

# My Pitrs and Elly & Me

Art, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Which was certainly the case for me in Poernima Gobardhan's double bill of *My Pitrs* and *Elly & Me*, shown as part of the compact online India Dans Festival. I saw the double bill as an on-demand on Sunday, 9 May.

The programme opened with a premiere that was originally performed on 5 May, called *My Pitrs*. I went in without any prior knowledge, so I didn't know the piece was about Gobardhan's ancestors (her parents hail from Surinam, her great-grandparents from India). That *My Pitrs* translates as 'My forebears' probably should have been a clue.

Yet this was not the first interpretation my mind went to during the opening moments of *My Pitrs*, where a solitary figure (Gobardhan herself), robed in white, emerges from the darkness. From the beginning, her presence commands attention. Not just because of the clever way her



long white robes are covering the small platform she is standing on, making it appear as if she has impossibly long limbs. It is all about her poise, the flowing yet exact movements – an important element of the classical Indian dance Bharatanatyam – perfectly emulating the violins on the score by John Ozbay. To me, Gobardhan appeared as an Indian deity, suddenly come to life.

The feeling of watching a deity is further reinforced by the strong lighting design by Albert Tulling. While Gobardhan is standing on her pedestal, the light casts stark shadows on the floor, making it appear as if she has multiple sets of arms. Later on, four pieces of white cloth are hanging suspended from the ceiling, as if they were columns in a temple.

In hindsight, yes, I could see how the way in which Gobardhan slings the piece of cloth that first covered her legs across her shoulders, manipulating it as a yoke, could be a reference to colonialism, or how a billowing curtain in the back creates the illusion of her ancestors always being near.

But the beauty of *My Pitrs* is that both my interpretation and her intention can peacefully co-exist at the same time. Her references are never too literal, nor her movements too traditional, which, together with a simple yet very effective stage design (by Gobardhan and director Leo Spreksel), makes her solo feel quite timeless.

The stage design in her second solo is even more austere. *Elly & Me* was



originally made in 2019 for CaDance Festival and was part of a diptych Ghobardan made on Eline Vere, the fictional tragic heroine of Louis Couperus' eponymous novel (spoiler warning: Eline dies). From white, the scenery goes to black: from Ghobardan's clothes to the coffin-like platforms she scales during the solo. Where *My Pitrs* felt serene and reflective, *Elly & Me* feels solemn and funereal. *My Pitrs* was mostly about the hands. In *Elly & Me* her feet are connecting deliberately with the earth.

But where knowing the background for *My Pitrs* added another dimension to my experience, this was not the case for *Elly & Me*. Don't get me wrong, again Ghobardan is mesmerizing to watch, and the solo works great as a eulogy – helped by music by Ólafur Arnalds and *My Heart's in the Highlands* by Arvo Pärt – but it could have been about any tragically romantic heroine, real or imagined, from Anna Karenina and Cathy (Wuthering Heights) to Emma Bovary. Here the references are both too vague and too restricted, trying to mould air into solid form.

## India Dans festival

Photo: Bart Grietens

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