



CULTURAL MEDALLION 2022

## ARAVINTH KUMARASAMY

A multi-talented artist, **ARAVINTH KUMARASAMY** is involved in Indian dance, music, and other related fields, and is a prominent figure in the international Indian arts community.

Born in Sri Lanka in 1966, Aravinth was trained by some of the renowned gurus in the Indian classical dance form, *Bharatanatyam*, and Carnatic music, from Sri Lanka and India. In 1984, he delivered his *Arangetram* (graduation dance performance), for which he had composed music and choreographed part of the repertoire. Three years later in 1987, as a 21-year-old, Aravinth came to Singapore to pursue his dreams.



'Anjaneyam – Hanuman's Ramayana' at Esplanade Theatre for Kalaa Utsavam, 2017.

Photo courtesy of Apsaras Arts

Over three decades, with a sense of commitment and conviction, Aravinth has envisaged and nurtured *Bharatanatyam* with imagination and ingenuity. His artistic philosophy drives his pursuit in enabling the dance form, predominantly a solo art form, to transform into a fine and compelling ensemble-centric expression. His dream and desire is to create and nourish a repertory company, a one-of-its-kind in Singapore as well as arguably across the world, in the space of *Bharatanatyam*.

Much like his creations which are diverse in form and content, Aravinth is a storehouse of numerous identities which inspire and influence each other. An artist par excellence, he is conscious of tradition yet also cognizant of rapidly changing global dynamics where innovation and technology have vital roles to play. During the pandemic, Aravinth produced two unique digital and CGI-based dance films – 'SITA' and 'AMARA' – that pushed the envelope and pioneered a new possibility for the world of dance in exploring the digital space.

Under his leadership as Artistic Director, Apsaras Arts Dance Company has built a stunning repertoire, boasting more than 35 full-length productions, that sparkles with a distinct identity. As a Singaporean flag-bearer for Indian classical dance ensemble work which is inspired by South-east Asian narratives, the company raises a toast to the potential of *Bharatanatyam* which is presented at various venues and world-class festivals.

Aravinth is also a champion of industry development, successfully curating and convening the Indian Performing Arts Convention (IPAC) annually in Singapore since 2012 and in Australia since 2021.

He is the proud recipient of several awards including the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award (1999), Bharata Kala Mani (Apsaras Arts, 2000), Aryabhata (Aryabhata Cultural Organisation, Bangalore, India, 2016), Kala Ratna (Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, 2019), Natya Kala Upasana (Bhaskar's Arts Academy, 2019).



## INNOVATING TRADITION

BY LIM HOW NGEAN

Community, innovation and education form the bedrock of Aravinth Kumarasamy's artistic oeuvre as he leads the critically acclaimed traditional Indian dance company Apsaras Arts Singapore. He ceaselessly supports and motivates artists to excel in their various traditional artforms. At the same time, he is making inroads in attracting younger Apsaras audiences with fresh narratives and contemporary staging to invigorate the *Bharatanatyam* dance form.

Under his artistic directorship since 2005, Apsaras Arts (which was established 1977) grew from being a respected dance academy with a focus on *Bharatanatyam* to becoming a renowned repertory dance company which tours internationally with boundary-breaking performances.

The avid educator in Aravinth also sees him advocating continuous education and upskilling craft and artistry in the next wave of dancers and musicians as well as in established artists, not forgetting his dedication in organising regional and international conferences on urgent issues and subjects in the Indian arts arena.

Even before Aravinth joined Apsaras Arts full time, he had been contributing to the company's performances since 1999 in various capacities – as music composer, co-choreographer (with Apsaras founder the late Neila Sathyalingam), and dance and music instructor.



'Nirmanika – The Beauty of Architecture' at Victoria Theatre, 2022.

Photo courtesy of Apsaras Arts

As artistic director, he has conceptualised and directed 13 full-fledged dance performances. He pays close attention to numerous details such as narrative, choreography and music composition, as well as other design fields of costuming, lighting, sound and set design. His is a multidisciplinary approach to performance-making.

As he explains, "I have trained in dance, vocal music and instrumental music, which allowed me to evolve as an artiste with a better understanding of the Indian performing arts. This is coupled with my interest in art, architecture and sculpture, and my study of history, culture and anthropology. *Bharatanatyam* is an art of storytelling. Given my training and my interests, I have been drawn to tell stories through dance."<sup>1</sup>

After building a sturdy foundation in music and dance in his birthplace Colombo, Sri Lanka, he trained for five years in *Bharatanatyam* and the Veena (an Indian chordophone musical instrument) in Chennai, India. At 20, he moved to Singapore where he continued to hone his skills in traditional dance and music at premier institutions such as Temple of Fine Arts, Singapore (TFA), from 1987 to 1993. TFA was where he learned about performing in, and staging, large scale performances. He later taught dance and music at the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, Singapore, and composed original scores for Bhaskar's Arts Academy's productions.

Aravinth was a working artist in the community in his new home Singapore as it was his strategy to learn the artistic and cultural lay of the land. Besides mentoring, composing and conducting for the Raffles Girls' School Indian Orchestra (1995-2000) and founding the Kolam Ayer Indian Youth Orchestra (2000-2005), he also trained students in music and dance for National Day celebrations and Chingay processions.

These diverse experiences prepared the artist for a holistic understanding and appreciation of a multicultural approach in aesthetic expression while staying true to his roots in traditional Indian art forms.

It was therefore no surprise when Aravinth ventured into South-east Asian narratives and aesthetics forms in his own creations. Since 2010, he has been engaging with South-east Asian narratives and themes by adapting them to Indian dance forms such as *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak* and *Kathakali*. The approach expanded and developed traditional artforms with new concepts and stories as well as broadened Apsaras's younger audience base with a more global outlook.

The landmark production of 'Angkor Wat: The Untold Story' (2013) pushed artistic boundaries in various ways. Firstly, the *Bharatanatyam* performance presented an original love story inspired by the temple wall friezes of the religious Khmer complex of Angkor Wat.



'The Heroines of Raja Ravi Varma' at Victoria Theatre, 2010.

Photo courtesy of Apsaras Arts

Secondly, he experimented with cross-cultural performance by introducing South-east Asian dance vocabularies and music into Apsaras's mainly Bharatnatyam repertoire. He had begun to examine Indian dance vocabulary and its influence on South-east Asian dance forms when doing research in ancient Khmer civilization and its art and culture.

The result was a spotlight on the dance forms of *Bharatanatyam*, Malay *Silat*, and Cambodian temple dance in various scenes throughout the performance. This cross-cultural strategy was also adhered to in the musical orchestration in *Angkor Wat* where it showcased Indian classical music, with Cambodian melodic accents and even Chinese drum rhythms. Acclaimed Indian dance scholar and critic, the late Dr Sunil Kothari, had written that 'Angkor Wat' was "an example of how various cultures come together to create wonderful work of diverse dance forms in a seamless manner."<sup>2</sup> This style of cross-cultural performance would then become Aravinth's theatrical signature in successive and critically-acclaimed productions such as 'Anjasa – Unravel the Buddhist Monuments of Asia' (2016) and 'Anjaneyam: Hanuman's Ramayana' (2017).

The multiple points of experimentation within a single production are only possible because Aravinth is a firm believer of collaboration artmaking. He has collaborated with artists and institutions near and far, from the renowned homegrown Malay dance group Era Dance Theatre to dancers from acclaimed Cambodian Royal Dance Ensemble. He collaborates regularly with internationally known sound engineers, musicians, composers and lighting designers from India and often invites notable dancers from all over India to boost his productions. "Collaborating with a good team of talented people has helped me to improve myself over the years, and working with creative minds has allowed me to see different perspectives," he stresses.<sup>3</sup>

Another of Aravinth's significant contributions to *Bharatnatyam* is the way he reconfigures the solo dance convention to showcase ensemble dances. Characterisation was key in performances such as 'Angkor Wat: The Untold Story'; 'Anjasa' (2016), and 'Anjaneyam' (2017), but the genius of Aravinth, together with Apsaras resident choreographer Mohanapriyan Thavarajah, was how he began to present *Bharatanatyam* sequences using ensemble dancers in recounting particular scenes, or even acting like a Greek chorus which passed commentary and echoed emotions.

The ensemble vision pertains to the artistic director's vision of growth and sustainability for Apsaras Arts as well as its students and artists, so that the company could grow from being a learning academy to becoming a touring premier company with a sizeable repertoire of performances.



'Agathi - The Plight of the Refugee' at Esplanade Theatre Studio for Raga Series, 2017.

Photo courtesy of Apsaras Arts

Aravinth, who was also a former FinTech entrepreneur, iterates, "There are institutions all over the world teaching dance, even in Singapore, which has academies older than us. The question is after 10 to 15 years of learning, what happens to all these students of dance? Not everyone can carve out a career as a soloist, as there are only so many opportunities out there. I want to create ensembles beyond the dance drama tradition as I believe ensembles are the way forward."<sup>4</sup>

Another way forward for Aravinth is to tell specific stories, whether inspired by the classics or those in contemporary settings. These stories focusing on a protagonist overcoming adversity heralds the present-day narrative that appeal to younger audiences beyond moral teachings.

The first example is 'Agathi: The Plight of the Refugee' (2017), where Aravinth tapped into his experience as a 17-year-old refugee in war-torn Sri Lanka so as to provide a dramaturgical structure to the performance. Other refugees' voices peppered the performance via poetry from renowned Tamil poets as well as from the verse written by children of refugees published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) agency.

The second example is 'Parama Padam: Life's Game of Snakes & Ladders' (2019), which was conceptualised by the company's resident choreographer Mohanapriyan Thavarajah and directed by Aravinth, offered a choreographic take on an appropriated boardgame. It shed light on the origins of the modern (British) boardgame Snakes and Ladders that was actually created by the followers of the Vaishnavite faith with the duo purposes of entertainment and teaching moral values of human life. 'Parama Padam' took the audience through the everyman's life about triumphs and tribulations while examining the existential question about the right thing to do.

Aravinth's diverse and progressive approaches to staging traditional performing arts are steeped in his commitment to ongoing learning and training in the field. He admits to a voracious appetite for knowledge: "Reading a lot of books, travelling and watching dance and theatre, listening to good music by different artists allows my imagination to evolve."<sup>5</sup>

One of Aravinth's passion projects away from the stage is the annual regional convention-symposium called the Indian Performing Arts Convention (IPAC). Held for 11 years thus far, Apsaras Arts's IPAC brings together practitioners of traditional forms so that they can exchange, share, discuss, and learn developments in the large arena of Indian performing arts.

Aravinth sees IPAC to be "for everybody in the ecosystem. There will be something for students who aspire; for professionals (choreographers, musicians, performing artists or composers) who



'Aalam – The Banyan Tree of Bharatnatyam' at Esplanade Theatre Studio for Kalaa Utsavam, 2009. Photo courtesy of Apsaras Arts

are practicing; for connoisseurs; and anyone who wants to know more. It has got all these tiers.”<sup>6</sup>

As in Aravinth’s artistic pursuits, the commitment to community is vital in his continuous effort to strengthen the artistic network in the name of betterment. This was evident during challenging times in the wake of COVID-19 and worldwide lockdowns. Aravinth made the decision to present the convention in a hybridised format by offering online seminars, discussion panels and lecture demonstrations. In fact, in 2020, Apsaras had already reached out to online audiences with events such as a ticketed streaming performance of ‘Anjaneyam’ and even presented dance films ‘SITA’ and ‘AMARA’ which incorporated CGI technology.

In 2020, Apsaras Arts was the recipient of The Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award, conferred by the National Heritage Board. The award recognises individuals or groups “who are dedicated to the promotion and transmission of their practices, and have made outstanding contributions in their field.”<sup>7</sup>

This award is in no small part a recognition of Aravinth’s contribution. Acknowledging the duty of upholding culture and its aesthetics, he understands the present urgency is to ensure that the traditional arts stay relevant in a contemporary world.

As he sees it, the way to maintain currency for the traditional arts is to keep innovating while serving the community at large, whether it is through unfailing development and training in the arts or constant artistic education and outreach to the audience.

As for the future of traditional Indian performing arts in Singapore, Aravinth is hopeful: “The younger generation of Indian artistes are smart and talented. I think that the future of Indian arts is in good hands. However, I do wish these youngsters will be more patient to watch more, read more and listen more, to evolve their craft which takes a lot of time and hard work. Most importantly not to have the fear of failing – as failures are the pillars of success!”

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Lim How Ngean is a performance-maker, dramaturg and dance researcher who has been actively involved in the performing arts for over 30 years.



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

My gratitude to National Arts Council for this recognition, and to all those who nominated me and to the many who supported the nomination.

I am grateful to my parents Mr N Kumarasamy and Mrs Swarnakanthi Kumarasamy for bringing me into the magical world of dance and music at a very young age. It was my mother who was with me in much of my artistic journey as a mentor, a researcher, and a dramaturge. I am indebted to my family – daughter Madhumitha and wife Pavithra – for the many sacrifices they made in supporting my career in the arts.

I am humbled to have been trained by several renowned gurus from Sri Lanka and India. My gratitude to S Sathyalingam and Neila Sathyalingam, for their mentorship, encouragement, and their belief in my ability to sail their ship forward, allowing me to chart voyages and arrive at new horizons.

I am blessed with an amazing team at Apsaras Arts – Vijaya Nadesan, Seema Hari Kumar, Mohanapriyan Thavarajah and Sankari Elavalahan – who are the supporting pillars of all that we create, and for their interminable belief in my mission. My gratitude to the creative young genius Mohanapriyan, our resident choreographer, principal dancer and costume designer, for coming on this journey with me over the past decade. As a team we have climbed great heights. My heartfelt gratitude to our board led by Ambassador K Kesavapany, and to Mrs Padmini Kesavapany, for their unconditional love and support.

I am indebted to the dancers, musicians, composers, choreographers, designers, marketers and technical teams, who have transformed my vision to reality. I am humbled to have had maestro composer Dr Rajkumar Bharathi and maverick Sai Sharavanam who have collaborated with me over two decades. I dedicate this award to each and everyone who have enabled my mission in the arts.