

Working with Bala

Satyajit Ray

Volume V, Number 4, December 1976

A tall girl with long limbs and a round face doing a kind of dance I had never seen before against a giant sounding-board that was a feature of the now-vanished Senate Hall in Calcutta. The year was 1935, and the occasion was the All-Bengal Music Conference. I remember the applause that greeted Balasaraswati's first performance – and the first performance ever of Bharatanatyam – in Calcutta. I was a schoolboy then, growing up in my maternal uncle's house in South Calcutta. A friend of the family was the impresario Haren Ghosh. Three or four years ago, Harenda had taken us to see Uday Shankar making his debut in Calcutta. It was Harenda again who told us about Bharatanatyam, and the young South Indian dancer who was supposed to excel in it. Since we trusted Harenda's judgement in these matters, we all went to see Balasaraswati.

It didn't take long after her Calcutta performance for Bala to turn into a legendary figure in Indian classical dancing. When in 1966 my friend Dr Narayana Menon asked me to make a short film on Balasaraswati, I was delighted to accept the offer. Although I didn't fancy myself as a maker of documentaries, I felt that a film which would preserve the art of someone who was supreme in her field was worth making. I must say I felt a keen disappointment when negotiations broke down and the film had to be shelved. Judging by her performance in Calcutta at that time, Bala had seemed to be at the top of her form, and the one talk I had with her had suggested that she was eager that the film should be made.

What transpired to upset our plans I never found out. I accepted it philosophically as one of the many disappointments a film maker has to face in his career, little knowing that exactly ten years later the offer would come back to me, and from the same source, and that I would find myself in Madras with my crew, all set to film my half-hour homage to Bala.

As we drove to Bala's house on the morning after our arrival, I felt a twinge of regret at having missed her in her prime. I consoled myself with the thought that Bala filmed at 58 was better than Bala not being filmed at all.

The regal presence that confronted us as we crossed the threshold of her house took my breath away. Bala had lost weight – due to diabetes, I'd been told – but had lost none of her poise and vitality. Face to face with her, I felt a fresh urge of enthusiasm for the film.

We sat in the light and airy drawing room, with Bala's illustrious ancestors looking down at us from the walls, drank coffee and talked about the film. Bala could follow English but wouldn't speak it; so we spoke to her through her daughter Lakshmi. While she talked, or even while she listened or sat idle, I noticed that Bala kept flexing the long tapering fingers of her hands almost incessantly. It seems as if the playful and restless fingers were an indication that she was perpetually poised on the edge of dancing.

I told Bala that the early part of the film would attempt to trace her career with the help of photographs, newspaper clippings and the like. In a matter of minutes, Lakshmi had brought out and

dumped before us scores of scrapbooks and photo albums. It took us hours of poring over them to decide what we would need for our film.

I also wished to include a few glimpses of Bala at home. How did she spend her day, I asked her. Well, it turned out that she spent a lot of time in her garden among her flowers, and an almost equal amount of time in the kitchen cooking (we had a chance to find out how good she was at it). She also did her *puja* regularly, gave Lakshmi daily dancing lessons, played her favourite game of *pasha* with her, and occasionally entertained friends. I asked her if she would let us show in the film some of the things she had just described. "Anything you like," she replied, "Except the cooking. I won't have you photograph me in the kitchen!" "What about a family meal with your daughter and your two brothers?" (Ranga and Vishwa were home on vacation from the USA where they teach). "That's fine," she said, and her eyes twinkled as Lakshmi translated: "Mother says if you want to be realistic you have to show her phial of insulin right next to her plate."

The highlight of my experience was, of course, the shooting of the musical items. We had decided to include two: a *padam* to display her mime and her singing, and a *varnam* to reveal the full range of her dancing. For the first we chose the ineffable *Krishnani Begane Baro* which I had seen her perform forty years ago, and on every subsequent occasion that she appeared in Calcutta. I had planned to shoot it in a seaside location and had found a beautiful, secluded beach about twenty miles from Madras on the way to Mamallapuram. I felt the open-air setting and the natural light would be a nice contrast to the *varnam* which I was going to shoot in artificial light in the studio against a black backdrop.

As we arrived on the beach on the day of the shooting (which happened to be our last day in Madras), I found a fairly strong breeze blowing. I asked Bala with some trepidation if this would interfere with her dancing. "Oh no," she said, "I can manage." And manage she did. I can think of no other dancer who can use her hand so that it serves the needs of *abhinaya* one moment, and comes down in a graceful arc the next to restrain a billowing sari.

It was Bala herself who chose the *varnam* 'Mohamana' for her second and final item in the film. I knew Bala could spin out a *varnam* for over an hour and hold a discerning audience spellbound for its whole length. I also knew that she had been rehearsing her piece for the film at home. I asked Lakshmi how long this particular version of the *varnam* would run. She said, "Mother has whittled it down to twelve minutes. She says she can't make it any shorter." I was anxious that the dance should go into a single reel, as otherwise it would involve a changeover in the projection, causing an inevitable jerk in the music. I should have been happier had the dance been a trifle shorter. At one point I even thought of pointing out to Bala that the exigencies of the 78 rpm gramophone record had at one time obliged even our most eminent classical musicians to perform 3-minute *khayals*, complete with *alap*, *vilambit* and *drut*. But in the end I decided to let Bala have her way, only pointing out that since the film in the camera had to be replenished every five minutes, she would have to do her dance in three parts. As it turned out, Bala had already decided to do it piecemeal, and had split it up into a dozen or so units. This was not out of consideration for the camera, but to ensure perfection in her performance. This striving for perfection, as I learned later, was instilled in her early in her career by her mother. "Remember," she had said, "There will always be at least one crazy person in the audience who will know all the time exactly what you are doing."

In filming the *varnam*, I had the extraordinary experience of turning into a bemused spectator, wholly at the mercy of the performer, but happy in the thought that what the camera was recording was Bala at her resplendent best.