

## The Draw of the Hills

EDITED BY LATIKA GUPTA



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Cover: Palden Dorje dressed as Drowa Zangmo, the legendary queen in one of Tibet's most popular folktales, Spiti valley. PHOTOGRAPH: PATRICK SUTHERLAND.



*Almora Dreams:  
Art and Life at the  
Uday Shankar  
India Cultural Centre, 1939-44*

SONAL KHULLAR



1. Zohra Segal leads a group of dancers, including Narendra Sharma and Kameshwar Segal, in Almora.

2. Uday Shankar in a performance, Almora.

IN 1941, ON A HILLSIDE IN ALMORA, A DISTRICT IN THE KUMAON (KUMAUN) REGION OF the United Provinces (now Uttarakhand), 21 women and men came together to begin a five-year programme of study in the arts, including music, dance, theatre, lighting, set and costume design, and make-up, at the Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The Centre was a remarkable, if short-lived, experiment in building a new national culture during the last years of British rule in India; it had opened in 1939 but financial and administrative problems led to its closure in 1944. Led by Uday Shankar (1900–77) and supported by a grant of 20,000 pounds from the Dartington Hall Trust that had been founded by British agronomist Leonard Elmhirst and his American wife Dorothy Payne Whitney in Devon, England, the Centre in Almora aimed to transform the relationship between art and life (figure 2).<sup>2</sup> Its students and teachers picnicked and sketched *en plein air*; participated in local festivals and put on fancy dress; rehearsed and performed the Ramlila (enactment of the *Ramayana*), *Grasscutters of Kumaon*, *The Rhythm of Life* and *Labour and Machinery* (figures 3–5).

These dance-dramas were intended to bridge Indian tradition and modern art, categories that were regarded as mutually exclusive at the time that Shankar founded the Centre. Featuring strange and disquieting visions, revolts by peasants and workers, and a Superman inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, *The Rhythm of Life* and *Labour and Machinery* addressed contemporary political and social issues, and departed from the “Hindu ballets” for which Shankar had become famous in Europe and the United States during the 1920s and ’30s. They marked not only a distinct phase of his career, but also a turning point in the history of the performing arts in India.<sup>3</sup> Drawing insights from everyday life, folk and tribal performances, and modernist art, the Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre expanded Shankar’s repertoire beyond Hindu mythology and Orientalist fantasy and laid the foundation for modern and contemporary dance in India.



3.  
Picnic in Almora.

4.  
Sketching *en plein air* in  
Almora.

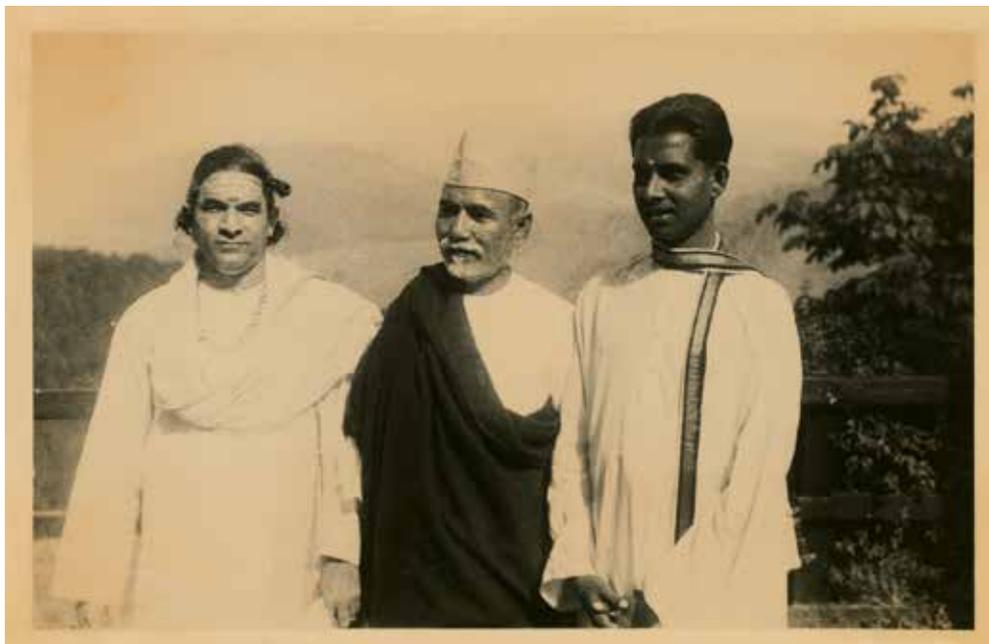
5.  
Outdoor rehearsal/  
performance in Almora.

A protégé of William Rothenstein (1872–1945) and Anna Pavlova (1881–1931), Shankar had no formal training in Indian dance or music; he had studied visual art at the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art in Bombay and Royal College of Art in London.<sup>4</sup> Shankar’s Indian dance emerged in the West and can be related to the creations of other performers such as Ragini Devi (née Esther Sherman) (1893–1982) and Stella Bloch Coomaraswamy (1914–91).<sup>5</sup> During the first decades of the 20th century, Western dancers such as Pavlova, Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968) and Ted Shawn (1891–1972) cultivated interest in Indian dance, travelling to and touring India during the 1920s, but their exposure to traditional forms was limited.<sup>6</sup> Unlike those dancers, Shankar drew on memories of folk performances from his childhood in north India, where his father had worked as an advisor to the Maharaja of Jhalawar.<sup>7</sup> Influenced by Rabindranath Tagore, he sought to create a new national art, freeing music and dance from colonial-era perceptions of being degraded and vulgar practices.<sup>8</sup> Hence the absence of the words “dance”, “music”, “theatre” and “performance” from the name of the Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre.

Staffed by experts in dance, dramatic and musical traditions from various regions of India, the Centre combined training in classical and folk practices (figure 6).<sup>9</sup> The project in Almora had stronger affinities with the national-modernist vision of Kala Bhavana, the art school at Santiniketan (established 1919) led by Nandalal Bose, than with the traditionalist, if utterly modern, dance school at Kalakshetra in Madras (established 1936) led by Rukmini Devi Arundale.<sup>10</sup> Although scholars have shown that the Bharatanatyam revival was a reimagining of Indian dance, or an invented tradition, Arundale’s rhetorical emphasis on authenticity, purity, recovery and the nation’s past was distinct from the self-



6.  
(left to right) Shankaran  
Namboodiri, Ustad Allaadin  
Khan and Kandappa Pillai in  
Almora.



proclaimed mission of Shankar's Centre which was: "to develop a spontaneous expression of the student's inner creative urge" and "to give a new interpretation" to "dancing, drama, and music".<sup>11</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, the poet-philosopher and patron of Santiniketan, wrote to Shankar in 1933: "we hope your creations will not be a mere imitation of the past nor burdened with narrow conventions of provincialism."<sup>12</sup>

Few records survive to write a history of the Centre: scattered newspaper and magazine articles; a handful of published memoirs and biographies; personal anecdotes and oral histories of its surviving members; a feature film *Kalpna* [Imagination] (1948) directed by Shankar; a documentary film *Simkie Paris-Delhi* (2008) about Simkie (née Simone Barbier), Shankar's professional partner and a teacher at the Centre; and diaries, notebooks and black-and-white photographs (figures 7–11) lovingly preserved in an Archies' Gallery album such as the one I use to write this essay.<sup>13</sup> In that album, an autograph book and nine notebooks, Shanta Mohan (née Goel), an erstwhile student at the Centre, offers a vivid glimpse of art and life in Almora between 1940 and 1941. Mohan's words and images record memories of comrades and conversations, of labour and leisure, of spaces and performances that are now lost or destroyed. Her archive enables an account of the Centre beyond a history of celebrity, which is to say, an account not centred on the master Uday Shankar or his pupils such as Zohra Segal (née Khan) and Guru Dutt, who would have illustrious careers in the theatre and cinema.

On the fragile, yellowing pages of lined notebooks, some bearing a stationer's mark from Chaori Bazaar in Delhi, her hometown, Mohan outlines a full schedule of general classes, exercise classes, improvisation classes, rehearsals, critiques, concerts and performances by the troupe, noting the date and teacher of each lesson in a clear and brisk hand (figures 17–22). In blue or black ink, she draws stick figures and diagrams to indicate positions and movements, and notes values associated with each: strength, softness, harmony, grace, beauty and savagery. In poetic and precise diary entries, occasionally in Hindi and mostly in English, she describes the activities and rhythms of the Centre: "They play, they run—they joke, they laugh / Which are the students—and which the staff? All look like friends... There sits one sketching and painting, Look this side, without wheels one skating; Another still drowned in his song / Some seem to love the garba-ping-pong, This one perhaps is trying hard to think."<sup>14</sup> While this portrait of making and working is idealized, it suggests