

Tara Rajkumar

Tara Rajkumar has made distinguished contributions to dance in Australia, United Kingdom and India for over three decades. Born in Kerala, India, she has taken the classical Kerala dance forms of Kathakali and Mohiniattam and contemporary productions to many parts of the world from village halls to prestigious venues such as the Sadlers Wells Theatre and the South Bank in London, the Sydney Opera House and the Victorian Arts Centre in Melbourne.

Tara Rajkumar's contributions to the dance arts, choreography and dance education have received much acclaim and recognition. In Australia, her original works include major new repertoires in Mohiniattam and contemporary works in the South Asian idiom. Tara and her Natya



Sudha Dance Company and School, which was formed in 1984, have presented original Mohiniattam repertoires to Melbourne audiences in numerous, critically acclaimed productions. Natya Sudha has progressed to evolve a new performance process which is a unique fusion of the intricacies of the Indian classical arts and the innovativeness and energy of contemporary dance movement.

Tara's extensive repertoire of classical and contemporary productions in Australia include **Krishna the Celestial Dancer, From Temple to Theatre, Mohini the Divine Enchantress, Indian Dance Theatre, Malache-Despatches from another World, Mahamaya, What She Said, Natyatreyi and Temple Dreaming**. Her **Archana** concerts are an acknowledged part of Melbourne's cultural fabric.

The Natya Sudha School has graduated 14 students in Mohiniattam, a unique achievement outside India for this classical dance style. Tara's deeply researched, original choreography of well over one hundred dances in many languages has enriched the appreciation of the arts by a wide range of communities in Australia. Examples include her adaptation to Indian dance of the story of **Mary Magdalene** and the **Virgin Mary** and compositions in nine languages - Malayalam, English, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Bengali, Singhalese, Tamil, Marathi and Hindi. This breadth of choreography is quite special even in an Indian context. Natya Sudha has contributed regularly in many events for a wide range of communities and organisations in Melbourne. Tara has devised innovative and impactful education programs for children in schools. For example at Erasmus School in Hawthorn, Melbourne, she had the entire primary school participate (2005) in her production of the Indian epic, **Ramayana**.

Tara Rajkumar's work has been acknowledged internationally in creating cultural bridges and forging a deeper understanding between the different communities. In 1979, Tara was the Founder-Director of the respected Academy of Indian Dance in London, UK. Under her direction, the Academy held path breaking events including two successful seminal seminars, "**The Contribution of Indian Dance to British Culture**" (1982) and "**The Place of Indian Dance in British Culture**" (1983). The Akademi, as it is now called, has recently completed a successful record of 28 years of seminal contributions to South Asian Dance in the United Kingdom.

Tara's contemporary choreographic works in Australia have been presented at national and International Conferences. For example, her production, **Mahamaya** (1997), presented at the 8th International Asia Pacific Confederation for Arts Education (ASPACAE) Conference, included her interpretation of the poetry of the Australian poet, Judith Wright. In "**What She Said**", Tara's novel adaptation of the poetry of the famous Tamil poet Ramanujam into contemporary dance with English text was presented at the 9th World Sanskrit Conference (1994) and Orf100 International Conference (1995).

Tara has developed numerous courses, lectures and workshops on dance for a wide spectrum of interests including universities, National Arts galleries and museums. She has raised cross-cultural awareness in

the local communities through hundreds of lecture-demonstrations and dance performances at schools, community events and local festivals in regional and urban venues in Australia.

Tara Rajkumar was invited by the Government of India, through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, to tour her successful Australian production of **Temple Dreaming** to cities in India on the occasion of India's Golden Jubilee of Independence. Her Natya Sudha production of **Mohini the Divine Enchantress** was toured extensively to much acclaim in the United Kingdom with support from the Arts Council of Great Britain and Australia's Arts Council. She also directed and presented **Bhumi Taal** (Global Rhythms) for the Victorian Premier's Dinner during Cultural Diversity Week and the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne at the invitation of the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

Honours and recognition:

- Honoured in the Victorian Parliament on the occasion of the Centenary of Federation in 2001 when she was included in the Victorian Honour Roll "honouring her contribution to Victoria and the Nation" in Arts and Education in the Inaugural list of 200 **Australian Women Shaping the Nation** during the period 1891-2001. This was a first for an Indo-Australian.
- Honorary Fellowships in the Department of Music and the Monash Asia Institute at Monash University.
- Included in Inaugural "**Who's Who of Australian Women – A Bibliographical Dictionary of Australian Women**", Crown Content, (2006), p892.
- The Honorary Consul General of India in Melbourne, presented her an award "acknowledging an outstanding contribution to Indian Art and Culture" on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of India's Independence (1997).
- **Victorian Volunteer Award** in 2006 by the Victorian government for Valuable Service to the Community on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Parliament of Victoria.
- Recipient of the **Ethnic Arts Award** in England by the Minority Rights Group (1981) "for bringing traditional Indian dancing to British audiences."
- Tara was featured as India's representative in the Melbourne Immigration Museum's computer interactive information facility (1998) in recognition of her contribution to the community as an Indian immigrant to Australia.
- Invited presentations and **keynote papers** at national and international conferences for example: ASPACAE Conferences in Melbourne and Bangkok, the Australian Association of Dance Education Conference, the Orf100 Conference, the Green Mill Dance Festival.
- Awarded a **Choreographic Fellowship** by the Australia Council (1994).
- Member of the Dance Panel of the Victorian Ministry for the Arts (1991-94)
- Board Member of the Green Mill Dance Project (1994-1996)
- Member of the Australia Council's Cultural Access Team (1990-91)
- Founder and Foundation Director of the Academy of Indian Dance, London (1979-1983).
- First Honorary Advisor of Dance at the well-known Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (Institute of Indian Culture) in London (1977-78).
- The Malayalee Association of Victoria, with a 30 year history representing the community, acknowledged the voluntary community service which Tara provides by instituting in 1997 an annual Encouragement Award for a deserving student at the Natya Sudha School.
- Her work in Mohiniattam and Kathakali has been presented to many dignitaries including HRH Prince Charles, Lord Mountbatten and Prime Minister Callaghan in the UK, Presidents Radhakrishnan and Venkataraman in India, and in the presence of Prime Minister Howard in Australia. The former President of India, Mr R Venkataraman, who witnessed her production of Temple Dreaming in Chennai, wrote about Tara: "As a dancer she is a match to any renowned artist of Indian dances. More than a fine artist, she has been a cultural ambassador of India abroad." (letter dated 17 Dec 1997).

Recognition in archival publications:

Tara Rajkumar's work has been recorded in various archival publications, journals and books, for example:

- "Women Shaping The Nation - Victorian Honour Roll of Women", Volume 1, 2001, p223.
- Inaugural "Who's Who of Australian Women – A Bibliographical Dictionary of Australian Women", Crown Content, (2006), p892.
- Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia (2003) ed: J Whiteoak and A Scott-Maxwell, Currency Press, p56, 331, 355, 660.
- The Australian People – An encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins, ed James Jupp, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p 428.
- "Temple Dreaming: A Creative Juxtaposition" in Sruti, a premier music and dance magazine in India (1996) issue 141, p17.
- "South Asian Dance: The British Experience" in Choreography and Dance, Issue ed: Alessandra Iyer, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997 Vol 4 (2), p1, 27.
- "Australian Dancer with Indian Connection" in Sruti, (May 2001), vol 200, p25
- "The Arts Britain Ignores" by Naseem Khan, (OBE), 1976; p64, 67, 68.
- "Traditions and Transition in South Asian Performing Arts in Multicultural Australia" in Culture Difference and the Arts (1994), ed: S Gunew and F Rizvi, Allen and Unwin. p 119, 122-123.
- "Dancer's Dreams Live on", The Monash University's Magazine (Issue 3, 1999), p12-13.
- "Indian Classical Dance: Traditions in Transition 2002", L Venkataraman and A Pasricha, Lustre Press, p94, 107.
- Dance Australia: November 1996, p60-61; October-Nov. 1994, p52; Oct-Nov. 1988, p53; Dec1989-Jan1990, p47.
- Dancing Times (UK) June 1993, p884, September 1982, p905.

Her contributions in England as the Founder Director of the Academy of Indian Dance in the United Kingdom have been extensively documented.

Recognition in the media:

Tara Rajkumar's contributions have attracted sustained national and international media attention.

- Major newspapers such as the The Age, the Australian, the Sydney Morning Herald and many other quality national newspapers in Australia, the Times, Sunday Times and the Daily Telegraph in the United Kingdom, The Statesman, Hindustan Times, the Times of India and The Hindu in India, have covered her work. In addition, her deep commitment to the community, over and beyond the normal, continue to be acknowledged in the local newspapers.
- She has been the subject of television programmes in Australia, the UK and India. Among several examples, a major half-hour television programme celebrating her work was presented during the prestigious **Festival of India in Britain** (1982).

Representative extracts from reviews and reports are given below:

- "Through her distinguished and acclaimed contributions as a dancer, choreographer, artistic director, educator, researcher and communicator, she had demonstrated a strong and unswerving commitment to forge cultural bridges and a deeper understanding between the migrant South Asian community and the host community in Australia. Through her art forms she has made pioneering inroads into arts education and community service in Victoria." - in Women Shaping the Nation, **Victorian Honour Roll of Women**, Volume 1, 2001, p 234.
- "Since settling in Australia, Tara Rajkumar has enriched the Melbourne dance scene with her dancing, choreography and teaching of the classical Indian dance styles of Mohiniattam and Kathakali. Recently she has been concerned with the development of trans-migrant dance forms in Australia. Malache is a contemporary story and its spoken text is in English, so it is fully accessible

to an Australian audience. Rajkumar gave a riveting portrayal"- in review of Malache in **Dance Australia**, Oct.-Nov. 1996, p60.

- "Tara Rajkumar and her Natyasudha dancers received rave reviews while it recently toured major cities in India with the Indo-Australian production of Temple Dreaming.... It is said the future is not the place we go to but the one we create. In that case Tara has certainly created a special one for herself." - dance critic, V R Devika, in the Indian national weekly **The Week**, Jan 8 1998, p66.
- "Tara has gained a name as a very intelligent and perceptive choreographer. Not satisfied with a mere mastery of the classical arts, Tara wants to see them extended to suit the contemporary sensibility... One (Louise Lightfoot) was an Australian who became a lover of Indian art and took it to Australia. The other (Tara Rajkumar), born to the Indian tradition, mastered the art and went to Australia to nurture her art there, and now brings it back to India with a hybrid vigour, watered by the creative impulses of an alien society it lives in"- dance scholar and critic, Leela Venkataraman in the national newspaper, **Hindu**, 28 November 1997.
- "Tara Rajkumar is that rare and precious thing – a gifted and eloquent story teller. To watch her dance is to be lured into a bewitching world of adventures among strange and wonderful people...." - In review of Krishna the celestial Dancer, **Dance Australia**, Oct.-Nov. 1994, p52.
- "Tara Rajkumar settled in Melbourne nine years ago, and almost immediately began giving her adopted city the benefits of her talent as a brilliant performer and dedicated teacher of classical Indian dance. .these grants recognise not only her contribution to the performing arts in Australia, but also to multiculturalism in the arts"- Patricia Laughlin in **The Age**, 16 Aug. 1994, p19.
- "Tara Rajkumar is not only a beautiful dancer herself, but an exponent of two dance traditions – Kathakali and Mohiniattam, here blended yet played against each other... As performed by Rajkumar, however, it showed the mime emerging from and carefully related to the dance sequences that had gone before. Each heightened the theatrical power of the other.." in review in **The Australian**, 19 August 1994, p14.
- "A whole community's plight is thus focused on individual sorrows, so that Tara Rajkumar's solo performance peoples the stage with a village. ... the tale unfolds in splendidly delivered dialogue and gestures rippling between dance and mime. Stylised, yet simplified, the movement looks as natural as walking" - in review in **The Age**, 14 July 1996.
- "Danced by Rajkumar alone, it was a virtuoso performance, both dramatically and in dance. A company such as Natya Sudha is well worth going to see – there is beauty, color, excitement and skill." - in review in **The Age**, 19 August 1994.
- "The major highlight was the unique presentation of Bhumital by the distinguished dancer and choreographer, Tara Rajkumar. Nearly thirty dancers traced the history of India and Australia from the days of the ascetic who figuratively split Gondwanaland into Australia and the Indian sub-continent....The production showcased the linking of cultures in a pulsating and action packed sequence..." **Indian Voice**, Melbourne, April 2006, p 18.
- "Tara Rajkumar is a dancer-actress skilled in the art of bringing an old, stylised and foreign form of dance alive on a 20th-century Western stage... Her performance on Saturday night was, in its climactic moments, as gripping an experience as any audience might find in a play, opera, ballet or piece of music which transcends its age and theatrical form to make an impact." Dance critic Jill Sykes in the **Sydney Morning Herald**, 2 October, 1984.
- "Tara Rajkumar, the classical Indian dancer, has been taking her mime dances around Victorian towns. Most of these country townspeople have never seen anything like her.", **The Age**, 3 August 1998.

- “The two-hour lecture demonstration given by Tara Rajkumar ...was a riveting exposition of various classical dance styles..we were privileged indeed to attend such an honest and gracious analysis.” New Zealand International Festival, reviewed in **The Evening Post**, 9 March 1992, p12.
- “In fact, Tara has a gruelling schedule of dance performances throughout Britain, from primary schools to arts centres. She lectures extensively on Indian dance and operates workshops.... The compartments of life –Indian and English – still exist, as they did in the post war years. But the dividing line is thankfully being eroded by people like Tara Rajkumar.” Naseem Khan OBE in **The Sunday Times Magazine**, April 13, 1980.
- “It was a joy to see Tara Rajkumar, a dancer from Kerala, performing at the Commonwealth Institute Theatre in Kensington with power and authenticity the supreme female solo of Kathakali, the Salvation of Puthana..” in a review by well-known dance critic, Fernau Hall, **The Daily Telegraph**, London, 15 Aug. 1975.
- “Culture Alchemist - Tara Rajkumar recently premiered her latest production *Temple Dreaming* in Delhi, where she used the theatricality of Kathakali together with the lyrical grace of Mohiniattam, building blocks to create a unique dance theatre. It incorporated western forms like ballet and contemporary dance as well. .. The numbers had all been conceived and executed with perfect integrity, making sure that both eastern and western styles remained true to their original forms. This was the transmigrant dance that the West had inspired this classical artiste to create...” **Indian ExpressNewsline**, Delhi, 11 December 1997.

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