

HemaRajagopalan_20151123_Master.3gp

Hema Rajagopalan [00:00:30] My name is Hema Rajagopalan. I am originally from India. I was born in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. But I had my education in New Delhi. That's my academic education. But I had most of my dance training in Chennai. And then I moved to Chicago in 1974. And since then I would say I'm a Chicagoan.

Jenai Cutcher [00:01:03] A Chicagoan. Well, let's start by talking about your first dance experiences in India. How did you come to dance in the first place?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:01:10] Well, I was six years old so I'm not really sure if I remember, but all I remembered was that I loved to dance and my mother had learned dance, Bharata Natyam, but she really did not perform because in those days, in the early 1930s, they were not allowed to perform, so women from good homes were not allowed to perform. So she had learned the artform and she had gotten married and had me when she was twenty-one, and in 1956, I believe, she found me- we used to go to dance performance all the time and I would always be dancing in the aisles, so she thought maybe when I was six years old to take her- take me to a guru. And she went to this guru, her name is Swarna Saraswati, who was a very famous Devadasi, the Devadasi tradition, who were the dancing women, women from the Devadasi tradition that danced, and she was also the cousin of the famous Balasaraswati who is world-famous, so she had just recently opened a school where she was teaching. So my mother took me to her school, and I guess she must have found me either very motivated or good in what I started doing at that time that within the six month period I had a Devi performance of two and a half hours or three, they say. So- which I cannot, to date, um, fathom how I had performed, and my mother would tell me bits and pieces and then I have reviews in the newspapers, which talks about me as having some- in the Sanskrit term, it's called "purvajanmavas", which means "from the previous births." You know, that this is not possible, for a six and a half-year-old girl to be dancing like this. So I had a- my guru was on the stage with an orchestra and I did a whole repertoire of Bharatanatyam which is called the "Margam", and many of the pieces in the repertoire, which had about twelve or thirteen items, many of those pieces pertained to very, very, um, mature expressional aspects, which I just cannot understand how. So, to tell you the truth, I- when you ask the question "what was my experience?", I don't believe as a six year old, I could remember. All I knew all my life is that I always danced, so I can't remember a time that I had never danced. And that's where it all began. So it's dancing.

Jenai Cutcher [00:04:33] And so this debut, it's called Aran-

Hema Rajagopalan [00:04:35] Arangetram.

Jenai Cutcher [00:04:35] Arangetram

Hema Rajagopalan [00:04:35] Very good.

Jenai Cutcher [00:04:37] Well, I wouldn't know how to pronounce it, but I could spell it for you.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:04:42] [laughs] Yeah. No, you were right though.

Jenai Cutcher [00:04:43] Typically when does that happen in a dancer's trajectory?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:04:46] So, in- well, typically it happens when the dancer has attained proficiency. And different types of gurus do it in different ways, and in 1956 you must understand that Swatna Saraswati was a Devadasi. In their traditions and their families, what they did was, these girls from their families were dedicated to the gods, as Devadasis. Of course, I was not one of them, naturally. But the point was she was used to they- coming from a family where they were used to doing these arangetrams at a young age, so I think- but at the same time they didn't have to have a full-length performance. They did some pieces, and then they were dedicated to the- to the gods of that particular temple. But I guess in my case it happened differently, and she must have thought that I am, um, qualified, or at least she found me as a blotting paper, like I was just absorbing and remembering. So the main piece, which is called the Varnam, is about forty, forty-five minutes long, and so I cannot believe how this would have happened. I have an audio recording of that. In those days we didn't have videos. But I have an audio recording of the whole arangetram. And I have my program, you know, which is there. So I just cannot believe that thing, and I have not had that experience of finding someone, in my experience, that had gone through like that. So but typically in India every school has their own way of doing things but usually it takes anywhere from, I would say, seven to ten years to really come to that level. And in my academy, in my Natya dance theater school, I make sure that they go through at least nine to ten years of rigorous training before they could actually be performing the arangetram.

Jenai Cutcher [00:07:01] Okay. I'd like to talk about your school in a minute, but let's just hear a little bit more about India. So you made your debut, you were six and a half, and then you continued to study-

Hema Rajagopalan [00:07:12] Yes.

Jenai Cutcher [00:07:12] And perform as well?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:07:13] Right. So it so happened that after my debut performance in 1956, my grandfather, who was also a very well-known journalist at that time, he was the first principal information officer of free India. So India's independence happened and he was very close to Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, the first prime minister. And so it was a very patriotic kind of thing, and my grandfather passed away just before I had my arangetram actually. So then it so happened that I moved away from Chennai to New Delhi and there they told- my parents found another great teacher who was in Chennai at that time. His name is Dandayudapani Pillai. Also they were from the Naddula lineage. These are great schools, Thanjavur schools. And Dandayudapani Pillai's brother was teaching in New Delhi. So then Dandayudapani Pillai suggested that "It is all my work and you could come, she could bring her here during the holidays in the summer months, but my brother would be teaching her there." So when we moved to New Delhi, I had another arangetram in 1959 when I was nine years old because when the schools change, the styles change, then you have to go through another arangetram. And so I did another arangetram there, and then there again I got good reviews apparently. And I continued- After that arangetram then I was 10 years old, since then I've been giving performances, so you start performing, you know. So I used to perform in all the major festivals and the organizations called Sabhas in Chennai, in India, and then in New Delhi and North India, and so on and so forth, so I was just performing during those years. And it wasn't until- I got married when I was 18 and in 1968, and then it so happened that I moved to- and that was another catastrophic episode in my life, I mean, period, in my life when I decided to leave dance.

Jenai Cutcher [00:09:34] You moved to ...

Hema Rajagopalan [00:09:34] I was in New Delhi and I was 18 years old, and then right from when I was 16 to 18 I was the- the upcoming dancer in New Delhi, so the Devas would talk about it and I did a lot of performances, and I found also- now, you must remember that I was six years old when I started dance. And dance was a big part- the biggest part of my life. Although I went to school. So I was going to school and then dancing because I was already performing when I was ten. So if I'm already in this realm of practicing and performing and learning and going to dance classes and going to school early in the day, but then I didn't have any other life. So it was only dance. So- and also dance to me was a very spiritual kind of journey, I would say, because most of the materials in what we danced is always about gods and goddesses, and values and mythology, and what is good and what is right and what is not- what should not be done, and sins, and this and that ... and why we dance, why we need to do this. And I also used to read a lot of philosophy because as it is I was very ... I think from my teenage years I used to listen to a lot of spiritual discourses from people and then I also was just interested, it tied into the mythology. And so there was a very big part of me was connected to that spiritual aspect. And most of the lyrics that were written, that we danced are so devotional, are all so devotional and pregnant with meanings and metaphors and imageries and so on and so forth, that as I grew I found that dance is the one that was feeding me, and it was a big part of my food intake as my soul was blossoming. And I was, like, enjoying this part of me that was growing. At the same time, this was the other side, the commercial side of the art. So in New Delhi you can imagine when- where there is- and then I found out that there's such a thing as- in those days, in the early '60s, it was not so prevalent as it is, as it was in the West, for example. PR-ing, you know, and marketing yourself, and public- the word public relations I never understood until I came to this country, of course, but then one had to- there were dance critics. There were impresarios, kind of, in of those agencies, they were presenting venues. So one would have to vie for that. One would have to go and initiate yourself, I mean, initiate the conversation and try and get chances to be performing, you know, making sure that critics came to the performance. So calling them on the phone, you know, I've found this to be very, very ... what should I say? Very, very limiting to my vision, limiting to my journey. I found that- and they didn't go together, like, my spiritual understanding, and growing, and connecting with the world was not-not in sync, I would say, with these other commercial aspects that went along with art. Art for art's sake was not being propagated. So I found a lot of that thing. And I was just 18. I got married and I went to college. And I did, you know, I did my master's in nutrition, but then I was undergraduate at that time, and it was kind of, very much, making me very frustrated. So they would be- I don't want to name names, but there was one, a couple of dancers maybe, who were already very famous dancers and I was put on the same platform with this dancer who was doing another style of dance, so what they felt, what the other dancer felt- she was senior to me, but people felt that when you present two styles, one: you can have a larger audience, audience space would be bigger, and it would catch more, it would be more interesting to do that. So I did a few performances there like that. During that period when I was doing that I also found that there was a lot of ... basically I had to found- I found that I have to market myself in order to be there. Like suddenly my name would be not there, in the list of- one particular episode that I very deeply remember and it has been impressed on my mind is the day that I got a call from the president's office. You know, what they did then in those days, even now I think they still present performances as part of the banquet when dignitaries are invited by the president, and there is a performance that's given for a small gathering, but it's a very prestigious place. And different styles are presented on that day. And so I have danced there a few times and then I found that repeatedly my name was let go,

taken off the list without any kind of, you know, advance notice as to why. So then my mother was very, very ... How should I put it? She was very world-wise, worldly-wise. And she always advised me that I had to market myself, that I have- I'm the artist and I have to go talk, and so they were a dance critic, or I phoned somebody there, or a presenter, that I need to go and approach that person and say, you know, 'How are you?' and stuff like that. I felt that I should not be doing that. I felt that 'No, that's not me.' And I felt, well, if I saw them somewhere, if they crossed my path then I would say 'How are you?' but I'm not going to go out of my way and say it because they're doing a job and I'm doing a job. It is their 'duty' to, you know, see good dance and curate it, or see good dance and review about it. Why should I seek out that person? So that was my, you know, childish? I don't know whether it's childish or whether it's the opinion that I had but because of that I had a big setback, and I'd felt that I don't want to dance anymore like this, commercially, where consistently there's pressure on the artist to promote and, you know, rather than working on the art itself, to go and market myself more, I'm always on that, you know, rather than rehearsing, I had to be sitting there and saying 'Which are the performances I have to get next?'. And then I would have to spend hours and hours in that office and nobody would see you and then, you know, there would be rejections and this and that, and I said 'No.' And of course there's a lot of other things that goes on behind the scenes which I didn't want to deal with. So at that time I had my first baby, Krithika was born, actually today is her birthday, she was born that many years ago. Ha! Wonderful! She was born, and then I have this little baby and I am looking at this child, thinking 'Oh my god, what am I going to do?' [laughs] And I was having postpartum depression, I think, after that because I felt 'What am I going to do in life? I don't know anything else other than to dance, and I don't feel right dancing like this.' So I was undergoing some kind of a ... depression and at that time my husband-my husband, of course, was in the government, he was in the railways in India, and he-he had a green card when he had married me so he could come to the US at any time, but he wanted to take time off and come and study. So he said, "Okay, I'm going to go there," and he decided that he would come here and do a master's program, and so then I followed soon too, and was here ... that's how I came here. But I decided I will not dance anymore in my life. And I had a master's degree in nutrition so I thought 'I'll be a dietician.' [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [00:19:40] And how did that work out for you?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:19:40] Oh, that didn't work out. [laughs] At all! [laughs] So we landed here in February, it was like this, it was snowy, we had never seen snow. And we were in a one-bedroom apartment in Forest Park, a studio apartment, and it was so depressing. And I couldn't deal with- and of course, I'd left my child in India with my parents and I had come because I was just here temporarily to see what's going to happen and see. And I found myself absolutely in a furthermore depressed situation. But anyway I got a job in- as I said I would, I said 'Ok, let me go see what I can do with my master's degree in nutrition.' But I danced every day though. Because that's what made me happy. So then I used to really envision an audience and I felt great after I performed. I danced in my small tiny apartment.

Jenai Cutcher [00:20:47] You danced for you?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:20:47] I danced for me. And I danced. And that's been my learning of the art form and dwelling deeper or diving into it deeper to understand what it is. And I studied the Natya Shastra more in depth, and studied articles and, you know, I had- and also you know that I'm very interested in mythology and philosophy. And I got this book, it was Wendy Doniger's first book, which was the Erotic Ascetic Siva, and I

started reading that book. So things kind of, you know, I kind of think it was a time when I was educating myself and I was- just a few months, and then I went to work as a dietetic-dietician clerk or whatever. I wasn't- I didn't have a license at that time so I was shadowing a dietician, I was working at Loyola University Medical Center and absolutely hated the job [laughs]. But what was very important was to me was I was enjoying my time when I was trying to understand who I am, what this dance is doing to me, what was happening. And at that very time, in I think it was '74, when- and there were very few Indians that were ... there, that we knew, and it used to really annoy me when the few Indians that I saw, most of them were trying very hard to melt into to the melting pot.

Jenai Cutcher [00:22:33] They were trying to assimilate?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:22:35] Yeah. So I didn't understand the term "melting pot," first- this is the first time I heard it. And I said 'Why would you want to melt into a melting pot? Why would you want to?'. Because you want your stuff to be seen. You don't want a mush when you eat it, when you want your vegetables. You want to see it. You can't just grind it. I mean, you need to, you want to savor it. And so the idea of melting cultures, you know, melting down, combining it with everything together, I absolutely hated that idea. So there started another part of me which was now a woman who was absolutely not interested in- I never talked back or I never would raise my voice or never was an activist on any terms. I just moved away rather than fighting it out or whatever. I didn't stand for anything. You see, I was always somebody that was, um, didn't have a mouth, you know, didn't have a voice. I would move away from a situation rather than speak up. Here I was, where I was so angry with everything, like I was, didn't like this, and I used to speak up and I used to say 'No, that's not true!' You know, 'why would you want to cut your hair and look like an American, like everybody else?' Because that's not what everybody wants, I mean, they want to see rich color and vibrancy and diversity. And so there started a different kind of a thing inside me. And at the very same time there was only one person in that whole group, maybe seven or eight families that we knew that said, "Oh you know how to do Bharata Natyam? Why don't you dance for us? It would be nice because we haven't seen a dance performance in a long time." So then he presented me, you know, in a-in a community-place and whatever, so that's when I danced. And I was so happy presenting the dance performance. And at the end of the show then there were a couple of families that said, "Would you be able to teach our children?" And I said, 'No, I've never taught before. I don't even know- It was like 1956, I mean, I don't even know how to teach!' And that's when the other cycle started. When- I mean, journey, I would say, and I talked to my teacher who was still alive at that time. And I talked- made a phone call and he said, "No, no, it will come automatically once you- but I can tell you how to begin and-" you know, I was too young when these things happened. So that's where that journey started in Chicago with- but then I started teaching without a fee. There was no tuition that I accepted for the first two or three years because I felt that this is something which is not commercially- you remember how I have this thing: 'This is not a commercial thing, it is a spiritual thing so it's not this at all.' And so that was another learning on my part because I was very sincere. There were seven students on the whole and they all came at different times. It was not a group class, I was teaching them individually and they used to come two times a week. And of course, then nobody accepts the fee, I mean, they are not paying for it, so they would say, "Oh, you know, today I cannot come because, you know, we have a birthday party, or-" And I would always wonder why- so I took dance very seriously, did not realize that, you know, it's not the same thing from the other side, the answer is something else for them. But, nevertheless, I think that's where my journey began in terms of this. But I was always performing, and my first tours started with musicians in 1980 when I decided that I would definitely perform with musicians because ... one requires live musicians in

this kind of a thing. And I- My husband was very, very cooperative in that and not only cooperative, I think he was the one who was arranging my tours. He really took a big step in promoting me and the idea of promotion, the idea of bringing awareness to Bharata Natyam, I felt that there were so many, so many, so many organizations, I mean, cities, I would say cities, and units of- you know, like museums or libraries or-or proscenium stages or regular, you know, universities where I thought that by my bringing the art form there, the awareness would then be there. They would understand, and that's what is happening in 1980. So that's how my journey actually started, and the school grew because I was performing all over so people used to know about who I was and slowly that started. That was my journey.

Jenai Cutcher [00:27:53] And so in 1974- through 1974,1980, you were performing as a soloist?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:27:59] Through 1982, almost '95 or '96, I performed as a soloist.

Jenai Cutcher [00:28:08] Okay.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:28:08] Yeah. Right from then on, I would say.

Jenai Cutcher [00:28:11] Okay.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:28:11] Even in India I performed- I went back again. I used to go every year, performed again in the same places, but now I have to go back and say- but even now I'd fight against it, but then I realized, that was the first time, like, United States, so my first exposure to marketing was when I saw on the TV you had one detergent against the other, saying, "This detergent is better than this!" Or "One drink is better than the other." And I would think, 'My god, how can they do something like that?' I mean, that's so bad, that's so mean, you can't come up on the- on a public media and say that this is better than that. So I slowly understood that ... you can lie- I mean, that marketing is more about making something bigger of what it is not, you know? That it is necessary, but I'm still struggling with that idea. I mean, I still can't market in that way. You know, I feel like others have to talk about it rather than me, but then I know that that's not the case, that's not the way it is, so ... Yes, then a big journey of mine started about marketing. How do I, you know, sell myself, and then how do I present to the presenter and say, 'I'm a good dancer?' So that was a big ... you know, 'awakening'. So to say.

Jenai Cutcher [00:29:39] And I would imagine here in Chicago in the '70s and '80s, you might have been, you know, a lot of people's first exposure to Bharata Natyam.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:29:48] Yes, absolutely. You're so right. Not just in Chicago, everywhere that I went. Everywhere that I went because I at least used to tour twice a year for three months every time. So I used to tour for six months in a year. So every weekend I would have Friday, Saturday, Sunday performances. Some days- some weekends it's just two, and so right from all the states, whether it's Florida, you know, East Coast, small upstate New York, smaller venues, bigger venues, you know. So Indian organizations, and sometimes it was universities. So like that, various, diverse, you know, kind of audiences. Yes, and everywhere I went after some time, it always used to hit me, and there was a lot of- because I think- I have a few, I mean, so many stories to tell, but certain things stand out in your mind, like experiences. Like, you're tired after touring, and then I was at one place somewhere in the West Coast, it was in San Diego State University actually, and this was a presenter who was an American, it was a university, and he had, uh, we were

presenting our performance and I was already performing in San Jose somewhere and then I had gone to San Diego. So we just arrived there in the morning, and usually I check out the venue, and, you know, where it is and things like that. Of course, there was no lighting crew or, you know, tech, we just went with our group of four musicians, and so I had to do everything. So I went to the venue and I was just checking out the status, talking to my vocalist, and so she was asking me, "So what are the items you're going to be doing today?" and we were just discussing, and I said, 'This-this seems more like an American audience and you know ... So maybe I will do an episode from the Ramayana, you know?' And I said something, 'Oh, Sita Haran, which is the abduction of Sita. It's more dramatic, and, you know, people understand the drama behind it. I don't think I will do ...' So I was explaining- talking about it, and I was standing next to the wing. And there's this, you know, somebody talking to me, he was on a ladder. And this gentleman was an American guy, who looked down and said- and he spoke in ... Oh, first of all, he spoke in English first. He said, "So you're not going to do any padams?" So padam is a genre of music which is done in Carnatic South Indian music. A padam is a genre where the lyrics are set in a particular way and it is always very erotic, and it's dealing with love, about a woman in love, you know. Or a man in love, either way, it's about love, erotic love. And it is very, very serious, mature material, and it requires subtle facial expressions, Abhinaya, and where we improvise a lot. So it's not dramatic but very improvised, so emotions are nuanced and there are layers of emotions. So you- one needs to have a cultured audience in order to get that response from the audience. So I have decided I will do that and even on platforms- on musical platforms where Carnatic musicians sing, this genre is- has been dropped because it goes very slow, so it is now being revived though. Many, many people sing it, but it's a very specific kind of a music which does not appear on platforms anymore in those days. And I was totally taken aback, and I said, 'What? How do you know about padams?' Then he started talking in Tamil, which is a language. I said, 'You know Tamil too?' Tamil is a language. He said, "Yes, you must do a padam today!" Then he slowly got down. He was the one who had organized the performance. And his name was I think Doctor Bob Brown or something like that and he was the head of the Department of Ethnomusicology. So even in some remote places where we say, 'Okay, let's take it lightly today and let's not do this,' there will be at least one person who is very gung ho, knowledgeable about Bharata Natyam, so I had to do a full-fledged whatever it was, you know. So it was very interesting to find various kinds of audiences all over. So I was very happy.

Jenai Cutcher [00:35:01] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:35:03] About my time there. But slowly what has happened is ... I find that the solo dance forms, solo artist performing, is now slowly giving way to group works, you know, spectacles. So the essence of Bharata Natyam, even in India, you get more audiences for that rather than solo works.

Jenai Cutcher [00:35:37] Huh.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:35:37] So it is just that mass which has changed because of all these other entertainment-oriented things that have come in where I think the general appeal for a solo Bharata Natyam dancer is on the way down.

Jenai Cutcher [00:35:53] Okay.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:35:56] So that's what's happening.

Jenai Cutcher [00:36:00] And so- And you also kind of moved from working strictly as a soloist to you developing an ensemble.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:36:05] So my transition was- I have to- I always say that whatever I did, everything that I do, I think in life was very organic, it just came, it just happened. And I'm very blessed. I feel very blessed that everything has happened like that. So whether it was my coming from the- from India to the United States was very organically, the transition just happened, maybe there was a purpose to this, where I started this, where there were the temples started in my house, you know, both the Hindu temples, yeah, it mushroomed from my house.

Jenai Cutcher [00:36:45] Oh wow.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:36:49] The birth of the temples because of the number of students that congregated in my house, my parents, and they would all sit around and they would want to do something. You're learning about dance, and you're learning about God and God's children need a place to play and that's how that happened.

Jenai Cutcher [00:37:07] You were the hub of the community.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:37:09] Yes, the hub of the community. So maybe there was a reason for me to move out of there, then my feeling like this, yes, that happened. So one day I was working with my classes, and I came home and I found, in this house actually, it was actually in this house. My husband was sitting at the- the dining table in the family room and the kitchen, and along with that, we know these people, my accountant and my- our lawyer, the family lawyer. They're all Indians and we knew them very well. They were- all three of them were sitting together. So it was very strange. I mean, I haven't found all three of them together. So I came into the house and I said, 'Hello' and wanted to make coffee for them and we just sat and chatted, and then I said, 'What?' and they said, "Oh, we just want to talk to you." 'Okay.' So we sat down. So the accountant opened the subject and he said, "Oh, we want to ask you a few things," because Raj, my husband, wanted me- wanted them to talk to me about Natya, you know? I said, 'Sure.' So then what he said was they wanted to know whether this was a hobby or business ... So I didn't understand, I said, 'I don't understand what you are saying.' "No, we just want to know whether you consider this Natya ... a business or- is this a business or is this a profession- a profession, business, or is it a hobby?" I said, 'It's not a hobby, for sure ... and I don't call it a profession, I call it my life and I call it my own way of life. That's all I know. I mean, yes, I take fees. Yes [laughs] it earns money. Yes. So why do you ask that?' So then he said, "Well, in short, we want you to know that this is running in a loss. I mean, every year your husband puts in close to thirty to fifty thousand dollars, which he is not able to do anymore because you spend a lot of money, specifically on musicians who come from India, and you tour a lot and it's not necessarily making money, if you think, and if it's a hobby that's a different story. He wanted us to tell you this." And you can imagine how I must have felt because I used to have at least a hundred students in those days, and I thought I was contributing to the family and now I'm being told that, you know-

Jenai Cutcher [00:40:12] It's actually an expense.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:40:12] It's now an expense. I said, 'Well, what do I do?' I felt very uncomfortable and they said, "Well, one thing you could do is not bring musicians from India. I mean, that would be a big cut in the budget, that would help you." But then I couldn't think about not-not dancing without musicians or dancing without musicians. I just

couldn't think about that. Not only that, I couldn't create because, you know, I always created new pieces every time and worked with composing of new works and this would not happen, and I couldn't think that was possible. It was in the year 1993, '92, somewhere there.

Jenai Cutcher [00:40:59] Ok.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:40:59] And then the very next week I got this phone call from an organization called The Arts which was an arts incubator in Chicago and ... don't even ask me how this was connected or whatever, and this woman said- her name was Suellen Burns, Suellen Burns, she's still in Chicago, she's- uh, some other organization, and she said, "Hema we, and so-and-so, and we are an arts- incubating non-for-profit organization, we are looking for an arts organization that we could incubate and we know a lot about you, you're a dancer in the city and we know you do works and we want to know where you want to be ... you know, are you a 501c3?" And I said, 'I have no idea what that is.' [laughs] So she- I know we are a non-for-profit organization but I don't think this what, you know, she said, "No, that's a different thing, so come meet with me," so one thing lead to the other and, in short, she said on the phone something like, "We would give you um, you know, we would make you grow into an organization that could receive funding and administration and this and that and marketing and PR in all this kind of education." I said, "Woah, that's good!" [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [00:42:34] "Sign me up!"

Hema Rajagopalan [00:42:36] Sign me up because I don't want to be dependent on my husband! [laughs] I mean, I want to know how to do this! And that's when in 1995 we were absorbed- the first time I went to The Arts I had no idea what a computer looked like, no idea what the office- you know, we had a cubicle. And that's- that journey started there and then they gave us all the support in getting our 501c3, understanding what this was, a board, and have a, you know- and I'm sitting in the office with empty cabinets, they gave us cabinets, of course, they said, "We'll give you training in the computers which was in the in the hall, I think in the center of all those participants. Well, we were, I think, five or six participants, and Hedwig Dance was one of the other- Jan Bartoszek was on the other side, and there was another African dance company called ALYO Children's Dance which doesn't exist anymore. But um, and then there was [00:43:46] Michael Warr, [2.0s] his thing was literally something I'm forgetting, so two or three organizations like that. And this was way up in the North, you know, I had to go there and sit there and- 'Ok I don't know what a computer looks like, what do I do?' No idea what, and I went and started there and then one thing led to the other and slowly we grew, I mean, now we don't know where to put our stuff, it's so much of paperwork but I didn't know what a paperwork- [laughs] never had any paperwork, it's more like that. So that's how it started.

Jenai Cutcher [00:44:22] And did they-

Hema Rajagopalan [00:44:23] And then eventually into 501c3 aspect of administration, and then the idea of the company, and then the idea of the fact that all these girls who took dance with me between 1974-75 to '94, they all tapered off in a sense they were good dancers but very few of them danced anymore because after their arangetram, what? I couldn't find so many opportunities for that. Some went back to India and performed and I knew they were good but I had no idea how, you know, that's when the company- I had group works which was presented in informal, you know, annual day shows or we did all these big fundraisers for the temples so they performed annually for them, we did huge

spectacles, the dance dramas based on mythology, there were a hundred students performing, but then they were all students of all category, it was not like a professional. But people paid money because it was a fundraiser. So it was a community effort. So it was not like it's a professionally developed, so the idea of: yes, now I have an office and Hedwig Dances is a dance company only and they don't teach, I mean, this is professional dancers and the idea of professional-ism with a group company started then and we were presented at the Ravinia, you know, which was another big thing. The MacArthur Foundation approached me on the spot and said, "We want to fund you." That was our first foundation funding. I said, 'Oh okay!' [laughs] So everything kind of came into being, I was very blessed. I have to say that.

Jenai Cutcher [00:46:29] Did Suellen Burns and Arts Bridge- did they say "why you?", how did they find you and why-

Hema Rajagopalan [00:46:35] So- so yeah, they've been following me- that's what Suellen said, that "I've seen you and your dancers perform in uh, spaces, you know, in the city," we always did free performances and they said, "We didn't know whether you were non-for-profit 501c3." But they wanted to have- help, you know, people like us even know what it is and exist and take them to the next level. And then I- you know and she talked and this was just a few days after my accountant and lawyer talked to me, then I said, 'Well this is the right thing for me,' you know, and that happened then. So similarly, I always think I dreamt of- I always tell my students that you should always dream big. I always used to- I always wrote a journal every year, every day and I would write certain things at the end of the year about- for the next year I would say- and then I go back, I look at all these things and I would say, 'I want to have a professional office with the office manager works what shows rather than my husband calling, you know, and have a professional dance company that tours and performs on main stages. In those days, group works with not present in India ...

Jenai Cutcher [00:47:56] Right.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:47:56] ... in the 80s and 90s, it's only now, I think in the- after twenty, two thousand, year 2000 that you really see, apart from maybe a very few organisations that did that. It was solo dance, and so- but then I found here I have put if there are 10 students in a class and I have to present them in a performance and I have to put all 10 of them at the same time so then I have to choreograph them, so it was- it became very organic that I have to do it, there was no other- it was a no brainer for me that I have to put that in.

Jenai Cutcher [00:48:39] Yeah

Hema Rajagopalan [00:48:39] That's how my choreographic techniques kind of became honed because of necessity ... and I was telling the Newberry Library people about Ann Barzel and many years ago, I think it was the early 80s I want to say, when I used to perform as a soloist in Chicago. There was this woman, a small woman, who always- old woman, I never knew who she was, she would always be there and I would never- and I have a very bad habit, not bad habit, my shyness of- as soon as I finished performance I would go inside, into the green room. It's my musician, uh, who's no more, my flautist, who used to carry my cards [laughs] and he'd say "Oh, you want to talk to Hema, here's a card!" [laughs] And I would just be shy and go inside. And others would say, "Come out, you know, you want to be there and meet with people," I would say, 'Oh, I'm feeling embarrassed,' or whatever. So, I never- I knew this person was there a few times but one

time she made the effort of talking to me, somehow she caught me there and asked me this question, "Have you ever applied to the National Endowment for the Arts?" And I said, 'I think so because my husband used to do that, my husband helped me along, I remember the name but I don't think we got any funding from National Endowment for the Arts,' and at that time I was not even a 501c3 or anything and I said, 'No, I don't think I got anything, I think I got rejected a few times or whatever.' So then she said, "How do you- how would you describe your dance? ... Let's say I'm asking you question: How do you describe Bharata Natyam?" So I said, 'Well, it's a classical dance style of the southern part of India and, you know, there we do very percussive and arms move,' and she said, "Stop, stop, stop. Ok, I'm going to stop you right there because ... what does the word 'classical' mean to you?" ... and I said, 'Oh, what do you mean by classical?' I said, 'Because it's classical [laughs] it's not 'contemp.,' it is not modern dance, it is classical like you have classical music,' I said. So then she said, "Like we have classical ballet?" I said, 'Yeah, but classical is classical, you know classical?' She said, "Yeah," [laughs] she was very funny, we had this conversation- the only reason why I was talking to her was that was one person that was so interested in, you know, in me and I said, 'Okay,' you know, and then she said, "Listen, do you want help with your proposal?" [laughs] "You know, maybe if you write what classical means to you in a different way? What do you do?" Because she said, "I saw you a few times before and you said you used the word-" because I was taught before the performance, and "You said something like 'I'm going to improvise,' didn't you say you were improvising, right? As your musician is singing, you're improvising something, you're making it up?" I said, 'Yeah, I improvise a lot all time, it's like jazz music!' So I said that because I love jazz, I know what jazz was, so I said, 'Yeah, it's like jazz music, I always improvise all this,' so .. so then she said, "That's what you need to write about it, ok, and then you say that it's classical because it's a fine art because it's so developed- isn't it developed? Because you say it is so developed, it's based on these two thousand-year-old thing, and now we are two thousand years since- for the past two thousand years you are developing the art form. [laughs] So it must have become so fine, isn't it?" [laughs] She was so cute.

Jenai Cutcher [00:53:16] She pretty much coached you then...

Hema Rajagopalan [00:53:21] Yes!

Jenai Cutcher [00:53:21] ... on how to write a grant.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:53:22] How to write a grant. And I said, 'Really?' Yes, I said, "You're very right!" [laughs] So she wrote in her- in a little notepad, so she underlined the word "classical," even now I say that, you know, I tell my ... people will write for me- my PR people, and they say, "Classical, please explain what classical is because I just don't know classical like that." And lo and behold, I garnered twenty thousand dollar grant, individual choreography grant next - the following year.

Jenai Cutcher [00:53:59] The first of many.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:54:01] Yes, and I was actually the maximum, they say that I got seven choreographic awards and apparently that was the largest, and after that they stopped giving individual choreographic awards and they became company- I mean, project oriented. But I think Ann Barzel was someone that was amazing and like that, there were people who came into my life and ... you know, propelled me forward, I couldn't have ever thought about NEA or, even to, you know, vocalize what my art form was. I think that was amazing.

Jenai Cutcher [00:54:42] To have someone asking the right questions.

Hema Rajagopalan [00:54:45] Asking questions and helping, and of course, I would definitely have to say Joan Erdman was another big um, she- she saw my performance, I want to say, I think in the early 80s again, saw the performance and- with orchestra, it was in Oak Park. I remember that very well. And she came backstage and talked to me and she was totally enamored, I thought, any American is usually, you know, so many Americans will come, they probably don't know the art form so much but then I found out who she was and she knows so much about the dance and she was totally, I think ... she totally liked the fact that I was very professional, it was excellent quality and she really- even today she's a big supporter of my dance I would say, and also you need someone like that as a scholar- she's a scholar too, you know, researching her role in a way and knows a lot more about other styles as well, not just Bharata Natyam. Then, of course, she is writing about Uday Shankar, she knows about- and then I found out she was in anthropology, anthropologist and so, I think the idea of being endorsed by someone or having this support of someone who's not Indian, you know, in Chicago. It's a big thing for the art form, for the art form itself and then she telling me, like if I complained or would pick up the phone and say, you know, "They don't know how to write," or you know, she would say, "Yeah, they have no clue [laughs] what they're writing." She also was the person who helped me as a major part in present- in curating a conference in the year 2001. She- we did the first Bharata Natyam conference in the U.S. in 2001, that was presented ... hosted by the dance center and Joan was a big part of it. It was wonderfully represented and attended by scholars and artists from all over the world. Then we did another one in 2006 which she was also a big part of that, so I think it's- we have, I think ... done our best to promote and, you know, and have media people there, have other people who might be interested in really coming to know about what it is. We did try. [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [00:57:39] And over the course of forty years, I mean, how ... how have you seen that develop even in Natya's audience?

Hema Rajagopalan [00:57:47] In Natya's audience, again this is all very organic, as I said before, I always consider that things happened to be and I grabbed those opportunities. Of course my interest was also there. So when we went into Arts Bridge and Jan Bartoszek, the artistic director, was across the hallway. And then we crossed, we met each other, and one day said, 'Hi, I'm so-and-so,' and she said, "I'm so-and-so," ... I said, "What do you do- Bharata Natyam, what do you do?" "I do modern dance," she said. And one day we just started talking and said- she said, "How do you move, can you show me your moves?" We moved some tables around and I showed my move, some moves, and she said, "Wow, that's beautiful!" and she showed me some moves and then she said, "You know, how about creating something together? Is it possible at all?" I said, 'Yeah!' I never would have thought about collaboration, you know, for that really. And we've collaborated with North Indian music but ... dance maybe, but not modern dance. So we did something called "Conversation". So we worked on that. So we presented it a couple times and it really worked very well, so we had contemporary dancers and Bharata Natyam dancers do some work together, and there began a whole series of my ... what should I say, my enhancement, my expansion of my art because of the nature of- one is the nature of Bharata Natyam itself, because one is the nature of Natya Shastra which enumerates so many different kinds of movements of the body which encompasses anything, I mean, it could include everything and the understanding of what those moments could lead to, and where my art form, Bharata Natyam, lies. What is the connection of Bharata Natyam to Natya Shastra, for example. Where does it all begin, how did it evolve, so my

understanding of what those movement vocabulary that Natya Shastra suggests- deconstruction of some of them to identify my own thing versus a modern dance, you know, how does that work? And then, putting them together and coming together and seeing how this develops, how my own ... pushing the parameters of Bharata Natyam to see where it goes. So I think it depends a lot on the artist, in my case, someone who has always been yearning or someone who has always this thirst for knowledge and to see where it can move further rather than it be static. And so that pushed me forward, pushed me forward. So one with the- Jan Bartoszek or when we collaborated with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, it was a totally different concept, an idea of collaborating with Western music ... where there are moments which is the movement itself, the musical movements itself, is so different from Carnatic or Indian music. So the understanding of that and what those pulses then give you, what are the different inspirations that we get- I got from these kind of interactions and experiences ... or, for example, so my- I am very open to collaborations, so how it expanded is that ... the way it expanded and how my movement vocabulary expands is purely by being sensitive to what I see, whether it be other artistic genres or coming in contact with those other artistic genres or simply by listening to music or even to see what happens around me, the way people move, the way people act. So I think an artist has to be very, very sensitive to the evolving ... evolving diaspora, evolving atmosphere. So that was very important for me, even now. So my own art form, I think my own style, my movement vocabulary, the way I present, uh ... is always on a ... I would say always on an expansive kind of ... always pushing something, always questioning, I always liked to question, I always liked to say, 'Ok, why not this?' rather than not choosing it. So that, I think, has helped me move forward. So I see the choreography has really, really changed, like what I would do ten years ago, I don't think I want- I mean, incorporate some of those elements, then I wouldn't do it the same way that I did it ten, fifteen years ago. I find- and now I find more meanings in what our mythology was or whatever I do, whatever Bharata Natyam does, I want always to connect to today's audience. In those days I never did that, I wanted to just let it be where it was, and then I would just use my language as a bridge to explain. But now I want to be able to connect, you know, you to my art some way, form, or the other ... and then that helps me, expanding or pushing, uh, boundaries, so to say, which they talk about pushing back boundaries. Another big experience I would say, which was endorsing me and saying I'm in the right direction, I always used to question, 'Am I being-' because, you know, there was once when somebody stopped me at a grocery store and said, "Oh, you know I heard you- you were- You did some fusion work with so-and-so or whatever. So is it because you want to get more audience, is it because that your own Indian audiences are not supporting you, that you are doing all this ... fusion work?" 'No,' I said, 'First of all, I want to tell you that ... I don't fuse.'

Jenai Cutcher [01:04:54] Just like you don't melt. [laughs]

Hema Rajagopalan [01:04:56] [laughs] Yeah. I said, 'I don't do fusing, I don't do fusion because I consider that a confusion. What I do is collaborate.' And I said, 'They clearly-' I was standing, actually, at the grocery line in Dominique's in my neighborhood. I was so upset because, you know, here we did this huge thing with, actually it's called "Amma," you know, it was a work that we did present with Hedwig Dances and it took a year to develop the work because it was about immigrant mothers, their problems that they had, and we had researched, we had interviewed so many different mothers from different communities, not just India ... and then collected stories from there and then collaborated. It was a beautiful piece of work. It was in 2001 or something. And here is this woman who is telling me, "Why do I do this? Is it because my Indian people are not supporting my Bharata Natyam anymore? 'This is not pure anymore,' and I am finding other audiences."

So- and I told her very frankly, 'I'm not fusing. I'm not doing any fusion. I'm collaborating, when you collaborate what happens ...' I took a long time to explain to her, and the grocery store women was just stunned and she said, "You know what, do you want to take this conversation somewhere else?" [laughs] So, it happened like that. So I want to say that- then there was a part of me that said, 'Am I being looked down upon because I am collaborating?' You know, that, 'I can't stand on the stage on my own, that I need some help from some other artist.' And at that very time we collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma ... and believe me, it was the experience of my lifetime ... it was amazing. So he and his so-called ensemble, they were here this house actually, Yo-Yo Ma was- he performed at the Pritzker earlier, Yo-Yo Ma only arrived on the day of the performance, so we didn't know what he looked like and they were a 16 piece ensemble that rehearsed here for almost, I want to say, ten days and they had their own- they were so organized, believe me, it's unbelievable. And they came in- it was actually Krithika, who is my daughter, who choreographed this work and she was the one was contacted by them as only part of watching what was happening and, um, amazing experience. So when we actually went there to perform, we were not there, I mean, when I say we were not there, I was not supposed to be there. So in their plan or in their diagram, I don't have a seat in the orchestra, so they had an orchestra where everybody was seated. I think there was a question- yeah, I was not even involved in anything. They had their own musicians and ... Yo-Yo Ma was supposed to do one piece of improvisation, it was called "Love Song" or the "Song of the Birds" or something, and Krithika was supposed to dance and he and she were doing a duet together, it was totally going to be improvised on the stage. So we were supposed to do the tech rehearsing, everyone is there, we are like, twelve dancers, I was there to support the dancers and the musicians, that was it. So, we were there two hours before they were rehearsing and there was a buzz, you know, "Where's Yo-Yo Ma, what does he look like?" So, the person who was actually playing the cello was just a fill-in. I didn't even know that. So, anyway, here comes Yo-Yo Ma and he ... so he- I didn't know who he was, so he was walking in and he said, "Where is Krithika? Where is Krithika?" you know, you didn't answer, so somebody said, "Oh," I was standing there, and they said, "That's Krithika." He went straight to meet with Krithika, and then he had probably read about me or whatever, so I mean he must've known who I was. So then, I was introduced to him. First of all, what he did was just amazing, he touched everybody's feet. He must have, you know, heard about this or seen the Indian tradition of touching feet. He touched everybody's feet and I was totally amazed there, all over. And then afterwards, I was just trying to explain some beats [claps hands] I was saying, [claps hands rhythmically] 'Na-na na-na, this is seven beats,' you know, I was telling ... So he knew to say, "Do we have a place for Hema?" So then everyone said, "No, no, no, she's not doing anything." "No, no, no, she must do-" because I was doing the cymbals, which we do in- as a Nattuvangam it's called, and I had that with me just for my dancers to know, and there was no place for me. But he made sure that I'm sitting right next to him on the stage doing this. Amazing! And then, of course, every time we performed he would take a bow, he wanted me to come and, you know, take the bow. After the performance he invited us to this special party where we had- all the artists had a party, but he said, "No, no, you have to be there." But what struck me most was what he said about collaborating. And I felt, 'Well, I've been feeling like this all the time,' and here I meet a great artist who said the same thing. He said something about the fact that every time he experiences a different kind of art, that his art grows manifold times. And that's exactly what I had found all the time and why ... and this kind of endorsed my feeling, 'Oh, here's a great artist who feels the same way, so I'm not wrong in what I'm doing.' So, I think ... in my presentations and in my choreographic works there's a lot of that, there's a lot of bringing in of other things and not being just closed-minded and just being intact, you know, it's not about just keeping the art form where it was but it's more about it expanding and evolving.

Jenai Cutcher [01:12:15] That's got to be tough when your art form is so closely tied to a national identity or a specific cultural identity.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:12:19] Yes, absolutely, absolutely. But here's where I feel- that's a very good question and I think it's a very relevant comment and a very relevant thing for ... and I would say the same thing for artists and choreographers to really keep in mind, that unless you are strong in your own art form- first of all, you have to be strong in your art form. Then you can be influenced by other art forms, then you can create but if you're not strong in your own art form, if you don't have an identity of who you are, then it's very difficult, if you're already flimsy and if you are something that can be, you know, diluted ... there is that room for that and that's where your art form's going to go the drain unless you find specific reasons for your expansion of whatever you're doing. You're not going to be having that integrity.

Jenai Cutcher [01:13:34] So how did you work on that strength?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:13:37] Ok. So then I- I had this opportunity in 2011 where I worked on a piece called "The Flowering Tree," and Krithika also was a major part of that work and it was based on a story that was written by A.K. Ramanujan, who was from University of Chicago, is no more, and when I was working on that I wanted to create a work which had no lyrics. This was another eye-opener for me. Several years ago, I was working with Ramanujan on a rasa theory. "Rasa" is a term that is used in the Indian ... Indian vocabulary in terms of music and dance and arts. The word "rasa" does not have an equivalent- equivalent English translation but it can be only close to it. We say it is an experience that gives- that brings you to the near, um, when you experience bliss and "what is bliss?" It is that completeness, it is that enjoyment, it is that is aesthetic happiness state of mind where you are just in heaven kind of a thing so it is a fantastic experience that the onlooker undergoes when he or she sees an art form, right? And that is rasa. So you must have an aesthetic sense of feeling where you are transcended to that level. I have this feeling that- I have that feeling, even today, that rasa is not just experienced by the onlooker but also experienced by the artist, you know? But in the Natya Shastra, that is where Ramanujan were talking to each other, he was writing his theory and he wanted to question a dancer and there I was, and I had a wonderful, wonderful experience with him. So I had this feeling that one must get to that point where you transcend, whereas the Natya Shastra says very clearly, "An artist should be knowing that line, should not go beyond that, if you experience rasa- supposing I'm really, very sad about- I'm portraying a sad woman who has lost her child ... in like the piece that I did the other day, for example, and I am so much in pain and I lose myself completely. I cannot come out of that then I'm not an artist. I must do- I must bring all these flavors for the audience to- to taste but I should not become that, then I'm not able to give you that," is the theory of Natya Shastra, that I'm not an artist because if I lose myself and I start crying I cannot continue to the next piece.

Jenai Cutcher [01:16:57] It's about maintaining control.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:16:58] It's about maintaining control. Now I am not totally with that, yes, to a certain extent but I feel that you have to maintain that but yet be aware of it but yet do all that, whereas certain art forms do it very mechanically, you go through, uh, one through ten, if you do all these things, then you're doing it very mechanically. You're not involved. So I feel that you need to be involved. So that's where I differ in that, so I wanted to give a production, I wanted to do a performance where I find I will do without

lyrics, no lyrics, only music- musical format and give all these things to the audience in a way that they can appreciate it without using- it was a very secular story, nothing to do with a divine God here, God that. No devotion involved and it's about environmental, you know, preservation of environment. It's about this woman that becomes a tree, the transformation of energies, and turns back into a woman again. It's about this- it's about women who are being taken advantage of. So it's a lot of different layers of things, so I wanted to do this. So, it was also, uh, my fortunate fortune that once, I was at the University of Chicago working Ramanujan and this was just the week before he died, actually passed away, so we were working on something and then he said, "Where's your car parked?" I said, 'It's right here.' He said, "Can you come to my office? I want to give you some books." I said, 'Okay.' So, he took me to his office, took out some books for me, he said, "I have extra copies, I want to give you this," then he tagged this particular "Flowering Tree" and said, "Have you ever done anything secular ... or have you always done only gods and goddesses?" I said, 'No, I've never done anything secular.' He said, "Here, read this story." So several years later in 2011, I was inspired, I worked on it for a couple years before that. So it was during that period that I was into deep research, I really wanted to bring out all aspects of Bharata Natyam and I wanted to give it to this- and it was presented at the Harris premiere, at the Harris Theater, so the audience was different, it was an Indian audience ... and so, what I wanted to do was I also started studying Laban.

Jenai Cutcher [01:19:36] Wow.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:19:39] And I said, "What is the Laban movement?" and I wanted to ... So I went through a course of what those dynamics were or what is it that it says using momentum, using ... Do we use momentum in Bharata Natyam, do we use gravity? What is it- what does that movement vocabulary, you know? And how do I compare it with Natya Shastra and are there some movement vocabularies there that we are not tapping into? Of course, this has a color, after taking, you know, let's say take four aspects of what Natya Shastra has said and here is Bharata Natyam as it looks. But if I took eight aspects out of there, does it still look Bharata Natyam? And so I had a couple of my dancers sit and I used to dance, in front of me, and they used to document these things. And I used to say, 'Okay, tell me, why did this, according to Laban, like this? If I used gravity, what does it look like? Can I use this?' So, you know, by taking off, by endorsing, by correcting, by making sure it is within that, I created a movement vocabulary that could still be fitting into the Bharata Natyam realm ... yet using different features of what Laban talks about. I didn't even know such things existed before. So I used a lot- even now I use a lot of momentum. I think yesterday I was talking about how momentum is not being used in what they were doing, and my movement always went with that, that energy has to be there. That fall ... that you don't see in Bharata Natyam usually, what does it do if you use it in a particular fashion? And how space, um, which I never used to think about before, we- I look at space as, 'Oh, did I come out left, right, up, down, this way,' but I'm not looking at the space that I have gone away from. I'm dancing here and I move there, and I'm looking at that space. What if you looked at that space ... what happens? So some of these- it's all, I think it's like questioning and asking these questions, 'Why not? Why this and why not that?' That you can really hit upon the right thing or hit upon things that never really you experienced before.

Jenai Cutcher [01:22:35] Yeah!

Hema Rajagopalan [01:22:36] And that's exciting to me ... like taking risk in that, for example, in Bharata Natyam, it's a plié and you are keeping your knees on the side, knees out toward outwards and you are sitting in that half-squat position, right? So, when

Krithika, my daughter, I think she was talking to me when- she had, you know, she had just put this dancer on the floor and these ... their legs were up like this. There were several dancer on the floor. The piece was about Adam and Eve.

Jenai Cutcher [01:23:16] [laughs]

[01:23:16] Okay? And she said, 'Keep your feet up.' I said, 'What are you doing?' So she said, "Look at it from this way, it looks like vegetation, it's- looks like they're plants or something, right?" I said, 'Yeah, gives an imagery of plants that are growing.' So in creation, you know, when God creates, you know, there was a section where she was trying to portray this, and I said, 'My god, but in Bharata Natyam we cannot do that.' So she said, "Wait a minute." I mean, she learnt it from me, how this- she threw this back at me because, "Okay, when you go back to Natya Shastra, does it say anywhere that in this position, it has to be not in the air? Does it say it has on the ground?" 'No, it doesn't.' So then [laughs] there you are. So I think, by ... questioning and by knowing what can be answered in the right way, that's why you need to know your foundation, you need to know what Bharata Natyam- where it came from and then. Another interesting thing happened is I got this DanceMaker's Forum, you know, choreographic award several years ago, 2004, and I thought, 'Okay, let me- anyway, I'm working on the Natya Shastra a lot, so I think I should create something using this, maybe go ... and my- I had this great desire of this- of just using a few ... these are charis, these are movement vocabularies that are movements ... described in the Natya Shastra. In the Natya Shastra there's only one chapter on dance actually, on pure dance. So, these are called- these are not positions but these are movements. There are several charis. So then, uh, I just took four of them, four or five of them, I think it was four, and when you actually do one chari as it is described, it looks like modern dance. So in this- in this project we had to talk, you know, we had to come back, Lane Alexander was one of them, Shirley was the other artist ... And I think it was Eduardo- was it Luna Negra? I don't know who else it was- Luna Negra, I think it was Eduardo. There were four of us and we had to come back in the meetings and talk about, you know, what we were doing, you know, hash it out and things like that and tell the others and they would ask questions. It was- it was supposed to- Ginger was one of the mentors- it would help us to propel our work forward. And also bring, you know, light to what we were doing, we were supposed to be in each other's, you know, lab, each other's studio spaces to see what's happening, interact and so on and so forth. And so their thing was, "My god, it looks like modern dance."

Jenai Cutcher [01:26:30] That's what they said?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:26:32] Yeah! It's not. I said, 'It's not modern dance.' So, it's all just- I just put four movements together, as it is described in the Natya Shastra, one after the other. It looks modern dance, looks like contemporary dance.

Jenai Cutcher [01:26:49] And this text is how many years old?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:26:53] Two, three thousand years old. So then, when I spoke to Joan- Joan saw it and said, "Here's what you do." She said- the work was called "Inside Outside," she said, "Hema, you know, yeah, some of it looks like modern dance so in order for you- people are going to think, 'Okay, she's in America and she's influenced by modern dance and here's what it is,' so they don't know what it is so ... what you do is in order to prove your point, create something called the prologue. And in the prologue, have a Bharata Natyam dancer- have two dancers, one in Bharata Natyam costume and one in some practice costume and show how this is connected, how your Adavu- an Adavu is a

pure dance unit. How is this Adavu connected to that chari? See, if you did those charis, those movement vocabularies, it looks like modern dance, ok?" So there were four of them. So I did each chari separately, one chari along with an Adavu, or Bharata Natyam, this came from there ... Like other classical dance forms also take their inspiration from that chari, they look- they may be Kathakali or Kuchipudi or Odissi but that looks different from Bharata Natyam. But their inspiration is this, right? Bharata Natyam's inspiration is also this chari, but when you do these charis separately, they look like contemporary dance. [laughs] It's amazing! Okay? So I have that, I presented that way. So I presented four different charis with four different Adavus and people could see clearly that connection.

Jenai Cutcher [01:29:01] Wow.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:29:07] Nobody could say anything, "Oh, that's amazing!" So, that was presented in Chicago in 2004, so that opened my eyes and I felt, 'Ok, now is time that I need to develop into this and see more, and that is when, in India, then they would want, I think it was two years? ... It was two years ago that I presented at the very-famous Krishna Gana Sabha, every year in Chennai they have this huge festival where they have lecture demonstrations and panel discussions and talks and ... so it's a very important time of the year where lots of people come. So they want me to present my thing and talk about it, present my work and tell them what this is so people can understand. So now they are- I mean, a lot of dancers using that now, using that chari and involving it in their vocabulary. So this reminds me of the time, I think it was '84 or '85 when I went back to India and performed and I was studying the Natya Shastra at that time on my own. It's very difficult to study the Natya Shastra on your own, by the way, because it's in Sanskrit. The way you understand it is it can be- it can have so many different interpretations unless you have the right mentor, it's kind of hard. In those days I was just trying to experiment and I did a simple, like, move, which was more like, lift the leg like that, sweeping motion of the leg, so my leg kind of flew like this, up, so it's like kicking out, you know.

Jenai Cutcher [01:30:59] Right.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:31:04] And ... I- again, that was one thing, then the other thing I did was the very first number that I did was in Hindi language. So not Indian language ... and it was a famous, very, very famous composer- famous composer, in the sense very renowned sage poet known as Tulsidas. It was his composition. It was on Rama. And it so happened that I performed that piece ... and this particular piece was on Shiva, sorry, but then he is famous for his Ramayana pieces as well. And the newspaper just went berserk and the main, big newspaper Hindu said, "This is an unconventional dance performance."

Jenai Cutcher [01:32:03] Was that ... intended to be a compliment?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:32:07] Nope.

Jenai Cutcher [01:32:07] Okay.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:32:09] "How can she do- first of all, why does she want to do not Indian pieces? It's a South Indian art form, how dare she come into Chennai, and do we not have enough composers?"

Jenai Cutcher [01:32:25] Wow.

[01:32:25] "Why won't you do that?" Then, the other thing was, "Why would you lift your leg and show your leg to the audience?" ... Okay? So the whole thing was bad for me. Then, the third main thing: "Just because she comes from America, she doesn't have to talk in English and tell us, we know what it is. You don't have to introduce your items." ... I was critiqued so badly, so then- but then you see nowadays there's so- and there's not a single dancer who performs without talking and there are so many Hindi or- not just Hindi, they do it in Bengali, they do it in Gujarati, so many Indian languages ... so things have changed.

Jenai Cutcher [01:33:15] I think you answered what was going to be my next question which was, could you investigate the form like this in India as opposed to here?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:33:29] I would say that one could definitely and people do that. I think you have much more freedom and the impetus and I think you are much more, many more, oh, what should I say, avenues that can open up in an environment like Chicago. I do not think I would have flourished like this or my art form wouldn't have expanded at all in India because after going from here, you present your art form there, then people are thinking about, "Oh, we could do this because this is where-" of course they are- now it is changing but it would have been much more slower I think. I do not think- one would have to be scared about doing such things, especially if you want to keep your feet in the air, no. [laughs] But there have been, have been rebellious artists like Chandralekha, whom we brought in 2001 at the dance conference here, who was total rebellion, you know, who did everything controversial and questioned things. So yes, that is also there but in a limited fashion.

Jenai Cutcher [01:34:51] Yeah. Uh, I want to pause, just for a second, it looks like maybe the microphone tipped and-

Hema Rajagopalan [01:34:55] Oh, ok. Yes it did.

Jenai Cutcher [01:34:55] Yeah, I want to make sure it also doesn't hurt your necklace. I forgot to ask beforehand, how are you on time?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:35:04] Oh, I'm okay.

Jenai Cutcher [01:35:06] Okay, okay, because I have more questions.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:35:08] Yeah, yeah, yeah, no problem.

Jenai Cutcher [01:35:09] Are you good? Are you going to check your phone to-

Hema Rajagopalan [01:35:11] I'm okay, I'm just going to check, just because I just left this woman- I mean, my husband took her there, I wanted to make sure ... [indistinct] Yeah, I just want to ... say goodbye, maybe she's leaving. Shanta, I was in the interview so I didn't pick up the phone, so, everything okay? All okay? And checked in, okay, no problem with luggage? ... Okay. Okay, okay, so take it easy. Okay. All right, good, okay. So [speaking in Tamil] everything will go well. Okay [speaking in Tamil]. Enjoy your trip. Relax! Sleep! Okay? Alright, bye, okay. Yeah. I was all worried. Can I get you something?

Jenai Cutcher [01:36:46] I'm okay.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:36:46] You're okay?

Jenai Cutcher [01:36:46] Yeah. You okay to do some more?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:36:47] I'm okay

Jenai Cutcher [01:36:47] Ok, yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:36:59] Check your mike.

Jenai Cutcher [01:37:00] Yeah, that should be good, definitely, yeah. I wanted to ask, I mean, over the course of a lot of your answers you've mentioned, you know, your peers at the Chicago DanceMakers Forum and Jan Bartoszek, but I'm curious, especially thinking about, you know, you're celebrating your 48th anniversary and the way the Chicago dance landscape has changed over those four decades. Who do you ... who are your peers? Who do you look to as your contemporaries here in the Chicago dance scene?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:37:37] I can only think of Shirley Mordine whom I've collaborated with a lot and also who is very interested in my work, and we chat a lot, like you know, thinking about how we should- and we go to performances together and we watch, we discuss, we've applied, we've put in grant applications together. She has studied a lot, she has ... she knows about Bharata Natyam, she has seen Balasaraswati in the earlier days, so she has an idea of what ... what Bharata Natyam is all about and she comes to my performances. Jan Bartoszek, the same way, and I would say Bonnie Brooks. Bonnie is someone that I feel like many years ago, I think it was before- just, just when she had just come into Chicago, Joan had said, "Why don't we try the Dance Center for hosting this conference in 2001?" so it must have- sorry, it must've been 2000 or the year '99 or whatever when I went and spoke to Bonnie and presented a proposal and said, 'This is what it is and this is who I am,' and she said, "Oh, I already read your proposal and I already- I know who you are, I've seen you perform in the West Coast and you come with a lot of," what should I say, I mean, "You don't need any introduction, I already know about you." And her interest, I would say, in, even during the DanceMaker Forums, uh, time, she was also one of the committee people, in her interest in coming and seeing my work, in her presenting Natya at the Dance Center even though we're not the "contemporary dance." Just recently again it was because of her invitation that we were there, not because of my asking them, which is a very big honor is what I feel. Yes, Bonnie has that understanding or, I wouldn't say the understanding, or the passion to know more about Bharata Natyam and she has actually been instrumental in having me give several lectures at the Dance Center, I have been an adjunct lecturer there, adjunct, whatever you call it, introducing Bharata Natyam as a subject matter at the Dance Center, so yes, Bonnie has been very instrumental. I'm not sure whether there is anyone else whom I would say is my peer. Other than that, I would say Lane Alexander, who has always talked about the fact that we are the percussive dance and we are the alternate dance that gets marginalized and does not get- does not get the recognition where it's valid, you know, and raising a point about that, so I would say Lane.

Jenai Cutcher [01:41:09] Also, I guess, thinking about the trajectory of the dance landscape, you had a couple people from Ensemble Español perform at your gala-

Hema Rajagopalan [01:41:20] Yes, yes.

Jenai Cutcher [01:41:20] You're also celebrating forty years, you know, Lou Conte and Hubbard Street wasn't too far behind you and Dame Libby, there were- it seems there are a handful of companies who become Chicago institutions-

Hema Rajagopalan [01:41:35] Yes.

Jenai Cutcher [01:41:35] And it cropped up around the same time.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:41:37] Exactly, and speaking of Lou Conte, it was very interesting because, and I knew Joan also knew Lou Conte and she had mentioned Lou Conte to me several years before, and I knew that Lou and I had uh, yes, started at a similar time and I always would talk about Lou and Hubbard Street saying that, 'Look where Hubbard Street is and look where-' [laughs] and then people would have to tell me, "Listen, Hubbard Street is Hubbard Street because what it is and you are not that, we cannot be there so don't feel bad." [laughs] So yes, I would ... and I always admired Lou, I mean, I met him a couple times in several- in some capacity but yes, that we have an Ensemble Español, Dame Libby I have met also a few times when we had collaborated with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at that time, and she always- I always admire her integrity and how she being, you know, has developed this organization to this level. I would say yes, we are similar at the same time, started.

Jenai Cutcher [01:42:47] What do you think it was about Chicago at that time that could support such ...

Hema Rajagopalan [01:42:53] Diverse?

Jenai Cutcher [01:42:55] Diverse dance companies and presentations of dance all the same time?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:42:59] That's why I have so much faith in Chicago audiences, I have so much faith, because if you noticed, you know, a recent performance of "Varna" is- Friday was totally sold out and Thursday we had almost like 240 tickets out of 260 tickets on Thursday sold out, sold. Saturday, of course, was a fundraiser we knew would sell out, but I'm saying the Friday and the Thursday audiences were 90 percent non-Indian ... okay? And I want to say that I think ... Chicago audiences really, really want to see more world dance, more world dance, and they are there, they're out there. We just need to tap into them for one, two, we need to develop the other, what should I say, we need to develop those dance forms, world dance, we need to give them equal billing. When I say equal billing, whether it's in print media or whether it's in accepting them as presenting in the Dance Center, because the Dance Center, several years ago, wouldn't have presented Bharata Natyam as it's doing now. It presented ...Nataraj but they presented other artists, Kuchipudi artists, last year. So, I think places that MCA, you know, and Ravinia has presented us because we were a part of the Arts Bridge at that time. But I think one other time also it presented us. Many times we- when I say 'we' I mean the non-mainstream artists, you know, like the non-ballet, the non-symphony, and the non-Hubbard, like Ensemble Español or like Natya ... like Muntu, Muntu also has a different kind of a presence, you know? I think these kind of organizations are included in festivals or- sometimes I feel, I may be wrong, uh, for funding purposes or, you know, to show that we want to throw in some color. I think Chicago has not yet gotten to the point where they're listening to the audiences. They're not bold enough to say, "We must have a Bharata Natyam performance." For example, like in New York, when we perform in New York or the West Coast the World Music Institute is there, which presents, of course, world music

and dance so you can say, "Oh, that's what it is." But then the Joyce SoHo presents it, the Joyce presents it, the Lincoln Center presents it. The Kennedy Center presents it. So why not you? So I think they are not listening, we are not doing there yet.

Jenai Cutcher [01:46:30] But maybe soon?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:46:31] I hope. I certainly hope so. I have done my- my, I think I've done a lot of work in educating and promoting, in ... in cur- hmm, curating is another word, in educating and making aware of our art form with media people, you know, educating them in the sense that, yes, it print material- the size and the space has decreased, yes, but definitely, media does make a lot of difference because it endorses, it endorses it, so I think rather than just be reviewing Joffrey all the time, one needs to be awake and say, "Okay, let's do this as well." So they would really help in this, in promoting ... and to have it be inclusive rather than being exclusive because we don't get that kind of slot and we hope we are able to do that, you know?

Jenai Cutcher [01:47:42] Well, what would you say are some of the biggest challenges you face in presenting work here in Chicago?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:47:51] Um, in Chicago ... in Chicago I would really think, for example, that, you know there used a thing called Dance Chicago, I don't know whether that still happens ... at the Athenaeum.

Jenai Cutcher [01:48:08] Ok.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:48:10] And they used to- they started a while ago and then they- at the Athenaeum, and then they give you a smorgasbord kind of a ... lots of things they would put in the plate, you know, so that ten minutes of each genre of dance within the one hour span, and we performed there. I think presenters are hesitant to take up a dance form or an art form which is not being very- not very familiar with audiences but they were not like this before, that's what I want to say. I have danced at the Dance Center of Columbia College in 1984. Of course, the Dance Center at that time was different but still, I'm saying it was Dance Center. I have danced at the, what else was there? It used to call- be called something else, I'm forgetting the name, it used to be ... I'm forgetting the name of that theater, that audience- that organization. Why is it not coming to me? It started with an "M"? Jesus. I'm forgetting this organization. It's not the Dance Center but it is the other.

Jenai Cutcher [01:49:35] McCormick Place?

Hema Rajagopalan [01:49:41] No, no, no, no, no ... there's one other small, it's a small theater and they used to present all these things, it is-

Jenai Cutcher [01:49:47] Oh, MoMing!

Hema Rajagopalan [01:49:47] MoMing, yes! MoMing. So, I've performed at MoMing several times. So MoMing was a place, yes, so like that I don't think, you know, presenters with, like, the MCA, for example, has presented Bharata Natyam because there was jazz music involved in it. I don't know whether anyone wants to present pure Bharata Natyam as it is. Like they do in- all over the world, you know? I would perform in France, you know, and solo, it doesn't have to be spectacle but here they need that, is it called "combined with something else?" Like literally, literally. I did a performance with uh, did a production with Shirley Mordine called "Pushed to the Edge." [laughs] Okay, it's funny. So, what

happened was I had my administ- I was in India, before this festival in India and my administrator wrote to me and said, you know, "Shirley wants to apply- remember Shirley wanted to work with us?" I said, 'Yeah, yeah, Shirley wants to work with us on some collaborative work.' "Well, there's a grant here that we can apply for and, you know, can you give me any ..." and he went through all that, I said, 'Okay,' and then details of what we have to do and this and that, we were working on what the proposal should be and while we are talking he said, "We need a title." I said, 'Bill. What is this? Why am I being- why do I have to do like, all kinds of circus acts for me to be seen? Can I not just do my Bharata Natyam and say, 'I'm doing my Bharata Natyam, please come and see me.' Why do I have to do all these other things? I'm literally being pushed to the edge!' So I said, 'You know what, this title's going to be "Pushed to the Edge.'" [laughs] So, we presented this at the North Shore Performing Arts Center with carnatic music, a famous, famous musician who played live. And uh, who played live and ... so it was wonderful, it was received very well. So, what I want to say is that, yeah, we always have to do something in order to be seen. That's why when I presented this time at the Dance Center I did not sugar coat it with something or whatever. It was an evolved work but I don't think it was something, it was more towards the classical, what do you want to see, traditional. Yeah.

Jenai Cutcher [01:52:57] Let's talk about that a little bit, could that work, "Varna," have been made at any other time? Or was there something ...

Hema Rajagopalan [01:53:09] That was different this time?

Jenai Cutcher [01:53:10] I mean, it's forty years.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:53:12] Yes, so when the forty years, that's why, there were things, movement vocabularies, concepts that I have actually kept intact, pieces from different periods of my work. That's why "Varna" is different.

Jenai Cutcher [01:53:33] So it was sort of a retrospective but in a new piece of choreography.

Hema Rajagopalan [01:53:37] In a new piece, yes, yes. Because I wanted in my mind to know, okay, how do I deal with it? For example, the very first piece was about the hydrogenous- you saw the, you might have seen statue outside which is half-Shiva and half-Parvati. Half male and half female. The dichotomy of the two energies, how they come together and how- so originally I've done this before with just two dancers, not the same piece but a different concept where there was a male and a female dancer. This time I had this vision of the idea of the dichotomy of two energies, movement vocabularies also speaking of the two energies, how they come together and keep moving away from each other in a very, very multiple way rather than it being just a duet. So, and you know, actually somebody criticized, criticized in the sense they were critical about it. One of the persons that saw that worked for us, they said, "Why are you having- I think you are having too many dancers here. So I am losing the sense of that." I thought, 'No.' I had a different vision of it, you know, I felt, 'No, at this time what I want to show is a multiplicity of what we are, who we are, and how that reflects in this one unit in the center and how that needs to be internalized.' So that was at a different layer and then I also did the second- there was a one piece which talked about creation, which talked about, you know, how God creates and these different things and usually I would have done it in a different way but then this was totally, totally ... I've never done before which was: why do we need to do fast, rhythmic, percussive pieces, percussive units of dance when musical notes are also very percussive? You know? And in order to show creation I would have shown different

animals or different beings being created but, in fact, what I showed there were the very-very slow moving ... collage. There were three dancers and slow moving collage of dancers transforming their bodies, using hand gestures, transforming their bodies and not going at all with what the music is demanding. So in that high flocks of that fast-paced rhythmic percussive, here was this gentle, flowing energies that were unfolding like a flower. To me, I thought that in this fast-moving environment, in this fast-moving pace of this universe that we are ... kind of going, there is this energy which is slow and slowly unfolding which gives me- so much of knowledge that is being given to me without my realization in this fast-moving, even though we criticize the fast- fast world, fast universe, but there is so much of awareness that has being unfolded in a beautiful way. So I wanted to bring that aspect there, so I think that was different. So it couldn't have come to me, I wouldn't have- you know, I would have just done whatever the musical thing demanded in footwork or whatever. And then, of course, we had the Sita, you know the ... that was a vision of Krithika's, which again speaks so differently and this was her choreography so I would have to say that- and of course with some inputs from me but then it was totally her's, if she- I wanted it in a certain way but she said she wanted to present it this way. So speaking of her life and how it relates to anybody it was just not one person, it was questioning her own father's behavior, her own husband's behavior, how he behaved and this back and forth, and I wouldn't have done it in a way where there were a couple of other dancers that showed abstract dance along with what she was thinking, what she was saying. So I think- and then the last piece, of course, had so much of movement vocabulary of my previous works taken in ... taken in bits and pieces but placed in different places so that it looked so different, so I think they all ... they wouldn't have happened if I had not had all the other things. So, when I was creating it, I was actually talking to my dancers and saying, 'Okay, so in "Seventh Love" we did this. Why did we do that, can you do that drop in a little, can you do that, you know, when you fell on the floor, for example? Can we use that roll that you did here? Or from "The Flowering Tree" we did this, let's take that concept but not duplicate it but work it in different fashion because I wanted to have the audience see and recognize some of the things that I might have done earlier, or even for me to talk about it and feel, 'Oh, this is a different thing I want to do.' And why the colors, because when Bonnie- somebody said, "Oh, do whatever you want but I want you to perform, you know, make sure you do something." And I said, 'Ok, but I didn't have a thought about anything but let me see what,' and I think the colors came up to my mind because I've been fighting with ... when I say fighting, I've been, you know, always vocalizing the fact that Bharata Natyam is this and Bharata Natyam is that and what is Bharata Natyam? And why am I coloring it like this, why am I giving it a different shape? In order to attract audience? And all that, so I wanted to have one piece, one performance which has all the aspects of Bharata Natyam. Even the piece that I did had so much of depth and ahbinaya, or the expressional aspect of it, and so that subtle expressions. So it shouldn't get lost and I think the Dance Center was a perfect space for it because it's not like the Harris Theater where you can't see after. This was the best, I think, that could have happened for the piece.

Jenai Cutcher [02:01:08] And how did it feel to be performing yourself again?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:01:12] Oh, just fantastic. I never knew that I had missed it so much. So, I forgot to tell you about why I stopped dancing. So the idea of, you know, I wanted to give, um, a chance, I wanted to say that, 'Okay, if I keep on dancing then it'll only be me.' I wanted my students, my disciples, my daughter Krithika, all of them to come to that point and I always looked at it from the company because that is what was being present- that is what is being accepted and I thought, 'Fine, I could be the choreographer and not dance.' And even in India, what had happened at that time was me and a few

other contemporary- contemporaries of my time, we had decided that we shouldn't be dancing in the prime times anymore, that we should give a chance to our students so that they also come up because everytime, if we are dancing, then we're not giving them a chance. So then I, you know, stepped back but then when I danced on that day it was just amazing, it was just a different feeling, it was like, somebody asked me the other day for a magazine from India, "What do you feel about- how do you relate to dance?" So I said, 'Like a fish to water. That's how I relate to dance.' So imagine me not having that- me being that fish which had missed that water for so long, you know? So when I went on the stage I just felt giddy, it was just amazing, amazing feeling. And just know, just so you know, we- I wasn't supposed to be performing that piece at all, I had just created that very day in the morning.

Jenai Cutcher [02:03:07] You're kidding!

Hema Rajagopalan [02:03:08] I'm not kidding because what originally was planned was not to deviate from the "Varna," so to keep the same concept. So I was going to do an expressional part during Krithika's piece which was the Sita part and I was going to do the motherly, affectionate, you know, the- how one cuddles the child and something else. But then Krithika, on Friday, after coming back from a performance said, "Why don't you just do the whole piece? I won't-"

Jenai Cutcher [02:03:42] The Sita piece?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:03:43] The Sita piece. "I won't dance it." I said, 'No, that doesn't look right and I don't know other stuff too, I can't just-' She said, "No, no, no, I don't want to dance because if you are doing part of that then you're taking away everything from me, then I wouldn't have anything to perform really. So either you do the whole thing or more." I said, 'Or what?' Then at 2:00 in the morning, you know, I sat and talked to my musicians and I said, 'Okay, in the morning we'll have a rehearsal and this is what we are doing,' so from 9:00 to 10:00 we worked on it and then they went to Costco to buy some stuff to full go to India, and that's where it was. So it was amazing. So I knew that I always improvised on the- I never did anything which was already pre-rehearsed. Even if we rehearsed, the pure dances will be rehearsed- rehearsed, but I would have a concept, I'm an artist who cannot rehearse and then perform. I have an idea but then on the stage it would be totally something else.

Jenai Cutcher [02:04:54] Right.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:04:55] I can't do that. Many artists are very, very rehearsal-minded and they would do- so the violinist or the flautist has to play exact nuances of what the dancer, it's very difficult. I'm not at all that. Like, I can't even choreograph- I don't have any, my daughter creates, Krithika creates on paper before she comes into the studio.

Jenai Cutcher [02:05:24] Wow.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:05:24] I create with bodies. I cannot create on paper. I will not know anything before I come onto the floor when I have choreography done ... so it bothers some and, you know, like musicians won't know what is- they're not, you know, primed or anything. It just has to happen on that day then it develops. But in the studio. Krithika will sit with a paper outside the studio, before she enters the studio. Then she will read out, and she will instruct, she will have the dancers, and go with that. I'm not like that. And I was so amazed to find, I worked on this Jungle Book project with Mary Zimmerman,

I was a choreographer for the "Jungle Book," an advisor for that so ... she worked the same way, she had no clue when she comes into- [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [02:06:43] Was that problematic that you were both, or did that help that you both had the same-

Hema Rajagopalan [02:06:46] No, it helped because, you know, she'll- won't like what I did or I won't like what she said and, you know, we can create something, something just comes up, you know? We discard things. I feel like you need the clay to work with. I can't imagine out of the- for me it's very difficult, even with expressional aspects or even music, when musicians are sitting and they would play particular raga and they would say, "Does this sound good, can we keep this?" On paper they would have sung it for me before, but when I actually go onto the space and I actually feel it and I do it, it doesn't sound right. I mean, to me it won't and I would say, 'Change it.' I actually changed- this was very, very wrong and I thought maybe it will not happen. So the piece of lyric that Krithika did, the Sita's thing, was written by the drummer.

Jenai Cutcher [02:07:49] Right, yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:07:51] Vijay Raghavan, who's an exceptional guy and his works are performed by so many artists, okay? So this was already set, it was already set to music by somebody in India. And so when I spoke to him on the phone and I said, 'I don't like the first line, I don't like the particular tune of the first line, can we change it?' He didn't agree with it at all. He said he kind of felt, "No, I don't want to mess with something which is already there because people will recognize it, that that particular raga in India and now you change it, it's not going to happen. I said, 'I'm uncomfortable with the way it is done,' and when I came and I told Krithika, she said, "If you feel like that-" she didn't have much to say that. I sung it for her and she said, "Yeah, it doesn't sound right to me either." So he changed it, you know? So, things like that happen and even with the arrangements of the percussion, the beats, that also changes on the spot sometimes when I'm solo, I'm just doing something. So that's one of the reasons why Krithika and I had performed, I think maybe four or five performances together, and that was it.

Jenai Cutcher [02:09:16] Ever. [laughs]

Hema Rajagopalan [02:09:16] Ever! Ever! [laughs] Ended, finished, no more. One reason being, one, I was never- I could never, this is the first time in my life, in "Varna," that I performed with the others. First time in my life. Never have performed, I don't know where to stand or I just do things on the stage. Whereas these choreographed works demand a lot of energies and knowing precisely where you stand, precisely where you look, I'm not used to that at all. So when Krithika and I used to perform together she will say, you know, "You're two centimeters away" or- I can't- I won't know where I am! And then it used to happen that, you know, there used to be this long Varnam which, you know, main stay of the Bharata Natyam repertoire when we performed, we used to take turns in doing the piece and doing the lyric and then I would go on performing, improvising on the spot. I wouldn't have agreed to something in the studio. And when I go there I'm just improvising, I lose track and then she would get so upset, she would say, "You are the one whose doing all this and I'm standing on the side. I don't want to dance with you any more." So that happens also. So improvisation is something that I ... it's my, I think ... okay. My belief that in- in dance, at least in our type of dance, in Bharata Natyam, when you have to ... when you're writing poetry on poetry, it's a very visual thing and the lyrics are there but you're layering it with so much of poetry. It is so hard to memorize that and yet be capable

of presenting the same thing with depth. I find that that freedom is limited. So I may have a concept of what I want to layer it with, how I want to improvise. But then I want to let go and do it on my own and I feel that that is where the artistry will really blossom to its full.

Jenai Cutcher [02:11:49] Yeah ... as long as you have that strong command and vocabulary then you can craft your poetry and your sentences in the moment.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:11:54] Craft your poetry, exactly, exactly, exactly, exactly. See, when you're given an essay to write, you're a journalist, if you're given an essay to write and you do it again, you can't memorize the essay and write again. Next time you write it's going to be different. So I feel that that is very important and I do that even with my students because you want the best expression out of their minds and that can only happen if you are given that freedom.

Jenai Cutcher [02:12:32] We've talked about your daughter a lot but not specifically. What was it like even at the Dance Center, what's it like now to watch her perform and have this commanding solo of her own and choreograph? You raised her in the art form, right?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:12:50] Yeah, it was very difficult [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [02:12:52] Sounds like it is!

Hema Rajagopalan [02:12:54] It was extremely difficult, it was very difficult because she was always very, very ... it's very difficult to teach one, sole daughter the art form, so for a long time- and that's why she had her arange- when she was 16 she had her arangetram, the debut performance, but that was not because I wanted to do it, it is because my musicians felt that, "You're not taking care your daughter, just do her arangetram!" [laughs] and she was complaining that, you know, I'm not ... because she would never be disciplined enough to really train and practice and learn. So, although she learned a lot from my guru, Kalanidhi Narayanan, who is my guru in expressions. She's a phenomenal teacher and she would always say that Krithika is very good in facial expressions. Although she learned a lot, she never really practiced so I gave up on her.

Jenai Cutcher [02:14:04] [laughs]

Hema Rajagopalan [02:14:04] So my musicians felt, "No, no, no, you should do this with her." I said, 'Okay,' and she was pestering me, "Yes, I'm going do it." So she wanted to do it, I said well- so my idea of doing it was, 'Okay, we can put a full stop to this because then it would be over.' But then, you know, she trained and she wanted specific pieces, she wanted me to choreograph specially for her, all those things happened. She performed, she carried the performance through because of her exceptionally good expressional ability but technically she was not good in technique, in pure dance which I knew, okay. That was in August or July or something like that. Then in September I got an invitation from India, in one of the leading organizations, and they wanted her to perform as the opening dancer of the festival. Young dancers are given the opportunities. Why? Because they heard the announcement that she had the arangetram so they felt, "Oh, Hema's daughter should open this festival." I said, 'No,' I looked at it and I said, 'I don't think so!' [laughs] And I showed the information to Krithika and she said, "But why do you say this?" I said, 'Well, you're not technically clean.' And she argued with me and I said, 'You want to watch your video again?' so she watched the video, she sat here, and she agreed. She said, "Yes, you're right. I am going to do this performance." So she took it up as a

challenge. She worked really very hard. She can't sit very well in the plié position, her turnout is not very good, her arms are not clean, her stance and movement is not clean at that time, that was in 1988, and she really, really worked hard and presented the performance and she got rave reviews. She is very, very good in expression so I'm very pleased about that. She is- she is a very passionate dancer. And in "Varna" she had said, you know, she didn't want to perform, actually, because she said, "I don't look good right now, I've gained weight," because she had these twins and all that stuff and I want to do it but then she really did beautifully, this piece that she wanted- she's very, very passionate, so when she gets involved, she goes into depth and all that and she's also done great choreographic works for Natya, for herself and ... I would say I'm very happy about it but, you know, at the same time I don't know whether she is ... she's not, I would say, she's not that ... in my case, dance is my life. In her case, dance is not her life all the time. There is a family, there are her children. My case, I only see dance all the time. That's a different thing. But she's a beautiful dancer.

Jenai Cutcher [02:17:49] And do you think the next generation will be learning soon? I saw them running around!

Hema Rajagopalan [02:17:53] Yes, yes, I hope! [laughs] I mean, I teach on Skype.

Jenai Cutcher [02:17:57] Oh, you do?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:17:59] I teach my granddaughter on Skype. So she comes on Skype and she learns.

Jenai Cutcher [02:18:06] Skype's a wonderful thing, I wondered if that's how you collaborate with your musicians, too.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:18:09] Yes, sometimes, because nowadays there is no other choice, they are so busy and they sent- and then recordings happened, there are things, they are in the studio recording- you know what happened actually, my musicians were supposed to come here on Saturday. They reached here on Tuesday.

Jenai Cutcher [02:18:33] Oh, that's right, I think you said something about that ...

Hema Rajagopalan [02:18:34] Amazing, I was so, you know, it was just crazy because they were supposed to be here on Saturday, they didn't get a visa interview and they could only get here on Tuesday and we were in tech rehearsal on Tuesday evening, imagine. So they had no idea what was going to happen. So they were in the studio, in the recording studio there because they had to- they were- one of them is a recording artist as well, I mean, he has a studio, so they thought that, you know, they have all the microphones set up there, they can sing from there, we can dance here. So in my studio there, they- they were singing and these girls were dancing. So that happened for at least an hour until ... [laughs] you know? And they were a little bit at least pliant and then they arrived here on Tuesday. So nowadays that happens, and yeah, the other thing amazing that happens is these tracks are recorded and sent electronically. Ok? Zoom! And then another musician is here in my house and he is recording his track over that track. Because I have a sound engineer here, so if I have to record my voice on it then I'm recording my voice on that track and then sending it back and they somehow integrate all this. This wouldn't have happened before, it was impossible.

Jenai Cutcher [02:20:13] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:20:16] I think the whole- whole idea of this electronic business or this tech, you know, technology definitely has put a different kind of a flavor to presentations. We're able to see what's going to happen, we're able to see here what's going to happen, we are able to rehearse, some of these dancers were in California.

Jenai Cutcher [02:20:43] Oh!

Hema Rajagopalan [02:20:45] The male dancer is in California, he lives there now.

Jenai Cutcher [02:20:49] I didn't know that.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:20:52] So he was, you know, he just Skypes and he performs, you know, he came here the week of and worked with with us.

Jenai Cutcher [02:21:00] And Krithika lives in New York ...

Hema Rajagopalan [02:21:02] Krithika lives in San Francisco now as well.

Jenai Cutcher [02:21:04] Oh, ok.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:21:06] And one dancer, so they actually- that's how we're going to- we're going to tour "Flowering Tree" next year and that's how it's going to happen. See, I'm collaborating with this Indonesian dance company in ... in Padang which is near West Sumatra, which is in the West Sumatra. And that's how we work, you know, like this is part, and this is this, see what happened and then we come together and then do it. So it may not be ideal but this helps in bringing us closer, for one, and it helps projects happen, otherwise they cannot happen.

Jenai Cutcher [02:21:51] I have one more question, you got time?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:21:53] Yes, yeah.

Jenai Cutcher [02:21:54] So how do you feel about where you are at forty years?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:21:58] Um, I feel good but I don't feel like I've achieved everything that I want. [laughs] No, I feel great that, you know, my dancers are very much, I would say, so- so well-developed when I saw the "Varna" rehearsals there, at this dance center, I feel they are very good. Fantastic improvement in they way they- the skill level that, in terms of my company. But I would definitely like to have a professional company that kind of- when I say professional, they're professional, they tour, but we are limited at the moment to their- their time limitations because they're all professionals. They're doctors and some of them are lawyers and that and they're all my students and that's why- so I might, at some point, want to go to a place where I have only dancers and nobody else because at that point ... that hasn't yet happened. But because I'm giving priority to my own students because they are- some of them are dancing for twenty years. So the movement vocabulary training that as gone into their body is what I want in my works. When I want that then they are made up of lawyers and doctors and engineers. So if I bring in imported dancers from India, for example, they're not going to be trained in my way of movement. So that is the challenge that I might have, so I'm thinking about that. Only yesterday I was talking to my dance company members about this, because "Flowering Tree" is going to tour next year and we've already booked in four places and ...

they worked schedules and this and that, so that is there. Apart from that I think want to see my company or my work being presented in a much more mainstream even though it is being presented, I would like that to happen more, like Joffree or like Hubbard. Yeah, so I think I don't feel like I have yet ... I want people to accept our work in a way that a Bollywood thing would be, but that's like a far- I don't think that's going to happen. Like Bollywood is accepted, you know, that's not going to happen, but I know that I would like that to be popular as well. And still a lot more work for me to do because I'm still exploring, I'm still seeing works. What is the- what are the drawbacks in our work, in my work? How is it that I can improvise that and making it in a better way, making a mark with all those things removed.

Jenai Cutcher [02:25:27] Well, you've come a long way in forty years, I think that it's possible.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:25:30] It's possible.

Jenai Cutcher [02:25:33] Is there anything we haven't covered that you want to make sure we talk about?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:25:38] Another thing, I think we did, we talked about the school, yeah, my policy, some things about the diaspora in the training that is happening in Bharata Natyam ...

Jenai Cutcher [02:25:52] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:25:53] All over the United States, and there's so many schools that are teaching Bharata Natyam for all the wrong reasons. So, what I feel is we are diluting ... diluting the art form. The training that is being done towards the arangetram goal is not for the right reasons. So many of the dancers that come from India who get married or were, yes, the fresh young women who are good dancers in India. Before, they not necessarily were good dancers but they just got married, they came here, they needed a profession, they thought, "Ok, let me start a studio in my basement and start teaching," so like that there are so many schools all over the United States. So what they are manufacturing is basically dancers for that particular day who don't know technique, who haven't understood, who haven't got the right training, who go through training and think that they can be good teachers and they're not good teachers. So this gives rise to a plethora of things, you know, gives rise to the ... to the whole scenario where there are umpteen number of dancers and whether you take funding agencies who do not know who to fund, they think that anyboy, any organization that does some ethnic dance has to be funded. So funding agencies are giving funding to a whole lot of organizations which don't deserve them. There are good organizations that are doing good work but they're not getting funded because their monies are being, you know, divided up so you get less funding, so from that scene, it is not the right thing to do. So I feel like the good amount of curating has to be done in tons of understanding what is good, first of all, and a lot of important organizations, let's say, when I say 'important' I am saying landmark organizations like museums or like the Art Institute or places like that where you want to go to see the authentic form of something. What the audience is seeing is not the authentic form but the diluted version or the fragmented version of what you see. So in that way I'm very unhappy that people don't take the time- take the time to really understand what is the right thing, what- who are- what do you mean when I say- for example, I sit on some panels from funding agencies, not in Chicago but other places, they put me on the panel, do, you know, for them to evaluate "Is this a good proposal? Is this the right artist?" I feel

like that, people have to really look at that and say what those credentials are. So we have a mushroom of so many, many, many, many, many, you know, artists and dancers. So that's one thing that I think. But that maybe be there even in India but then there is these checkpoints in India, you know, there's a lot of checkpoints, but I feel we don't have those checkpoints in the United States because there are not- they just take it for granted that this is Bharata Natyam, they put on a costume and they dance, that's what it is. So the value of that is lost. So I feel like that's going to be a degradation and these arangetrams are simply done for no rhyme or reason because they've done three, four years, they would do an arangetram. For what are you doing it? They're not capable. My own students, for example, who are teaching in other cities have done that. And I stopped it. I have said, 'No, why are you doing the arangetram?' "Oh, because she wants- she has to go college." That's no reason to do an arangetram. She's not ready. There is no reason to do that. So I think that kind of an understanding has to be done and it can be done only by us, by artists, or by gurus like us, bringing in other artists from India who are good so that the audiences can see them, so that parents and these students see what is good Bharata Natyam, then do you reach that level. And why do an arangetram if they are not serious about it? If they're not going to dance afterwards there's no point in it.

Jenai Cutcher [02:31:23] It's a big investment to then leave it.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:31:24] It's a big investment, yes, it's a big investment in terms of time and money and everything, but that is where I feel like presenting organizations, like community presenting organizations, should give platforms to these kind of schools where they are learning. Let's take Chicago, for example, there are so many teachers teaching and it's only Natya Dance Theatre that presents what you saw, "Varna," for example. There is- there are teachers in this area, in Chicago, in the suburbs, they are teaching for more than twenty-five years, I want to say they are teaching for almost thirty years and less, okay? We are the oldest, so thirty years or less. But there's not a single school which has come to this point. Why? They need to ask this question. Why is there not a single school which can say that after their arangetram of ten years is over, even ten years, I still have that student dancing. They don't- they cannot claim that. Whereas, what you saw in "Varna," there have been students in "Varna," I mean dancers in "Varna" have been dancing for eighteen years or twenty years, right?

Jenai Cutcher [02:32:50] Which means like, eight to ten years past their arangetram.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:32:53] Past their arangetram. That doesn't happen. Whereas with Natya what I have done is we give them an incentive. We teach without any fee after the arangetram is over and every Sunday they have a class, so students come to my house no matter what, where they are, no matter how long they're learning, whatever, so they come here and they work with me for two to three hours, then we have this mission of finding an opportunity for them to perform. It's not easy. I have to apply for funding, I have to get funding to be presenting them in a show like that. So I feel like there are so many community organizations in the western suburbs who believe in putting bad, you know, group performances and free performances and it'll remain there. They need to raise the bar and say, "Okay, we are going to curate this show, we're going to select people and give them prime time." We don't want ten people on the stage so that we can get ten times ten dollars so that they can- in sort of that. They can say, "We have the funding but we want to present, curate it. We want to present featured artists. And after my vocalizing and fighting with the temple organizations this year they did that and they presented one of my students who danced in "Varna" for half an hour, which was a good thing. So I think if that kind of thing happened then the bar will be raised and then they will come to an

understanding that they need to maintain that quality. So that is one aspect of arangetram, but it's because it is very, very popular. Why is it popular? Because the Indian community, Indian parents want to teach this art form to their children and once they learn it, they want to present them in a performance, it's a party for them. You know, it's like showing off. "My daughter can perform, my daughter can dance." Let's get everybody there if they have the means to do it, they want to throw a big fair, they want to do dinner, they to do all of this.

Jenai Cutcher [02:35:28] It's an expression of status.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:35:30] Exactly! It has become like that. It should not be the case. It should be done- arangetram, I've always said, should be done when the teacher feels it's ready, she's ready. It can be done anywhere, it doesn't have to be done on performance level, you know, in a proscenium stage where you invite people to- with dinner, just do it anywhere, provided that child is going to continue to perform, not otherwise.

Jenai Cutcher [02:36:02] Because it's a learning experience.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:36:03] It's a learning experience, yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:36:03] And they would have other opportunities to acquire-

Hema Rajagopalan [02:36:07] It's an amazing learning experience, yes. Previously, I used to say- I used to have an interview with parents and I used to say, 'Why do you want to do the arangetram?' I used to, you know, demoralize them actually, I should say, 'Don't have it.' But then now I've change my mind because what an arangetram does to the child is an enormous value to the child because it gives them on a lot of self confidence to come onto the stage and perform for two and a half hours. It is a great feeling and they really develop and blossom and become self-confident, they're able to think that they can conquer anything in their life at that time. So I feel that isn't very good, we should have it but at the same time I tell them, 'You need to really know what happens afterwards.'

Jenai Cutcher [02:37:00] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:37:01] And here also they go to colleges and universities but I encourage parents to go and bring them over the weekends so that they can learn or they come to the downtown studio or they perform somewhere or the other. So they maintain that and not dump it because it takes such a long time to develop. It's not like you're taking, you know XY dance here or there.

Jenai Cutcher [02:37:26] Well, and the content too, it's just, you know-

Hema Rajagopalan [02:37:29] Yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:37:30] You're dealing with the major themes of life.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:37:33] Yes, yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:37:34] I feel like the more you live it, the more you will understand and the more of you to express.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:37:40] Express! So what we also do is to encourage them to give solo performances in India during the festival. They've done that and they do that

consistently so that critics in India see how these people are, they get reviews, they get viewed by their peers. And the only thing is it's an expense which we as the parent organization or the supporting organization has to do. Parents have to put in some amount of support but then it needs to be few else so that they can be performing later at a higher level and become solo artist if they have to. They can be doctors. They can also be artists, you know, developing artists and do that.

Jenai Cutcher [02:38:30] Your students, are- you're their guru?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:38:32] Mm-hmm.

Jenai Cutcher [02:38:33] I heard a few people at your gala refer to you as Aunty.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:38:39] Yeah, they always call me Aunty [laughs].

Jenai Cutcher [02:38:44] Is that a common ...

Hema Rajagopalan [02:38:46] Common way of calling?

Jenai Cutcher [02:38:47] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:38:48] In India we always called our teachers, we always refer- because there's always a bond, it's not just, you know? So we call anybody Aunty in terms of- in Tamil or other languages, they'll say "mami," m-a-m-i, mami is Aunty, basically. Or "athai" is also an aunt, so we always refer to somebody with a relationship, like they will always say "annan" or "akka." Annan means elder brother, akka mean elder sister so they will never say- in Tamil. And in Hindi we say "didi" or "bhaiya," okay? We never address them as Mr. So-and-so or XYZ. I called my teacher, who was Dandayudapani Pillai, I called him "vaathiyaar," vaathiyaar means teacher, guru. Sir, like that. And I always called- even now I call my teacher, Kalanidhi Narayanan, who was the- my expressional aspect teacher, abhinaya teacher, mami. Kalanidhi Mami. So when I came here, they always started calling Aunty. So to everybody I've become Hema Aunty, including my lighting designer [laughs] and stage manager. Dustin has been working for the past twelve years and he always calls me Hema Aunty [laughs] so he knows. Now, it's very important for you know that certain things when we tour and, this is part of our crew, the stage manager comes with us and lighting, and the stage manager Sarah has been with us for maybe six, seven years now. So when we tour, they respect our culture and they would never wear shoes on the stage. It's a similar, you know, structure. So they imbibe that Indian culture of, you know, making sure that sacred space is not violated so they always wear- and everywhere that Dustin goes, including my sound man Carl, he also will not wear shoes. So if you go anywhere to a different space then they would request those people not to wear shoes on the stage. So much so that I feel embarrassed and I would say, 'Dustin, you don't have to bother about them not wearing shoes, it's okay.' He'd say, "No, it's not a big deal, we can ask them not to wear shoes." So I think it's a relationship that develops over the years and because of that relationship, I'm always so- I would say that it's a very natural process that you get very involved with their lives, so with their personal lives, with their issues in personal life, so you become very attached.

Jenai Cutcher [02:42:04] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:42:05] When that happens in their ... so I'm invited to their weddings, I have their children's- [laughs] you know? It's very family oriented, so I've

become very close to them because one is this- the parents look at me as not just a dance teacher, it's also spiritually I'm inspiring them or philosophically I am their mentor or I'm somebody who they look up to, you know. "What do I do in this life, in my life, do I do this or this?" They'll be calling me, their boyfriends or their marriage life for, you know, breaking apart, everything. So I'm also a counsellor [laughs]. Yeah, that also happens.

Jenai Cutcher [02:42:59] You should up your hourly fee! [laughs]

Hema Rajagopalan [02:43:01] [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [02:43:05] Well, I'm glad we started talking about that because it was definitely, you know, the family sense was really palpable the night I saw the company perform.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:43:15] The night that you were there, there were many people, and many people couldn't get tickets, of course they waited until the end. So, the people that- the majority of them were parents that were ... and well-wishers, who had their children with me who are not even here.

Jenai Cutcher [02:43:33] Oh, really?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:43:36] Yeah, many of them. They are doctors or lawyers in other cities, they're not even in Chicago. Their parents were here, on that day ... and because they always wanted to- and these are dancers who have dance in a signature work called "Shakti Chakra" and "Ahimsa" and all these works and they have toured with me a lot and they have always wanted me to dance with them. And I was always a part of the orchestra, I would never have- I have never danced with them. So, they actually wanted to see me dance, some of them came from out of town and some of them couldn't because they have children, little babies, and the parents were there. So my current students who are- it's a huge number, could not get tickets that day because they waited, you know, they thought, okay, they'll buy the tickets but ... [laughs]

Jenai Cutcher [02:44:41] Well, maybe that communicates to them what a special occasion it was.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:44:46] Yeah, right, right. They didn't realize that, you know, I hadn't danced in a while or, yeah, that people came to watch me.

Jenai Cutcher [02:44:53] So, what does that mean to you, that-

Hema Rajagopalan [02:44:54] That I should dance [laughs]. That there is still some value in my dance and that I should dance. I'm planning to [laughs]. Because I didn't realize that one could dance expressional and one could still be there if you're not fit, you know, to do other aspects of this dance, because I had danced so technically correct and my dance choreography was, in my repertoire, was very athletic and ... that's another thing, when I came to this country, I found that I had to negotiate spaces on the stage. So my leaps were large and covered a lot of space and ... so my pure dance was very athletic and was long, long pieces of pure dance because I had to project emotions through my body movement which I thought felt- I couldn't do because if there are a thousand people sitting in the audience, I couldn't negotiate that. So then, after dancing so athletically, I felt now, when I'm not able to do that, I don't want be dancing, compromising that so I stopped.

Jenai Cutcher [02:46:19] But it just changes.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:46:21] It just changes, that I didn't realize until now.

Jenai Cutcher [02:46:23] I was wondering, I saw a car, I think-

Hema Rajagopalan [02:46:28] My husband [laughs] must have dropped my- so this- this dancer, she's brilliant, she danced that day, "Varna," this girl who just left today. She is also- she's been here for four years and she's on a P-3 visa, so every year we have to renew her.

Jenai Cutcher [02:46:46] Ok.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:46:47] Because she goes back home and she stayed there for two-three months then she comes. And she also teaches, she's also instructing, she has two MAs, two masters'.

Jenai Cutcher [02:47:00] Wow!

Hema Rajagopalan [02:47:00] One master in Bharata Natyam and one master's in Kuchipudi, which is another form of dance, and she just left this morning. She was in a dilemma because she comes from a small village in India and her parents are getting her married to this man whom she doesn't want to marry ... and she was in a dilemma for the past- well, she got engaged in March and had come to- she went back for a week and came back. Not March, she got engaged in September. She was going back home for just doing some Puja, which is like a ceremony or whatever, in the temple, didn't realize that she would get engaged. Came back- in two hours, she said "yes" to this man. Unbelievable. And she comes back home and she says, "I don't want to marry," and that she didn't tell me until a week ago. Cards are printed, she's supposed to get married in December, on the 12th, and she- and that's how I want to say, that how family, how our family likes support, there are- there are parents who are so close to her and were calling me a week before and saying that, you know, she doesn't want to get married. I don't think she wants to get married. And I said, you know, I had this picture as well, but she seems happy and she is chirpy but she is so busy with "Varna" and other things that she's just lost. And so I talked to her because my board president, who's also my student, talked to me. So we- when I say 'dancers,' we're all just connected so, you know, as family, that we are all well wishers for everybody. So my board president- because imagine a board president of an organization talking to the artistic director about internal- I mean, family affairs, I mean, personal affairs. So she talked to me, she said- she's a lawyer, and she said ... she still calls me Aunty, and she said, "Aunty, you cannot allow this. You just have to stop it. You just have to ask her why she's marrying this guy." I said, 'Okay,' I promised her. So three days ago, I asked her here, in this room. She said, "I don't know," and she calls me "ma'am," "madam." Because in India, they call their superiors or teachers "ma'am" sometimes. Sir. Ma'am. She calls me "ma'am." So she said, "Ma'am, I don't know why I'm marrying this guy, but I don't want to marry." I said, 'Write it down,' so she wrote it down. So the past two days, we have been ... so now she finally decided that she is not going to marry this guy. So she's going back to say that [laughs].

Jenai Cutcher [02:50:14] Wow.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:50:15] So we are very much- when we call each other by a relationship, I think, automatically, there is that- it's a connection that's forged automatically.

Jenai Cutcher [02:50:34] Seems like a connection you take very seriously.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:50:37] Yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:50:37] Well, I'm glad we talked about that, too.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:50:42] Yeah. I don't know whether I've answered everything, we've talked about the arangetrams, we've talked about ... yeah, I would like to talk about, since, you know, you come from the dance history perspective. I'm sure you're aware that contemporary dance, I think, was inspired by Indian dance.

Jenai Cutcher [02:51:08] How so?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:51:14] I think it was, like, if you take Isadora Duncan or, you know, if you take ... who was the other person who was- so it was dance that they saw, even Anna Pavlova, Ruth Saint Denis ... okay, who started dancing, I think, bare feet and with the incense and "Radha," all these kind of pieces that she performed. It was then that that momentum of movement, of going away from ballet and being grounded started. So I think that Indian dance has a very important place in contemporary dance of the West but they don't give it that kind of a legitimate place where they honor the Indian dance, is what my feeling is.

Jenai Cutcher [02:52:27] You mean in dance history courses or ...

Hema Rajagopalan [02:52:28] Yes, yes. I mean, they may touch upon it but I don't think they kind of go into too much depth in finding out where this is coming from. Well, Jacob's Pillow, for example, has touched on ... they have, of course, you know, have had this connection with Indian dance. I think I have- I have complained or maybe I feel- I do feel, not maybe, I do feel that they would really, really benefit from learning, benefit from becoming aware of workshops maybe and, you know, understanding what this- in universities and other organizations. I know that I had brought Kalanidhi Narayanan and professor C. V. Chandrasekhar, who is a very well-known- he's in his eighties, early eighties. He's going to be eighty years old. And Kalanidhi, of course, is past her- 85 or 86, the year. In 2003, I brought both of them to do workshops, one at Hubbard Street when Julia was there- Julie Nakagawa was there. I had brought them in for almost two weeks of workshops and they did workshops for the Hubbard Street 2 dance company, I think it's two level, and then Hedwig Dances had them for one week. So, like that, I think organizations must explore this and must incorporate these courses in their works and the Dance Center of Columbia College, of course, several times, I give workshops- not workshops but lectures and they've had these courses, but I think more needs to happen. Not for any rea- any other reason but ... but for pollinating, you know? To take from other, just like we do. When I am saying that, I get inspired by the ballet leaps or ballet turns or pirouettes or whatever. We do have similar things but I get inspired by other aspects of art forms, the art. The same way, I think, I don't hear any other dance artists saying that, "I was inspired by Bharata Natyam."

Jenai Cutcher [02:55:25] No?

Hema Rajagopalan [02:55:27] Have I? No.

Jenai Cutcher [02:55:30] Well, maybe Jan, when you guys met.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:55:33] Yeah, but we are doing a collaborative work, I don't see her- I haven't yet, you know? So, I think they need to start thinking about this, if Ruth Saint Denis and Anna Pavlova had that inspiration and you are following in those footsteps, in a way, I think- I would think that it's only natural that you want to know about what we are doing, whether it's the mudra or whether it's the facial expression or the percussive footwork or the geometrical lines. If I can talk about taking inspiration from Laban and thinking, 'Oh, what's wrong with my dance form, let me see. Are there any gaps that might help me expand?' I'm sure the other would, right? Specifically if you developed because of this. Specifically- yeah, if this came about because of Ruth Saint Denis or XYZ. Now, I'm not sure whether ... there are- I'm sure there are reasons and I'm sure there are connections which I am not aware of.

Jenai Cutcher [02:57:10] Yeah, well, in terms of inspiration, I think you're right. It does seem ripe for teaching modern dance or contemporary dancers and choreographers a lot about their own art form. But you also got me thinking that, you know, while modern dancers tend to get a very general history of the form, it's not ingrained in the teachings to honor it or examine it, I think, in the same way, for instance, Bharata Natyam or tap dance.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:57:44] Yes, yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:57:46] You- in modern dance, you can learn techniques and vocabularies without learning much of the history.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:57:53] Yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:57:53] That doesn't really happen when you- I don't think, right? When you learn Bharata Natyam as a form, you learn the package.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:58:02] You learn the package. You learn the package, yes, yes.

Jenai Cutcher [02:58:05] I bet there are a lot of modern dancers out there who don't know about Ruth Saint Denis.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:58:10] Yeah, exactly, exactly.

Jenai Cutcher [02:58:15] But yeah, that just seems- that's sad to me.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:58:18] Yeah! Yeah, yeah. In Juilliard, for example, at Juilliard there was this dancer who is no more now, she is Indrani Rahman, who was a very beautiful dancer who is no more and she used to teach in Juilliard, Bharata Natyam and Odissi, and I think ... schools like Juilliard, which is very popular, could be having lecturers and could be having dance instructions now and then on these art forms but I think in- over- across the U.S., I think institutions, dance institutions and teaching institutions would really do well. I mean, I've gone to so many, like Antioch College or I've gone through other places where they used to invite me again and again every year, so- I mean, every other year when I was touring, and I always had a bunch of- Oberlin College, Ann Cooper Albright was there, you know Ann Cooper Albright?

Jenai Cutcher [02:59:25] I do, I'm from Ohio so-

Hema Rajagopalan [02:59:26] Oh, you're from Ohio!

Jenai Cutcher [02:59:26] I know Antioch College, too.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:59:29] Antioch College, yes, I forget-

Jenai Cutcher [02:59:29] Both forward-thinking institutions there.

Hema Rajagopalan [02:59:32] Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. I was in residence at Oberlin, because of Ann, for a year and, you know Jonathan Meyer, who is Khecari artistic director? He's a student of mine.

Jenai Cutcher [02:59:51] Oh, I didn't know that!

Hema Rajagopalan [02:59:52] Yes. Khecari is a Sanskrit word.

Jenai Cutcher [02:59:57] I wondered. Wow, so it really influenced him!

Hema Rajagopalan [03:00:02] Yes! Jonathan was a very good dancer and he danced with me too earlier, before, you know.

Jenai Cutcher [03:00:12] He was your student at Oberlin?

Hema Rajagopalan [03:00:13] At Oberlin.

Jenai Cutcher [03:00:14] Okay.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:00:15] I was in residence there for a month.

Jenai Cutcher [03:00:18] Wow.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:00:19] And he was the brightest student there. Excellent student.

Jenai Cutcher [03:00:26] So that goes to show you how studying Bharata Natyam can inform ...

Hema Rajagopalan [03:00:29] Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah.

Jenai Cutcher [03:00:34] Well, that's a neat connection I didn't know about!

Hema Rajagopalan [03:00:39] Yes, and he is a very, what should I say, exploratory kind of a mind. And clean, I would love to see him do Bharata Natyam and not ... I don't know, I'd love to go see one of those things happen. I read about it, I'm sure it's good but, I mean, he thinks out of the box, you know, and in the trenches and he does some things which are out of the box, which is different but he's- his dancing is very good. He has a clean body and the lines are beautiful when he dances. He used to.

Jenai Cutcher [03:01:30] I saw him improvise once and now that you say that, I can see, even just in terms of focus, how maybe studying Bharata Natyam has helped him and you see it in his improvisation.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:01:43] Yes, yes, yes. That energy, that grace, the thing that understands- the grounded, you know, being grounded and coming from there. Very good. Yeah, so these things come to my mind, Antioch and Oberlin and- when I was in Oberlin that's where I saw a lot of videos because I used to sit and, I mean, I had free time. So that's another thing I think, encouraging, like people like Ann, inviting other artists and encouraging students to be exposed to another genre of dance, and even in Urbana-Champaign, but that was through another department because that was the Sanskrit department which invited me but, I'm saying, there also- in various universities, the key people there, you know, they were responsible to have this kind of an exchange that could happen. That would really help students work, right?

Jenai Cutcher [03:02:57] Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:02:57] So, I think that point of view it's a good idea.

Jenai Cutcher [03:03:01] Yup. Um, anything else?

Hema Rajagopalan [03:03:10] I'm thinking, dance company-wise, I talked about that, I talked about media, you know, media needs to be really encouraged to write about dance and to be educated and I did that, we did- we brought both- Laura Molzahn was on- I think Laura was on one of the panels during our conference so that we- they could have an idea of what, and we had writers from India come so that they kind of interact. I think that part of it is missing in Chicago, for some reason they marginalize us. Writing about Bharata Natyam is totally marginalize, or any Indian dance, not just- whether it's Kathak or Bharata Natyam, but it's very marginalized, they should, you know, in fact, they should be- they should be, I feel like if there is any one or two rare instances of performances like that, they should cash in on that, right? But they don't do that. That's my problem. That's one of the issues I had, so we talked about media, about audience development. Yes, audience development, I think ... it's- it's wonderful to perform. I think artists should perform in areas which are not the Indian community-oriented areas, like the Western suburbs. Natya tries to present performances in main- you know, diverse audiences need to come, and I think we have done a great, what should I say, in presenting free performances through the city of Chicago when we perform for ... arts- arts-deprived areas like the South Shore, for example, or the inner city areas through Park District facilities. Even if there are twenty or thirty people that are sitting, they enjoy the audience- the performance. And we performed at the Maggie Daley, you know, park, in the city? My god, it was amazing! The space was filled and there were people that were standing because we had glass doors, they were just there, you know, oh, so many people outside watching, so I think artists should perform like that so that they're able to bring a light. So now, as I said before, presenters should just listen to audiences and not at ticket sales sometimes, it depends on how they promote it, you know?

Jenai Cutcher [03:06:14] Right.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:06:17] And present good performances like us.

Jenai Cutcher [03:06:21] [laughs] Well you've- I mean, you've toured internationally for a very long time. Is there anything that you think makes the Chicago dance scene distinct or unique?

Hema Rajagopalan [03:06:33] Distinct, I would say yes, in one way, and in another way, yes, when I say yes, it makes distinct- makes it distinct because I think the Chicago audiences are very diverse ethnically from- when they come from different backgrounds and they're very eclectic, for one. And the other is that they are very, very ... they're very curious. They want to know more and they enjoy it so I think that, from that point of view, that is there, it's very much like, I would say, if you go to- in Chennai, when you go to in India, when you go to performances. There are people that come there just because they want to know what that new thing is which they have not seen before. Similar to, I would say, French audiences. Like, I was once in France, in Paris, actually, I was on my way and we were going to Germany and then going to India and we were going to perform that day, I only had one performance and then we went to this- and I had already asked for an interpreter because I knew you need an interpreter for my art, my kind of dance. Believe it or not, I had an interpreter, I started the performance and halfway through, the organizer- and I had big shouts from the audience, organizer came and said, "They don't want you to talk. They don't want an interpreter. You just dance." I said, 'How can- they will not understand.' "They like it, they don't-" so I know that some French audiences can just be- they just love it just the way it is, okay! [laughs] So I think some Chicago audiences, like that, they don't care whether they understand it or not, they just come there because it's different, they want to absorb that new adventure, so I think they like that so Chicago audiences are different.

Jenai Cutcher [03:09:03] That's a good answer, I'll take that, yeah! Okay, I ... I usually- that's always my last question but if you have anything else that you want to make sure we- we record. Yeah.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:09:23] Okay. I think we've covered mostly everything and I think that we can only raise the bar for Chicago and I feel like that needs to happen at some point, hopefully, so that's what my wish is and hopefully your project, I think, is very, very valuable. I want to talk- and your project is very tied with what we do in dance. See, dance education, you know, which we didn't touch upon, outreach, we say, outreach, we want to talk about the dance as an outreach, dance as a- what do you do with the post and the pre-performance talks and things like that. It's only recent that I'm hearing about these pre-performance talk or the post-performance talk but I would want to say that our dance form, when we present dance, it's always an outreach performance because we are presenting something with a goal, with a purpose of enlightening, purpose of educating and enlightening, always. I am not here to perform so that whatever you want, you can make of it, no. I am clearly educating and I want to make sure that you enjoy it. That's why it's very important to have rasa involvement. I want you as an audience to really enjoy what I want- what I'm doing so I'm going to give you all the tools necessary for you to be educated about it, right? Then I want you to be enlightened and experience that joy, and that is very important for me. So, my performance always becomes an outreach performance, so there is nothing which is arts and education or whatever, I would always wonder why is this a separate thing? It's always part of it, art has always been a part of it- Indian art, so to me, it is not a separate component. So outreach is an experience that any, any Bharata Natyam performance is always an outreach, it's always that way. So, to that extent, I would say, presenters or- or organizers or audiences must make an effort in that level to know more about it or to find out more about it before they come to the performance if they want to get the maximum of what- and get curated, you know, get to that level where they say, "Okay, next time, we would enjoy it in a better way." So, this outreach was a new thing for me. I thought it was always there, [laughs] you know, took it for granted.

Jenai Cutcher [03:12:45] Yeah. Yeah, but I guess, in order for your audiences to become more educated outside of the performance, those resources have to be there.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:12:56] Have to be there, have to be there. And that's important, yes. Yes, other than that, I think we've covered the dance company and presenting, yes, I would say one thing about funding though, funding scenarios ... we're just doing an interview. So, I would say ... the government doesn't fund arts much at all. So I think arts- we don't- I do not think the American culture, American philosophy, American thought doesn't think that arts is an important component of life. Whereas, I don't- we don't see arts as a separate component from our lives. Art is very much involved in our day-to-day life, in everyone's day-to-day life in India. Art is not separate. Art is something which is there in our spiritual prayers, like music is a very devotional thing, so music is an art form which is connected so much with our lives, right? So there is devotion in that. Dance is a separate thing, I'm not talking about dance, I'm talking about arts in general. Arts in general like even visual art, like, let's say, drawing, you know, drawing a floral pattern, is a day-to-day life that we do in front of the altar. We decorate the altar, we decorate that prayer room, for example. So art is very much integrated at every level ... in- in ceremonies, you know, you see it in dan- you see it when the baby is born, for example, there is decorations happening around the cradle or there is music, there's a celebratory kind of music that happens. In arangetrams, we talked about arangetram, you would not see a single arangetram where the lobby is not decorated, you know, the front of the thing is not decorated. Decorated with floral patterns, decorated with artifacts. It's always a ceremony, right? And dinner is always served with some kind of a ceremonial whatever decoration that is there. So art is, I find, is integrated in an Indian lifestyle in every level. Whereas, it is taken- it takes- it is taken out of that, out of context and is kept as a separate entity and can only be incorporated when necessary, which is where the problem comes, I think, so then government doesn't see it as an important aspect, which should be living, which is necessary, why should it be, right? So that's a very strong drawback that I see. And so the community doesn't value the arts so it becomes a separate entity, it's not part and parcel with that.

Jenai Cutcher [03:16:33] Right.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:16:39] So that is one aspect.

Jenai Cutcher [03:16:43] Yeah. That's as a great point to make and part of what I like about this project is that that issue comes up and everyone talks about it in their own way. But nobody has been able to compare it to the way another culture does it, for example.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:17:04] For example, when we do- when we have performances in India, you know, in India especially in Tamil Nadu, and even in other cities there are presenting organizations, like Oak Brook would have it's own theater. So going to the theater, going to attend music and dance performance is like an everyday thing, like every now and then. It's not, like, when it happens or whatever, right? So like that. So, in- from that regard, I like the series that- what do you call it, you call it the season ticket that they buy. You have a season, I appreciate that a lot. Because, you know, somebody was asking me, "How can we buy a season ticket? We can only go to a dance performance-" Are you kidding me? You can see so much of dance! Theater, you know, you buy a season ticket! Yeah! Symphony, buy a season ticket, yes! That concept is there but then it is not, you know, valued, it is not supported. See, music and dance should be a must in these schools, for example. It's not something that you take as an option. So then, when it becomes part of life then you automatically will do it.

Jenai Cutcher [03:18:34] Right.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:18:37] Then you become an audience person as well. So from that point of view, I think the Chicago History Project- Chicago History Project ... I am so happy about it. I'm so happy, and it needs to have its place. I don't know whether there is a replication of this in any other state. I'm not sure.

Jenai Cutcher [03:18:58] Not that I know of.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:19:03] Not that you know of, but I think it is a beautiful, amazing thing that should be there nationally.

Jenai Cutcher [03:19:11] That makes me happy to hear.

Hema Rajagopalan [03:19:14] Yeah. That's why I'm very- why I was very interested in this right, right away. I don't know much about ... I know Ginger. Oh, Ginger is another person that I should talk about because I met Ginger through the DanceMakers Forum first, I think, and I was so, so, so moved by her compassion. I felt very, very happy and honored and- what else did I feel? I felt like there's another dancer, I knew she was a dancer. And she was an artist and I knew that- the fact she taught- asked more questions about my art form and was- I'm talking in 2003 or 4. I was very, very moved by that, you know? Very few people stop and take notice of the other art form, so from that point of view- and Ginger was always very supportive of my work and I think she's one- then I found out that she also knew Joan. Joan told me she was a Hubbard Street dancer, was she? Yeah. So I- from that point of view, I think she's a very good person on this project because very few people are really, really from an anthropological, you know, way of looking at things and what are these other dance forms that are existing, what is- what is a historical perspective of the presence of these dance forms in a particular area. I think this is all important and very, very relevant. Very relevant.