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WORKING NOTE



## Two dances and a conference

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Philip Lutgendorf participated in an international symposium on the evolution of song and dance in Hindi cinema hosted at Sonoma State University in April 2017, where he also attended two-related events – a screening of Uday Shankar’s recently restored dance-drama *Kalpana* (1948) and the world premiere of Leela Dance’s *Son of the Wind* – both of which he discusses below.

### The event

A symposium on ‘The Evolution of Song and Dance in Hindi Cinema’ was held at California’s Sonoma State University in April 2017. Organized by Rajinder Dudrah and Ajay Gehlawat, its presentations, which generated the articles featured in this special issue of *SAPC*, offered an array of new perspectives on this cinema’s musical and choreographic dimensions, with notable and especially welcome attention given to the latter. For despite general agreement among scholars of popular Hindi cinema that the presence of music and dance is one of its trademark features, scholarship on this formidable entertainment industry has often focused on its narratives as texts, and to a lesser extent on acting, camerawork, and *mise-en-scène* – largely ignoring the music and dance sequences that may constitute as much as a third of a film’s running time, or even dismissing them as insignificant add-ons or ‘spectacles’ of emotional excess (see, e.g. Prasad; Dissanayake and Sahai). And if song itself has been (to venture a pun) downplayed in most Indian cinema scholarship, the films’ choreographic component has usually been still more overlooked. This is perhaps natural given that most film and cultural studies scholars lack specialized training in musicology (or the emerging discipline of ‘choreomusicology’ highlighted in Usha Iyer’s contribution), and though two ethnomusicologists who presented at the symposium have produced important books on Hindi cinema (Beaster-Jones; Booth), scholars (like me) who lack such training are often painfully aware of their inability to effectively analyze in musical terms what is going on in song/dance sequences. In bringing together eminent ethnomusicologists with other scholars who write on Bombay cinema and with two whose work focuses on dance and its practitioners, the symposium demonstrated the potential richness of a more wholistic approach to (what one participant called) the ‘layered assemblage’ of Hindi films.

It was thus, especially, appropriate that the academic presentations were bracketed by two dance performance events happily arranged to coincide with the symposium – a screening

of the newly restored print of dancer and choreographer Uday Shankar's much-discussed but rarely seen 1948 film *Kalpana*, and a live performance: the world premiere of a full-length ballet in Kathak style, 'Son of the Wind', by the San Francisco Bay area-based dance company Leela. That neither piece exemplified the mainstream, cinematic productions that were the focus of the academic symposium made the cumulative package even richer and more provocative – especially in compelling participants to think more about the centrality of dance in cinema, and indeed about the tenuous boundary-line dividing 'dance', as conventionally understood, from the more encompassing choreography of any physical movement accompanied by diegetic or extra diegetic music.

As a fortunate spectator and discussant at the symposium, I was given the task, for this journal, of commenting on the Shankar film – an assignment about which I felt some trepidation, as I am neither a film specialist nor a scholar of music and dance. In what follows, I have drawn not only on my own response to seeing the restored print (and several viewings of a poorer quality one that is helpfully archived, with extensive scene-by-scene commentary, on the extraordinary internet site *Indiacine.ma*), but have also benefited from several insightful analyses that place the film in the wider context of Shankar's career and legacy (Erdman; Munsii; Purkayastha). Although he was largely scorned, for decades, by a classical dance establishment that branded his work 'inauthentic' even as it quietly adopted some of his innovations in pedagogy, ensemble work, and story ballets (for example, in the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra of Delhi's mounting, since 1957, of an annual 'Ramlila' as a spectacular dance-drama), Shankar has received more appreciative assessment in recent years as a visionary innovator who singlehandedly developed a style of modern dance in India that was neither purely 'classical' nor 'folk' but, notwithstanding its foreign influences, unquestionably 'Indian'. The restoration of *Kalpana* offers a welcome opportunity to reassess his impact on both cinema and dance (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Uday Shankar as Krishna in a dance sequence from *Kalpana* (1948). Copyright of Cineteca di Bologna, Italy.

## The film

If many Hindi films, especially in the first decades after the advent of sound, are essentially 'operatic' – in which a medley of songs and dances (as many as a staggering 72 in 1932s *Indrasabha*) are loosely stitched together by a storyline periodically invoked through dialog and action – *Kalpana* is perhaps best appreciated as a long dance performance similarly interrupted by a quasi-autobiographical storyline that, unless one is familiar with Shankar's life, can be confusing to follow, as well as by satirical and allegorical set-pieces that comment (often obliquely) on then-contemporary events and trends. The acting is, at best, highly mannered, and Shankar's flat delivery of lines and static poses seem especially awkward. Although Amala Shankar, as his main love interest, is more spirited, it is clear that neither of these talented artists was really comfortable expressing feelings through verbal language. It is dance that is the lifeblood of this film.

Framed as the unsuccessful pitch of a screenplay by an idealistic writer (Shankar, made-up with gray hair, spectacles, and a Gandhi cap) to a jaded studio owner, the film unfolds as the life story of one Udayan ('arising', the Sanskrit version of Uday's name), an artistic genius who dreams of serving the nation. In childhood, escaping a deadening village school to stage dance performances with friends, including the headstrong girl Uma, Udayan finds a benevolent mentor in Uma's father, shows skill at painting, and (now grown up and played by the middle-aged Shankar) departs for the pilgrimage city of Banaras for further artistic education. There he assembles a dance troupe that includes the Muslim youth Noor (who, as Udayan's best friend, makes a passing nod to communal harmony) and a group of talented sisters from a respectable family – whose playful camaraderie with adolescent boys and willingness to appear on a public stage probably alludes to then-current discourse about 'purifying' dance of its traditional association with courtesans and making it suitable for middle-class girls. The resulting show, starring Udayan, who performs a famous Shankar piece based on the mythology of Shiva and also demonstrates a sinuous arm and hand technique that is captured in an expressionist montage, is followed by a quarrel with the theater owner over profits and his apparent accidental murder. The young artists flee into the countryside, which is in the grip of drought and famine, to which Noor soon succumbs. While trying to save him, Udayan encounters a deranged village girl, Kamini ('desirous', played by Lakshmi Kanta), who recovers to become his dance student and, eventually, the jealous second female figure in a love-triangle with his former childhood playmate and future dance partner and wife, Uma ('mother', an epithet of Parvati, played by Amala Shankar, whom Uday had married in 1942).

Post-famine, Kamini brings Udayan to Bombay – a city, as he petulantly announces, 'filled with all the filth of Europe and America' – and introduces him to the city's Westernized elite, to whom he pitches his idea for a cultural center that will revive traditional Indian arts. An industrialist's boast about his new factory leads Udayan into an apparent reverie presenting portions of one of Shankar's most famous ballets, 'Labour and Machinery', in which massed male and female workers execute machine-like movements in a shadowy industrial set – seemingly inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) – and then are led in revolt by a proletarian hero (Shankar, of course). Awakening, Udayan insults his would-be patrons and flees the cocktail party in disgust, only to be pursued by one 'decent', *khadi*-clad industrialist who hands him a check for 50 lakh (five million) rupees to start his center, reminding him that 'rich people can also be human beings'. The fact that rich human beings – including the

principal patrons of Shankar's erstwhile Almora Centre – can also be British, is as carefully elided here as was the foreignness of much of his artistic education and early performance career, via the film's substitution of holy Banaras for decadent London and Paris.

The establishment of the Himalayan *Kalakendra* ('cultural center'), which the remainder of the film celebrates, is heralded by a montage of newspaper headlines and models of its intended components, triumphantly announced by a voiceover narrator: 'Experimental radio station! Library! Museum! Gymnasium! National theatre!' Its scope is further suggested by brief vignettes of Udayan lecturing on neuroanatomy; rows of dhoti-clad boys chanting Sanskrit mantras; students in painting classes; and physical training that includes boys wrestling and girls boxing. An apparent student performance offers glimpses of another famous Shankar ballet, in which dancers garbed as wooden marionettes (*kathputli*) perform to a song that declares, 'We have been asleep for centuries, dancing like wooden puppets' – that the sword-wielding puppet masters are coded as bearded, turbaned Muslims seems to unconsciously incorporate one of the tropes of Hindu nationalism. Other performance pieces – such as a satire on modern higher education by black-robed graduates in mortarboard caps, and a pitiable appeal for national unity from an emaciated Mother India clad in a tattered sari – are inserted, often abruptly, into the storyline.

Two subplots concern crises that apparently threaten the center: Kamini and Uma's rivalry for Udayan's affections, and its need for funds once the initial gift has been exhausted. The former, perhaps alluding to Shankar's many amours but also seemingly intended as an allegorical conflict between materialism (Kamini) and spiritual artistry (Uma), has many confusing ups and downs, including attempted murder and fantasied suicide, but ends with Uma's marriage to Udayan, staged as the danced union of Parvati and Shiva in a shimmering *devaloka*. The latter occasions a debate in which Kamini proposes making a film to earn money; Udayan rejects this and instead proposes mounting a massive 'spring festival' (*vasant-utsav*) that will showcase their new national theater and bring together Indians of all classes as well as practitioners of all the country's dance traditions.

This grand spectacle, which comprises most of the film's second half, incorporates more examples of Shankar's solo and ensemble choreography along with ethnographic footage of Indian tribal and South-East Asian dancers, vignettes about the arrogance and licentiousness of princely rulers (the film was made just as most of them were facing accession to newly independent India and Pakistan), the continuing fight between Kamini and Uma and the angst it provokes, and scenes of a cheering audience in an orientalized version of a European opera house. Despite having been forced to crawl into this structure through a knee-high archway (because, as an usher announces, 'in the temple of art, both king and pauper must bow their heads'), the princes are eventually charmed by female dancers, who, in one remarkable sequence advocating women's liberation, strut proudly down a gangway wearing only blouses and skirts – the absence of the requisite *dupatta* constituting the equivalent, in the Indian context, of appearing topless. Donations pour in, apparently insuring the continued life of Udayan's Centre. His would-be cinematic life story does not fare so well, however: the bored producer abruptly cuts the writer's narration short, announcing that the script lacks commercial appeal, and has the writer thrown into the street. There, alone under a lamppost, he bewails the fact that, in the present benighted state of his country, 'my *kalpana* (fantasy) will remain only a *kalpana*'.

## The legacy

Among the several ironies that surround *Kalpana* is the fact that the script of this dance-centered film – telling the story of the non-making of a dance-centered film – explicitly rejects cinema as a corrupted and corrupting art form (‘it is doing our country more harm than good’, Udayan opines, in response to Kamini’s proposal that they make a film) and instead champions a revived ‘national culture’ to be taught in precisely the kind of ashram-like academy that had (in fact) been dissolved by Shankar in 1944, in order to devote himself to filmmaking. In a further irony, the dance academies that would actually prove enduring in post-Independence India would largely reject Shankar’s syncretic style in favor of ‘pure’ strains of reinvented regional traditions (Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Manipuri, Odissi, etc.), and yet his eclectic vision would be enthusiastically adopted by the very industry that he had critiqued. Indeed, viewing *Kalpana* makes clear that Bombay film choreography and (what Usha Iyer aptly calls) ‘dance musicalization’, especially during its celebrated ‘golden age’, owed a great debt to the *kalpana* and innovation of Uday Shankar.

This is evident in big-budget films that prominently featured dance and dancers – such as V. Shantaram’s *Jhanak Jhanak Paayal Baaaje* (‘The anklebells ring’, 1955). Perhaps the most celebrated Hindi film about dance (a box office hit, also honored with four Filmfare Awards and the President’s Gold Medal), it features a series of dreamlike mini-ballets that are no less hybrid than those in *Kalpana* and that sometimes draw on the Khmer and Thai-influenced costumes and jewelry favored by Shankar’s Paris-nurtured ‘oriental’ esthetic. Shankar’s influence is evident, too, in semi-art films, such as the underappreciated masterpiece *Jagte Raho* (‘Keep awake’, Sombhu Mitra, Amit Maitra, 1956) – a dreamlike allegory of dystopian urban life unfolding during a single night, that ends with a Shankar-esque apotheosis into a morning hymn (*Jago Mohan pyaare*, ‘Wake, darling Krishna’), that features Nargis bearing a pot of water – echoing a scene in *Kalpana* in which Uma, to the same *bhajan* lyric, offers puja for Udayan’s spring festival.

There are Shankaresque echoes, too, in the semi-autobiographical *Kaagaz ke Phool* (‘Paper flowers’, 1959) by Guru Dutt, whose own artistic trajectory began as a dancer at Shankar’s Almora Centre. His story frame – of a dying director, rejected by the cynical magnates of an industry that once lionized him, and reveling in a long flashback that recounts his career – suggests *Kalpana*’s frame and embedded narrative, and Dutt is also justly famed for his choreographic approach to dreamlike musical sequences. Shankar’s stamp is even more visible on the famous balletic dream sequence of Raj Kapoor’s hit, *Awara* (‘The tramp’, 1951). A late add-on by Kapoor to K. Abbas’s dark screenplay, this nine-and-a-half-minute segment – featuring six sets, four songs, and scores of dancers – was, at the time, reputedly the most expensive musical number ever produced. It was choreographed by Simkie (Simone Barbieri), Shankar’s longtime French partner and a teacher at his school, and its corps of dancers was supplied by Shanti Bardhan, another ex-Almora student. Its vision of the protagonist Raju’s internal world moves between a hell and heaven that hybridize Christian imagery of fire and devils with Hindu temple spires and Shaivite statuary, to the accompaniment of music that combines raga-esque sitar and tabla passages with frenzied orchestral ones evoking (among other things) Mussorgsky’s ‘Night on Bald Mountain’. Anyone who has seen *Kalpana* can easily recognize the *Awara* sequence’s debt, both choreographically and cinematographically, to Shankar’s hybrid vision.



**Figure 2.** Seibi Lee as Hanuman, with vanara troops in ‘Son of the Wind’. Photo by Margo Moritz.

This vision has likewise been reaffirmed in the art form that (according to *Kalpana*) Shankar loved best: live ensemble dance performance – both in the rethinking of ‘classical’ styles that has been ongoing in India since the 1980s, and in the contemporaneous efflorescence of such innovation among dance schools and companies in the Indian diaspora. This was exemplified by the remarkable performance with which the Sonoma State program concluded: ‘Son of the Wind’, a spectacular retelling of *Ramayana* episodes centered on Hanuman, mounted by the pupils of Pandit Chitresh Das (1944–2015), a Bengali Kathak guru who established a school in San Francisco in 1979. The Leela company, an outgrowth of this school, features many of Das’s senior students, and their lavish production – their first independent choreography since their guru’s death – is a tribute to his love for large-scale story ballet (a love shared with his senior neighbor and friend during his childhood in Kolkata, Uday Shankar). As a *Ramayana* scholar who also enjoys dance, I was struck both by the production’s sophisticated conception (incorporating several strands of Rama-epic lore, both ‘classical’ and ‘folk’) and by the professionalism of its execution by an all-female cast of 17 dancers (Figure 2). Given that traditional *lilā* performances of epic stories in India generally feature exclusively male casting, even in female roles, the gender reversal here was striking, especially given the predominant martial mood (*vīra rasa*) of most of the episodes – though the dancing was so powerful and effective, the costuming and makeup so beguiling, that I entirely forgot about gender during the show. With its technical brilliance, emotional power, and reverent yet creative reinterpretation of sacred epic, ‘Son of the Wind’, staged by American women of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, was world-class transnational dance theater that celebrated Indian performance traditions even as it innovated within them and challenged cultural stereotypes. In my imagination (*kalpana*), Uday Shankar was looking down from the upper balcony, and (as in much of his film) smiling benignly.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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