

In touch with Padmini

Chettur-Cultured Bodies and the Representation of Gender in Dance

The intense and minimalist dance style of dancer and choreographer Padmini Chettur represents an exciting and provocative choreographic language. From her training and experience in traditional dance forms, she is creating works that evoke an alluring intelligence; her choreography, however, does not adhere to the aesthetic and formal characteristics of traditional Indian dance clichés. She has taken her dance works on tour in India and Europe, and now to the rest of the world. Vinita Ramani caught up with Padmini, and the performance of 'Paper Dolls' at the Esplanade Theatre Studio, Singapore (10 September, 2005)

The Scene

Four dancers dressed in cream-coloured, soft, almost diaphanous, sleeveless thigh-length dresses that hung like petticoats on dolls, along with loose pants in the same colour.

The floor before us was wide, like sitting along the length of a rectangle, or rather like watching a film unspool in cinemascope. It created the same sensation as the moving picture does. One senses the potential for movement, stillness and colour to manifest and linger in a corner here, a space over there. The eyes must rove, seek and capture vignettes occurring within the bigger narrative thread.

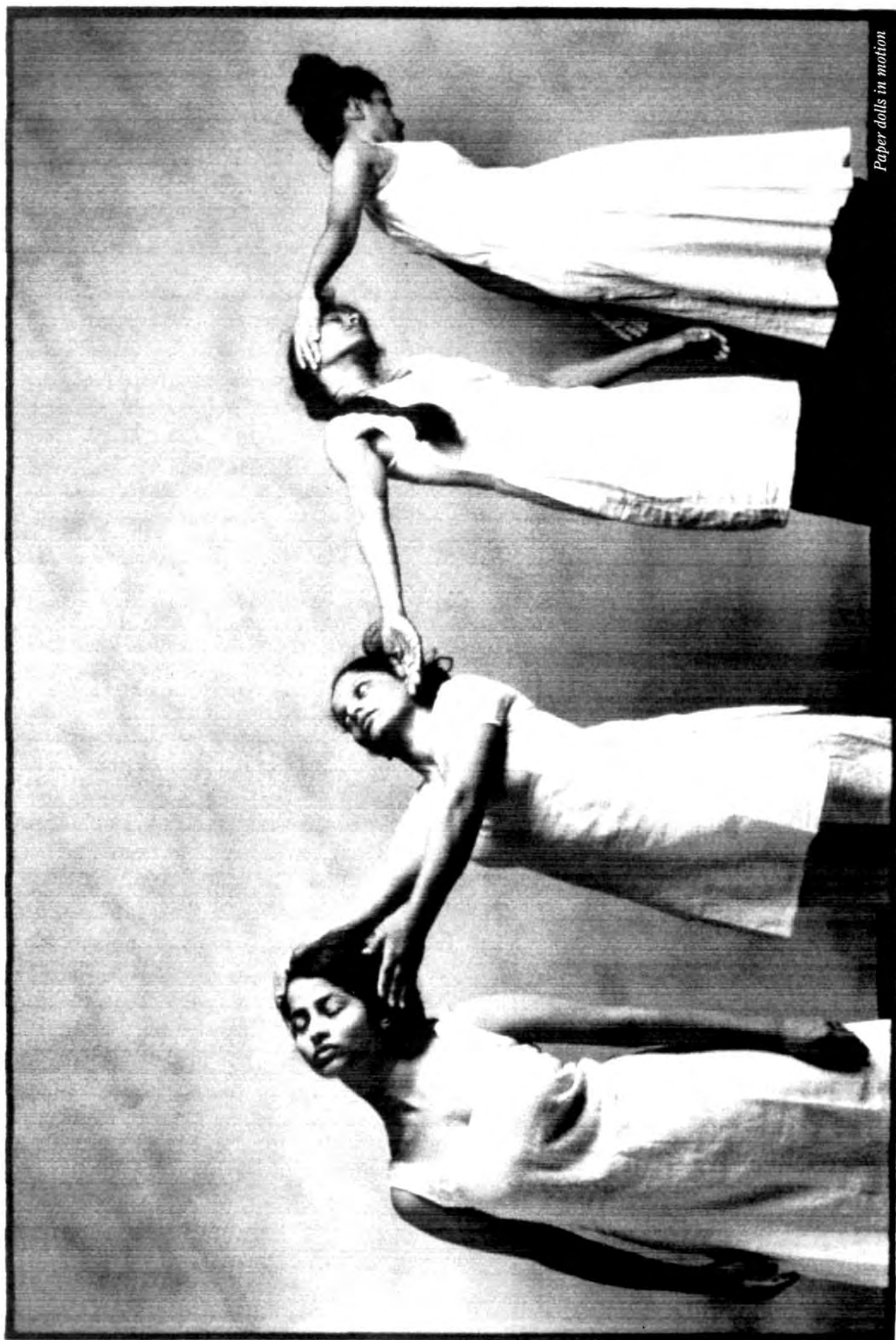
In the black, minimalist space, the background to the dancers is an ochre wall. It is grainy and depending on how it is lit, changes from vermillion tones and sunset warmth to the pale quiet brown of tree trunks.

It is this space that the audience walk into, for Chettur's choreographed piece, 'Paper Dolls' which is different because the dancers have already begun when we pad into the theatre, finding the seats we desire.

Already, repetition is in process.



*Padmini Chettur
Sketch by Pattanapong
Varanyanon*



"The chain of paper dolls we cut out as children come to life. They represent what is perfect but what is also two-dimensional. A form easily broken, held together by the thinnest strips of flesh. The line unravels, then breaks into segments, clusters, fragments. Each affects the whole constantly, consistently. The dancers are hung perpetually in a tense negotiating space of nearness and distance. They remain connected, often by time, sometimes through intention. The aim is not to dance in isolation, but in response to the dancing around you."

The music, composed by Maarten Visser, is bare. It begins with what sounds like one note played on one cello string. A jarring but oddly pensive 'D' that does not want to move beyond and meet its neighbouring notes. A note that only wants to say it is there. Like a metronome, it guides the dancers who are lined up along the back wall, and they go through a series of gestures that are at once soft, but angular and boxed in.

It is what dancer and theorist Ananya Chatterjea described rather aptly, in reference to another dance

piece called *Sharira* (2001), choreographed by Chandralekha and danced by Chettur and Shaji John:

"an increasingly simple movement idiom, removed from any sustained use of technically superlative moments ... in the absence of 'wow' moments of technical virtuosity, we are drawn to notice subtle nuances of technique, expressivity of unfolding hands, the circularity of the journey of a foot that lifts to take a step behind..."¹

Gestures: the deconstruction of gestures that must represent meaning, emotion and in fact, must tell a story. Chettur and the three dancers neither demand nor exhibit emotion. Yet, they convey feeling through the deliberate and calculated execution of movement.

"We started the work on this piece in 2002 and the image was that of dolls in a line cut out of a piece of paper. Their forms were identical, two-dimensional, held together by their thin paper arms. The strength of the form was the line they created and the sense that the spaces in between them were as important as the dolls themselves."

Once again, Chandralekha and Chettur, both trained in bharatnatyam, deconstruct the typifying codes associated with the dance form that involves the "use of a detailed repertoire of eye gestures" and, instead, choose to "question or resignify the existing symbolic codes" (Chatterjea: 47).

¹ Chatterjea, A: *Butting Out – Reading Resistive Choreographics Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha*, 2004: Wesleyan University Press, Middleton, CT

Originally intended as a piece for five dancers, Padmini Chettur's *Paper Doll* is performed with four (an unfortunate injury was the cause for the absence of the fifth dancer).

The Context

Modernity in India has left in its wake the legacy of a particular idea of tradition, art and authenticity. It is a history which Chettur's predecessor and former teacher Chandralekha, revealed in her work as a dancer and which Chettur now continues to do through her own choreography.

Classical *bharatnatyam* dance as we know it today is the product of a modernising project in India. One which took the humiliation and ambiguity associated with the dance of the *devadasis* – the

“servants of god” who danced in temples – and placed it on the stage. Thus, it was washed clean of what Chatterjea clarifies was its “*sringora rasa*, the erotic mood” with its “expositions of love and lovemaking” and transformed into “*bhakti rasa*” or “the devotional mood,

which distances itself from its previous associations with sexual desire and embodied spiritual longing.” (Chatterjea: 152)

Chandralekha painstakingly dug into and gleaned from her own tradition, insisting time and again that this meant that she drew from indigenous cultural practices, ridding it of the chaff that has so come to dominate our ideas of “Hindu”, “Indian” or “woman”.

Chettur pushes even further and delves into the realm of energy, kineticism and a minimalism that does not pretend to speak a language or tell a story.

Chandralekha referred to it this way: “It is the principle of power, of stability, of balance, of holding the earth, of squaring and circularizing

“What struck me in this visual moment of mindless movement – this later became a prelude to the piece and you will see moments as you enter the theatre – was the very absurdity of trying to create ‘meaning’ out of movement that was created literally by assembling parts of the body in a puzzle like manner. This particular problematic became the core question which led me to the ‘concept’ that ‘Paper Dolls’ ultimately deals with: the fact that space, time and the positioning of the dancers’ minds can create ‘meaning’ out of the simplest movement.”

the body and of breaking the tension and rigidity of the vertical line by a curve" (quoted in Chatterjea: 46).

'Paper Dolls' is this image, this vision in action.

"The quality of *'Paper Dolls'* seems to require two almost contradictory abilities from the dancers. One is the ability to execute the 'movement' and provide it particular interpretation which can be intensely personal. The second is the ability to execute the 'movement' in a way that the other dancers become a part of it. I found myself constantly telling the dancers to imagine the larger picture in order for themselves to be perceived. This is a work with no solos, duets or trios. The five dancers together create the context for each other – continuously weaving patterns with invisible threads."

The Interview

Known for her elegant dance style, derived from an acute awareness of her body, Padmini Chettur – born in 1970 – has been trained in the traditional Indian Bharathanatyam dance since she was very young. In 1991, Padmini became part of the company of choreographer and dancer Chandralekha in Chennai, India, and began to adopt contemporary movements. She worked with local dancers in Madras, her native city, in creating *'Paper Dolls'*, which is more than a blend of traditional and modern dance. Based on the idea of a chain of cut-out paper figures, the dancers are linked to one another. I had the opportunity of speaking with Padmini, the dancer and choreographer, after the performance of *'Paper Dolls'* in Singapore.

VR: You talk about *'Paper Dolls'* retaining an "idiotic, dogmatic, endless quality" in its evocation of two-dimensional images, its use of repetition and the presence very simply, of this "line", with all its infinite potential to be melded. In an odd and quite intriguing way, there are fluidity, malleability and an amorphous quality in this dance and its "lines". This is a cliché in my mind, perhaps, that contemporary dance movements involve a great deal of angularity, suddenness in terms of movement and time, which I did not feel in your choreography. What are your thoughts on this?

PC: As you've observed, the actual physicality of *'Paper Dolls'* softens the line into multiple curves that endlessly change the 'intimate' spaces around the body and between the dancers. So, there are two very

different 'lines' we can look at always – the straight, tensile ones that are the lines connecting the dancers in space. These we imagine very much through the way large spatial shifts are stretched in time. The lines that flow through the bodies often challenge the very linearity of the piece. I always try to avoid the most literal definitions, and often what conceptually defines physicality is often the very opposite of what we imagine, and especially in *Paper Dolls*, I had to push to keep the bodies soft and very human to avoid "pretty" or "puppet" associations.

VR: The liner notes to the performance programme mention "layers of significance" that "began to show within the confines of this space". Can you share a little more about decisions in the presence of the dancers on stage, and the use of lighting. Quite often, during the dance, I felt my attention drawn to the borders of that space.... to what was not occupied by the dancers. Tell us more about your understanding of "empty time" or "empty space"..... I ask this also with regard to the use of music, which was remarkable as it brought attention to the space between notes. And in its rhythmic insistence, it became slowly organic, even melodic (whereas initially, I only heard a sound, being repeated).

PC: The first spatial decision was that the five dancers would remain on stage (unfortunately you saw the reduced four-dancers version in Singapore due to a last-minute accident involving the fifth dancer). The image of the five dancers linked together transforms continuously throughout the piece, the connectivity always there either through movement, time or space. In some ways, the piece makes us look at the dancers moving together or apart with attention. The 'narratives' that are created through these body relationships range from literal ones to the largest intended narrative which is that we are all somehow, perpetually affected and affecting the balance of what is around us. That nothing/nobody is isolated in the way we sometimes think. Ultimately, through this thinking about 'connection', the movement itself – though completely 'meaningless' as newly invented movements are – begins to communicate in ways that depended on: a) positions of other dancers; b) timing of other dancers. "Empty space", therefore, is not really 'empty' but always the space in between dancers' bodies or body clusters. It can be positive or negative space. It is always the

"My own work, which started with the very idea of questioning perceptions of the female body in performance, has even been criticized for its complete de-exotification. The implication also being that thus I become a cog in the wheel of western imperialistic consumerism. Whatever the case, I need my work to repair a lot of damage done to women's possible empowerment within the arts."

space we enter or leave behind. Both are equally important in order to retain a larger spatial relationship between the bodies. Likewise in the work of Maarten Visser, the reason you notice the time in between notes is because it is treated as 'something' and not nothing. Right from the first note, the sounds are always travelling up/down the musical scale. The melody, therefore, results even through the series of silences. In a sense as in the movement, the 'melody' is stretched and detailed to a point where it could almost be lost.

VR: *There is something ironic in reifying culture or gender by attaching it to a body, since both are subject to interpretation; subject certainly, to change. You point this out with regard to modernity (i.e. it can't be defined in any homogenous way). How do your dance, your body itself and how you inhabit it, express in a "third" way (so to speak) something which is not "traditional", not "modern"?*

PC: I don't really understand, and don't want to use these "traditional" and "modern" categories; they are especially unimportant in the creative process. The physical vocabulary, which ultimately informs the audience about the body and its politic, is first of all conceptually derived. Of course, other choices of "aesthetic" and "presence" are results of years of thinking, opening the mind, and most of all meticulous work on the body to actualize visions.

So perhaps the "third" way stems from the personal but finds its way to the universal. I try to communicate directly through the body in a way that 'information' is unimportant. It is a great pity that the dance world which could have won so much 'liberation' for the body has ended up constraining and 'boxing' it into either articulate or market "dance".

VR: *In what other ways do you feel an "Indian woman's" body has been inscribed, or coded? How must that body perform? Alternately, did you find avenues for a more open interpretation of bharatnatyam in working with Chandralekha, which "traditionalists" ignore in their insistence that bharatnatyam is a "pure" and "ancient" form (which in a way, ends all dialogue and debate or interpretations of the art)?*

PC: I'm never interested in the debates of "traditionalists", and of course Chandralekha did a lot of 'radical' work but in my opinion her focus was not new interpretation of bharatanatyam. Her work was "choreography", and she redefined the notion of dance in India. She began thinking of empowered bodies, and also of other 'choreographic'

" ... my aim is really to demystify. I represent an India still in the process of assimilating urbanity into its culture. An India where the 'body' still longs for freedoms it doesn't yet have."

parameters of 'space' and 'time' which the present-day proscenium bharatanatyam doesn't address at all.

I think, through time, the 'Indian woman's' body has always been inscribed or coded through patriarchal eyes. From Khajuraho to Bollywood, the exotic seductress is present. The only difference now is that we not only seduce the millions of Indian patriarchs but also millions of western Indophiles, and we add the crown of 'high culture' when it suits us. Ironically, the "off-screen" reality of Indian women's freedom gets worse as we continue to propagate the myths of Sita and Lakshmi.

VR: *What freedom does that body long for?*

PC: Any woman's body longs for freedom from fear. For freedom to express strengths, sexuality. India is still unfortunately a country where a mother and child can't enjoy an evening on a crowded beach without a male protector.

VR: *Any pieces you are working on at the moment which you'd like to say a little about?*

PC: I am working on a new group work for next year that deals with 'emotion'. The work is a co-production of SPAF, a festival in Seoul which invited my composer to work with traditional Korean musicians. I am still in the early stage of movement research with the dancers but the focus is on defining the intangible areas of 'emotionality'. Or rather to define 'emotion' as a series of transitional qualities for the body. It is too early to say more.

The quotes by Padmini Chettur in blurbs are taken from <http://www.kunstenfestival-desarts-be/Front/projectdetailuitgebreid.action?project=7536&id=331#>

Having flown across the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and sunk her feet into the sands by the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian sea as well as the Straits of Malacca, one recurring theme **Vinita Ramani** has noted is the manner in which we still cling to fixed ideas of identity, culture, authenticity and histories which are revisable to suit our proclivities. So she writes, with the hope that we become aware of some of these things we cling to. Currently based in Singapore, Vinita writes in her journal; she writes letters, articles, vignettes, reviews, critiques and expositions.