

Thursday, December 2, 2021

The Harris Theater presents Ragamala Dance Company - Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim

Company: Ragamala Dance Company
 Venue: Harris Theater
 Location: Chicago, IL

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The Harris Theater presents Ragamala Dance Company - Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim on December 2, 2021 at 7:30pm. Tickets are \$35-140 and are available at <https://www.harristheaterchicago.org/performance/fires-varanasi-dance-eternal-pilgrim>.

Bharatanatyam choreographers Raneeramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy's *Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim* evokes an elaborate ritual where time is suspended and humans merge with the divine. Through images that reflect the cosmic trinity of Varanasi, India — sacred pilgrimage routes, the Ganges River, and the patron deity Shiva, heightened by the chants of Vedic priests — the choreographers imagine a metaphorical crossing place where one may leave the mundane and enter into the world of immortality.

"With the death of our father/grandfather away from his homeland of India four years ago, we became part of an age-old tradition that accepts life and death as an integrated whole. A devout Hindu, his desire was for his ashes to be scattered in the Ganges River in the sacred city of Varanasi, India, just as our ancestors before him. In this theatrical reimagining, we expand upon the birth-death-rebirth continuum in Hindu thought to honor immigrant experiences of life and death in the diaspora.

The transformation of the soul after cremation becomes a powerful symbol for human resilience and the tenacity of people and cultures across time. In this full-length work for 10 performers with an original, recorded score, French scenic and lighting designer Willy Cessa transforms the stage as the performers traverse the iconic stairways and landings along the river banks, performing ritual ablutions in the sacred river." — Raneeramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy

Raneeramaswamy, Aparna, and Ashwini dedicate our performances of *Fires of Varanasi* to the memory of our dear friend Patricia Barretto.

The foundation of Ashwini Ramaswamy's work and aesthetic begins with decades of Bharatanatyam training with her gurus - her mother Raneeramaswamy, sister Aparna Ramaswamy (Directors of Ragamala Dance Company) and the legendary Smt. Alarnel Valli of Chennai, India. As a founding member of Ragamala, she has toured extensively, performing throughout the U.S. and in Russia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, the U.K., and India. Ashwini has received commissions from the SPCO's Liquid Music Series, American Dance Platform, and the Great Northern Festival, residencies at the Baryshnikov Arts Center (NYC), UNC Chapel Hill (North Carolina), and the National Center for Choreography (Akron, OH), and support from the National Dance Project, the MAP Fund, US Artists International, the Minnesota State Arts Board, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, South Asian Arts Resiliency Fund, a Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship and McKnight Foundation Artist Fellowships for Dance and Choreography. She is currently a Visiting Professor at Macalaster College. <https://www.ashwiniramaswamy.com/>.

Ragamala Dance Company was founded in 1992 by Raneeramaswamy. Now under the direction of Raneeramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy (mother and daughter), the company is in its 25th season of creating intercultural, collaborative performance works that forge together ancestry and continuity. In this milestone year, long-time Ragamala soloist Ashwini Ramaswamy has joined her mother and sister in their intergenerational creative partnership. As first generation Indian-American artists, Raneeramaswamy and Aparna's aesthetic is deeply influenced by their cultural hybridity. Thematically, they explore the myth and spirituality of their Indian heritage in order to engage with what they see as the dynamic tension between the historical, the ancestral, and the personal. They approach the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam as a living, breathing language with which to speak about the contemporary human experience. Described as "soulful, imaginative and rhythmically contagious" (The New York Times) and "the standard bearer of a singularly successful kind of hybridity" (The Huffington Post), Ragamala's work has been commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, the Krannert Center for Performing Arts at the University of Illinois, the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), and Opening Nights Performing Arts at Florida State University, and has been developed in residence at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) and during an NPN residency at The Yard. The company has been recognized with awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, National Dance Project, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Japan Foundation/New York, US Artists International, New Music/USA, MAP Fund, American Composers Forum, and two Joyce Awards from the Joyce Foundation. Ragamala tours extensively, highlighted by the American Dance Festival, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Music Center of Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, University Musical Society at the University of Michigan, the Just Festival (Edinburgh, U.K.) the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai), and the National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai), among others. <https://www.ragamaladance.org/>.

The Harris Theater is located in the cultural heart of downtown Chicago, against the spectacular backdrop of Millennium Park — the top tourist attraction in the Midwest. As the home venue of nearly 30 of Chicago's not-for-profit arts organizations and a presenter of great artists from around the world, the Theater boasts some of the most diverse offerings of any multi-use venue in downtown Chicago. A destination venue for live performances and cultural events, the Theater provides a unique setting for conference keynotes, corporate meetings, product launches, live tapings, and commercial productions. Prominent artists, companies, and thought leaders that have appeared on the Harris stage include Mikhail Baryshnikov, Joshua Bell, English National Ballet, Tom Hanks, Chelsea Handler, Angélique Kidjo, Marie Kondo, Ernst & Young, KPMG, Paris Opera Ballet, Stuff You Should Know, and Sheryl Sandberg, among others. With a range of private event spaces, lighting and technical inventory, and modern amenities included in the rental rate, the Harris Theater is a flexible and accessible space that can be tailored to any event. Beyond the facility itself, the Theater's in-house technical expertise, box office and ticketing support, marketing services, and experienced customer service staff will ensure that each renter has the support and infrastructure they need to execute a successful event for their clients, employees, and audience. <https://www.harristheaterchicago.org/>

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