

Peak Performances season begins with inspired performance by Nrityagram Dance Ensemble

written by [ROBERT JOHNSON](#) October 16, 2025



Members of Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, which performed at Montclair State University on Oct. 9.

Credit: RAVI SHANKAR

A ravishing display of Indian artistry opened the Peak Performances season at Montclair State University on Oct. 9, at The Alexander Kasser Theater. The Nrityagram Dance Ensemble from Bangalore are world-famous exponents of a dance form called Odissi, which is rooted in Hindu devotional practices and enmeshed with literary and musical traditions. From the Western perspective, these arts are unthinkable old — the dancers' sculpted poses can be found adorning the Rajarani Temple in Bhubaneswar, which dates to the 10th century, and cave sculptures point to even more distant origins. Yet in performance, these dances glitter and seduce, combining virtuosity with sensual appeal and spiritual longing. The Odissi tradition is stunningly alive.



SURUPA SEN

Credit: RAVI SHANKAR

Nrityagram is a modern company that grew from efforts to re-establish India's artistic heritage on a new foundation in the 20th century. The late Odissi dancer Protima Gauri Bedi founded Nrityagram as part of her ambitious project to create a "dance village" where students could receive free training from master teachers in a classic gurukul setting. Now the company tours under the leadership of Surupa Sen, a product of the school, who has choreographed the current suite of dances called "Khankhana: The Sound of Dancing Feet."

As the opening piece, "Sankirtanam," gets underway, we hear the muffled sound of ankle bells, and then a soloist appears springing into the "chauka" position, in deep plié. This basic pose anchors the dancer in a geometrical space, but while Odissi technique calculates the number of angles formed by the dancer's body, it is typically more sinuous than square. In fact, Anoushka Rahman's lines soon relax, and she adopts a contrapposto attitude with one hip jutting out.

Odissi possesses a decidedly feminine geometry, and swaying movements of the head and shoulders add to the richly costumed dancer's allure. "Sankirtanam" is nonetheless a prayer addressed to Krishna, and when the group enters, the five women begin to act out scenes describing the divine musician with a flute poised at his lips, or defeating the foul serpent, Kaliya. (Employing a vocabulary of symbolic hand-gestures, the dancers place two palms side by side, with fingers bent, to suggest a gigantic python head). This stylized violence is only momentary, and the soloist soon resumes an expression of wonder and longing, opening her arms and inviting the audience to worship with her.

The second piece, “Pashyati Dishi Dishi,” emphasizes Krishna’s role as the divine lover celebrated in the sacred verses of the “Gita Govinda,” preserved at the Jagannath Temple in Puri. The dance gives soloist Surupa Sen ample room to display her expressive skills as she portrays Radha pining for Krishna’s embraces. Anxiously, she searches for him with her eyes and listens to catch the first sound of his approach. Perplexed and frustrated by his absence, Radha can’t stop thinking of Krishna; with eyes sparkling in anticipation, she adorns herself for the tryst. Her face turns up to receive his kisses. She inhales delicious fragrances, even stumbles through the forest looking for him — all to no avail. In the end, Radha kneels and looks over her shoulder with an expression of disappointment that is heart-wrenching in its meekness. Sen gives a tour-de-force performance.

The abstract “Aakriti” presents a dialogue between four dancers and the musicians seated in a row at the edge of the stage. The piece begins evolving languorously as the dancers sink, or rise and twist, hands pressed together or held in graceful opposition. As the tempo quickens, their movements curve and flow, the hands flick, and they mark the rhythm with their feet. They even manage to look elegant hopping on one knee. Stylish and unruffled at any speed, these performers are one with the music.



Nrityagram Dance Ensemble members perform in “Khankhana: The Sound of Dancing Feet.”

Credit: NAVEEN V. RAJU

After a tribute to the divine mother, Sri Devi, that honors both her nurturing and destructive aspects, Nrityagram presents a “contemporary” piece called “Smriti Ranga,”

which employs the Odissi vocabulary but translates the themes of this company's classic works into an abstract, modern setting.

We still see images of absence and longing, but now they arise in the context of ordinary human relationships. Telegraphing emotion, a woman stands with her back to the audience, while another reaches yearningly toward the wings. Two dancers hold hands and embrace, then turn away with a dismissive gesture, and finally break apart. A soloist recalls happy moments of fulfillment when life seemed like an orchard filled with luscious fruit, while another woman recalls the pain of watching a beloved child depart. One is dragged unwillingly from her place while another prances gaily. "Smriti Ranga" is a dance filled with such moods and suggestions, the dancers whirling between scenes and weaving gorgeous patterns of movement.

With this sparkling presentation by Nrityagram, Peak Performances makes a brave opening, defying the budget cuts that have impacted this series since the end of the 2022-2023 season. Dance fans will have to wait months, however, for another chance to celebrate the art of movement, with a performance by Camille A. Brown & Dancers, on Feb. 12. Visit [peakperfs.org](https://www.peakperfs.org).

View the full article here:

<https://www.njarts.net/peak-performances-season-begins-with-inspired-performance-by-nrityagram-dance-ensemble/>