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Review: 'Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim' by the Ragamala Dance Company

The sacredness and eternity of Hinduism, the pilgrim archetype, and the immigrant

By Tatum Lindquist The Daily
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Courtesy of Meany Center

It is dusk when the curtains open. Three thin, long pools line the stage. Golden bells hang staggered, suspended over a set of simple steps in the back. Only one person is seen, kneeling beside one of the pools and placing one tiny floating light after another on the water with a prayer.



The audience settles into the soft scene: some restless from the near silence, all enraptured as rhythmic music plays and three dancers with smoking vases — and then more dancers — enter from the sides of the stage.

From Feb. 9 to 11, Meany Center and Seattle Sacred Music & Art presented “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim” by the [Ragamala Dance Company](#). In its three-night run, South Asian American mother and daughter Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy embodied a delicate balance of divinity and humanity in this threefold dance narrative.

Founded by Raneer Ramaswamy in 1992, Ragamala’s previous work utilizes interdisciplinary dance and production to pioneer multicultural narratives through performance. The “Fires of Varanasi” champions Ragamala’s vision in their dance tradition of Bharatanatyam, a major form of Indian classical dance.



Courtesy of Meany Center

“Varanasi, India is a city where past, present and future mingle within a single space — the sacred city is a portal between the ancient and the current,” Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy write in their [creator’s note](#).

Inspired by their respective father and grandfather’s death, and the desire for his ashes to be scattered in the Ganges River in Varanasi, this performance interwove the narratives of ancestral

Hindu art and philosophy, the artistic pilgrim, and the resilient and empowered immigrant.

In rhythm, the dance unfolds in three scenes: “Darshanam, To See and Be Seen,” “Liquid Shakti,” and “The Purification of the Living and the Salvation of the Dead.” The spiritual and physical themes surrounding the Ganges, central to all three narratives, imbue this balance of divinity and humanity.

From the philosophical exploration of Shakti, the cosmic female energy in Hinduism, to the rituals of purification and healing; from the compelling and lively performances of the soloists to the grounded and meditative movements of the background dancers; the



audience watches, nearly still and completely entranced.

With so much to watch and hear, the minimal use of projections, smoke, props, and water feel at home, to such a degree that I nearly miss when the accompanying dancers stand or walk in the pools. Yet upon noticing, the familiar sense of my feet under cool water gave me shivers as I watched solo dances of Raneer Ramaswamy, Ashwini Ramaswamy, and Aparna Ramaswamy in scene two, "Liquid Shakti."

For a dance company that's toured extensively around the world, Ragamala's "Fires of Varanasi" cultivated a sense of shared humanity through their nested narratives of resilience and healing, which resonated with many as evident by the standing ovation at Saturday night's performance.



Robert Simmer. Courtesy of Meany Center.

While Ragamala moved to their next city, many more performances in the Meany Center's dance series lie ahead, including Camille A. Brown & Dancers in mid-March, and both The Motherboard Suite and Step Afrika! in April. Tickets and more information can be found on the [Meany Center's website](#).

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