

# When one plus one equals more than two

As Co-Artistic Directors of Kadam, **Sanjeevini Dutta** and **Sujata Banerjee** forged a unique South Asian Dance Artist-in-Residence/Animateur collaboration that spanned the East of England. Together with **Nikki Crane**, former Dance Officer, Eastern Arts Board, they offer their recollections

**Nikki Crane:**

Bedfordshire was eager to establish a distinct brand of animateur post with a focus on South Asian dance. This was new ground for the Arts Board and for rural East Anglia. The risks were not insignificant.

It was a gift to have two talented professional dance artists, Sanjeevini Dutta and Sujata Banerjee. Together they formed Kadam, meaning 'footstep' – appropriate as the role required multiple small steps in new communities with competing expectations.

Together as artists they combined a sense of fun with entrepreneurship and sheer hard work. It was tough getting started. Sanjeevini and Sujata were fearless in the face of some of the challenges, including engaging local Muslim women in healthy exercise delivered through sensitively choreographed movement and dance sequences.

**Sanjeevini Dutta:**

Sujata Banerjee and myself, the Kad-dames as we were sometimes referred to, arrived in Bedford through pure chance. I had switched careers from social work to performing and teaching Odissi, a less well-known style of classical Indian dance. I realised that my heart was in the arts.

The South Asian dance animateur post was created with the purpose of infusing diverse dance practices.

Although based in Bedfordshire it was hoped that the impact would be more widespread across the sprawling Eastern region of the seven counties of Bedfordshire, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Essex.

**Sujata Banerjee:**

I arrived in the UK in 1982 as a young artist, married to a non-artistic soul. I never thought I would dance again. Through the Bengali community's events and the Commonwealth Institute's education work in London, I started performing and teaching as an independent artist, when suddenly there was the role with Kadam. My background in Kathak suited the role – as did my personality – independent and risk taking, a quick decision-maker with an irrepressible interest in communicating with people. As a dynamic classical style it allowed me as a dance artist and animateur to create spontaneously and, while there are boundaries within it – like the necessity to 'obey' the rhythmic structure – it offered limitless possibilities.

**Sanjeevini:**

Bedford College offered Physical Education and Dance teacher training. It had piloted a South Asian dance residency to test the viability of including a South Asian dance element in the degree curriculum but students had not taken kindly to the hardship



of the bharatanatyam araimundi (sustained deep plié) position. However, the College took the decision to offer us a base at the Bowen West Theatre, and the Town Council and County's Education Department also made an investment in the animateur post.

The South Asian community in Bedford was largely working class, conservative, with little knowledge or engagement with, classical Indian arts. Given the territory, we decided to build bridges with the community



(top) Photo: Cast of the Mahabharata with Sujata Banerjee, director Nona Shepphard, actors Shobana Gulati and Ajay Chabra

(right) Photo: Simon Richardson; Mayuri dancers Odissi Youth Group 2005

(bottom) Photo: Simon Richardson; Cranfield Mela, 1996



establishing local dance classes, school workshops and promotions, including fabulous dancers and inspirational artists at the Bowen West theatre, such as Nahid Siddiqui and a young Akram Khan.

The development of relationships with the community was made possible by schools and progressive head teachers who welcomed the enrichment artists would bring by their presence. Our workshops took children into new territories learning about the pranks of Krishna stealing butter

or the wonders of Goddess Lakshmi emerging from a brown carton cut into the shape of a lotus flower!

**Sujata:**

The sheer energy of people engaging in dance, imaginative projects, dedicated students, supporting colleagues across the region, nurturing committed audiences and making (lifelong) friends lay at the heart of our practice - reinforcing that where there is life, there is movement; where there is movement there is rhythm; where

there is rhythm there is the foot beat of Indian classical dance.

Indian classical music is often described as ragas - a series of five or more notes upon which a melody is constructed. These notes are associated with different times of the day, or seasons, or projects forming the essence of Kadam's work.

**Sanjeevini:**

Kadam was encouraged to feed ideas to the Region's bid-writer for hosting the national celebration of The Year >>

of Opera and Musical Theatre in 1997. We proposed an adaptation of the Mahabharata – a new dance theatre project that was the brainchild of Sujata's and a crowning achievement for Kadam. Articulating the values and practices of a different culture was the challenge presented by this production. This Hindu epic (famously directed with an international cast by Peter Brook), probably has the significance of the Mystery Plays to earlier times in England. It is the kernel of Hindu philosophy told in the form of a story. Rivalry between two factions of the same family leads to the destruction and near extinction of mankind. The messages it contains are profound. In order to make the production understandable to audiences, we built a year-long programme of storytelling and workshops in the Sikh temple to which all were invited. I recall a young lad giving an involuntary cry at a particularly dramatic moment when the heroine is about to be disrobed!

Kadam took an entrepreneurial approach where the interest and personalities of the amateurs 'created the job'. We were ambitious and playful, occasionally dabbling in hair-brained schemes such as building a floating platform on the River Ouse to mount a dance spectacular.

My own background in Odissi, a more recently developed classical style, led to the first sustained Odissi dance class in the East of England. Starting in a primary school in Bedford, with predominantly non-Asian children, the small group, known as the Mayuri dancers, stayed together for over ten years, enhancing many community celebrations. It produced a professional Odissi dancer, Katie Ryan, and inspired South Asian children to attend dance classes. The legacy of genuine community support is visible in classes to this day.

Sujata's interest in dance science gave rise to the Kadam Dance Camps, which ran for ten years and now form part of the Milapfest Institute for Indian Arts programme.

### **Sujata:**

I realised my dance and music training in India had been 'hard core', lasting more than 15 years. I danced on cement or mosaic floors, without complaint, training regardless of whether there

“It encapsulated a set of principles which follow me around to this day: don't be fearful of collision and conflict; go into the eye of the storm; find the meeting point and in doing so move to an entirely new place together that you never thought you would discover.”

was a romantic monsoon or scorching 40-degree summer sun. This led me to begin to recognise the benefits of this but also increased my awareness of possible injuries for Kathak and other South Asian forms. And so I began to devise body-conditioning exercises to strengthen feet and other parts to avoid or minimise injuries. The potential significance of this, and investment in the next generation, was recognised and funded by the Arts Council Great Britain.

We were not scared to dream big for Kadam. We played a prominent role in supporting the Eastern region. While working with Sanjeevini as co-artistic director, Nikki Crane introduced me to Flamenco and the concept of Filigree was born. It was one of the most exciting projects and times of my life.

Filigree became the first major collaboration with Kathak, Flamenco and Raqs Sharqi. Funded by Eastern Arts Board it received notable praise for its originality and continued touring for three years to more than 40 venues both in the UK and India.

### **Nikki:**

Filigree grew from a personal collaboration between Sujata and myself. We were fascinated by the roots of Flamenco and how it linked to the Mughul courts of India and Kathak dance. And then there was the North African influence. Serendipity struck: Liza Wedgwood, a Raqs Sharqi dancer, was living in Hertfordshire. But the challenge was:

- How could we bring these artforms together with musicians?
- What was the common heritage of these extraordinary dance forms?
- How could this be manifested in both dance and music?

Remarkably I was able to find some

funding for this ambitious venture. A rich diversity of dance and music was lacking in the region at the time and we were beginning to create fertile ground for audience development and community participation through Kadam.

Sujata commissioned the composer, Jayanta Bose from Calcutta to create the incredible musical score comprising Indian tabla, Sarod, flamenco guitar and Egyptian tabla and saxophone. Liz Lee, a flamenco dancer we knew from Suffolk came forward and Sujata was poised to take up the Kathak dancer role.

It became a true delight of diversity, when cultures would collide but then find a meeting point, rhythm often the thing that restored harmony. Suddenly, after struggling to find a connection, the dancers would land on what felt like home ground, perfectly synchronised with the other performers. It was a formative experience for me, one I have never forgotten, and encapsulated a set of principles which follow me around to this day: don't be fearful of collision and conflict; go into the eye of the storm; find the meeting point and in doing so move to an entirely new place together that you never thought you would discover. I've taken this into my work in criminal justice and health – I can still feel the thrill of Filigree – the uncertainty, the discovery of something unique emerging. Unforgettable.

### **Sujata:**

Through our exhilarating amateur programme Sanjeevini and myself sought to find the connection between the inner experience and the physical expression. A deep interest in training dancers scientifically started to ignite my work and enabled me to begin to

question my practice. This led me to doubt whether there was a role for me in dance or with Kadam. I took six months off and went around the world, performing, visiting dance institutions and meeting new people. My answer unfolded... I missed it so much! Dance is a bond that immediately unites... that enables us as dancers to connect to a different and deeper level of ourselves and the life we live.

#### **Sanjeevini:**

Remaining with Kadam, with self-belief and energy, has given a long life and legacy to the amateur project. In 2016, Kadam mounted *The Rose and the Bulbul*, a performance in Stockwood Park which animated the spaces moving from the Islamic to European period gardens, drawing references to refugees leaving their cultures and travelling to the West. In tracing a journey of 20 years from the dance theatre productions of the *Mahabharata* in 1997, to *The Rose and The Bulbul* in 2016, has revealed that sitting at the core are the same key elements of inclusivity – across art forms, across cultures and across the professional/community divide.

The Kadam amateur project undertaken as a job share was unique. The synergy of two individuals with different temperaments working closely created harmony and vision. The energy, creativity and the multifaceted output of the early phase of Kadam's existence established a bank of experience and knowledge from which both the founders have continued to draw. It was key to giving South Asian dance an opening through which it could infiltrate into more mainstream arts.

#### **Info**

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Photo: Sheila Burnett; *Stars are Out Tonight*, Amici Dance Theatre Company

# Discovery

**Wolfgang Stange**, Founder, Director and Principal Choreographer, AMICI Dance Theatre Company has for 36 years been unafraid to challenge conventional attitudes to disability and the arts. By drawing on powerful themes, productions are inclusive of disabled and non-disabled artists and performers to reveal the strength, commitment and individuality of each performer. Here we discover the building blocks of his integrated teaching and workshop process

**AMICI's work, through my guidance as an artist and choreographer, has always had challenging themes.** From the struggle of the working class in *Rueckblick*, to the bereavement and grief of mothers losing their children to untimely death through society's uncaring attitudes, in *Elegy*; from the pain and confusion of a person who is suffering bi-polar syndrome, in *Passage to Sanity?*, to the holocaust theme in *Hilde*. The list goes on.

These performances have a profound impact on audiences as they show the strength and commitment of each performer, respecting their individuality and the acceptance of differences. Clement Crisp of the *Financial Times* reflected:

"The reasons are not difficult to understand. AMICI's artists (for artists they certainly are) are wonderfully committed to what they do, grandly responsive to the demands that Stange makes on them – and his dance theatre stagings are often complex, layered with meaning far beyond the obvious needs for his casts...[company] artists are also blessed with an expressive innocence, with a directness in communication which cuts through all barriers to understanding. In a wonderful way they speak their truth, open their hearts to us, with an honesty devoid of any artifice, with wholly trusting belief in their text, which is unsophisticated and hugely expressive."(1) >>