

# Artful Stories: Artist Collaborations Across Disciplines

by Jenna Bonistalli and Malini Srinivasan

*City Lore teaching artists, Malini Srinivasan, an Indian Bharatanatyam dancer, and Jenna Bonistalli, a visual artist, have collaborated on two school residency programs and a professional performance. Amanda Dargan talked with both artists about what they and their students learned from these collaborations.*

**A**manda: You've worked together on a few projects. Can you describe an example of how you collaborate?

**Malini:** We co-taught two third grade classes in our most recent residency. Each class picked a Jakata tale from the Buddhist tradition, a sort of fable, and they told that story through visual art and dance. We did a couple of sessions together in which we tried to make the connections apparent. We introduced the idea of gesture and the character traits, and the idea of telling a story through two different media. We also took a trip to the zoo. Each student had an animal character to portray, so they drew from their animal observations there to come up with material for their character. The residency culminated in a performance in which the paintings served as a between-scene narrative. The paintings were projected sequentially so that you could see different scenes from the story while you watched the dance.

**Amanda:** So the students created movements inspired by their visit to the zoo and you also taught them traditional dance movements. How did you meld the two?

**Malini:** I started with a formal gesture—as a warm-up, we read the story of the “Weird Bird,” (a poem by Shel Silverstein). I showed them bird gestures from Bharatanatyam and they showed me their bird gestures. They would say, “Oh, a bird can also fly like this.” So there was immediately the classical and the improvisational, which could both, stylized, fit into that dance language.

In the first few sessions, I established the outlines of a movement vocabulary—what parts of the body we use, for example. Bharatanatyam dancers focus on the hands and the face. So when they got to the zoo, which was mid-residency, they had a sense of the broad outlines of this art. When they saw their



Teaching artist Jenna Bonistalli leads a class discussion with guest artist Malini Srinivasan

Photo by Anika Selhorst

animal and developed their gesture, it wasn't necessarily like classical movement, but they did have this idea of how we use of our bodies. Then they incorporated of very natural movements that they saw a monkey do, or a lion do. Actually, that's exactly what I do, it's just a much longer stewing period for a classical artist where you spend years learning the vocabulary. But to advance as a real artist, you have to take your personal observations and bring them into your gesture, because otherwise they're not real. When you add your experience, your observations of what a bird is like, then those gestures come to life, for everybody. So this was an abbreviated version of what I do. They combined ideas and movements instilled through my teaching but also things that were their own.

**Amanda:** What did you learn from this experience?

**Malini:** With visual arts you give them an assignment and they have time, individually, to work. I've drawn from that. Because the problem with teaching a dance skill or technique is that it can be so strict that there's no feeling of creativity or individual input. Part of what I was trying to do with the zoo trip was to give them an individual project that they could bring to the ensemble piece. That's the nice thing about having your own drawing. You can sign your name to it and say, “This is mine.” I think every artist, young or old, wants to be recognized for their own contributions.

**Jenna:** Having that performance at the end was really powerful for me. When you have an art show, the art is often on display and people walk by, but you don't necessarily have a large audience that is attentively focused on the work. The artwork in this performance helped the audience to both see a story performed in



Teaching artist Malini Srinivasan leads her class in Bharatanatyam dance movements and gestures

Photo by Catherine Fletcher

movement and gesture and in visual art. To see an audience engage with the performance on both of those levels, watching the movement as well as hearing the narration and seeing the artwork, there was a synthesis that you rarely feel at the end of a visual arts project.

I think it's particularly relevant to folk art traditions, because there is a performative element in many painting traditions in India, especially the Patachitra tradition. The paintings are sung. They are performed. In the Mithila tradition, which was the drawing and painting tradition we looked at here, you might have a wall painting for a specific celebration such as a wedding or a child's birth. The display is imbedded in the social context of art. It doesn't just stand on its own in a hallway that people may or may not walk by and see.

Also this idea of kids embodying arts language through dance. In visual art you use the words "gesture," "line," "movement," "shape," "expression" all the time when teaching. But the day before with Malini they've been trying expressions with their faces. Malini was using the word "shape." So it's re-

ally concrete—if you're eight years old, concrete is a good reference point. You're not asking them to imagine a theoretical scenario. They've done it the day before.

*Amanda:* What did you draw on in your collaboration?

*Malini:* One reason we picked Jakata tales was because both of us have visited the region where Jakata tales are told, the whole border of north India and Nepal and Sikkim. Going up to Tibet where the borders between countries are pretty porous, there are so many languages and also religions are very fluid. I've been interested in Buddhism for a long time, although my family is Hindu. I love that whole region and the way that stories are told. So this was a way for me to enter a story, which may have

been told in a Buddhist family to young children the way Hindu stories were told to me. I feel that I share something with these communities and with that place. And since Jenna had visited Sikkim, we had that in common.

*Jenna:* I lived and taught in Kalimpong in West Bengal, India, about six years ago. So that was a region and a culture that I was also familiar with. When Malini and I first looked at these stories, we talked about connections between our own personal work and the stories, as well as connections between dance and the visual arts, and a huge part of it was looking at the natural world. These Jakata tales attach a deep importance to nature, to the elements of water and fire, to plants (bamboo in this case), to animals. Animals are personified characters that take great action in the world. Similarly, looking closely at the natural world and reinterpreting it inspires many artists, including myself. In the painting workshops, it became a core part of our discussion, because we used paint made from pokeberry, from turmeric and from purple cabbage. We talked about

natural materials as part of the storytelling tradition.

One day I thought about the idea of "traditional materials." Even though I'm not trained in Mithila painting from India, I think all of us have connections to some of the materials from other traditions. Material traditions have been passed down over many generations, shared between artists from all over the world, as people migrate and travel. Using that language for students—this idea of traditional materials and art forms—was a powerful connection. Also, the idea that wherever you are in the world, you can look around for the resources that are available and make something from them, became a core part of the conversation. The pokeberry was harvested in New York; the turmeric was not. It helped to instill a kind of ecological awareness—both on a material and a thematic level, because these stories are about the environment. They're moral tales about how people should approach the earth and our place on it together, whether we're from India or New York or wherever we're from.

*Amanda:* You collaborated recently on a professional performance. Tell me about that.

*Malini:* I was commissioned by Dr. Sunita Mulchi and the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University to create a dance piece. They hosted an art exhibit for the Indo-American Art Center called "Erasing Borders," which featured visual artists of South Asian descent. The performance was to be at the opening of the exhibit, so it had to be a piece that worked in a gallery setting. That was a big challenge and I was completely stumped as to what to do.

So I looked at the work that was going to be there, and I noticed a painting by Reet Das called "Stealing the Queen's Royal Jelly." It's a very big piece that has a skeleton and different animals in it, birds and bees, and it looks like they're stealing from the skeleton. It's a very beautiful work with very rich colors, very Indian colors—oranges and reds and blues. There's a red string that runs through that painting. On my first visit to his studio, I saw this red string and it went through every one of his paintings. This was very intriguing to me. So what is this string? He's very articulate about his



*Malini and Dancers perform at the Charles B. Wang Center*

Photo by Ezra Margono

work, and his explanation is that this string is the narrative, the storyline that keeps going. I loved this idea and also the idea that each of his distinct paintings is part of a larger narrative that is represented by something as clear as string. There's so much movement in the painting from the birds and the bees and the string, so I thought, what if we were to take off where these bees start in the painting, which is they're getting the string, so what do they do with it next? It has to do with death and what you take from the dead and what you create next. In a bee's life cycle, if they pick up something they then create their hive or they collect pollen and make honey. They use everything they collect and make something out of it. So that's where I got the idea of trying to make a hive out of string in the piece. Reet's idea was to make the hive site-specific so it would fit into its surroundings just like bees make their hive in the nook of a tree or in the corner of a building.



*Malini Srinivasan and Dancers interpret a painting by Reet Das, "Stealing the Queen's Royal Jelly." Jenna Bonistalli (far left) builds a "hive."*

Photo by Ezra Margono

That's when I knew I was in trouble. I was like "How in the world am I going to do that?" I have no idea what to do with string. I'm a traditional artist who performs usually in a black box stage and this is an interactive, largely improvised, piece. And we're going to make something? That's when I called Jenna.

*Jenna:* Her goal was to make it look like a hive, so because I have experience using fibers in different ways, I said maybe you should get some felted wool, because you can pull it apart and fluff it out, have some transparency, add light. It will move more softly. It's a different material from string or yarn. It has soft features to it, so you won't have these hard spider web lines. We walked to the store and were experimenting with types of fibers, talking about possibilities, and she looks at me and says, "Well, would you be in the piece?"

*Malini:* I think she thought I wasn't serious, but eventually she was convinced. Jenna was responsible creating something out of the material we brought to her. I think her involvement changed the focus of the piece quite a lot. I'm a dancer, so I was thinking about how to make the string part of a dance movement. But interestingly, a lot of the movement started becoming about the material. We tried to make the whole gathering process one of discovering the materials we were working with. Every time someone picked something up it was like this new thing. I think the materials really changed the piece, because we had to play with it and get to know it. This is something Indian dancers don't really do. And we had—I can't tell you—so much fun. It was like being a kid and you have this art project and you just get to play with stuff. It really took the focus off the performative element and on the actual process of finding our materials and building our hive. That had a lot to do with Jenna's involvement, because your perspective on



*Jenna helps a student with his brush stroke technique*

Photo by Anika Selhorst



*Malini demonstrates dance gestures for Jenna's visual art students*

Photo by Anika Selhorst

the material and your love for the material brought us into that world.

*Amanda:* Jenna, what was it like making visual art as a performance?

*Jenna:* Wow. It was so interesting—to watch this work of art constructed in eight minutes from nothing. The combination of play and purpose at the same time was an important balance. There was a lot of play, in the sense that each dancer when they picked up their material would sort of fall in love with it. Sort of, "What's this? What can I do with it?" And they would play with it, in that love sense. But they were also adding it to this structure over time. We did set some constraints. We did say each dancer takes one red thread, then a maroon colored thread. First we build

this structure. Next we take the felt and we start wrapping it. So, there were some rules associated with what you were supposed to do with the matter, but in the middle of that there was a lot of room for interpretation.

It was an interesting way to think. As a visual artist you often don't have to think about your audience in terms of time and rhythm in the actual making process. There was a pacing that had to happen as we were working. It's really hard to tie a knot when you're nervous. You're trying to stay fluid, but it's a little nerve-wracking. You're tying the knots and something goes wrong. You're trying gracefully to make it work. It was improvisational, definitely.

*Malini:* Absolutely, a lot of the movement was a sort of structured improvisation. We chose more basic, simple movements. The rhythm was a 4-beat cycle, so it was not too complicated. Then the dancers could pretty much do what they wanted, but we set little duets, so that there was interaction between dancers. And then we had choreographed movement at the end when all the bees start going up the staircase and fly away.

*Amanda:* Did you fly away, too, Jenna?

*Jenna:* Yes I did.

*Malini:* Yes she did. And may I add that Jenna was wearing a full Bharatanatyam costume and jewelry and she looked to die for. I could have married her off to an Indian boy in a second.

*Jenna Bonistalli, former Education Associate and teaching artist for City Lore, now lives in New Orleans, where she works as an independent artist and as a teaching artist for Kid smART.*

*Malini Srinivasan is a dancer, teacher and choreographer based in Queens, NY. She works as a teaching artist for City Lore and Symphony Space.*

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