

BWW Interview: SHAADI's Achinta S. McDaniel Choreographing A Wedding Dance For All Peoples

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by Gil Kaan

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Blue13 Dance Company presents SHAADI, an interactive Indian wedding, at the Heritage Square Museum September 17th & 18th

Blue13 Dance Company presents *SHAADI*, an interactive Indian wedding, on the private grounds and Victorian mansions of the Heritage Square Museum September 17th and 18th. The audience will participate in the celebratory nuptials partaking of provided drinks, music and a DJ.

Had the chance to chat with Blue13's Founder/artistic director **Achinta S. McDaniel** who choreographed these wedding festivities.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Achinta!

Thank YOU!

Is *SHAADI* a combination of the different Shaadis you've attended?

Not intentionally - though I'm sure my many experiences have rubbed off on the work.

Do you remember how many Shaadis you've attended?

I'm Indian! That's like counting how many breaths I've taken :-). More than I can count, with lots of great childhood memories in India attending weddings, and stateside being part of weddings, dancing, choreographing for cousins, planning, scheming, dressing for them, all the fun and fanfare through the years is what I remember most fondly. The ceremonies? Not so much.

I am aware of the various rituals that accustom a Chinese wedding. I even still have my mother's Chinese ceremonial wedding gown. What traditional Indian rituals can one expect at a Shaadi, and that *SHAADI* guests will experience in September?

Wow - amazing. Me too! I even wore my mother's wedding Sari (updated a bit) for my brother's 2017 wedding.

I'm not sure how "traditional" our performance is in the context of Indianness and ritual. Yes, I am Indian and a lot of the work has Bollywood and Bhangra inherently in the sensibility and choreography, along with classical and semi-classical Indian forms. However, we are an American company, a contemporary company, and a diverse one at that. Guests should expect a truly American aesthetic



created by an Indian American artistic director for a company of predominantly Black and Brown dancers. There are a lot of fun Indian elements including a rousing "Punjabi Wedding Song" finale, so we will not disappoint avid Bollywood fans. I am most interested in creating a space of joy and multiplicity that exist in the same plane - with work that reflects my upbringing as a daughter of immigrant parents. American dance isn't one thing, and neither is Indian dance. We hope to convey that to our guests during *SHAADI*, and invite them to roam around and choose what they want to experience throughout the evening.



How did you happen onto the Heritage Square Museum as the site for *SHAADI*?

I wandered upon Heritage Square as if it were Brigadoon! I couldn't believe when I moved to our NELA neighborhood 10 years ago, that such a place could possibly exist, much less beside the 110 freeway and the L.A. river. It is such an awesome site, and as soon as I stepped foot inside the gate, I knew this was the place for something special. I have wanted to create a choose-your-own-adventure dance experience for years now. The pandemic meant canceled tours, so gave us the time and inspiration to make this finally happen. I was reminded of Heritage Square when we went to see Pacific Opera Project there a few months back, and it just thrilled me to realize this just had to be the place for the work to happen.

Are all the dancers in *SHAADI* members of Blue13?

Along with my incredible Blue13 dancers, we also are lucky to have guest dancers including Anthony Arellano, Argia Brockway, Joya Kazi, Jacob Magana, Antonio Martinez, Monica Moskatow, and Svetlana Tulasi, and beautiful USC Glorja Kaufman School of Dance majors, Valerie Chen, Lindsay Lykins, Chase Peterson, William Okajima, Hayden Rivas, Atticus Dobbie.



How about your *SHAADI* musicians? Blue13 members also?

The musicians are longtime collaborators Alma Cielo on violin and Sarangi; drummers Dhol Nation, along with percussionist Enrique Lara.

How long did it take you to choreograph *SHAADI*?

SHAADI pulls from existing repertory and new works, along with improvisation and collaboration with the dancers and my associate director, Jon Paul. It has been in the works for about two months.

Do you usually choreograph a piece alone? Or do you utilize your dancers' inputs?

It is a combination of the two, and the process is always evolving when it comes to composition. I do really enjoy working with the dancers and honoring their individuality and gifts. And Jon Paul is always part of the mix.

Do you hold auditions for new members periodically?

We usually audition once a year in the late summer/early autumn.

What inspired you to create Blue13 in 1999?

No one was doing Bollywood on stage back then in a professional respect beyond cultural shows, college teams, and very few classes. No one was Indian that was dancing in any modern dance company. I didn't see anyone that looked like me on those stages, and no one that looked like me in commercial dance in the U.S. I saw real lack of true inclusion. Indian women like me were not expected to lead arts organizations or make dance. I hate being pigeonholed. I loved seeing Ailey as a child. I wanted to make things like that - that were meaningful and joyful and represented my voice and the voice of so many other children of immigrants who are usually invisible in the art realm and, further, culturally disallowed to follow an artistic path. Beyond being inspired, I was privileged/am privileged to have really outlier Indian parents who not only "let" me dance, but financed and supported my education and creation of the company.



What is the significance of your dance company's name Blue13?

I've had some bizarre fixation on the color blue since childhood - something alien, or a reincarnation leftover perhaps? That's a joke... kind of. Also, my mother's nickname is "Nilli" which is a play on the hindi word for blue, "Neela." And 13 in Punjabi is the same word as the word which means "yours". I believe being gifted with art means giving that gift. So 13 is quite literally yours.

You've studied all types of dances. Which for your very first dance class?

My first dance class was ballet when I was perhaps not even 3 years old, at the YMCA in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio.

Do you have a favorite style of dance specific to your various moods?

I am a moody one, and my work varies so much to reflect that. Bollywood for joy and to get me out of a funk or exhaustion; Bhangra for feeling proud and badass; Contemporary/Modern for soul feeding and catharsis.

What was the hardest style for you to learn that you now have mastered?

I would say Kathak, but I am not a master. As dancers, we never stop learning.

Do you use the same mindset when you're choreographing as when you're teaching at the Glorja Kaufman School of Dance at the University of Southern California?

I would say it is a different hat definitely when teaching, even with building dance works as part of the curriculum. Not all choreographers can teach and vice versa. I love teaching and approach it with the knowledge that all of my students have very different experiences with dance, so the courses must meet them where they are. There does not necessarily need to be a "product" at the end of a semester, just a real wealth of learning and mindful process. With the company and professional dancers, my approach is yes, respecting their diverse and individual voices and lived experiences, and honoring their abilities, but also with the mindset that they are there to work and bring a concept to life. The expectation is very different.



Kirby Harrell
Photo by Jon Paul

Blue13 has performed in venues all over the world. Any particular stage experience that stands heads above all others?

We've been fortunate to have worked with some incredible presenters and crews. Some stand outs are our most recent outdoor performance for The Geffen Playhouse, 2020's *TERPSICHORE IN GHUNGROOS* at The Wallis in Beverly Hills, and UNESCO in Paris, where we performed *FEZ-QUEEN OF CITIES* to close the tour that went to New York and Morocco.



Alisa Carreras, Antonio Martinez, Jacquelyn Buckmaster-Wright & Robert Gomez. Photo by Achinta S. McDaniel

I will say, the first time we performed at the Ford in Hollywood was 2006 - we took to the stage in the blackout, and the famous Punjabi wedding song "Apna Sangeet" started. The crowd started screaming and cheering upon hearing that first note. In the dark, anticipating the new beginning, I will never forget the feeling of pure excitement and joy.

What other venues are still on your bucket list?

The big ones! - The Kennedy Center, Jacob's Pillow, and The Joyce.

What's next for Blue13 and Achinta S. McDaniel?

Next up: November is a big month for Blue13 with a site-specific work at the historic Casa Romantica in San Clemente, a weeklong residency in Las Vegas with two public performances of **TERPSICHORE IN GHUNGROOS** and **DIYA AUR TOOFAN**, and our return to Disneyland's Festival of Holidays, beginning November 12th with four shows a day throughout the Diwali and holiday season, ending January 9, 2022.

Thank you again, Achinta! I look forward to being a wedding guest at your *SHAADI*.

So looking forward to meeting you and dancing with you!

For tickets to the LIVE performances of **SHAADI** September 17th and 18th, log onto www.blue13dance.com

