The dance form called Odissi has its origins in Orissa, a state in eastern India. It was practised in the most important shrines of the region, like that of Puri, as part of the ritual ceremonies since the year 1000, although it is believed that it existed from as far back as 200 BC. We have 16 types of ritual services that are done daily in the temples, from burning incense to singing and dancing; many young girls, called mahari or devadasi dedicated their lives to the temples. This happened without interruption until the state of Orissa lost its independence and came under foreign rulers who destroyed the temples. During that time, the mahari were taken out of the temples and into the courts. The kings were considered the representatives of the gods and therefore they wanted the young girls to dance for them. The dances that used to be done only for the gods and at the feet of the Lord, outside the temples soon lost the sense of religious devotion and became only a form of entertainment for the kings. Gradually the dancing girls also became the concubines of these kings, losing their reputation and status. They were looked down upon because of the corruption that was prevalent amongst them.

At the end of the 15th century, the Minister Ramananda Patnaik, devotee of Vishnu, thought of spreading his cult through dance and music. He adopted little boys, dressed them up as girls, and had them dance outside the temples during the religious ceremonies. These boys were called gotipua (goti means one and pua means boy) but not allowed inside the temples. Inside the temples danced the mahari and outside, in front of the public, the gotipua. My guru Kelucharan Mahapatra comes from the tradition of the gotipua.

With the decline of the Odissi dance and of the culture in Orissa, this saying emerged: “People who have little shame sing, people with no shame play musical instruments and those who are totally shameless, dance”.

You must remember that India is a vast country and every 300 kilometres the language, the behaviour, the festivals, the rituals, the way of dressing change...
It is Sanjukta Panigrahi, the Indian dancer from the classical form Odissi, who is explaining, addressing the participants of the symposium *Theatre in a Multicultural Society*, held in Copenhagen during the tenth session of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in May, 1996.

The same evening of the symposium, I arrive at Kanonhallen, the theatre in the centre of Copenhagen, to prepare for the performance *The Island of Labyrinths*.

The ensemble of Theatrum Mundi is composed of about fifty actors, dancers and musicians from Bali, Japan, India, Latin America and Europe - the collaborating artists of ISTA for many years - and is directed by Eugenio Barba. Since 1987, at the conclusion of each session of ISTA, the ensemble has presented a performance consisting of a montage of scenes and dances from the diverse performative genres and traditions. Since 1990, the Theatrum Mundi performances would take up again and re-elaborate material presented earlier and also create scenes in which the various traditions interacted. In Copenhagen, this work was developed further resulting in *The Island of Labyrinths*. Each artist faithfully preserves the characteristics specific to his/her own style, integrating them into the new context, where a dramaturgical unity allows stories and characters to emerge, wrapped in a veil of illusion and ambiguity. We premiered this performance for the opening of the tenth session of ISTA.

I enter the dressing room. Sanjukta is sitting on the far side, carefully looking at herself in the mirror. She is painting on her forehead the red third eye, which in India is a beauty mark. I begin to iron my costume and I can see Sanjukta who continues to put her make-up on. From the rhythm of her preparation I understand that we are both on time. Sanjukta has been at the theatre for two hours already. In a few minutes Hemant, one of her musicians, will knock and discretely enter our dressing room to help Sanjukta adjust her false plait and belt. Later, on stage, Sanjukta will put on her ankle bells while her four musicians will tune their instruments prior to the beginning of the performance.

How many times have I quickly run on to the stages of the world to pick up some of the bells that had fallen, so that Sanjukta would not hurt herself by stepping on them...
My first meeting with Sanjukta was in 1977, during a seminar on Indian theatre and dance organised by Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark. Sanjukta had been invited along with other well-known artists, such as Shanta Rao (Bharata Natyam dance), Uma Sharma (Kathak dance) and Krishnan Nambudiri (Kathakali). Chérif Khaznadar, then director of the Maison de la Culture of Rennes, had suggested her name to Eugenio Barba, as a substitute for a Chhau group which was unable to come at the last minute. Sanjukta presented her performance in a white costume and afterwards gave a work demonstration. Her dance remains engraved in the memory of all those present as a magical apparition. Tage Larsen, one of the actors of Odin Teatret, after having seen her dance, spent the afternoon washing his car, with a reaction similar to that of Eleonora Duse who spent the night tidying up her room after having seen Adelaide Ristori on stage.

The spectators who see Sanjukta’s Odissi dance remain strongly affected, ecstatic, enamoured. The word commonly used to try and explain the experience of a meeting with her is “beauty”. Sanjukta is incredibly beautiful: on stage, in life, during rehearsals, discussing with her musicians, correcting the rhythm, smiling with her cheeky expression, thanking the public, kneeling before the God Jagannath, drinking her morning tea, entering the stage dressed in white, or shocking pink, or orange, or turquoise, teaching, making jokes, when she says at a symposium that she doesn’t like to speak in public, when she dances ... Sanjukta is always the image of beauty itself. With passing of the years, softness and wisdom has been added to the physical power and shyness at the beginning of her career, making her seem even more beautiful.

I always feel a sense of gratitude and privilege after having been on stage together with Sanjukta during the performances of Theatrum Mundi. The pleasure comes not only from sharing the time of the performance and from the common artistic experience in front of the spectators, but also from all that which is hidden to the audience, from the taking part in a work process together. In the precision, the order, the calmness, the tension of each gesture, I see the dedication and the concentration of a great artist who prepares her performance. And then I see in her relief, in her weariness, and in her relaxed smile, the awareness of someone who has carried out her task to the point of allowing a miracle to occur before the eyes of the spectators.
On stage I see Sanjukta transform herself from man to woman, from god to monster, from elephant to peacock, from Radha to Krishna, from crocodile to lotus flower, from actress to dancer, from old woman to little girl, from loser to victor, from body to soul.

I was born in 1944 in Berhampore, Orissa, in the north-east of India, where my father, an engineer, was on transfer. After three boys my parents were very happy to have a little girl. I belong to an orthodox Brahmin family. At that time, it was taboo for a girl of a Brahmin family to learn dancing. But my mother, Shakuntala Mishra, who was an enthusiastic amateur singer, encouraged me.

My mother comes from Mayurbnanj, Baripada, and was the daughter of the renowned Kailish Panda, the great patron of the local dance Chhau. Appreciation for the arts ran in her family, so when my mother saw how I moved, she thought of having me take dancing and music lessons. My father’s entire family was vehemently against this. They accused my mother of wanting to ruin my life. “She won’t be able to marry, she won’t be able to mingle in society”, they said. My mother responded: “All right, let her learn as a child, especially if she has talent. If she wants, when she’s older, she can stop”.

My parents went regularly to the theatre and they used to take me with them. My interest in dancing grew when I saw Padmabhushan Kelucharan Mahapatra and his wife Lakshmi Priya on stage. After their performance, I tried to imitate them in front of a mirror at home. Like all little girls of that age, I was fascinated by beautiful clothes and ornaments. My mother said to me: “If you learn dancing, then you will be able to wear those clothes” ... So my determination to learn grew. I was only four years old when I began dancing.

The first session of ISTA was held in Bonn. ISTA was founded by Eugenio Barba together with Sanjukta Panigrahi (India), Katsuko Azuma (Japan), I Made Pasek Tempo (Bali), Fabrizio Cruciani (Italy), Jean-Marie Pradier (France), Franco Ruffini (Italy), Nicola Savarese (Italy) and Ferdinando Taviani (Italy). Sanjukta has always been the “queen” of the “republic” of ISTA and has always opened the works with one of her dances.
Sanjukta has frequently been asked what ISTA and her meeting with Eugenio Barba have meant to her. It was evident to all what ISTA and Eugenio Barba had learned from her: her contribution to the research in the field of Theatre Anthropology is essential and unique. Sanjukta answered that the work at ISTA has given her a greater awareness of the principles concealed behind the blindly accepted rules of her tradition. During her apprenticeship she had revered the rules and the forms that were passed down from one generation to another through the teachings of the gurus, without ever questioning them. Now she was able to identify the principles contained in the form and she felt she was more proficient in protecting the essence and the idiosyncrasies of the Odissi dance. For example, on having to teach a particular step to some actors of Odin Teatret, while Eugenio kept interrupting her to have her slow down so as to indicate better all the smallest details, Sanjukta noticed that what she considered to be only one step consisted in fact of different phases, and that each of these followed a contrasting direction, impulse and force to the previous one. She realised that precisely in her play with rhythm and in how she passed from one phase to the other - which before she did automatically - lay the secret of her art.

On that occasion Eugenio was able to point out concretely to Sanjukta what “physical actions” - often mentioned during ISTA sessions - were. They were exactly those smallest dynamic units emerging from the analysis of the step. Sanjukta associated “physical actions” with Stanislavsky, another name she had heard a lot about, and became even more curious. Words like “impulse”, “energy”, “accent”, “tension”, were no longer new to her as in the first years when she was only imitating what her guru showed. Eugenio sent her the book Stanislavsky by Jean Benedetti and a little later Sanjukta, in exchange, offered the book Jhana Yoga by Vivekanda, a disciple of Ramakrishna, who had had great importance in Eugenio’s life. During her demonstration at the ISTA session in Umeaa, in 1995, Sanjukta spoke publicly for the first time of Stanislavsky, in search of analogies that could explain her technique to the western participants.

At each new meeting of ISTA, Eugenio Barba is confronted with the task of how to stimulate both himself and his collaborators who come from such different cultures, in the same way he has done for more than thirty years with the actors of Odin Teatret. Each time he searches for new fields of work. The importance of the
first day of apprenticeship, the discovery of common principles in the different
techniques, the comparison of the various traditions’ ways of improvising, or the
correlation of vocal techniques, of the use of text in dramaturgy, of the oppositions
that show themselves through vigorous or soft energies - these are some of the
themes dealt with which are part of the baggage of common experience of the
masters that gather around ISTA.

A great deal of time is used trying to translate the basic concepts of the
various genres into familiar and recognisable terms for the participants. Eugenio
will ask the Balinese to speak about the term bayu, which is to say wind and
energy, the Japanese to clarify what jo-ha-kyu, their basic scenic rhythm, the Afro-
Brazilians to demonstrate how the orixá - their gods - correspond to different types
of energy. But in order to fully understand each concept he always turns to
Sanjukta, who through her enormous technical vocabulary finds references and
elucidation speaking of laysa and tandava, vigorous and soft presence, of nritta
and nritya and natya, which is to say pure dance and expressive dance and
drama, of loka dharmi and natya dharmi, daily behaviour and stylised behaviour in
the dance, of rasa and bhava, feelings and emotions.

And after these great masters have undertaken at ISTA the challenge of
speaking, of improvising together, of dancing before a cultured audience and in
front of peasants in the villages of south Italy, after they have gone through the
experience of creating new choreographies, of becoming directors and lecturers, of
teaching intellectuals and well known actors of other traditions, Eugenio searches
for other tasks that can take us all along unknown paths.

So Sanjukta adds to her answer that ISTA has made her discover hidden
potentials and has allowed her to find words for what before was only a body
knowledge. And this thanks to the demand for always more complex
demonstrations, and for her to explain, narrate and analyse in detail scenes or
entire performances, and for her to give lectures and talks.

Sanjukta has faced these new difficulties with the same courage and
determination she had discovered and trained during her first day of apprenticeship
when she was made to sit absolutely still and fix her attention on a point on the
wall. She can be doubtful in the beginning, in the same way when as a child she
returned home and said to her mother: “My guru doesn’t know how to teach, he just makes me sit and look at a wall”.

On several occasions Sanjukta has said she misses the intensity of dedication with which the non-Asian students she has met on tour and during ISTA sessions follow her. These students follow her only for a few days, but with body and soul. Sanjukta is saddened by the fact that in India young people are not willing to make the necessary sacrifices in order to become artists. Modern life, social changes, work requirements, compulsory schooling generate a context in which it is difficult to recreate the master-student relationship that had been so essential for her own apprenticeship. Some pupils in India have accused her of egocentrism, of not leaving place to others, of wanting to be always the one to dance. Her comment is that it is necessary to learn first, that one must be willing to submit to the rules in order to discover one’s own power and independence. It is possible to become a great artist only after years of dedication and discipline. Today the young people are not willing to blindly accept and respect the master, the guru. The way of teaching changes, but also the obtainable results.

‘Kelucharan Mahapatra has been my guru since I was four years old. When I went to him for the first time, he asked me to sit down with my body upright and my legs crossed, pick a point on the wall and concentrate. Because I was getting impatient, he asked me to do two things at the same time: to vibrate my fingers and rotate my eyes with power. Later I had to do various exercises to strengthen each part of the body. We started with the toes, practising an exercise with knees bent and open as wide as possible, the back straight, the body leaning on the heels and jumping up in the air. Each exercise had to be done one hundred times; if you stopped before the end, you had to start again from the beginning. Then we did exercises for the legs, thighs, hips, waist and torso, and other exercises for the head, neck and eyes.

I started learning dance even though my father’s family and the neighbours were against it. My guru did not belong to a Brahmin family, but to a family of painters and traders. Our neighbours were amazed my guru was allowed into our home. I remember one day my father had given guru Kelucharan Mahapatra a lift and a neighbour asked him who he was. When my father told him,
the neighbour spat and exclaimed: “You, a responsible engineer and a man of society, you take people like this in your car, you mix with commoners?”

When I was about six years old, the school authorities complained to my father that I was always arriving late at school. I was late arriving home as well. The reason was simple: friends and neighbours I met in the street would say “Sanju, dance for us”. I would willingly put down my books and dance. My father was very angry and stopped my dance lessons for fifteen days. I cried day and night, and my father, who couldn’t stand to see me like this, called back the guru. But he also said to me: “Your mother wanted you to dance and I, going against the social rules and the will of the family, consented. But if you don’t study, they will say it is because of the dancing. You must promise to study books as well as dance”. I promised.

During the fifties, schools started organising a lot of cultural events. They invited me everywhere to present small dances. I represented my school and I became a very special student because I generally received the first prize. My teachers were very proud of me. At home, my younger brother Himanshu, was jealous. My first public performance took place when I was five years old. I was supposed to dance for only five minutes, but I loved the applause so much that I refused to get off the stage. My Guruji (the name of respect for guru Kelucharan Mahapatra) and my mother were very irritated and kept making signs at me to come down.

In 1952 I danced at the International Children’s Festival in Calcutta. The next day I was in all the newspapers. I was only seven years old. I became famous all over Orissa as “Baby Sanjukta” and the consequences were disastrous. I became so busy that sometimes I gave two performances a day, even though they were dances of barely five minutes. My father’s friends were telling him that I would become spoiled, so my father thought of sending me to Kalakshetra, to Rukmini Devi Arundale’s school in Madras, in southern India. My mother also wanted to send me to study there. It was the only school where I could learn to dance and study at the same time.

My father had six children and it was not possible for him to finance my schooling at Kalakshetra, so he asked for a government scholarship for me. It was the first government scholarship awarded to a child.
In Bologna in 1990, ISTA took place in a huge villa on the outskirts of town. The participants slept in large rooms, while the masters were given separate rooms.

One of Eugenio Barba’s pleasures during the intense ISTA sessions is to visit the masters in their own quarters, sit down in a corner and follow their rehearsals without intervening. One day I am also seated in the corner of the Indians’ room, where there are three floor mattresses and a large carpet, on top of which are their musical instruments. Gangadar Pradhan, who accompanies Sanjukta on drums, Hemant Kumar Das, who plays the sitar, Nityanand Mohapatra, who plays the flute, and Raghunath, the singer, musician and husband who is always at Sanjukta’s side, rehearse a dance number with her. Sanjukta sings the rhythm together with Gangadar, and plays the cymbals. Raghunath sings the text while his hand automatically pumps the air to get the sound out of his small harmonium. Behind them an electric box endlessly repeats the four notes of the raga. Hemant pays attention to all of Raghunath’s signals and Nityanand tries to enhance the atmosphere of the raga chosen for this part of the story with his flute. The verse is repeated and Sanjukta explains what sign she will give to indicate to the musicians that she has finished improvising on the base of that particular verse and that Raghunath can go further with the sung text. Sanjukta improvises, stops, starts again from the beginning, adds something, softly sings the melody remembering the words, corrects a musician, discusses with Raghunath, sometimes without even interrupting the dance.

A simple verse like “and Shiva entered the forest”, repeatedly sung by Raghunath, allows Sanjukta to improvise at length, revealing that which the forest contains, the flowers to be picked and their perfumes, the flight of a frightened deer, the light that penetrates between the intertwining branches which seem to be making love ... She can follow a thousand paths, come across a thousand animals, see a thousand plants before returning to the story of Shiva in the forest.

Sanjukta’s gift for improvisation is well-known. Ferdinando Taviani has written about it, remembering the ISTA session of Volterra, Italy, in 1981:

Sanjukta Panigrahi improvised before our eyes a dance based on the Bhagavad Gita.
The theme was suggested to her by Barba. In a few minutes Sanjukta arranged with Raghunath the verses to be sung and the music. Then she performed with no preparation whatsoever, for more than half an hour, a long dramatic dance that was completely new to her. The certainty with which she mapped out the dramaturgical frame astonished us: she began when Krishna goes to yoke the horses to Arjuna’s coach and finished not with the last scene (Arjuna saying to Krishna: “My dismay has vanished”), but with that which is technically called a dramaturgical coda: Krishna returning to the stable, unharnessing the horses from the coach, tying them up to the manger.

Even the dramaturgical coda has an equivalent at the pre-expressive level of organisation: the recurrent advice to not always stop the movement where the accent is given.

We asked Sanjukta what were the words of the text sung by Raghunath. They were the teachings that Krishna imparts to Adjuna in the middle of the second verse:

- Be called to act,
- not to enjoy the fruit of your action.
- Do not depend on the fruit of your action.
- Do not rely on non-action either.

- Do what you must do without worrying about success or failure.
- This is what we call ‘discipline’.

With that enchanting expression with which at times she seeks to be shy, Sanjukta added that she was particularly pleased with the theme proposed to her by Barba, because those verses were the text of her morning prayer.

Here we find another explanation of that family atmosphere that brings together Eugenio Barba and Sanjukta Panigrahi despite their differences: deeply similar words had appeared in Ferai and had later became one of Odin Teatret’s mottos.

- Do what you must do.
- Do not ask.
- Do not ask.

In 1986, Sanjukta came to Holstebro with Kelucharan Mahapatra. During this ISTA session, I saw how Odissi dance could become like a Neapolitan popular play when it was not interpreted by Sanjukta. The pupil seemed more mysterious and fascinating to me than the master. It was also the first time I saw Sanjukta bend down to kiss Eugenio’s feet, as a form of respect to greet a master.
Eugenio, embarrassed, tried not to submit to this ceremony. In the same way that she followed all the formalities towards her Guruji, Sanjukta was adamant

Nevertheless at the same time she protected and guided her guru, introducing him into the foreign environment and worrying about his health. Sanjukta smiled, watching him use all his seductive might to conquer the scholar audience and was amused by the linguistic misunderstandings that came about as Kelucharan Mahapatra did not speak English, but only Oriya.

Sanjukta can be playful with Eugenio as well. She knows she can understand him before he expects it, that she can solve his problems even before being asked, that she does not need explanations because her artistic and feminine intuition work well. Only with Rukmini Devi I cannot imagine her being playful - that was the time of discipline, of sad solitude, of the crossing of the desert. Sanjukta’s childhood ended suddenly when she moved to Rukmini Devi’s school and had to grow up quickly in order to discover her capacity of endurance. The pleasure of play was put off until many years later when, forgetting technique, she could improvise and amuse herself for hours using the language of dance, and could start a collection of dolls from all over the world, given to her by friends.

My parents wanted to send me away from Orissa, the town where I was born, to a place where I could concentrate totally on both dance and school. They sent me to Madras, in the southern part of India, about 1200 kilometres from my home. I was only eight years old. As soon as the decision was made my father began to worry. They don’t speak Oriya there, but Tamil - a language I didn’t know - and also their eating habits are different. I had begun to study English just a few months before.

We arrived in Kalakshetra and, after having seen me, Rukmini Devi refused to accept me in the school. “She is too young, she does not know the language and she is not a vegetarian. Bring her back when she is fourteen years old!” My mother insisted on pleading with Rukmini Devi to see me dance before deciding, given that we had come from so far away. Finally Rukmini Devi agreed to let me stay, but warned my parents: “I will keep her for three months and if within that time she is not able to look after herself, is not able to mix with the other children, if she cries, I will send her back”. So I stayed under these conditions.
Initially I was very lonely and homesick, and I remember I used to cry at night so I would not be discovered. I did not want to be sent back because I knew this would greatly disappoint my mother. The other children made fun of me because I didn’t speak their language. I communicated with the mudras, the hand gestures, in order to say "I’m hungry" or "I must wash my hands", and then within three months I learned Tamil. We got up at five in the morning. I remember the sound produced by our feet beating on a mud floor.

I stayed in Kalakshetra for six years and passed my high school exams there. I grew up, matured, learned to be disciplined and to rely only on myself for everything. I learned concentration, how an artist should behave and how important it is to practise to keep the dance alive. It was a complete education. Rukmini Devi used to say to me that modern civilisation was becoming superficial and was losing the spirit of dedication. She used to ask herself how many young dancers knew about Indian culture and how many of them loved it. She wondered how many dancers were aware that their bodies were instruments of the divine, that their lives should be noble and pure, that their bodies should be healthy and disciplined in order to fulfil their mission as artists. She would say to me: “We want to dance, we love the Indian dance because it gives joy, but we must remember that there should be integrity and reverence”. When I received the diploma, Rukmini Devi bade me farewell with these words: “Sanjukta, you have completed your course, but this is the beginning of your life. Take care.”

Whenever Sanjukta has to dance, her first gesture is to bow to the ground to ask forgiveness of Mother Earth for stamping on her. When Sanjukta begins a performance, when she must quickly intervene in order to explain something, when she teaches, her first action is always to salute the earth. She bends down, opening her knees, leaning on her heels and keeping her back straight. With open hands and straight fingers, she touches first the floor in front of her and then her face. It seems like a simple, easy movement, however it contains in itself the secret of her dance in its movement and technique, in the artistic and personal expression, and in the dedication that the craft demands.

We were outside on a tennis court of the Hotel Aguativa during the Brazilian ISTA in 1994. Gangadar helped Sanjukta, playing the drum and singing
the rhythm that the participants in the class had to keep. The first thing Sanjukta taught us was the salute. Then she taught us two steps. After two hours of class we realised that merely standing in the positions that appeared so natural in Sanjukta’s walks was an arduous task. The feet were placed at a distance measuring one and a half time one’s own foot, the arms were held horizontally at the height of the shoulders. In front of the participants, Sanjukta executed the step exasperatingly slowly, always following the rhythm of the drum. Each phase was circular. Sanjukta explained that straight lines don’t exist in Odissi, in contrast to the other classical Indian dances. She had us take the position of tribhangi, the characteristic position of the Odissi style, made from the three curves of the body with the torso displaced in the opposite direction to that of the waist and head.

Patiently showing each phase, she underlined the exact moment in which the weight shifted from one leg to the other. She pointed out the swaying of our hips to us, to make us understand how the lightness and power of her steps could become vulgar and heavy if the hips are not controlled in the swift passage from one foot to the other and from one tribhangi position to the next. She came amongst us and firmly held our hips between her hands as we tried to execute the steps. At times she sang the rhythm so that Gangadar didn’t have to continually start from the beginning. She lifted our elbows as they had the tendency to drop quickly. She straightened the fingers of our hands which could not manage to keep the perpendicular position.

She repeated and repeated the same small details so we could try to understand them with our bodies. We realised we had not seen anything when she had danced and that we would have to watch many more times in order to perceive the complexity of what she was trying to teach us. The muscles of our legs screamed with pain, our shoulders seemed to hold up arms of lead and the rhythm was impossible to keep. Then Sanjukta would make us rest and showed us all she could illustrate with the two steps: an elephant, an arrogant lady, a peacock ...

After the exercises for the feet and legs, for the torso, the head and eyes, one learned the hand gestures, the mudras or hastas. There are 28 basic gestures for one hand and 24 basic gestures for both hands. Because we were taught from a very young age, we learnt the gestures to the rhythm of a nursery rhyme to
remember them in an easier way. Each hand gesture has its own use. For example, the same gesture can illustrate: picking a flower, taking an arrow, aiming and throwing it, offering something, different types of perfumes, smelling ... The position of the fingers is the same, but where the hand is placed changes.

Then we learn 15 types of jumps and 15 types of pirouettes and the four basic body positions on which the style is based, and the 36 foot positions. Each position, gesture or movement has its own technical name, so that afterwards the master can tell you to do such and such neck, such and such eyes, such and such gesture, such and such foot position and the pupil has to put them together to create one whole movement.

Then there are the different ways of walking. We have 16 types of walks, for example like a warrior, a lady, a man ... We have to learn many animal and bird movements. In the Odissi style, we have many different steps in the basic position called chauka, which means square, and the same amount in the position called tribhanghi, when the body assumes three curves. The steps are practised according to the rhythm. First the master or the percussionist plays a particular rhythm in a slow tempo, then the pupil doubles the rhythm, repeating the steps in a slow, medium, fast tempo and then again medium and slow. In this way the dancer memorises the rhythm and is able to repeat it.

In the third year I was taught how to separate the movement of the torso from the hip movement. You have to pay attention to your own body and know how to control it so the hips do not automatically follow the movements of the torso. It is really essential to control the torso because, most of the time, the movements belong to the torso and not to the hips; in some stationary positions, you can deflect your hips, but this does not mean swinging them around. There are four movements of the torso: deflecting to the left, to the right, in and out, and the fifth is around in a circle.

Later I began to execute small choreographies and to deal with the emotions. We have nine major sentiments. We consider that the master can teach the technical aspects, about 25%. But then each dancer must practice these technical aspects using her own emotions, according to her own feelings, experiences and abilities. The nine universally known emotions are sringara love,
vira heroism, karuna pathos, adbhuta wonder, raudra anger, hayasa humor, bhayanaka fear, bibhatsa disgust and shanta peace.

To show love, you are taught to flicker the eyes. This flickering is executed differently depending on the character. To show anger technically, we are taught to keep the eyes wide open moving the eyebrows slightly. To show heroism, we are taught to keep a smiling face and raise the eyebrows and widen the eyes. Fear is conveyed with a gesture of the hand, the position of the torso, and fixed, open eyes. For disgust, the chin is lifted slightly and the eyes are opened wide. For peace, which corresponds to meditation, the eyeballs are turned, keeping the body and hands calm. Having rehearsed technically each emotion, simple themes and exemplary situations would be given for us to improvise upon. For example for fear, we could be asked to try imagining being in a forest and seeing a lion.

There are two types of expression: the loka dharmi and the natya dharmi. Loka dharmi is very natural, similar to the behaviour of daily life, natya dharmi is an idealised behaviour that is used in dance. Rukmini Devi explained the difference to me as though one were a realistic behaviour and the other stylised, saying that Indian art has always favoured idealism on stage.

After having learned all the elements of the dance and the nine emotions, once the technique is mastered, we must continue to practise it so as not to worry about it when we are on stage dancing. We must practice technique so that it comes naturally, automatically, without effort.

In 1977, when Sanjukta came to Denmark for the first time, thinking she would only have to present her performance, she became suspicious and uncertain when Eugenio Barba asked her to explain the technical bases of her dance. At first, she thought that revealing her professional secrets would leave her dance and her culture exposed. But she saw that Shanta Rao - an older very well-known dancer, considered a legend for being the first woman in India to learn various styles of dance from different gurus at the same time - was willing. Sanjukta’s pride could not accept her being less worthy and this sense of rivalry, later felt towards the Japanese Katsuko Azuma during the first sessions of ISTA, gave her courage and daring. Sanjukta also quickly realised that Eugenio did not intend to change or intervene upon her dance, but rather, respecting her tradition, he wanted to try and
learn from it principles that could also be useful to actors who did not work with the same style or genre.

Eugenio’s curiosity, the insistence of his questions, his fastidiousness in the work terminology became tools for Sanjukta as well. She became curious as to the techniques and ways of European theatre, to the point of asking Eugenio to suggest to her a classical European character to work with in order to create a new choreography. One of Sanjukta’s projects became to dance Medea’s story directed by Eugenio Barba, in the Greek theatre of Syracuse.

Although Sanjukta had danced choreographies created by her master Kelucharan Mahapatra, and although her own choreographies are a result of a collaboration with Raghunath and the musicians, the relationship between actor and director is something she discovered from the work at ISTA.

During a session of the University of Eurasian Theatre held in Fara Sabina in 1993 with the theme “Parallel Dramaturgies”, Sanjukta was asked to work as a director, staging the Indian classic Shakuntala by Kalidasa, with the actors of Odin Teatret. At the same time Eugenio staged his version of Shakuntala with actors of Odin Teatret and with Sanjukta.

Mirella Schino describes this situation in her article, Shakuntala among the olive trees:

In order to give a similar starting point to Sanjukta, Barba had chosen to create a neutral territory, far from the practice of either of them: Indian drama for him, the work of the director for her.

In the afternoon it was Sanjukta Panigrahi’s turn. She too was to work in an uncharacteristic manner. Nevertheless, like Barba, she remained faithful to her own style, but in the manner of a poet who is obliged to write with the usual flavour and associations but using the words of a foreign language. She worked with a text that was familiar to her but impossible to realise in its entirety in the short span of the Fara Sabina session. She lacked the gestures of her dance, the detailed codification, and had to work with the Odin actors who had none of these at their disposal. She was deprived of anything beyond single gestures; she was deprived of her dance rhythms.

In Odissi dance the narrative is as fascinating as a lyrical movement. It composes and interweaves elements that could be considered descriptive
were they not reduced and incarnated in the body of a single dancer to a single and effective brush stroke. The dancer is the deer: on looking closely it can be seen depicted in mimetic detail, but in the same moment the dancer also shows the trees of the sacred forest, the chariot and the bow of the hunter, the flowers, the hermit, the caress of the king, and Shakuntala who receives it. She has the mobility of a flame. She consumes what she touches. This dramaturgical complexity begins to disappear once the actors who interpret the story become more numerous.

It was a difficult process. Sanjukta realised that the results she usually demanded of herself required much more patience to be drawn out of other actors. She realised that her suggestions did not always have the desired effect and that, even if she tried to go deep into the work, the results did not satisfy her. She felt herself under judgement by the external observers.

That experience gave Sanjukta an even greater understanding of Eugenio’s position when he elaborated and put together scenes for the Theatrum Mundi performances. Even though she remained faithfully bound to her Indian culture, she managed to translate Eugenio’s instructions more and more effortlessly.

Also in Fara Sabina, while working on the theme “Parallel Dramaturgies”, during an evening of entertainment when everybody danced, Sanjukta staged a Bob Dylan song, sung by Jan Ferslev, actor and musician of Odin Teatret. The verses of the song had to be sung slowly and repeatedly, while Sanjukta quickly created physical images equivalent to the text, developing the simple rhythm of the song with her steps. At a certain point the text said: “If only she was lying by me”. But Sanjukta could not lie down on the ground. The rules of her dance would not allow it, and so she created an equivalent image kneeling down. The dance was fixed and remembered and was used some years later in the production *The Island of Labyrinths*.

On another occasion Sanjukta refused to follow Eugenio’s instructions. It was during the ISTA in Salento, Italy, in 1987. Goethe’s *Faust* was being worked on. Faust was represented by Katsuko Azuma, Margarita by the onnagata Kanichi Hanayagi and Sanjukta was Mephistopheles, dressed in European style for the first time and, also for the first time, with her long hair let down loose. At a certain
point a book fell from Faust’s hands and Sanjukta, as Mephistopheles, had to kick it away. To mistreat a book was taboo in her culture and so she refused. Despite all of her solidarity towards Eugenio and towards the work in which she was discovering the richness of silence as accompaniment, she categorically refused to kick the book. This episode reminds me of Sanjukta in Bologna when during the work on the “Crossing”, she had to blow out a candle. To blow out a flame was taboo for her and so she would wave over the flame until it faded.

It is abroad where Sanjukta has said she feels most Indian. Also in India her performances are much requested and her photographs can be seen hanging in shops in Bhubaneswar. There she has become a legend and is considered to be the living representative of Odissi dance. She is often on tour in India, travelling by train for hours and hours from one region to the other, from one religious festival to the other, from an outdoor stage of two or three thousand people to a small theatre where she shows her dance to government celebrities. But abroad she feels freer. When she can, she stays long periods in Holstebro, working without being disturbed.

In Holstebro. Sanjukta worked together with Iben Nagel Rasmussen, actress of Odin Teatret, and with Indian and Danish musicians, to create a children’s production based on The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling. In India, it would not be possible for her to let herself appear childish. She took a video of the performance home with her, as a secret treasure to show her grandchildren. And it would be even more impossible for her to present the folkloric dances as she did together with Gangadar during the “cabaret” evening at the ISTA session in Bologna, and absolutely forbidden to participate in the representation of a religious trance which Hemant played, as she did for the “cabaret” in Umeaa. I watched her enjoying herself and at the same time being surprised by her own daring. I could see that she felt secure in this foreign environment which would not judge her.

But life can also be nice at home in India. There are people there who help in the kitchen and with the cleaning. Sanjukta shows them how things should be done, even though in town she knows she can be cheated more easily than the young boy who works for her. Raghunath plays with the dog, rehearses, receives visitors, works with music students at seven in the morning, makes sure that the
holy cows have enough pasture. Sanjukta takes care of her sons, for whom she must find wives. She worries about Guruji who is getting old and needs a heart transplant, does administration, answers the telephone, arranges the necessary visas for the tours abroad, prepares new choreographies.

Abroad it is Hemant who cooks. Raghunath makes the morning tea and builds altars in hotel rooms and lights incense sticks, creating panic for the hotel management who don’t know how to control the smoke alarm system.

When, during the ISTA session in Bologna, she was asked to speak of the five most important episodes in her professional life, Sanjukta spoke of her masters. In addition to mentioning her mother, Guruji, Rukmini Devi and Eugenio, Sanjukta explained how much she owes to Raghunath, her husband.

*When I was at Kalakshetra, any visitor from Orissa who had heard about me came to visit me. I suppose they were curious to see how such a small child was living so far away from home. One visitor was Nihamani Panigrahi, a musicologist, who had adopted the Brahmin son of the Maharaja of Jaipur. He saw me when I was fourteen years old and decided I was the perfect bride for his son Raghunath Panigrahi, who was twenty years old. So Nilamani Panigrahi visited my mother and told her: “My son is a singer and your daughter is a dancer, it would be very nice if they married.”

Later I accidentally met Raghunath because he was invited to Kalakshetra to sing “Gita Govinda”, the poem by Javadeva. I was not aware of the marriage proposal and I didn’t take much notice of the meeting. He, however, being aware of his father’s suggestion, liked the idea of marrying me.

I heard about this possible marriage when I returned to Bhubaneswar. My mother thought it was a good idea, but my father was totally against it. He said to my mother: “You wanted our daughter to learn to dance, and I agreed, but marriage is something different. They are both artists and they do not have a fixed income. Their life will be a never-ending struggle, they will starve”. But my mother answered back: “Sanjukta loves dancing, if she marries anyone else, she will have to stop and she will get depressed and upset. You are trying to avoid problems for her, but she will really be in trouble if she marries another man. She will be unhappy and that is much worse”. My father wanted me to marry an
engineer or a doctor. He wanted me to become a doctor too, like all of my cousins. But my mother knew that with such a marriage, I would only end up in the kitchen like all other married women, while she hoped that by marrying an artist we would be able to work together.

These arguments continued for a year. Raghunath came to Cuttack to meet my mother and she took a great liking to him. She admired his singing and liked his behaviour. I too was attracted by his way of singing. It would not be wrong to say that I fell in love with his singing more than with him. With time we decided to get married.

To make me forget Raghunath, my father organised another scholarship for me, this time to learn Kathak at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Bombay, 2500 kilometres from home. He thought I was too young to get married. However, Raghunath followed me to Bombay and my father saw that it was impossible to separate us. Guruji, who is like a father to me, intervened so as to try to convince my father. We married in 1960, when I was 16 years old. It was a shock for everyone in Orissa: it was the first time a dancer had married a singer.

As my father had rightly anticipated, it was not easy. Raghunath and I decided to live in Bombay because we thought it would be easier to survive as artists there. But we had to struggle hard. There were times when we walked for hours because we couldn’t afford the bus; other times when we had only one meal a day. Raghunath did some radio programmes, and this was our only income. I was trying to get myself known as a dancer and I had to face many humiliations. I remember clearly one nasty incident. The “Times of India” used to have a column in the newspaper to introduce new talents. We went to see the sub-editor responsible for this section and showed him our certificates and positive reviews and asked him if he could write an article about us. He said: “Do you think anyone who walks in off the street can just come into our office and we will write an article about them?” Those were difficult days, but we supported each other. My father wanted to help us, but I was too proud to accept any kind of help from him.

We decided to try our luck in Madras. The situation was made more difficult for me by the birth in 1961 of our first son, Parthsarathi. However by following me to Bombay, Raghunath had lost all his contacts in the film industry where he had previously worked and so our difficulties continued. Our second
son, Sabyasachi, was born in Madras in 1963. Those years, 1960-1964, were a real trial for us. I was barely twenty but was facing problems many people do not even know about at an older age. Because of the birth of our children, I couldn’t practise, and although I had learned Bharata Natyam in Madras, I now found I could not concentrate on it alone and by doing so neglect the Odissi dance.

In 1994 the Odin celebrated its thirtieth birthday. To celebrate we had invited to Holstebro the friends that have followed us closely so that they could meet some of the living founders of tradition - Grotowski, Kazuo Ohno, Santiago García, Judith Malina and Sanjukta Panigrahi - and remember through film those who have died - Stanislavsky, Artaud, Decroux, Brecht, Meyerhold, Copeau.

We can think of tradition as something that is handed down to us from the past or we can think of tradition as something that is invented, looking into the past in order to choose one’s own ancestors. Certainly Grotowski is a founder of tradition, given that his books and the legend of his performances have inspired an entire generation of theatre practitioners. Kazuo Ohno, together with Hijikata, invented Butoh creating a link between modern and traditional Japanese theatre. Santiago García is the best known representative of the collective creation method used by theatre groups in all Latin America. Judith Malina with Julian Beck and the Living Theatre, as well as Odin Teatret or Dario Fo and Franca Rame, are all people and groups who began something that will be continued in various ways by others. But Sanjukta is probably the person who most of all deserves the title of founder of tradition.

Sanjukta, in a similar way to Decroux with corporeal mime, reconstructed and invented her tradition day by day, exercise by exercise, movement by movement, step by step. Slowly and patiently she recomposed and re-elaborated a basic alphabet and later created dances and choreographies demonstrating all the complexity of an art. It is mostly thanks to her that Odissi, in the last thirty years, has become one of the five classical Indian dances, with the same standing as the dances already recognised for centuries.

Odissi dance was slowly lost with the decadence of the devadasi and of the gotipua. Some gurus - among whom Pankaj Charan Das and Kelucharan Mahapatra should be remembered in particular - who came directly from the
tradition preserved by the devadasi and the gotipua, and who were versed in music and played the pakhawaj (a drum), found themselves working in the Annapurna theatre under the direction of Kalicharan Pattnaik in the 1940’s in Cuttack. They started coming together in an association called “Jayantika” in order to discuss, experiment and codify what was considered to be a regional dance. They wanted to rescue its specificity and contribute to its revival. Odissi style dance began to be seen again. In 1954 Priyambada Mohanty represented the state of Orissa for the first time in the Inter-University Youth Festival with a dance of barely eight minutes. Indrani Rehman, daughter of an American by birth, takes Odissi dance abroad for the first time. While the repertory grows and the narrative and dramatic parts of the performances are organised under various names (pallavi, abinhaya, ashtapadi, mangala charan, batu, moksha), each guru begins to be surrounded by particular students. Rivalries arise and exchange comes to a stop, the future of the dance no longer seems so promising. Sanjukta, a pupil of Kelucharan Mahapatra, the senior guru of the Centre of Odissi Research, where a system of written scores for the technique of Odissi dance is being worked out, takes upon herself the work of reconstruction with particular zeal until her name becomes synonymous with Odissi dance.

Sanjukta applied the written rules of the Natyashastra, profited from the Bharata Natyam technique, put to use all Rukmini Devi’s teaching, studied the sculptures and the paintings she found in Orissa and in particular in the Konarak temples, nourished herself on all Guruji’s knowledge and invented steps, positions and choreographies that now are considered to be an age-old tradition. She methodically composed each element, the positions of the feet, the head, the neck, the torso, the hand gestures, until finally all together it came to appear like something that had always existed. She discovered the most organic, natural and beautiful scenic behaviour through the most artificial, patient, and thankless construction.

When I was young the most well-known dance forms were Kathakali from southern India and Kathak from the north. Odissi was not known. When I danced as a little girl in 1952, it was the first time that Odissi dance was
mentioned in the national press. In Bhubaneswar my gurus were trying to reconstruct the dance, from the little they had at hand.

Though I studied Bharata Natyam in Kalakshetra, I continued practising Odissi with my Guruji. In Odissi all the movements are circular or semi-circular, rather than straight and angular as in the Bharata Natyam. I was young and was getting confused by the two styles; I was not happy about this. My mother advised me to choose if I wanted to seek perfection. I chose Odissi.

The Odissi style has been reconstructed based on paintings, manuscripts and temple sculptures. There are thousands and thousands of temples and we had thousands of sculpted figures to refer to; no one really knows how many there are. For us they are like open textbooks. We find different attitudes from them: a lady looking at herself in the mirror or holding an instrument like a sitar, or playing the drums or washing her hair; and each of these attitudes is carved in thousands of ways. We have to visit the temples, see the paintings, and then reconstruct in practice what we have seen.

I went to the mahari, who by then only remembered a few movements. I referred to the gotipua, to sculptures, to paintings, and began to collect sketches working with my guru. We wanted to resurrect the style and transform it into a classical dance. We choreographed various dances. We worked day and night. We never looked at the time, if there was a dance to build up again, that was the only thing that mattered. I thought obsessively that I had to make Odissi dance known. It was not the work of one night, it came little by little, facing many difficulties. Given that I knew Bharata Natyam, I took advantage of this in order to make demonstrations in which I pointed out the difference between the two styles. But to do all this I needed to be surrounded by the temples of my region and by the inspiration that my Guruji gave me.

Raghunath and I decided to return to Bhubaneswar, where in 1964, the government had opened a music school. I was offered to teach dance and I worked there for two years. I also slowly started getting invitations for performances. Things seemed to be going better, but instead I was entering the worst period of my life.

Unlike my family, which was fairly progressive, my husband’s is more tradition-bound. My father-in-law, who was the progressive member of the family,
had passed away. My mother-in-law lived in Gunupur, a small village bound by superficial and unnecessary traditional values. In 1965, some people in the village started provoking her: “Why is your daughter-in-law not with you? Why is she dancing when she should be here to look after you?” The more successful I became, the more animosity I inspired. Finally my mother-in-law spoke to Raghunath about all this gossip.

Raghunath is a simple person and easily influenced. Suddenly, one day he went to Gunupur and wrote me a letter telling me that he would not return. At first I didn’t believe it, but after two months, I was forced to join Raghunath in Gunupur, 450 kilometres further south, where all the daily habits and customs are different from my own. I had no choice, because in India divorce was socially unacceptable; I couldn’t talk about my problems with my family.

I had to get Raghunath to understand things from my point of view. I thought of doing everything his family asked of me. I left the school where I taught and went there with all my clothes, my ornaments and my childhood prizes. I also took my elder son, Parthasarathi, who was then about six, while my younger son remained with my mother. When I got there, I found out that I had to take care of all the housework, including drawing water from the well. I could do everything but I was not allowed to dance. For me it was torture, I cried every day. Because I was a dancer, they accused me of not knowing how to behave and of not being able to take care of the house. It was ironic because in the years when we were so badly off economically, Raghunath and I stayed close, but in 1965, when life seemed to be becoming a little easier, we entered the worst period of our marriage.

One day, after I had been in Gunupur about four months, I received the news that my younger sister’s husband had had an accident and died. At first, my in-laws refused to allow me to leave, but I insisted. I told my mother-in-law that I wouldn’t eat another morsel of food unless she let me go. I was allowed to leave, but without my son or any of my things. I returned to Bhubaneswar alone. I didn’t care about my clothes, but it was very painful for me to leave my son behind. I decided that I would not go back to Gunupur. I thought that if I had to give up dance, then I would go mad. I had to continue what I had begun; I felt a
responsibility. I wrote lots and lots of letters to Raghunath, but they had no effect on him. Everything appeared hopeless.

My maternal uncle decided to intervene and he travelled to Gunupur. He succeeded in getting through to Raghunath, getting him to return to Bhubaneswar with Parthasarathi. In 1966, we began again together. I think that dance and music helps bring people together even when personal problems force them apart.

In 1967 I got my first major breakthrough. I danced for about 25 minutes at the award ceremony of the Central Sangeet Natak Academy in Delhi, together with other students of Guruji. My performance got excellent reviews. After that, life picked up; I got lots of programmes everywhere, hundreds of invitations, and my earnings also improved. Happily, Raghunath’s career also picked up at the same time. But, as he accompanied me as a singer more and more, he couldn’t always follow up his own programmes, and at first there was a bit of confusion and clashes. We made a rule that we would accept the first invitation, and make an exception only if the second invitation was really very prestigious. Surely Raghunath has made many sacrifices for me.

The reason Raghunath and I started working together was our decision to establish Odissi as an individual classical style. At that time nobody was able to present a fully fledged Odissi performance on stage. Guruji, Raghunath and I worked tirelessly to achieve this. I had a lot to learn in order to reach this goal. We worked with determination and zeal, creating new choreographies. I managed to develop the dance from a ten-minute number to a performance of two hours. The results started showing themselves. I received many awards. The biggest of them all was the Padmashree (a civilian award given by the government for honourable service in whatever field) in 1975. I was in Bhubaneswar in the middle of a lesson when the telegram came. I had to read the telegram twice before I could believe it. I thought: “Now I have more responsibility. I must work with more earnestness and concentration, I have to justify this recognition”. It was the first time a dancer from Orissa was so honoured and everybody in the state was really happy. My family was ecstatic. My husband, my mother were all delighted, my father was in tears. I was proud then as I am now, because whatever I have achieved in life is because of my own sincerity and hard work.
Sanjukta has always been the most organised and reliable of all the artists who collaborate with ISTA. Therefore I was very surprised when in Londrina, Brazil (just after having received the confirmation that the Balinese were happily on their way) I received the message that Sanjukta had missed her aeroplane because she was without her passport. I could not believe that Sanjukta could create such problems. The three Indian musicians, who didn’t speak any English and so were unable to explain what had happened, arrived at Londrina alone.

Sanjukta arrived with Raghunath just in time for the official opening of the ISTA session. Since we had not had the chance to prepare the opening dance, Eugenio asked her to improvise and tell the story of what had happened to her. Sanjukta improvised for more than half an hour, inventing *mudras* and gestures that suggested aeroplanes and telephones, customs officers and ticket offices, panic, delay, tears and desperation. This is how we came to know that, arriving in New York and wanting to help an elderly Indian lady who didn’t speak any English, Sanjukta had handed in their passports together to the immigration official, and he had returned the wrong passports. At the moment of checking in for the flight to Brazil, seeing that she had no visa, Sanjukta realised what had happened. She had to call some Indian friends in New York for them to track down the old Indian lady and recover her passport. The next flight on the same airline was three days later. So, once she had recovered her passport and had managed, with tears, to convince American immigration to help her with her problem, Sanjukta had to contact the Brazilian organisers of ISTA to buy a ticket with another airline. This was not easy because by now ISTA had moved from the town of Londrina with its office equipment, telephones and faxes, to the residence in the country where we would work for a week completely isolated from the world. Finally she decided for herself and she bought new tickets. Sanjukta felt she was in the wrong and it was not easy to convince her to accept reimbursement for her expenses. Meanwhile, the three musicians, without Sanjukta checking up on them, could drink beer at ease, without having to hide the glasses under the table, as they were used to.

Sanjukta knew how to cry when it was necessary. I imagine she learned this as a little girl to obtain what she wanted from her father, knowing that he was unable to resist her tears. A combination of two elements made Sanjukta cry: if
her tears could be useful and if she was depressed because of a physical pain. I was twice witness to the effect provoked by this special tactic.

Richard Schechner, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, organised in 1991 in Bellagio, Italy, a meeting entitled “Intercultural Peformance” to which he invited intellectuals and artists, among them Sanjukta Panigrahi and Eugenio Barba. Sanjukta suffered at that time from a tendonitis in her foot and felt great pain each time she danced. In India the doctor had told her the pained was caused by a small bone that was growing on the bottom of the foot and which she believed she could see in the x-ray as a tiny bone in the form of a nail. Sanjukta was depressed because she thought she would not be able to dance any more without pain. During a discussion among the people gathered by Richard Schechner, questions arose very far from Sanjukta’s way of thinking, but as answers were expected from her she began to cry, to the great consternation and embarrassment of the Anglo-American men and women who were full of good intentions and guilty feelings. The next day, during the return trip from a physio-therapist who had assured her that she would quickly recover if she got the right treatment, Sanjukta made fun of the expressions on the faces of the American participants to the meeting. She could not understand why they should make such a big deal of something that seemed to her so simple and banal.

The other occasion was in Copenhagen. Sanjukta had arrived a couple of days late to the rehearsals of The Island of Labyrinths, to everyone’s amazement. She excused herself by saying that she had mixed up the dates and that she had made a commitment she absolutely could not cancel, but we could see that she felt uneasy about her decision, and Eugenio also had difficulty in hiding his irritation. In addition, Sanjukta had a serious problem with her knee and after each rehearsal I had to provide her with an ice pack to relieve the pain. One night at the hotel, after an argument with Eugenio about the written programmes, she left in tears. I had to intervene. I knocked on the door of her room, and Raghunath, who was watching football on television, opened it for me, while Sanjukta sat on her bed crying. We spoke for a while and then I left her in order to convince Eugenio to go to her. The next day Sanjukta was more convincing in the rehearsals and Eugenio stopped pretending to ignore her. After each performance Sanjukta continued to apply ice packs and, despite the doctor’s
proscription and our advice to dance sitting down, a week later at the Festival of Cultures of Lecce organised by Nicola Savarese, she danced as beautifully as always seducing an audience of one thousand people. At the end of the ISTA session in Copenhagen, just before getting into the taxi that would take her to the airport, Sanjukta said good-bye to Eugenio with a cheeky smile and gave him a copy of a magazine in which she tells of her life in an interview with the title in large letters very visible on the cover: Sanjukta Panigrahi On How to Mend Broken Relationships.

I remember another time when we were all sitting in a bus during the ISTA session of 1986 in Holstebro. Sanjukta was depressed. She told me that family problems in India were worrying her. I gave her a golden chain from Portugal, telling her that it would bring her good luck. With a smile, some years later she showed me that she still carried the chain with her, locked in a small box. It had worked, she told me happily.

When I look back on my life, I feel I have failed or not been very successful as a mother. Since neither of us had secure incomes, I could not refuse any dance programme even if this meant that I had to neglect my children. Of course, my mother and my sister helped me, but it was not quite the same. In the later years, I have tried to make it up to my children. When they were born, everyone expected that I would have to give up dancing, but my mother told me not to give up and that she would always be there to help me.

I also had dreams for my children which have remained dreams. I wanted Parthasarathi to become a classical singer, but because I concentrated on my career, I could not help him with his. He has a beautiful voice, but he only sings pop music. I wanted my second son, Sabyasachi, to become a professional musician, but he always says his first love is the camera and now he makes films.

If I had to live my life again, I would not marry so young. At times I feel completely worn out handling so many responsibilities alone and at first I wished someone would tell me what to do. There was no-one to show me the way. Today I have become so used to doing what I want that I would find it difficult to do what someone else tells me to do. Raghunath is very dependent on me. My children too have always thought of me as a very strong person, someone they
could go to for advice. Even when I did not feel well mentally, I felt compelled to be strong for everyone else because if they had understood my real feelings, they would have been depressed. I have become very sedate, disciplined and independent. If something has to be done at a certain time on a particular day, I will try my best to see that it is done.

There are people who love, respect and admire me, but my life is arranged in such a way that I cannot open or entrust myself to anybody. But of course there have been many beautiful moments which have made me happy.

In 1987-88 I developed a serious problem with the heel of my foot. I was on tour in Europe and Eugenio Barba told me that I should go to a specialised hospital for dancers’ ailments in Bergamo, Italy. I didn’t know of this hospital and I didn’t have enough money on me to be hospitalised. Eugenio said to me: “There are seventy to eighty people here who have been working with you since 1980. Do you think that between us we can’t raise the hospital charges?” I cried, saying I didn’t want charity, and he protested: “I am a very selfish person, I am doing it for myself, not for you, so that I can see you dance still for many years”.

Once, after a performance in the United States, Beate Gordon, an expert on Asian theatre from the Asia Society, came to me. She touched my feet and kissed my hands. I told her not to, but she said: “I know you are younger than me, but I want to pay respect to your feet which are so powerful”.

Recently a pandit came to my house and, after looking at my palm, said: “Don’t give any statements until 1996, because anything you say will be misinterpreted and will give you problems”. I laughed at those words, but later it did seem that I was in the papers for all the wrong reasons.

Many papers wrote that I had become a devadasi and some went on to add that it was a desperate attempt to seek cheap publicity. They had asked me if I would like to dance in the temple and I had answered that I would feel fortunate to dance before Lord Jagannath because whatever I am today is because of the blessings of Lord Jagannath and thanks to the dance originated from him. I keep his statue on stage whenever I dance. Fifteen years ago, I had asked permission to dance in the temple, but I was denied this privilege. The journalists asked me a very specific question: “Would you like to dance in the temple every single day?” and I clarified that, because of my profession and my family, it would not be
possible for me, but if they gave me a block of seven or eight days, I would gladly perform, even during the ritual festivals. I cannot become a devadasi because of the present situation in my life. I cannot follow the rules and regulations of conduct that are laid down for the devadasi. I can perform and offer my art form at the feet of the Lord only for the sake of culture.

During her performances Sanjukta is alone. She establishes a dialogue, improvising with the sung text, with the rhythm given by the drums, with the colours of the music - especially of the sitar and flute - with the space, making it breathe through the dynamism of her steps and the liveliness of her eyes, with the spectators drawing them into the play of alternating energy which changes from moments of eroticism and seduction to explosions of vigour and fury.

But on stage she is not accustomed to a dialogue with other actors. It was not easy for her to adapt the complex play of actions and reactions so well structured in her dance to a scene with another actor.

When Augusto Omolú, the Afro-Brazilian dancer, came to ISTA, Eugenio entrusted him to Sanjukta, so that she would initiate him to the kind of work that was awaiting him. They worked together for hours and, even without a common language (Augusto doesn’t understand English and Sanjukta doesn’t speak Portuguese) they managed to understand each other. Sanjukta had sort of adopted Augusto and passed on to him the fundamental experience of choreography in space, of impulses and counter-impulses, of the composition of the various parts of the body in relation to each other. Augusto learned. Then came his turn to want to help Sanjukta.

They were working together on a scene of The Island of Labyrinths, which had been fixed following an improvisation where both Sanjukta and Augusto used all their possibilities of transformation. They were the gods showing all their powers of illusion, it was a scene that revealed maya. Augusto passed from one Orixá to another, from the warrior Ogum to the beautiful Oxun, from the serpent Oxumaré to the hunter Oxossi, while Sanjukta transformed herself from deer to elephant, from peacock to crocodile, from god to monster. At the end they came together to drink from each other’s hands in silence. At first it seemed that Sanjukta dominated and then she would bend down in front of Augusto. The fluid
and continuous movements underlined the impossibility of grasping that which is covered by the seductive veil of illusion.

During the rehearsals both Sanjukta and Augusto had difficulties using the other’s actions in such a way that their own transformations would be perceived as a reaction. They needed to understand each other’s impulses and rhythm. Also the Indian and the Afro-Brazilian musicians struggled to follow the two dancers. The more complex and rich in detail was the art of the individual dancer, the less they seemed capable of relating to each other. Augusto tried to solve the problem with his eyes, Sanjukta by following the Brazilian drums. At times they succeeded, but not always.

During the public demonstrations when more actors were asked to improvise together, Sanjukta relied on her technique and on the enormous physical alphabet at her disposal, without worrying about embellishing the single elements in detail, finding contact with the other actors through a game or battle between different energies. For the spectators this combination of genres and diverse cultures, that appeared to be communicating so easily, was impressive. For us working on stage with rhythm, energy, space, actions and reactions, the task became difficult only if we were asked to remember and repeat. To achieve the same quality again it was necessary to reach a deeper understanding of what each individual actor/dancer was leaning on for support.

Working with Sanjukta, I found a common ground in music. It was easier to find ourselves together by reacting to music, rather than force the meeting. It was as though the tension of pushing the encounter didn’t let it happen. This is why the last scene of *The Island of Labyrinths* when Sanjukta dances the *Moksha*, the liberation, the last prayer, and I fall, get up again and fall again until I am transformed, was so intense for me. I could not see Sanjukta, I could only feel her feet, her rhythm, the shifting air, as we moved to the same music but I felt we were profoundly connected.

The first time we worked on this scene was in the Cloister of San Martino’s Church, in Bologna in 1990. It was to be the final scene of the performance of the Theatrum Mundi. All the “monsters” - the Balinese Barong and Rangda, the Japanese Shishi, Odin Teatret’s Androgyne and Mr. Peanut - had appeared on stage and danced to the fireworks of the Pupa (a folkloric puppet
from the Abruzzi region in Italy) accompanied by the “storm” music played and sung by all the musicians as well as all the participants of ISTA. At the end the “monsters” “died”, falling to the ground in different places on stage, while the Balinese peasant woman continued to sow rice as she sang. Mr. Peanut, which is to say Death on stilts, was the last to fall. At that point the Indian music of Moksha began and Sanjukta started to dance. Her rhythm grew to a maximum showing all the oppositions of Shakti, of the creative and destructive energies, and then decreased to the meditative peacefulness of the final position. The musicians sang “Om” and Sanjukta showed the white of her eyes, while her breathing went from small gasps and spasms to peacefulness. It seemed as if Sanjukta’s entire body was stretched towards the heavens while her hands hung relaxed at her sides showing the liberation of bodily ties.

In this last part of Sanjukta’s dance, Mr. Peanut would lose his stilts and his long trousers as he transformed himself into the woman dressed in white with a baby whose head was a skull in her lap. It was a scene from the performance The Castle of Holstebro that I had been asked to adapt for this new situation. We ended together, Sanjukta standing behind me, her arm on my shoulder, like a Mary and Joseph with child. The scene was later repeated in all the successive Theatrum Mundi performances, on a stage in the middle of the lake in Londrina, Brazil, and in Umeaa, Sweden, in the great theatre of the town. We elaborated the scene further for The Island of Labyrinths in Copenhagen, where the longer period of rehearsals allowed me to find a link with the Indian music and to react to Sanjukta’s steps, as if these were determining my transformation.

At ISTA the actors work together not only to create scenes for the performances and during the demonstrations, but also by collaborating in different phases of a creative process. A procedure that all the actors of ISTA have practised is reduction. By reducing our actions in space while keeping all the impulses and intentions, Eugenio tries to show our dance on stage free of the conspicuous aspects of the genre and culture we belong to, and free of narration and anecdotes. Sanjukta had had difficulty understanding this process, most of all when Eugenio would ask her to reduce 25%, 50%, or 100%. Until one day Eugenio told her that reduction was similar to what she always did while remembering a dance score without executing it completely in space.
I have often improvised with Sanjukta following the reduction principle. Sitting at a table, holding a book ... And while the spectators could imagine a scene from Shakespeare, or Ibsen, Sanjukta and I concentrated on the sequel of actions which we were obliged to remember differently, since the body could not extend completely and decide for itself. When we had difficulties we smiled and started again from the top. But I preferred to see Sanjukta dance with her whole body, enveloping her dance in magic, without being forced to discover what is hidden behind.

There is a difference between a narrative and a pure dance sequence. The choreography and scores of the narrative sequences are created in a different way than those of pure dance. To create a narrative part we start from the hand gestures. Pure dance parts are created starting from the feet.

In a narrative sequence the dancer and the singer alternate and assist each other to illustrate the story. If the text speaks of an elephant, the dancer can show the trunk. Then the text can remain on a verse, for example “The Elephant King is caught in the deep water”, while the dancer tells the story of how Vishnu in the shape of an elephant went to pick lotus flowers and is captured by a crocodile. The crocodile grabs the elephant’s foot three times, then the dancer shows Vishnu hitting the crocodile. This story can be represented in different ways. For example, not showing the crocodile, but a foot caught in a trap. The dancer decides how many times the same verses are repeated and for how long, because the dancer masters the gestures and the technique and has full freedom in the choice of how to use them.

When you create a choreography, first of all you must know the story and its meanings very well. We have to study the text that is not in a familiar language, but in a literary language. Sometimes underneath the general meaning, there are four or five hidden meanings and we must discover them all before starting.

The first phase is done sitting down and working on the hand gestures, the mudras. You need time to assemble them so that the choreography is varied, avoiding the repetition of images and patterns. We must maintain the meaning, but change the patterns; and move the hands without disturbing the gesture’s
line, for example paying attention not to cross the hands. It is important to connect all of the mudras with the same quality of force. A choreographer can compose an infinite amount of hand gestures just following her imagination.

After having created the mudras, and having repeated them many times, we try to do them together with the feet movements. Always keeping the meaning in mind, the feet should not disturb, but they should move in harmony with the hands.

Every movement must keep the rhythm and measure the soft or vigorous energy according to the meaning. For example the action of crushing should be vigorous, but if you are addressing a god, the feet should move softly. By putting the feet and hands together, you achieve the choreographic meaning.

Then the body must be shaped, and at this point the torso is central. The dancer must be able to move from one side to the other without interrupting the movement, avoiding static positions. The movements of the body must flow heeding the hands, becoming small or quick and hard.

Afterwards we work on the eyes and finally on the neck. When we are able to control all this technically, without forgetting the pattern, we work on the emotions. Until you are sure of your technique, you cannot work on emotions. But when you forget technique, the emotions come.

Each time Sanjukta comes to ISTA she shows Eugenio one of her new choreographies. And each time Eugenio asks her to narrate how she created it. He is always fascinated by the clarity and the intelligence of the montage technique.

This is one of the reasons why Sanjukta is so important for ISTA and for the research conducted by Theatre Anthropology. Sanjukta can clearly show all the levels of organisation that characterise the actor’s process up until the final montage in a production. She explains how layer after layer is elaborated, revealing all of the passages of the creative process and composition of a dance or of a story.

Eugenio talks of the pre-expressive level, of presence and of the dramaturgy of the actor, and Sanjukta demonstrates a sequence of pure dance in which the hand gestures don’t mean anything, but only want to be “beautiful”.
Eugenio talks of the level of relationships, and Sanjukta first points out the relationships between the various parts of her body, then the relationship with the music, with the space, with the spectators. Eugenio speaks of the more complex level of storytelling, and Sanjukta illustrates how meaning is created through the montage of the sung text, the mimed action, the improvisation, the emotions represented and the dynamism of the dance. Sanjukta’s demonstrations reveal to the participants of ISTA what the different levels of organisation are in the dramaturgy of a performance, what the work of the actors on themselves is, what the pre-expressive and the narrative in the creative work is. It becomes clear how these principles can be used by different genres, cultures, aesthetics and needs, without senselessly talking about appropriation or the loss of professional identity.

When a dance touches people, there no longer are barriers of culture, language or caste. This is why dance is so important in India, it is a common language. I frequently chose to dance poems by Salabega, the Muslim poet devoted to Jagannath, an Hindi deity. These dances have moved the public especially in those regions in India where there are great problems between Muslims and Hindi. If you are a musician or a dancer and are able to reach the heart of the spectators then there are no barriers of caste or religion or language. There is only the relationship between the dancer and the spectator, that particular feeling, and nothing else. When I perform in Europe I am not worried about doing the narrative parts even without explanation because I have the feeling that the deep meaning of the dance will somehow be understood.

In some parts of India musicians and dancers are respected as gods. It is difficult to imagine that they are normal people with families and social lives.

Now I have started teaching dance. I find that I can analyse dance much better as a teacher. I see the mistakes more clearly when someone else is dancing. I would like to start a school like the Kalakshetra. I would like to guide dancers preparing them for all the experiences they will have to go through, but I would also like to teach them to be earnest human beings and not only good artists.

A dancer’s life is very short, and I don’t know how long I will be able to dance. I don’t want to live long. I would be happy to die on stage. I don’t know
if people will remember me. All my life, I have known only dance, but still I wish that people will remember me as a good human being, a sincere person. There are some social obligations that I have neglected because of my profession, but on the other hand, I try to take care of the needs not only of my immediate family, but also of the larger family of musicians and technicians who help me in a performance. I do not really have many regrets, because I was given a great reward in having “brought back to life” Odissi dance in my country and all over the world. I have been honoured like few individuals in my field and for that I am deeply grateful. I feel that all the things that I have gone through in my life have led me somewhere, as if they had a special purpose. They have helped me to be strong.

If I had to live my life again I would still want to dance.

Rukmini Devi, Sanjukta’s master, said in a speech at a congress on Indian dance in 1954: “On rare occasions there are born messengers of art who create something great and by that creation give to the world a vision of the life to be. Such messengers do not invent anything new, they just feel the reality and reveal it, almost unconsciously”. Sanjukta is one of these messengers.

In India they write of Sanjukta that her total involvement gives her performances a radiant quality. She seems to be lit from within and the light permeates her whole being. In the narrative parts she appears to be so carried away that one cannot resist her hypnotising beauty. Her most impressive dance is the Moksha, where she seems to go into trance, representing the atma - the individual soul - that longs for its union with the paramatma - the universal spirit.

Everything ends in order to be reborn and to begin again in a different way. At the end of the performance The Island of Labyrinths, I, as Death on stilts, have fallen to the ground like all the other monsters. Sanjukta begins to dance. Accompanied by the Indian music I struggle to survive, I get up and fall down again, I free myself of the costume and of the skull until I am sitting down as the woman dressed in white holding a baby: Death. Sanjukta above me takes the meditative position of Om, as if her body was transforming itself into spirit, as if her dance were only for the gods.
Holstebro, August 1997.

Translated from Italian by David Korish and Roxana Avila

The words of Sanjukta are edited from the interview printed in “Savvy”, Magma Publication, Bombay, January 1996; from her speech at the symposium Theatre in a Multicultural Society during the 10th session of ISTA in Copenhagen, May 1996; from her speech at the ISTA in Bologna in 1990 entitled “Cinque maestri” (Five Masters), published in Teatro Eurasiano, n. 2 “Tecniche della rappresentazione e storiografia” (Techniques of Representation and Historiography) edited by Gerardo Guccini and Cristina Valenti, Biblioteca Universale Synergon Bologna 1992; from the work demonstration presented during the ISTA session “The Female Role” in Holstebro in 1986; from the book “Odissi - Indian Classical Dance Art” by Sunil Kothari and Avinash Pasricha, Marg Publications, Bombay 1990; and from personal conversations.

The words of Rukmini Devi are taken from her speech “Indian Dance”, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Delhi, 1955.

The words of Nando Taviani are taken from his piece Ricordi e altre allegrezze - Cronache e disgressioni dall’International School of Theatre Anthropology (Memories and other Delights -Chronicles and Digressions from the International School of Theatre Anthropology) copied in the pre-print of Teatro Tascabile of Bergamo, 1995.

The words of Mirella Schino are taken from her article Sakuntala fra gli ulivi, (Shakuntala among the Olive Trees) published in Teatro Eurasiano n. 3, Drammaturgia dell’attore, edited by Marco de Marinis, I Quaderni del Battello Ebbro, Bologna 1996 and in Asian Theatre Journal, vol. 13, n.1, Spring 1996, University of Hawaii Press, USA.

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