

Summer 2014

Ballet Review



**Ballet Review 42.2
Summer 2014**

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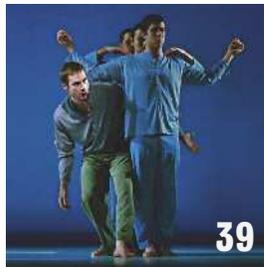
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**Cover Photograph by Dominik Mentzos, The Forsythe Company:
Fabrice Mazliah and Christopher Roman in William
Forsythe's *I don't believe in outer space*.**

makes me wish I had seen what directors Pavel Liska and Kelly Copper did with the material of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, even if it appears from the program notes that the Bard's text plays a very minor role in it.

—In any event, I look forward to Foreign Affairs 2014.

New York

Karen Greenspan

For *The Manganiyar Seduction*, presented at last year's White Light Festival at Lincoln Center, the stage is set with a grid of red-velvet curtained boxes, four rows high and nine across. Each box is framed with bright globe lights. Within each box sits a brown-skinned musician, cross-legged, wearing white cotton pantaloons and tunic, topped with a multicolored turban.

A single box lights up, the red curtain is drawn back, and a solitary player on the *kamaicha* (round, cellulose instrument made of mango wood covered with goat skin) bows a soulful introduction. A second box lights up and a singer joins in with singular full-throated vocal techniques honed in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan in northwest India. Another vocalist takes over the exploration of melodic contours incorporating pointed hand and arm gestures.

Finally, these initial unmetered sounds unite as the *kamaicha* sets a steady droning beat. A box on the third row lights up to reveal the *dholak* (two-headed hand drum), setting the heartbeat of the music that is already commanding the pulse of each member of the audience.

At the same moment the conductor, Deu Khan, has synchronized his dramatic entrance, dancing and stomping onto the stage wearing the same white garb as the other musicians. In his hands are the *khartaal* (castanets made of teak wood), which he plays with energy and theatrical flair while coaxing, daring, and cheering on the artists he is conducting. His physicality is powerfully dance-like as he shimmies his head, waves his arms,

squats, lunges, step-touches, advances and retreats as if performing a martial arts form. Playing the *khartaal* also involves special hand movements. When I spoke with Deu Khan after the performance, I asked if his movements were choreographed. He replied, "I am just a musician. I play the *khartaal*." Hardly!

Solo and small group improvisations alternated with a robust unison choral refrain culled from a Sufi poem which translates as, "The only alphabet my beloved taught me is the alphabet of love." The poem, "Alfat In Bin Un Bin," is attributed to Bulleh Shah, a beloved Sufi saint, humanist, and philosopher who lived from 1680 to 1757 in what is present-day Pakistan. The simplicity and humanity of his poetry explains its cross-cultural appeal, stretching across Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. As a result, many of his poems have been set to music. The unforgettable melody was reminiscent of an ancient folk tune I might hear in many a culture where the men sit and sing together, pounding out the insistent rhythms on a drum, lap, or table. Of course, each time the musicians returned to the choral refrain, the fullness of sound was augmented by the vision of many red boxes lighting up.

The twang of a solo on the *morchang* (Jew's harp) was engaging in its playful strangeness and the snake-charmer flutes, or *pungi*, seduced the spirit with their reedy exotic timbre. The *dhol* (bass drums played with a stick while standing) are brightly decorated with colored fabric, tassels, and tiny glittery mirrors, much like the dress of Rajasthan's Gypsy women. These drummers pounded out an undulating rhythm that conjured up images of a camel caravan crossing the landscape of their desert homeland. Some of the other instruments they played included the *sarangi* (fiddle) and *algoza* (double flute).

The Manganiyars are a caste of Muslim musicians from Rajasthan, India. For at least three hundred years their lineage has kept the tradition of celebrating through music and song the history and cycles of life for the royalty and the wealthy merchant class of the region, which straddles the India-Pakistan border. As

they performed at the royal court, in private homes, and at community celebrations, they developed an evolving repertory dedicated to every type of occasion.

Although the Manganiyar musicians are Muslim, their patrons were frequently Hindu. There is testimony that they, too, were originally Hindu, but converted to Islam during the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707), possibly to escape his tax levied on non-Muslim populations in northern India. Manganiyar customs and music embody a unique hybridization of Hindu and Muslim influences. They have historically included Hindu deities in their worship and songs.

Shalini Ayyagari, an ethnomusicologist who has researched and written extensively about Manganiyar music, explains that their musical practices draw on Hindustani classical music as well as a Sindhi (from the Sindh province in eastern Pakistan) musical system called *surs*. The *surs* are fixed vocal melodies rooted in poetry, local folklore, and the surrounding landscape. The Manganiyar's inclusive music includes Sufi poems, Hindu ballads, historical narratives, and musical games, as well as compositions and improvisations to fit particular occasions. Ayyagari identifies their music as an example of cultural ingenuity, an amalgam of various musical practices that eludes boundaries.

After the violent partition of India and Pakistan into separate nations in 1947, trade in the desert region dwindled and times were inhospitable to maintaining a musical livelihood. The survival of Manganiyar music and the skills to produce the instruments were in jeopardy. Through the dedication of several folklorists, the Manganiyar musical tradition was reinvented for the concert stage, enabling tourist, national, and global audiences to enjoy this unique yet universal artistic expression. Now we are the lucky recipients of this rebirth and cultural diplomacy.

The theatrical concept was the brainchild of director Roysten Abel, an Indian theater director, who was originally seduced by a couple of Manganiyar musicians involved in one

of his earlier projects. Once that production had ended, he discovered that he longed for their music. The challenge was to find a way to induce the seduction of the soul through reimagining this folk tradition. Thinking back on the heightened seductive quality of Amsterdam's red-light district, he conceived the staging for the music.

In a postperformance interview with John Schaefer of WNYC, Abel explained his commitment to reimagining endangered folk traditions with dramatic enhancement in order to bring them to the global stage. He elaborated, "For modern audiences you have to give a fuller experience." Another example is his staged piece, *A Hundred Charmers*, conceived to employ one hundred snake-charmer players and the artisans who craft the instruments, as well as to save this dying performance tradition from the legal injunction in India forbidding the ownership of snakes.

In the final Manganiyar choral refrain, "The only alphabet my beloved taught me was the alphabet of love," all the red curtains are open, the boxed compartments are dancing with light, thirty-six musicians are singing and playing – full volume, up-tempo – while the conductor/*khartaal*-player exerts his entire body, like a spellbinding sorcerer, stirring up an intoxicating dervish of sumptuous sound, light, and color.

New York

Harris Green

~~Acheron, my Webster's assures me, is a river in Hades, so Acheron, Liam Scarlett's first commission from New York City Ballet, could be expected to begin with the stage steeped in murk and its cast of seventeen slowly moving to hushed, somber music. The fact that the nine men are bare-chested implies a classical mythos. The eight women's loosely flowing costumes hint at an ancient Grecian influence. Mark Stanley's moody lighting establishes stasis of a kind — for a while.~~

~~—Those in the audience who read the really small type in their Playbill learned that Scar-~~