

## MERCEDITAS MANAGO-ALEXANDER: OF DANCE AND DIASPORA

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The humanity and warmth of her stage presence are the most palpable qualities she brings to her dancing. Filipina-American dancer Merceditas Manago-Alexander gives life to characters and emotions through movements filled with passion and gravity. I watched her live for the first time in October 2007, on the third and final night of Malaysian choreographer Joyce Lim's hour-long performance of "stolen" at the Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in downtown Manhattan. Among the five female dancers in this intimate theater-in-the-round performance, Merceditas stood out, not so much because of technique, but because of her powerful projection.

In real life, Merceditas is just as warm and engaging. As a Philippine-based scholar doing feminist dance history research on Filipina dance artists in New York, I met her for the first time in December 2006 at the Movement Research Studio in New York City, and I was greeted by a presence that welcomed me as if we were friends of long ago. How are you, she beamed as I entered the studio, where she sat with legs comfortably sprawled on the floor while waiting for her dance students' arrival. Fortuitously, none of her students came that night, and it was just me and her who ended up conversing as we sat casually on the dance floor, like dancers killing time while waiting for warm-up class to begin.

Year 2011 marks Merceditas' 25<sup>th</sup> year in New York City, also known as the "dance capital of the world." Not much has been written about her in contemporary Philippine dance history, which is the same predicament faced by many Filipina dance artists who have striven to strike a career in New York and other parts of America, among them Elizabeth Roxas, Kristin Jackson, Marie Alonzo, and Paz Tanjuaquio. This interview thus aims to chronicle

one contemporary Filipina woman dancer's professional endeavor in the dance world amidst the diaspora of Filipino dancers and artists in various parts of the world, particularly in New York City<sup>1</sup>. Merceditas is part of a number of Filipino dancers who have made a career in dance overseas, enacting the notions of identity, belonging, and citizenship while facing the diverse forms of displacements of living away from their home country, as she would retell here. Cultural anthropologist Martin Manalansan describes the Filipino diaspora situation in the US: "Carrying the baggage of colonial and postcolonial cultures, the Filipino... immigrant arrives in the United States not to begin a process of Americanization but rather to continue and transform the ongoing engagement with America" (Manalansan 13). It is within this mode of engagement that this interview aims to offer one such a view where a Filipina artist is predicated within the "contradictory and uneven sites of transnational migration and global cultures"(Manalansan 13), situated within the cultural melting pot that is the New York City dance world.

The choice to interview Manago-Alexander, however, is not so much to add Manago-Alexander to a canonical construct of "Filipino dancers," but to help in the task of enriching the yet meager research in the field of Philippine contemporary dance.<sup>2</sup> It is my hope that further research about other Filipino-American dancers spring forth from this initial endeavor.

As a feminist dance scholar, I also aim to use this interview as a technique towards a form of enlistment of a contemporary woman dancer/mover into the task of what Carol Brown calls "the project of feminist dance histories" (Brown 199-213). Brown's essay, "Re-tracing our steps: possibilities for feminist dance histories," outlines the potential feminist strategies in historicizing women in the dance world amidst the largely androcentric writing of dance history, which has been characteristically anecdotal and atheoretical, idealizing "woman" as a passive muse-dancer to the active genius who is the male choreographer. Appraising and researching the *othered* voices and histories of women in the dance world by chronicling their achievements and aspirations is one of the ways of enlisting women through this feminist dance

historical methodology, which I began in my previous research on Filipina independent women dancers, *Defiant Daughters Dancing*<sup>3</sup>.

And so I aim to recuperate in this interview the “voice” of one such a woman dancer who would articulately construe her own history as a Filipina-American dance artist overseas, and present how her experience of cultural diaspora has influenced her throughout her rich professional life, while negotiating both Philippine and American dance contexts<sup>4</sup>. Choosing to live in New York for the past quarter of a decade, Merceditas recounts here both the joys and perils of a cultural émigré, rooted in her sense of positionality as a Filipina woman in dance, while exploring the diverse influences of a culture other than her own.

A brief background on the artist: Merceditas began formal ballet training at age five with Effie Nañas, one of the classical ballerinas of the Philippines in the 1970s. At the tender age of nine, Merceditas started to dance with the country’s premier ballet company, Ballet Philippines, essaying the role of Clara in *The Nutcracker Ballet*. Ballet Philippines invited her to apprentice and she was promoted to principal roles in ballets such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Carmen*, *Paquita*, *Giselle*, *Napoli*, *La Bayadere*, *Don Quixote*, and many other neoclassical and contemporary works by local and guest artists. When she reached the age of 18 in 1986, the University of the Philippines’ President’s Committee on Culture and the Arts gave her the Outstanding Student Artist Award for representing her country at the Third International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Mississippi. She moved to New York that same year, and has since danced with Feld Ballets/NY (Ballet Tech), Dennis Wayne’s Dancers, Connecticut Ballet, Ballet Hispanico of NY, Elisa Monte Dance Company (Monte/Brown), Papatian, Doug Varone and Dancers, Cherylyn Lavagnino, among others. She currently teaches dance at Sarah Lawrence College and previously with the Alvin Ailey School. She also finished her BA in dance and anthropology at the State University of New York/Empire State.