

Ileana Citaristi

Destination India

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My first trip to India was in 1974. In those years the Orient Express was still running between Paris and Istanbul (via Italy) and the war between Iran and Iraq had not yet started so it was still possible to reach India by land. I had already started acting in theatre by then, but theatre was not the motivation for the journey. In fact I wanted to run away from what I thought had come to me too easily; I wanted to put myself on trial, far away from the familiar and safe atmosphere of a closed circle of friends and admirers. Although I had taken a couple of examinations in Indian art and religion, I knew almost nothing of that world. I left for a destination which was totally unknown and without any planning for the journey, open to all sorts of experiences and strongly believing in living life as it comes, day by day. I came back after six months full of energy and confidence; I had passed the test. But life made me realise quite soon that one actually does not need to go that far to face trials. On my return I found that the man who loved me so deeply was slowly dying of cancer; all the energy accumulated during the trip was put immediately to use and I was able to go through that experience without totally breaking down.

By the time I returned to India for the second time in 1978, I had already started working with my body. The first experience was in 1975 during a workshop with an actor from Jerzy Grotowski's group, Stanislaw Sciarsky. During the training in a villa in Veneto I had the first exposure to some of the physical exercises from Kathakali training, along with an intense experience of working the body to exhaustion. The impact of this experience was extremely strong; it did not give me any particular technique but the discovery of a lot of energy inside my body. The search had taken a new direction although the destination was still unknown. I went through some more workshops with the Bread and Puppet group and Odin Teatret, experimenting with techniques of improvisation and street theatre, and finally I formed my own group in Bergamo, my home town.

The group was made up of only women at first; it was



Ileana Citaristi Photo: A. Pasricha

great fun. We used to improvise on whatever theme and in whatever space; on top of a tree, inside a cave, in the dark, with candle-light, shadows and masks. In the meantime I had finished my university course with a thesis on "Psychoanalysis and Eastern Mythology". The two searches were still running on parallel tracks; on one side there was the search with the body, towards a sort of expression not well defined, and on the other the search with the mind, towards the attempt to give a metaphysical meaning to existence.

It was during this time that I happened to see a Kathakali demonstration by an actor from Kerala, Krishna Namboodiri. He was demonstrating without make-up and

costume, explaining in detail all the different meanings that each part of the body could convey if used according to a very specific and elaborate grammar. It was a revelation; it seemed as if he had come all the way to Bergamo for me! I immediately asked him how I could learn some of this grammar and he told me about the workshop he was planning to organise in his own school in Srikrishnapuram, in the south of Kerala, starting on the 1st of April of that same year.

So by the end of March 1978 I was moving towards India for the second time. This time, I flew to Bombay and from there, without stopping even for an hour, I got on to the train south. It seemed to be a never-ending trip; when finally I caught a bus towards Srikrishnapuram from the Palghat station, I was totally exhausted. What kept me awake was the extraordinary beauty of the landscape; I thought no place on earth could be more beautiful and perfect than this. I finally reached Srikrishnapuram on the first of April at 11 a.m.; the workshop had started two hours previously.

Three months of intense training followed, with early morning exercises, followed by breakfast and step classes, training in *abhinaya* in the afternoons and eye exercises at night. It was the height of summer in Kerala and all the classes were held in a room with a muddy floor and walls and open windows, without electricity, surrounded by endless green. It was almost like dancing in the middle of a forest. There were around fifteen people attending the classes in the beginning, all from different parts of Italy and all living together in a big house not far from the school. Only three of us reached the end of the workshop; the rest of the group dropped out gradually preferring to go swimming in the river rather than sweating in the class.

On the last day the three of us performed with full make up and costume in

the classroom with the entire village clustered inside to watch us. It was a fitting finale to an extraordinary experience; with my physiognomy transformed and amplified by the heavy costume and green-patched make up, I literally "became" the mythological character that I was portraying. At the end I nearly collapsed; the excitement along with the heavy headgear and the intense heat inside the room almost made me faint. But the experience had been so overwhelming that, after that, I could not possibly think of just leaving everything behind and going back to Italy! I told Krishna Namboodiri that I wanted to learn more about Indian dance and he suggested that I go to Orissa and study the graceful Odissi dance which he had once seen performed by Sanjukta Panigrahi while both of them were abroad.

The monsoons were already in full swing by that time and, with a heavy heart, I left Srikrishnapuram, my guru Naripetta and all the friends I had made there. From Palghat this time I caught a train eastwards until I reached Madras and from there I moved north with the Madras-Howrah Rail, which was stopping at Bhubaneswar on its way to Calcutta.

The only thing I knew about Orissa at that point was what I had read about the famous Sun temple of Konarka while preparing for my examination on Indian art. It was not difficult to find Sanjukta Panigrahi's house; she received me quite warmly and also helped me to find a room nearby where I could stay. From the moment I began my classes I realised that I would have to undo everything that I had learnt in Kerala, starting from the position of the feet which had to be kept pointed sideways instead of bent inwards. I stayed for a couple of months struggling to learn something of this totally new and different body language. It was only at the end of my visit that



Shalabhanjika, Indian Museum Calcutta

another Odissi dancer who used to come to Sanjukta's house to practise, spoke to me about Sanjukta's guru, Kelucharan Mohapatra, who, she said, was staying at Cuttack and was the master of almost all the Odissi dancers. I scribbled his difficult name on a piece of paper and started packing for my return to Italy.

The stay in Italy was not that long; I remained only for four months, just sufficient time to realise that I had not learnt enough. I had a project in mind, a theatre

piece inspired by Ovid's story of *Echo and Narcissus*. I decided that, to stage this, I would need a longer exposure to the techniques of both Kathakali and Odissi style of dance-theatre. So I left for the third time reaching India on the 1st of June 1979. My first destination was to be Orissa, where I was planning to stay for the first six months, followed by Kerala for the next six months. I had a return ticket valid for one year.

This time as soon as I got out at Bhubaneswar station I caught a bus towards Cuttack, just twenty-five kilometres away. From the busy bus station I headed towards a small lane a little way from the main road where the rickshaw puller knew there was the house of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. I don't remember exactly at which point the plans that I had made started taking their own direction. I only know that slowly the correspondence with the Kerala master grew weaker and weaker and then at a certain point terminated. The theatre project vanished from my mind, the return ticket was thrown away and only Cuttack, Odissi and Kelucharan Mohapatra remained.

Life took another rhythm and I hardly realised it; it was like living a second childhood, learning to walk all over again. The destination became that little lane where Guruji's house was situated and as long as I could reach that place nothing else mattered. For six years I didn't return to Italy, and when I finally went back for the first time in 1985 it was just for three weeks to give a few performances of Odissi dance. I have been going regularly since then, along with my musicians or my group of dancers for periods of three to four weeks a year,

enjoying the opportunity to share with my own people whatever India has given me, but always eager to come back as soon as possible.

When I arrived in India in 1979 intending to remain only for a year, I had a small bag with me containing, besides a few personal things, a small tape recorder and the book of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Although I sent the book back to Italy after some time, I retained the pages relating to the story of *Echo and Narcissus*. It was only seven years later, in 1986, that the item was finally composed, not as a theatre piece but as an innovative dance piece. It was a synthesis between the mode of expression that I had found and the theme that belonged to my previous upbringing. The search for this synthesis still continues.

ILEANA CITARISTI (Italy/India) is a dancer, choreographer and scholar. She was born in Italy and has lived in Orissa, India since 1979. She has received many awards for her dance and choreographic work. In 1995 she founded her own institution, Art Vision, for local and visiting students.