

## CRITIC'S PICK

# Review: Three Dancers, One Solo. How Do They Make It Their Own?

Ashwini Ramaswamy, whose specialty is Indian classical dance, works with two dancers from other traditions in “Let the Crows Come.”

By **Gia Kourlas**

April 14, 2022

**Let the Crows Come**    NYT Critic's Pick

Ashwini Ramaswamy has dancing in her blood. Much of her extensive training in the South Indian classical form of Bharatanatyam took place under her mother, Raneer Ramaswamy, and her sister, Aparna, the artistic directors of the respected Ragamala Dance Company in Minneapolis. But to grow, don't most of us need a splash of rebellion? Or, at the very least, a sprinkle of daring?

In her magnetic “Let the Crows Come,” Ramaswamy achieves something of both, with one foot planted in the present and the other in tradition. For this evening-length piece at the Baryshnikov Arts Center — opening two years after its scheduled New York premiere — she has taken a Bharatanatyam solo and placed it on three bodies as a way to explore how she has been shaped by two worlds: India and the United States.

Most important are the different ways those bodies have been trained: The work features Ramaswamy; Alanna Morris, whose background is in modern dance; and Berit Ahlgren, who specializes in Gaga, the movement language developed by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. (All three are credited as choreographers of the work.) Ramaswamy is a singular dancer, but so are they all — the force that is Morris is breathtaking.

The source is Ramaswamy — alive and glittering in her sculptural poses, her exacting footwork and her fluttering, birdlike fingers and hands that illustrate, in part, the role of the crow in connecting the living to the dead. After dancing by herself and then being briefly joined by Ahlgren and Morris, she ends her opening solo alone. The same structure is repeated with the other two, knitting the work together with simple eloquence.



From left, Alanna Morris, Ramaswamy and Berit Ahlgren. Maria Baranova

Even as the dancers matched and echoed one another's arms and feet, their interpretations were, at times, wildly — and certainly stylistically — different. Yet they were all capable of holding the stage with a similar intensity, as if they were dance spirits, one shadowing the other. And the music was just as important. For her experiment, Ramaswamy was drawn to how a D.J. remixes a song. How does a piece of music, or a dance solo, change and shift to reveal different facets over time? And how can that honor different generations?

For their composition, Jace Clayton, known as DJ Rupture, and Brent Arnold use a Carnatic score from Prema Ramamurthy as their point of departure. Joined by Rohan Krishnamurthy, Arun Ramamurthy and Roopa Mahadevan — whose stirring voice seemed to guide Ramaswamy's lithe feet along an invisible tightrope of sound — they created a sonic world, which, like the dance, dips into the past and present.

Through the interpretations of Ahlgren and Morris, the Bharatanatyam choreography creates an undulating pattern of sensations. Ahlgren is articulate yet dreamily pliable, as if she had been taught Bharatanatyam while floating through water; all the while, her arms carve and curve almost emphatically as she holds onto shapes and her torso undulates, pausing when necessary for emphasis.

And Morris, who draws on Ramaswamy's detailed use of the face with her own joyful smile and glowing eyes, finds her way into Bharatanatyam as she darts across the stage, sinking into big, juicy pliés while stretching her arms for days. She's articulate yet free in her body; swirling to the floor and rising up again, you feel that her cascading sense of momentum, for all her grounded glory, has a weightlessness, too.



An offering of rice: From left, Ahlgren, Ramaswamy and Morris. Maria Baranova

If Ramaswamy is like a living sculpture and Ahlgren is more distant, diaphanous and of the air, Morris ties them together, surfing on a peak of feeling as if dancing the histories of *her* ancestors. It makes sense: Ramaswamy's title takes inspiration from a Hindu tradition involving the offering of rice. If a crow comes and eats the rice, it means that your ancestors are well — they have ascended.

Throughout the evening, a large bowl of rice sat at the front of the stage. In its final moments the three dancers surrounded it; with open palms, each gathered as much as they could before letting it rain through their fingers as they stood beneath a slim spotlight.

Did you know something like that was coming? Sure. But it was still arresting. Finally, the dancers, who had been moving in separate spheres, joined forces as if the threads of Ramaswamy's imagination had united and flourished, making space, not just for more generations but for more ways of thinking. The crows came.

#### **Let the Crows Come**

Through April 15 at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, Manhattan; bacnyc.org.