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Alonzo King's LINES Ballet Announces New Project with Rita Sahai

Alonzo King's Lines Ballet will feature the music of Hindustani vocalist Rita Sahai in a new work that will be part of the program for the **Fall Home Season at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (Nov 3-5, 8-11)**. The piece, which will include live music played by North Indian musicians, will have its premiere Sept 30th at the California Center for the Arts in Escondido. Rita Sahai has been designated a "Jewel of Music" and nominated for a Grammy Award; her previous collaboration with Alonzo King's LINES Ballet earned an Izzie Award in Music. Production and costumes will be designed by Robert Rosenwasser, Associate Artistic Director, with noted lighting designer Robert Wierzel creating the lighting for the piece.

Songs Like Dreams

An Interview with Rita Sahai

"Music is part of me," says Rita Sahai simply. "Sometimes I'm sleeping and music comes into my head—and it's so beautiful. I think that I am writing it down, and then I wake up in the morning and I have only been sleeping." Born into a musical family in Allahabad, India, Rita Sahai began training as a vocalist when she was nine years old. She studied first with Pandit Rama Shankar Mishra, a renowned singer in the Benares Gharana style who happened to live in her town. Even at that age, her gift for Hindustani music was recognized. When she asked her teachers for guidance, they all replied with the same advice: "Don't give up. Just keep singing."

Years later, after the sarod master Ustad Ali Akbar Khan has named her a "Jewel of Music," and her album of Hori Festival songs, titled Rangamalika, has been nominated for a Grammy Award, Rita Sahai continues to dedicate herself to music. She practices several hours a day in her home in Berkeley, singing classical and light classical ragas from North India. She enjoys Hindustani (or North Indian) music in particular, she explains, because the vocalist is "free to create," while the tabla player who accompanies her keeps the rhythm. "With a tabla player, I am free, I let go of the beat, and he is keeping the rhythm for me," she says, "Then I can come home again, because the tabla is like coming home in a song." She often works with musicians whose instruments compliment her voice "like a shadow," especially tabla, violin, harmonium, and flute. "Sometimes with a shadow, depending on the angle and where it falls, it becomes very long or very short, or even very hazy—but it follows me!" she says with a smile.

Her first experience working with Alonzo King and LINES Ballet came in 1996, on the ballet Sacred Text, which won an Isadora Duncan Award for music. Remembering her feelings about performing with LINES Ballet, Rita Sahai recalls being struck by Alonzo King's spontaneity and creativity. In fact, during the sound check, she was humming a different song than the one intended for the score of Sacred Text, when Alonzo King came up to her and began to listen. "Yes, do this one!" he said, and so the raga she had casually chosen —just a song she felt like singing, while the theater crew fine-tuned the sound system—was integrated into the score, which went on to receive that year's "Izzie" Award.

Rita Sahai describes the feeling when her inspiration arrives as "something special, coming from my heart. When a writer writes a book, it is because he has something to say; it is the same with music for me." When she begins to develop songs for a piece with Alonzo King's LINES Ballet, the musical process is intimately related to the choreographic one. "I need to see the dance first," she says thoughtfully. "Even a little bit of it. Then I can create." In addition to giving concerts of ragas of many different styles—devotional thumri, political and popular bhajans, monsoon-inspired classical songs, romantic and seasonal ragas, etc.—she teaches Hindustani vocal music to a broad range of students, including those in the Ethnomusicology graduate program at UC Davis. "I like to teach my students: true feelings," Rita Sahai explains. "It's very heart-warming, heart-touching, to feel the music. You must fall in love with each note... and then these notes will come dancing to you."

—Selby Schwartz