

Akshongay: Then and Now—Intercultural Artistic Duets and the Relational Practice of Collaboration

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Abstract:

This article reflects on the creation, evolution, and remounting of *Akshongay* (Bengali: একসঙ্গা, meaning “together”), a full-length duet that unites Bharatnatyam and Western concert dance, co-created by Toronto-based dance artists Nova Bhattacharya and Louis Laberge-Côté. Their collaboration, which began in 2000, has evolved into a decades-long creative partnership rooted in critical difference, trust, and sustained inquiry. Developed across geographic, cultural, and stylistic borders, *Akshongay* embodies the possibilities of intercultural duet-making within the broader context of Canadian diasporic performance. In what follows, the artists reflect on their collaborative process, the work’s layered emotional and aesthetic terrain, and the embodied experience of revisiting and remounting the piece over a decade after its premiere.

In 2000, we met through dance, observing each other’s performances and discovering mutual artistic interests. This creative admiration motivated us to begin a collaboration that has endured to the present day. From the outset, our partnership was not based on aesthetic alignment but rather on an openness to experimentation, risk-taking, and discovery. As Laberge-Côté reflects, “Because of its abstract nature, dance practice is often largely based on aesthetics. Interdisciplinary dance partnerships can easily fall into the trap of focusing solely on stylistic contrast, which often leads to a restrained hybrid vocabulary or the over-valuing of one form over the other. [...] The dissimilarity in our dance backgrounds could have become a monumental obstacle on our shared artistic journey.” (71) Instead, we found inspiration in Carl Jung’s quote, “The

meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances; if there is any reaction, both are transformed.” (49) Laberge-Côté adds, “Nova and I intuitively knew that our creative relationship was not about fusing, minimizing, or highlighting our stylistic differences. Instead, our collective aim was (and still is) to transcend these differences by cultivating play,” (72&73) following Alan Watts’ concept that “... existence is musical in nature, that is to say that it is not Serious; it is a play of all kinds of patterns.” (69&70) By foregrounding relationality, musicality, and playfulness over fusion or stylistic compromise, we found our process and the very heart of our partnership while discovering moments of humour, trust, and a genuine connection within the nuances of our distinct backgrounds and methodologies.

After a series of short collaborative works (*The Yiri-Biri Birds of the Yago-Bago*, *Lingua Franca*, and *Romeo and Juliet before parting*) which premiered between 2003 and 2006, we recognized that we were ready to engage more profoundly in a significant creative initiative. This engagement culminated in the choreographic work we titled একসঙ্গা / *Akshongay* (Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté). This full-length duet, which “acutely weaves mythologies from Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté respective Bengali and French-Canadian backgrounds to tell a story of emancipatory love” (Jeyasundaram), marks the meeting of diverse bodies, cultures, histories, and imaginations. It delves into a rich tapestry of themes and emotional landscapes—harmony and dissonance, deep connection and poignant distance, elation and sorrow, as well as endings and new beginnings. Ultimately, the work embodies a vibrant, multifaceted world that we have collaboratively constructed and meticulously crafted through the shared

language of movement.

Akshongay was conceived through a lengthy creative process involving a dynamic amalgamation of unity and separation. The development and presentation history of *Akshongay* unfolded across a rhythm shaped by artistic momentum and life circumstances. The process began in 2008, grounded in shared time and space in Toronto. In 2009, we presented a ten-minute excerpt at the Kalanidhi Fine Arts Festival, just before Louis relocated to Germany, marking the first of many instances where the work was shaped by absence. Between 2010 and 2011, the creative process continued in fragments, interrupted by international distance but sustained through commitment. Louis's return to Canada in 2011 allowed us to resume deeper in-person collaboration, leading to the 2013 premiere at Enwave Theatre in Toronto. What followed was a presentation life marked by irregular rhythms yet deep meaning: performances at Kalanidhi and the Canada Dance Festival in 2014; the Burlington Performing Arts Centre and Prismatic Arts Festival in 2015; and a week-long run in 2016 at Citadel Live in Toronto. These engagements, though not continuous, reflected the work's core themes of love, friendship, separation and union, as well as the enduring pulse of shared artistic purpose.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it impossible for us to be in the same physical space, we maintained our creative connection through weekly phone conversations—essential lifelines that preserved our bond and fostered the artistic process. It was during these significant dialogues that the idea of eventually revisiting and performing *Akshongay* once more began to subtly re-emerge, activating a renewed sense of potential and momentum. The 2025 remount, nearly a decade after its last performance, affirms the work's evolving life

and the sustained bond between us. This rhythm of creation and presentation mirrors the duet's own emotional and structural architecture: not a linear unfolding, but an interplay of proximity and pause, of intimacy and interval.

The concept of distance—whether geographic, cultural, or temporal—resonates throughout the history of collaborative duets. For instance, in their concluding work, *The Lovers*, Marina Abramović and Ulay traversed from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet and subsequently part, ritualizing rupture while embodying separation. Similarly, we acknowledge the bittersweet reality that all creative partnerships must ultimately reach an endpoint. Nevertheless, by revisiting *Akshongay*, we challenged the notion of closure, offering instead a continuity shaped by adaptation—formed by individuals who have recognized one another in youth and now in maturity.

As we re-entered the world of *Akshongay*, we found ourselves reflecting more deeply on the personal terrain that underpins the duet. Dance artist Mushtari Afroz observed, “I listened to Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté recount their five-year creative process leading to the premiere of *Akshongay* over a decade ago—a journey of deep self-reflection on their personal fantasies, challenges, and struggles within their own relationship—and I couldn't help but view the couple on stage, who emerged organically yet was infused with artistic integrity and informed by those reflections, as the embodiment of two people who have catastrophically fallen in love. This ‘catastrophic love,’ as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests, echoing Alain Badiou, disrupts the very balance of life. It pulls one out of their ordinary trajectory and introduces a ‘singularity’—a rare event that unsettles their comfortable, predictable rhythm of daily life in a way that completely shatters it. The couple

in *Akshongay* has ‘fallen’ into the abyss of this passionate catastrophe, losing control but determined to navigate the uncertainty that follows” (Afroz; Badiou and Truong; Žižek).

This continuity through change — what philosopher Brian Massumi describes as “inhabiting uncertainty, together” (214) — embodies a hallmark of the collaborative resilience that sustains long-term artistic partnerships. It is mirrored in the practices of duos such as Burrows and Fargion, who have engaged in interdisciplinary work across dance and music for several decades, allowing form to emerge through structure, repetition, and responsive play. Their unwavering commitment to shared authorship, where composition becomes a dialogue, performance a living memory, and the creative process a site of continuous unfolding of embodied learning, parallels the ethos that has informed our own collaborative journey. Akin to the partnership of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, we maintained our distinct creative expressions in parallel, thereby generating meaning through coexistence rather than conflating into unity. Such interdisciplinary and long-term partnerships encourage us to perceive the duet not merely as an artistic structure but as a medium for relational existence. As evidenced by collaborators such as Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane or Eiko & Koma, the duet can serve as a vehicle for creative intimacy, profound mutual trust, engagement in risk-taking, and shared authorship.

Revisiting the world of *Akshongay* twelve years after its premiere and nine years since its last performance has proven to be both a profound gift and a significant challenge. The passage of time has granted us an expanded perspective, enabling us to reevaluate the work’s structure, impact, and emotional arc with greater clarity. At the same time, the inevitable changes in our physical bodies have

required a reassessment of the movement, infusing the process with a new sense of experiential acceptance. Engaging with the work once more has evolved into a captivating blend of the refreshing and the familiar, akin to returning to a cherished house built long ago, only to discover new doors and windows that time has unveiled.

However, the creative realm of *Akshongay* is also sustained by the contributions of our esteemed collaborators. Marc Parent’s lighting design continues to shape the environment we inhabit. Notably, Marc’s role has expanded to include cueing the evocative sound score, reflecting the profound integration of design, music, and choreography that is central to the piece. This return to *Akshongay* is also influenced by the loss of three cherished collaborators: composer Phil Strong, artistic consultant Tedd Robinson, and rehearsal director Dan Wild, who each passed between 2020 and 2022. Their spirits remain interwoven with the work, and their profound influence endures through the nuances, silences, and breaths intricately woven throughout the performance. Their contributions exemplify Diana Taylor’s concept of the “repertoire,” (Taylor) which refers to a system of embodied knowledge conveyed through live, enacted performance rather than through archived documentation. Their physical absence does not signify erasure; rather, it constitutes an atmospheric presence that eludes full cognition while necessitating ongoing engagement and relational dynamics.

In their stead, we are both supported and challenged by exceptional artists, Marie-Josée Chartier and Andrea Nann. Their observations, insights, and generous provocations have facilitated a reconsideration of the work from novel perspectives, thereby expanding our creative horizons. These interventions do not aim to supplant what preceded

them but rather to reorient the possibilities. They embody Donna Haraway's concept of "making oddkin," (Haraway) fostering new kinship relations across differences to engage with the complexities of creative becoming. Sound designer Debashis Sinha, another pivotal remount collaborator, has approached Strong's sonic landscape with diligence and reverence. As we revised the choreography, Sinha made thoughtful adjustments that facilitated the preservation of Strong's enduring artistic legacy with quiet perseverance. The artistic contributions and unique perspectives of Chartier, Nann, and Sinha have proven invaluable in revitalizing and reimagining this work. Collectively, we navigated the intricacies of revisiting a piece from the past, allowing it to evolve and transform in unforeseen ways that honour its original spirit while opening new expressive avenues.

As we approached the conclusion of the rehearsal process, we reflected on the transformative effects of time on our physical bodies and inner spirits. This remount served as a sacred space to honour the passage of time—not merely the visible aging of the physical form but also the accrued wisdom, resilience, and tenderness that emerge from enduring life's challenges together. The return to *Akshongay* represents not simply a restaging of a past work, but a profound re-envisioning of our own identities and relational dynamics with one another, our audiences, and the artistic lineages we carry forward. Similar to the work of Karen Jamieson and Margaret Grenier, whose *Light Breaking Broken* interwove Coast Salish and contemporary dance traditions, our collaborative process affirms that meaningful intercultural exchange must be rooted in long-term memory, mutual consent, and a refusal to hastily navigate the complexities and uncertainties inherent in the creative becoming.

Performing this work at this stage of our lives compelled us to reflect on the ephemeral nature of our artistic endeavours. As we move closer to the inevitable conclusion of our stage careers, we remain acutely aware of the narratives and legacies we shall leave behind. *Akshongay* constitutes a multilayered tapestry intricately woven from the threads of memory, imagination, cultural foundations, and shared experiences—a performance that encapsulates both kinetic expression and stillness. Similar to the works of Jones and Zane, our duet encompasses both autobiographical and abstract components. The personal is not merely the subject matter but the very medium through which we navigate, shaping the terrain of our artistic exploration and expression. Afroz reflects on the lasting impact of the work across time, sharing: "Ten years have passed since I first saw *Akshongay* live in performance... A lot has changed over the past decade— I have matured philosophically in my thinking about dance and its transformative potential... and I have learned to more deeply embrace the many shades and complexities of love in my own life." (Ibid)

Throughout the years, multiple critics have responded to this terrain with insightful perspectives. Historian and scholar Sunil Kothari observed that *Akshongay* "succeeds in celebrating the power and beauty of abstraction" (Kothari) through a synthesis of dance vocabularies that, while rooted in Bharatanatyam and contemporary idioms, transcend them to create something wholly new and visionary. Brannavy Jeyasundaram underscores the political and aesthetic care embedded in the duet, noting that the work "deliberately avoids the fetishistic guise of 'fusion dance' or 'East meets West'" (Ibid), but instead emerges from an improvisational structure that bridges distinct movement vocabularies and personal histories, offering a

reciprocal exchange that defies exoticism.

In bringing this revitalized version of *Akshongay* to fruition, we welcomed audiences to explore the world we cultivated through our longstanding collaborative journey. This invitation encouraged them to reflect on their own narratives of love and loss, aging and evolution, and the profound beauty inherent in shared artistic experiences. Meaningful collaboration transcends the mere act of creating something together; it is a way of living in relation, nurturing responsiveness and mutual understanding, and rehearsing the kind of futures we aspire to witness. In *Akshongay*, we pose the query: How can we coexist, despite our differences? Our enduring partnership remains a testament to the resilience and transformation that can arise from prolonged artistic exchange, even as the nature of our collaboration evolves over time. Much like the choreography, our relationship has weathered phases of distance and dissonance, only to be revitalized in unforeseen ways. Through *Akshongay*, we honour the heritage we uphold while embracing the unexplored possibilities that lie ahead, guided by the intimacy, trust, and mutual learning that have sustained our creative journey across and beyond differences.

Jeyasundaram also observed the depth of mentorship and friendship in the duet's creative foundation. In her words: "When asked what advice they offer for emerging artists in search of meaningful collaboration Bhattacharya says: 'Creating is hard, it is very easy to get sucked up into the seriousness of it.' To which Laberge-Côté adds: 'Collaborate with people that will make you laugh.' And they do. Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté are great friends with a sentient, emotional trust they have spent years building. Perhaps in the end, true artistic partnership is reminding each other of laughter." (Ibid)

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Image 1. Akshongay 2013 Poster



Image 2 : Akshongay 2013 Production Shot by John Lauener



Image 3-4: Akshongay 2013 Production Shot by John Lauener



Image 5: Akshongay 2013 Production Shot by John Lauener



Image 6: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 7: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 8-12: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 13: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 14: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 15-17: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 18-19: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 20: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 21-25: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley



Image 26-29: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley