



Photo by Grant Halverson

What is the issue?

U.S. dance companies rooted in culturally specific dance forms are often labelled “traditional” or “ethnic,” which can obscure their artistic innovation. The case of Ragamala Dance Company, led by mother-daughter choreographers Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy, shows how a multidisciplinary dance company rooted in Bharatanatyam mobilizes tradition to create culturally innovative work.

What is the research context?

Founded in Minneapolis in 1992 Ragamala aims to balance classical dance tradition and contemporary artistic possibilities. The Ramaswamys dance partnership began in 1983, while Ranee and Aparna studied Bharatanatyam, the classical dance of South India, under guru Alarmél Valli. Through Ragamala, they create new theatrical works grounded in Bharatanatyam to reach new audiences.

What are the research findings?

For the Ramaswamys, gaining recognition within the

Research Approach

Researcher Ying Diao spent a year conducting observations at the dance company and interviews with Ragamala’s leaders, company members, students, and other stakeholders, including funders and presenters. She also reviewed historical documentary videos and Ragamala’s extensive archive to understand the history of the organization.

contemporary American dance landscape while navigating external labels of “ethnic” or “traditional” is an ongoing challenge, as those labels can constrain an art form’s evolution. The study finds that the Ramaswamys’ creative journey in Ragamala is shaped by a productive interplay between multiple forms of cultural evolution and constraints that unfold across artistic creation and institutional norms of the nonprofit arts ecosystem. The Ramaswamys’ artistic practices demonstrate that tradition can be a generative force that supports aesthetic expansion, interdisciplinary collaboration, and

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engagement with institutional structures. At Ragamala, Bharatanatyam serves as a dynamic, living tradition that continues to evolve alongside artistic experimentation, technological change, and shifting sociocultural expectations.

In its first two decades, Ragamala gained recognition in the local arts community through cross-cultural collaborations and choreography that helped introduce audiences to Indian classical dance and establish its universal resonance. By the 2010s, the Ramaswamys' artistic vision expanded into more deliberate interdisciplinary projects that brought dance into dialogue with live music, poetry, visual art, and lighting design, defining the company's distinct artistic identity. Works such as *Sacred Earth* (2011) illustrate how their approach moved far beyond cultural exchange to articulate its own voice within the American contemporary dance scene by demonstrating the universal language of Bharatanatyam. The Ramaswamys' recent choreographic works, including *Fires of Varanasi* (2021) and *Children of Dharma* (2024), further demonstrate how deep grounding in

tradition enables the form to resonate across sociocultural and historical contexts.

Ragamala has sustained robust audience engagement. Each year, on average, its public performances reach 11,000 audience members and its outreach programs engage 10,000 youth and adults across the United States. The company's success demonstrates how the dynamic interplay between classical performance and innovation can be leveraged toward sustainability and impact in arts organizations rooted in communities of color.

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Why does this matter?

Contemporary art forms rooted in communities of color often blend traditional elements with artistic innovations to steward cultural legacies. Funders and other arts stakeholders might consider:

- Interrogating how the routine use of labels can unintentionally narrow how artistic work is understood, engaged, and supported.
- Programming deeply rooted cultural forms alongside other contemporary and interdisciplinary art to avoid siloing the forms' practitioners or audiences.
- Prioritizing long-term, interdisciplinary artistic development that supports experimentation among artists and organizations practicing deeply rooted cultural forms.
- Expanding how artistic impact is evaluated to include qualitative indicators, such as how performances reframe cultural understanding, reveal the continuing vitality of classical traditions, and promote recognition of shared human experiences across cultural differences.

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