

INDIA ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Arts 2 – Ragamala Dance Company

Cliff Sloane

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.*

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 three 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.

- - -

Cliff Sloane

711 W Lake Street, Suite 309, Minneapolis, MN 55408
612-824-1968

The Interview

Cliff Sloane

Narrator

Dan Rein

Interviewer

March 14, 2014

CS: Talk about our famous McKnight winner...

DR: Yes.

CS: Right?

DR: Sure.

CS: Yeah. And she thanked me about...She especially thanked me in sort of kind of a bizarre way. I didn't trust him, he had long hair but he offered me a job.

DR: [Laughter] Funny, funny. Yeah she mentioned you in the interview I did with her. So...

CS: Did she mention the resume story?

DR: Um...No, she didn't.

CS: Ok, the resume story is my favorite Ranees story. (Let me just close a couple of things that might tax the bandwidth.) Ok, you will certainly enjoy the resume story. It was about three years after I first saw her again and around the time when I first introducing her to arts grant writing and she was going to try it on her own. She was going to write her first arts grant by herself and she said, she called me and said, "Cliff, what do I do? They want me to have a resume. I have never done a resume." I said, "Ranee, you make a list of everything you did, put it in a reverse order of when you did it and you group them and print out that list. She said, "Can I call you when I'm done." "Yeah, sure." Few days later she says, "Cliff I've done my resume." [Inaudible dialogue] Yeah, ok, ok. I'm going to read it to you. I first started studying the art of Bharatanatyam growing up as a child in the great city of Madras. [Inaudible dialogue] [Laughter] [Background noise]. There's typical ornate prose, kind of narrative about her life. And I said, "Ranee, Ranee!" It's terrible isn't it? [Crying sound] I said, "It's not terrible, it's beautiful, it's just not a resume. A resume doesn't have any sentences, no verbs, no sentences, just a list of

accomplishments and jobs.” And so I went through it with her, I went through her paragraphs, step by step, how to take a beautiful ornate prose sentence and turn it into an item on the resume. And when she came to me about a week or so later with the real resume and I said, “Yes this is how-this is how you do it.” And she had other people helping her too. Particularly I think Godan helped her with her resume. Godan was a huge help and I hope that he figures enormously in- in the stories about the creation of Ragamala.

DR: Yeah, yeah we did a long interview with Godan. So...

[Inaudible sound]

DR: So how did - how did you first get involved with Ragamala?

CS: Well Ranee...I knew that there was this woman named Ranee Ramaswamy who did Bharatanatyam. The first gig I got for her, the one which she said he had long hair and he wants me to do this. I don't know how I got her number. I don't quite remember I think it may even come from Miriam but I am not quite sure. And I got a call from AFS Club in Montevideo, Minnesota or Marshall. Was it Montevideo or Marshall? I don't remember, one of those. And they wanted some entertainment for their International festival and I said I had a few groups that I had made contact with that I was willing to try to help promote and I thought given that it's kids, given that it's AFS, I thought Ranee would be perfect for AFS. She'd be just foreign enough but people will be thrilled and not too foreign that people would run away. So I suggested it to the AFS people. They said yeah it sounds great. So I called Ranee and I said and I asked her if she wanted to do it. Nah...She wasn't sure-she wasn't sure. She called around spying around me to find out if she should trust me and then agreed to do it. She and Aparna, little six year old Aparna, oh shit this was 1982 went out to, I think it was Marshall, went out to Marshall, to do the AFS thing and it was a monster hit. It was a huge hit and that's what got her on the whole art step. What got her on to the Ragamala concept was David Whetstone. He is the one who had that seriously the artistic vision of using the different forms of expression into this unitary concept. And he is the one who got that going he's the one who really pointed her in that direction. I basically just supported once she saw that was the direction she too wanted to go on.

DR: So-so in what ways did you support her?

CS: Well, I put her in my catalogues for doing gigs in schools. I recommended her when I thought that she'd be good. Got a couple of those festival type gigs with dance that were at those festivals. Can't remember how many it's been [inaudible]. And then when-when she and David decided that they wanted to do the big Ragamala thing she asked me to write the notes. So, I did this major research project where I read [inaudible] wrote this major book on this, interviewed Brian Silver, interviewed quite a few other people and

then compiled this information. I even read Ananda Coomaraswamy [inaudible]. So I went scouting around holding the information together and wrote something that was halfway between program notes and a scholarly statement about that unitary vision concept or Ragamala thing. And between the three of them, Bill [inaudible], David Whetstone and Raneer, they chose the poems and they drew from different sources. So when I wrote the notes. I cited which source each poem came from. So I was the intellectual foundation for all, they were the artistic vision and I tried to knit it together [inaudible].

CS: I also came up with a title which was a variation of something that he was [inaudible] said about what Ragamala was, a poetry - a poetry... [Inaudible]. What was the subtitle damn I can't even...I was the one who came up with that subtitle and was a paraphrase of something that I am very sure it was [inaudible] who came up with, "Something in motion is poetry [inaudible],-"A painting in motion is a poetry in dance music". I think that's the subtitle we put.

DR: So do you remember what year this was?

CS: I believe, no, I can't say exactly, the program notes should be easy to find [inaudible]

DR: Ok.

DR: Somewhere around there is when I think they started Ragamala, in 1992.

CS: They called it Ragamala after the concert of Ragamala. And the concert of Ragamala gave the organization its mission of once again I will say it again [inaudible]. It may not come up again in the way that she describes it but it is certainly their artistic basis of the unitary vision with different artistic forms enjoined together for a unitary statement. That is what I thought was utterly brilliant about the direction that Raneer took, was that she was no longer just a dancer but that she was going to combine as many art forms as she could in this single vision and the Ragamala concert at Southern Theatre was the first of this. I think we really owe it to David Whetstone for kindling that artistic awakening for Raneer. He really was primarily responsible for that occurring.

DR: So you-were you still with Compass at that time?

CS: No, no I don't believe so because I would've put Compass' logo on the program. If I was still, I would have pitched it to Molly & Jen and said let's-let's get behind this. Let's be a full sponsor. So I must not have been because I don't recall even thinking about that. So I was just an independent at the time.

DR: Ok. So...and...

CS: But I certainly would have pitched a co-sponsorship had I been with Compass and it would have helped them along even more.

DR: So and you know that was...so this was the first thing you did with them...how did the relationship continue to grow?

CS: Ranee went off on her own. I was always there to help them out. But she just ran with it and I was very happy. I always thought of myself as someone who would make connections for other people but then you know, I didn't mean to be prominent in it so when she ran off on her own with this stuff I just found it delightful.

DR: Sure.

DR: So-so do you remember how long were you involved with Ragamala at that time Cliff?

CS: She said we did some other programs that I didn't even know about roughly the time- just before the time I moved back to Seattle. But I knew about and went to some and all the other programs beforehand. It wasn't until about let's say early (19)95 that she started to come up with so many projects that I was no longer even aware of that.

DR: So when you were involved you know what kind of audiences you know like for instance the Ragamala thing and the thing you mentioned with the poetry. What kind of audiences were coming?

CS: She was getting a lot of...what's the name of that dance union that she's a member of?

DR: It was the dance alliance or something like that.

CS: Yeah, the one that Louise Robinson was in charge of for quite a while?

DR: Right.

CS: The one that... [inaudible]... one of the founders of it. Minnesota dance alliance I can't any better recall to say about it. She tied in heavily to their promo stuff. I helped write some press releases but once she and Louise got tied they had a much better infrastructure for doing that thing. And so I thought she was in very-very good hands to connect with MDA. I also helped her to write applications for the Minnesota State Arts Board. I also wrote letters of recommendation which she required for the National Endowment for the Arts. By this time she had a total grasp of how to go about doing grant writing and all I could do was add some words. My involvement was basically just as a knowledgeable person in the Arts admin. world who could add my voice to her recommendations.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: So her audience wasn't primarily Indian then?

CS: It was about fifty-fifty at the Ragamala concert, maybe even fewer Indians. And percentage of Indians started to go down. Never dropped too low, she always had Indian but as she put it and some of her closer friends put it, Raneer had developed through arts. So the people who were coming weren't there just to watch their little girls do their *Arangetram* but they were people who were touched by the artistic aspirations. And so she got an artistic audience from among the Indians. So the difference between the Indians and the white people became very-very small because they came for the same artistic reasons. That's roughly how I'll describe the transitions of the audience, that she wasn't representing a Tamil community or the children, the parents of the Indian children who were studying at her school anything like that. So it became people who respected Raneer's artistic goals...

DR: Yeah, yeah.

CS: And that transition occurred from 'Ragamala' through to I would say it was really nailed down by the time she did 'Visions of Mary'.

DR: So, do you remember when that was?

CS: That was (19)95-96.

DR: Ok.

DR: With the Minnesota Dance Alliance she was already grasping the artistic side of things...

CS: Yeah.

DR: Moving into that direction.

CS: She was embraced by them and mentored by them. Her greatest mentoring in the arts administration field probably came from Minnesota Dance alliance. Oh and the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Neil and Louise helped her hugely with that. They just really embraced her and helped-really helped to cultivate her status as a skilled administrator.

DR: Ok.

DR: So you were only involved for a short period of time then? And that...

CS: I was involved with Raneer as an individual artist quite a lot both before and after that but Ragamala as a production company that was pretty light pretty minimal because-because of the massive support she was getting from other art administrators. Then even after all

that I got her a residency through young audiences in [ringing noise] (19)95 and she did [background ringing noise] fabulously well at that residency.

DR: What were the other things that you were involved with Raneer outside of Ragamala then?

CS: That artistic residency I recommended. She did a couple of other art school residencies. Some of them came from not me and some of them came from me. They were like weeklong art residencies where she had kids learning mostly Bharatanatyam. Can't remember exactly how many I think it was two or three over the course of about four years. [Pause] Yeah most likely but it was Individual artist residencies program.

DR: Ok, can you think of anything else you want to add Cliff about your interaction with Raneer and Ragamala that I haven't you know asked you about?

CS: Yeah, just the one thing Raneer and Rita came with the exact same level of skill and with the exact same intentions of what they wanted to have happen and to me the most fascinating thing was to see their differentiation and the different trajectories that each took. All the rest of the stuff is all very interesting but to see two people who started out at the same point differentiating in such dramatic ways I thought it was probably one of the most fascinating things I ever saw. Working with artists in this differentiation where they really clarified who their audience was and what their artistic goals were and pursuing it. In both cases such a huge amount of integrity and intelligence. So that to me is the most fascinating part of the story.

DR: So immediately they each had a clear vision it sounds like.

CS: No, no they started exactly the same point. It took about...it was about two or three years' worth of each of them going for grants and doing productions two or three years of these grant- production thing before they started to really figure out what they wanted for themselves. After the first two- three years it was Raneer-Rita, Rita-Raneer, Stones and beetles. They were always seen together and Compass saw the two of them together and all the art administrators that I was talking to promoting their work saw them together. And over the years they really started to get differentiated. By the time I left Compass that differentiation started to be noticeable by just about everybody in the arts world. And by the time the Ragamala production happened it was dramatic and clear.

DR: So you saw the whole process?

CS: Yes from the beginning.

DR: Ok.

CS: That's what I am saying it was brilliant. I saw it happen, I saw-I saw that exact same point, I saw them slowly pull away from each other, I saw them to articulate what they

wanted from all of this activity and I saw the ways they sought mentorship, comfort, support and alliances outside of the typical Indian community things and the different ways that they did that.

DR: So yeah amazing-amazing to see that all develop.

CS: Yeah. Of all of those things with the Indian community that has to be the most brilliant because the depth of those two totally dissimilar artistic visions are still comparable in their integrity and intelligence and I found it really exhilarating to see how they could take such different paths after starting at the same point and still end up to a great thinking about who they were and what they want to be.

DR: Well I think it says something to the-the community is able to embrace both.

CS: Yeah, yeah.

DR: Well Rita kept with the parent and their kids. They wanted to see their kid's dance. She kept them in the fold; she stayed Bengali all the way through. This is the differentiation and she retained a great artist of the Bengali community.

DR: Do you remember where we left off?

CS: Yes, the divergence between Rita's thing and Ranee's thing. That they started out at the exact same level and they started to differentiate from one another.

DR: Right and you were saying how Rita went off and was teaching more the young kids.

CS: She involved a lot of kids. That was the point. In fact, she brought in the big stars but she never stopped using the little... or taking lessons... her and her daughters.

DR: Ok and then Ranee which direction did she take then?

CS: More professionalism, more to a professional company that was [inaudible] definitely more on... [Inaudible] how do I say this, more professional, a professional dance company and less a community dance company that used professions.

DR: Ok.

DR: So that was the big difference between the two of them then?

CS: As far as I can see when they started to [inaudible] split. That's exactly what I saw. How they would describe it I can't tell you but that's what I saw back in the mid-90s.

DR: Ok.

DR: When Ragamala was beginning...

CS: That was where we left off and that was all I wanted to say but...just you know airing my few cents worth they went in different directions, both directions very valid and they both sort of found their artistic path.
