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## **Curator's Corner: Artist Spotlight On Sahasra Sambamoorthi**

by Alissa Horowitz

"Bharata Natyam is an expression of self. Anyone can watch and appreciate and you don't have to be Indian to do so."

-Sahasra  
Sambamoorthi



Sahasra has been studying Bharata Natyam since the age of nine. After graduating from Columbia's SEAS program in 2008, she has maintained two small businesses in the performing arts, she is co-owner of [Parampara Magazine](#) and also founded a nonprofit organization, [Navatman Dance](#). Navatman is broken down into three parts: a dance company, an events planning company, and a conservatory (in progress). Bharata Natyam is a form of communication, and in her choreography, Sahasra tries to remove this dance form from a purely traditional format. She wants to make her work accessible to Indian and American audiences alike. This is not always easy. "How can you get someone who has never seen a *mudra* [hand gesture] to understand the story you are trying to tell?" asks Sahasra. "This challenge is so exciting to me." For Sahasra, it is not just about what Bharata Natyam is today, it is the history behind it that makes it so special. You have to know and understand this background in order to choreograph within it.

This past spring marked the launching of a tour of Sahasra's "Her Story," which she co-choreographed with fellow Columbia alum Srinidhi Raghavan, and with the help of Srinidhi's mother, Usha Raghavan. "Her Story" presents a new interpretation of the stories of four women in Hindu mythology (à la Martha Graham and Greek Mythology): Kaikeyi, Devaki, Kannagi and Andal. "I know I personally feel women are really marginalized in mythology," said Sahasra, "The characters themselves are downplayed." Kaikeyi, for example, is one of the three wives of King Dasaratha (the King of Ayodhya in the Ramayana). People are quick to call her an evil woman, since she is blamed for persuading Dasaratha to banish Rama from the kingdom so her own son could take the crown. But there are two sides to every story, and it is the woman's voice, the voice they don't usually have, that is heard in "Her Story." Even though these women existed apart from each other, and apart from us today, their stories

explore issues that are still relevant today, like the story of Andal, who contradicts her father to marry the one she loves.

Sahasra and Srinidhi choreographed “Her Story” two years ago, and six months later performed it at Symphony Space. They then began getting offers to tour the piece, taking it to such cities as Boston, Baltimore and Chicago in the U.S., and abroad in Ottawa (Canada), London (UK) and Chennai (India). I asked Sahasra to talk about some of the differences in audience reception in North America vs. India. It is perhaps easier performing in India because the audiences are usually more receptive, she told me. They are more knowledgeable of the dance form and excited to attend a Bharata Natyam performance. However, it is also more challenging because the audience expects something. As an artist coming from outside India, there is a stigma about how you are going to perform, and often the audience does not take the work seriously at first. However, a rave review in [The Hindu](#) proved that “Her Story” won the audience’s heart in the end.

While Sahasra Sambamoorthi is first and foremost a Bharata Natyam dancer, anyone can see this young trailblazer is on the crest of the wave leading us towards a new understanding of South Asian arts in the United States. Her goal? To eliminate the exoticization of South Asian arts in mainstream culture. Standing in her way is the TV watching majority whose dance knowledge is informed by such shows as “America’s Best Dance Crew” and “So You Think You Can Dance.” Presenting misinformed “Indian” inspired dances, or fusions of Bollywood and hip hop, Sahasra worries these shows perpetuate stereotypes of Indian dance as “the other.” “Tradition changes always,” she told me, “but you lose that richness, that history, that reverence to that particular art, when people like Jay-Z use bhangara beats in their music.”

Sahasra is currently pursuing a self designed masters degree on top of it all, after only having graduated from Columbia in 2008. Considering the struggles recent grads are now facing in today’s economy, not to mention choosing to follow a career in the arts, I asked Sahasra about the challenges she has faced, and what advice she can offer young people just starting out in the dance world. She said that while there is a time to be realistic, there is also a time to tell yourself “I am number 1, I am best in the business.” You need the confidence to lay out your goals and commit yourself to achieving them. At the same time, you must be open to the fact that things do not always happen the way you expect them to; there can be many paths to the same end.

To learn more about Navatman's upcoming events for this Fall and Winter, please visit [www.navatman.org](http://www.navatman.org)

To learn more about Bharata Natyam, Sahasra suggests:

1. Free web series by Preeti Vasudevan online at [www.dancingforthegods.org](http://www.dancingforthegods.org)
2. Janet O’Shea’s book, “Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage” (can be found on Amazon.com)
3. Priyadarsini Govind has a great DVD set (but it’s best to see her live)
4. Nrityagram Dance Ensemble (an Odissi dance company that has performed at Central Park Summer Stage)