

# SHOBANA JEYASINGH

**The dancer turned choreographer who formed the internationally acclaimed Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company 22 years ago says being exposed to cutting-edge contemporary dance in London marked the beginning of her dance education. She tells Antonia Windsor what inspired her to carve out an artistic career in the UK**

**What made you decide to come to the UK?**

I was keen to study English Literature and it seemed logical to do my degree in the UK. I was offered a scholarship to study at the University of South Carolina in the US, but I was particularly interested in the Lake Poets – Wordsworth and Coleridge – so decided to go to the University of Sussex instead, even though it meant my parents had to pay. I did a BA in English Literature and then specialised in Shakespeare Studies for my MA.

**Had you been to England before you came to study?**

No, I came at the age of 17 and I didn't know anyone. Sussex had a Development Studies Institute so there were lots of international people there, but I was the only overseas student who was studying English Literature.

**Were you dancing at that time?**

I was dancing as a hobby because my parents – like all middle-class parents from south India – sent me to bharata natyam (classical Indian dance) classes. It was something all well brought-up young ladies needed to know – a bit like ballet in Britain – so I was in dance class from about the age of seven. I went to school in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and India. In Sri Lanka I was at a school that had dance as part of the curriculum. I studied at school, after school and at weekends, but, although I always loved dance, I never really imagined I would have a career in it.

**What did you do after university?**

In some ways it was very idealistic of my parents to send me to do Shakespeare Studies because I don't think any of us thought much further than: 'That's a wonderful thing to do', so I followed the typical English graduate route and trained to teach English as a foreign language. I then taught in a school that used to be a ballet school, so the dining room was a sprung wooden floor, and I got permission from the owners to move all the tables after school and at weekends and practice – so my dance career came about through an eccentric route.

My father believed in education, even if it didn't yield a very practical result at the end, and my mother did a degree in maths and astronomy, so she was also into learning. But, despite everything, it was quite difficult for them to recognise dance as an intelligent career

choice. I think they would have been happier if I had been a journalist or gone into publishing. It took them a long time to understand that it was possible to have a career in the arts. In India it is very difficult to have a career in the arts, whereas in Britain there are huge arts institutions and many opportunities to work in the arts – in marketing, management and performing.

**Did you get an opportunity to dance at Sussex?**

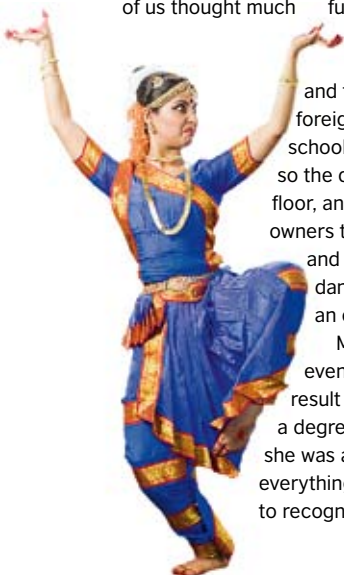
No, I wasn't really doing a lot of dance, apart from a bit of practice in my room. There wasn't that much contemporary dance that we could see at Sussex really – there was an arts centre that showed mostly plays and in Brighton there were lots of rock concerts. It was only after I left university and came to London to teach English that I began to see loads of different dance – Rambert, London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Extemporary. I went to the ballet and I went to the South Bank to see Indian classical dance, so my dance education really began then.

**How did you make the journey from being a classical dancer to working as a choreographer?**

Obviously my first language in dance literacy was from Indian classical dance. I found a dancer who had a company in south Kensington, and I began dancing with her and touring Britain in my summer holidays from the school where I was teaching English. The school had a wonderful policy of giving unpaid time off if, so I spent all the summer doing dance tours in very small places all over Britain.

I went back to India on a very regular basis to build up my technique, working with a famous dance choreographer and teacher, Valluvoor Samaraj Pillai. He is a dance teacher from a very old dance dynasty – his family has taught dance since the 11th century. Indian classical dance as we see today, particularly a form such as bharata natyam, was created by middle-class people in the 30s, 40s and 50s as a way of combating the British presence in India, because part of the move for independence was a cultural one, part of it was to prove that we have a classical culture, which was equal to Greek or Latin.

However, I began to get frustrated with myself as a dancer, and realised my interest was really in designing dance as opposed to performing it. I didn't really want to design classical dance because I felt the options were limited in the classical form. So, my dance choreography is really contemporary in that it is about my life as I live it, and I had to go outside my classical technique to embrace whatever I thought was useful for my stories.



CHRIS NASH, ALAMY, ALASTAIR MUIR





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**Did you take classes in contemporary technique?**

I used to do a residency in Newcastle at Dance City, the national dance agency for the north of England. Every year I would go to schools taking bharata natyam workshops, which was quite tough, but Dance City also had a huge range of courses and I took some contemporary classes there. I wasn't the brightest pupil, but it was good to understand the logic. I also did Pilates for many years because I think there is a physical literacy that you need to know. I would not call myself a contemporary dancer – not a western contemporary dancer – because I have never really performed. When you choreograph it is a bit different from dancing because what you need is an understanding of how the body works and of how to generate movement from bodies that have been trained in lots of different ways, and then to find some coherence out of what is shown to you in the studio.

**What backgrounds do your dancers come from?**

For many years they were only from Indian classical dance, but gradually that changed and now I don't have anybody who does Indian classical dance in my company. I began to draw on dancers who were available to me in London – it is such an amazing place because you meet people with incredibly diverse dance cultures. If you are trained in Indian classical, your body contains a single code for movement, but what I'm looking to create is movement

that is multicode because that is what I experience living in London. What I find amazing about London is that culturally everyone is a bit multicode – we have to improvise in order to change things, to morph; everybody has got to mix, we get to experience different cultural codes. I am always aware of people making this interesting consensus, for survival more than anything else. London people are always crossing, changing, improvising, inventing. That's what I hope I capture in the language of my dance compositions.

My dance is quite stylised – I'm still very influenced by my classical training and probably very influenced by my English literature training as well, because I do feel that a stylised body has got more poetic charge to it, so when one abstracts and heightens you get more juice out of the body than when you are making it do everyday things. Everyday things happen in the everyday anyway. If you want to put something in the theatre then you need to transmute the everyday into something else, make it more of a metaphor.

**How easy was it to build your company in the UK?**

One brilliant thing about Britain is that there is an investment by the Government and the state into the arts. Obviously it is being challenged at the moment, but I was very lucky when I started because there were various grants I could apply for.

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It is never easy in the arts – it is not like going to a company and immediately getting a pensionable salary. You only take up a career in the arts if nothing else makes you happy.

The Arts Council was a crucial player in my choreography career – for years I was a project-funded dancer and then when I set up my company, very gradually we were able to have an infrastructure. At the beginning I had about 24 part-time administrators in the space of three years because I could never pay them enough and whatever I earned, 10 per cent of that was nothing. My first break came when John Ashford, who ran The Place – the theatre at the London School of Contemporary Dance – believed in what I was doing and invited me to be a resident company there, so that gave us some stability and a network, and was a very crucial part of the company’s development.

#### Do you go back to India much?

Yes, every year, because my mother still lives there, in Bangalore, and I’ve all my relations – of whom I have literally thousands.

For the very first time, after almost 20 years of my company’s existence, we went to India last year, which was an incredible experience. Although most people in the dance world in India would name-check my company – because dance is a very small world in India – I never really had the resources to take a middle-scale dance programme like ours there because it is quite expensive. There are 16 people on the road, it is highly designed and we have to tour with two technicians, so production costs are very heavy. We were able to do it with the help of two commercial sponsors – one was Tata, which is a huge Indian company; the other was a motor company in the south of India called TVS Motors. So for the first time we were funded privately and it was through their generous sponsorship that we were able to present our work in

three major cities in India – Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai. I had no idea what the response would be because my kind of work had never been seen in India. It was amazing because it was so well received, and even people who I thought might not like it because they were purists seemed very ready to try to understand what the dance was about.

We also had sponsorship from the British Council through a super programme called *Connections through Culture*. I’ve got the funding for stage one, which is looking and networking for possible projects that would involve both Indian and British dancers creating something on an equal basis. I’ve met quite a few visual artists and I’m at the thinking stage of a project that I’m hoping will happen over the next two years. It will involve an institution in India where we could have much more long-term links and produce something that would be available in India and in Britain.

We did a workshop in India and there was an amazing amount of interest from young contemporary dancers who are all on the journey that I made, in that a lot of them are shifting from classical to contemporary. This is something that is engaging lots of people in India at the moment – shifting from classical to contemporary without rejecting the classical, without polarising, without saying that everything about the classical is bad.

Also, there is a whole other group of people in India who haven’t come through the classical route. On television in India there are lots of dance competitions and there is a huge corporate entertainment scene where dancers are asked to produce pieces of work. Lots of young men are involved, which I also find interesting because in Britain finding male dancers is quite difficult. It is a very interesting time for contemporary dance in India – I think it is evolving in its own way and I am really hoping that I can play a part in that.

