





# A NAUTCH GIRL FROM NEW YORK

Over a century ago, a vaudeville artist from New York created an “Indian dance” without visiting the country. A documentary revisits Ruth St Denis, pioneer of modern American dance, and a woman deeply influenced by India >>>

by **NANDINI NAIR**

**Y**ELLOW RAYS of light and wisps of white incense spiral through the stage. A dancer dressed in a midriff-revealing blouse embellished with blue baubles flourishes her skirt, exposing her bare ankles. She drapes a long string of marigolds along the curve of her body as she bends backwards. She then crushes the flowers to her face in a performance titled “Radha”. The dancer is New Jersey-born Ruth St Denis, the setting: a vaudeville house in New York; the time: over a century ago.

St Denis (1879–1968) was a pioneer of modern dance in the US, but more curiously, a woman who introduced “Indian dance” to the West, without ever having been here, without having seen devadasis or nautch girls perform, understanding and interpreting at will from photographs and contemporary literature on the East. She learned to wear a sari from an Indian family in New York. In her performances, she played exotic Indian goddesses and apsaras, as well as street dancers asking for *bakshish*. Her imagining of India might have not been traditional or “authentic”, but it was pathbreaking.

An ad for a packet of the Egyptian Deities cigarette brand — a bare-breasted Isis standing proudly below a banner “No better Turkish cigarette can be made” — sparked St Denis’s interest in the “Orient”. St Denis took the poster down from a soda shop and hung it in her room. “In an hour’s time, the next 30 years of life changed,” she would later say in an interview. The image showed her the possibilities of stillness in movement. St Denis had started performing acrobatics and splits at the age of 15, in variety shows, which included trained monkeys and three-faced calves. In Isis, the goddess of motherhood and fertility, she saw, for the first time, the possibilities of the spiritual and the rapturous. It led her to the exploration of Japanese, Egyptian and Indian dance.

A 1908 article in the *New York Times*

about the “American Girl’s Hindu Dances”, said, “For ourselves we have rarely seen anything, which more clearly suggests the languorous compassion and sentiment of the Indian peninsula, and if, as we are told, Miss Ruth St. Denis has never been in India, she has largely profited by her study of the East and native teachers. There is much in the evening’s entertainment which is curiously interesting, a keen esoteric flavor of barbaric crudity and sensuousness...” In 1926, she travelled with her partner and dancer Ted Shawn to India during an 18-month international tour. During their five-month stay here, they held over a hundred dance concerts. Travelling by train and road, they put up a show nearly every three days.

*On the Trail of Ruth St Denis*, a documentary out later this year, marks the 85th anniversary of the historic journey. Directed, produced and co-written by Kuwait-based Talal Al-Muhanna, it is a historical dance documentary where the camera follows British-Australian dance artist Liz Lea as she retraces the “footsteps of one of the 20th century’s greatest artistic innovators”. Lea, who has trained at the London School of Contemporary Dance and at the Darpana Academy, Ahmedabad, says that St Denis’s pieces had very little to do with classical forms. “St Denis was not able to see classical dance in 1926 and she did not pretend so. This way, they were simply dance. But inspired by India.”

After their year-long trip, St Denis and Shawn’s shows in New York’s most-acclaimed venue Carnegie Hall were sold out. They went on to create the Denishawn School of Dance and Related Arts in Los Angeles, which is known for its influence on ballet and modern dance. In the ‘30s, they also started Jacob’s Pillow, a legendary summer dance festival in the US.

In India, St Denis has all but faded from the dance history books. In the US, her popularity has risen and fallen; but today she is “usually presented as one of the major figures in the history of American dance, and she is always cited, along with Loie Fuller

Imagining India:  
Ruth St Denis as Radha

IMAGE COURTESY OF BARBARA ANDRES COLLECTION, ADELPHI UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

and Isadora Duncan, as one of the three 'mothers' of modern dance," writes anthropologist Jane Desmond in a paper "Dancing out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St Denis' Radha of 1906."

Performer and producer Al-Muhanna, who grew up in the UK and the US, found St Denis to be a great subject to explore in a movie as she is a "larger-than-life figure who inspired great changes in 20th century art". For Lea, the reasons were more personal. "As a non-Asian artist working with Bharatanatyam, I was fascinated by her work and also, just as she was a vaudeville dancer, I too began my career as a showgirl in Japan and Sydney. She seemed to epitomise the way forward and I value her work greatly," she says.

Filmmaker Al-Muhanna found himself on a treasure hunt as he tried to trace St Denis' journey. His team studied old film clips, photos, and letters and tried to place them in the present. It took them to the

banks of the Taj Mahal, The Oberoi Grand in Kolkata, Bellevue Hotel in Kanpur, which they found was "half-forgotten" and even St Xavier's School in Delhi, which was once a grand hotel where St Denis had lived during her tour. For the crew, the movie shoot allowed them to rediscover St Denis and India. In Mumbai, a shoot on the rooftops, with glimpses of a cricket stadium led to an exciting film sequence. The banks of the Taj Mahal provided a stunning location; especially as St Denis and Shawn are said to have "wept in each other's arms" when they saw the sun rising over the marble

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dome, says Lea.

St Denis's tour to India was a success. Her performances in Lahore, Calcutta, Karachi, Delhi and Madras were largely sponsored through ticket sales and occasionally by royal patronage from the Nizam of Hyderabad or the Maharaja of Baroda, writes Dr Uttara Asha Coorlawala, (dancer and professor at Barnard College, New York) in a paper "Ruth St Denis and India's Dance Renaissance". Rabindranath Tagore was also a fan and invited her to teach "Indian dance" at Santiniketan. Al-Muhanna adds, "Ruth St Denis and the entire Denishawn dance company made great waves in cultural circles in India back in the day. One local (English-language, mind you!) newspaper even claimed that it was 'the most artistic entertainment the West has ever offered to the East.'"

Detractors are quick to say that St Denis had neither real training nor knowledge of Indian dance. Coorlawala feels that although St Denis cannot be credited with directly reviving India's esteem of its own dances, she did serve and propagate a positive image of Indian dance forms outside India.

St Denis's name has faded into near obscurity in India for both chauvinist and accidental reasons. Coorlawala says, "she was after all, white (read foreign) and American. (In those days the perception in India was that people from New World 'have no culture.')

In our nationalist story, what would you expect?" Al-Muhanna and Lea concur that dance figures in India "actively de-emphasise" the role of dancers like Ruth St Denis and Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova played in the renaissance of Indian dance, "by igniting interest in dance as a noble profession after appearing there as performers in the 1920s."

The crew of *On the Trail of Ruth St Denis* hopes that the film will provoke a discussion on St Denis's possible role in inspiring Indians to "revere the dance as opposed to denigrating it". The 1920s were, after all, the time when bare feet and ankles were considered immodest in the West and when India itself was embroiled in the anti-nautch movement, which suppressed regional dances and shied away from the devadasi tradition. Today, we can only guess whether St Denis's dance was seen as "high art" or "low art" when she was performing here. She showed that "dance brings man back to himself" and believed that "rhythm creates the universe and everything in it".

With the movie still in post-production, director Al-Muhanna hopes to bring it to India's film circuit by the end of the year, and also bring St Denis back into the spotlight. □



PHOTO: LARA PLATMAN COURTESY OF LIZ LEA DANCE