

## ***Revealed By Fire, One Woman's Narrative of Transformation***

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### **Abstract**

On the morning of June 23, 1985, Flight 182, en route from Toronto to Bombay, India disappeared from all radar screens and subsequently was lost to a mid-air explosion over the Atlantic Ocean, 100 miles from the southwest coast of Ireland. It was the largest aviation disaster in Canada's history. Of the 329 passengers aboard the flight, 156 were Canadian, three of whom were Canadian choreographer Lata Pada's husband and two daughters. This essay is an account of Pada's artistic process in the creation of *Revealed By Fire*, a bharatanatyam performance choreographed by Pada for her dance company Sampradaya Dance Creations. Set in a theatrical interface between Pada's present and the dream-like life of her past prior to the crash, *Revealed* evokes the darkness and destruction that followed on the heels of this event, as well as her tumultuous journey of self-discovery in the process of the dance's making.

Onstage, an Indian dancer moves slowly and tentatively. She looks intently at a point in space remembering a musical rhythm with her feet. Gradually her footwork becomes more percussive and rhythmic. Outside the dance studio the street sounds of Bombay drift in mingling with the sound of her dance guru's instructions. The dance begins to take on a life of its own. Suddenly the rhythmic music is interrupted by the sound of a phone ringing

loudly. She stops and quickly runs over to pick it up. She freezes. A plane crash. No survivors. No details are available yet. Her husband and two daughters were aboard that plane heading to Bombay from Toronto. Bits and pieces slowly sink in; a back projection of fire leaps across the cyclorama which is draped with saris that appear to also catch fire.

[2] Lata Pada turns and slowly walks upstage toward the fire. She begins pulling down the sari panels one by one, revealing the strong, vertical image of shooting flames. The fire is raging now and the projected image widens out across the back of the stage. Pada is a small dark figure now who appears engulfed in flames. The edges of a photo album twist in the heat. Photos of her husband Vishnu, and her two daughters, Brinda and Arti, drift across the screen caught in a fire draft, their smiling faces curling and dissolving in the flames. Other images follow rapidly, each of them smiling in another, happier time and place, disappearing into smoke. These images become embers, then ash disappearing in a gust of wind. Pada sinks to her knees reaching up to the screen as if to try and recapture her family's faces for one more moment. The screen goes black.

[3] This is the opening scene from *Revealed By Fire*,<sup>i</sup> a bharatanatyam performance choreographed by Canadian choreographer Lata Pada for her dance company Sampradaya Dance Creations, which premiered March 8,

2000 at Harbourfront Theatre, Toronto, this work commemorates and mourns the loss of Pada's family tragically killed in the Air India bombing of 1985. Set in a theatrical interface between Pada's present and the dream-like life of her past prior to the crash, *Revealed* evokes the darkness and destruction that followed on the heels of this event, as well as her tumultuous journey of self-discovery in the process of the dance's making. Through the creation of this work Pada faced head on the aesthetic challenges of representing a personal and traumatic event in an effort to heal not only herself but also those spectators who had lived through sudden, inexplicable loss. This essay is an account of Pada's therapeutic and artistic process. It is based on ethnographic research<sup>ii</sup> I conducted during the seven months of preparation involved in the creation of *Revealed By Fire*.

[4] At the time of this research I was a contemporary dance performer and choreographer, interested in experimental choreographic projects. What drew me initially to Pada was her willingness to wrestle against a strict language of virtuosic bharatanatyam<sup>iii</sup> and incorporate other media in her dance project. *Revealed* was to be a major collaboration between several artists, including a sound artist, dramaturge, and filmmaker. I became even more interested as the creative process advanced and Pada committed to making her life changing and traumatic loss the explicit central theme of the piece. Pada's plan for this work was a big step away from the solo

bharatanatyam repertoire I had seen in the past. Where classical bharatanatyam was often a screen on which Hindu religious mythology could be projected, Pada wanted to draw on this dance form while finding a way to express her own life experience in India as well as in Canada, where she had lived for over half her life. The snowy, cold winters of Thompson, Manitoba were a big contrast to Bangalore and the sounds of the vina. Themes of disruption and difference, crossing boundaries, citizenship and belonging, along with personal tragedy were all a part of a narrative Pada wanted to bring forward in music, text, dance and moving image. Knowing how important virtuosity was as part of establishing and maintaining her credibility as a classical Indian dancer, and given Pada's longstanding reputation in Canada and internationally as a classical bharatanatyam dancer, I saw the importance of Pada's project.

[5] The conception and creation of this dance work took over two years undergoing considerable transformation in the process. This process was understandably difficult for Pada. Each of its stages seemed a test of Pada's commitment to releasing her own dramatic presence to tell a more harrowing tale of death, life, limitation of memory. First, Pada had to accept that a personal and life-changing moment would be explicitly presented in her work as its central theme. For cultural and aesthetic reasons on which I will expand later on, this was not an easy decision. Secondly, Pada wanted

to open this story up to the audience. Pada was sensitive to the fact that many in the Toronto Indian community had also suffered traumatic loss in this very plane explosion. The story for Pada was personal but as she kept reiterating “also universal.”

[6] Pada faced what Kaplan (2009) describes as the difficulty in “finding aesthetic strategies appropriate to constructing a position for the viewer—and this is very important—that enables the viewer to take responsibility, and secondly, for creating a witness where there was none before” (Kaplan 2009:84). Pada succeeds, as I will elaborate, in generating a form of spectatorship that can be called ‘witnessing’ and is distinct from the “‘I-paid-for-my-ticket-and-now want-to-see-a-show’ variety that puts the performer in a one-sided relationship to the viewer” (Cooper-Albright, 2004:145). *Revealed* moves beyond a spectacle of grief. This work brings the viewer into the structure of an injustice and its accompanying rage.

[7] On the morning of June 23, 1985, Flight 182, en route from Toronto to Bombay, India disappeared from all radar screens and subsequently was lost to a mid-air explosion over the Atlantic Ocean, 100 miles from the southwest coast of Ireland. It has been determined that this was the largest aviation disaster in Canada’s history. Of the 329 passengers aboard the flight, 156 were Canadian, three of whom were Pada’s husband and two daughters.

[8] At the time of the performance of *Revealed*, no official inquiry had been launched into the events and circumstances that led to such a tragic disaster that affected not only the lives of all the families and loved ones of those aboard Flight 182 but the collective psyche of the country. Most recently John Major's final report of the federal inquiry was released blaming a series of errors between CSIS and the RCMP at the heart of is the observation that national security continues to be badly handled by the RCMP and Canada's spy agency CSIS. Many of those who lost family members, when I initially conducted this research, held much hope that explanations on how such a catastrophe could occur and equally importantly, why it took over 20 years to mount an inquiry, would ever be forthcoming. On June 21, 2006, after pressure by the South Asian community now backed by local politicians, a full governmental inquiry into the Air India bombing was launched.

[9] What mystified many in the Indian community was the unprecedented length of time that had passed before the government would take seriously the need for an investigation. The subsequent trial had the dubious honour of being the most expensive trial in Canadian history. Costing \$130 million, the trial in the end held only the cold consolation that such mistakes would never be repeated again. Due to miscommunication and political hostilities

between the investigating governmental agencies, CSIS and the RCMP, key pieces of evidence were destroyed (*Major Report* 2010). To make matters worse the accused perpetrators were found not guilty due to lack of evidence and were released; only Inderjit Singh Reyat was convicted for manslaughter receiving a sentence of five years (*Globe and Mail* 2006). For many families Major's report—though welcomed for its insight—came too late for them to feel justice had truly been served.

***Between Bombay, India and Thompson, Manitoba there are seven steps. Where am I/ Where am I going?*<sup>iv</sup>**

“About two years ago there was a documentary on my life aired on Vision TV. A couple of days later, I had a phone call from a woman who was absolutely grief-stricken, almost incoherent. She didn't tell me her whole story, all she could say was that the documentary had an incredible impact on her life and helped her to put her own grief into context. I think that gave me the strength and the motivation to tell this story” (Pada 2001 pers. con.).

[10] *Revealed By Fire* was a uniquely generative site for Pada bringing together artists of both Eastern and Western theatrical traditions. It required a re-thinking of what the possibilities but also limits of bharatanatyam were

in the context of working with a broader palette of film and sound score. While dance would obviously play a big part in the work Pada did not want to make a work that focused on bharatanatyam exclusively. She regarded the multi-media format of the piece as not only elegiac but one that would allow for the shifting contexts of the dream-like past of her former life and her current life, newly married with a thriving dance company.

[11] All collaborators understood the kind of dance that Pada wanted to make—not simply a reproduction of the past but a glimpse of how it had transformed her. Having to excavate the painful past was a given challenge; communicating it to three collaborators with strong opinions of their own for the project was another. Interdisciplinarity was like encountering “a beast that, if examined solely with the tools of the discipline, would leave out major body parts—parts that are inexplicable within the discipline” (Condee 2004:236). Pada was wrestling with the beast and it seemed all the collaborators had different visions of what such a hybrid animal could be.

[12] Videographer Cylla von Tiedemann and sound artist Timothy Sullivan suggested a storyboard in order to get down some order of a narrative plot line. Pada procrastinated in exploring the central image—the fire of the plane crash. Her tendency to perfectionism—each proper bharatanatyam movement setting order against the chaos she felt inside—was working



against her accessing this central image: fire as both the destroyer and giver of life.

[13] She told me once that when she thought of this dance all she saw, like the aftermath of a bombing, was a potentially desolate and discouraging, even alien landscape. What came before was one life, what came after a totally different one. How to pull these pieces together? How could she turn a personal landscape, which had effectively been scarred and burned by loss, into theatre? How should she conceive of the relation between this historical event that affected the lives of so many she knew and individual stories?

[14] As it turned out she didn't have to look for continuity where there wasn't any. Viewing the work cinematically gave Pada the opportunity to explore other movement possibilities in the transitions between scenes and the spaces in which narrative fragments occurred. This exploration tore open the seams between the poles of representation/subjectivity and nostalgia/familiarity. Encouraged by her collaborators, Pada began to develop confidence in the process of committing to, rather than avoiding, the potentially cathartic nature of the work.

[15] In searching for the right personal symbols Pada was drawn to “the whole exploration of the idea of the goddess in Hindu mythology and the representation of the female energy which was very powerful and very evocative” (pers. con. 2000). Using the motif of the goddess she felt she might be able to overcome the guilt and emptiness she experienced after the loss of her family and face the healing of a past that had ruptured both a cultural and personal life. Pada and I spoke often about the metaphors she was interested in employing, and while Pada had several ideas, she kept returning to the myth of Sita, consort and heroine of the Hindu god-king Rama. Fire was central in Sita’s famous tests of endurance, as it was to Pada’s own story. In the Indian epic of the *Ramayana*, Sita follows Rama into exile after he is banished from the throne. She is subsequently abducted by a demon king who threatens her life and, finally, having been re-united with Rama after a bloody war, had to endure a test of her chastity by fire (*agni pareksha*<sup>v</sup>) a metaphor for a great test of endurance to prove her love and strength of character to Rama. Fire also symbolizes the custom of sati in which an Indian widow was expected to sacrifice herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. Pada’s personal journey of recovery through the making of *Revealed* required her also to commit a form of psychological sati, to enter the fire and to undergo a form of spiritual purification.

[16] Dramaturge Judith Rudakoff came into the project around the Fall of 2000. She composed a 'script' in conjunction with Pada that tied together the elemental aspects of the work and facilitated the creation and expression of the archetypal feminine in the form of a personal mythology. Rudakoff worked a lot with the imagery of the four elements. This script evolved into a potent means for the expression of Pada's memories, her feelings about her childhood and her early years as an immigrant in the prairies of Canada. A pre-recorded text allowed Pada to structure her role theatrically and give textual form to her ideas. It served as a kind of Ariadne's thread through the central metaphors and memories of the past. Pada's voice narrates the series of events that she, and her inventive company of five dancers, describe as her journey of self-transformation. The role of 'Lata' as narrator erased the need to give her every action a precise value associated with specific images and intentions and inspired another layer of recovering and uncovering personal identity. Dramaturge Judith Rudakoff explains:

"We talked in real theatrical terms about the character of 'Lata' as opposed to Lata the person, and what the character of 'Lata's' role within the theatrical narrative of *Revealed by Fire* was in communicating these things to an audience... What we had to do was strike a balance between the universal story that Lata wanted to communicate, a story of female empowerment and

reconnecting with personal identity and place in the world, and her personal story..." (Rudakoff, 2001).

[17] While re-framing the events of the past for theatrical presentation, Pada was effectively re-writing her autobiography—putting the pictures in the scrapbook according to her own chronology. This process of creation would ultimately re-awaken her personal mythology and heal the wounds of the past. Pada felt herself becoming a different 'self,' someone other than the helpless onlooker to whom these tragic events had happened. Through this process, Pada developed a new personal and artistic vision of her work as a dancer and choreographer.

"My exploration had to do with an internal cultural examination of my own identity in my growing years and then after marriage moving to northern Manitoba with a young family, while trying to be an Indian dance teacher, a mother, a wife... then suddenly, being stripped of all those identities and having to forge a new identity. These were underlying things that I felt I needed to resolve" (Pada, 2001).

[18] At the same time, as work began on *Revealed* there had been a lot of press coverage of the Air India tragedy. Prior to opening night March 10, 2001 sixteen years after the event, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

arrested two suspects, catapulting *Revealed By Fire* and Lata Pada from an unfortunate moment in Canadian history to front page news in many national daily newspapers, provoking a flood of media interviews. One effect of this media attention could be seen in the busy box office at Harbourfront and a guaranteed sold-out run. At the same time, coincident with the rehearsal and performing period, the local Sikh community held fundraisers to support the legal costs of the newly arrested suspects (Rudakoff 2002). Pada and her collaborators were all too aware they had a fine line to walk between producing a theatrical event that would portray the reality of the event but also not allow it to become sensationalized by press coverage. A large portion of her audience was South Asian and there was no way of knowing whether they would embrace or shun *Revealed*.

“No one took a photograph at the airport. What were they wearing? I don’t even know what they were wearing that day... Don’t forget to lock the door... Did you pack everything you’re going to need? Who wants the aisle seat? A plane flies over head and all I can think about is fire” (Pada 2001).

[19] The big issue in an epic story such as this is the extent to which it is able to transcend the personal. “If *Revealed By Fire* were no more than an extended therapy session conducted in public, it might be gripping in a ghoulish sort of way but would also be embarrassingly self-indulgent.

Thankfully, this is not the case," writes critic Michael Crabbe (2001:28). The opening of the dance is important in that it sets the stage for the sensory experience that will develop. We are led immediately into the circumstances of Pada's ordeal. The first sounds we hear are the sounds of distant traffic in Bombay where she's rehearsing, then the roar of a jet passing overhead. But it is the jolting sound of the abnormally loud ringing of a phone, a sound that will ultimately change the course of her life that cues us to listen closely. We hear her voice in a pre-recorded text as 'Lata': "It was an ordinary day. I was rehearsing. The phone rang."

[20] As she is told the terrible news of the crash, Pada is very still. Silence, then crackling fire. The silk banners become tongues of fire. Pada's emotional abyss has begun. As she pulls down the panels streaming from the cyclorama the screen opens to footage of raging fire. We are introduced to the sight and even smell of fire symbolic of the explosive moment of the plane crash that took her family but also the burning ground of memory; fire both onscreen and onstage, evoked destruction as well as emergence. There is little that can change fire but fire itself can change everything in an instant. The image widens out across the back of the stage giving the impression that Pada herself is engulfed in flames: the flames of sati, the flames of half a life that has disappeared forever.

[21] A wind blows through the flames slowing the raging inferno long enough for us to catch a fleeting glimpse of the other characters in this drama, Brinda, Arti and her husband Vishnu who will never enter the stage space except as elegiac reminders. It was hard not to be affected by the vision of Pada's husband and young daughters dissolving into an overlay of flames. The opening of the piece forms a keyhole through which Pada leads us into a world which we come to see, as the dance continues, is actually two worlds. Pada describes how, in creating this work, she became aware of an intersection: that of the physical state of reliving the shock and the psychological states of recalling the tragedy. By working through it again in the form of a danced narrative these two states met and mirrored one another. She had to distinguish the irrevocable rift that occurred to her in the life she knew prior to the crash and the life following it. Her past is represented as dream-like; her individuality then defined in the roles of wife, mother, a member of a family and that family as a member of a larger community.

[22] The dance takes place in seven sections. Beginning with the news of the plane crash as she is rehearsing in her guru's studio in Bombay, *Revealed* is told in flashbacks to her childhood, then forward to her marriage and immigration to Canada. Describing the sections as frames, Pada viewed the work cinematically. Along with von Tiedemann and Sullivan, Pada

created an intricate storyboard which articulated the multiple time periods the story covered, as well as the psychological dimensions she wanted it to reflect. Film footage depicting an array of images, coconut palm trees of southern India, jasmine flowers, Indian women carrying pots on top of their heads, a winter parka—the first gift from her husband upon arriving in Manitoba, images of nature shifted and dissolved continuously in the background signaling the geographical and culturally liminal crossings she had travelled. Other symbols of rites of passage also flashed across the screen: vignettes of her childhood, her marriage in India, motherhood in Manitoba expressed the corporeal transformation that represented her submersion in and re-emergence from the past; transformations that also altered their memory (Marks 2000).

[23] Cylla von Tiedemann's videography gave the 'memory sections' a dream-like quality that had the effect of altering spatial location and placing the audience by creating the illusion of the stage space having an interior and exterior. These images brought the audience into different spaces, while also often creating the illusion of the stage space being split: between an interior personal space and an external, public space of action. The ever-shifting relationship between these spaces was visually emphasized through the images shifting dimensions. At times the performing area appeared as if extended both in a downstage direction towards the audience and also



upstage towards the film images. The effect gave the scenes of the *Air Crash* and Pada's *Solo* a sense of being caught in a threshold between past and present. Von Tiedemann's projected photographs, in which fire and water are recurring images, provided powerful support for Pada's theme. Like Sullivan's soundscape, they mix jolting reality with purely poetic effects. Like the woman who called her after the Vision TV documentary and felt relieved that she had not been alone in her sorrow and guilt Pada hoped this dance would help dispel the ghostly remainder of lives cut short "I also feel that my audience needs to move, and move with me and learn with me that there are whole new ways of looking at things."

"In a tiny black box, the final moment recorded. How do unlock the box? What's the combination? I sleeplessly turn left, turn right, turn left."

[24] *Revealed* conveyed through dance and text events which, in the absence of other records became a vehicle of Pada's memory of, and future dreams for, her family. Autoethnography was a transformative tool for Pada in discovering her place in the 'new' world of awakened memory by linking forms of storytelling; connecting the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political (Bochner and Ellis 2002). Through the combination of text, dance and film Pada was freer to explore and keep

interpretive possibilities open. She found that a different present could weave itself around a memory image, triggered by a sensory perception.

“This work is a long emotional and spiritual journey for me that began at a very, very important time in my life about 15 years ago. It’s a work that I didn’t realize wanted to be told. It was a story inside me that found voice only about two years ago when a series of events took place in my life that gave me the courage and gave me the impetus to tell my story. I felt that I had a story that could be told through dance and I wasn’t quite sure if I had the courage to tell the story” (Pada 2001).

[25] At a time of a profound shock, time stands still; a similar movement infused Pada’s process. Little by little, Pada revisited the minute animations and tactility of her daily life after the crash. Details of her past re-captured her attention. Certain elemental experiences came forward, dancing into being a plot line of the present that Pada, her collaborators and her audience could inhabit—the smell of the jasmine flowers she wore in her hair as a child, the pongol kolam designs in front of houses, lotus flowers, the lakes of Bangalore. The difficulty of memory excavation grew less arduous, and along with it, her trust in the collaborative creative process grew enabling her to move between her past into the present toward the future. As an audience member, I could feel Pada’s memory images: the feel of her wedding sari,

her wedding jewelry, the biting cold of Manitoba winters, the feel of wet stones beneath her feet as she walks into a stream. One scene depicting Pada's widowhood after the crash showed the dancers circling around Lata, stripping her of her wedding jewellery and clothing, then pressing their blood stained hands against white cloth reminiscent of widows' sati. An image juxtaposed with huge red banners wave-like floating across the cyclorama. Such metaphors gave substance to her memories showing the "slippage between the symbolic and the 'real' and that the 'real' in dance, the body, holds in its hands our well-being, our mortality" (Hamera, 2002: 32).

***"The experience of being embodied is never a private affair..."<sup>vi</sup>***

The dance work was conceived in multiple locations. Pada and videographer von Tiedemann decided to take what was to become a fateful journey through southern India, filming an Indian imaginary evocative of Pada's remembered past. Their relationship was strained almost to the breaking point on this trip. Pada said that it later helped her "to confront the reality of my culture, of my history, of my past. "Pada's 'wound' of familial loss provided a way of making visible a set of interpenetrating cultural disciplines of the body. Pada felt completely out of her depth opening up this wound to public scrutiny. For one thing, there was a great fear of reprisal from the Indian community for this approach. As Foster observes, the classical Indian dancer is trained to develop what she calls the "storying

body” which facilitates projections of idealized gender representations, female goddesses and male gods (Foster 1996: 332). Pada was very aware that colonial and post-colonial images of Indian culture and notions of idealized feminine embodiment continue to influence contemporary opinions and practices of bharatanatyam. Moreover, popular bharatanatyam performances do not generally present the kind of knowledge with which Pada was operating, one difficult to recall and difficult to tell.

[27] Pada faced the pull of contradictory cultural traditions and expectations. Her primary collaborator, Cylla von Tiedemann, urged her to explore dimensions of psychological realism and theatrical audacity—to explore the ‘truth’ of the ‘character’ of Lata: “Here in North America, we do exactly the opposite. [Performers] strip themselves naked on stage to talk about their emotions and share everything.” (von Tiedemann 2001). On the other side was the voice of Pada’s guru<sup>vii</sup> questioning her motives: “Why would you tell your story onstage? It is the lives of the gods and goddesses who must be celebrated.” Pada recalls, “He thought I was bringing the work to a mundane level by telling my own story, and somehow cheapening the art form as a result. I knew I would be breaking with cultural conditioning with this work: my own and my audience’s.” Aware of the dim view that traditional bharatanatyam practitioners have regarding what is perceived as

narcissistic experimentation when choreographers attempt to innovate, Pada elaborates,

“We are trained that there are very specific ways of showing emotion in Indian dance, but it’s very stylized... if you want honesty and real emotions to come through then I feel you have to put aside stylization because it has to be lived in the body. Eventually I had to strip away all my training, put it aside... How did I react as a human being, not a dancer? How did I react and what would my body have said?” (Pada, 2000).

[28] Bringing Pada’s own narrative forward was pivotal to the realization of the powerful performance she envisioned. This performance would mine the gap inherent in the simultaneous therapeutic performance of a life and an expression of aesthetic values. But Pada couldn’t decide on how to work—through myth or through her memory. The following is an excerpt from one conversation that ensued on this question about six weeks before the performance between von Tiedemann, Pada and myself.

Pada: “I vacillated when I got to India. I thought that Cylla, with her photographic artistry and her love of India, and I could trace the nexus between dance and sculpture found in Indian temples, and how devadasi dance compositions evolved out of the temple and why they were so deeply devotional and philosophical in

content... But underlying it was always [my] story that wanted to be told. I didn't feel comfortable about it being the right kind of story because in India people are very, very private. We will do everything on the stage."

During this trip von Tiedemann had argued with Pada to risk making the core of the work her own story and not retreat from what in her view could be compelling theatre.

Pada: "So here was the whole dilemma: was my story one that could be told and did I have what it took to tell it? There were so many hurdles—I questioned it. I mean that trip through India... Remember how stressed out both of us were! Remember I had a tantrum?"

I had said to Cylla "I want to be filmed or photographed against those temples in Belur." Cylla replied, "What does that have to do with the project?" I said, "Well, I suppose not much but I'm not going to lose this chance to be photographed in front of these incredible temples. Could you please do this for me?" and she said, "OK." So I got up at 4am and got ready and looked horrible and was completely unexcited excited. But the night before we had a long talk in the hotel room and Cylla said, "You know, we really need to get down to what you want to say."

Von Tiedemann: "We didn't cancel the photo shoot though."

Pada: "We wouldn't have the 'script' if we had not gone on that personal, emotional, spiritual journey!"

Me: "It seems very courageous to put such a life experience on stage..."

Von Tiedemann: "It was but you can't believe how many barriers there were—emotional barriers. That was a very deep wound that Lata had healed with many, many patches. But I think it never heals, it cannot heal. So I always knew you had it in you to do this piece but it was so deeply buried. It was like unpeeling a big bandage over a deep wound, taking everything off until you got to the bare wound again. There was a lot of resistance on your part."

Pada: "There was. You're always afraid to take the scab off an old wound because you don't know what is going to happen... But I guess you just get to a point where you say, it's worth making that leap—both ways, both artistically and emotionally. And they just seemed to come together."

Me: "What do you feel was the turning point – the point when you decided to just go for it?"

Von Tiedemann: "When we actually got to putting down the storyline in Shridhari, Kerala in the beginning of Dec. 2000 we began to imagine how it could look and how we'd deal with it. It

was a really good exchange. I thought it was the first step in a true artistic collaboration. That's where we had the idea of the storyboard was in India. The biggest and most difficult part of the collaboration was, for me, that we both were often were working separately because we were so busy. But now, when I think back, I understand that Lata needed that time. We'd push it so far and then have to leave it alone, pushed it again and then left it alone. I am extremely impatient, so for me that was very hard to be patient with this. Normally, I like to manifest things fast; I am not used to that process of work where you work for such a long period of time on one piece."

Pada: "When we traveled through the villages of India, the temple sites, and as we went from Kerala in the south to Rajasthan in the north, our process, being together, provoking each other, challenging each other, was where this work was beginning to find its clarity. She was realizing, and so was I, that it truly was about what I wanted to say. I can't thank Cylla enough for having provoked me and yet at this time it was a difficult and awkward situation because we weren't coming to terms with what this work needed to be. I was afraid that I didn't have the justification to tell this story. But to make a long story short, that journey that we took to India was extremely



important. Out of it came the revelation that here was the story of a woman that could be both personal and universal.”

[29] For Pada the working process not only meant relinquishing her identification with the institutions and social practices from which she had been trained and recapitulating the loss of her family in the Air India tragedy, but it also meant a new and un-programmatic approach to choreography. As she got deeper into this creative process Pada was more able to allow for the highly charged overlapping synaesthesia of all the senses that are become involved in rhythm, language, film and movement. The boundaries between notions of heritage and contemporary bharatanatyam practice as being never quite complete were also revealed. Though sections of dance and music had been completed, the ambient music, spoken text and video and film images had yet to be finalized. It wasn't until the end of December 2000 that the storyboard was up and finalized leaving only two months until the premiere.

***“In the boxes I found a tape of the girls’ voices... this is the intimacy that death forces upon us.”***

Pada's uncovering of personal identity was a participatory process for all her collaborators. Pada emphasized how, in working with Tim Sullivan,

musician and creator of the sound score, they discovered together the importance of re-tracing the grieving process:

Pada: "To collaborate with someone who can get into the skin of your work is very important because collaboration can be either very superficial incredibly confrontational. Then you start building walls and you want to keep that territory to yourself because you don't want to become vulnerable again. It requires an enormous amount of strength on both sides to be able to get that [understanding] ...Timothy pushed me to understand, or actually reflect and contemplate and open up those wounds, to talk about it, because it was important to him to also figure out what textures and emotions and what moods he needed to bring to the sound score."

Sullivan: "One of the things we did see working on this piece was a theme of grieving following Kubler-Ross' model<sup>viii</sup>. The second section is an immediate movement into Lata's past... a state of shock. And then there's the remembering, of her marriage, her life in India before finally getting to the air crash, which is the point where the past meets the future. We graphed what happens when you're riding these waves between reality, between the present, and the memories. You move away from the memories back to the present and then drift back to the

memories, back to the present, back to the memories and the two finally converge" (Sullivan, 2001).

[31] A riveting moment took place during the performance at the sound of her daughters' voices, captured on a phone cassette recording, just prior to their boarding the plane. Pada had held on to this cassette but hadn't the heart to listen to it in all the intervening years since the plane crash. Sullivan entreated Pada to include the taped message as part of the soundscape to which Pada finally agreed. An electric current went through the audience at the sound of her daughters' voices. It was an eerie moment, hearing the innocent past speak to us through the girls' voices just shortly before they boarded the plane. Pada once told me, "I used to go to bed at night wondering what the girls wore on the plane, if they had eaten, if Vishnu had been tired." Pada's decision to use it in the sound score of the dance had an electrifying impact on the audience. She had never been able to bring herself to listen to it until the making of *Revealed*. The collaborators themselves were unprepared for the intensity of the experience. The sound of weeping could be heard throughout much of the audience. Many of the spectators had suffered personal losses in the Air India tragedy but others were experiencing Pada's trial by fires mediated by their own experience. But at the sound of her children's voices there wasn't a dry eye in the theatre. The

trace of their voices gestured to a past, more importantly, this trace gestured to a past in which Pada had never been present.

***"All my mothers, a line through me, a sounding of voices, who am I? All my mothers are living through me. Who am I? I am the journey. The only way out is through."***

An image that kept coming back to me time and again as I watched this process with everyone working to retrieve memory images, sounds, tastes—a feeling—was the idea that the trauma of losing her family seemed to mean a loss of parts of Pada's own corporeality. As Grosz (1994) observes, in the studies of the phantom limb phenomenon, disturbance in body image affects not only the way an individual perceives and experiences her own body, but may also affect the individual's ability to relate her present position or wished-for goals of action. In a related manner, objects "external" to the body are often incorporated by the body image; objects or implements, and I would add, human others with which the subject continually interacts also become unconsciously invested parts of one's body image and, in turn, sense of self. The memory is full of such objects. By Grosz' account the extent to which body image operates as a kind of body-knowledge is essential to one's ability to move forward, to act; making clear the inextricable link between corporeality and agency. As the work on *Revealed* progressed I noticed that it began to develop a tactile and

contagious quality, something the audience could brush up against and feel like another body. Recuperating the physical memory of her past also worked forward allowing the viewer multiple options to interact with the work.

***"The Solo: All my mothers, a line through me. Beginning with the ending. End of all beginnings. Who am I? I am the journey. I have always been here."***

The cross-fertilization between artistic genres expanded the possibilities for Pada's dance work. The multimedia nature of this work multiplied the metaphors as well as their contexts. This was most apparent in her solo which was improvised every performance and was the only unchoreographed moment in the whole programme. It formed the climax of the piece.

[34] Lata's lower body seemed weighted down initially, as if she struggled against a great heaviness and was barely able to pull herself off the ground. At the same time her arms and upper body were in a frenzy of sharp, percussive movements; abandoned homeless, and adrift knowing she can't go back and unsure of the future. The stage was lit by shards of diagonal light. Lata attempted, tentatively, to walk as if searching for footing, stubbornly attempting to navigate her fate. Spoken text over the movement,

and a collage of film images, resonated as a kind of talking-back to fate. The hesitancy in her gesture was sharply interrupted at times by stabbing and clutching movements like someone needing to surface through deep water for air. The solo was a kind of voluntary disorientation, a loss of control even over the meaning of the solo, a moment of contradiction in which she has not yet discovered the new being which it affirms.

[35] Her movement now steadily percussive and determined had a definite rhythm puncturing the space around her lit red by video footage of a streaming silk panel. An end of mourning, a relinquishing of the search for loved ones who can only be partially recalled. These lost loved ones were not only family but places and even ways of inhabiting the world, and end to the terrors of the past. Such healing of the past was a necessity both for Lata as well as many in the audience. One of the last images in the dance was Lata walking along a rocky shore. She appears to want to leap into the ocean whose engulfing presence urges her to swim or die, to become a convergent point through which the ocean's divergent forces flow... it is a beginning again.

### ***Conclusion***

"It is more recent that intercultural dance artists are in a position to question the historical archive, both Western and traditional, in order to read

their own histories in its silences or to force a gap in the archive so that they have a space in which to speak" (Marks 2000: 20). To undertake this kind of work often requires the sometimes traumatic interrogation of personal and family memories, only to create an empty space where no history is certain. This can be a psychically draining experience. It can also be generative of new knowledges. *Revealed By Fire* was a work that gave Pada a way to question her relationship not only to her family and her past but also her relationship to a way of knowing the world. The multi-media collaboration destabilized a narrative she had cultivated about what represented legitimate forms of knowledge that could be embodied by classical dance while mobilizing other forms of expressiveness. The re-conceptualizing of social space allowed for the creation of a distinctive cultural space that may be defined and re-defined not by fixed, unchanging categorical relations of class, ethnicity or gender, but by a constantly shifting array of culturally defined relations (Jeyasingh 1998). Individual voices have a double claim: to personal self-expression as well as dissent, asserting the freedom to articulate alternative visions over pressures to represent an entire culture. *Revealed By Fire* marked for Pada a means of challenging hierarchical religious and cultural paradigms.

[37] *Revealed* went beyond the dramatization of one woman's world demonstrating that mythological containers are also the repositories of

individual experience. Her grief may be individual or widely shared but in *Revealed By Fire* it became a collective experience in which the dancer, her company, her collaborators and her audience could all share. *Revealed by Fire* was the result of a tentative process of creation that began in the time of grieving: in effect the scent that arises from funeral garlands. This work described a process that moved from deconstructing dominant social and cultural histories to creating new conditions for stories; the holding of artifacts of culture in order to coax from them memories, and from memories, stories.

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<sup>i</sup> *Revealed by Fire* incorporates original text by dramaturge Judith Rudakoff and spoken by Pada, film and film design by dance photographer Cylla von Tiedemann, Carnatic music score by R.A. Ramamani, and sound engineering and composition by musician and composer Timothy Sullivan. *Sampradaya Dance Creations* include dancers Anandhi Narayanan, Lakshmi Venkataraman, Rajkumari Chatterjee, Aneela Maharaj, Shubha Navaratnasingam.

<sup>ii</sup> My primary research was conducted in Toronto as well as Chennai, where I traveled for insight into comparative approaches contemporary bharatanatyam performance, speaking to bharatanatyam performers and choreographers as well as dance scholars and critics. Pada gave generously of her time to answer my endless questions as did the other collaborators on the project: Timothy Sullivan, sound composition, Cylla von Tiedemann, visual design and videography and Judith Rudakoff dramaturgy and final text and especially dancers, Anandhi Narayanan, Lakshmi Venkataraman. The original score was composed by R.A.Ramamani from India and in place by the time I came into the project. I conducted formal and informal interviews with Pada and her three primary collaborators in the chaotic and creative conception between June 2000 and January 2001. I recorded and transcribed interviews and where recording devices were intrusive or I was not able to record more informal conversations I took notes from memory. I attended all the working rehearsals Pada held with her dance company in studio as well as tech/dress rehearsals that took place in Pada's home studio, where Lata's mother so hospitably cooked for, and fed me along with dancers, musicians and tech crew, considering me 'part of the company' by that point.

<sup>iii</sup> This is certainly open to interpretation and many would argue that the solo form is a relic of another era. However bharatanatyam 'virtuosity' might include are an ability to hold the stage in solo dance, tasteful choice of music, performance stamina, *abhinaya* or nuanced emotional expression, clarity of movement and, in the case of traditional performances, the ability to evoke the spirit of the Hindu gods and goddesses whose stories are being portrayed.

<sup>iv</sup> All the textual quotations are from the play text written and developed by Rudakoff in conjunction with Pada unless otherwise indicated.



<sup>v</sup> Sita famous wife of the god-king Rama undergoes voluntary self-immolation to prove her fidelity to Rama throughout her captivity by the demon-king Ravana putting to rest any doubt about her character.

<sup>vi</sup> Tamisari, 2000: 274.

<sup>vii</sup> Pada's first dance guru was Kalaimamani Guru Kalyanasundaram and later Padmabhushan Kalanidhi Narayanan.

<sup>viii</sup> Elizabeth Kubler Ross' five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance.

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