

# Indian Dance in Italian Churches

Words By Donald Hutera

Working with a Jesuit priest in the church of San Fedele in Milan, Roberta Arinci, bharatanatyam practitioner, leads the congregations in worship through dance.

**D**ance might seem an unlikely link between the ancient temples of India and the churches and cathedrals of contemporary Italy, but not to Roberta Arinci. Based in Milan, this dancer, choreographer and teacher uses Indian classical movement to lend a new slant on worship to other practising Christians.

Just over two decades ago, while studying art history, Arinci met Father Francis Barboza, a dancer and priest who chose bharatanatyam to express Bible stories. Attending a performance of his, Arinci says she found in Indian classical arts the creative and spiritual expression for which she'd been searching. Barboza became the first of many gurus who helped her during what she calls "a long process of learning the technique and mental attitude of praying with the soul and the body." Gradually, Arinci encountered other styles like kathak, odissi and kuchipudi. "I'm still learning," she says, adding,

"this was the basis upon which I started to introduce dance in churches."

The Christian church has a rich, centuries-old tradition of sacred music, mostly vocal, composed for liturgical services. Four years ago Arinci joined a choir that practises Gregorian chanting. "Over and over again," she says, "as I sang I started thinking, 'Why all this music and not some movement instead - or, better, together!'" First came solo programmes of traditional Indian dance: Arinci's primary classical styles are bharatanatyam with a Christian theme (for which the items include pushpanjali, shabdham, varnam and tillana) and one item of Odissi with a Christian sloka. Only later did she begin choreographing for others, and specifically for liturgical services. In this, she says, "I still need the help of the priest who believed in this experiment." A theologian and musician, Father Eugenio Costa is the parish priest in the Jesuit church of San

Fedele. Located in the centre of Milan, next to La Scala Theatre and the Duomo, the city's main cathedral, San Fedele is where ballet dancers brought flowers to the Madonna after their performances.

"Three years ago," Arinci continues, "we started working at this delicate job of using dance in the Christian liturgy." It has since been featured during, before or after the Mass via both solo and group work. For the latter Arinci dances with between five and eight people. Under Arinci's weekly tutelage the women have learnt how to use their bodies to pray. "I can't teach Indian dance as it is," she explains, "but I use movements from it, precise gestures for the hands, as in bharatanatyam, especially if there is a text to be performed; simplified, but keeping the energy and meaning of the movement. It's clean, and very beautiful. If it's too complicated it won't work spiritually; maybe the style it's closest to is kathak. That sort of energy is very close to our body." The dress they wear is the sari; salwar from Arinci's own

collection have also been used according to the occasion. And, she says, "We have seen that it's best to dance while people sing. We sing with them, like the Devadasis in the Indian temples who used to dance for the Hindu Puja."

Arinci says that while she and Father Costa consider what they are doing as 'a work-in-progress', even as an experiment it has succeeded liturgically, artistically and in terms

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of the human response. "People understand that it's not an exhibition or a show. I have a collection of stunningly moving remarks by those who have both attended and performed in services. They say that our dance made them pray more, that they did what they had always dreamed of but never dared to do, and so on. This thing moves people towards God, towards themselves, towards the beauty they possess and didn't know before."

"Still," Arinci admits, "it's something new. I've been asked, 'But are you Catholic? It doesn't belong to our tradition.' I am headstrong, but I'm working seriously, slowly and carefully. My point is not to shock. I'm so rooted in Indian dance I can't think of doing anything negative. I am using my body and senses. This is natural to me. I'm sure from a theological point of view that there's nothing against using the body to glorify God and praise him. God chose to take human shape through his Son, Jesus. He revealed himself through the Bible; it is the word of God. Jesus himself is the word made flesh."

Since October 2007, Arinci has also presented dance during services in the church of the Carmelite Friars in Monza, a small town near Milan. Her long-range dream would be to establish a course of liturgical dance so that others might introduce it into their own churches. "Over and over people come to me and say, 'This is very beautiful and so emotional, why not do it in other places?' Okay, maybe others say, 'What are you doing? This is madness!' But maybe down the generations they will feel the need of doing it."

Roberta Arinci, bharatanatyam in a Catholic church.  
Photo: Courtesy the artist

