

# MANDALA

*South Asian  
Performing Arts*



[mandalaarts.org](http://mandalaarts.org)



A photograph of three women in traditional Indian attire performing a dance on stage. They are wearing sarees in shades of red, grey, and purple, adorned with gold jewelry including necklaces, earrings, and bangles. The woman in the center is looking towards the right, while the woman on the left is looking towards the center. The woman on the right is looking towards the center. The background is dark, suggesting a stage setting.

# Mandala Arts

**Mandala South Asian Performing Arts** is a MacArthur award-winning organization, founded by Artistic Director **Pranita Nayar**.

From classical to contemporary, Mandala Arts offers audiences an evocative exploration of the dance, theatre and music forms of South Asia.

Our performances and productions have a connection to ancient and classical traditions, ranging from the Indian Ocean to the Himalayas, and from Persia to Indonesia. These practices evolve into the lived experiences of diaspora artists. We are dedicated to sharing cultural exchanges and experiences through our Academy, our company performances (Mandala Ensemble), and our outreach programs. Mandala's Ensemble artists bring their far-ranging aesthetics and vocabularies into the work.

Mandala Arts has presented work at Chicago Symphony Center, Harris Theater, Logan Center for the Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, and with Auditorium Theater.

# Executive Artistic Director

**Pranita Nayar** founded Mandala Arts in 2014, where she serves as Executive Artistic Director. Pranita is a producer, curator, master teacher and choreographer whose work is rooted in South Asian dance forms and their changing contexts within the diaspora.

Pranita has been an exponent of Bharatanatyam in the Chicagoland region for over 30 years, and her path has flowed into deconstruction of the movement vocabulary – from gesture to reassemblage.

Pranita's work has received many honors; she has been a Lab Artist with Chicago Dancemakers Forum (2016), received three MacArthur Awards through her leadership in South Asian arts, and is an 11-time recipient of the Master Teacher award given by Illinois Arts Council.

Her work has been presented at the Lincoln Center, The Smithsonian Institute, Harris Theater (Chicago), the Olympics (Salt Lake City, 2002), and the MTV VMA's (Shakira). She has taught residencies and workshops at Harvard University, Northwestern University, University of Chicago, University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign and Chicago), Muhlenberg College, Franklin & Marshall College, Wayne State University, secondary schools and has worked intimately with Chicago Public Schools.





# Artistic Director

**Ashwaty Chennat** is a movement and theater artist, choreographer, and educator based in Chicago. She is a principal artist with Mandala Arts since 2016. Ashwaty began her extensive training in Southeast Michigan in Bharatanatyam (Sudha Chandrasekhar), as well as ballet, jazz and theater forms.

Her current work explores collaborations with musicians; she is working with jazz percussionist Alvin Cobb, Jr. to explore mental health narratives in communities of color, where they investigate rhythmic sequences found in Carnatic and jazz intersections.

She worked with western classical musicians in 2019 to set contemporary movement to Stravinsky's Firebird Suite (conductor: Sameer Patel, Chicago Sinfonietta). In 2016, she collaborated with renowned international cellist, Mauro Valli, to create movement for Bach's Suite in D Minor. She looks to find new expressions by identifying movement within visual and sonic mediums. Ashwaty's work has been presented at Chicago Symphony Center, the Art Institute of Chicago, McCormick Place (Chicago), the Logan Center for the Arts (Chicago), and Hill Auditorium (Ann Arbor).



# UNWINDING

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/KV6hu9AAICc>

*Choreography and Direction:* **Pranita Nayar** with assistance from **Ashwaty Chennat, Ashley Fargnoli, and Berit Godo**

*Music Production:* **Rich Rankin**

7 Performers, 2 Technical Staff,  
1 Operational Staff

*Runtime:* 70 Minutes



"Unwinding: a new body bhavam for Bharatanatyam" is a ground-breaking project that deconstructs the classical Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam. This work is the result of Pranita's 30-year career in Bharatanatyam education and presentation, investigating its origins and contexts.

Applying modern concepts to the grounded sculptural and rhythmic qualities of Bharatanatyam, Pranita finds triumphant playfulness and heart-warming self-discovery through her new movement. Set to field recordings of India's rural communities, "Unwinding" is charged with new expression, derived from the elements.

*"While I found myself again repeating that catchphrase about recontextualizing Indian dance for modern times leading up to the premiere of her newest evening-length work named after this process, "Unwinding" is actually accomplishing a deconstruction of Bharatanatyam like no other I've seen ... the way Nayar is dismantling the form feels like a radical act, an "unwinding" of centuries of tradition, layers upon layers of meaning which are tightly tied to the cultural fabric and spirituality of the people of India in ways that Western concert dance forms have never been."*

— Chicago Tribune



# CONVERSATIONS WITH DEVI

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/Gn7wdwS2MUM>



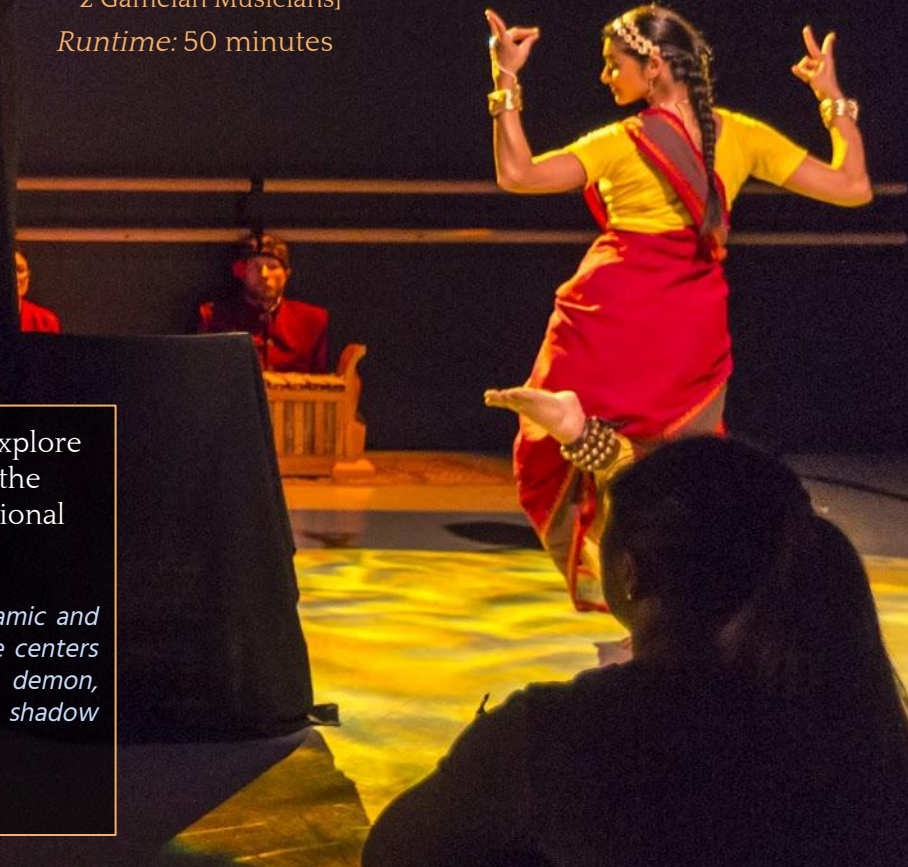
*Choreography: Pranita Nayar*

*Puppetry: I Gusti Pak Ngurah Kertayuda*

3 Dancers, 1 Puppeteer, 1-2 Technical Staff

[Additional Personnel: 1 Actor, 4 Carnatic Musicians,  
2 Gamelan Musicians]

*Runtime: 50 minutes*



Three tales of Devi, the goddess, come to life. Balinese Shadow Puppets explore the demons and textures of South Asian mythology. Complimented with the expressive storytelling and rhythms of Bharatanatyam, this multi-dimensional spectacle will explore the significance of womanhood.

*"Beautifully merging traditional Balinese shadow puppetry performed by the dynamic and animated I Gusti Ngurah Kertayudah with Bharata Natyam dance, this performance centers around the Goddess, Devi who combats the egotistical and power hungry demon, Asura...Nayar creates an interesting staging with two dancers on one side of the shadow puppet theater, and soloist on the other."*

— Dance Enthusiast



# TRADITIONAL REPERTOIRE

## *Classical South Asian Dance*

Video Link: [https://youtu.be/54Q\\_40b3brE](https://youtu.be/54Q_40b3brE)

1 or more Performers, 1 Operational Staff

*Runtime: 40 Minutes*

Mandala's Traditional Repertoire invites audiences to experience an ancient visual storytelling tradition of South Asia: classical dance. Through striking and geometric shapes, complex rhythmic sequences, and evocative expressions of the face and hands (gestures), poetry rendering heroes and demons, sensuous moonlit rendezvous and the gifts of motherhood are portrayed by a single artist.

*"...(the artists) found spaces to explore new expressions while maintaining generational continuity and honoring tradition...Classical Indian dance forms rely on Nritta, movement focused on precision, shapes, and rhythms, and Abhinaya, movement that tells stories through hand gestures and facial expressions. Nritta and Abhinaya create a back-and-forth, seamlessly building a strong energy within the dance artist called Bhakti, a complete surrender to the music, dance, and story."*

— See Chicago Dance





# FIREBIRD

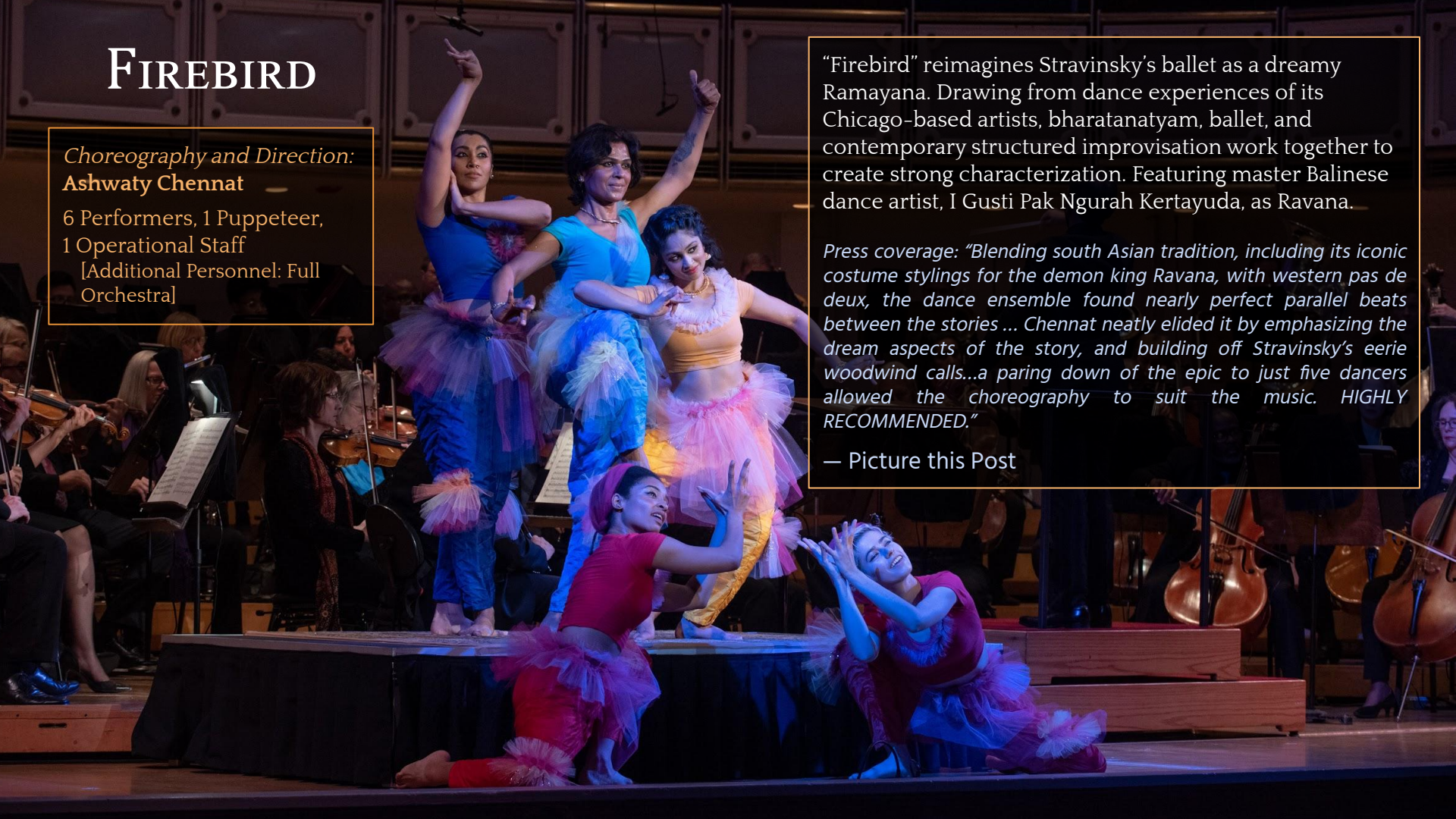
*Choreography and Direction:*  
**Ashwaty Chennat**

6 Performers, 1 Puppeteer,  
1 Operational Staff  
[Additional Personnel: Full  
Orchestra]

“Firebird” reimagines Stravinsky’s ballet as a dreamy Ramayana. Drawing from dance experiences of its Chicago-based artists, bharatanatyam, ballet, and contemporary structured improvisation work together to create strong characterization. Featuring master Balinese dance artist, I Gusti Pak Ngurah Kertayuda, as Ravana.

*Press coverage: “Blending south Asian tradition, including its iconic costume stylings for the demon king Ravana, with western pas de deux, the dance ensemble found nearly perfect parallel beats between the stories ... Chennat neatly elided it by emphasizing the dream aspects of the story, and building off Stravinsky’s eerie woodwind calls...a paring down of the epic to just five dancers allowed the choreography to suit the music. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.”*

— Picture this Post





# Press Highlights

## UNWINDING

"The literal deconstruction of the Bharatanatyam dance was at once humorous and hypnotic, and truly illuminated the complexity of the form...there is a strong sense of play"

— New City Stage

"(Unwinding) gave the viewer the opportunity to ... create their own narrative through line, and through the deft assembling of the choreography begin to understand some of the basic meaning behind certain movements and gestures"

— Picture this Post

## MASKS AND MYTHS

"...a journey through the lens of the Sri Lankan artists. We saw their past, present and a glimpse of what they envision the future to be."

—Picture this Post

"The collaboration between artists from opposite sides of the world linked up in a way that cannot be unseen on unheard"

—Performance Response Journal

"By beautifully melding their traditions and layering conventions from concert dance, the lesson from (these choreographers)...is about reconciliation"

—See Chicago Dance

## CONVERSATIONS WITH DEVI

"Female empowerment shines through South Asian mythology"

— Medill Reports Chicago

"Beautifully merging traditional Balinese shadow puppetry ... with Bharata Natyam dance ... illustrates the power of the arts in furthering social change"

— Dance Enthusiast

"An entertaining production with poignant connections to present day"

— Performance Response Journal

## FIREBIRD

"A tightly focused, atmospheric Ramayana ... blending South Asian tradition with western pas de deux ... found nearly perfect parallel beats between the stories"

— Picture this Post

## STORY OF RAM

"...giving the opportunity to drink in the uniqueness of the dance, the ritualistic flavor of classical South Asian theater and the detailed beauty of the ornate and radiant costumes"

—City Pleasures

"Mandala Arts tells The Story of Ram from midwestern perspective ... enlivening the performance"

—Desi Talk



# Chicago Tribune

October 3, 2017

## 'UNWINDING' TRADITIONAL INDIAN DANCE, THIS CHOREOGRAPHER CAN'T GO BACK

LAUREN WARNECKE

"Reimagining classical Indian dance for modern times." I must have written that description a dozen times, about a dozen different works over the past few years.

But pulling apart a thousands-of-years-old movement tradition embedded in classical Indian bharatanatyam has proved to be elusive. I write again and again about this or that work "reimagining" or "recontextualizing" bharatanatyam, but as a relatively uneducated viewer of Indian dance, I find the finished products of those efforts still, by and large, look pretty much like classical bharatanatyam.

It's a big request for any dancer to undo her training, but one the average student of modern or contemporary dance knows quite well. The path from dancer to choreographer brings many pleasant surprises, and many more existential crises, as she learns that all those rules she learned, well, are meant to be broken by choreographic devices.

One could date ballet's reimagining to more than a century ago, with Isadora Duncan's barefoot dancing and the German expressionist movement that propelled "Unwinding" is actually accomplishing a deconstruction of bharatanatyam like no other I've seen.

"My audience is not from a thousand years ago, so what are we preserving? For whom am I preserving it?" said Nayar during a studio visit rehearsing for the upcoming one-night-only performance of "Unwinding" at the Studebaker Theater. Nayar has studied the bharatanatyam for decades, frequently traveling to India from the United States, her home since 1985. She moved to Illinois to study dance ethnography at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, specifically researching the transformation of traditional bharatanatyam temple dancers, who were associated with prostitution, into the concert dance form it is today. "The bharatanatyam of today is only about 100 years old," she said.

Still, the way Nayar is dismantling the form feels like a radical act, an "unwinding" of centuries of tradition, layers upon layers of meaning which are tightly tied to the cultural fabric and spirituality of the people of India in ways that Western concert dance forms have never been.

"I think it's really novel, what I'm doing. I've never seen this distortion of the body. Bharatanatyam is an interdisciplinary dance form, but I've broken it out," said Nayar, who is entering admittedly scary territory for her and her dancers, many of whom are also classically trained bharatanatyam dancers.

But whatever fear Nayar or her dancers may have wasn't evident in the studio, and playfulness appeared to be central to her process. I visited a rehearsal already in progress, walking in to two amoebalike dancers shrouded by silky saris draped over their entire bodies. They then worked through a section that dissects classical dance passages by body part — head and eyes, hands, and feet — using fabrics to drape the dancers' bodies and create the effect of floating parts.

Nayar becomes practically giddy with excitement as she witnesses the transformation of deeply ingrained movement patterns from her training. She compartmentalized the interconnected nature of the body, space, time and rhythm, transferring her primary focus from rhythm to space, a lesser consideration in traditional iterations of the form.

"And then there's the mind," she said, which connects to the stories and legends contained within each pattern.

Nayar unwinds these by removing the prescribed abhinaya and mudras (facial expressions and hand gestures), softening the edges of the steps, doing them backward or transitioning them onto the floor. A single mudra, a closed palm with splayed fingers representing the water lily, is now the impetus for an entire section of "Unwinding" in which four women portray the individual petals on the lily. As I was leaving rehearsal, Nayar remarked that she wished audiences could see what I saw — that is, the actually unwinding process — saying that it, more so than the performance, is the "thing."

And it is this that makes Nayar the perfect candidate for the Chicago Dancemakers Forum Lab Artist Grant, a \$15,000 award given annually to dance-makers and performance artists who are focused on intense research and process over product. "Unwinding's" premiere at the Studebaker marks the end of her yearlong investigation as a 2016 Lab Artist. I asked Nayar if she could go back to creating traditional Indian dances after going through this process. "Physically, I will always be bharatanatyam," she said. "Emotionally and mentally, I've moved beyond that."



# Previous Performance Venues



## In Chicago, IL:

- ⌚ Chicago Symphony Center
- ⌚ Art Institute of Chicago
- ⌚ Harris Theater
- ⌚ Museum of Science and Industry
- ⌚ Field Museum
- ⌚ McCormick Place
- ⌚ Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts
- ⌚ University of Chicago
- ⌚ Studebaker Theater
- ⌚ Vittum Theater
- ⌚ Katten/Landau Studio (Residency with Auditorium Theater)
- ⌚ High Concept Labs (Mana Contemporary)
- ⌚ Walter Payton High School
- ⌚ Chicago Park District
- ⌚ Chicago Public Library

## Outside of Chicago:

- ⌚ Northshore Center for the Performing Arts (Skokie, IL)
- ⌚ Wentz Concert Hall (Naperville, Illinois)
- ⌚ Bloomington Center for Performing Arts (Bloomington, IL)

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