

An Interview with Mr Aravinth Kumarasamy – Apsaras Arts Ltd

Apsaras Arts Ltd - Recipient of the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award 2020



Apsara Arts

Image Credit: National Heritage Board

Culture Academy	Congratulations to Apsaras Arts Ltd for receiving the award. Tell us about yourself and Apsaras Arts, what do you do, and what sets you apart?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	I am Aravinth Kumarasamy, the artistic director for Apsaras Arts. Apsaras arts is an Indian classical dance company, it was established in 1977. Apsaras arts stands apart in being not just an academy which trains and teaches Singaporeans, but is also a repertory company, where Singaporeans who are aspiring to be full time or part time Indian classical dancers are engaged and employed. The work of the repertory company is the bulk we do, the teaching portion is what we do to supplement it. We have a repertoire of productions, which we perform in Singapore and internationally.
Culture Academy	Apsaras Arts has received critical acclaim for its innovative performances. Could you tell us about your creative process?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	Using Indian dance from Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali to Manipuri, we have conceptualized and choreographed dance productions, which are inspired by Southeast Asian narratives and themes. For instance, in our last production – Anjaneyam: Hanuman’s Ramayana, we worked together with Javanese

	<p>musicians and dancers and were inspired by them. We retold the Ramayana from Hanuman, the monkey god’s point of view. We collaborated with dancers and musicians from different countries such as Singapore’s Era Dance theatre, India’s Kalakshetra Repertory Theatre, and Indonesia’s Bimo Dance Theatre. It is very unique to tell the common narrative shared by both Javanese and Indian culture on the same stage.</p> <p>Another iconic story we told is Angkor: the untold story, where we got Cambodian dancers and musicians to tell the story of behind the building the largest temple in the world, the Angkor Wat. Similarly, another production called Anjasa, brings the audience through a journey of all the Buddhist monuments of India, starting from India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, sharing the common narratives of Buddhist narratives across the region. This is what sets us apart - our thematic work. Our repertory productions have remained very popular in many places, especially India.</p>
Culture Academy	How do you encourage the uninitiated to understand and appreciate classical Indian dance?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	For serious learners, we have an academy that features Indian Classical Dance. They can go through an eight-year programme and graduate with a diploma. Besides that, we also teach in Community Centres, Ministry of Education schools, such as conducting dance classes at the heartlands. Before a production’s premiere, we conduct community engagement roadshows, where we head to locations like the National Library, schools etc, across Singapore to give them a sneak preview. This allows them to understand the work and encourage them to come and watch the dance. We do these community outreach events very regularly.
Culture Academy	The Covid-19 pandemic have nudged the performing arts towards digitalization. What are some of the challenges with digitalizing dance?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	<p>With the Covid-19 pandemic and the circuit breaker measures, we started running a lot of digital events. One of them include our spotlight series, where we use Zoom and invite experts to interact with dancers and dance lovers. We did this regularly and completed 10 such episodes bringing experts, scholars, or panels to speak. We also participated widely on the international stage through Instagram and other social media platform performances and festivals. Our dancers were able to perform from their home, and this was shared worldwide. The moment we were able to come back to our studio, we went back to create digital performances. Our key challenges were the availability of venue and videographers who are experienced in capturing dance. We also realized that almost all local performing venues did not support live streaming. So, we needed to capture the performance on video first, and then upload it later.</p> <p>Social distancing is also a challenge. We had to keep to a 2-metre distance, however, Indian dance can’t be done that way traditionally. So we have to re-think the choreography of our performances to adhere to these guidelines.</p>
Culture Academy	How have Apsaras Arts continued and expanded on the vision of founders Mr

	and Mrs Sathyalingam?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	Their vision was to create a repertory company. They both came from a line of world renown dance institution called Kalakshetra in Indian. They embarked on a new repertory here. When it was founded in 1977, it was a teaching academy. 15 years ago, we transformed it into a repertory company as well. Mr and Mrs Sathyalingam wanted to create opportunities for Singaporeans to be showcased overseas. We have intensively done that in the last decade. Our international tours have taken Singaporean artists to many places in the world.
Culture Academy	What is your advice for aspiring dancers and dance choreographers?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	<p>Because of the current pandemic, I would say that dancers and choreographers must find a way to be on the digital platforms. Digitalization is here to stay, even though we are likely to return to physical locations after vaccinations. This is because digital platforms allow us to reach out to international audiences. My advice is that they should think about how to use these digital platforms to cleverly showcase their work.</p> <p>I would also encourage dancers to watch a lot of performances. It's not just practicing your own craft under your own training programmes and mentor. You should take advantage of the easy online availability of these performances. Before the internet, I had to personally travel to watch these performances. I think by watching and imbuing them, they could get inspiration. Perhaps the inspiration would not immediately spark off new ideas, but they could come many years later at an unexpected time. This is important because everyone seems to be busy digitalizing, but not enough people have become busy watching these works.</p>
Culture Academy	Are there shortcomings to digitalization?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	Yes, for example, When we shoot a digital work, we assume that the audience would work on a television or laptop screen. However, many watch it on their smartphones as well. So, it affects the experience. Nevertheless, even the best screen is still not a real-life experience.
Culture Academy	What does this award mean to you?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	The award means that we have a greater responsibility to do two things: to nurture the culture and grow it. But also, to make it relevant and available for generations of Singaporeans in the future. This includes imparting the entire process of artmaking such as costume designs and music. This is another reason why digitalization is important; it is so that future generations could view them.
Culture Academy	What are some traits that make art in Singapore unique?
Aravinth Kumarasamy	Singapore is closely connected to the Asia Pacific region and Asian countries, both historically and physically. We are the crossroads between India and Southeast Asia. We would like to create more opportunities for Singaporeans to better appreciate these connections. In the arts, Indian dramatology is captured in Cambodia, Thailand and Javanese dance and there are many commonalities in

these cultures. Situated in the centre of it, we have the opportunity to reflect on these influences and take these artforms to its full potential.

Southeast Asian cultural artforms are unique, as they are very diverse. They are the same, but not the same.

In Singapore today, we go beyond the rojak idea of our artforms. We are looking at our commonalities. Singaporean art may not have a long history and culture, we may not have invented our own dance form and music form, but what makes us unique is that we are ready to open new concepts and always ready to collaborate. That makes us very unique. We celebrate this in all our cultures. The Peranakan culture, Singapore Indian culture, etc all show traces of the willingness to incorporate and cooperate. This is one of our key cultural traits that makes art uniquely Singaporean.