

**INDIA ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Arts 2 – Ragamala Dance Company**

**Aparna Ramaswamy**

Narrator

**Dan Rein**

Interviewer



**MINNESOTA HISTORICAL  
& CULTURAL GRANTS**

*Made possible by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the vote of Minnesotans  
on November 4, 2008. Administered by the Minnesota Historical Society.*

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# INDIA ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA

## ORAL HISTORY PROJECT Arts 2 – Ragamala Dance Company

The India Association of Minnesota (IAM) was formed in 1973 as the India Club of Minnesota. IAM is a not-for-profit organization that represents people with an interest in the culture and heritage of India to **build** a sense of cohesiveness within this community, **represent** the community to the population at large, and **serve** as the focal point for advancing the educational, cultural, and charitable interests of the community. The organization is statewide, though the largest numbers of its members live within the Minneapolis and St. Paul metropolitan area.

“Arts 2 – Ragamala Dance Company” is the seventh project in a series conducted over the past 17 years between the India Association of Minnesota and the Minnesota Historical Society. This project has the following goals:

- 1) Create an oral history of Ragamala Dance Company.
- 2) To preserve the recordings of dance performances by Ranee Ramaswamy and the Ragamala Dance Company.

Acclaimed as one of the Indian Diaspora’s leading dance ensembles, Minneapolis-based Ragamala Dance seamlessly carries the Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam into the 21st century. Artistic Directors Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy retain roots in the philosophy, spirituality, mysticism, and myth of their South Indian heritage, while using their art form as a rich language through which to speak with their own voices as contemporary American choreographers. They see the classical form as a dynamic, living tradition with vast potential to move beyond the personal and spark a global conversation.

Ragamala has a unique & compelling story, with deep local roots & broad international branches. Yet the origins & early history of the company have never been formally documented. As Ragamala celebrates its 20th anniversary, it is vital to document its history & prominent place in the life of the Indian community, the dance community, & the broad fabric of people & cultures that make up our state of MN. Thus a key goal of the project is to digitize video recordings of the early years of Ragamala’s productions (1991-2002), which are currently stored in antiquated analog formats that are in danger of being lost as the technology becomes obsolete and to preserve them at the Minnesota History Center for posterity. This will enable all Minnesotans, not just people of Indian origin, to reap the benefits of the very highest quality of Indian classical dance presented in Minnesota over the years, into the future generations. The archive will also serve as a resource for historians and scholars of Indian music, history and culture in MN.

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## **The Interview**

**Aparna Ramaswamy**  
**Narrator**

**Dan Rein**  
**Interviewer**

**April 7, 2014**

DR: I am with Aparna Ramaswamy and you are Co-artistic Director right...

AR: I am.

DR: With you mother Ranee?

AR: That is correct.

DR: So how long is the-the Co-Artistic Director [background noise] been a thing?

AR: I wasn't sure of this myself but I read something yesterday that said that I became Co-artistic Director in [pause] 2000. I am not sure that's correct.

DR: Ok.

AR: I think somewhere between 2000 and 2004 perhaps.

DR: Ok. And so, what brought about the co-sponsorship?

AR: So, I've been working closely with my mother ever since I was a young child and so we studied together. When... we would always perform together and when she would create works I would definitely contribute input and I would perform in them. And so it was always a-a very natural partnership and so when I started choreographing my own works she would do the same for me and then at some point we realized that what we had wanted, what we would like to do moving forward, is create works together and we felt that we have different strengths [pause] [background noise] that we bring to the elements of a production, different strengths and weaknesses and so we balance each other out very well and we were really in this practice of creating every step together, every movement together, making administrative decisions together. So it made sense and also there are many funding organizations and presenters that want to know what your succession plan is going to be and so this was a way for us to show people outside of the

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organization that we-we are thinking of the future. So it's not just about the present but it is about the future as well.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: Let's go into specifics here because you-you said you know you balance each other out (this) the weaknesses and the strengths. So what do you see those as say the strengths that each of you have?

AR: Sure, the strengths that we each have are also our weaknesses. We [pause] we approach new work and the work that we are in very differently. My mother is...she works the way [background noise] that she is when you are with her. She is very quick, rapid-fire. She has hundred ideas that she wants to try out. She sometimes can hardly finish talking about one before another one comes to her and so it's wonderfully creative and inventive. But my method is to delve very deeply into one idea and so I wanna make sure that we really work out all of the possibilities. Make sure that-that idea is not going to work before we go to the next one or when we are creating a new work [background noise] that we pay attention to every single detail. So I am much more committed to the narrow focus and the depth and she is much more of a broad thinker so while we both have ideas of aesthetic and future projects how we approach the project is different. And it's very good to have both perspectives because it's difficult for one person to do all of those things. And so, the idea is when you have two people it's not just doing half the amount of work, it's doing double the amount of work. So that's what I hope that we're achieving and we've really seen the work change and grow over the last few years and feel that it's a partnership that's working very well. The other thing that we do for each other is it's so helpful to have someone to bounce ideas off of. Someone who you feel safe talking to and someone...but someone who isn't afraid to tell you that they...that maybe you're veering down the wrong path. And so to be able to say, to have ideas spoken out loud is so valuable and we offer that for each other.

DR: My-my question here maybe is we should not go all the way back because you started to dance with your mother right? So when exactly did you start dancing?

AR: So I started studying with my mother when I was five years old and she was teaching in the Indian community and I was [pause] dancing in the back. I don't think she even knew that I [clearing throat] knew the movements. I just would learn all the movements and I was so in love with it that my grandmother told her that she should pay attention to me because there is someone in her own family who it seems talented or quick to pick up. So that's when I became a part of her class. And then when I was eight years old our teacher Alarmel Valli came to Minneapolis for a-a two week residency and we both joined the advanced class and so there were many adults and me who took this class from her and then when that class finished she, Alarmel Valli, told my mother that if she brought me to

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India that she would like to teach me. And so my mother asked if she also could study and so we started at that time as students together. My mother changed her style. I hadn't been dancing that long so it was easier for me to start with a new style and we became her, our teacher's private students and ...but from then on we had the very same focus and the same goals and we were able to-to help each other and even at such a young age I knew the seriousness of what we were doing. I think if you take on an art form that is as deep as Bharatanatyam and you really have something within you it feels like a calling and so we both had the same level of love for the art form and so we were able to pursue that together.

DR: So at what point then did you start becoming part of the dance company?

AR: So, I remained...we both are students of-of our teacher Alarmel Valli. I was her first student to perform a debut recital, an *Arangetram*, at the age of twelve and it was very interesting because she chose somebody who didn't live in India to be the first student she presented which is a wonderful recognition to say that someone who is coming to India for four months here and studying is ready for that type of challenge. So in the many years I followed since we met our teacher we would go back to India for four months a year and we came back to Minnesota, we not only practiced what she taught us we were performing quite extensively at community functions, branching out into the mainstream and teaching. So during that time when my mother was doing...so both of us performing together because otherwise she had students and sometimes the students would participate but they-they weren't quite a part of the productions until the early 90s. So through the 80s, we performed together and then in the 90s she had some students and then some dancers who came out of the University of Minnesota who she had met when she was teaching there, who were very serious about studying and so then we...so I...so my mother and I led these dancers together as an ensemble to create work. So I was simultaneously studying and performing as a soloist while I was dancing in her work and our work.

DR: So you were actually working with your mother and then because Ragamala came about in early 90s right?

AR: That's right-that's right. So Ragamala officially started in 1992 but it was a natural next step for the work that we were creating and seem to again travel side by side with the work that we were doing in India and the study and my solo career that was advancing both in India and here. So we were definitely learning from both but they were, we were...there was momentum in both of those tracks.

DR: So it sounds like you are saying also that [clearing throat] what you were doing with each of them was feeding both parts you know.

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AR: Absolutely because you cannot [pause]...the way I see it, the work that we are doing now and the aesthetic that we have shaped comes from all of the experiences that we have had and if I was just studying in India or working to be a soloist there or a soloist here I would not have had all the opportunities that I have had. There is...there has been a great visibility for the work we do with Ragamala both in its approach to meet crossover audiences and make the work accessible and understandable to mainstream audiences. So but that gives you the confidence...it-it certainly gave me the confidence rather than just going to India and trying to perform once or twice a year and performing here once or twice a year. I was working constantly and even though the work is-is-is slightly different the-the language is the same. And so you are feeding off of the experiences that you get. At the same time when I was studying intensely from my teacher that is a dictionary for the work that we are doing and that type of focus and dedication and ability to have long classes or to be able to sustain a two hours solo performance again feeds the aesthetic and the work that we are building here.

DR: You know Ragamala began in 1992 and you were a part of that [background noise] so how have you seen things develop, grow, change?

AR: So, one of the reasons my mother [clicking tongue] started Ragamala or at least one main artistic goal that she had at the time [clicking tongue] was to make this form of Bharatanatyam, an ancient form, accessible for mainstream audiences. You don't have to be Indian or speak one of the Indian languages or understand the movement vocabulary to appreciate it. And I...while I think that is definitely something that still exists I think the way we do that has expanded and has become deeper. So in the (very) in the first several years the work was-the work was experiments juxtaposing different genres and forms and it was very interesting to see how our form, our language could meet other musical styles and other dance forms and there was such a curiosity among us really driven by my mother to meet other forms and see how what are the similarities and differences and there was a great response for that work and it was very exciting, it was work everyone was doing at the time. So what we have learned from that [background noise] and I think one of the ways that I contributed is really looking for deeper thematic connections. So now that we have seen that works at certain, in certain situations, so the next time we are going to work with an-a musician let's say from Japan, from maybe in the Taiko form, we have worked with Taiko musicians so we understand that they have very complex rhythms, understand that they have a spoken rhythmic language, they have movement that is very beautiful so rather than just being visual and-and-an oral what are those thematic connections? So looking for mythological connections, philosophical connections in literature and having that be the common thread and rather than comparing and contrasting really making one thematic statement that doesn't just speak for those two forms that you are using but really speaks to universal audience. So how does the message that we are getting across translate to [clicking tongue] a-a truth,

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something about humanity, emotional honesty, transcendence that everyone can understand and so the layering of art forms becomes more complex, the connections become more subtle and it becomes one production that has many elements interwoven and so I feel that-that is the direction that the work is moving in and that has resulted in work that is of much higher production quality, suited to larger spaces perhaps employing visual elements, art installations on stage but again making sure that every element has a specific voice that adds to the course.

DR: So the productions are becoming more complicated, more complex?

AR: Yes.

DR: So in the process, is it taking...I imagine it is demanding more of you and also more time?

AR: Yes, absolutely-absolutely but it's very interesting to figure out and it's important to find the right people and Ragamala is at an interesting stage right now where in the last I would say even a year and a half we...the visibility of the work and the places we're going, everything has grown. In a year we used to maybe have in a good year we had in the last two years two or three very well-known presenters that would invite us. [Pause] Next year we had fourteen and it happened, it seems [snapping fingers] like overnight and so administratively we are a very lean organization. We all do the administrative work and artistic work. So we are in the process of figuring out technically how to match and we are not there yet. It's quite challenging to make sure because we don't have even the-the budget, we definitely don't have the budget to fulfill the dreams, the visions that we have. So, we are not able to have the size of staff that we need technically to do what we are doing. So, that's a challenge to figure it out and how it's worked so far is that we have two or three very competent people who we've been able to hire year after year, who have worked with us for years and have seen the work change, they feel invested in the work and so they are really going over and above to figure out these problems of set design and these production elements. But that is definitely an area where we need to somehow match where we are going.

DR: You are-you're starting to address one of the questions I didn't think we will get here

AR: [Chuckles]

DR: This quickly but so the future...so you see this as one of the challenges of the future but you see the challenge today but as things are developing...

AR: I think it's a challenge that will be somewhat solved in the near future I am hoping. I think that we're figuring out [pause] how to manage...these are growing pains so this is one of the-one of the pieces that we need to figure out but I hope that in the future



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these...the opportunities will continue to come so we have the opportunity to actually fix these problems.

DR: Huh...

AR: [Pause] So that's-that's one thing. The other thing is that we don't want to rely heavily on the scenic elements only when it naturally makes sense. So, every production that we do in the future probably will not have a scenic element to it. But when it's appropriate we want to make sure that it-it's possible. But what is changing for us and has been steadily apparent to us is that the size of every production is definitely growing. So the collaborators are from outside of Minnesota, often they are international collaborators [background noise] with a very well-known national figures and so schedules are complicated, it gets more expensive, visas may be involved, touring becomes more complicated and that is something that I-I anticipate will continue to be and we're...I think we're...the staff is very used to dealing with these issues and while it feels like a-a black hole sometimes of time I think that will also just...we will just continue to deal with it because it means that the work and the artist that we are working with are of a stature. We want to continue that. [Background noise]

DR: Well maybe here you can address because [background noise] in a way Ragamala is very unique and that many of the staff are also dancers and you are one of those [chuckles] that are working behind the scenes behind dancing. So, how-how has that affected you, how has that made you look at you know this whole forum and also I guess you have to look at the business end...

AR: Absolutely.

DR: As well?

AR: Absolutely. We [pause] we have been playing these many roles for many years now and it did come out of a necessity and some administrative and financial challenges that we had many-many years ago. And while our budget is still very small compared to the work that we are doing I would say that everyone who is serving in these dual roles would prefer to keep it that way and we have each learned so much about running business in general, running a non-profit, running an arts organization, running a small arts organization who has quite a wide reach. And so because of that we have learned skills in the various areas or departments we like to say and that has helped us understand the work that we are doing not just the artistic, the actual artistic product but how do you talk about the work? And so then when you talk about the work it gives you again insights into the artistic product. How do you teach and lecture and does it make sense what you are saying what your mission is, what your aesthetic is? Are you really reaching people or do you live in your own bubble? And you learn to be very flexible because you want the work to be out there and you want it to happen so you find ways to [pause] not just

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package but you find ways to talk about your work so people in various places understand it and the main thing is that while you were out selling your work you are the work so you're completely invested in it. So you are the salesperson and the product at the same time and it...while it definitely is challenging from a time perspective and also from the perspective of having too many things happening at one time as I said before. I am a person who really likes to focus and anything I do I will spend quite a lot of time on it if I am allowed to.

DR: [Chuckles]

AR: So, it definitely gets challenging to handle everything but it works...it has worked very well and I think that we have given our dancers the experience to move forward if they need to, if they decide to stop dancing, in an administrative capacity but also the possibility of feeling completely invested in the work.

DR: You know it how to talk about the work, ok how has this affected you know you're-you're involvement and your presentation to the community and to the audiences?

AR: [Pause] What I find fascinating and most important do not just talk about but to then make sure that it is evident in the work...is how ancient forms and practices are relevant today, how our-our art form of Bharatanatyam is not a museum piece. It is not a relic that shows history and antiquity but rather a dynamic living, breathing entity that [pause] can be the language [background noise] that we can choose to create them. And so when one sees it like that you see a world open up in terms of the poetry you choose, the themes that you choose and it's very interesting to see that so much of literature when we choose to use it...it doesn't mean that you have to use modern themes, it just means that you have to dig deep into the metaphor and the richness of ancient worlds and it will all make sense to us today and that's what I find utterly fascinating and I feel that if you can communicate that to people today then they stop asking the question of why Bharatanatyam or I need to understand every hand gesture because when they feel that it is something that is relevant to our world the themes or the themes that anybody can access then the next step is just to feel the work. To try not to over-intellectualize but to really just sit back and be part of the environment, of the music and the dance and everything that is spontaneously happening before you. And that's what I feel is the most important and the most vital of what we are doing with Ragamala.

DR: Okay, I wanna...I am really curious here at what point in your development as the dancer did this become evident or this become a focus, is this part of the teaching, is it part of your interaction with your mother and Valli. What...when did it change for you?

AR: That's a good question. I don't think it's a change. I think it's a-a natural evolution of all of those things and to go back...I'm going to answer your question but to go back to something you asked me earlier, what are my...what are our strengths and weaknesses

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that balance [clapping sound] each other out and it's very interesting. My mother [clicking tongue] is like an explorer. She's so adventurous about moving forward and she wants to try, sometimes crazy things and I have always since I was a young child, since I was a teenager have been so fascinated by the past, the richness of our art form, the beauty of it, the rhythm and it's not past to think about rhythmic complexity, poetry, the fascination with the art form as I saw it, as I saw my teacher performing it and teaching it. [Clicking tongue] So, it's not, while I love this art form, it's not that every time I go to India every single dancer fascinates me. My teacher's expression, her understanding of the art form and her ability to make it contemporary poetry and make it completely personal, fascinated me, was life-changing for me and so I would always act like an editor for my mother even at a young age...

DR: [Chuckles]

AR: [Background noise] Saying what if we looked back, what if we...so that idea was [background noise] always there with me. I think I didn't quite know how to meld the worlds until I got older and created more work and starting thinking about it more and talking about it. So I am seeing now in the last few years that those worlds don't have to be separated, that there is room to join them and have there be a flow between them and that is what I have learned from everything. So, a few years ago I told my mother yes there are many other forms that we could work with but let's go back into the Indian forms because there is-there are these contemporary messages and these connection points that we can make and she thought I was being old-fashioned and historical but we found a way to do it. And so now even though our next project is with a Jazz composer, he is an Indian American Jazz artist that is looking into Carnatic music to create new work. So how do us as Indian-American artists in this country bring our voices to the stage, how are we inspired by the writings of an eighth century Indian poet. So that's the answer. Did I answer your question?

DR: Yeah, yeah.

AR: Ok, good.

DR: You know [background noise] it's totally fascinating...

AR: Hm...

DR: [Pause] Taking the old and seeing how it relates and it is isn't it?

AR: It is.

DR: Yeah.

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AR: It is. I feel that often times in this country it's not a bad thing but this country was built on the idea of starting over, of rejecting the past and so it became a trend in the artistic world also to reject the past. What happens when you do that? You reject training, you reject technique, relationships with teachers, lineage, [pause] history, all of those things. Each of those elements have so much to offer us and they make us who we are and carrying all of those things teaches you to be a certain type of artist and then allows you to freely express because nobody isn't influenced by what's happening around them. These just become...all of these things become more information. So, that's the way that I see it and I think that my training with my teacher was-is very-very important and I-I continue to train with her very-very actively. She is a soloist, she creates her own work but when she teaches she talks about the work. She does...and when I was younger obviously I was learning technique and that technique became ingrained. So then your body does the technique but how do you make that technique your own and that freedom is what makes you an artist. The ability to meet the music and internalize the theme or the poetry or that music or that space or the feeling or the spirituality of that moment, that is a present quality, that's contemporary.

DR: So what's your teacher's reaction to your work here?

AR: So in her eyes and it's true, we continued on this parallel path, so I perform in India, I do solo evenings of her choreography and I am [clicking tongue] her senior most student. I am carrying her lineage forward. She knows about the work, she's seen some videos, she's seen "Sacred Earth" and she's seen some other things and she has attended one performance several years ago and she thinks that it's all very tastefully done. It has a high aesthetic quality. She understands that we have a need and a curiosity here in this country to meet other forms and not only perform solo evenings. She feels that there would not be an audience for that if you did that for twenty years here in this country. There is a tradition of that in India. So I think that...and she is very proud of the work we are doing but...and so we definitely tell her about the work but we don't spend a lot of time talking about it or having her in rehearsals to see the work. There is [background sirens] probably some fear [chuckles] and...

DR: On whose part?

AR: On my part.

DR: Ok.

AR: My mother is a little more fearless but still she also feels a little bit but... So, wanting to be open and honest but not wanting the focus to be about us or what we are doing. When we are with her we really want to spend time learning what she has to say and what she has to give and the level of her art is incredible. So when you are in front of a genius like

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that it's hard-it's hard to feel that the time is right and the place is right to talk about your own work.

DR: Hm...You are there for a different reason, you know.

AR: But...and the relationship in India [background noise] with one's teacher is very different than possible here when you are...you've known someone since you were a young child and you've idolized them, they become your-your God and so in this country it may be easier to have a very open dialogue with the mentor. But even while she is a wonderful person you think of yourself in a very different place. You don't...once I go to India I don't think of myself as a choreographer or anyone who has reached-achieved any sort of success. You go right back into becoming a student. And I think that's in some ways as wonderful because it keeps everything balanced and you learn once again how small you are in the greatness of the form, her greatness, the history that you are part of and that's a reality check that's worth quite a bit.

DR: Well, it sounds like for you this is your root which you prop up when you do things here and...

AR: Yes it is.

DR: And just from your statements about you know you are so into the past and what that's about and what is there that it seems you've made this...it's the energy that is going both ways back and forth.

AR: Yes, it feels like that. What it feels like is that you have these different markers where you are creating new work [pause]. I always tell my mother it is easy to have someone...people can either say what you do is repetitive or it's an aesthetic and you define the world between-between those two things. But I feel that for myself and for us and our work we have certain markers that we always check in with. So what would our teacher say if she saw this right now and then you-you look through the lens of audiences here, you look through the lens of resonance with one's core artistic principles and then how does it feel as a performer? Do you feel when you've creating work do you want to dance in that work or do you just want to sit back and how does that feel? So there are all of these different places that you can check into and so while the work is different I feel that it is important to have consistency in a few of those things. So then you have...it gives you a little bit of an outline for your aesthetic as you are moving forward.

DR: [Background noise] Well I think it sounds like it's back to where things where you actually have to question yourself as an artist to [background noise] give you the ... sometimes it-it gets back to originally what you were saying with your mother that balance because sometimes you can't see it.

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AR: That's right-that's right and I think you have to constantly question yourself I think that it helps to have other people question you and it helps to know what [pause] where...how far you are willing to push yourself. [Pause] But often times people say you have to leave your comfort zone but that is different for everybody. You can push yourself artistically but I think that idea of resonance is very important. Does it still resonate with you as a person and as an artist? Would...do you want to put your name on this? It's very scary to put your work out there and put your name on something and you have to believe in it two hundred percent. So what does that say about who you are as a person, that work, if someone sees that work, one work, what does it say about you as a person? Does it get what you are talking about? What I was talking about earlier? That's the goal.

DR: So is it, okay it's...I just started saying that you have to do this for each piece and it's ever continual question, challenge, creativity you know there's the excitement, there's all of the things that we have been talking about. So you-you are constantly challenging yourself it looks like.

AR: Yes, yes and Ragamala used to do two productions a year and I think it is either my contribution or my fault that we now do one every fifteen months. Sometimes thirteen months but it is not...that was my original idea saying well I think we should spend more time on the productions we have so we can accomplish some of these things but then as the projects became more complex as we talked about, it took more time, it took more funding. The preparation time to get everything organized took a lot longer. So then that natural time between productions and then you involve the touring and that schedule and you are always touring with the work that you did before and so that doesn't often [background noise] lend itself to a very easy premier schedule at home. So we've-we've tried to give ourselves enough time to create these works with that idea of really being able to challenge ourselves for each one. But then if you look at the arc of the work does it show an aesthetic? So I talked about one work so seeing the last three or four works and I would say in the last few years that arc has become clear for us. So it's a very exciting time because so many people presenters and press and audiences, they are really responding to the work and it feels like that can't be the only factor [background sirens] but it's one of the factors because again we don't live in our own bubble. So it feels that we are making the right decisions as we move forward. Thus...

DR: So then as you've done you know spent more time with each production and then you're also now touring so how have the audiences changed throughout?

AR: The audiences have changed in that they have [clicking tongue] so here in Minnesota we have been developing our audience for quite some time and as we used to perform exclusively in the Indian community, we came out of the Indian community and our audiences has...our audience has gotten bigger and it's not just an audience that's a dance audience or an Indian audience, it's become a little bit of-of all of those things. So,

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there's a dance audience, because now we're dedicated to having live music for every production, there's a music audience. There are audiences who are Indian although I wish there was more than Indian audience for our work. I feel that the Indian audiences is some of them have heard of us, many of us...many of them know us...maybe they feel that our work is too contemporary. But I think if they saw it they would see how it could resonate with them as Indians and Indians in the diaspora or possibly it's just not part of their [pause]...a part of their practice of going outside of the spaces they are comfortable enough in buying tickets and attending performances, could be any of those. And then there are people who love Indian culture, there are people who are very interested in these high-bred themes. So, all of a sudden you see the-the audience expand. There are so many different reasons. There are people who are looking for [background sirens] some sort of a transcendent experience. People are looking for a way to not be intellectually tied but emotionally more free and there are people who know our work and follow the trajectory and who really would like to see. They were curious for what's happening next, a loyal base. So, I feel that there are many different worlds that the audience comes from. As we are traveling more we have definitely been to many-many [background noise] small towns and we have had people come for many reasons to see the work. People who are curious or maybe because that is the artistic event that is happening and the response has been amazing, very-very interested, curious, excited, all of these things and then now as we travel to these more known venues they have a dedicated dance audience that comes to anything that they have and all of a sudden we are in venues with two thousand people and again there are many reasons why people come. But every time we travel we always have an educational or audience engagement component. It's very important for us not being from a mainstream or western form for us to be able to explain not just the form but our aesthetic of the form and our aesthetic for the work that we create. So, we almost always do audience engagement activities at various levels. So the audience has a way to feel comfortable or feel an entry point.

DR: So that's one of the things that... Was there...was that there in the beginning, where you would try to communicate with the audience what you were doing?

AR: So one of the reasons why we have a large and dedicated audience here in the Twin Cities and why we have the relationship we do with funders and press is because of that educational component and it was the groundwork that my mother was doing for all of us. She spent so much time teaching and meeting people and we both performed anywhere and everywhere they would have us. So, people would become familiar with the form. So that's a very important component.

DR: Do-do you teach as well?

AR: Oh yes, very much so. I have taught-I have taught since I was twelve years old.

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DR: [Chuckles]

DR: So then how has that affected this whole process?

AR: Teaching is very interesting. It can be extremely rewarding. You can learn quite a bit from teaching. It can also be very frustrating. We have had over the last how many every years, twenty to thirty years many dedicated and talented students and we have had many people whose parents want them to come and learn something of the culture [clicking of tongue] and I am a very strict teacher. I feel that I studied in a very strict environment, I learned very seriously and I'm here to pass along that knowledge and I have had...I've learnt my own lessons along the way and I am a perfectionist that's what I do. So, that's how I teach. And I have students who studied with me from when they were six until they left and got married in their twenties and they still keep in touch with me and visit and so I have some very strong relationships with my students and that's a wonderful feeling to feel that. I think they were quite frightened of me because I was very strict but they looked-they were able to look beyond that and see that it was for a reason and that it did in the end really help them grow as artists. And [clicking tongue] [whispering]. So, in the last few years I have taught less, I teach some private students who are very talented. I no longer teach the group classes. A lot of it is my own schedule, just trying to balance all of these things. Our dancers do a wonderful job teaching. I think it would be very...I would love to come back and teach more but I just haven't been able to figure it out yet. But the other thing I'm realizing is I am not sure if it is because I am getting older or if it's because...I think it's both. If it's because I have children now myself that I am feeling much kinder...

DR: [Chuckles]

AR: To students, I am more understanding when I teach I can see the difference between serious students and students who are here for an experience and my expectations are different whereas before I just had a high bar for everybody. I created some beautiful students...

DR; [Chuckles]

AR: But it would drive me mad. So having and then I also understand that Indians diaspora want a way, they need a way to connect with the culture and they are going to do twenty activities. While I don't believe it's the best way...they are going to it's the reality of it. So what can we give them without demanding their entire week. It's not going to happen. So I'm becoming more realistic about those things. So I feel that it is...I just cannot-I cannot have the tension in every point of my life. So, I am learning, I am trying to balance.

DR: Becomes a survival mechanism...



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AR: Right.

DR: Yeah.

AR: Pretty much.

DR: Is there anything you want to add that we haven't touched upon?

AR: [Pause] Well I think I just want to say that [pause] for me and from my experience my relationships with my family and with our dancers and everybody at Ragamala has been such an important part in creating the type of work that we do and moving it forward. The dance form itself is traditionally a solo form. So, so much of my practice and my study is done as a soloist and there is great joy in doing that. There's great freedom, can also be lonely. As a child working with my mother was wonderful but it's also lonely. You don't go to classes with everybody, you work on something that everybody else is outside doing something and you are inside the studio working hard. You feel that it is worth it. But it sets you apart. And so the fact that I work with my mother and my sister, we all share this passion... [Pause] Living an artist's life can be very lonely. And there is a community that we have created here where everyone is family and friends and we all believe in the same thing. I know it sounds very idealistic and it's not perfect by any means but it gives you that support system that you need to jump into this work and follow it and pursue your vision relentlessly. I feel very fortunate for that.

DR: Thanks so much.

AR: Great. Thank you.

DR: Thanks.

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