

Spirituality is very political

PICTURE: RANA CHAKRABORTY



...says modern dancer Marin Leggat who explores the spiritual through her art

NAMRATA BHAWNANI

Modern dancer Marin Leggat is in Mumbai as the United States' cultural envoy. Though it's her second trip to India, it's her first to Mumbai. Before launching into the interview, she exclaims that there's much she hasn't been able to do—see tigers, go to Elephanta... and shop!

● **Tell us about your show...**

Modern dancing, or contemporary dancing, as it is known here, is an offshoot of ballet. At the turn of the 20th century, a group of women eager to express themselves more freely, threw off their shoes, their restrictive corsets. Their movement became more organic, natural and free. They wanted to be individuals. That's the vein of dance I come from.

The first piece is my choreography called *Light Traces*. It deals with those aspects of our life that we can't see, but we still feel are real. Then I will perform a solo and the last piece by Terence Lewis' dancers is called *Surkh*.

● **What are the themes that you explore through your art?**

...Just the larger life questions that we ask ourselves. How do we infuse that into our art? Our background, our religious beliefs, our cultural heritage... all that becomes a lens through which we create

meaning for ourselves. When I go on stage, I want to honour the audience. It's humbling that they've taken the time to come see my performance. There's a synergistic pattern I hope to create.

● **How are the themes reflected in your performance?**

With the dancers, we talked about our values, relationships, traits like honesty and integrity. Most dancers here come from a commercial background, Bollywood is their DNA. Maybe they haven't had the opportunity to ask 'why do I do what I do? What need is it filling in my life?' I asked the dancers to identify a core value that is dearest to them and they created a movement motif for it.

● **Was the image of India as the spiritual destination a big draw? How do you intend to merge Western philosophies with Eastern values?**

India does have that image. With this project, I'm approaching spirituality in very broad brushstrokes. I wanted to explore the stereotypes of Indian spirituality and see how much it connects with the real lives of these dancers.

With modern and post-modern dance, there is a reaching out beyond the borders of countries. Even the pioneers of modern dance looked abroad for influences. One of the first dancers, a woman named Ruth Dennis, was inspired by the

stories of Radha and influenced by India, even though she had never been here.

I think spirituality is very political. Spirituality involves religion and immediately you're in a political arena. I focus on those aspects of humanity that unite us, rather than divide us.

● **What are the challenges of working with Indian dancers?**

Several dancers have been trained in classical dance or at least, exposed to it. In modern dance, you need to keep your pelvis stable. In Indian dancing, most of time, the back is slightly arched. I've had to work a lot on strengthening the dancers' lower backs as modern dance strains the back.

I also love how expressive these dancers are. In the US, many contemporary dancers are disconnected from the spirit. You see a lot of glazed-over faces.

● **Is dance merged with soul searching a lucrative career combination?**

In New York, it is hard to support yourself solely on dancing and choreography. There you don't have the crossover between commercial work and the artistic. I'd like to teach at a university eventually and maybe get a job with health benefits and retirement benefits!

Marin Leggat performs at St Andrews on July 3 at 8 pm. Pick up free passes at the venue