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India's Nrityagram troupe brings ancient dance to Victoria



[Mike Devlin](#)

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Nrityagram Dance Ensemble will perform at The Royal Theatre in Victoria on Friday and Saturday. STEVEN PISANO

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NRITYAGRAM DANCE ENSEMBLE

Where: Royal Theatre, 805 Broughton St.

When: Friday and Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$40.25-\$120.25 from the Royal McPherson box office (250-386-6121 or toll-free at 1-888-717-6121, Monday to Friday, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm (Royal Theatre closed 1:00 to 1:30 pm))

A pair of performances by India's Nrityagram Dance Ensemble won't encapsulate the breadth and depth of what the Bangalore-based company represents. That would be impossible, given that the school from which the company was borne specializes in Odissi, an ancient style of Indian dance that is still evolving after nearly 2,000 years in existence.

"What we have done in terms of transforming the choreography and the approach to the tradition has completely changed the form in India," said the company's choreographer and artistic director, Surupa Sen. "We are the first ensemble to bring it in the way that we have to North America."

Though the company visits North America annually, making it to *The New York Times'* best dance of the year list in consecutive years, travelling though several foreign borders with a cast and crew of 11 people always presents its share of challenges. The trip from India to Seattle this week was nearly 24 hours in length, followed by another half-day of travel to Victoria. For that reason, Sen said Nrityagram Dance Ensemble must choose their travel spots wisely.

"People have seen us a lot in the United States, but not much in Canada," Sen, 54, said. "I think it's exciting to be able to share that with another country."

Odissi — one of eight classical dance traditions in India — is a stylized form of Indian dance that uses very specific geometric techniques, from hand signals to facial expressions, in order to communicate. The liquid, lyrical style is practiced by numerous companies worldwide, yet few can compete with Nrityagram, the first modern dance school where students study under gurus eight hours a day, six days a week for seven years.

Sen (who was a featured dancer during the company's first Canadian performance in 1993) was the first student to graduate from the program in 1996. All told, she has been studying the form for 34 years, and continues to dance today. To celebrate the company's Victoria debut, Sen said she will take a rare solo turn during performances Friday and Saturday.

"I believe if I don't dance I won't be able to create, so I just keep dancing," she said. "I would go mad if I didn't."

Dance Victoria had originally scheduled Sri Lanka's Chitrasena Dance Company for part of the program this weekend, but the appearance was cancelled due to logistical issues. Nrityagram Dance Ensemble will instead present, for the first time in North America, its new work, *KHANKANĀ*, which has yet to be seen outside of India. There's always a bit of nuance when it comes to presenting new work, but a premiere by Nrityagram Dance Ensemble is doubly hard without context, Sen said.

Sanskrit literature, on which much of Odissi is based, is like Latin to most people, which is why primers will be given prior to each performance this weekend, she said. "You have to give them a reference point to make it accessible."

Nrityagram Dance Ensemble is a mixture of contemporary and classic in many ways. But Sen doesn't like either word to describe the company, to which she has dedicated more than half her life. Odissi is about sensibility and structure above all other elements, according to Sen.

"I have very strong roots in tradition, because it is a structure one has to follow. It needs a tremendous amount of discipline, like ballet. You have to be able to imbibe the language of the body completely, and that takes a good number of years. It has to serve the purpose of the dance, which is to journey from the outside to the inside."

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