, who place the work "in context" by offering an introduction from the stage or a handout with one or more essays. The public programming that accompanied the *What We Bring* exhibition gave us an opportunity to work with some of the performing artists, whose work was featured in the exhibition, to integrate their immigration stories into their performance. Their performances were elevated by the seamless inclusion of some of their dramatic life stories, stories that they themselves, rather than a folklorist, are the ones telling the audience.

The performances for *What We Bring* centered around a group of new immigrant performers featured in the exhibition, who also worked with City Lore as teaching artists. These long-standing teaching artists, who bring their traditions into public school classrooms, had long wanted to have a chance to work together as artists.

The performers who came together for this grand experiment were Chinese American dancer, actor, choreographer, and theater director Lu Yu; Peruvian American percussionist and composer Héctor Morales; Indian American Bharatanatyam dancer, and choreographer Malini Srinivasan; Ivorian American dancer and choreographer Yahaya Kamate; and Afghan American poet Sahar Muradi. Working with another teaching artist, George



Yahaya Kamate with his *n'goni* (musical bow).

Zavala as director of the performances, the ensemble interwove their six stories with the performances of their art to create a powerful theatrical piece about experiences of migration.

The weaving together of these pieces came to symbolize the process whereby immigrant traditions often inspire one another and enrich America's cultural life. A touchstone object from each of the five artists was featured in the performance, as well as in the accompanying exhibition, in a sense coming to life for the performance. The exhibit objects included *ghungroos* or ankle bells from Malini Srinivasan; a

cajón drum from Héctor Morales; the *n'goni* string instrument from Yahaya Kamate; the *Divan-e-Hafiz*, the collected works of the celebrated 14th-century Persian poet Hafiz from Sahar Muradi; and the hat, tunic, belt, and apron from the opera *The Monkey King Wreaks Havoc in Heaven* from Lu Yu.

Malini offered her perspective on her performances:

This is about different worlds that travel with people, and what I think is really interesting about projects like this is that it takes these art forms and looks at them as journeys. As a journey



Lu Yu with his Chinese opera crown.



Héctor Morales with his *cajón* (box drum).

that went from one place to another, that was assembled from different influences, and that had all kinds of twists and turns. The art didn't sort of plop down on you, and now you are a Bharatanatyam dancer; you get there through all these different ways, and it shows how art and immigration work together. It's not that the art came from India only—it's that along the way, all these things happened, and the person is formed by that and the art is formed by that.

Héctor Morales adds to what Malini expressed:

One of the great things about this play was that, in a very sober way, it brought the focus back right into the human side of immigration. It was so moving for me to learn the immigration stories of my colleagues. Even though I have known some of them for a couple of years, I had no idea about their incredible life journeys, which, just like mine, brought them to the United States. In a way, this play revealed a greater

truth about immigration, it made me aware that it was not just us taking the decision to come to America—it was a myriad of different circumstances, events, coincidences, conflicts, and dreams which ended up, just like an invisible river, carrying us to these shores.

The *What We Bring* performances were, in a sense, about the journeys of art and the art of journeys. The play's subtitle is *Tales of Migration*. The movement of people and cultures is as old as our species, and so the topic of migration includes all of us. Sahar reflects on this sentiment:

There's a scene in the play where the whole cast simulates a baggage claim conveyor belt. We are gently and curiously exchanging our objects with one another, in a moving line that keeps regenerating, in a kind of endless loop. And for me, this is the heart of the show, which asks us to respectfully pause and interact with one another's stories of origins and migrations—to wonder and be curious about our

neighbors and the wild and unique paths we all took to get to this one same location.

The full play was performed at Teatro SEA at the Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural & Educational Center on May 27, 2018. A more portable, abridged version of the play was performed at the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival in July 2017, and at Madison Square Park in June 2018, as well as at City Lore's long-time school partner, Public School 11, in May 2018.

As creativity births creativity, two of the artists, Malini and Sahar, were inspired to create a new theater piece, *Ask Hafiz*. Malini came up with the idea to illustrate Sahar's harrowing immigration story, using the gestural dance of Bharatanatyam. The story is grounded in the Central, South, and West Asian tradition of consulting Hafiz's poetry as a form of bibliomancy, or fortune-telling, a tradition Sahar grew up practicing with her mother. Sahar poses questions about her family's war-provoked emigration

from Afghanistan and survival tactics in the United States, and the poems answer—with a bit of interpretation from the readers. Malini and Sahar collaborated with the Iranian American singer, songwriter, and poet Haleh Liza to set Hafiz’s poetry to music. The final piece is composed of Malini’s choreography and solo performance, Sahar’s live narration, and Haleh’s score and performance, accompanied by violin, cello, and percussion. The beautiful piece was performed at Joe’s Pub on March 21, 2019, as part of the Women’s Raga Massive’s Out of Woods Festival, as well as at the Queens Central Library on March 2, 2019, as part of the *What We Bring* traveling exhibit.

Here’s one excerpt in which Sahar writes about her older sister becoming the de facto parent, a common experience among immigrant families:

By 11 years old, Shabnam is our caregiver, our family interpreter, our English-fluent pilot through the labyrinths of school and housing and doctors’ visits. She sees Padar’s (her father’s) desperate trips to Atlantic City and Madar’s (her mother’s) legs, purple from standing. She notes the posture of their exhaustion and learns her duties. Her teachers applaud her. Relatives sing her praises. But no one asks Shabnam what it feels like to grow up before you should. No one explains to

her that we escaped one war there for another kind of battle here.

And soon Shabnam, too, begins taking her heavy heart to Hafiz. She turns to the Divan and asks: “How will our family survive?” Hafiz answers,

“O wise bird of the dawn, I send you forward.
Just see, from where to where I cast you!
What shame that a bird like you be trapped in the ruins of grief.
From here, I send you to the nest of faith.
On love’s path, there is no such station as near or far.
I can see you clearly and send you my prayers.”

Our work as public folklorists is to collaborate with traditional artists and with communities to help make their cultural expressions accessible and powerful to their own communities and for general audiences. Bringing together master storytellers and theater artists to work with the artists to integrate their stories into their performances and find ways to bring them to life for audiences, furthers the work we do with communities. It can attract new audiences and a new level of engagement with the featured traditions. In words, as well as in dance, music, and painting, artists are all, as Barbara Myerhoff once described them, *Homo Narrans*, storytellers at heart. ▼

Steve Zeitlin (steve@citylore.org) is the Founding Director of City Lore. He is the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016).



Sahar Muradi with her *Divan-e-Hafiz* collection, the collected works of 14th-century Persian poet Hafiz.

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