

Fires of Varanasi

Created by Raneer Ramaswamy & Aparna Ramaswamy

Premiering: Oct 10, 2020

Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts
Northridge, CA

10-11 dancers, 4 crew

Lead commissioner: The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

Co-commissioned by the Harris Theater for Music and Dance

Co-commissioned by and developed in part at the
Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College, the Younes
and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts, Cal State
Northridge, and Northrop, University of Minnesota

With additional commissioning support from
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and the American Dance Festival



Photo by Arun Kumar

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*In this miserable burning ground
young ghouls scavenge the desolate theatre;
at twilight, flawlessly in time to the rhythm
of heavenly drums
effortlessly bearing fire in his palm
the beautiful one dances.*

(Karaikal Ammayar, 6th century; tr. Karen Pechilis)

Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy's *Fires of Varanasi* is an immersive ritual for the stage where time is suspended and humans merge with the divine. Through images that form the cosmic trinity of Varanasi—sacred pilgrimage routes, The Ganges River, and the patron deity Shiva—the choreographers imagine a metaphorical crossing place—where one may leave the mundane and enter into the world of immortality.

With the death of our father/grandfather away from his homeland of India four years ago, we became part of an age-old tradition that accepts life and death as an integrated whole. A devout Hindu, he yearned for his ashes to be scattered in the Ganges River in the sacred city of Varanasi, India, just as our ancestors before him.

In this parallel world, we expand upon the birth-death-rebirth continuum in Hindu thought to honor immigrant experiences of life and death in the diaspora. The transformation of the soul after cremation becomes a powerful symbol for human resilience and the tenacity of people and cultures across time.

In this full-length work for 10-11 dancers with an original, recorded score, French scenic and lighting designer Willy Cessa transforms the stage for the dancers as they traverse the iconic stairways and landings along the river banks and performing ritual ablutions in the sacred river.

Co-Artistic Directors Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy (mother and daughter) are South Indian-American women artists who draw from the artistic traditions and spirituality of their Indian heritage to create work that is a platform to contemplate how humans receive, interpret, codify, preserve, and re-create culture. Based in the dance form Bharatanatyam, their intergenerational, culturally-hybridic practice serves as a dialogue about the contemporary human experience. Through their works, they ask the question—in our globalized world of fast-paced transformation—how do we draw from our embedded cultural knowledge to instill values of self-reflection, clarity of mind, harmony, and seeking?

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