

This is a first report about ‘Moving On’, the National Symposium for South Asian Dance, held at the Curve Theatre in Leicester on 28 October 2011 as part of the 30 year celebrations of CICD. A fuller report will be provided in due course by Padma Rao.

Supported by a large number of organisations and individual artists, CICD put together a packed programme of discussions and panels for the day, which attracted almost 80 participants. Though it was indeed a long and intensive day, it became clear in the end that significant progress had been made through this event with regard to thinking about future directions for South Asian dance development in the UK and elsewhere.

The Symposium was followed by an evening performance at the Curve Studio, featuring four young male dancers, each presenting one ‘traditional’ or classical and one contemporary item. Ash Mukherjee, Aakash Odedra, Sooraj Subramaniam and Revanta Sarabhai performed to a full and appreciative audience, receiving much praise for their performances, which vividly illustrated how various dance styles and performance methods can indeed be combined to good effect.

The day was inaugurated by Leicester’s Assistant Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood, who expressed her delight that CICD’s 30 Year Celebrations throughout 2011 were culminating in this national event. This put Leicester on the map not only as a much-heralded multicultural city in postmodern Europe, but also as one of Britain’s major centres for cultivation of South Asian dance forms. A brief welcome by Nilima Devi, Artistic Director of CICD was then followed by a power point presentation by CICD’s Chair, Prof. Werner Menski. This set the scene for the day’s discussions and demonstrated that just as law and life are connected and are full of potential conflicts and tensions, dance can and needs to be perceived as a highly dynamic field of activity. This is indeed comparable to flying a kite with four corners, angles or perspectives that compete over the direction which dance developments may take. In the field of dance, the four corners are, basically: (1) the individual artist and her/his values and ethics; (2) the social and more informal context within which dance activities take place; (3) the formal and sometimes state-centric frameworks for dance development, including official funding; and (4) the value-based messages that dance performers give through their work, linking in with today’s agenda of human rights and international norms. The full presentation is available on the CICD website, at www.cicd.org.uk.

The fact that South Asian dancers may not only be ‘crazy’ (*pagal*) about dance, but also love to talk, and thus can be equally good with words than with movements, was made evident in an excellent starting panel of four young dancers. Anusha Subramanyam, Mayuri Boonham, Aakash Odedra and Sonia Sabri offered their thoughts, guided by carefully prepared and focused questions from Nilima Devi and expert facilitation by Dr. Ann David. Anusha and Mayuri also presented clips of their work with rich commentaries and insights about their personal journeys as artists and multi-media and multi-site performers. Aakash provided versatile and deeply reflective insights into his multi-style training and its strains on body and mind (‘dancing from the kidney’), even resulting, as he put it, in partly animalistic instincts that keep a dancer flying in the air, quite like a kite. Sonia, who could not be present in person because of other commitments, contributed a well-focused, articulate pre-recorded account of her artistic journey and the many challenges along the way.

After a much-needed coffee break, two presentations by Arts Council officers provided guidance and advice from the more formal corner of the kite, speaking about how South Asian dance and dancers might move successfully into the future. Sri Sarker eloquently presented a critique of over-reliance on existing funding structures and hierarchies, advising a more dynamic, non-territorial approach. This should particularly help struggling emerging artists to secure spaces for development, room for movement and arenas for new voices. Useful advice was also offered on the potential for applications for Grants for the Arts.

Hasan Mahamdallie then presented a highly sophisticated case about creativity and diversity and their assessment, taking the official line that a new vision of diversity was needed today. It was also made clear that one consolidated conversation would be desirable, rather than a cacophony of competing voices. Taking the view that ethnic minority arts are at the centre of Britain's and Europe's plural art worlds, it was argued that the DNA of art is not just English or South Asian. Good art at the highest level was of necessity intrinsically plural and conscious of holistic approaches and multi-perspectival versatility. It was less clear how the Arts Council's new focus on creativity, linked to disability, could be made relevant and productive for South Asian dance artists, since the fact of being culture-specific – thankfully - does not count as disability, but still appears to be treated as a kind of disempowering influence. A lively debate followed, indicating inter alia that supposedly multi-cultural Britain continues to struggle with appreciating the rich offerings made by South Asian dance artists and dance forms, whether in the field of education or performance work. Corner 3 of the kite, this showed, generates its own turbulences for South Asian dance development. Hence the advice to stay away from this corner, in this age of self-employment, had multilayered connotations.

After a delicious lunch, provided by the expertly multicultural catering team at the Curve, a session on future visions and opportunities featured presentations by Meera Kaushik (Akademi), Paul Russ (Dance4) and Atiya Golay (Zeroculture), offering quite different perspectives and insights. Meera documented the successes of Akademi's work and highlighted the increasing relevance of politically visible performances. She also discussed the notable development of the creativity focus in the post-ISTD phase, which gave rise to a highly trained cohort of young dancers, who now needed to think about how to move on. In terms of future visions, Key Performance Indicators (KPI) were flagged up as an important element that required further analysis and critical monitoring.

Paul Russ emphasised that more co-operation and coming together was needed, especially at regional levels, where different urban centres often lacked co-ordination of efforts. There were also many competing levels of expectations and largely unspoken issues of personality and agenda of control were putting brakes on development. Cross-agency working was recommended and the building of stronger alliances between South Asian dancers and other participants in dance development ('more white faces') was suggested as a useful way forward. However, this also raised important questions about the relationship of dance practitioners and dance administrators, promoters and fundraisers. In the current economic climate of freelancing pressures, an emerging culture of expert advice offered potential, but also posed risks.

Atiya Golay emphasised and illustrated that current South Asian dance development presents creative challenges at all levels. She pleaded for more open boundaries and less control by 'older' status-conscious people, thus providing another refreshing young perspective on the challenges of moving on. While the relevance of

contemporary debates was beyond question, dancers were constantly challenged into multi-tasking activities, which could be stressful. While there was no time to debate how younger dancers could seek to avoid falling into the traps of ‘establishment thinking’ and authoritative practices, this was clearly also an issue that would retain much relevance for the field as a whole, posing huge challenges and significant pitfalls.

The next session was arranged as three break-out groups which addressed respectively issues of dance training and South Asian dance in British higher education, the role of the media and audience development, and the role of dance companies in dance development.

In Group 1, a number of case studies on dance education provided rich material for further analysis. The new opportunities for sharing dance, through CAT and the various Higher Education provisions, had led to notable advancement, but where would those variously trained dancers now go? In the media group, the growing importance of new publicity tools and social network possibilities was highlighted, as well as the significant importance of preview publicity, rather than post-event review. Outsourcing of grant applications was also advised in this forum, freeing dancers’ creative energies. Group 3 engaged in discussions on moving on through dance companies and confirmed that there is considerable dynamism in the field as a whole, while also identifying a number of challenges and offering some hope for new ventures and collaborations. While increased networking might offer new scope, it also increases the pressures on multi-tasking individuals to do even more in the 24 hours that a day offers.

After tea, the focus shifted first to exploration of the potential synergies between dance artists and producers. Farooq Chaudhry gave an immensely insightful presentation on ‘the business of art’, demonstrating how the Akram Khan Dance Company skilfully divides responsibilities between artist and producer. Farooq provided candid hands-on guidance to practitioners, encouraging them to search for suitable partnerships with managers and producers. Emphasising the need to have one eye on art, and the other on money, he also highlighted that the business model presented was actually quite simple and commonsensical in principle, but demanded in practice constant skilful navigation, monitoring and alert decision-making. The lively Q&A session, chaired by Jamie Watton of South East Dance, brought out further dimensions of such exciting and evidently highly successful business and management models.

A session on creativity, new work and collaborations followed, chaired by Dr. Stacey Prickett. This offered some more exciting insights into how several young dancers perceived their development. Recounting how their respective training and experience, apart from South Asian dance expertise and influences, impacts on their work and artistic journey led to really fascinating accounts, showing how it is possible to contribute to the richness of South Asian dance development in very personal but highly meaningful ways.

Shane Shambhu outlined and illustrated his development as a dance artist from a Bharatnatyam base, exploring how aspects like *abhinaya* acquired new meanings for him in new artistic contexts. Amina Khayyam presented her Kathak-based trajectory through new work on Garcia Lorca’s writing, demonstrating the subtleties of stylistic mixing in performance work. Subathra Subramaniam fascinatingly illustrated how her academic science background led to highly innovative dance developments, sending virtual ‘shivers’ through the audience’s minds. Kali Chandrasegaram presented a very different form of personal management of the boundaries between dance, culture and

other fields, offering a danced lesson in human rights consciousness and gender navigation.

The summing up of the day's proceedings was conducted by two speakers who had both been taking notes throughout the day to come up with a number of concluding observations, suggestions for action points and recommendations. Linking back to the model of the kite with its four competing but constantly interacting corners, Werner Menski highlighted the empowering experience of sitting through the whole day. The presentations and discussions had actually been giving more strength to every single corner of the kite of dance. Illustrating the skilled cultural navigation that the Symposium had brought out, the need for balance had been emphasised throughout. The constant presence of movement, reflection and continuous re-adjustment processes reinforced that dance was a highly dynamic, potentially stressful, but also highly rewarding activity to engage in. The Symposium had achieved the following outcomes:

1. From a very personal angle, it had provided rich evidence of how individual dancers, mainly younger ones who recounted their experiences, had engaged in solid dance practice combined with reflections on their role and their contributions to the art form and to wider society. Shane's thoughts on *abhinaya* as an actor's way of thinking, Amina's inspiration through literary art works, Subathra's science-based approach and Aakash's reflections on what it meant for body and mind to dance in so many different ways were prime examples that the next generation of dancers were not just 'crazy' about dance. They had the ability to move on and to convey messages of deep significance through their dance work.
2. From a social angle, being linked into a community or society, having the potential to rely on partnerships of various kinds had clearly been brought out as an important parameter of artistic work and success. South Asian dancers were individuals, but at the same time closely interlinked and connected with others. That such highly dynamic relationships are never quite without strains and stresses is merely human and needs to be managed by the individuals concerned to ensure continuity of engagement with dance.
3. From a more formal angle, the need for 'official' support mechanisms and support structures is there, but cannot be relied on by most dance practitioners. While the need had been aired from a variety of perspectives, it had become clear that there were significant gaps of communication between individual artists, and also between artists and potential funders and promoters. Arts Council policy and individual artistic and developmental agenda needed to be more closely aligned to assist individual dancers in accessing support structures and funding possibilities. The emergence on new semi-formal structures of freelance support had been clearly identified as a growth area, but also as a source of new tensions. Farooq's presentation had made it very clear that at the highest level, success could be cultivated for some time by skilful management and acute awareness of pluralism and dynamism. Dancers, however, were not immortal beings, and there were physical limits to dance development that are simply a fact of life. Further down the line of prominence, it would be less easy for emerging artists to move on to a bright future, while the focus on funding was never going to go away.
4. The more ideological angle and dimensions of South Asian dance had also been brought out, not only in discussions about naming dance forms and identifying

caste-like status allocations. Dancers inevitably conveyed and utilised political agenda, which came out well in a number of contributions, particularly Meera's emphasis on politically visible performances, Atiya's presentation about political and ideological agenda involved in dance practice and management, and Kali's closing presentation on gender balancing.

Padma Rao had collected a number of observations and action points. She will provide a fuller report of the day's proceedings in due course. Her main concluding points at the end of the Symposium itself were:

1. While we had also listened to senior dance practitioners and leader figures, this Symposium had given an important space to young dancers, who actually had much to say and contribute to these discussions. They should be encouraged even more in future events of this kind, which should certainly take place.
2. The close links of dance training, performance and production had been brought out throughout the day. There was evidently no agreement on whether there were too many trained dancers or too few, but it was evident that there was more room in the sky.
3. The importance of working together had been reinforced throughout the day and again, there was room and space for all kinds of South Asian dance and no need to play status games or politics with different dance styles and labels.

In the final discussion, Anusha emphasised that South Asian dance development had in many cases been possible despite the absence of much funding. This observation would appear to raise two important issues: Even if South Asian dance is an art form that Britain may still try to ignore, it will continue to develop, simply because there will always be committed individuals 'crazy' enough to be involved in various dance forms. Secondly, and closely connected, even if there is little funding for the arts and for specific dance projects, the future is not at all bleak, since individual skilful navigation and self-help management techniques will continue to contribute to the wider development of the arts and to South Asian dance development. The presence and active engagement of so many young people in this National Symposium was a notable source of much hope and encouragement.

Finally, CICD and Nilima Devi were thanked for putting together this thoughtful, packed programme, and participants were released for a short break before the evening performance, which was also a resounding success.

On behalf of CICD, I thank all participants and especially the speakers, facilitators and chairs of sessions for the wonderful spirit of collegiality and co-operation. May all your kites fly high and move on with ease!

WM