

## Miti Desai: Where Dance, Design & Inner Transformation Meet

### by Awakin Call Editors

At the end of her first day at her first job at a prestigious design firm in Mumbai, 20-year-old Miti Desai came home and wept for five hours straight. Questioned by her concerned parents, the explanation that instinctively rose to her lips was this: “Every aspect of what happens there ultimately comes down to a financial transaction. I can’t live my life that way.” Twelve days later she quit. A few months later she flew to Atlanta, Georgia, a freshly enrolled graduate student of the Portfolio Center. A week after classes began she turned up at the dean’s office with an announcement: “I think I need to leave the school.” Why? “Everything we’re being asked to create here is commercial.”

A soul-searching six-hour conversation ensued, and in the midst of it, a pivotal realization dawned on Miti about what she was truly looking for: To explore design, not as a commercial enterprise, or a purely external form, but to explore it as an internal experience. She wanted to live design through her body and mind. “I think I need to dance,” she told the dean.

“Stay here with us for two years,” he counseled, “You can choose your own projects. And when you graduate if you still want to dance – then dance.” Stay she did, but two years later Miti still wanted to dance. With no guarantees, much less any kind of a plan, she flew back to India, abandoning a work permit and career prospects, to look up Mandakini Trivedi, a danseuse whom she’d heard taught Bharatnatyam, the classical form of Indian dance Miti had trained briefly in as a child.

At their first meeting Trivedi asked Miti what she wanted. “I want to learn Bharatnatyam from you,” Miti responded. “But I don’t teach Bharatnatyam,” said Trivedi, “I teach Mohiniyattam.” At the time Miti had never heard of Mohiniyattam – the classical dance form hailing from the southern Indian state of Kerala, and capturing in its elegant, circular movements something of the swaying grace of coconut palms. Trivedi’s presence held a special quality. Miti’s spirit had led her this far; she wasn’t about to turn around and go home on a technicality. Mohiniyattam it was to be then, she decided. For the next eight years she “disappeared” into a rigorous discipleship under her chosen teacher.

Now, well over a decade later, Miti Desai is an accomplished professional dancer and teacher whose finely-honed skills and poised understanding of the deeper dimensions and demands of her chosen form have entranced, informed and inspired audiences around the world. Apart from her training in India, she also studied at the Bauhaus Theater in Dessau, Germany where she was exposed to the world of Western theater, music, costumes and dance. While appreciative of all of it, her own heart was spoken for. It belonged wholly to the classical Indian dance form, with its rich underpinnings of philosophy, mythology, poetry and spirituality, and most of all, its design principle of transcendence.

That focus on an evolution of consciousness is a central theme in Miti's journey. Elaborating further she says, "In Indian thought the purpose of life is to elevate, engage, introspect and integrate. This thought is given a form through the actual form of the dance. But the real purpose of dance is for the dancer to understand and express, through the magnificent form, the experience of the formless. ...This to me is a heightened goal and a journey that inspires my inner space." It is an approach that demands both intensity of discipline and integrity of character from the practitioner. When practiced as intended, the form tends the mind ever towards stillness, deepening awareness and a capacity for subtlety – and freedom.

With her roots deeply plunged into the soil of dance, Miti later completed a masters in Design Education from London's Goldsmiths University. Today as founder and creative head of Bangalore-based Miti Design Lab, she explores the inner principles of her training in multiple outward spaces as well. Her work is stunningly wide-ranging, yet beautifully integrative. As she explains it her work includes communications design through branding and multimedia products, education design where she works with schools and institutions to help think through the educational process, social design where she works with communities, business design, where she helps people structure and design around their business ideas, and then there is thought design and of course – dance. For Miti all of it is part of a design continuum, each an integral part of the whole.

Today the Nateshvari Dance Gurukul, where Miti trained (and previously taught) with Trivedi, is a center committed to keeping alive the aesthetic, symbolic and yogic tradition in Indian dance, through a constant aspiration towards perfection – not only of the technique, but also of the self. And, under the mentorship of Trivedi, Miti is the Executive Trustee of Shaktiyoga Ashrama, a residential school outside Mumbai that is dedicated to the integrated study of the Indian classical arts together with spirituality and the Indian classical sciences.

As she shares in an interview with peace and environment activist Satish Kumar, "Inner growth is of prime importance to me. I try to view every action through that peephole. So professional decisions are weighed against core values. The practice of classical dance leads to an inner journey, an introspection, and I try to support that value in everything I do...it is a humble attempt from my end and not any tall claim of achievement."

Today, design is not a word Miti uses casually, "It can be experienced, explored and experimented with at every level. It is way beyond the capacity of my mind and conscience to define design because I feel it is limitless; but it is definitely an area constantly investigated in every medium through which it reveals itself. I would say that design just is – and not – is this, or that."

\*\*\*\*

This Saturday join an Awakin Call with Miti Desai and learn more about her unique journey and relationship to dance and design. RSVP details [here](#).