Tagore in Dance
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THEATRE

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India loved Hollander's ballet rendition of Rabindra Sangeet'

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The songs and compositions of Rabindranath Tagore, "Rabindra Sangeet," are very dear to us Indians. The Bengalis, especially, are immensely possessive and sentimental about Tagore. Mention "Rabindra Sangeet" and one visualizes women in red-bordered white saris with Rajnigandha flower garlands adorning their necks swaying in slow rhythm to Tagore's compositions in true Shantiniketan dance style, which Tagore himself had fathered.

Jonathan Hollander is an American choreographer and avid admirer of Indian classical dance. His Battery Dance Company of New York celebrated the culture of India and the 50th year of Independence through the three-hour original ballet, "Songs of Tagore & Other Dances."

Hollander's rendition of Tagore's songs is different--it is a sincere and innovative effort of a committed choreographer to re-evaluate the poetic visions of Tagore in Western

contemporary terms. It is also the first time that a Western choreographer has created dances for Tagore's poetry. The March 7 evening at the J.N. Tata auditorium in Bangalore was overflowing with expectancy. Most of Bangalore's Bengali babus were there, along with the city's cultural elite--all "on invitation only."

Hollander dexterously wove the evening from the harsh "Summer" heat and dust, to the refreshing "Monsoon," to the themes of "Love," eventually soaring to the ultimate bliss of "Spirituality." He used ten celebrated songs of Tagore in this sojourn. Some of his own compositions performed earlier in the US, such as "The Travellers" and "Seen by a River," were interspersed into the ballet.

Hollander's team of six dancers were visual poetry in rhythm, underscoring the universality of Tagore's poetry. Much as we looked forward to seeing Hollander alongside his "six," he chose instead to take the mike elegantly clad in a gorgeous peacock green silk robe--to compÃ¨re.

"In 1994 I heard a song of Tagore when I went to Calcutta, and from that very moment I had this burning message in my head to create a ballet--'Songs of Tagore.' But I had absolutely no clue how I would gather the information I would need to steep myself in Tagore's music," said Hollander. Through a friend he met Samir and Sanghamitra Chatterjee in New York, and could not have asked for more. Those of us who saw this ballet returned mesmerized by Sanghamitra's rendering of Tagore's lyrics, backed by Samir's perfect tabla. In fact, her rendering dispelled all commonly held and wholly false notions that

Rabindra Sangeet could be slow and boring, a suspicion fortified by many past singers of the work.

While Hollander had choreographed all but one piece using Battery dancers, he tapped the local dance great Mallika Sarabhai for the finale, Mamo chitte niti. She launched the audience into another world of beauty as she danced to lyrics including: "In my soul, all the time, someone is dancing. Oh, what a joy, what a joy. Day and night, dance of freedom and confinement. I too join the dance and find my fulfillment."

"Songs of Tagore," which premiered at the French Institute in New York in 1995, has seen 30 shows all over the US, six in Poland, one in Sri Lanka and over 24 now in India. Jonathan's deft handling of the sensitive lyrics of the Nobel Prize-winning poet has received rave reviews from every major newspaper and magazine in India. This ballet has successfully left an indelible beauty mark on the face of modern dance.