

Ragamala Dances an Epic for Our Time

The Ragamala Dance Company returned to New York's Joyce Theater with a visual feast for the eyes and stimulating food for thought with their new production "Children of Dharma." Rooted in the Bharatanatyam classical dance tradition from South India, this intergenerational, family-run dance organization founded by Raneer Ramaswamy, based in Minneapolis, is becoming a more frequent presence in New York City. Ragamala's creative and intelligent collaborations, bring a contemporary lens and thoughtful awareness to the mythology and ritual of their Hindu ancestry and culture making it accessible to a larger public.



Ragamala Dance Company in "Children of Dharma." Photograph by Rob Simmer/Three Phase Multimedia

Performance

Ragamala Dance Company: “Children of Dharma”

Place

The Joyce Theater, New York, NY, January 8, 2025

Words

Karen Greenspan

“Children of Dharma,” co-created, co-choreographed and co-directed by Ranee Ramaswamy and her daughters Aparna and Ashwini, was inspired by “The Mahabharatha,” a seminal Indian epic. This amalgamation joins a list of countless retellings and interpretations spawned over the millennia. With relevance to our times, the epic tale affirms the cyclic nature of things. Despite the endless struggle for power and ensuing bloody wars, an underlying moral order (*dharma*) and harmonizing nature endures and reasserts itself. Last summer, while ensconced in the work’s creation, the company’s executive artistic director Aparna Ramaswamy shared, “‘The Mahabharatha’ is not just a text, it’s a way of being—it’s a million lessons lived and learned.”

Ragamala’s “Children of Dharma” delves into the emotional states and transformations of three key characters: Krishna, Draupati, and Ghandari. The first character to grace the stage is the god, Krishna. He appears out of total darkness and the primal resonance of an intoned mantra. Treated as a personification nature in this production, he provides a connecting presence throughout the work. As the lights come up and he walks onstage, we know by virtue of his flute-playing posture that he is Krishna. But then follows a choreographic surprise. His otherworldly qualities are heightened by his meandering walk with toes dorsiflexed (lifted off the floor), several held classical Cambodian poses, and a gesture solo of Cambodian mudras with their notable hyper-extension of the wrists and fingers. Danced by the mesmerizing Garrett Sour, trained since early childhood in classical Cambodian dance as well as Bharatanatyam more recently, this Krishna and this take on “The Mahabharata” is off to a captivating start.

The action takes place within the scenic and lighting design of the genius Willy Cessa. The distilled set consists of several wavy fabric panels hung from above. The panels, at times simply bathed in white light, at other times covered in projected images—mostly of ancient temple statues from India and Cambodia—easily adapt to create a variety of evocative landscapes.



Ashwini Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy of Ragamala Dance Company in "Children of Dharma." Photograph by Steven Pisano

Projected images of a blooming forest usher in the ensemble that performs pleasing group choreography using the percussive footwork, exacting arm positions, and decorative hand gestures of the Bharatanatyam style. Krishna bounds onto the scene—his leaps infused with striking energy and elevation. As the group revels in a celebratory gathering, Krishna weaves through the Gopis (female cowherds) to dance with each one separately until he poses in the center of their spinning circle. The danced action draws from a tale in which all the Gopis believed that they had each spent the entire night dancing alone with Krishna—an example of how Krishna multiplies himself to connect with each soul. The devotion of the Gopis toward Krishna is said to represent the soul's yearning for union with the divine.

As a prelude to the next character, soloists Aparna and Ashwini Ramaswamy perform a dance of invocation. Costumed by D.S. Aiyellu in persimmon-colored, pleated dance saris with glittering ornaments, they enter the space, now transformed with projections of ancient stone statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. Arriving center stage, Ashwini descends to the floor and gestures devotional offerings to the gods while Aparna remains upright portraying the deity—lunging forcefully, arms vibrating in a fiery display of power. With a switch in level, the two dancers exchange roles. The role interchanges continue until they join in unison for a riveting dance sequence of percussive footwork, precision arm and hand gestures, and even minute lateral head slides to spoken percussive syllables. The pure dance sequences highlight the hand-in-hand relationship of Bharatanatyam with Carnatic music. In this case, the score was developed alongside the choreography in collaboration with seven gifted musicians, who then recorded it.



Ragamala Dance Company's "Children of Dharma." Photograph by Rob Simmer/Three Phase Multimedia

The character of Draupati is painted in multiple layers giving depth to the stage and the story. A recorded narration tells her story—the wife of the five Pandava brothers—collateral gambled and lost in a game of dice between men consumed with greed for power and wealth. But beyond the narrated story of a victimized female, the production conceives Draupati as the supreme goddess—Mother Earth. As two dancers mime playing the game of dice in a square of white light stage left, Draupati (danced by Aparna) appears upstage center as if she has stepped out of the multi-armed stone goddess projected behind her. Moving downstage, she clutches an imaginary spear and overwhelms numerous foes displaying her ultimate power. With the final roll of the dice, Draupati is pulled by her hair and thrown to the winners of the game (the Kauravas), who try to strip her. Of course, in this dance form, these actions and conflict are dramatically rendered as a solo. Amid Draupati's distress, Krishna appears in response to her appeals for help. Extending his arm toward her—his hand vibrating with energetic power, Krishna provides an endless sari that cannot be unwound.

Draupati's anger engenders her prophetic curse that sets off a devastating war between the Pandavas and their Kaurava cousins. The ominous scene of Krishna leading the dancers off to war in a traveling sequence of martial postures against a backdrop of weapon wielding figures from antiquity is chillingly effective. And this introduces the final character, Gandari, mother of the defeated Kauravas. Gandari, performed by Raneeramaswamy wearing a black sari, steps into the white light and removes the blindfold she has worn since marrying her blind husband years ago. Seeing the destruction of her 100 sons, she sinks to the floor grief-stricken—her trembling fingers gesturing tears from her eyes, her fists beating her breast. With an accusatory finger toward Krishna, she blames him for causing the war and her great loss.

In a final tableau of cyclic renewal, the ensemble dances classical gestures of devotion to the projection of a smiling Mother Goddess bedecked with flower garlands. The epic concludes with this excerpt from the epilogue printed in the program:

The Kauravas have died.

Gandari has died.

I, too [Krishna], have died and left the mortal world.

Draupati is appeased ... As Mother earth, she renews humanity's purpose during their brief time between birth and death.

It seems we have a million more lessons to live and learn.

Karen Greenspan

Karen Greenspan is a New York City-based dance journalist and frequent contributor to *Natural History Magazine*, *Dance Tabs*, *Ballet Review*, and *Tricycle* among other publications. She is also the author of *Footfalls from the Land of Happiness: A Journey into the Dances of Bhutan*, published in 2019.