



Saturday, December 2, 2017, 8pm

Sunday, December 3, 2017, 3pm

Zellerbach Playhouse

Ragamala Dance Company

Written in Water

Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy, *artistic directors*

Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy, *concept and choreography*

Ashwini Ramaswamy, *choreographic associate*

Amir ElSaffar and Prema Ramamurthy, *musical composition*

Development of the Musical Score:

Amir ElSaffar, Aparna Ramaswamy, and Ranee Ramaswamy, with the musical ensemble

Visual Art:

Original paintings by Keshav

Additional artwork by Nathan Christopher

Historical image provided by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

Dancers:

Aparna Ramaswamy, Ranee Ramaswamy, Ashwini Ramaswamy, Tamara Nadel, Jessica Fiala

Musical Ensemble:

Amir ElSaffar, *trumpet, santur, and vocal*; Preethy Mahesh, *vocal*;

Rohan Krishnamurthy, *mridangam*; Arun Ramamurthy, *violin*; Kasi Aysola, *nattuvangam*

Jeff Bartlett, *lighting design*

Maury Jensen, *sound engineer*

Mat Terwilliger, *lighting supervisor and production manager*

Rob Simmer, *video director*

Commissioned by the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (lead commissioner and developmental partner) and Opening Nights Performing Arts at Florida State University, Tallahassee.

Created in residence at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) at Florida State University, Tallahassee; the Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi; an NPN residency at The Yard in Martha's Vineyard, MA; and the Cowles Center for Dance and the Performing Arts in Minneapolis, MN.

Special thanks to Dr. Vasudha Narayanan at the University of Florida; Dr. Mark Elliott, senior curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge; and Dr. Savitri Puram (bhakthadasi.blogspot.com).

Cal Performances' 2017-18 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.

From the Choreographers

In *Written in Water*, we explore the concept of spiritual ascension through the second-century Indian board game Paramapadam (a precursor to Snakes & Ladders), the 12th-century Sufi text *The Conference of the Birds*, and the Hindu mythological story *Ksheerabthi Madanam*, the churning of the seven seas.

We have drawn upon *The Conference of the Birds* to frame the arc of *Written in Water*. The protagonists of this Sufi epic progress through seven valleys, representing states of being. With *Written in Water*, we mirror their journey through a world of psychological complexity, traversing experiences of spiritual longing, human love, unity with others, detachment from material life, and, finally, ultimate oneness with the divine.

In the first movement of *Written in Water*, we experience human life, love, and struggle, explored through the framework of the board game Paramapadam. The game board serves as a physical and metaphorical framework through which the seekers/dancers navigate snakes and ladders representing the heights of ecstasy and the depths of longing.

In the second movement, we explore the human quest for the divine. The mythological story of *Ksheerabthi Madanam* is a metaphor for a world in chaos. Amid this dynamic tension between good and evil, Vishnu stands for the perfect center toward which humans strive.

In the final movement, we journey toward transcendence—toward unmediated union with the divine.

In developing *Written in Water*, we played the game hundreds of times, using the floor as the board and our bodies as the game pieces. The projected images are from original paintings by Chennai-based visual artist Keshav, specially commissioned by Ragamala for this work. *Written in Water* was developed through an ongoing collaboration in which choreography, music, and visual art were constructed simultaneously in a constant artistic dialogue that spanned two years.

—Ranee Ramaswamy
and Aparna Ramaswamy

Ragamala Dance Company was founded in 1992 by Ranee Ramaswamy. Now in its 25th season under the direction of Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy (mother and daughter), Ragamala creates work that conveys a sense of reverence, of unfolding mystery, of universal celebration.

Ragamala has been hailed by the *New York Times* as, “soulful, imaginative and rhythmically contagious.” The company has toured extensively, highlighted by performances at the Kennedy Center (Washington, DC), Joyce Theater and Lincoln Center (New York City), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), American Dance Festival (Durham, NC), Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT), Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Just Festival (Edinburgh, UK), Bali Arts Festival (Indonesia), Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India), and National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India).

Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy are artistic directors, choreographers, and principal dancers of Ragamala Dance Company, which was founded by Ranee in 1992. As dance-makers and performers, they explore the dynamic tension between the ancestral and the contemporary, making dance landscapes that dwell in opposition—secular and spiritual life, inner and outer worlds, the human and the natural, rhythm and stillness—to find the transcendence that lies in between. As mother and daughter, each brings her generational experience to the work—the rich traditions, deep philosophical roots, and ancestral wisdom of India meeting and merging with their hybridic perspectives as Indian-American artists. As proteges and senior disciples of legendary dancer/choreographer Alarmél Valli—renowned as one of India’s greatest living masters—Ranee and Aparna trained in the South Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam, which is the bedrock of their creative aesthetic.

Ranee and Aparna’s work is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, National Dance Project, MAP Fund, The McKnight

Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, New Music/USA, USArtists International, and the Japan Foundation, and has been commissioned by the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Lincoln Center Out of Doors (New York), Krannert Center (University of Illinois), Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center (University of Maryland), Opening Nights Performing Arts (Florida State University), and Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi (UAE), and they have developed work in residence at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography and an NPN residency at The Yard. Most recently, Raneé and Aparna were selected as Research Fellows by the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center (Italy).

Raneé currently serves on the National Council on the Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. She is recipient of a 2014 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a 2012 United States Artists Fellowship, a 2011 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and 14 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Choreography and Interdisciplinary Art.

Aparna is recipient of a 2016 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award and a 2016 Joyce Award. Described by the *New York Times* as “thrillingly three-dimensional... rapturous and profound,” she has received three McKnight Artist Fellowships for Dance and Choreography and a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and was selected as one of *Dance Magazine’s* “25 to Watch” for 2010. Her solo work, presented with live music, has toured the US and India with support from the National Dance Project and USArtists International. Aparna is an empaneled artist with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and serves on the board of trustees of Dance/USA.

Amir ElSaffar (*composer, trumpet, santur, maqam vocal*) has distinguished himself with a mastery of diverse musical traditions and a singular approach to combining Middle Eastern musical languages with jazz and other styles of contemporary music. A recipient of the 2013 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, ElSaffar

has been described as “uniquely poised to reconcile jazz and Arabic music without doing either harm” (*The Wire*) and “one of the most promising figures in jazz today” (*Chicago Tribune*). He currently leads several critically acclaimed ensembles: Two Rivers, which combines the musical languages and instrumentation of Iraqi *maqam* and contemporary jazz; the Amir ElSaffar Quintet, performing ElSaffar’s microtonal compositions with standard jazz instrumentation; Safaafir, the only ensemble in the US performing and preserving the Iraqi *maqam* in its traditional format; the Alwan Ensemble, the resident ensemble of Alwan for the Arts, specializing in classical music from Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq; and his newest project, the Rivers of Sound ensemble, featuring 17 musicians from a broad spectrum of traditions ranging from *maqam* to American jazz. In addition, he has worked with jazz legend Cecil Taylor and prominent jazz musicians such as Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway, Marc Ribot, Henry Grimes, and Oliver Lake. ElSaffar has appeared on numerous recordings, and has released six under his own name, *Maqams of Baghdad* (2005), *Two Rivers* (2007), *Radif Suite* (2010), *Inana* (2011), *Alchemy* (2013), and *Crisis* (2015). For more information, please visit www.amirelsaffar.com.

Prema Ramamurthy (*composer*) has been a respected vocalist and composer for more than four decades. She was initiated into music by her parents, the late Sri S. Nagaraja Iyer and Smt. Jayalakshmi, and her grandfather, Sri S. Srinivasa Iyer. Ramamurthy has had further intensive training under the great Maestro “Padmavibhushan” Dr. Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna. She has also trained in *pallavi* singing with Vidwan Sri T. V. Gopalakrishnan, and learned the art of singing *padams* and *javalis* from the veteran musician Mrs. T. Muktha. Ramamurthy is an A-TOP Grade Artist of All India Radio and Doordarshan Television. She has won critical acclaim as a composer, and has performed in many of the top venues and festivals in India, the US, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, Mexico, and South Africa.

Keshav has had a passion for drawing since childhood, but does not have formal training in art. He learned from museums and art books, and was influenced by the Renaissance masters and the Impressionists. After seeing the work of the Indian master Ravi Varma, his interest turned toward Indian art. In 1983 he began contributing his drawings to *Ananda Vikatan*—a magazine that was a guiding light for all artists/cartoonists in South India—and sketching musicians at the Music Academy in Chennai. In 1987 he began contributing cartoons to the national newspaper *The Hindu*. He eventually joined the staff at *The Hindu* as cartoonist, where he has remained for more than 28 years. Meanwhile, Keshav continued with his passion for the arts. His quest in Indian art led him to discover the treasures in temples and the symbolism used in the Indian epics, and he started to see Indian art and what it communicates in a new light. This led him into the world of Krishna. Keshav began a journey into symbols, fascinated with the ways abstract ideas could be communicated through simple metaphors that have stood the test of time. In 2006 his one-man show, *Krishna Leela*, was presented in Chennai, and later in Bangalore. Keshav paints in oil, watercolors, acrylics, charcoals, and pastels. For the past several years he has been painting one Krishna a day (#krishnafortoday) and sharing it in his blog and social media postings. Keshav has a master's degree in commerce from Madras University. "Cartooning is my profession, painting is my passion." For more information, visit www.kamadenu.blogspot.com.

Ashwini Ramaswamy (*choreographic associate, dancer*) has studied Bharatanatyam with Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy—her mother and sister—since the age of five. She now has the honor of studying under Bharatanatyam legend Alarmél Valli. The *New York Times* describes Ashwini as "imbuing her refined, sculptural muscularity with a tranquility that contrasts with the springy exuberance of her feet... there is a continual flow of energy coursing through her limbs." Ashwini has toured extensively with Ragamala, performing throughout the US and in Russia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, the UK,

UAE, and India. She is a McKnight Artist Fellow for Dance, and the recipient of grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board, USArtists International, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, and the Jerome Foundation. Ashwini's choreographic work has been presented by Augsburg College, Ritz Theater, and Red Eye Theater (Minneapolis, MN), and Triskelion Arts (Brooklyn, NY). Her most recent project, *Kirana*, co-created with Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy, was presented at the Joyce Theater (NY) in 2017. She is currently collaborating with Raneer and Aparna on their forthcoming *Body, the Shrine*. Ashwini is the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's Liquid Music Series' artist-in-virtual-residence this season; that ensemble has commissioned a work from her, to be premiered in 2019. She is also Ragamala's director of publicity and marketing, and holds a degree in English literature from Carleton College. Ashwini currently serves on the board of Arts Midwest.

Tamara Nadel (*dancer*) is a disciple of Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy and a founding member of Ragamala. She has toured extensively with the company, highlighted by performances at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, American Dance Festival, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, NYU Abu Dhabi (UAE), Just Festival (Edinburgh, UK), National Centre for Performing Arts (Mumbai, India), and Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India), and appearances in Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Russia. Nadel is a McKnight Fellow in Dance, and a recipient of grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board, Minneapolis Jewish Federation, Metro Regional Arts Council, Rimón: the Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, and the Jerome Foundation. She is currently working with choreographer Raneer Ramaswamy on a solo work rooted in the writings of the Sephardic Jewish poets of Golden Age Spain. Nadel is Ragamala's director of institutional development and holds a degree in religious studies and dance from Macalester College. She served on the City of Minneapolis Arts Commission from 2008–10, and is currently on the board of Minnesota Citizens for the Arts.

Jessica Fiala (*dancer*) has been studying with Raneé and Aparna Ramaswamy since 2006 and has toured with Ragamala throughout the US and to India, the UK, and the UAE. She is a teacher at the Ragamala School and has taught across the US and in Bangkok, Thailand. Fiala holds an interdisciplinary master's degree in museum studies and cultural studies from the University of Minnesota, and has written about Bharatanatyam, museum history, and public art. She has presented research at conferences at the University of Naples "l'Orientale" (2013), University of Shanghai (2016), and University of Pittsburgh (2016), and participated on a panel for the Society of Dance History Scholars' *Beyond Authenticity and Appropriation* conference. Her writing on museums is included in the anthology *The Ruined Archive* (2014), and she was a research coordinator for the 2015 International Award for Public Art. Fiala is a research associate at Lutman & Associates.

Preethy Mahesh (*Carnatic vocal*) has been accompanying eminent dancers since 2003. She belongs to the traditional school of music initiated by respected guru Sangitha Kalanidhi Shri D.K. Jararaman, and later came under the tutelage of Tanjore Shri S. Kalyanaraman. A graded artist of All India Radio, Mahesh has several recordings to her credit, many in collaboration with dancer Smt. Priyadarsini Govind. She has toured widely as an accompanist to many of India's most renowned dancers, performing at prestigious festivals and venues around the world with performers including Alarmél Valli, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Priyadarsini Govind, Revathi Ramachandran, Rukmini Vijaykumar, Shobana, and the Dhanajayans. Mahesh is the recipient of the Best Dance Vocalist award from Sri Krishna Gana Sabha (Chennai, India), and the Bharatalaya Trust honored her with the title Gana Kokilam.

Rohan Krishnamurthy (*mridangam*), described as the "pride of India" by the *Times of India*, is a musical ambassador specializing in Indian percussion. He received advanced training from the esteemed Indian master Guruvayur Dorai.

Distinguished as a soloist, composer, and collaborator, Krishnamurthy performed with legendary Indian musicians and Grammy Award-winning artists such as Glen Velez, Anoushka Shankar, and Vishwa Mohan Bhatt. An acclaimed educator, he earned a PhD in musicology from the Eastman School of Music in New York. Krishnamurthy has presented and taught at renowned institutions including the Eastman School of Music, Harvard University, and A.R. Rehman's K.M. Conservatory of Music (India). He directs the award-winning RohanRhythm Percussion Studio, which has attracted dozens of students from around the globe. Krishnamurthy holds a patent for a novel drum tuning system that is now available worldwide. For more information, please visit www.RohanRhythm.com.

Arun Ramamurthy (*violin*) is a versatile violinist, composer, and educator based in New York City. A disciple of the celebrated Carnatic violinist brothers Dr. Mysore Manjunath and Sri Mysore Nagaraj, Ramamurthy has become one of the country's leading Indian classical and crossover musicians, performing internationally in traditional Carnatic and Hindustani settings and cross-genre creative projects. He has been fortunate to perform with artists such as Dr. Balamurali Krishna, Sudha Ragunathan, Anindo Chatterjee, T.N. Seshagopalan, Mashkoor Ali Khan, Marc Cary, and Awa Sangho. He leads the Arun Ramamurthy Trio, an ensemble that brings a fresh approach to age-old South Indian classical repertoire and *raga*-inspired originals. Praised by *All About Jazz* for "a beautiful, exotic, ear-opening listening experience," his trio's debut album *Jazz Carnatica* was picked by NPR's *New Sounds* as a "Top New Release." Ramamurthy is a co-founder and vice president of Brooklyn Raga Massive. He created the concert series Carnatic Sundays at Cornelia Street Café, an iconic jazz venue in New York's West Village. He teaches students of all levels, and has taught workshops at music schools, universities, conservatories, and summer music programs. For more information, please visit www.arunramamurthy.com.

Kasi Aysola (*nattuvangam*), co-founder and co-artistic director of Prakriti Dance, is a Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer, and performer who trained under his guru, Viji Prakash, for more than 10 years. Aysola has been privileged to work with leading exponents of Bharatanatyam including C.V. Chandrasekhar, Sudha Chandrasekhar, Bragha Bessel, Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, Harikrishna Kalayanasundaram, and Mythili Prakash. He has performed as a soloist in the US and India and toured with the Shakti Dance Company, Dakshina Dance Company, and Blue13 Dance Company. A versatile and eclectic artist, Aysola has continued his study of Indian dance and music, including Kuchipudi dance under Sri Vempati Ravi Shankar and Yamini Saripalli, and Carnatic music under Vanaja Dasika.

Jeff Bartlett (*lighting design*) has been honored to light Ragamala Dance Company since *A Canticle of Mary* in 1994. He has lit many of the company's signature works, including *Song of the Jasmine*, *Sacred Earth*, *1,001 Buddhas: Journey of the Gods*, *Yathra/Journey*, *The Transposed Heads*, *Body and Soul*, *Bhakti*, *Sthree*, and *Ihrah*. A dance lighting specialist based in Minneapolis, Bartlett has lit scores of artists in hundreds of productions over more than two decades. A 2008 Artist of the Year in *City Pages* magazine, his design work has also been recognized with a 2015 St Paul Cultural Star award, a 2014 Knight Arts challenge grant, 2010 and 2005 Sage Awards for Dance, and a 2003 McKnight Theater Artist Fellowship. Bartlett is the production manager and resident lighting designer at the Weitz Center for Creativity at Carleton College.

Support for the creation and touring of Written in Water was provided by a 2016 Joyce Award from the Joyce Foundation, the Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards program, and grants from New Music USA (made possible by annual program support and/or endowment gifts from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Baisley Powell Elebash Fund, and Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation), the National Endowment for the Arts, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), the Carolyn Foundation, and Caroline Amplat Giving.

Additional support for Ragamala's 25th Anniversary Season comes from The McKnight Foundation; the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; Target; the Dr. Dash Foundation, whose mission is to preserve and promote rich Indian heritage and culture; the Goodale Family Foundation; the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund; and members of Ragamala's "Rasika Circle."

For more on Ragamala Dance Company

For upcoming tour dates in the US and abroad, or to subscribe to Ragamala's e-newsletter, visit www.ragamaladance.org and info@ragamaladance.org.

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