



Shantala Shivalingappa talks about dance and her show *Namasya*

The Joyce Theater spotlights Shantala Shivalingappa, a classical Indian dancer, in four solos—including one by Pina Bausch

By Gia Kourlas - Mon Jun 18 2012

*Shantala Shivalingappa talks about *Namasya*, a program of four solos at the Joyce Theater that pays tribute to ideas about reverence. The revered classical Indian dancer Shantala Shivalingappa performs works by the famed German choreographer Pina Bausch, Ushio Amagatsu of the Butoh group Sankai Juku, Savitry Nair and herself.*

*In Sanskrit, the word *namasya* means “to pay homage” or “reverence.” *Namasya* also serves as the title of Shantala Shivalingappa’s evening-length work, which showcases solos by Pina Bausch, Ushio Amagatsu of the Butoh group Sankai Juku, Savitry Nair and herself, beginning Wednesday 27 at the Joyce Theater. (Nair is Shivalingappa’s mother and a much-admired classical Indian dancer.) Shivalingappa specializes in Kuchipudi, a South Indian dance form; but she has also branched out with the likes of Maurice Béjart, Peter Brook and Bausch. In *Namasya*, she explores the artists and traditions that have influenced and inspired her. The intimate program is also a chance to be in the presence, for an uninterrupted hour, of one of the most transfixing dancers of our time. Shivalingappa spoke about the piece from Paris, where she was raised and still resides.*

Time Out New York: Did you conceive of *Namasya* as an evening of four solos?

Shantala Shivalingappa: Actually, it came into being at different stages. The first solo that I started working on was the one with Pina Bausch. It was intended for one of Pina’s festivals. This was in homage to a dear friend of hers, who had been very influential and present in my life, and who had just passed away. Somehow the time constraint was such that the solo wasn’t ready for the festival, but we continued to work on it for about three years off and on. I thought, I have this one solo: What can I do with this? I have admired [Ushio] Amagatsu’s work for a very long time. The thing is that he only choreographs for his own company, and he only works with Japanese men.

Time Out New York: How did you approach him?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I knew the person touring his work in France, so I asked, “Do you think I could put this request to him?” And he said, “Well, you know, why not? He appreciates your work and he has seen you dance. Ask him and you’ll get your answer.” [Laughs] I went to see one of [Amagatsu’s] shows when he was in Lyon, and I just candidly put this to him, and he said, “Let me think about it.” And very soon after, he gave me a positive answer. I was absolutely thrilled. The work with Pina, of course, was something that had started a few years before, because I had also worked with her company; it was much more familiar for me. Whereas working with Amagatsu was something completely different, even in terms of body language, movement—just everything. We worked for two weeks. He came into the studio with quite a clear idea of what the solo was going to be; the music was composed. But he left a few areas open for what would come up during our rehearsals. It was a wonderful experience. Unforgettable, really.

Time Out New York: Why do you think he broke his rule about only choreographing for his own company to work with you?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I don't know if it's really a rule. It might be just the work he does. But he did give me a clue, because one day we were talking, and he said he felt that it would be possible to work with me because there was something about the stories of Indian dance and the movement. He said, "I could feel there were some common points—that we could find common ground together." It was actually quite surprising. When you first look at both of the styles, they're nearly completely poles apart. Kuchipudi is vibrantly colorful, it's very rhythmic, it's very quick. It tells concrete stories with characters. His style of Butoh is very slow, very minimal and completely abstract, so it seemed like, where did he find the common ground? [Laughs] But when I worked with him, I realized that it was actually the inner process that was strikingly similar.

Time Out New York: How so?

Shantala Shivalingappa: The solo that Amagatsu choreographed for me, from beginning to end, is a series of very precise images that come from either nature or certain emotions—like the wind or a flower or a lake, or waking up in the morning, or the sun—extremely precise images and emotions and perceptions that actually give rise to a particular movement. The movement is nothing like Kuchipudi, but the process of having that story in your inner eye is actually very similar to what I would do in a Kuchipudi piece. That was quite a revelation, and it also allowed me to see my own style in a different light. A lot of the elements that I learned with Amagatsu have seeped into and influenced my subsequent work in Kuchipudi.

Time Out New York: Like what?

Shantala Shivalingappa: Like the dynamics of slowness and the pull of gravity. I think that I developed a different kind of awareness to some of those things. I could see that they also had an existence in Kuchipudi. That continues to be present in my approach.

Time Out New York: So you had two solos. What came next?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I also had the idea to have certain video images of Indian dance that would give a slightly unusual view of the way the movement is seen. Indian dance is very frontal. I worked with Alexandre Castres—he's an ex-dancer of the Pina Bausch company who also does video work, and he filmed some of the Kuchipudi sections that I dance. He put the camera in different places and also made the images kind of hazy. It gives elements of Indian dance: the color, the gestures, the eyes and the face, but it gives a little bit of a different view of it.

Time Out New York: What is the fourth piece?

Shantala Shivalingappa: The last solo was created by Savitry Nair, my mother and also the first dance teacher I had when I was very little. It was created when both of us were teaching a workshop in the Rudra [Béjart] School in Lausanne [Switzerland,] which was founded by [choreographer] Maurice Béjart. This was just a few weeks before Béjart passed away. My mother was very close to him; it was really through him and his company that I discovered what it was to be a dancer. There was something very special about being there at that time, and one day, she said, "I have an idea for a solo for you." The music is a classical Indian piece that Béjart used in one of his early works. We just got into the studio and in two days, we made this solo.

Time Out New York: Have you and your mother created many pieces together?

Shantala Shivalingappa: This was not the first time, but it's maybe the second time. We haven't done that much together. When I started learning Kuchipudi, I was 15, and that was the first time we did something together. [Laughs] The next thing was for Namasya. It was short, but it was a very special moment. There was this whole atmosphere of being there, using Béjart's music and knowing that we didn't know how long he would be there. It was a very emotional time. That is mostly what I remember, more than something more choreographic. It was the situation. That ends the evening.

Time Out New York: How did you meet Pina Bausch?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I met Pina Bausch, again, through my mother. They were quite close friends. This was when I was a teenager. Pina knew me when I was growing up, and whenever the company came to Paris, we would go and see the performances, and she would come home for a meal. I didn't know that I was going to be a dancer. [Laughs] That was not at all the aim of my activities. When I started dancing more seriously, during the first tour that I did in Europe with my master from India, she invited us to Wuppertal [in Germany]. We performed in the theater and gave a demonstration and workshop for the company. She saw me perform with Bartabas [who directs Zingaro, a company specializing in equestrian theater] several times; she saw my work with Peter Brook. She was always aware of what was happening, and one day when her company was in Paris, she said, "Let's go out for lunch, just the two of us. Why don't you join the company for the next piece that we're going to do?" This was in 1999. It's quite an incredible and wonderful story.

Time Out New York: How did you fit in with the company?

Shantala Shivalingappa: It was a bit like a brave new world. I started performing as a classical Indian dancer and had also done other projects, like with Zingaro or Béjart, but I had always been chosen as a classical dancer, and that's what I would perform. It's really with Pina that I started doing movement that was different from my classical training. I was a guest in the company, and all the dancers knew each other so well. I was kind of parachuted inside of it. [Laughs] And I was very young, so everything was a bit bizarre for me—the way they rehearsed and the way they were so uninhibited in rehearsal was very strange. It was a slow process, and Pina had that immense human gift—she's done it with countless other dancers before me—of holding you by the hand and making you feel comfortable and confident and secure enough that you are able to relax and to allow yourself to just jump into the water and to see whether you can swim, and how you can swim in new ways. It's such an incredible environment. When I started working with the company, I was 22. It was a very slow and long process, and for the first piece that I made with them, I didn't really know what I was doing! I just tried to do the best I could, given the tasks that we were given. The next piece was three years later, and little by little, it opened a whole new approach to movement and to expressing emotion. And also human relations—being in a company and traveling together and sharing together and working together, all these things I really learned with Pina and her company in a very strong way.

Time Out New York: Were you taking dance class with the company?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I don't have any formal training in anything else [other] than Kuchipudi, so I just did what I could. Now I can do a simple classical barre exercise, more or less. I never imagined that one day I would stand with my hand on the barre and move my arms up and down like a ballerina going into a plié. I love to do that, and it's definitely brought a lot, again, movement-wise. Also, just an awareness of a different way of holding my body and initiating movement. It's so enriching.

Time Out New York: When and why did you decide that you wanted to pursue dancing in a meaningful way?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I started learning when I was six with my mother. I took her classes twice a week in Paris while I was going to school, but it was never really a passion. It was something I enjoyed, but I didn't see myself as being a dancer. When I was 15 or 16, my mother was making a piece of choreography with myself and two other dancers—she wanted me to learn a variation in Kuchipudi. I trained in another style, Bharata Natyam, which is what my mother specializes in. She is also a Kuchipudi dancer, and it was her master that then became my master. She said, "I would like you to learn a variation from my master and from his school." That summer, we went to India. I had been to his school before, and I had seen Kuchipudi before, but this time I was there to learn a particular variation. [The master's] son taught me a few minutes of the variation, and that was absolutely a defining moment. The feeling of those movements in my body was like coup de foudre, as we say in French—it was

love at first sight. It was a very strong, intense experience just in my body—and a very organic kind of experience—and I just went mad for Kuchipudi. That's all I wanted to do. [Laughs] Whatever time I got, I would spend a few weeks in India. And then when I finished my 12th grade in school, I took a year off and went and studied Kuchipudi. There was nothing else that interested me or existed apart from learning Kuchipudi.

Time Out New York: Did your mother have a sense that would happen?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I don't think so, no. It came as a surprise to her as much as to me. I also remember that when I was completely smitten by the style—not just dancing, but watching other dancers in my master's class, I was like, This is such an amazing experience. I had a very deep desire to share Kuchipudi with as many people as possible around the world. Obviously, I was living in Paris, and this was happening in India. I thought, No one knows about this in Paris or anywhere else, and they must know about it. This has so much to offer and it should be more available to people, so that was a strong wish from the beginning.

Time Out New York: Kuchipudi is quite fast. What are its other characteristics?

Shantala Shivalingappa: Like all Indian dance styles, it's got a strong storytelling element. The mythological episodes and stories are acted out. In the pure-dance aspect, I would say that it is very fast-paced. It's earthbound with the beating of the feet on the floor, which is quite intricate. At the same time, it's also very airy—there are a lot of jumps in it. And there's a very beautiful opposition between the feet, which are very strong, and the legs, which are anchored into the earth, and the whole work of the back and the torso, which is extremely swaying and flowing. It's very graceful, but at the same time very strong. And there is a lot of use of the hips and the curves of the hips.

Time Out New York: In Namasya, you are onstage almost the entire time. How difficult is it to move from style to style?

Shantala Shivalingappa: Well, the format of being onstage for a long time is something we're used to in Indian dance. It's very normal for a dancer to have a two-hour performance. The more tricky part, as you say, is to change from Amagatsu's style to Pina Bausch's and then into something else. That's also an amazing opportunity. At the beginning, it was more difficult, but the more I perform the piece, the more I have found natural links and an organic way of going from one solo to the other that also makes sense. The whole evening, of course, has four different solos, but for me, they're very much linked, and I experience it as one whole evening. It's like walking on one path that takes you through different environments. But it's still me, and I'm still walking with my feet on the floor somehow. It's beautiful, because it connects the different styles in a way. They can be together without being separate entities.

Time Out New York: You have been touring this show since 2007. What is it like to keep returning to this? How do you get yourself back into the frame of mind to perform it?

Shantala Shivalingappa: I love returning to pieces—this one or other ones. In Pina's company, they do pieces that are 20 or 30 years old; of course, some people have not danced them for that long, but some have been dancing them for 15, 20 years. You change, you evolve and you're a different person sometimes, and the dance is in parallel with that. At the same time, there is something in it that does not change, because it's the same choreography. But you always find something new, and you find new ways of expressing it.

Time Out New York: What was the process of working with Pina on the solo?

Shantala Shivalingappa: Well, the process of working on a solo with Pina—it was the same also when I worked with her for pieces in her company—is that basically she gives you certain starting points for movement. We call them questions, but they can be a theme or a word or an idea, or just a feeling. Basically, that's the starting point for you to create some

kind of movement coming out of whatever [an image] triggers in you. It could be the sunlight, feeling happy, a river, tears. She gives you these questions, and you produce some movement that seems to answer them. This goes on for a period of time, and it gives you a certain amount of movement material. When she feels that you have enough material, then you sit down with her. Everything is taken on video. You watch this together, and she tells you which part seems more interesting. You mark those particular moments that she would like you to keep, so there's a selection; from that selection, you start putting little phrases together and then you get longer sentences and whole paragraphs. Little by little, the solo starts taking shape. She keeps directing you through it. It's a constant back-and-forth between sitting with her and watching things and working on your own.

Time Out New York: That's really beautiful. Her solos seem so personal.

Shantala Shivalingappa: I know! It's incredible. They're extremely personal, because the movements do come from the dancers themselves; and at the same time, a dancer on his or her own would never be able to make that solo. And also, another thing that's extremely striking with Pina's solos is that the solo is worked on absolutely in silence nearly until the end. Actually, until the end. When it's ready, music is attached to it. So either she already has an idea, or she looks for things—and you can also propose something if you like—but the end product is so amazingly musical. It's really as if that dance piece was made exactly to that music piece. It's unexplainable and just incredible. [Laughs] It's a surprising process.

Time Out New York: Bausch died in 2009. Is it melancholy for you to perform this piece?

Shantala Shivalingappa: No, not at all. The whole of Namasya is very much [created in the memory of] certain people who are not here today. But they are so present in my life; and dance, for me, is only a celebration of that. It's a celebration of all that they were and that they continue to be through the dance. You know, dance has a way of making something alive in the moment; and when the dance is over, then it's gone, and it's okay. For me, it's even a way of being in contact and of making them be alive. It's wonderful.