

Upaj: Improvise

Michelle Baird • Published on February 26, 2013

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Two cameras, five weeks, and 100 hours of footage. But where was the story?” is the conundrum that Producer Antara Bhardwaj, Producer of Upaj: Improvise, began with. She and her crew filmed Indian kathak master Pandit Chitresh Das and rising tap star Jason Samuels Smith on tour in India for India Jazz Suites, an east-west dance collaboration. The result is a 50-minute documentary of an unlikely but electrifying collaboration between a master steeped in the Indian classical tradition and a 28-year-old tap dancer from a streetwise

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Sumana

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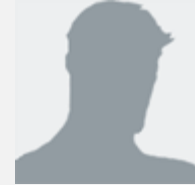
American art form.



“Guru-ji is 68 and has had a plethora of experience. Trying to encapsulate his life within 50 minutes? It was a little challenging, and it was a little challenging for him to realize this film is only about one part of his life,” explains Bhardwaj. Pandit Das is widely recognized as a virtuoso, and was awarded the National Heritage Fellowship by the U.S. government in 2009 for his work choreographing, composing, and directing. Das is committed to the concept of “innovation within tradition,” striving to create contemporary works rooted within the kathak tradition while running one of the largest Indian classical dance institutions in the world. Das has also served as an unlikely mentor for Jason Samuels Smith. Smith is an artist who has risen rapidly in the dance field over the past decade, receiving an Emmy and American Choreography Award in 2009. African-American tap and kathak are both percussive, and deeply rooted in improvisation, yet very different. Das brought Samuels to India for his first visit during the documentary, and the film documents this transformational experience. “India always changes people... and this is the

listening to AR Rahman 'talk' in a gathering a few months back..He felt a loss of words and started crooning...

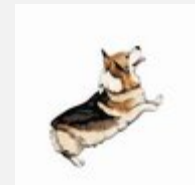
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Prakash Narayan

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Anita Felicelli

Hi Akram, I tend to agree with you. But it's worth noting that rapes in the U.S. are also believed to be underreported. A stats comparison is all we have to

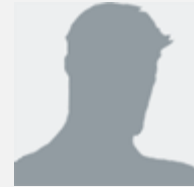
story of the unlikely friendship of two people who've come together through an art form," says Bhardwaj.

For Bhardwaj, the documentary presented a personal challenge at an important period in her life. She had directed her own feature film and produced Jag Mundhra's *Shoot on Sight*, featuring Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. Yet Bhardwaj found herself at a turning point with her work in filmmaking. "I didn't want to live out of two suitcases anymore," and she missed dancing while working on films, having trained with Das since childhood. Upaj gave her the opportunity to tour with Das while working on the film simultaneously, an intensive process. "I was totally immersed," she says.

Bhardwaj first stumbled into the project when she saw sample scenes Rina Mehta, the Executive Producer of Upaj, had put together. Impressed by Hoku Uchiyama's work as the film's Director, Bhardwaj thought, "What is this project? It was so near and dear to me. And I was blown away by Hoku's artistry." Yet working on a documentary about one's teacher is a complicated proposition. "It's a tough line to walk. I realized I shouldn't try to direct; there needs to be some distance from the subject." Knowing your subject is crucial for a documentary filmmaker, but so is preserving objectivity. "At times I would watch scenes and cringe. Maybe this shows my guru in a vulnerable way? I had to step back and realize how this was important to the story... you don't

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want to sensationalize, and you don't want to exploit" says Bhardwaj.

Working in a documentary format for the first time was a transition for both producer and director. "It was a rude awakening. We both come from a narrative background" and working on a documentary while filming in India proved to be a very different experience. Moving from highly scripted scenes to following a story as it evolved in real time was initially an adjustment for Bhardwaj. The process of production also turned out to be a marathon. "I had to let go and let this film take its time." And the challenge of showing your film to your subjects at the end and awaiting their reaction? "It was nerve-racking, showing the final cut. Everyone was watching in different places. What would they think? But in the end they said, 'Let's go with it.'"

"I'm proud of the unique insight I was able to bring to a multi-ethnic team, some of whom had never been to India before," says Bhardwaj. Upaj, although a film about artistic improvisation, is also a film about cultural improvisation as well. Uchiyama, as well as crewman Shaun Jefford, had never been to India before. While filming the unique collaboration of two men from very different backgrounds on stage, the documentary crew was also bridging some important cultural divides of their own. Yet it's the personal reactions to her work that Bhardwaj finds most compelling. She watches the audience react to

the documentary, “whether that’s being inspired, intrigued by a subject they didn’t even know existed, touched by the passion” and knows her process has facilitated a connection between the audience and the story of the two artists on screen.

Upaj will be screened at the annual Chitresh Das Dance Company and Chhandam School of Kathak’s annual gala. A performance by the Chhandam Youth Dance Company will start the evening, followed by a screening of the film, a performance by Das and Smith, and a question and answer session with the dancers, director, and producer. Dinner will follow.

Saturday, March 2, 5:30 reception, 6:30 showing and performance. Computer History Museum. 1401 North Shoreline Boulevard, Mountain View. Tickets start at \$250. Traditional attire. www.kathak.org. julie@kathak.org. (415) 333-9000.

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