TRANSCENDING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: HYBRIDIZATION IN THE ARTISTIC WORKS OF UMESH SHETTY

Premalatha Thiagarajan

This paper analyzes two creative dance works produced by one of Malaysia’s lead contemporary dance choreographers, Umesh Shetty. It interrogates the ways in which the framework of Indian classical dance tradition is blended with the techniques drawn from other dance genres in the process of creating hybrid dances. This essentially focuses on issues pertaining to the transformation of traditional dance repertoires into hybrid art forms, the identities manufactured through the production of the Malaysian dance context, and the reception as well as circulation of the artistic endeavors.

Introduction

Malaysian dance choreographers have actively engaged in the process of creating hybrid dances since the 1970s. The diverse cultural groups within the multi-ethnic country have been experimenting with new ideas and aspirations through interactions, blending and fusions of cultural experiences. Important to note is the fact that the assimilation of different dance forms, particularly eastern and western dance forms, have not resulted in westernization since local dance choreographers have been more concerned about manufacturing an identity of “Malaysian-ness” through their creative endeavors. In line with this idea, this paper focuses on the cultural diversity in the works of one of the leading Indian male dance choreographers, Umesh Shetty.

Known as a versatile dancer in the Malaysian dance scene, Shetty’s contemporary dances signify his passion to transcend and move between different traditions. Through this study I want to ask how are traditional dances transformed into cross-cultural hybrid forms and what happens through this transformation? What is the identity do the dances manufacture in the multi-ethnic societal context such as Malaysia? I investigate the ways in which the dancer/choreographer experiments with the exploration of Bharata Natyam in terms of structure and vocabulary by blending movement patterns from other dance genres to create experimental work. Besides, the visible hybridization in terms of dancers’ ethnic identities and dance movements, the titles of the dance pieces and the incorporation of modified costumes as well as commissioned musical score present an interesting case study. Furthermore, this paper

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1 I am utilizing the term contemporary to refer to “current” or “present” dances that are non-traditional and are generic to the dance genres that already exists in Malaysia.