

SWAPNA MAYA

A Sujit Vaidya Bharata Natyam presentation

May 16, 2015 – Scotia Dance Centre, Vancouver

One of the joys of being part of the relatively small (but ever active) Vancouver South-Asian arts community is being able to watch the evolution of an artist right from the time he or she performs in public for the very first time.

Sujit Vaidya—a star pupil of Jai Govinda’s Mandala Arts School of Bharata Natyam—audaciously burst on the scene in November 2009. He performed his *arangetram* (initial public performance) after an absurdly short three-year period of study. According to his first Guru Jai Govinda, he traversed the distance from complete novice to dance graduate so rapidly because of his dedication, discipline, hard work, and talent.

Since then, Sujit Vaidya has performed internationally, in solo and duet performances, and continues to hone his craft through advanced studies with Guru A. Lakshman of Chennai. And he enjoys challenging himself. This was in ample display at his one-night only program ***Swapna Maya***, performed on May 16, 2015 before a sold-out house.

In the 25 or so years that I have been watching classical Indian dance in North America—and in the process,

gaining an education in how to appreciate a recital—I have only seen it performed to recorded accompaniment. In India, this is seldom the case, but in North America, the sheer logistics of assembling an orchestra and paucity of musicians, makes most dancers opt for canned music. Mind you, the recordings are of top quality and often commissioned from noted Indian musicians and vocalists specifically for a show, but at the end of the day, they are still recordings. Expressed in musical terms, it would be the difference between karaoke singing and performing a jazz number with the freedom to improvise and riff with a live, responsive orchestra.

Swapna Maya, as Sujit conceived it, was an exploration of illusion and reality through a heady, imaginative amalgam of dance, video, spoken word, and—most exciting—the introduction of live music to Vancouver’s Indian classical dance landscape. Interstitial pieces of film, a shifting kaleidoscope of slides, and spoken word linked the suite of dances that comprise a Bharata Natyam *margam* (the traditionally prescribed structure or path for a recital). What we got was no less than an elegant conflation of Western thought (Edgar Allan Poe: *Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?*) with ancient Hindu philosophy expressed through the idiom of Bharata Natyam to illustrate the will-o’-wisp nature of human existence.



Spoken-word artist Priya Rajarathnam played master of ceremonies and introduced the individuals who collaborated on *Swapna Maya* before switching to her role of unseen vocal guide. The evening's orchestra was made up of *nattuvanar* (vocal percussionist and concert master) Puneet Panda, Carnatic vocalist (and his wife) Taniya Panda, *mridangam* (a South Indian drum) percussionist Curtis Andrews, and violinist Mukund Shankar Krishnan – more about them later.

Videographer Max Gross created the dreamy film and still photo imagery, while Harry Grunsky's delicate tracery of paper leaves and vines, along with a few lamps seemingly suspended in mid-air, cast exquisite shadows across the simple black-box stage.

When the house lights dimmed, a film projected on a movie screen of the industrial and urban aspects of Vancouver (city scenes and the towering bulk of the Granville Bridge) segued limpidly into a modern glass and mirror-lined dance studio, wherein Sujit Vaidya—dressed not in traditional South-Indian *veshthi* but contemporary exercise gear—is seen rehearsing. All of reality passes by in a snap of the fingers, he says mischievously with a resounding snap, or words to that effect.



To Sujit's credit, he succeeded in establishing the dream-like state right away that I no longer recall if it was just him speaking during the opening film clip or the lush-voiced Priya Rajarathnam as well, luring us into a hypnotic trance. When the screen faded to black, there

was the real Sujit caught within the glowing embers of a spotlight, in a blazing fuchsia silk *veshti* edged with electric blue and gold, light glinting off the rubies in his necklace, performing a gestured *pushpanjali* (*floral offering to the Gods*) to consecrate the stage, which then gave way to a *Shiva stuti* (song of praise). The piece depicted the dancer's quest to emulate Shiva—the lord of the dance—to be in the world but not of it, to find a still centre within a maelstrom of chaos – the lyrics sung to *raag* Kedaram.



The androgyny of a colour like fuchsia was used to telling effect in the *varnam*—the centerpiece of the recital, in which Sujit transformed into a lovelorn *nayika* (heroine), plaintively lamenting Krishna's ambivalence towards her, passionate one moment, and

distant in the next. Gorgeous, heart-rending *abhinay* (dramatic expression) conveyed her anguish at her lover's indifference. Of course, love is an illusion, as she understands when Krishna reveals his divinity to her.



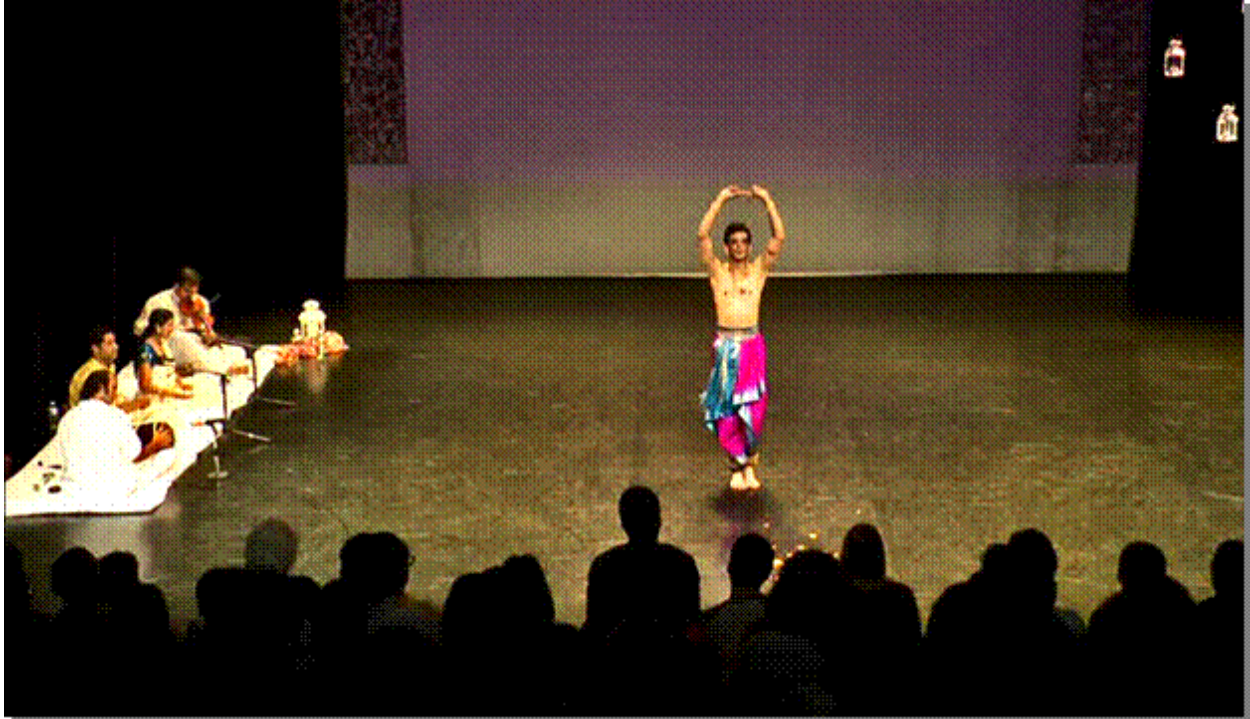
It was during this piece that I realized the benefit of a live orchestra: Sujit emoted the *nayika's* distress to a phrase sung by Taniya Panda – she understood that he had still more ways of interpreting the line, so she repeated it, while he gave another expression through choreographed *mudra* (hand gesture) and *abhinay* of the *nayika's* unhappiness. These repetitions continued, until at a fleeting glance from him, Taniya moved on to the next line of the composition in *raag* Charukeshi. This interplay—cue and response between vocalist and dancer or *nattuvanar* and musicians—is impossible with

taped music. The dancer must keep in time with the recorded track or lose synchronization.

An interstitial film with Sujit in *veshthi* and traditional jewellery performing a *padam* (literally a stanza or verse), provided a brief respite for the dancer and singers after the demands of the *varnam*.

Another *padam*—in the flesh this time—set to *raag* Kalyani, demonstrated Krishna's amorous mischief as he teases an unimpressed *gopika* (cow-herding girl or milkmaid). Naturally, it ended with Krishna/Sujit jauntily striding off-stage, arm thrown triumphantly around the now smitten *gopi* – this recalled a similar exit during ***Five Faces***, the last time I'd seen Sujit dance, and made me chuckle aloud.

The *thillana*—the fast-paced traditional end-of-recital piece—was about the ultimate state of being, where dancer and dance merge in ecstasy and become indistinguishable from each other.



The *thillana* brought ***Swapna Maya*** to a close to rousing applause from the spellbound audience.

At this point, I'd like to shine a light on the many challenges staging this recital brought to Sujit Vaidya and his artistic cohorts.

The four members of the orchestra reside in three different geographical locations. In addition, they have exacting day jobs. Puneet and Taniya Panda live in Baltimore, Maryland, where Puneet is a physician. Mukund Shankar Krishnan is from Edmonton, while Curtis Andrews is the lone Vancouverite. The challenge for Curtis was that while he is an accomplished musician of immense versatility, he had never been an accompanist for dance, a different enough beast to be tamed in just three weeks. The orchestra had only three

days to rehearse together with Sujit Vaidya, and that they pulled it off without discernible glitches is no small achievement. What it added to the performance and audience enjoyment is incalculable.

The venue was available to the performers only on the day of the show, so the many technicalities had to be worked out in a scant few hours before it was time for the theatre doors to be thrown open to the audience.

Jai Govinda, the pioneer of Bharata Natyam in Vancouver and exponent par excellence, has not performed in years, and there are rumblings that he might retire from teaching as well in the not too distant future. Vancouver's fervent wish is that he continues guiding and mentoring the local dance community for a long time. It is dancers like Sujit Vaidya, who with their passion, discipline, and euphoric enthusiasm give one hope for coming years.

Every time I see Sujit Vaidya perform (usually annually), his progress and evolution is breathtakingly evident. His lines are clean and a delight to behold – his athleticism (what joyful leaps!) and stamina for holding poses long so they register indelibly, and a calm confidence coupled with deep *bhakti* (reverence) transform the stage into his temple. In undertaking the presentation of ***Swapna Maya***, Sujit proved he is an artist who doesn't shy away from challenges, no matter how daunting.

On the way out of the auditorium, I ran into a young man—another Jai Govinda student—who hopes to have his own *arangetram* next autumn. Sujit's performance was so inspiring, he said, renewed fervour shining in his eyes. So stay the course, and follow his example, I exhorted him.

Kudos to all the collaborators and supporters (that's you, Darius, and Kamal Sharma – take your bow, too) who made ***Swapna Maya*** a reality for one evening – it now firmly belongs in the realm of the illusory, but, oh, what a fine memory.