

**INDIA ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Arts 2 – Ragamala Dance Company**

**Tamara Nadel**

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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**Tamara Nadel**  
**Narrator**

**Dan Rein**  
**Interviewer**

**October 16, 2013**

DR: Tamara Nadel.

TN: Yeah.

DR: Ok, maybe we can start by ... ok, how did you first become involved in Ragamala?

TN: Ok, I became involved in Ragamala completely by accident. I came to the Twin Cities, to go to Macalester and I was [background noise] dancing as a hobby – I never thought it would be anything I would do professionally. I was planning to go to law school and but I had always danced and I auditioned for the dance ensemble, I was taking some classes in the dance department and one of them was a class called Dance Appreciation – that was required of dance minors, taught by Becky Heist, the chair of the department and one of the assignments was the entire class was going to see a dance performance and they were supposed to go and write a review, and I couldn't go, I had rehearsal for something and Becky said, "Don't worry about it. Just go see something and write the review". And I had a good friend at that time who was Indian and her parents were coming to town and she was taking them out to dinner to an Indian restaurant and to see this Indian dance performance and they invited me to go along and I was like "Sure, I have to go see something. It turned out to be the first show that Raneer and Aparna did as Ragamala, in 1992, "Ragamala: A Painting In Motion" and I was just blown away by it, just so impressed by the combination of intense physicality and deep spirituality and profound emotional content that I had never seen before and... but (I'm) I loved it and wrote this review of it that I still have that's absolutely glowing, and thought that would be the end of it. Then my Junior year I studied abroad, came back and found out that the dance department was bringing Raneer in to do ... to set a piece on a group to do a semester long workshop and set a piece for the annual dance concert. So, and the-the interesting thing is that I wasn't supposed to be there that semester. I was planning to stay and travel in Israel and Europe for the second semester and decided not to. Kind of, almost at the last minute decided not to ... decided to come back, be at Macalester for that semester, happened to be the semester Raneer was there. I took her class and then after that she asked me to keep studying with her. That summer she asked to be in a piece and it was when she was just forming the company, so she was looking around, she was teaching at the U at the time,

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teaching at Macalester, just looking for dancers to bring into her company of people, train another forms that she could mold and teach and educate ... she also had some of her own students that she was working with. So, yeah, she asked me to be in a show that summer and I have been with her ever since.

DR: Oh, well! So that was how many years ago?

TN: That was, and nobody in the future is allowed to do the math on this one, [chuckles] that was in 1994.

DR: Ok. So '94... So you've been... and you had prior... So you had dance experience before this?

TN: Yes, I grew up doing ballet and gymnastics.

DR: Ok.

TN: And was doing some modern dance at Macalester. I was taking an African dance class too.

DR: So ... how did that ...or ... how did it going to South Indian dance form? How was it going from the traditional Western dance form to very traditional South Indian dance form?

TN: At that point, what I was wanting to do was try out everything. Like I said, I was taking African dance, I took a couple of semesters of Scottish Highland dance, I took Ranees's workshop. I was doing all these different things, kind of like I said I never thought I would be a dancer. I hadn't actually studied ballet in a long time. I did ballet when I was a kid and then moved into gymnastics, and had been doing that, and again never thought I would be competitive at any level but just did it for fun. So got back into dance as something just for fun, and so in that sense I was just trying out these all different things, and see how much I could learn, and how much I could experience, and when I met Ranees, it was again that, it, what appealed to me about it was the...the rigor of the classical form. But then, and this is something that I didn't really realize at the time, I had seen them before, so I knew that there was this incredible capacity for emotion in the form. But when you are first learning, of course you don't touch that. That doesn't come until many years later. So, what appealed to me, at first, about doing it was the physicality of it. It was hard, it was precise and it was rhythmic and it was mathematically rhythmic in a way that was exciting. I've always been a math brain and so that's what-what appealed to me at first. But then as you, as I have been working ... it will be 20 years in February that I have known Ranees, as I have been working with her, the thing that keeps me interested is that every project is something new. Every inspiration, every idea, every approach to every show is completely different than the one

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that came before and the work has evolved so much in the way Ranee and now Aparna, you know for the last many-many years, it's been the two of them together, really as a unit. They- they almost share a brain, in the way that they work together, they counter point each other, but also support each other, and they like to say once something ... once an idea comes out, they don't know who had the thought, and who finished it. So it's really what I talk about, but now I am talking about both of them. That the way they are constantly evolving and the way they approach their form and the way they approach their vision, with their form as a medium is constantly evolving and that's what keeps me interested.

DR: Hm...Hm...

DR: Maybe you could explain a little bit... how it's evolving?

TN: Sure.

DR: How you see it in the early stages thru today?

TN: Sure. Ahem ... I am also the grant writer for Ragamala, so I'm-I'm lucky enough to be privy to a lot of the discussions that they have about their vision and their approach. So, from the beginning, at the beginning Ranee was just starting to find her place in this community – she had-had actually had a place in the community since the early eighties. She is, as I am sure you know from talking to her, totally fearless. So, she had come to this country, she hadn't danced in years – she had stopped dancing when she got married and the community at the time was small and had asked her, to start...they found out that she danced, and asked her to teach, because there was nobody here to teach the kids, and so she started going back to India to study and that's when she got back into it and I am sure this is all in her history how she met Valli and all of that. But (ahem) but what she is ... is completely fearless. So she would pick up the phone and call the Minnesota Dance Alliance and say "How do I write a grant proposal?", "How do I write a resume?", "How do I write a press release?" She heard Robert Bly's translations of Mirabai and called him up and said let's work together. You know it's like iconic figure – she picks up the phone and calls him, because that's-that's the kind of drive she has and why did I start talking about that? What was the question? [Laughter]

DR: The evolution...

TN: The evolution. So when she first started working here it was about taking this form, that she loved and almost translating it for American audiences, and so she, and also at the time there wasn't, there wasn't a big Indian community here. She didn't have an in to the national network of South Indian classical musicians. So she was working with what she had. She would find, so it was partly necessity that like she couldn't necessarily do, work with classical music, 'cause she didn't have the musicians here to work with, but also she

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was in this country, in this, you know, multi-faceted culture for the first time and looking around and thinking I can take inspiration from that, I can take inspiration from that, and she would hear a piece of music or hear a piece of poetry or see another dancer and see the connections, both thematically and physically and musically and approach them and do this collaborative work. So in the early years, I feel like her work was much more kind of out there, like what can I do with my form, let's see how far I can push the limits of the form, while still maintaining, strictly maintaining its aesthetic and cultural and spiritual integrity. So, it was never, she was never reacting against the form, that's a totally different thing, there are people that do that and that's-that's a totally different form and this was... she was making a temporary statement, within a classical form, and so there was never any rejection, there was never any reactionary philosophy. It was all about seeing the depth and breadth of this form and what it could do. Could it share a stage and have an artistic conversation with West African dance, with Japanese Taiko drumming, with Western classical Opera? And then, as she started evolving and also as Aparna's voice started coming in, because Aparna's voice, Aparna's instinct is a lot more classical – they are kind of a classic first generation-second generation, you know, Ranees is reaching out, while Aparna is reaching back, and that's a very reductive way to look at it and I-I don't want to, like, get stuck there, but-but the idea is Aparna is much more of a classicist [chuckles]. So, but she also has a-a vision of, a vision beyond just the physical or the musical collaboration but she really needs to have a root in a theme or in a philosophy, in order to make a collaboration work. So the two of them together, as they evolved, and as their voices, kind of, counterpointed and merged at the same time, their work has become a lot more kind of philosophically and spiritually rooted. It has become much larger in scale as they grow, their vision of what they can accomplish scale wise is growing, and everything, actually not even most everything, everything they do now is an evening length work because that's just the way their vision is evolving. They want to create these fully integrated experiences. Shana Sippy, who is a Religion Professor at Carleton, who has been an advisor to us in many projects, she said, "Ragamala creates not works, but worlds", and that's something that they really, when they heard it, they were like, yes, that's exactly what we are trying to do. Because they want to give the audience a full experience that- that's of course aesthetic and intellectual, but also visceral and emotional and truthful. So, as their aesthetic is evolving and growing, the thing that we have been talking about the most when we are talking about their work now is that emotional truth so that it's not ... I won't say what it's not, I will say what it is, it's the everything we do is a true expression of emotion and that's something that-that we wanted to do as artists and that we hear from our audiences that they value about what we do.

DR: So you've seen that as a continual development and growth, and I will just throw this in here that Ranees did mention that Aparna [clearing throat] ... was concerned... she was like the root she was going to the root and that was always a concern of hers.

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TN: Yeah.

DR: You know, just as you stated...

TN: We have been using the image of a tree lately, the roots reaching down and the branches reaching up. But the roots are vital. Without the roots the tree will fall over.

DR: Exactly!

TN: So, and that's not to say that Ranee lost her roots, when she was experimenting...

DR: Oh no, she has great you know, great respect ....

TN: Yeah.

DR: That's where she's coming from ....

TN: Right. But it's that-that mindfulness of the roots and the branches, that and that oppositional force is what creates the strength of the work.

DR: Hm... Yeah, you need them both.

TN: Hm...

DR: Yeah.

DR: Then as you know these things, you know, the company has evolved in this way, how have you evolved in this process?

TN: That's interesting well; we always talk about Bharatanatyam, or really any classical art form, as an ocean. The depth and the breadth of it is just practically infinite and you can keep learning and keep immersing yourself and there's always farther to go and that's what makes it exciting. But, that's also what makes for a lifelong journey. So, with every project, we learn something new, with every class with Ranee and Aparna you learn something new, every rehearsal, every conversation. You know, as someone, the way our company works is that we are all both art-art, nearly all of us have both artistic and administrative roles. So I dance for the company, I teach for the school, I do community outreach as an artist, I am also the grant writer and administer the community outreach and also do many-many other things because it's a small non-profit and so that's how it goes. But to be able to approach it from all those different perspectives and also to be immersed in it all day, so I don't have to go and wait tables for eight hours a day or do my other job, but everything that I do professionally is toward the same goal of advancing this company, advancing the work. Every minute is a learning experience, writing a grant, talking to Ranee about the next project, talking with Aparna about reframing the way we talk about our aesthetic, you know all these things, each thing,



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gives you just a little bit more knowledge, a little bit more depth. So and-and from the beginning Ranee really welcomed all of us into her world; not just her company, but her family, her culture, her tradition. She took us to India. I went to India with Ranee when I had only known her for like less than 2 years. And it was amazing to be completely immersed in the December season in Chennai and see performances and go to the temples and see the women making flower garlands and watching people, how they-how they move, how they walk, how they carry themselves in the temple, how they carry themselves in life – all of this factors, feeds back into the performance, because it's all of... you know, for someone who doesn't come from an Indian background, it's not just about learning the dance form, it's about learning music, poetry, philosophy, culture, traditions, but also about embodying another culture, because Bharatanatyam is very much a physicalization of a particular culture, and so learning about that, you can't just learn in the studio. There has to be more than that, so there has to be reading and studying and all that but there also has to be the experiential bit of being in India and seeing how people are and seeing they go watching the procession of the chariot and you know all of these things that you are trying to embody in dance, actually seeing what they are, how they work, experiencing them first hand. So, there is- there's so many different perspectives from which, you see I have lost track of the question again, because I just kept talking [Laughter].

DR: Your involve...How you evolved?

TN: Right. So...

DR: And which you were addressing. Ye-ye-ye-yes.

TN: So, yeah, from the beginning Ranee really brought us into that and allowed us to grow into that, and allowed us to be a part of it in a way that I think is pretty spectacular. This is a-a form that is traditionally passed on, only within a particular caste, and that hasn't been true for a long time for many sociological and historical reasons, but - but it really is, you know we still encounter people who look at us and think, "Oh what are those American girls gonna do?" And they see us dance, and they, what we do opens their minds. So, but there are still (so) there are still somewhat of a reflexive, like this is something for Indians to do and which is always interesting because, of course, India is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, you know, is it, does it make any more or less sense for a Cuban and Jewish girl from New York to do Bharatanatyam than for a Muslim girl from North India? I don't know. India itself embodies so much diversity. So, but- but for Ranee to really just welcome us into her tradition that way and the way she sees it and you see this in everything she does. Ranee and Aparna both, that if someone is willing to come to them and respect their tradition and be interested in their tradition and want to learn about it, they are so happy to teach. And they are not... you know they are not selfish with their traditions or with their experience at all. They are such generous

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teachers and such generous artists, directors, choreographers, dance makers, you know whatever the-the word is for the person who brings all these people together and has this vision of pushing itself forward. So, in that sense I feel like I, bringing it back to me, because that was the question, that I have just, I am constantly learning and constantly getting closer to what we are trying to do with the work.

DR: Hm...Hm... yeah. It's a... sounds very organic and holistically learning...

TN: Absolutely.

DR: And-and embracing, as you said something, a culture that's not really, you were brought up with.

TN: Yeah.

DR: Yeah.

TN: And on the Company side, actually this is the other side of the question, cause it is not just about the work, but it is about the growth of the company, that when I first started, we were, (perform) we would do a performing season in town, we would maybe do a, (red) we did a lot of school residency on those days, and that has to do with funding for education, disappearing of course since art doesn't have as much there, we still really value community outreach and we value creative community outreach, so always looking for ways to get our work out into the community, engage new audiences. But at the beginning it was small scale performances, local community outreach, you know we, statewide community outreach as well, there was some statewide touring. In the late 90s, we signed with our first agent and we started touring somewhat, but the evolution from, you know, doing two weeks a year at the Southern and doing residencies in Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota to performing at the American Dance Festival and having a work commissioned by Lincoln Center and but commissioned by the Walker, you know, that-that trajectory has also been a really exciting thing to be a part of. You know work that's recognized increasingly by national funders, national presenters. We just signed with a new agent who has a much more international focus. We have had some international touring but we are really looking to expand that, as one of our next hurdles, so- so that's been really exciting. As the Company has grown, as the vision has grown, as we have all grown as artists to see the presence of the Company grow. And you still to be very much rooted here in the community because this is our home. Twin Cities is our home, Minneapolis, Minnesota is our home and we are still, we are not gonna give up our roots here, but we are so honored to be able to take work that was born and bred and nurtured here to places like Lincoln center, places like American Dance Festival, that-that will make people think, "Oh, Minneapolis. Do we have a dance scene there? [Background noise] Maybe that's something I should check out." You know, whereas, of course, we know ...

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DR: Hm...Hm...

TN: How strong the dance scene is here. But that's not something people necessarily recognize in New York, so we're – we're happy to be part of raising that consciousness on the national and international level that this community does exist here.

DR: I am curious, at what point it is that you started out as a dancer and when then did you become part of the staff and you know maybe you can talk a little bit about, how it's mostly the dancers who are the staff as well?

TN: Yeah. It was by accident, again. When I first started working with Raneë the Company existed as a 501 (C) 3 non-profit, but there was no staff and before Raneë even put herself on salary, we brought in a Managing Director and kind of tried out that model...

DR: Hm...

TN: Of having a Managing Director and dancers and we were at a certain point put on salary as dancers and then we went through some financial troubles and it was, kind of by necessity, we found ourselves with some debt and with, you know, dancers that were on salary that were hoping to continue to build the Company but we had this debt, we had a board saying we don't know how to sustain this financially unless we fire the dancers and we are sitting there saying, but if we fire us, the Company disappears, and so we just, out of necessity, kind of trial by fire, took on all of these roles and Aparna had done some work in Marketing, so she took over the Marketing, I thought I didn't really have any grant writing experience, except that I had written a couple of successful personal grants. So Raneë had some experience grant writing from before she had any staff, she was the grant writer at the time. So that kind of fell into my lap as I can write, I will try grant writing and so, we just kind of jumped into those roles and ended up growing into them, growing with them and when the time came when we were in a financial position to bring in new staff, we had found so much value in that model that we had, that we didn't give it up. So we did bring in new staff, we got a grant from Bush foundation at one point to hire an administrative assistant, who was our first, you know, non-artist administrative staff member, and that position has now, it has gone through a couple of different people and it has now grown into an office manager position. We had business management that was something. We got a grant from McKnight, when we were having these financial troubles to bring in-to bring in a temporary person. Then we got a grant from MRAC to bring in a permanent business manager so that we'll ... so that was one thing we knew we didn't have was that financial expertise. Now we do, because now we know ...

DR: [Laughter]

TN: That you have to pay attention to those things [chuckles]. They can't just be one person who understands that side of it, because then you could get in trouble. So now we all

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know how to read balance sheets and you know how to put together a budget. But in those days we brought somebody in and she is amazing and she is still with us – our business manager Jan Gonder. So we eventually, Ranee’s other daughter Ashwini, who had after graduating from college, gone to New York to work in marketing, in Publishing, in the Marketing side of Publishing, for a while, came back because she missed being part of the Company and she moved into a Marketing role as well, because she had this marketing experience and it was at a time when Ranee and Aparna were trying as much as possible to pull back from the administrative side. They are still the Artistic Director so they oversee everything administratively but the kind of nuts and bolts, and of course-of course they are gonna to be a part of it, but as much as possible we were trying to make time for them to create art and so Ashwini came in as our marketing person and I stayed on as a development person and so we eventually were able to bring in Louise Robinson as our Managing Director, which was amazing. She was one of Ranee’s first advocates in this dance community back when she was at the Dance Alliance in the early 80s, and so and then she had taken some time out of the professional world to raise her kids and then it happened to be that we were at a place financially to bring her in at the same time that her kids were in high school, so she came on as Managing Director. We have, right now, as an Office Manager, interestingly she is not a dancer with our Company, but she is a dancer. She dances with Mathew Jenchesky and so it’s kind of an added bonus – like part of having that administrative / like office manager person, not be a dancer with our company, as that we want to have somebody to be in office when we are on tour – that was very much a logistical thing, because until then, and still very much, you know we, when we are having big touring seasons we do all of our work from laptops [chuckles] and iPhones and iPads and if that stuff didn’t exist you know, 2000 year old classical form would not exist without modern technology, because this, our Company could not function without all that connectivity. But-but Louise, ah Elise, I have trouble getting Louise and Elise’s names straight , so you will have to forgive me, but Elise our office manager, she is able to be here, but she is also an artist so she understands the work, she loves the work. We are also able to support her career, because we give her flexible hours so she can do rehearsal so that works out really well. She is an artist even though she is not one of our artists. But - but it ends up being this, like it was all by accident, but it’s, this situation where people who are writing the grants, people who are writing the press releases, people who are writing the fund raising letters, people who are making the copies and running to the post office, are all people who are so invested in the mission and also who are there for the creation of the work, so we know about it at a very intimate level and that’s the thing about Ranee and Aparna’s creative process is that they very much involve the dancers in it, so they have their conversations and their creative epiphanies and their you know, working through different ideas, they do it with us in the room and using us as part of their experimentation, so we are there for all of this evolution of their thinking and whenever

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we can we like to be there just as flies on the wall when they are talking about the work just because it is so exciting for us get that perspective on it, but it also makes us better at our administrative jobs of marketing and fund raising and all those things because we can speak passionately and deeply about the work. So, and it was funny, I was talking to the Executive Director of Dance USA last week, at a meeting, and I introduced myself, because we had never met, and I introduced myself as Development and Outreach Director and dancer, and she said, “Oh yeah, you guys have that model, don’t you and you know you do it is way that is very ...” What was the word she used, not integrated but, basically she said there are a lot of people who do it, but you guys are the ones who do it right. But it’s not just gratuitous that we hire our dancers into these administrative positions because we want to employ them 52 weeks a year, which is also really amazing, and an added bonus of this is that most dancers are laid off for twenty weeks a year and we are, we don’t have to be, but - but we’re known for-for doing it in a way that works on both sides.

DR: Yes. You- you... well they both feed each other.

TN: Hm...

DR: Both the roles...

TN: Yeah, absolutely.

DR: Yeah.

DR: Maybe you can talk a little bit; you said you also teach...

TN: Hm...Hm...

DR: And maybe you can talk about the-the-the dance school and that aspect of Ragamala.

TN: Sure-sure. We - we think it is so important to pass on what we have to the next generation. So it’s the...Ranee and Aparna are senior disciples and protégé’s of Alarmel Valli, who is one of India’s greatest living masters and that repository of knowledge and tradition is something that they passed on to us and that they want to continue to pass on to the next generations. So it’s that artistic excellence, but also our work ethic and our broad vision of the classical form, as being capable of speaking to the contemporary experience. So all of those things are what we attempt to put forward to our students and we really value what we can offer, because we are, we are primarily a performing company and touring company, and so, we and, the primary focus of what we do is creating new work, so we don’t have, necessarily have the resources to have a huge school. So, what Ranee and Aparna decided to do, at one point a while ago, was keep our school small, our intro classes are open to anybody, but the classes are extremely rigorous and we expect dedication and practice and really hard work from our students, and, so the

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senior level classes are quite small (laughs), because they, you know, if kids want to or the parents want their kids to take Bharatanatyam classes as a link to their culture, as something fun to do on a Saturday, as, you know, a chance to put on a costume to get on a stage or really most importantly as a way to stay connected to Indian culture in Minnesota. There are many opportunities to do that. There are lot of community level teachers, particularly now, there are, we are always meeting new teachers who are moving to town and, who are starting up either small form groups or classes. So that, that is out there – we don't have to fill that niche. But the niche that we want to fill is, Rane always says, "to be the Harvard of Bharatanatyam". So, to really be strict about the integrity of the form, so we...our intro classes have 20 kids, and our senior classes have like 4. And we have found some amazing kids who are really excited, and really dedicate themselves and, you know, they are 15, 16,17 year old kids, who really, you know they come in, and you don't know this about them when they come in and they're only seven or eight years old, and they're seven or eight years old, they're ... kind of casual, kind of maybe little bit lazy [laughter] you know, interested but you know whatever... but at certain point you see when it clicks in their mind and they think, "Wow, this is really amazing. What do I need to do to be able to experience this?" And then to see the ones that do-do that is incredibly rewarding.

DR: Yeah. I think key word here is discipline.

TN: Hm...Hm...

DR: It's the discipline.

TN: Yeah.

DR: An artistic discipline.

TN: Yeah.

DR: Yeah. And I think...

TN: Absolutely.

DR: A lot of people don't realize ...

TN: Yeah.

DR: [Chuckles] What it takes.

TN: Yeah.

DR: You do.

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TN: Yeah, you end up spending a lot of time talking to these kids, who are like straight A students and they are like three grades ahead at Math and they work so hard on their homework and there is a point at which they realize they also have to work hard at dance but it is not innate [laughter]. They know they have to work hard at their homework at school. [Laughter]

DR: Yeah. They somehow think because its dance they can get by.

TN: Yeah, dance is fun.

DR: Yeah.

TN: Yes, it is, but it is also hard. It is only fun if it's hard work.

DR: Okay, maybe you can talk, okay a bit about how, you have seen the audiences grow and change throughout the years as the work has grown and changed. How have you seen the audiences grow and change?

TN: Interesting. You know by the time I came in, Raneer had already done a lot of the groundwork of reaching out beyond the Indian community. Because, of course the Indian community was her first audience base, and her first support base. But she really reached out to the Dance Alliance, to the Southern Theater, to the Press, to, you know there are, in the late 70s, early 80s there were handful of women who really created a place for non-Western mainstream dance in the Twin Cities and it was Raneer, it was Susana di Palma, it was Cassandra, Busara Whittaker – really just kind of put their work out there and demanded that it be seen. Not demanded, but by putting good work out there, in a sense made people look. And-and didn't just put it out there but wrote grants to MRAC, wrote press releases to the Star Tribune, developed relationships with the people in the... I don't want to say mainstream dance community, 'cause that again is very reductive, but the ... [sirens in the background] in those days that's what the dance community was and it didn't have the diversity that it has now and-and that was really remarkable. So by the time I met Raneer, in the mid-90s, a lot of that had been done. So the audience was already extremely diverse coming from, kind of, all walks of life, all sorts of interest. There were, there was the Indian community, there were the people who were already interested in Indian arts and culture, there were the dance audiences that were coming because they were curious about what was being presented at a place like the Southern or in those days Studio 6A, what- what I'm... am noticing more and more is the recognition, with the name recognition of Ragamala is growing and growing, as - as the audiences grow, as more people come to see us, more people hear about us we make more and more connections in the community. That's another thing about collaborating with local arts organizations, whether they are performing groups or presenters, it's that mingling of audiences that happens. So... or if we... we do a collaboration with Taiko drumming group from Japan, as we just did, we reach out to the Japanese language program at the

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University of Minnesota and invite them to come and Meet-and-Greet with the artists and then some of them end up coming to the show and that's, you know one exam..., a simple example of building partnerships to build new audiences. When we had a - an indigenous folk artist from India, whose work is rooted in his community's philosophy of "Interconnectedness between humanity and nature", we did... we co-sponsored an artist talk with the Alliance for Sustainability and the 'Wedge', and he also did a demonstration at the University Farmer's Market. So it's drawing those connections and that's something that Ragamala has really become known for. It's kind of moving beyond, now that the money isn't necessarily there in schools anymore, moving beyond school residency model into a more community residency model and-and finding those unique connections that can happen when you have a particular artist or group here. So, in that sense we have-we have been consistently building our audience in that way, but it's using, it's following the same path that Ranee had already charted when I met her. But-but yeah the recognition, more and more, when you say, when somebody says who you dance for and you say Ragamala, twenty years ago it was "What's that?", and these days, increasingly it is, "Oh Ragamala. You guys performed at the Cowles, right? Weren't you just there?" So, so people are more and more... we're-we are becoming more and more of an institution. You know, as Ranee gets the McKnight Distinguished Artist Award, Ranee and Aparna are the Star Tribune Artist of the Year, you know there is more and more sense that we are an institution in the community and that is something that I have really seen grow.

DR: Good.

DR: Well, and-and you have certainly addressed a few of these things just right now the community relationships.

TN: Hm...Hm...

DR: And how that is growing and how do you see as ... seen the popularity of the dance form? How has that changed in your time with them?

TN: Well, in the last five or six or eight years, since Bollywood has become a thing that is, it is very much a double-edged sword. Because, you know, somebody says to you, "Oh, I seen what you do. I have seen Bollywood movies".

DR: [Chuckles]

TN: You have to say that my thing is... [Chuckles] Bollywood is to Bharatanatyam as MTV is to New-New York City Ballet. You know, just because they do gestures [laughter] so, but the other edge of the sword is that it develops a curiosity. You know people see a Bollywood movie and they become interested in India and so when they get the flyer from the Cowles that we are gonna be there, they come to the show, and once they see it



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they realize it's different and maybe they develop an interest in that too. So, Indian music, Indian movies, Indian food, I mean, Indian food has been popular for a long time but it's becoming more and more kinda mainstream, as more and more people are getting into it, it's becoming more and more part of the pop culture and so, and that of course has its problems, but it-it also has its... it creates a curiosity in people. The other thing we have been noticing, this is back to your previous question, is that less and less we are considered like the "ethnic thing" on somebody's season, like when we are touring and that was a lot of the reason we left our old agent and moved onto to our new agent because we didn't want to be pigeonholed in that way anymore and I think it has to do, somewhat with way presenters philosophy's are evolving. presenters are stop ... are not thinking like that necessarily anymore, but also we have worked very hard to frame our work as contemporary dance, contemporary dance with classical roots, but contemporary dance and so we are not the ethnic dance, we are not the traditional dance. We never use the word traditional, because traditional calls to mind – I am doing the dances that I learned from my ancestors, which is not at all what we do. So, it has somewhat to do with general perceptions changing, but also we feel like we've been a part of making that perception change. You know, the more you come back to, you know somebody says, "Oh, you are that traditional dance company, aren't you?" and you explain to them why that's not true and why what we do is contemporary, they begin to understand that and the collective consciousness on it starts to change and so that's something I have really seen evolving too... is that more and more people see our work as a contemporary expression, not as, you know, a bit of ethnic dance or, what do they say now, "Culturally specific non-Western", you know, all of these very not at all descriptive terms that put together, [chuckles] like 99% of the dance of the world. So we're, so it's our goal, you know we-we've taken the word traditional out of our vocabulary. We are trying to take culturally specific out of the vocabulary...

DR: [Clearing throat]

TN: So people talk about what they are talking about. I am talking about Bharatanatyam. I am not talking about ethnic dance or culturally specific dance.

DR: Great.

DR: You sort of touched upon this, so being part of Ragamala, what has it meant to you, personally?

TN: [Pause] Well, being part of Ragamala is really, like you jump in both feet, and it's-it's your life.

DR: Did you know that when you [laughter] when you went?

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TN: I ... you know, you get an idea. Back when I first started dancing with Ranee, she was, when she was still living in Burnsville, and she had her studio in her house, we used to go down there for classes and rehearsals, and you would drive down there, you would have rehearsal, you would go upstairs – you would ... she would feed you, teach you how to eat Indian food with your hands, explain all the different kinds of food, you know learn how to make tea like an Indian with milk and sugar and like all of these like [chuckles] little things, but the point is it started early. It's a family endeavor, Ragamala, and its and anybody who comes in becomes part of the family. And so, yeah, in a certain sense I did know that [laughter]. But, again, as the work has grown, it has become more and more kind of everything that you do relates to it and that is... that's the kind of person I am. I would never be able to have a job or not never be able to, if I had to I would, but I would never enjoy having a job that I just did to make money and having my life be something else. You know, I am wired to have my career be my life and my life be my career and that be, and have my professional life be working towards something that I care about personally. So- so I like it that way, that's not to say, it makes it sound a little like a cult [laughter], so I don't mean to say we don't have friends and families and lives outside of what we do, but-but it's always a part of us, in all of those other relationships and situations that we have in our lives. This is very much a part of what we do and it's a 24x7 thing. It's not something you do from 9 to 5.

DR: So it sounds like, going back to something you said earlier about, in the process of learning the-the philosophy, the spirituality, the physicalness – it's come to involve all parts of you

TN: Hm...Hm..., yeah. Yeah, it is definitely the work forces you to be involved physically, intellectually, emotionally, all at once and that's something, that's a perception not a lot of people have of dancers. People think of dancers as bodies in space, and, I don't know, I have never danced professionally with another company, but I know that what we do requires that entire dedication of all parts of who you are. You can't stay emotionally removed from the work and do it properly. It requires you to be a channel for emotional expressiveness, otherwise it becomes, it gets back to what we were talking about before, about truth. If it's going to be truthful, you have to open yourself up to it emotionally, otherwise it is just pantomime. And intellectually, particularly as somebody coming not from India, but even, you know born and raised in India doesn't mean you know Indian philosophy, you know, it's not-it's not innate- innate and that's another thing that is interesting when people think that only Indians can do Bharatanatyam. Just because you are ethnically Indian doesn't mean you speak the language, doesn't mean you were raised with the traditions, doesn't mean you have been educated in the philosophy that goes behind this dance form and so, even for the Indian members of the Company, which really is just Ashwini [chuckles], other than Ranee and Aparna, Ranee's other daughter Ashwini is at this point the only other Indian member of our Company. We do have one

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apprentice who is Indian. She is fifteen years old. She is a spectacular dancer, but she is Christian. So for her learning the Hindu traditions is just as much learning something new as it is for me and-and she is living here so, she, there are things that has to be explained even to her. So, yeah-yeah it just requires that-that intellectual and emotional engagement beyond the physical.

DR: Great.

DR: Okay. Sort of combine these two things.

TN: Uh... huh.

DR: What do you feel the impact Ragamala has on Minnesota and then how do you see the future of the Company?

TN: The impact that the company has on Minnesota is I think two folds – the internal and the external. It's the bringing this unique voice and this unique experience to audiences here, creating a showcase for the highest and deepest form of the classical arts of India for the Indian community in town. You know, it's something we hear all the time that people [background jingling noise] are so proud of us, so proud of Ranee and Aparna for what they have done with their own classical art forms here in this country, so provides that voice and that show case for that community, particularly for youth who are born and raised here, [background noise] and don't have that experience elsewhere. But then the other side of it is creating [background noise] ... should we be ...

DR: That's okay.

TN: Is that okay?

DR: That's okay.

TN: The other side of it is [pause] creating reputation for Minnesota...

DR: Hm...Hm...

TN: And for this community nationally and internationally, so that, like I said before, when we perform abroad, when we are getting funding from foundations in New York and Washington, its, those people there [background noise] recognizing this community for what it is [talking in the background].

TN: Yeah. [Shutting of door]

DR: And the future?

TN: Future is to keep going – you know we very much feel right now that we are on a trajectory. In the last year we've had some really exciting developments. You know our

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fifth commission from the Walker Art Center, our first grant from the MAP Fund in New York, which is a-a funder that really values cutting edge community (uh) sorry, wrong word, cutting edge contemporary work and for them to recognize what we do as cutting edge contemporary work was a big step for us. In terms of, what I was saying about reframing the mindset around the kind of work we do and (uh) we got our third grant from the National Dance project, our, it was the 18<sup>th</sup> grant from the NEA. Our work is commissioned by the Walker, commissioned by Lincoln Center, commissioned by Krannert Center in Illinois and the Clarice Smith Center in Michigan, in Maryland sorry, performing in Edinburgh for the fourth time. We-we performed in India three times over the last four years, the whole company has. Aparna goes there as a soloist regularly but as a company we just started going there recently, and which is another interesting thing, the way we were received in India because we went there as an American Company doing contemporary work rooted in Indian classical form and we had no idea how it would be received and Ranee waited for the longest time before even reaching out to presenters in India because she was waiting for her teachers blessing. So we never performed in India before 2010, and we did a tour through the Soorya Festival, which is a very prestigious festival in Kerala, and we did eight cities in nine days and in every place there were people who came up to us after the show and admitted to us that they only came because they were curious about what the American company was gonna do and they were blown away by the work that we did and we had people saying “students here in Kerala should learn from how much these American women have dedicated themselves to our art forms”. You know really beautiful sentiments, they, one-one reviewer said when the curtains closed on the whole festival, which was ten different performing groups touring to these cities at the same time, that it was us that stole the hearts of the audience. So, we were so gratified by the way Indian audiences really embraced, what were really trying to do here with their classical forms, and so, back to that the... The recognition for the Company has been really growing. Ranee got a US Artist Fellowship. I don’t know if she said any of this in her own interview because she is very, she is modest about this stuff so I am going to say it.

DR: I think so.

TN: She got a US Artist Fellowship, which is huge. She was appointed by President Obama to the National Council on the Arts, actually she was nominated. She can’t be appointed until she is confirmed by the Senate and that might not happen for a while with the Government shutdown. So for posterity, this was when the government was shut down 2013 (ahem), so that, that kind of trajectory of recognition and then also the constant growth of the work, you know the projects that Ranee and Aparna have brewing for the next couple of years are so exciting, and taking the work and their vision and all in new directions, so I think what we all see in the future is just continuing on that exciting trajectory.

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DR: So is there anything you want to add that we haven't touched upon? [Pause]

TN: Uh...

DR: Any aspects of the dance, the school, the collaborations?

TN: [Pause] You know, I can sit here and talk for days [laughter]. Is there anything I can think of that I can say? [Pause] I don't know. Couple of, like little specifics, that are something that we are working on right now is putting together a Parent-Teacher organization at the school, which is something we never officially had. We have always tapped our parents as volunteers and supporters and what not, but- but a couple of the parents are putting together this- this PTO, and it's so exciting to see how excited they are about rallying the parents around supporting Ragamala and it's the little things like that- that are just ... that really kind of keep us going, and you see I didn't talk much about the school, because we were talking mostly about the work and the company, but the school, you know when there are those kids that really do step up and go do that extra work and do what we call *Arangetram*, which is a debut performance, as a soloist, as a student soloist. They're you know, it often happens that kids will do their *Arangetram* and then go off to college and never dance again [laughter], which is for us very sad because they've put so much work into it, we've put so much work into it, they, you know, if we let a kid do an *Arangetram*, it is because they have put just above and beyond energy into and commitment into their study, so, but sometimes it's just not what they want to do. They ultimately want to be a lawyer or want to be a doctor. But- but there are few who stay, and they you know, they want to go to college in town so they can keep dancing and they keep studying, they keep working and they keep growing and that's just so much fun to watch and such fun to watch these like young kids fifteen, sixteen years old really having that kind of poise and commitment and dedication. So-so that's- that's a lot of fun. But, I don't know, is this going to be edited at all, because I feel like I ended on like the big picture of it and now we are pulling back to the small picture of all like the little things that I forgot to mention. But mostly, I mean I guess I want to end back on that note of like we're-we're just so excited about all of those things coming together – aesthetically and also from like the promotional and business side of it, just getting the work out there. The-the work is growing to exciting (put)- exciting places, and then at the same time probably as a result of that the recognition and our ability to put the work out there for new audiences, is also growing. So, you know, just as Ranee and Aparna are having these amazing ideas, that's what the Lincoln Center is starting to notice and you know, not starting to notice, they have been starting to notice for ten years, but when they're actually acting on that and you know, bringing us there at this time, we are so excited. Not that we weren't excited about the work we were doing five years ago, but it's just each-each time we look into the future, it just looks more and more exciting in terms of ... can-could I say the word exciting more times [laughter] but-but that's what it is. We are really looking at continuing on that trajectory and seeing where it takes us next.

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DR: Thanks a lot.

TN: Thank you. Thank you for doing this.

DR: Oh yeah.

TN: This is a really great thing.

DR: My pleasure.

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