

Dancer's dreams live on

The rich legacy of a creative and pioneering Australian is helping to strengthen cultural bonds between Australia and its Asian neighbours.

Josie Gibson reports.

Until Tara Rajkumar opened the trunk stored in the archives of Monash University's Music department all those years ago, Louise Lightfoot had been nothing more than a name to her. But once she began delving through its contents - the diaries, papers and artistic mementos - the spell was cast.

The Indian-born dancer and choreographer was so inspired by what she discovered from Lightfoot's mementoes that she created a dance theatre show about the life of this fascinating Australian expatriate. Premiered to great acclaim in both Australia and India, *Temple Dreaming* interweaves the stories of Rajkumar and Lightfoot, two immigrants dedicated to maintaining the powerful, highly stylised form of southern Indian temple dance known as kathakali.

A central motif in *The God of Small Things*, the popular first novel by Indian writer Arundhati Roy, kathakali was revived from near-extinction in the 1930s by a handful of people, among them Louise Lightfoot.

Fortuitous stop

By all accounts, Lightfoot was an exceptional woman. Possibly Australia's first female architect, she was an assistant to Walter Burley Griffin, designer of the nation's new capital, Canberra. But in 1926 her love of dancing triumphed over security and she left her job to set up a ballet school, going on to produce what could be called the first Australian ballet.

In 1937, Lightfoot was sailing for England when her ship docked in Bombay. It was a fortuitous stop.

"A very strange thing happened to me when we neared the shore of India and were standing on the deck watching the figures on the wharf grow more distinct," Lightfoot wrote. "I had never had any special interest in India. My heart was set on Europe ... I was amazed then at this great flood of ecstasy which now came over me - ecstasy, anticipation, reverence, yearning, a bursting sensation as if my whole body would dissolve. I remember as we walked the streets of Bombay that day, I had the feeling of being 'home at last'."

For all her planning and forcefulness, Lightfoot had encountered a force she could not resist, "a destiny, as they say in the gestures of kathakali, that was written on my forehead".

Lightfoot ended up staying in Asia much of her life, performing and promoting the temple dances not only of India but also of other Asian nations struggling to preserve their ancient cultures in the face of malaise and colonial dictates. The Australian was

instrumental in taking both artists and art forms to Australia, America and Europe, and in mentoring dancers who would become custodians of their countries' cultural heritage.

"Louise Lightfoot was a woman far ahead of her time," says Rajkumar, an internationally renowned performer and choreographer and founder of the Academy of Indian Classical Dance in Britain. "In addition to taking kathakali out of India for the first time, she contributed in a major way to popularising Indian dance within India at a critical period in the renaissance of the classical dance styles."

Now an honorary fellow in Monash's Music department and a research associate of the Monash Asia Institute, Rajkumar is concentrating on developing the Lightfoot vision even further with plans for a Monash foundation to promote the maintenance and development of contemporary Asian performing arts in Australia. Through such efforts, she argues, centuries-old traditions will not only evolve but enrich the process of innovative contemporary performance.

"The whole performing arts scene is changing tremendously, with people like myself taking traditions from one culture to another," Rajkumar says. "I don't want to call it 'global art' - more transmigratory. What I'm doing here is finding new ways of communicating in the country to which I've brought my tradition. If one doesn't do this, the tradition dies off."

Louise Lightfoot died in Melbourne, the city of her birth, in 1978. But for Tara Rajkumar, this unique Australian's vision continues to evolve, like the dance forms she worked so diligently to preserve.



Architect and dancer Louise Lightfoot was instrumental in taking Asian dancers and their art forms to the Western world.



Respected dancer and choreographer Tara Rajkumar is keen to promote and develop contemporary Asian performing arts in Australia.

Source: <http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/monmag/issue3-99/item-05.html>