

# RAGAMALA

• DANCE COMPANY •

RANEE RAMASWAMY AND APARNA RAMASWAMY, ARTISTIC DIRECTORS



[WWW.RAGAMALADANCE.ORG](http://WWW.RAGAMALADANCE.ORG)

*Image by Steven Pisano*

# The Artistic Directors



Raneeramaswamy by Ed Bock

**RANEE RAMASWAMY and APARNA RAMASWAMY (Artistic Directors/Creators/Choreographers/ Principal Dancers)** explore the dynamic tension between the ancestral and the contemporary, highlighting the fluidity between the secular and the spiritual, the inner and the outer, the human and the natural. Working in an intergenerational partnership between mother and daughter, their creative vision merges the rich traditions and deep philosophical roots of their Indian heritage with their hybridic perspective as first generation Indian- Americans. As protégés and senior disciples of legendary dancer/choreographer Padma Bhushan Smt. Alarmél Valli, known as one of India’s greatest living masters, Raneeramaswamy and Aparna’s training in the South Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam is the bedrock of their creative aesthetic.

Among their recent awards and honors are a Bogliasco Foundation Fellowship (Italy), Guggenheim Fellowships, and a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Research Fellowship (Italy). Their choreographic work has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center (Washington, D.C.), Lincoln Center (New York), American Dance Festival (Durham, NC), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), and the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), among others, and supporters of their work include the National Endowment for the Arts, National Dance Project, MAP Fund, and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. They have developed work in residence at MANCC (the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography), the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth, and during an NPN residency at The Yard.

Raneeramaswamy currently serves on the National Council on the Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. She is a recipient of a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a United States Artists Fellowship, a McKnight Distinguished Artist Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and 15 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Choreography and Interdisciplinary Art, among others. ([www.raneeramaswamy.com](http://www.raneeramaswamy.com))

Aparna is recipient of a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a Joyce Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and four McKnight Artist Fellowships, among others. Described by *The New York Times* as “thrillingly three-dimensional... rapturous and profound,” she was selected as one of Dance Magazine’s 25 to Watch for 2010. She is an empaneled artist with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and her solo work, with live music, has toured the U.S. and India with support from the National Dance Project and USArtists International. In 2018, she premiered a new solo work commissioned by the American Dance Festival as part of Wondrous Women, featuring Aparna alongside Camille A. Brown, Michelle Dorrance, Rhapsody James, and Yabin Wang. In 2019, Aparna’s work with composer/violinist Colin Jacobsen was commissioned by and for the Silk Road Ensemble. ([www.aparnaramaswamy.net](http://www.aparnaramaswamy.net))



Aparna Ramaswamy by Ed Bock



# The Company

Now in its 30th season and under the leadership of Artistic Directors Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy and Choreographic Associate Ashwini Ramaswamy (mother and daughters), Ragamala Dance Company has been hailed by *The New York Times* as “soulful, imaginative, and rhythmically contagious.”

Over the last four decades, Ranee and Aparna’s practice in the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam has shifted the trajectory of culturally rooted performing arts in the United States to create an exemplary company within the American dance landscape.

Through both intimate solos and large-scale theatrical works for the stage, Ranee and Aparna empower the South Asian American experience. By engaging the dynamic tension between ancestral wisdom and creative freedom, they reveal the kindred relationship between ancient and contemporary that is urgently needed in today’s world.

Ragamala Dance Company is a pioneering, intergenerational, family-run organization committed to the idea that while history is time bound, the stories we share are timeless. Ragamala’s work in the performing arts field is expansive. We set our gaze far beyond the stage to realize the kindred relationship between ancient and contemporary that is urgently needed in today’s world.

Ragamala engages in a collaborative practice with myriad artists and aesthetics and is rooted in the idea of Bharatanatyam as a dynamic living tradition. Ranee and Aparna’s training under legendary artist Alarmél Valli is the bedrock of a creative ethos that springs from beauty, truth, and spirit.

AVAILABLE FOR TOURING IN 2023-2024+

## FIRES OF VARANASI: DANCE OF THE ETERNAL PILGRIM

11 DANCERS, 2 TECH, 1 STAFF: 14 TOTAL

Fires of Varanasi is an immersive ritual for the stage where time is suspended and humans merge with the divine. Creators Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy imagine a metaphorical crossing place that enters into the world of immortality, expanding upon the birth-death-rebirth continuum in Hindu thought to honor immigrant experiences of life and death in the diaspora.



## ANANTA: THE ETERNAL DEVOTION

2 DANCERS,  
4 MUSICIANS,  
2 TECH: 8 TOTAL

Sisters Aparna and Ashwini Ramaswamy are joined by an extraordinary musical ensemble from India in Aparna Ramaswamy's newest work, which weaves together body, memory, desire, and devotion.

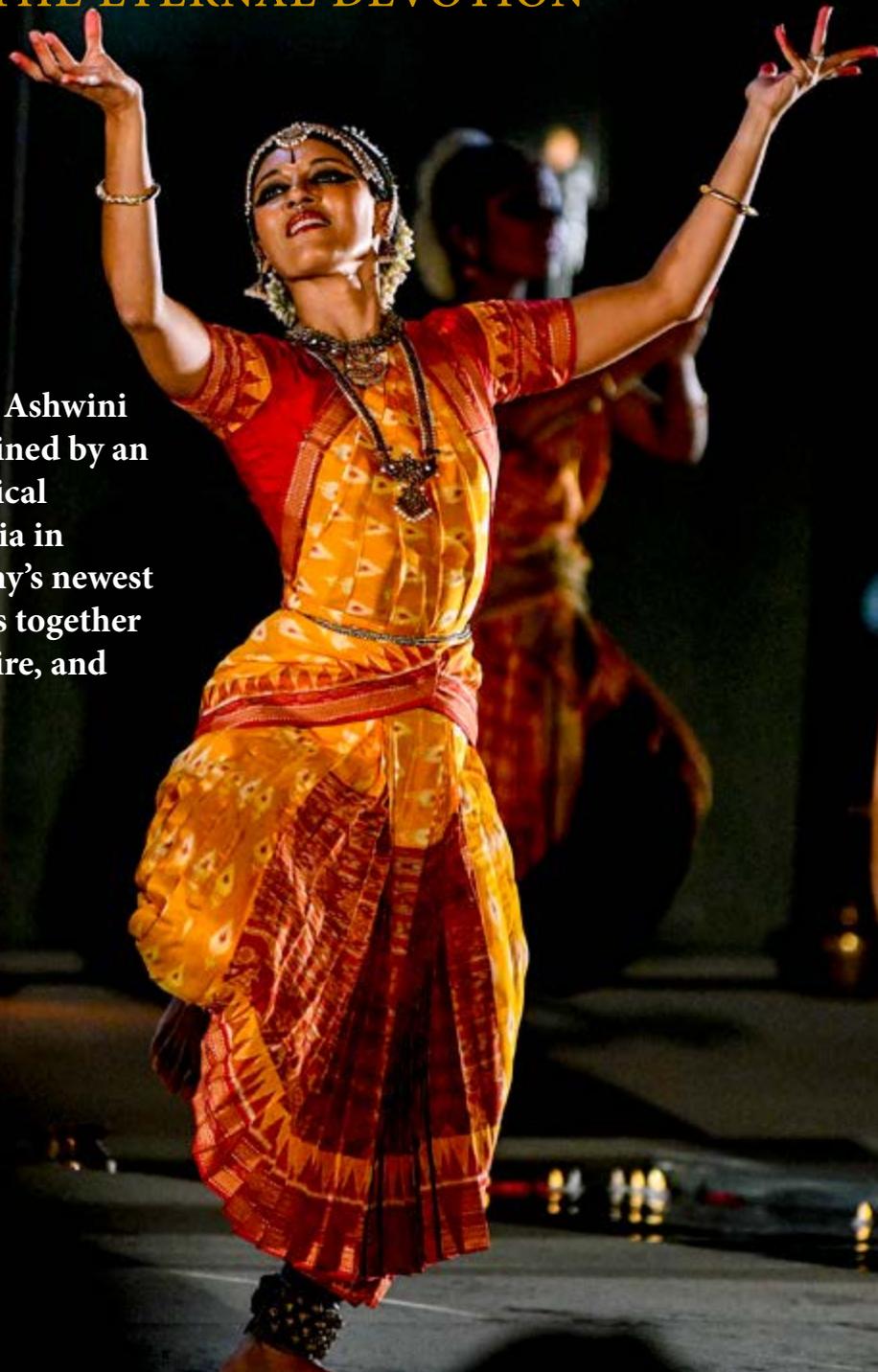
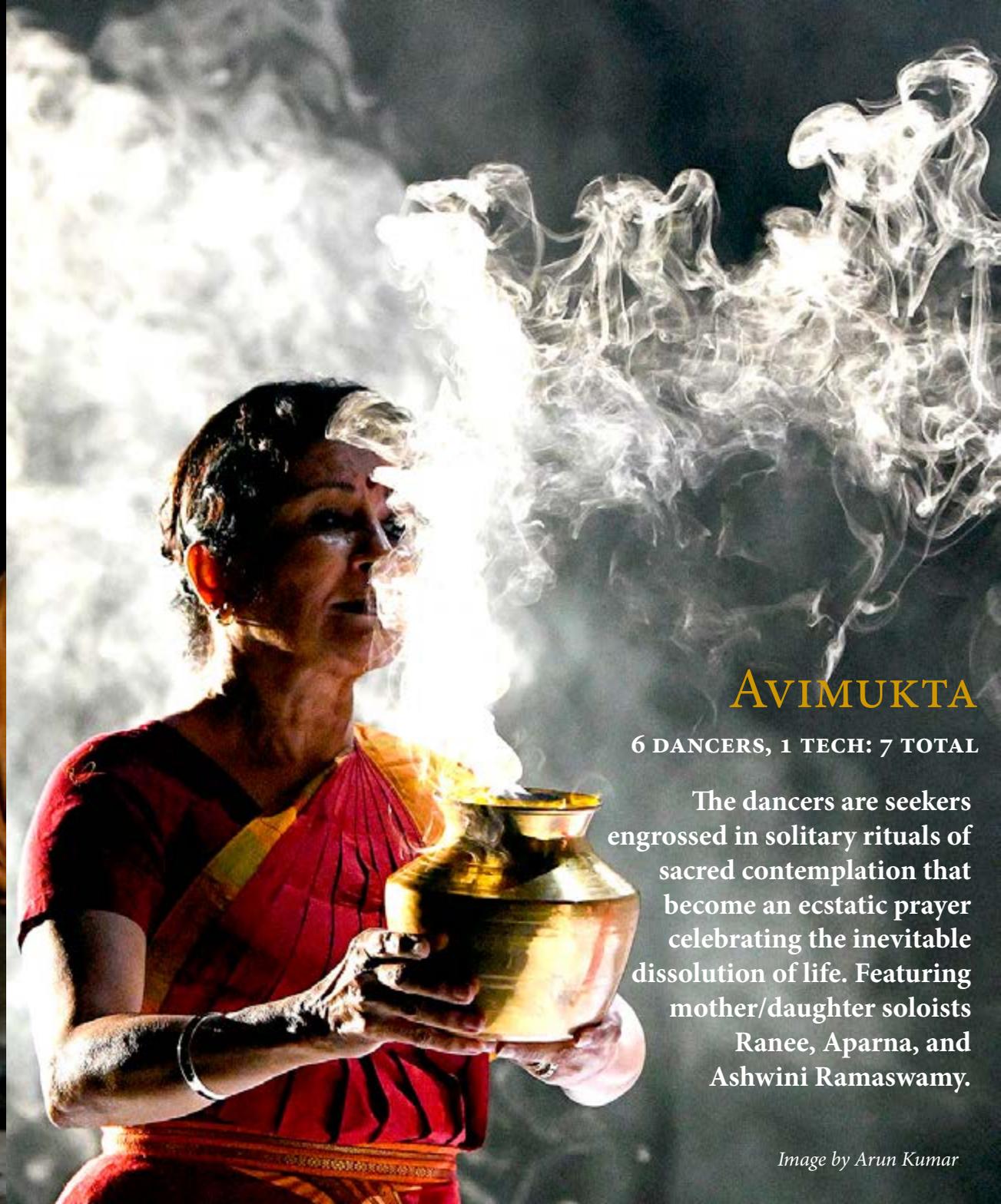


Image by Arun Kumar



## AVIMUKTA

6 DANCERS, 1 TECH: 7 TOTAL

The dancers are seekers engrossed in solitary rituals of sacred contemplation that become an ecstatic prayer celebrating the inevitable dissolution of life. Featuring mother/daughter soloists Ranee, Aparna, and Ashwini Ramaswamy.

Image by Arun Kumar

# SACRED EARTH

4-7 DANCERS, 4 MUSICIANS, 2 TECH:  
10-13 TOTAL OR 4-7 DANCERS & 1 TECH  
(WITH RECORDED MUSIC): 5-8 TOTAL

*Sacred Earth* honors the natural world and the sustenance we derive from it. Inspired by the ephemeral arts of kolam rice flour ritual and indigenous Warli painting, *Sacred Earth* features large-scale original paintings and explores the beautiful, fragile relationship between nature and humanity.



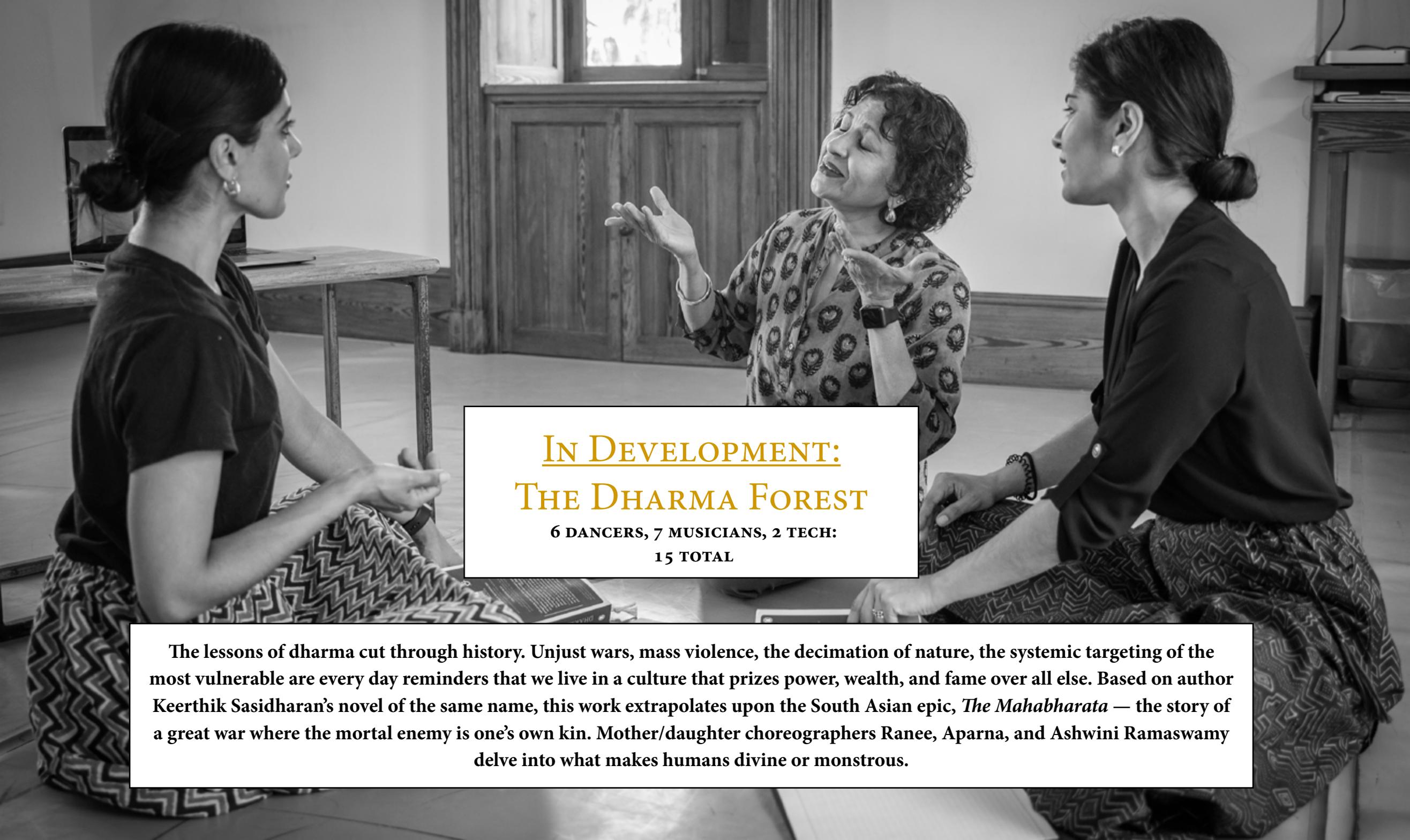
Image by Arun Kumar

# INVISIBLE CITIES

13 DANCERS, 1 VISUAL ARTIST, 2 TECH: 16 TOTAL OR  
8 DANCERS, 1 TECH: 9 TOAL

Choreographic Associate Ashwini Ramaswamy collaboratively reimagines Italo Calvino's novel with a dynamic group of artists—Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy (Bharatanatyam); Berit Ahlgren (Gaga), Alanna Morris (Modern), Joseph Tran (Breaking), and visual artist Kevork Mourad, who creates *Invisible Cities*' interactive, immersive projections.





**IN DEVELOPMENT:**  
**THE DHARMA FOREST**

**6 DANCERS, 7 MUSICIANS, 2 TECH:  
15 TOTAL**

**The lessons of dharma cut through history. Unjust wars, mass violence, the decimation of nature, the systemic targeting of the most vulnerable are every day reminders that we live in a culture that prizes power, wealth, and fame over all else. Based on author Keerthik Sasidharan's novel of the same name, this work extrapolates upon the South Asian epic, *The Mahabharata* — the story of a great war where the mortal enemy is one's own kin. Mother/daughter choreographers Ranee, Aparna, and Ashwini Ramaswamy delve into what makes humans divine or monstrous.**

# Press Highlights

“The eye often goes straight to [Aparna] Ramaswamy’s impeccable technique and incandescent beauty. Through her dancing, the music’s textures come into view.”  
—*The New York Times*

“Ragamala imbues the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam with a thoroughly contemporary exuberance... a visionary approach to an ancient art form.”  
— *Dance Magazine*

“Ragamala has become the standard bearer of a singularly successful kind of hybridity, merging ancient traditions into high-end productions that are hard to resist”  
— *HuffPost*

"Never before have I seen so many ritualistic staples revealed on stage with such grace and ease... Together both the audience and Ragamala Dance Company achieved something special ... a gift of stellar completion, grievance and renewal."  
—*See Chicago Dance*

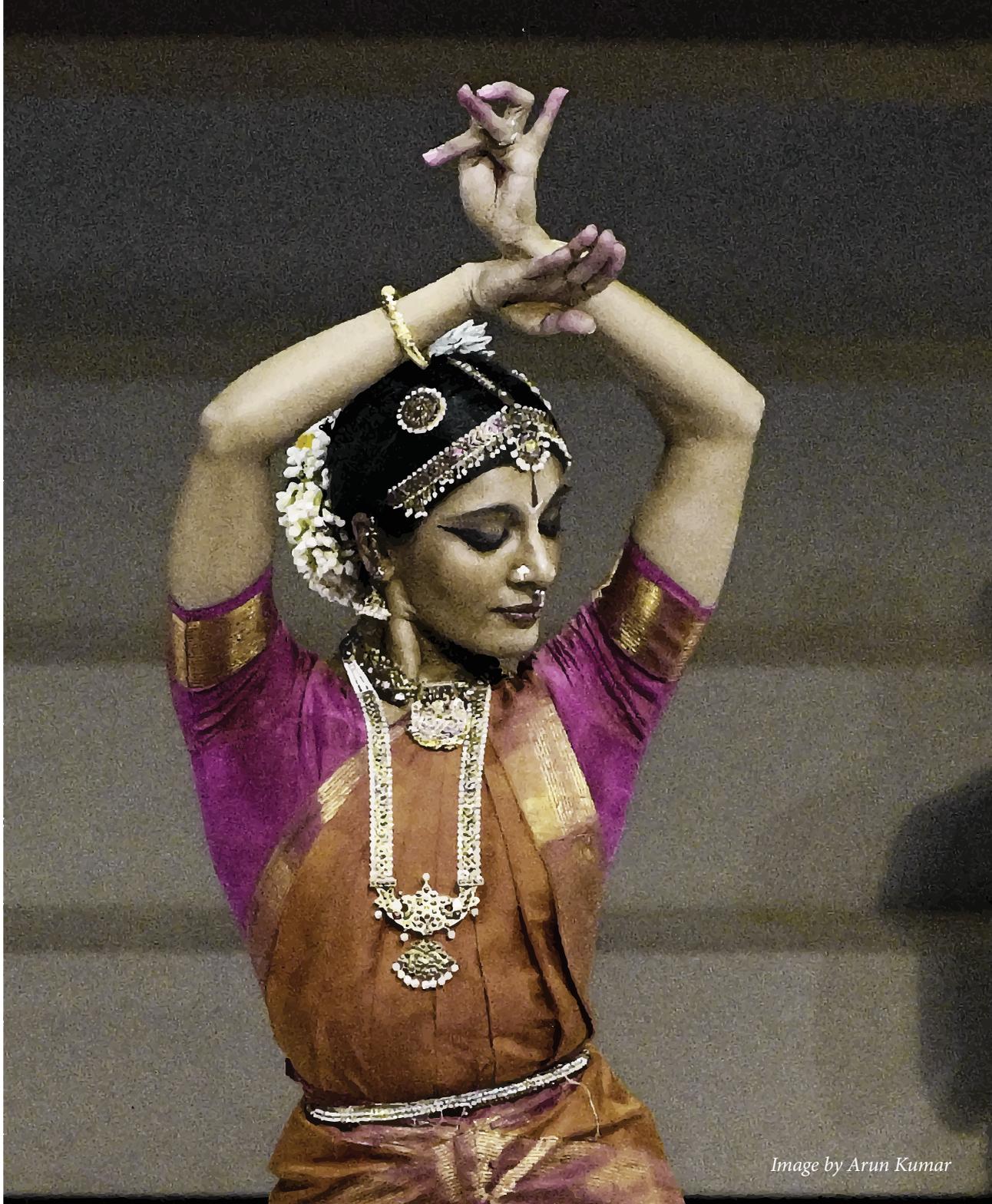


Image by Arun Kumar

“Ragamala shows how Indian forms can be some of the most transcendent experiences that dance has to offer. This is an excellent company.”  
—*The New York Times*

“The relationship between the music and dance is not only meant to be, it exemplifies what happens when artistic boundaries (real or artificial) are radically tested, if not knocked down all together.”  
—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“As Indian dancers based in the U.S., Ragamala’s works reflect the rich heritage and deep philosophical roots of India amalgamated with the inquisitiveness and creative liberty of the United States.”  
—*The Hindu*

“[Ranee Ramaswamy] is a master...her careful art glimmers with some of the magic of the divine.”  
—*The New York Times*

“A beautiful, meditative piece... its transportive qualities fulfilled my desire for immersive art in a way that I have been desperately missing.”  
— *Broadway World*



## From the audience:

*“Still living and reliving the beauty of it all... Truly ethereal, a prayer where for a few hours, time and place transformed.”*

*“Took me to a different place... a place of artistry, peaceful and soothing”*

*“...for a few moments, time and place transcended to ancient rituals... there was magic in the air, and we were spellbound.”*

*“A stunning and surreal production on a perfect night.*

*“Exhilarating, superb, world-class, one-of-a-kind”*

*“Full of grace and perfection... Thank you for bringing Bharatanatyam and Indian culture to the mainstream in the U.S.”*



# The New York Times

September 24, 2021

DANCE

## PLENTY OF CLASSICAL FORMS

For millennia, the sacred city of Varanasi in northern India has been the site of ceremonial cremations believed to release the deceased from the reincarnation cycle. In “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim,” the esteemed Ragamala Dance Company, led by the mother-daughter artistic directors Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy, evokes these rituals through the classical Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam. Though the work was conceived before the pandemic to honor the passing of the Ramaswamys’ father and grandfather, its narrative portrayal of life, death and rebirth — at once solemn, celebratory and sublime — is a fitting choice for the Joyce Theater’s first in-person shows since March 2020. “Fires of Varanasi” will be performed at 8 p.m. through Saturday and at 2 p.m. on Sunday. Tickets start at \$26 and are available at [joyce.org](http://joyce.org).

Additionally, the 14th edition of the Indo-American Arts Council’s Erasing Borders Dance Festival continues through Sunday with online performances by other acclaimed practitioners of Bharatanatyam and additional classical Indian dance forms, including Kathak, Kathakali and Odissi. For more information on the free livestreams, go to [iaac.us](http://iaac.us).

BRIAN SCHAEFER



JEZNAH MOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ashwini Ramaswamy, center, and Sri Guntipally, right, perform “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim,” at the Joyce Theatre in Manhattan.

## TOP 10 MOMENTS FOR DANCE IN CHICAGO IN 2021: LIVE, ON A SCREEN AND BEHIND THE SCENES, CHICAGO DANCE FORGED AHEAD

By Lauren Warnecke

December 8, 2021

Ragamala Dance Company at the Harris Theater in December: Cathartic isn't quite the right word but captures a smidgen of what it felt like to experience "Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim" earlier this month. For its latest work, Minneapolis-based Ragamala drew inspiration from the holy city of Varanasi, India, where the faithful sojourn to convene with the divine and spread loved ones' ashes along the Ganges River. Brimming with allegory, this relatively simple production points your eyes to the pops of color that show up in the dancers' vibrant costumes and flower petals strewn into three shallow reflection pools decorated with tiny tea lights. Those pools frame crisp, perfect bharatanatyam phrases, while hanging above the stage, brass bells, tolled from time to time, call the elders to join. They were certainly among us.



Image by Arun Kumar



## Let's Dance

RAGAMALA DANCE COMPANY'S RANEE RAMASWAMY, ALONG WITH HER DAUGHTERS, APARNA AND ASHWINI, ARE USING BHARATANATYAM, AN ANCIENT HINDU DANCE FORM, TO HELP US UNDERSTAND MODERN LIFE...AND DEATH. BY STEVE MARSH

Hindus believe that the first dancer was the god Shiva and that Shiva danced the world into existence—and can dance it right into oblivion—in a continuously spinning cosmic cycle of divine movement. For 30 years, as the artistic director of the Ragamala Dance Company, Ranee Ramaswamy (right) has been using the language of Bharatanatyam, one of the oldest Hindu dance forms bequeathed by the gods, to

teach Minnesotans—including her own dancing daughters, Aparna (center) and Ashwini (left)—about how myth and art and ritual give meaning to every cycle of life. Ragamala's new show, *Fires of Varanasi*, which comes to Northrop on Feb. 26, explores an aspect of the cycle that all of the living will eventually experience: death. *Read more about the family on page 54.*



## Succession

IT TURNS OUT THE MOST PROLIFIC AND INNOVATIVE MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY BUSINESS IN MINNESOTA SELLS A 2,000-YEAR-OLD DANCE STYLE, AND THE WHOLE WORLD IS BUYING IT.

BY STEVE MARSH

For a billion Hindus, the holy city of Varanasi, set on the banks of the Ganges River in northern India, is the ultimate bucket list destination. Literally. In fact, according to Ranee Ramaswamy, the co-artistic director of world-renowned Ragamala Dance Company, the best time to make your pilgrimage is while your bucket is actually being kicked.

"They say that when you die in

Varanasi," Ramaswamy explains during our visit to her south Minneapolis studio, "Hindus believe Shiva himself whispers a mantra in your ear."

Sitting in the Ragamala studios/offices and talking about death and reincarnation with Ramaswamy and her two daughters—eldest Aparna is co-artistic director with her mom, and youngest Ashwini is choreographic associate as

The Ramaswamys in their south Minneapolis dance studio

well as in-house PR and comms—isn't nearly as much of a downer as you might think. I mean, yes, the three of them are all wearing black blouses (Ranee is wearing hers with nutmeg-hued slacks; Aparna and Ashwini with blue jeans). And their new show, *Fires of Varanasi*, (which debuted at the Kennedy Center

# INTERNATIONAL TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- NYU Abu Dhabi Arts Center (Abu Dhabi, UAE)
- Music Academy (Chennai, India)
- Narada Gana Sabha (Chennai, India)
- Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India)
- Just Festival (Edinburgh, U.K.)
- Soorya Rasavikalpam Festival (Trivandrum, Trissur, Palakkad and Kozhikode)
- National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India)
- Soorya Festival (Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India)
- Iida Bunka Kaikan (Iida, Japan)
- Nagoya Kita Bunka Shogekijyo (Nagoya, Japan)
- Matsumoto Bunka Kaikan (Matsumoto, Japan)
- Bali Arts Festival (Bali, Indonesia)
- Festival of Spirituality and Peace (Edinburgh, Scotland)
- Open Look Dance Festival (St. Petersburg, Russia)
- Miao-Li International Festival (Miao Li, Taiwan)
- Mandapa (Paris, France)



*Image by Ed Böck*

# UNITED STATES TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- Joyce Theater (New York, NY)
- Lincoln Center Out of Doors (New York, NY)
- Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, D.C.)
- American Dance Festival (Durham, NC)
- International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT)
- The Harris Theater (Chicago, IL)
- Opening Nights at Florida State University (Tallahassee, FL)
- Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH)
- Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN)
- Clarice Smith Center for the Performing Arts (College Park, MA)
- Flynn Center (Burlington, VT)
- Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT)
- Hancher Auditorium (Iowa City, IA)
- Krannert Center (Urbana, IL)
- The Hopkins Center (Hanover, NH)
- The Soraya (Los Angeles, CA)
- Lied Center (Lawrence, KS)
- University Musical Society (Ann Arbor, MI)
- Zellerbach Playhouse - Cal Performances (Berkeley, CA)



Image by Teresa Wood

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