

[CHAKRA: spins India in youth ballet](#)

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How do you teach children about love and humanity and a higher power? If you're Jacques d'Amboise, director of the National Dance Institute in New York, you gather the wit and wisdom of an ancient culture and distill it into a music and dance extravaganza. This June, audiences in New York saw children of every race participate in the musical Chakra - almost a United Nations with bells on their ankles. The 1,000 children - Caucasian, oriental, Asian and Afro-American - were from 26 schools in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Jersey City, all participants in the In-School program of the National Dance Institute. Jacques d'Amboise, former New York City Ballet principal dancer, created the institute fifteen years ago.

Chakra - A Celebration of India is the result of a three-year collaboration sponsored by the Indo-US Subcommission on Education and Culture. Says d'Amboise of his visit to India, "It was phenomenal. It's one place you can never get out of you. It's affected how I think about art about people, and about religion. It's a very profound influence."

In writing Chakra, which he also directed and choreographed along with choreographers from India and America, d'Amboise was influenced by characters from the epics and the Panchatantra tales from India. Chakra is the story of Nandan and Nandini, a pair of twins, ("representing the male and female in each of us") who go through life in search of enlightenment, learning many valuable lessons along the way. As d'Amboise explains, "The first thing they learn is humility. They cannot tell the river to change its course. Everyone has to fit in with nature. Everyone has his place and flow in nature." By almost losing each other in the desert, the twins realize the power of love and sharing. And when there is an argument between an elephant and an ant, the twins learn that wise decisions will always be based on humility and love. The one who teaches them this important lesson is none other than Hanuman, the monkey god, d'Amboise notes, "He is the perfect example of super strength, wise and yet human, understanding of human foibles, courageous yet cunning." Hanuman was played magically by the performance artist Michael Moschen, who along with d'Amboise, is the recipient of a McArthur Foundation "genius" grant.

Indeed. Chakra brought together celebrity performers with school children on a professional stage for the first time, and the result was magic and exuberance. Mallika Sarabhai, one of India's great dancers who has also acted in Peter Brook's Mahabharata, was the mistress of ceremonies as well as the storyteller. One of the highlights of the show was "The Gift-Giving Cow" danced by Mallika Sarabhai and choreographed by her and d'Amboise, with original music written and sung by the celebrated folksinger Judy Collins:

Cow of beauty, cow of light,

You are a cow of karmic beauty,

You have seen and done your duty

No one must defile you ever

Slaughtered you will not be - never

Buddha, Krishna and Arjuna

Sing your praise, sing your praises

Cow, you are so fabulous, incredible and

generous.

Mother Cow was danced by Donlin Foreman of the Martha Graham Dance Company. Sadidharan Nair, renowned kathakali dancer performed a solo dance which unleashed the power of kathakali. Five very talented young dancers from Madras Bharatakalanjali Academy of Dance and Music performed "The Dance of the Hand Maidens" choreographed by the Academy's founder, V.P. Dhananjayan. Composer David Amram conducted an original score based on a traditional 10-beat rhythmic pattern widely used in Indian music.

The scores of colorful papier mach[?] masks worn by the dancers were made by students in city schools. Hundreds of beige dhotis were flown in from India and tie-dyed in the varied hues of nature for the performers who played the river, the forest and the desert. Artist Red Grooms created a backdrop of a massive Indian temple, created from hundreds of foam rubber blocks, intricately carved and painted with Indian motifs. The young performers 'wearing' the blocks became part of the temple.

Chakra was magical entertainment - and much more. It taught viewers and performers alike about the wonders and wisdom of India, and by merging Eastern and Western talents, it brought the two cultures a few steps closer.

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