

INDIA ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Arts 2 – Ragamala Dance Company

Ranee Ramaswamy

Narrator

Dan Rein

Interviewer



**MINNESOTA HISTORICAL
& CULTURAL GRANTS**

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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.

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Ranee Ramaswamy

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The Interview

Ranee Ramaswamy

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July 24, 2013

DR: OK, I am with Ranee Ramaswamy and Ranee, (uh) you're the artistic director

RR: Yeah.

DR: Of Ragamala Dance.

RR: Yes.

DR: Maybe we should begin (eh) what exactly is Ragamala Dance?

RR: Well, I have to first say that now we are co-artistic directors. I am co-artistic director with Aparna Ramaswamy. I am the founder but she is...we are co-artistic directors now. Well, Ragamala dance (um) is a company but the Dancers are trained in the classical style of Bharatanatyam which comes from the south-eastern part of India. The Dance form is very-very rich and has...it's almost like an encyclopedia. It has so much [clearing throat] but using this form we create work that is relevant, work that makes us that we can make a statement to that (um)that even though it echoes the past it still its material that is very relevant to the present. So, we use (um) poetry, mythology, (um) philosophy and stories from Indian from the Hindu (uh) traditions but we present it to the stage in (um) the-the you know in the modern day stage with (um) with our interpretation of it (um) not changing the stories but the way with the staging and with (uh) choreography and visuals we (it) we bring (um) a...visual art forms and everything is (um) very well (uh) crafted and-and combined to bring this (uh) ancient (um) but yet relevant (um) material to today's world.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: So how did you then first become interested in Dance?

RR: Well, I grew up in India, Southern India, Madras or now they call it Chennai and that's the seat of Bharatanatyam. Everybody studies Bharatanatyam. For me I...my cousin who

lived in Kerala was... my grandmother was very interested in Dance so, there was small village ... you know, teachers are accessible...it's easy. So, she had my cousin learn Dance and every summer when I went to visit them I saw this happening and I really-really wanted it. And it's different in a bigger city because somebody has to take you to this-these classes and my parents were not at that time very, you know...they didn't have the time. My Dad is a scientist , Mom's homemaker, grew up in a joint family, it was not possible but because of my desire I (uh)-I pushed them to give me classes and we found that there was a-a teacher teaching in my brother's school, very close to him... to my home. So my brother, who is five years younger, was my chaperone. So I would come back from school and then run to these dance classes. Very you know unknown dance teacher in the corner...the street corner who taught young kids but I...that actually was something that I was very...I found myself being drawn to it more and more so she actually started to come to our house to my house and teach me. So that's how I started to learn Bharatanatyam.

DR: So how old were you?

RR: I started at when I was seven and I finished... seven or eight...I think between seven and eight and then at seventeen I stopped.

DR: Because?

RR: Because that was the tradition in those days. Parents wanted me to just get married and nobody in the Brahmin community wanted their children to dance so that was the end of it at that time until now.

DR: So then...

RR: [Clearing throat]

DR: What-what...

RR: [Clearing throat]

DR: Happened in between?

RR: Well, at seventeen, I-I had a...(uh) my marriage was arranged and at twenty I got married at... then I moved to Calcutta, you know, a small suburb in Calcutta called Chandan Nagar and... so there was no...I mean I never in my life thought I would continue dancing again because I think people were quite happy with what they did, you know, they learnt music, they learnt dance, music you can always sing if you are by yourself, dance you can't do it. So even though the desire was there-there was no... absolute no possibility that it would...if I lived in India that I could have ever danced. So I was content with what happened. I had Aparna and came to the United States when she was

three and that's when it all started again because the Indian... I was talking to people at the Indian community who...(wi) I had told them that I had studied dance and so, said there was nobody here at that time to do Bharatanatyam, so they asked me if I would perform at a ...Coffman...in the Coffman Union for a Diwali function. So I had no music and no costume, you know, nobody brings all this if you had stopped dancing long time ago. So there was one Mr. Reddy who... (um) Kasturi & Dr. Reddy who had classical music. So they gave me M. L.Vasanthakumari's (uh) tape of (uh) Allarippu which is a pieces, a very beginning piece and Kamala Laxman's Natanam Aadinar which is a song about (uh) Shiva. Since it was in Tamil, I, you know, bought a \$25 (uh) tape recorder and practiced it in the apartment. I actually choreographed it and I found I loved it and I danced it and people really enjoyed it and they asked me to teach the kids in the Indian community. But really to tell you the truth I didn't remember any of the vocabulary since I had...it's been so long and then also when you are learning when you are young you don't really collect material. Your teacher teaches you something and you walk away from it and so I started to go back to India which was...you know in 1980 I went back for four months. From then I went back to India for four months for like fifteen years to (st) to get more material to come here and teach. So that was the...my beginning in Minnesota

DR: Hm... Hm...

RR: Bharatanatyam

DR: Maybe you can explain because...well there is many dance forms in India. Now there's Kathak...

RR: Yeah.

DR: There's Bharatanatyam. And I know there's a bunch of others as well

RR: Yeah.

DR: So... why here in Minnesota?

RR: Why I came here?

DR: Yeah.

RR: Well because (um) my, you know (um), my ex-husband's friend lived here in Minnesota. So we had, you know, when you come from another culture another country you need someone. So, we came to Minnesota because, we, when he had a green my... Aparna's dad had a green card. You know, he... not when we... he was in the process of getting a green card and after we got married about three years later the option of getting it happened. So, he had a friend here so we decided that we would come to Minnesota.

DR: Okay... okay...

DR: How long has Ragamala been around?

RR: I (st)... Ragamala was founded in 1992 so it's twenty-one years. So, at the beginning there was no Ragamala, we, I was just (uh) I was dancing. I was teaching Aparna and a few kids in the Hindu Mandir. And (uh) Aparna and I were performing, even though she was that you know, then when, when she turned eight, we met Alarmel Valli, who came to Minneapolis. And we took her classes and you know, we became her students and we'd be learning from her. That actually made me a lot more serious about dance because you know Valli is an amazing teacher to learn from her. For the first time in my life, I knew I was doing the correct thing. Cuz before that, there was always a fear of if I was doing things correct or not, you know and once I, once we started to study with her, we knew that we had the best teacher in the world. And you can't just take that-not take that seriously. And Aparna was very much into this and so was I. So (um) we both started to perform the pieces that we learned with Valli in India. We would... we'll go for four months, study with her, come back here and perform with the Minnesota Dance Alliance and so on. And then in (um) 19... so once I had that confidence that I was getting better and better, I wanted it to-I wanted to apply for grants and I worked with the (um) Minnesota Dance Alliance, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council and wrote small grants and I got them. I got a national endowment for the Arts Apprenticeship Program. So I could go to India and study. So (um) it's... but... and-and gradually as you perform you-you-you are more (um) with the Minnesota Dance Alliance I got more involved with (um) you know, Suzanna-Suzanne-Suzanne- Suzanna De Palma, Cassandra Shore and Joe Kwala.

[Airplane noise in the background]

RR: You know, and so you are in... you're also more involved in other art forms and we-were trying to experiment and trying to see how can (uh) Flamenco and Bharatanatyam come together, so, you know, all this makes you more creative in a way that (mmm...), you... we... still... I've always kept the (tr)-the vocabulary untouched. But it, you reach out a little bit more from-from where you are to a little out. And then that's when I heard (uh) Robert Bly's poem, "Mirabai Versions" I (um) actually Jocelyn, a friend of mine I don't know if you know her...

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: Was a student of mine (um)... had this book (um) "Mirabai Versions" by Robert Bly and I was very-very moved by the poems and wanted to dance to it. I didn't know that he was... who he was. I had never heard about Robert Bly at that time and (um) Cliff Sloan, do you know Cliff Sloan?

DR: Yes.

RR: So I asked him and he said you should call him and ask him if he... I said, "Would you read when I-if I dance. And he said you should call him and ask. So I called him and he said sure. And that's how (um) I (um)... Aparna and I did a piece about Mira (uh)... (uh) Mirabai's poem as well as (um) (um) Rumi and (uh) that actually people who came to see Robert Bly saw us. And (uh) that led to the understanding that you know English poetry actually got people's attention. They understood what I was doing than just classical Indian music.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: Not that there's anything wrong with that, but if you are performing in the United States, I think it's good to be a little accessible.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: So the (uh) David Whetstone who was (um) the musician with Robert Bly and I actually started the company together. (Um) the piece was called Raga... the company was called Ragamala because the first piece that we did was Ragamala, a painting in motion. So that in 19 (um) 92, we incorporated the company as Ragamala. (Uh) (uh) a (pai) (uh) Ragamala (da), it was called Ragamala Music and Dance Theatre and the idea was to make this art form accessible to all audiences. With that in mind we started Ragamala.

DR: So the-the Robert Bly (uh) Mirabai collaboration was then 92?

RR: That was in 91.

DR: OK.

RR: So, at that time that was before we formed Ragamala.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: So that was the first time that I met David Marcus and Robert Bly. So that was in...because I never thought that any music other than South Indian would fit our dance but then I was blown away by the emotion because it's not just about the music it's about the-the content, the material and the-and the emotion that was so filled in that (um) performance.

DR: So you began right away with collaboration?

RR: Yes, yes.

DR: Then it wasn't just straight classical dance?

RR: No, we began with mean...so I was doing Indian classical dance, then we had Robert Bly...yeah it is kind of because we used tabla, used sitar which is not ever used in Bharatanatyam even at least now people are trying to do things but ...

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: I did that such a long time ago

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: With Robert Bly's reading and then I danced to the ...because I was kind of nervous just doing it to that and I had Usha sing the songs in Hindi so that there would still be a little (um) a component of classical dance and music together.

DR: Hm...Hm... (Pause)

DR: So...and throughout the years you have continued to explore collaborations? So, it just started out with this in mind that you need to do this to make them more accessible and...?

RR: Well, you know, more accessible but also at (th)-that time if you think about what twenty-five, twenty-two years ago, even when I started twenty-five years ago it was hard to get audiences. You know, when I was dancing to the...when I first began it was only all Indian audiences I was dancing to, all these little festivals in the temple and so on. When the American audiences come, if you don't have a variety, it's not like that they can't...they don't have that much knowledge to enjoy Varnams of all kinds you know. I mean it-it-it just... I think the place where I am and where I began, this also made you think that way that you know you have to do this if you want to have your audience base bigger... those who, you know you have to take the art form to them. So not only was I collaborating...say if you have dance with...I mean we did a lot of...I did a lot of collaborations. It also brought that audience into ours and then they...a lot of them stayed. So it was kind of saying you know here's rice, but here's lemon rice and here's coconut rice and so you give them a little flavor and introduce the art form to them.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: Now, (um) I have heard somewhere along the way that you and Rita started a dance thing together.

RR: Before...

DR: Years before....

RR: Yes. (Um) I don't know what ... I think it-it-it stopped in 98 because we both were applying, you know we were applying...we were applying for work together but then we

had our own ideas and we had to...I... if I-If I applied then we couldn't apply in an organization to do two projects so we decided that this is good because then she can apply for hers and I can apply for mine.

[Background noise]

RR: So, we did for three-four years I think we had a organization together called Nrityajyoti and the two of us (uh) created work together.

DR: Hm..Hm...And was that mostly Indian audience at that time? Yes?

RR: Yes.

[Background traffic noise]

DR: OK. And-and so you found with Robert Bly thing that you know it brought in a different audience?

RR: Yeah it did. Definitely, I mean it was performed (um) in Studio 6A downtown. You know I have never been downtown before much and it brought audiences that would go in that...the...it was a... what do you call it?...dance (sea)what-what do-what do you call them I forgot...that their dance season you know.

DR: OK.

RR: So they had two different groups of dance...performances and I was in the-the bigger piece with (um) Ekon Komo you know these are big... performers and I didn't realize how what big names they are and I was in the same (uh) whatever that-that [sound of tongue clicking] God I can't remember what I am-what I am going to say. It's a (uh)...they had two different dance festivals. They didn't call it festivals but I don't remember.

DR: Hm...

RR: Anyway in that (um) the whole three weeks of six performers or something...

DR: OK.

RR: So I was one of them.

DR: Yeah, ok. Didn't- didn't the Walker do [sound of tongue clicking of tongue] it was like a choreographers thing...I don't...

RR: Yeah, no, I was never a part of that.

DR: You were never a part of that? OK.

RR: No, actually then the-the 90...In 98 the Walker did a piece that I again performed with the...all these poets, various poets that I...it was called "Where the hand goes the eyes follow"...that these are the pictures that I-I collaborated with (uh) (um) Mark Norberg, a photographer and I sent the poems that (uh) I sent my dance...these pictures to six poets all over the country and had them write (um) two poems for each...one poem each for each picture and I got twelve poems and I had the poets come here and-and read them on their own and then had them set (um) in music by Howard Levy on the piano and on... and harmonica and-and they had the-the mural in the back and I performed in one of the galleries. That was in 98. So, all these interesting things happened.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: And I think it gradually, definitely even these venues brought us more audiences.

DR: OK. Hm...Hm...

DR: So, with these collaborations you started seeing the audiences grow. How have they grown and how have they changed....

RR: It's a very....

DR: Over the years?

RR: It's a very interesting question because I think I...you have to (st) stretch out as much as you can then you have to go back just like that. After having done all these collaborations you know the collaborations all of them had...I was in those days excited about how much can Bharatanatyam be pushed. But then when Aparna finished college and joined me as a artistic director, co-artistic director we started to go back to the very you know, the-the-the meat of Indian culture and-and perform extremely traditional stuff but in a very innovative way. So we went instead of just doing an evening concert I... you know we did pieces like "Yatra" which is a whole...I mean that was quite...the whole... the lifetime you know, start birth to life. So more into philosophy than just mythology and the traditional format of Bharatanatyam so, she actually, Aparna actually influenced me more... that to come back, now that we have done this let's go to our roots. You know, let's go back and look at our own thing and having born, being born and raised in India and knowing the languages of India you know, I am a very good (um) you know I what do you call it, I am a-I am a wealth of (um) information. So with her interest and my knowledge, now our whole company has taken a different twist. But all the audiences are still with us and actually it has grown a lot more because they get the real, I think that the depth of Bharatanatyam, the feeling, the story, what it should be but in a different format.

DR: So you sort of modernized or made it more, well contemporary....

RR: Yeah.

DR: But yet you have kept...it sounds like you have gone to the hard core essence...

[Background noise]

RR: Yeah.

DR: Of what it is.

RR: Yes, and you know in some ways like we are not...Bharatanatyam is a solo dance form but you know, we have a group of dancers. Our dancers are all not Indian so in some ways we are very different from an authentic Bharatanatyam company. [Background noise] We always have to have something that would help the audience understand us so we weave the poetry and everything in the performances instead of just saying ok here's this and here's this. So, (um) without that (whe) when we did a piece called "Sthree" which is a story from (um) a south Indian epic but the whole story Zorawar wrote it in English, the script and the-the entire story even though it was totally classical music, totally classical dance. The storytelling was done through narration throughout the piece, in English and when we took it to India people loved it. They said we can understand the story for the first time because of all the language barriers that they have. Many people can understand English. So what's happening is that people really appreciate that and they appreciated it. We got like twenty-seven papers carried our reviews and they loved it. We were a little nervous but so, you know, it...I think... [background noise] not that we have (um), we try to give something to the audience so that they can... even you know [background rustling noise] because it's so heavy they have to have something to get in there and I think we-we have found the way to do it.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: What have been say some of your most successful collaborations?

RR: (Um) The collaboration with (Shu)... (um) Shubhendra Rao with Saskia Rao. That was that was actually Aparna's idea and that-that was phenomenally successful for us. We had....there we had no narration. There was only music and dance but the (um) you know there's I think a collaboration is successful if the musicians or if the collaborators are strong, you know, if they are very good with what they bring then it's-it happens very-very beautifully.

[Heavy breathing sound]

RR: (Um) Our collaboration with (um) Tokara Taiko (um) Art Lee from Japan, was extraordinarily successful and again there was a guy, you know he is not Japanese but lives in Japan and studied from masters and really works with his art form and he is very young, extremely interested in, fascinated by the rhythms of Indian dance [background traffic noise] but then you know, also interested in the idea of the philosophy and very

open to-to try new things and we really had a successful two collaborations now, one that toured all over the country and even in Japan and one we just created called “ 1001 Buddhas” [airplane sound in the background] and which we are hoping to tour in a couple of years and I think that(um) these are extremely very-very-very successful.(Um)We have actually had quite a lot of good collaborations you know, it is... I think we pick the collaborations, collaborators in a way that we have something in common. You can't just say, ok, because people tell us oh why don't you, you know collaborate with a hip-hop person, you know. You don't just collaborate because there is someone there. There is something that is-that is a thread that connects the two of us and because we don't do each other's art form but we meet where the...

DR: Hm...

RR: Where-where the perfect cross-crossover is. It works beautifully.

DR: Hm...

RR: So, I think we have had...I mean I am just naming these two because we just did it.

DR: Yeah and I remember...

RR: [Clearing throat]

DR: It was-it was an outdoor thing but with the Gamelan????

RR: Oh they were amazing. Yes.

DR: But there (i-i-i)...in you know knowing some of the history of the whole area there is a commonality between

RR: The story Ramayana and...

DR: Which we...yeah.

RR: You know so the Bali... the Deva and we'd two collaborations with them at the Walker and (um)

[Pause]

DR: The “Sethu”?

RR: Yeah.

DR: Hm...

RR: The “Sethu” and “Dhvee”.

DR: Yeah, ok.

RR: We did two and with the same collaborators and that was I mean really a spiritual experience. It was beautiful (um). Again, Deva was extremely open to suggestions and you know we were (fascin) because you know I think there should be [pause] ...you know we are not as Aparna says we are not or we will never be avant-garde you know. So there has to be some [pause] (um) [pause] root which kind of has a-a connection which makes sense you know even the Taiko is a big drum but the-the way they learn it and the-the way they speak those the syllables and the way their rhythms and the-the teacher-student relationships they have (um) the....So, all of that kind of plays in how we work together and how they all you know the-the-the process happens.

DR: Hm...

RR: And if-if someone is not willing to or not as collaborative or not interested then it just doesn't work.

DR: Hm...

DR: So it sounds like there is a [pause] also a lot of philosophical and spiritual aspects that come into play...

RR: Yes.

DR: With your collaborations.

RR: Yeah, it-it does and it's interesting because when we worked with Shubhendra and Saskia, they had just...they had a... you know, the-the piece was about from birth to death compared to a one day of morning to night and soon if you look at it you know we had we-we are from the same you know from the...from India...from Hindu we had Hindu-Hindu belief (um) and the what I was going to say is something...they-they had just had their son...

DR: Oh yeah!

RR: So they were making this...they had made this beautiful piece of music that was celebrating that and at the same time there was you know...I was looking at Adi Shankaracharya's (um) "Bhajagovindam" which talks about (wh) how-how life is so (uh) like water on lotus you know just falls away but we think we are permanent so it from that-from that birth thing to going to the you know philosophy of life. Life is everything and so it was really wonderful to-to weave all those things together. So, it's not just music and dance because we all [pause] traditionally if it-if you take Bharatanatyam usually they start with a piece of music and that's what they choreograph. But, now you know like [pause] we...My tea... our teacher has done amazing things as a soloist so

when we do now we take about...you know we look at the visual art of Kolam and say you know this is evoking the earth so let's go from there. So, we build from an idea more than just taking a piece of music and it took me... now I have to say this because several years ago, the twenty-five, thirty years ago, the thirty two-thirty three years that I have been here there was no musician here in those days. There was no mridangist, there was no flutist, there was no violinist, no vocalist and I had no money. So there was no way to bring anybody so I forget that the collaborations, some of them were because also it... you were excited because there was (li) ...there was music. You could work with Suzanna, she would bring her music and then we would-we would play off of it. So sometimes things happen because there is nothing else that you know...so(um)... so what was I said now we are in a place where we have amazing musicians so our vision can come you know ca-can happen without (um) the all those problems I mean we have all (sh)young second generation Americans, I mean Indian Americans, who have studied from masters in India , Umayalpuram Sivaraman's student playing our mridangam, M.S. Gopalakrishnan's student playing the (vi) the violin and Aparna and I, students of Alarmel Valli. So you know it's really it...we are bringing India's masters that tradition to the stages here and then creating this canvas that is different from what they are doing there but with the same knowledge that we have brought from there.

DR: Hm....

DR: I hear you are touching a point to underlying this thing the-the funding how is that all changed throughout the years?

RR: Um, you know...

DR: Because obviously there was nothing to begin with.

RR: No, nothing. (Um) I think Ragamala you know when I first...when Rita and I were working together we had like two-three thousand dollars to work off of except Metropolitan Regional Arts Council would give us like two thousand five hundred or something like that. Then when we did our first performance you know I think of like ten, eleven, it was Jerome Foundation was there and they would give us like five thousand dollars. But slowly but surely, definitely, we are now getting National funding. (Um) I mean though it was better few years ago. It's now... I won't complain. We are, you know, we have gotten the MAP Fund??? for the first time and two NDPs you know, so I-I don't have any complaints. Minnesota we have Target and McKnight (um). But I think we have raised our-our work in-in a way that (peop) we-people are noticed, we are being noticed by national (uh) funders and presenters and that was the goal when you know, most Indian dancers who come here become teachers and they have lots of students and they don't start...I mean I think it is still hard for Indians to understand what a company is because most probably, mostly people say she runs an academy or she runs a dance

school and I have to say well actually I run a company and then they don't understand what's a company and on top of it what's a non-profit company and a lot of people don't understand why you need money for this you know.

DR: [Chuckling]

RR: It's a...so I-I think it's a ...it's really important that people are educated as to how a company runs. I-I... given an opportunity I would go talk about it. It is (um)... running a company is completely different from having... being a sole (uh) headmistress of a group of dancers. So, yeah it's-it's I-I wouldn't do anything different given another chance.

DR: OK.

DR: Let's we have-we have two ways we are gonna go but the first one is...in the process then how has (uh) you know you have sort of touched upon this one but how is Ragamala's vision changed over the years because it seems with...as the funding has come the vision has changed too.

RR: Well. The vision is getting bigger that's what, definitely we this year...last year we did "Sacred Earth" and that was a big production you know we had to (uh) it included visual art, bringing an artist from India and (um) creating huge backdrops and videos and we travelled with that . It was very-very successful. The next three projects are getting bigger and bigger so (um) you know our...we have a...we are working towards a new agent. Our old agent is you know...we had her for fifteen years. Now we are moving to a different direction and our old agent used to say, "Don't make anything so big that (um) we can't tour you know." So, I always believe in creating the work that you want to create. You don't...I-It will tour if it needs to but if you don't... [Rustling noise]

[Pause]

RR: You know put everything that you want on stage then you-you are not really being truthful to yourself. So yeah our vision is that we the...our next project is at the Walker by... the "Song of the Jasmine" with Rudresh Mahanthappa that Aparna is taking the lead on and I will be working and dancing but she is the main person. We are very excited about this. It's a...it's going to be a departure from...we...even though you (wan)...don't want it to be a departure it will be because of the musical instruments, musical genre is so different. But the interesting thing is he is Indian, has never..., he is very interested in classical music but he is not...he only does jazz and Aparna only does classical Indian dance and doesn't do jazz so they are...we are trying to paint a picture here where we can bring all these things together. I (th) I am sure you heard that their concert at the Walker. She was awesome???

DR: Yeah, I was there.

RR: Then our next two, I don't want to give away my projects but they are I think [pause] bigger.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: But they are all very (um) Indian in nature.

DR: OK.

DR: So, when did the touring start?

RR: [Clearing throat] We have been touring since (2) 1998. So '98 we did the piece called ("Rain seed") "Return of the Rain seed" and that was the first time that we got our first tour (um) Indiana [clearing throat]. We did eight places in Indiana. Gradually you know, we have been touring (um) all over the country and did we did twenty-eight to thirty tours on "Sacred Earth".

DR: So your vision has been bigger

RR: (Clearing throat)

DR: Rather than just the twin cities...

RR: Yes.

DR: All along?

RR: We have always wanted yes, we wanted to and in-international. You know we went... we have gone to Bali and in...our...we were worried about India but now every year we have been performing in India and which is...was a dream

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: And (um)it's-it's the last three years we performed in three different festivals and Aparna is going back this year to perform solo and we are hoping next year we'll do our festival in Bombay. So it's very I mean it is-it was a little nervous because we are all not Indian so we were kind of little worried about what the press would say. Many people didn't even notice they were not Indians because they were dancing so beautifully.

RR: [Clearing throat]

DR: So, well maybe here we should talk about then the (sch) the-the school part. The (When) from the beginning has it always been a school involved with Ragamala too?

RR: We have always had a school involved with Ragamala. Never too big because we-we are now hardly ever in town [chuckling] so it's difficult to run it. We have maximum we

have had is forty but somewhere between twenty and forty and we don't do you know they do the debut recitals. We do very few of them because we concentrate more on...I-I want to call it the Harvard of Bharatanatyam so you come here and do it the right way and just like my teacher taught us so there are some lovely girls coming up. Sadly, all Indian students leave

DR: Really?

RR: They go off and become doctors, engineers. They don't want, I mean, this is not a money-making...

DR: Oh yeah.

RR: Profession, so nobody...

DR: We-we know that yeah [chuckling]...

RR: Wants to be professionals, yeah.

DR: You know....

RR: Yeah, everybody knows it [chuckling]

DR: Yeah.

RR: That is why they don't want to do that.

DR: Yeah, we-we know it's you know it's passion.

RR: Yeah, if you don't have that then you don't have a.....

DR: Yeah.

DR: So then, the school has brought you dancers into the company then throughout (uh)...

RR: Oh yeah.

DR: The time.

RR: (Um) Actually, not until... we had Kim, who is a Vietnamese girl who was dancing with us, then she got married and left. She was fabulous. She started when... Aparna started to teach her when she was twelve years old. She danced with us for probably ten years and there was one more, Sarah, who was an adopted Indian child who danced with us and performed in our company for a while and then she is just social (ser) social work and she's...doesn't have much time to do this. (Um) Otherwise, girls do their... whoever has finished their... the debut recital and they are ready to perform [pause] they leave so we haven't gotten too many from-from the school. We do have two or three really coming up

right now but it's hard for them to tour or perform when (ther) they have school. And once they finish school then they have to go to college so they're no longer available. So, that is our problem.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: So we run, you know, we have five dancers including me and that's a dangerous situation. I put an ad on the Facebook saying that if anybody is interested in performing with Ragamala. There was a thousand hits in three hours but not one [chuckling] response. So, you know, finding someone and training them for four-five years to become [pause] to perform is hard because Bharatanatyam has...we have so many styles, schools and our school is so (um) different that nobody wants to change their style. Everybody is happy with their own style. So,

DR: Even though they are in the middle of America?

RR: Yeah.

DR: They don't want to change their styles?

RR: No, why it's (de) it's hard, why physical why-why work so hard to change something then you can do what you ...

DR: [Scoffing sound]

RR: Want with...I mean it depends on what you want. I changed my style when I was twenty-nine, thirty years old because I just loved it and I don't I mean every day I think because I did that today our performers are at the Joyce or at the Kennedy Center because it's so phenomenal. Our style is just superb because it comes from a superb master. (Bu) But I... you know, not everybody looks at it that way you know. (E) I wonder even in India...if I were in India I would stop dancing and become a student of my teacher and I'd never perform again. [Pause] But, doesn't happen like that.

DR: [Chuckling] Interesting, yes.

DR: So, you run the school basically to teach people the style then?

RR: Yeah,yeah.

DR: And (eh) people keep continuing to come and learn?

RR: Yeah, they come you know, they...because it's not a... there's no guarantee of one year or two years, depends upon how good the kids are and how quick. All our dancers teach so it's nice that our...they have worked so hard, I mean, the two of...me and my

daughters are Indian, you know, the three of us. And then we have three and Amanda just recently dropped out so we have only three people who are trying to teach everybody.

DR: Hm...

RR: So...

DR: So what do you see in the future for Ragamala?

RR: In the future for the Ragamala I-I am hoping that there will be the new agent, there would be more international tours that we would have (uh) more national tours and festivals [pause] funding.

DR: Yeah.

DR: How have the audiences changed over the years?

RR: Actually, we have I would say eighty percent non-Indian audience [clearing throat] and audience are... we have...we always sell out the Cowles Center or??? Walker. So we have very good following which is...I mean I think what we give has-has so much (uh) you know the backbone of it is mostly spirituality and not just mere entertainment. So, people really enjoy what we do and we are very sincere and hardworking and [pause] (um) they seem to like us so far.

DR: Yeah, well I find that kind of amazing that this tradition is so rooted in India but yet your audiences are (eighty-fif) eighty-five percent non-Indian.

RR: Yeah. [Clearing throat]

DR: Hm...

RR: Yeah I-I am (all) mean we definitely do miss the Indian audience. I don't know if they don't come because it's our performances are downtown. Because there is a lot of you know culturally there are...you know I never went downtown until I started to perform there. So you know people are very happy you know they are all in the suburbs and-and also [pause] you know (ni) right now I probably there are fifty Indian dancers in the-in the Indian community I don't know. So, I don't know if as much Indians are as particular as the college they go to [pause] in art. Do they only want to see the, you know really classical, good...I mean I won't say good, everything is good but you know you follow somebody I think...

DR: Hm...

RR: That's how it works in the art field.

DR: Yeah.

RR: And one has to know before there were thousand people, you knew everybody. Now there is hundred thousand people you don't know anybody. So there is a lot of marketing things that you need to do, we need to do in order to learn our Indian audience which has, you know, we have not had any time. It's like we are all running to doing the next thing or the next thing.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: Maybe it would be wonderful to have, I mean we have tried to perform at the Hindu Temple for free for people to come and see us. I mean they like us. Everybody, you-you talk to anybody they'll say that Ragamala is really good but [pause] that doesn't [pause] bring money to the table.

DR: Did-Doesn't get them out of the temple...

RR: Yeah.

DR: Into the ...

RR: Yeah.

DR: Halls.

RR: I think everybody is really busy, you know, think the ...you come here as a second generation immigrant. You work really-really hard to put your kids through college and art is not that important I guess.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: Is there anything we haven't touched upon if you want to address?

[Pause]

RR: (Uh) [pause] I think (wha) I mean I think I-I would say that I think in-in [pause]...this is about Ragamala but also a legacy like I have brought two daughters and both of them are almost you know...the one is really-really well known all over Aparna and Ashwini is starting to get there which is not an easy thing to do you know bring some...your kids here and teach them culture and be part of this, not just your own culture but embrace both cultures and work in-in the arts. (Um) I think what I wanted to say was that the Indian community I know they are but it-it's ...I always think that you know when people move to Minnesota they-they find out if there is a Guthrie or is there a good ballet school? I wish there was that feeling of pride that this Indian company has taken us to the Kennedy center...

DR: Hm...

RR: You know the Indian community has... I don't think there is-there are companies that are presented like our...like the...we are presented to in-in-in the biggest theatres in the-in the country. (Um) [pause] I...would be nice to [pause] to-to be in that position.

DR: To be respected in your own hometown...

RR: Yes.

DR: Yes because (uh) I had no idea personally that you toured as much as you did. I knew that you know there was the Kennedy center and various things but I had no idea to it was...

RR: Yeah we tour a lot.

DR: So big-big extent.

RR: Yeah, oh, and this year we have commissions that... so it is even...this is the first time they are co-commissioners for this project with the Jasmine and I am sure you know about my nomination for the...so all this adds to in...you know it's all feather in-in in the community cap.

DR: Hm...Hm..., yes.

RR: [Clearing throat]

DR: Just...

DR: You have talked about how when you first began that it (ou) out of necessity the-the (co) collaborations came.

RR: Quite necessary, necessity and excite.

DR: Yes and excitement. And then when Aparna started coming and growing into her own that you both wanted to go back to your roots. So, how do you see things in the dance form then evolving?

RR: Well, the roots is not you are not going back into the same format. You are just going back to your own [pause] (uh) encyclopedia to get the things out.

DR: Your vocabulary.

RR: That's it, our vocabulary. I mean not just the dance vocabulary but as I mentioned I mean there is no dirth for [clearing throat] stories and philosophy and poetry and I mean as long as I live I think we can find...

DR: [Chuckling]

RR: Things. So, that's what is you know, exciting. Th-There are so many things that are exciting now that you open your door and look into that same closet that you have (um) kind of only [pause] looked on the top.

DR: You have glanced and then said ...

RR: Yeah. (Clearing throat)

DR: Oh, this is here too...

RR: This (ama) and then (al) because of the we have music composer in India; we have all these musicians, those things are possible to do. Before, it was there but what could we do with it.

DR: Hm...

RR: We couldn't do anything with it. So, and we do it. I think we have very-very good ideas and we have good aesthetic taste. And then, we have very good discipline and work ethic so all this together you know you can have material if you don't have taste then it falls. So, that's all this together, and you know, that's what makes exciting work.

DR: Hm...Hm...

RR: And also like creating "1001 Buddhas", [background traffic noise] I mean think about it who would...we were in Japan with, performing with these, with our collaborators and went to Sanjūsangen-dō temple and looked at the statues and my goodness this was Shiva, this is Avalokiteśvara, this is Lakshmi you know. They are all looking like this and you think they all came from India and ...say let's make a piece. Aparna: Yeah we should do it. And then you read and find out things and more and more and here you have [pause] and then you have the bodies and then you have the musicians and then you have people from Japan who wants to collaborate and then you make the piece. So it-it's not like everybody looks at things and says well I can do this, I can do something from this. So I think we have intelligence in that-that artistic intelligence to (um) create something from you know, ok, this is an idea but then how do you bring that on stage.

DR: Yeah.

RR: And then our...I mean I have to say without our dancers I mean our-our dancers are just totally dedicated and it's every time I look at them and think you know they are not even Indian here I am telling them "Long for Krishna", you know, you are doing this and...

DR: [Chuckling]

RR: And they do it. It's not like I am trying to convert them but you know, as an actor you have to do what you have to do. And then you put your feelings and your emotions and...

DR: Yeah.

RR: Here we have a handful of fabulous performers.

DR: Yes.

RR: So... [Clearing throat]

DR: And I-I think that's where the hard work and the discipline...

RR: Yeah and it took you know, it has taken so...now, it was like...I was used to be so scared of our teacher to tell her that what we are doing you know. And then finally, one...when she was here I said, "Would you watch this?" And showed her "Sthree" and she sat down and watched it. This is really good and it uses all the Pandanallur style you know it's not the dance is not taken away you know, you can have classical dance and you can take away its expression, you can take away its rhythm, you can take away and make it modern but then it is nothing. It's when you take everything and then place it in (uh) in-in-in places where it thrives then it has its meat and blood is there. So she said this is very good and then she said you can perform it in India. That's when we went to India. Until then, we have not taken our work to India. And then, so when this Buddha was created I sent her the review of it. I said I would love to show you this but I haven't...She, you know, she was here but we didn't have time. So now she really-really thinks Ragamala is doing very good work. She said, "Wherever I go, I hear good things about you." So...

DR: Can't ask more...

RR: Yeah, that's the ultimate, your ultimate audience or...

DR: Yeah [chuckling].

RR: Is your teacher.

DR: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

RR: But we-we you know we have learnt a lot from her this the whole I mean without...if she wasn't there, she gave me a...I would always tell her that you gave me a life, you know. I only have a degree in drawing and painting and without this dance, putting everything into this and the sophistication everything I actually we have learnt from her. [Pause] The style...

DR: Uh...huh

RR: The technique, the beautiful technique

DR: Uh...huh. So it sounds as if she has created a... given you something of a challenge that you have risen to.

RR: Yeah, yeah.
