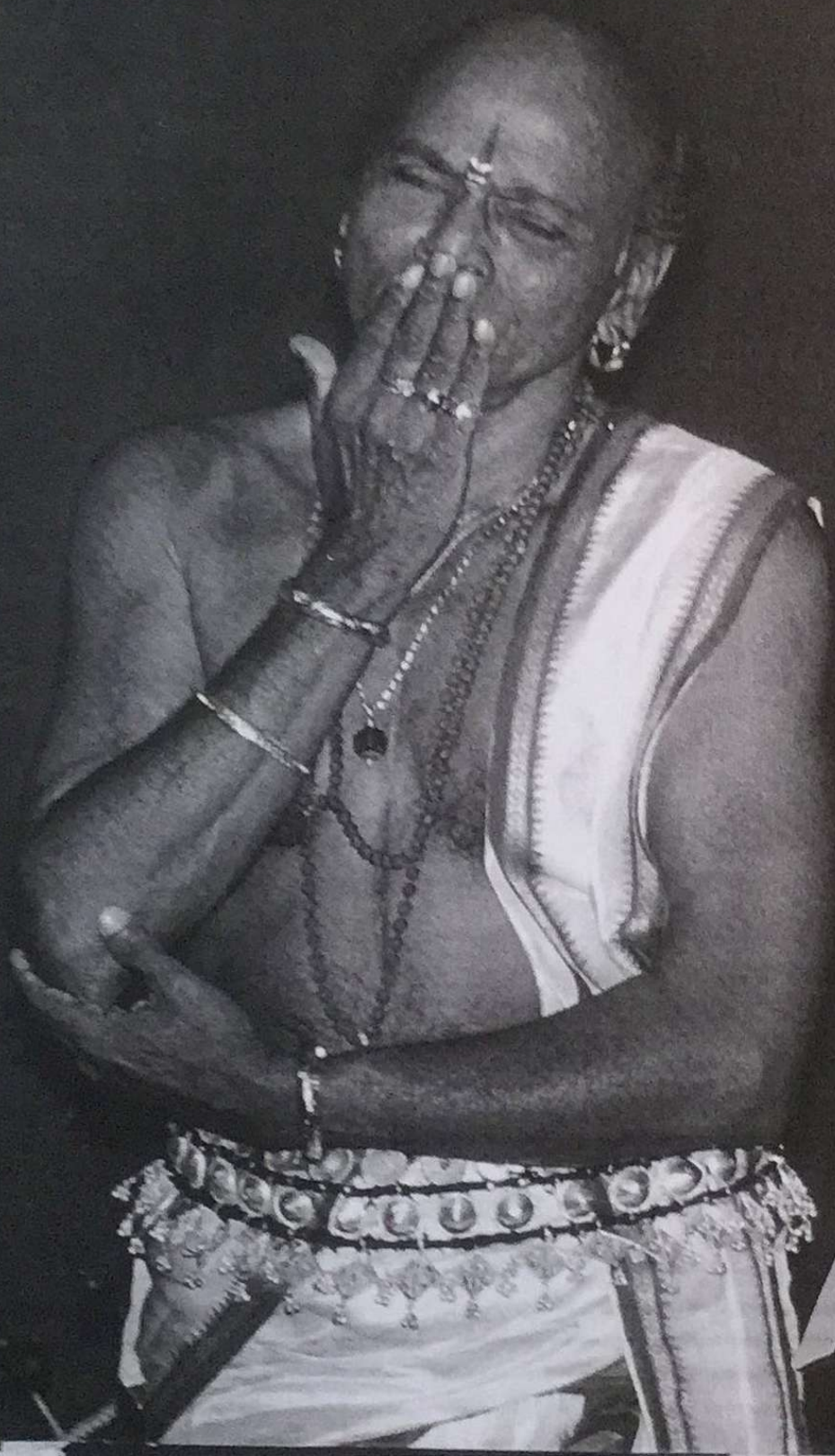


ASHISH KHOKAR'S

# *attendance*

THE DANCE ANNUAL OF INDIA 2004-05



**K**athak  
elubabu  
hajuraho

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## News from New York : POWER, PLAY AND QUIET, SACRED SPACES

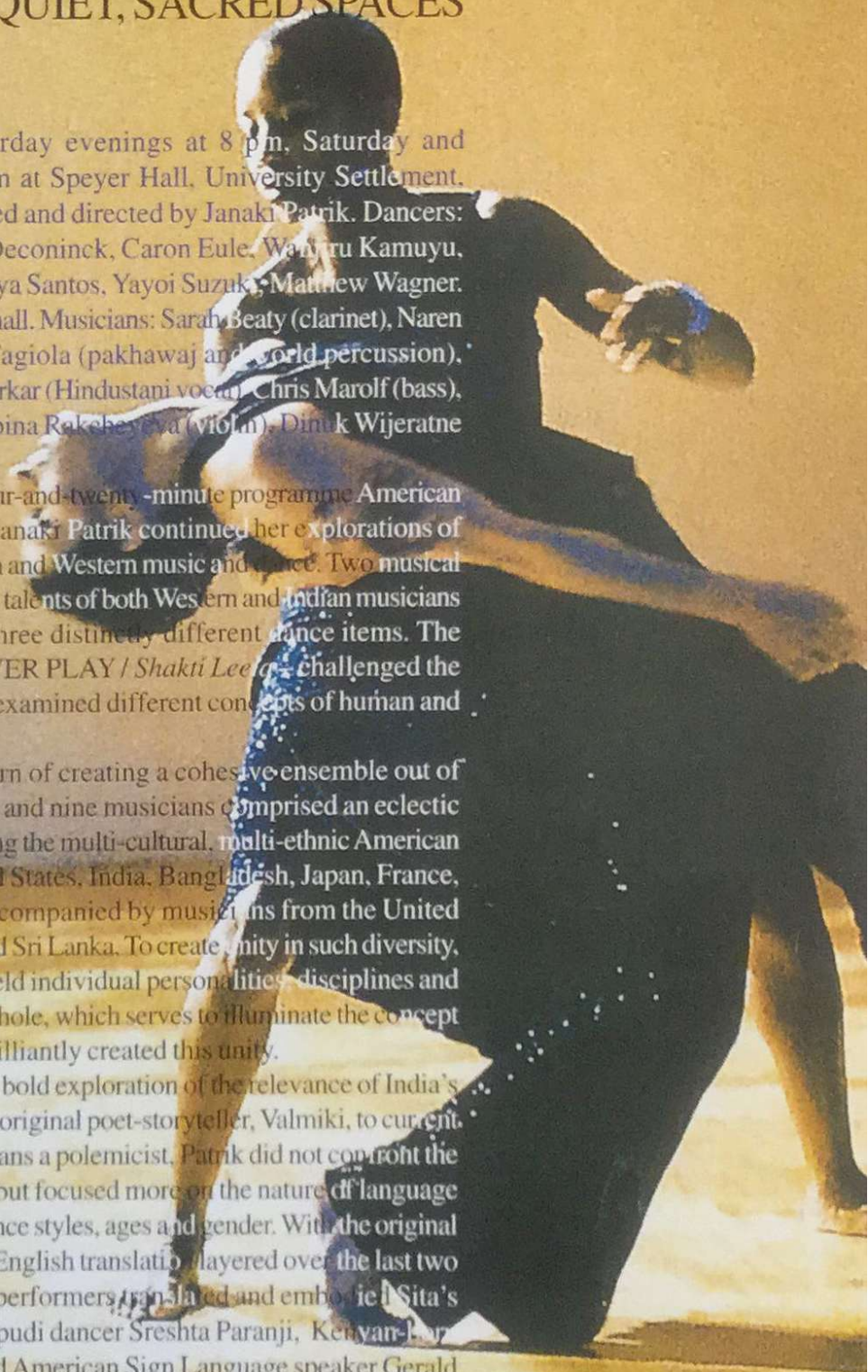
By Matteo

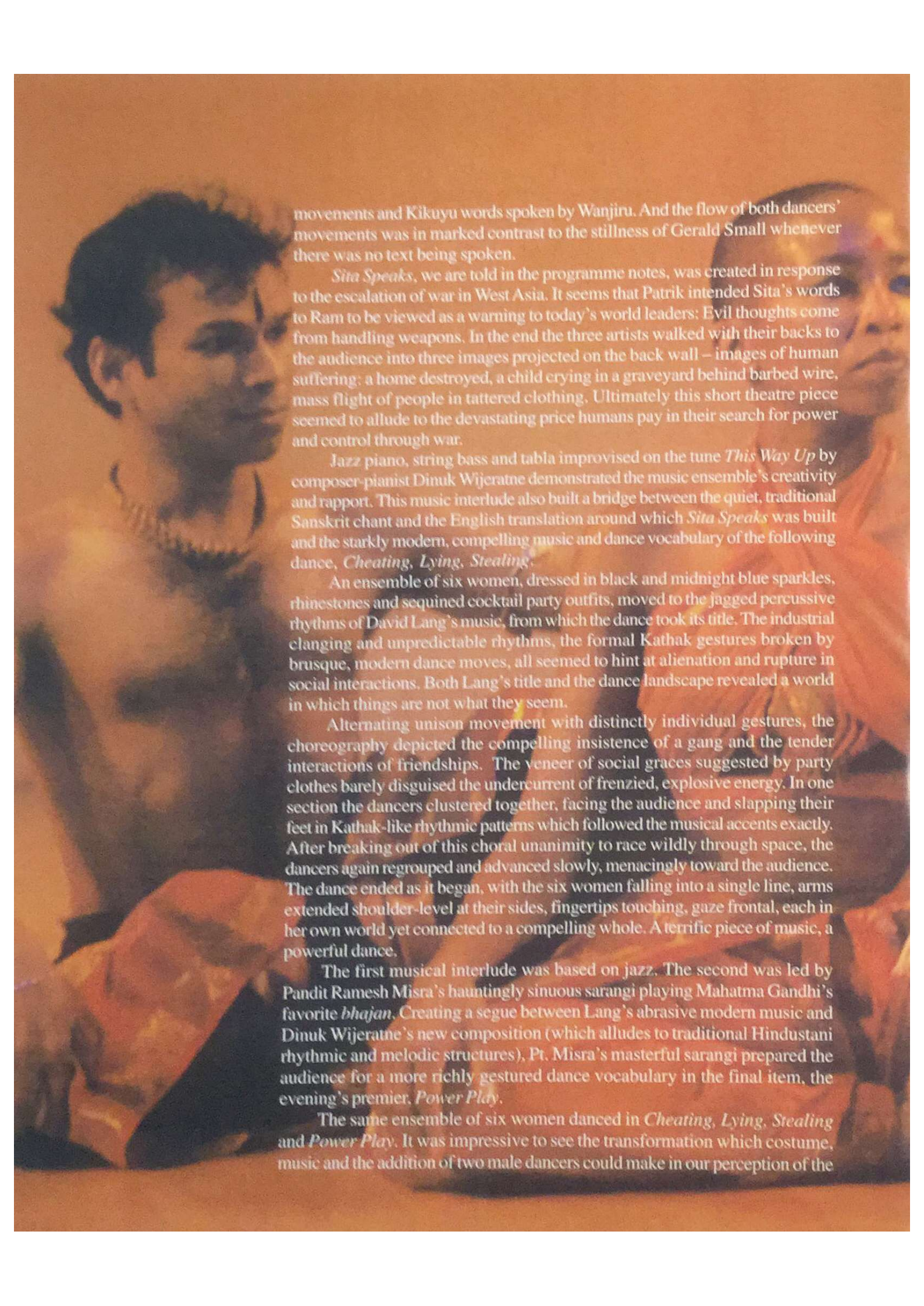
Wednesday through Saturday evenings at 8 pm, Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3 pm at Speyer Hall, University Settlement, New York City. Conceived and directed by Janaki Patrik. Dancers: Anup Kumar Das, Aimee Phelan Deconinck, Caron Eule, Wanjiru Kamuyu, Sita Mani, Sreshta Paranjhi, Amy Priya Santos, Yayoi Suzuki, Matthew Wagner. American Sign Language: Gerald Small. Musicians: Sarah Beaty (clarinet), Naren Budhkar (tabla and chant), Peter Fagiola (pakhawaj and world percussion), David Fedele (flute), Usha Kallianpurkar (Hindustani vocal), Chris Marolf (bass), Pandit Ramesh Misra (sarangi), Sabina Rakebeshvya (violin), Dinuk Wijeratne (piano).

In a seamless, uninterrupted hour-and-twenty-minute programme American Kathak dancer and choreographer Janaki Patrik continued her explorations of intersecting paths synthesising Indian and Western music and dance. Two musical interludes featuring the improvisatory talents of both Western and Indian musicians created breathing space between three distinctly different dance items. The title of the entire production –POWER PLAY / *Shakti Leela*– challenged the viewer to reflect on how each item examined different concepts of human and divine power and play.

Continuing her familiar pattern of creating a cohesive ensemble out of diverse talents, Patrik's ten dancers and nine musicians comprised an eclectic international group, joyfully reflecting the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic American landscape. Dancers from the United States, India, Bangladesh, Japan, France, the Philippines and Kenya were accompanied by musicians from the United States, India, Azerbaijan, England and Sri Lanka. To create unity in such diversity, a director must have the vision to meld individual personalities, disciplines and techniques into a cohesive, logical whole, which serves to illuminate the concept and message of each item. Patrik brilliantly created this unity.

The programme opened with a bold exploration of the relevance of India's ancient epic *Ramayana* as told by its original poet-storyteller, Valmiki, to current social and political affairs. By no means a polemicist, Patrik did not confront the audience with any political agenda, but focused more on the nature of language and communication across performance styles, ages and gender. With the original Sanskrit chanted throughout and an English translation layered over the last two repetitions of a short excerpt, three performers translated and embodied Sita's words to Ram: nine-year-old Kuchipudi dancer Sreshta Paranjhi, Kenyan-born modern dancer Wanjiru Kamuyu and American Sign Language speaker Gerald Small. Overlapping stage spaces and occasional intersections of similar gestures seemed to hint at the interpenetrability of time, space and tradition in our modern world. Sreshta Paranjhi occasionally interrupted her marvellous focus on the Sanskrit word-to-gesture translation to acknowledge the abstract but emotive





movements and Kikuyu words spoken by Wanjiru. And the flow of both dancers' movements was in marked contrast to the stillness of Gerald Small whenever there was no text being spoken.

*Sita Speaks*, we are told in the programme notes, was created in response to the escalation of war in West Asia. It seems that Patrik intended Sita's words to Ram to be viewed as a warning to today's world leaders: Evil thoughts come from handling weapons. In the end the three artists walked with their backs to the audience into three images projected on the back wall – images of human suffering: a home destroyed, a child crying in a graveyard behind barbed wire, mass flight of people in tattered clothing. Ultimately this short theatre piece seemed to allude to the devastating price humans pay in their search for power and control through war.

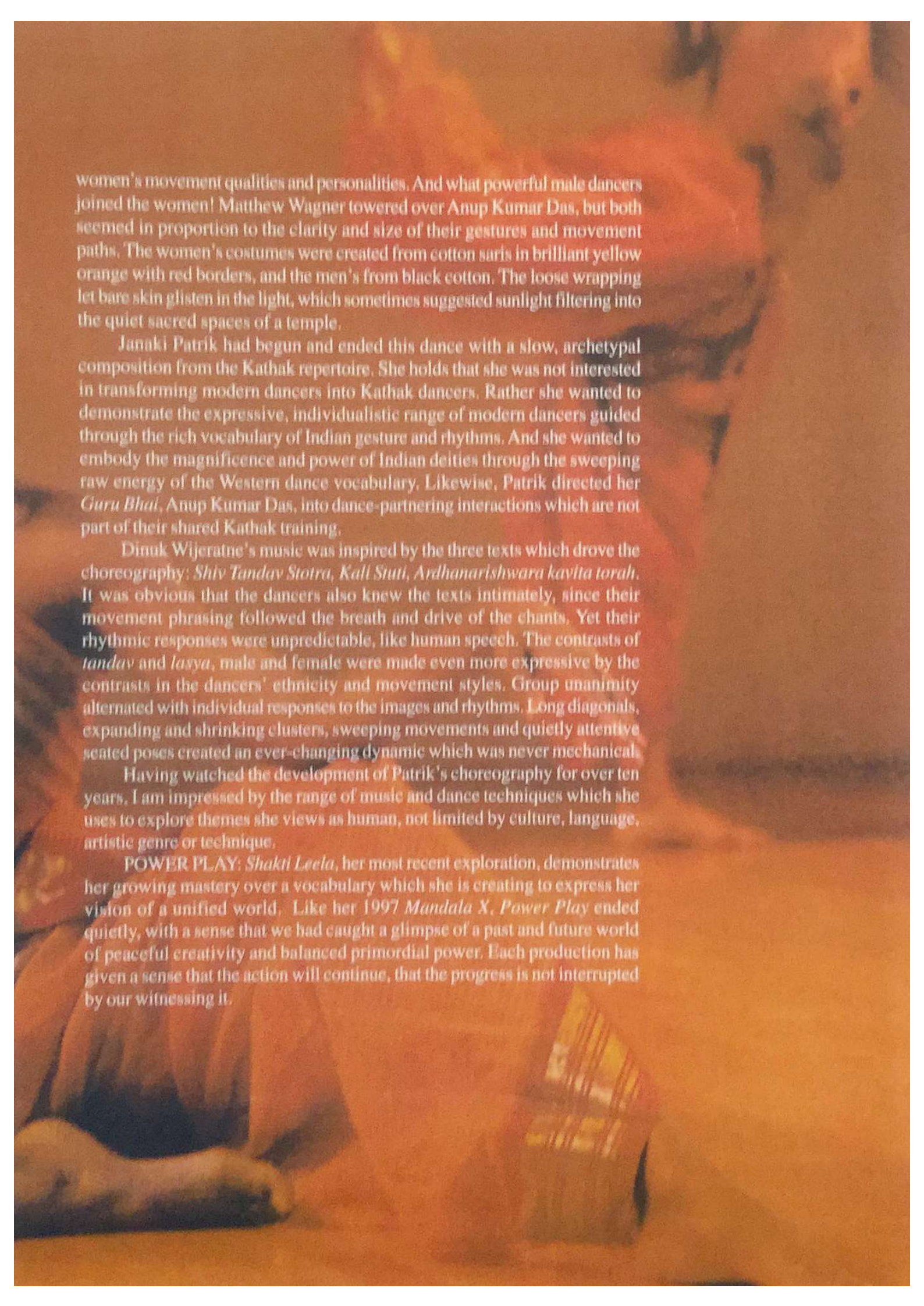
Jazz piano, string bass and tabla improvised on the tune *This Way Up* by composer-pianist Dinuk Wijeratne demonstrated the music ensemble's creativity and rapport. This music interlude also built a bridge between the quiet, traditional Sanskrit chant and the English translation around which *Sita Speaks* was built and the starkly modern, compelling music and dance vocabulary of the following dance, *Cheating, Lying, Stealing*.

An ensemble of six women, dressed in black and midnight blue sparkles, rhinestones and sequined cocktail party outfits, moved to the jagged percussive rhythms of David Lang's music, from which the dance took its title. The industrial clanging and unpredictable rhythms, the formal Kathak gestures broken by brusque, modern dance moves, all seemed to hint at alienation and rupture in social interactions. Both Lang's title and the dance landscape revealed a world in which things are not what they seem.

Alternating unison movement with distinctly individual gestures, the choreography depicted the compelling insistence of a gang and the tender interactions of friendships. The veneer of social graces suggested by party clothes barely disguised the undercurrent of frenzied, explosive energy. In one section the dancers clustered together, facing the audience and slapping their feet in Kathak-like rhythmic patterns which followed the musical accents exactly. After breaking out of this choral unanimity to race wildly through space, the dancers again regrouped and advanced slowly, menacingly toward the audience. The dance ended as it began, with the six women falling into a single line, arms extended shoulder-level at their sides, fingertips touching, gaze frontal, each in her own world yet connected to a compelling whole. A terrific piece of music, a powerful dance.

The first musical interlude was based on jazz. The second was led by Pandit Ramesh Misra's hauntingly sinuous sarangi playing Mahatma Gandhi's favorite *bhajan*. Creating a segue between Lang's abrasive modern music and Dinuk Wijeratne's new composition (which alludes to traditional Hindustani rhythmic and melodic structures), Pt. Misra's masterful sarangi prepared the audience for a more richly gestured dance vocabulary in the final item, the evening's premier, *Power Play*.

The same ensemble of six women danced in *Cheating, Lying, Stealing* and *Power Play*. It was impressive to see the transformation which costume, music and the addition of two male dancers could make in our perception of the



women's movement qualities and personalities. And what powerful male dancers joined the women! Matthew Wagner towered over Anup Kumar Das, but both seemed in proportion to the clarity and size of their gestures and movement paths. The women's costumes were created from cotton saris in brilliant yellow orange with red borders, and the men's from black cotton. The loose wrapping let bare skin glisten in the light, which sometimes suggested sunlight filtering into the quiet sacred spaces of a temple.

Janaki Patrik had begun and ended this dance with a slow, archetypal composition from the Kathak repertoire. She holds that she was not interested in transforming modern dancers into Kathak dancers. Rather she wanted to demonstrate the expressive, individualistic range of modern dancers guided through the rich vocabulary of Indian gesture and rhythms. And she wanted to embody the magnificence and power of Indian deities through the sweeping raw energy of the Western dance vocabulary. Likewise, Patrik directed her *Guru Bhai*, Anup Kumar Das, into dance-partnering interactions which are not part of their shared Kathak training.

Dinuk Wijeratne's music was inspired by the three texts which drove the choreography: *Shiv Tandav Stotra*, *Kali Stuti*, *Ardhanarishwara kavita torah*. It was obvious that the dancers also knew the texts intimately, since their movement phrasing followed the breath and drive of the chants. Yet their rhythmic responses were unpredictable, like human speech. The contrasts of *tandav* and *lasya*, male and female were made even more expressive by the contrasts in the dancers' ethnicity and movement styles. Group unanimity alternated with individual responses to the images and rhythms. Long diagonals, expanding and shrinking clusters, sweeping movements and quietly attentive seated poses created an ever-changing dynamic which was never mechanical.

Having watched the development of Patrik's choreography for over ten years, I am impressed by the range of music and dance techniques which she uses to explore themes she views as human, not limited by culture, language, artistic genre or technique.

**POWER PLAY:** *Shakti Leela*, her most recent exploration, demonstrates her growing mastery over a vocabulary which she is creating to express her vision of a unified world. Like her 1997 *Mandala X*, *Power Play* ended quietly, with a sense that we had caught a glimpse of a past and future world of peaceful creativity and balanced primordial power. Each production has given a sense that the action will continue, that the progress is not interrupted by our witnessing it.