

ROOH: Within Her

About ROOH: Within Her

In ROOH: Within Her, Urja Desai Thakore and her team explore narratives in quiet, every day, heroism across two millennia of history, literature, lore and family chronicles.

ROOH begins with Urja's keen interest in the mythical mother figure from Puranaanooru 278, a story she discovered during a dance recital by Bharatanatyam exponent Priyadarshini Govind. This 2nd century CE Sangam poem, ascribed to Tamil poetess Kaakkai Paadinayar Nachellaiyar, recounts the journey of an old woman scouring a battlefield, determined to disprove rumours her child-soldier son died a coward, fleeing the enemy.

When Urja shares her intention to choreograph this tale of fierce, single-minded, courage with her family, her mother – the singer-composer Abha Desai – reminds her of other lore, closer home, from their own state of Gujarat. She picks one rooted in a real incident that renowned author Jhaverchand Meghani immortalised in the poem Charan Kanya. Across eight rousing, remarkably rhythmic and lyrical, stanzas, Meghani's verses extol the Gujarati folk heroine Heerbai: a teenage cowherdess who drove away a lion that seized her favourite calf, while the entire village quaked in fear.

Mahika Thakore, Urja's school-going daughter, joins in the conversation, quizzing her mother and grandmother on inspirational figures in their clan. More stories unfold about the immediate family. Her grandmother Nanda, who left home in 1946 to marry the man of her choice, a man outside her community, an act of daring and conviction in conservative, pre-independence India. Her great-aunt Brahmavidya who brought up Nanda's children so Nanda could finish her education, work, become a celebrated author and composer...

And young Mahika, in turn, highlights the heroines – some unnamed, some forgotten through time – whose actions and commitment have helped shape her worldview, and perhaps that of a new generation.

Through ROOH: Within Her, Urja Desai Thakore connects distant past and recent history to individual choices, creative and personal, and celebrates how all of these seemingly minor narratives inspire our current and future selves.

ABOUT PAGRAV DANCE COMPANY



PAGRAVDANCECOMPANY

Pagrav means 'the sound of feet' in Gujarati.

Founded in 2005 by acclaimed dancer, choreographer and teacher Urja Desai Thakore, Pagrav Dance Company (PDC) creates work rooted in classical Indian Kathak styles, fused with contemporary storytelling and design. Through Kathak – which expresses stories through movement, especially footwork and facial gestures – we celebrate an ancient tradition and its potential to empower people and enhance lives.

The company is highly committed to nurturing the next generation of dance artists by providing a supportive platform for emerging dancers.

Artistic Director and CEO Urja Desai Thakore creates the company's touring productions. Her sensitive, thought-provoking choreographic style is highly regarded by both traditionalists and modernists alike.



CAST AND CREDITS

Choreography and performance: Urja Desai Thakore

Writer and dramaturge: Karthika Naïr

Music and soundscape: Alap Desai featuring Abha Desai, Urja Desai Thakore, Mahika Thakore, and Geeta Sridhar

Musicians: Gurdain Singh Rayatt, Kaviraj Singh, Prathap Ramachandra, Vijay Venkat

Set and lighting design: Willy Cessa

Costume design: Sandhya Raman

Assistant choreographer and rehearsal director: Mira Salat

Production manager: Mat Ort

Touring Production Manager: Ben Moon

Sound engineer: Camilo Tirado

Executive Producer: Lia Prentaki

Company Manager: Louise Clohesy

Company Coordinator: Giulia Coti Zelati

Marketing Associate: Sukayna Powell

Photography: Pari Naderi

Rooh is a new production by Pagrav Dance Company, supported by Arts Council England, Milton Keynes City Council, Sadler's Wells, South East Dance, SAA-UK, and Gem Arts.



SEQUENCE I

Puranaanooru 278 by Kakkai Paadiniyar
Nachellai / Sangam Era poem

The old woman, whose dried veins rise in gaunt arms, whose belly shrivels like a lotus leaf, raged on hearing many a person tattle that her son was killed running away from the enemy, "If he fled from the battlefield, I will chop off these breasts that fed him." With a sword in hand, the angry mother set forth to scour the blood-soaked field, combing through (mounds of) bodies. And when she found the child's corpse, rent by wounds, she was happier than the day she birthed him.

SEQUENCE II

Charan Kanya by Jhaverchand Meghani

The lion roars...

The king of the forest roars

The lord of Gir roars

The ruler of Airavat roars

The lithe-waisted hero roars

The wide-jawed creature, maws open, roars

The arrogant beast roars

He whose cry reverberates like the sea roars

Where does he roar?

From the web of thickets, he roars

From the heights of mountains, he roars

From the edges of villages, he roars

From the meandering rivers, he roars

From the rise and fall of the sun, he roars

From near and afar, he roars

They tremble...

The calves of cattle tremble

Human infants tremble

Birds at midnight tremble

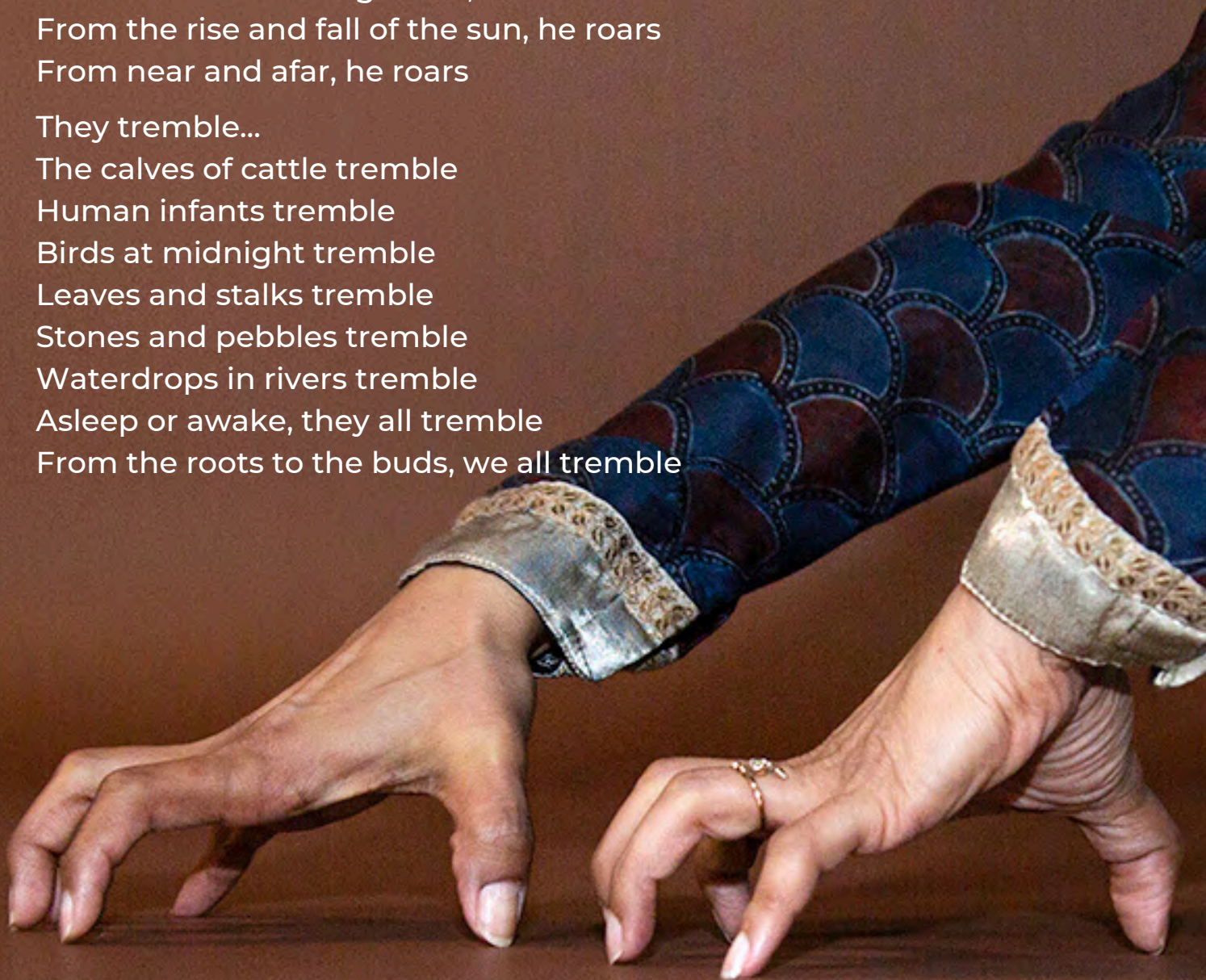
Leaves and stalks tremble

Stones and pebbles tremble

Waterdrops in rivers tremble

Asleep or awake, they all tremble

From the roots to the buds, we all tremble





His eyes gleam...

Like lightning through clouds, they gleam

Like seeds sprouting from earth, they gleam

Like embers of coal, they gleam

Like carats of diamonds, they gleam

Like the aura of an egotist, they gleam

Like the gaze of a martyr, they gleam

Like the flicker of lamplight, they gleam

Like the glare of Death, they gleam

His jaws open...

Like a giant crater, they open

Like the mouth of a cave, they open

Like Yamraaj unlocking the portals of death, they open

Like earth baring the doorway to hell, they open

Like “barchi” sniggering at you, they open

Like the lion’s drooling tongue awaits you, they open

They rise...

The brave eager to resist rise

Their good helpers rise

The grass-cutters rise

The stone-carvers rise

The herders rise

The householders rise

The cowherds rise

The milkmen rise

The mustachioed wastrels rise

The opinion-makers rise

The reformers of society rise

Stay away!
They menace the lion: "stay away!"
"Dog of Gir, stay away"
"Coward, stay away!"
"You've eaten your fill, stay away!"
"Robber, stay away!"
"Marauder, stay away!"

The maid of Charan...
She's all of fourteen, the maid of Charan
Soft as a veil, the maid of Charan
Fair as fair, the maid of Charan
Pure is she, the maid of Charan
Flushed with fervour, the maid of Charan
A tree-climber, the maid of Charan
A mountain-roamer, the maid of Charan
Full of youth, the maid of Charan
Stoked by fire, the maid of Charan
And yet grounded, the maid of Charan.
Like the Goddess herself, the maid of Charan,
Roaring to the lion, the maid of Charan
Shaking her stick, the maid of Charan
Chasing the lion, the maid of Charan

The coward has fled...
Lionesses, your mate has fled
The battlefield a poltroon has fled
The lord of the mountains has fled
The elephant-killer has fled
The dreadlocked-one has fled
The whiskered hero has fled
You are a male, from a woman have you fled
From a young girl have you fled



SEQUENCE III

Divado Jale by Chidananda Desai

The lamp is being lit,
before Ma, the Mother Goddess
She awakens, the Mother Goddess
keeper of the light.
She who destroys
obstacles in life
She who brings joy,
Ma the Mother Goddess



SEQUENCE IV

Excerpts from **Women of Uttarakhand** by Karthika Nair

Bati Devi.

Mahadevi.

Bhusi Devi.

Nratya Devi.

Rukka Devi.

Lilamati.

Uma Devi.

Harki Devi.

Baali Devi.

Pasa Devi.

Roopsa Devi.

Tiladi Devi.

Indra Devi.

Gaura Devi.

Women of Uttarakhand,
I did not know your names.
For years. No, decades.
The child I was
heard just the word Chipko.

Chipko.

To hug.
No, something more.
Something like, to cling. To cleave to.
Yes.
Yes, cling.
Like flesh to skin.
Like bark to sapwood.
Like root to earth.
Warm, wet, rich.

The child I was
heard the words
Chipko Andolan
An-dol-an.
Andolan.
It rang like heartbeat.

You were heroes,
heroes without uniforms,
without medals,
without weapons.
Those voices called you heroes.
Heroes.

Even if those voices only gave us
the names of the leaders.
All men.
Brave men, good men.
Yet, yes, let us say this:
always, and only, men.

I never heard your names then:

Bati Devi.
Mahadevi.
Bhusi Devi.
Nratya Devi.
Rukka Devi.
Lilamati.
Uma Devi.
Harki Devi.
Baali Devi.
Pasa Devi.
Roopsa Devi.
Tiladi Devi.
Indra Devi.
Gaura Devi.

Your spines arched into swords,
the only weapons you would ever have.
Your arms and breasts covering tree trunks.
Your arms and breasts living armour
held between tree bark and axe-blade.
Your arms and breasts between a forest
you called Mother and destruction, barbadi.
Your voices, singing,
Our Bodies Before Our Trees.



We find your names,
Here.



Bati Devi.
Mahadevi.
Bhusi Devi.
Nratya Devi.
Rukka Devi.
Lilamati.
Uma Devi.
Harki Devi.
Baali Devi.
Pasa Devi.
Roopsa Devi.
Tiladi Devi.
Indra Devi.

ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM

Choreography and performance: **Urja Desai Thakore**



Urja Desai Thakore is an award-winning choreographer whose exceptional choreography has earned her numerous awards and accolades including the 2023 Eastern Eye Award for *Kattam Katti*. Her unwavering dedication continues to have a profound impact on the dance community. Her leadership skills have also been recognized, as she was selected by DanceEast as one of the 12 next generation leaders of the arts and invited to participate in the Rural retreat for the next generation of leaders.

Writer and dramaturge: **Karthika Nair**



Karthika Nair is a poet, playwright and dance scenarist. Until the *Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*, her reworking of the South Asian epic in multiple voices, won the 2015 Tata Literature Live Award for Book of the Year (India), and was highly commended at the 2016 Forward Prize (UK). Nair's scripted and co-scripted dance performances include Akram Khan's multiple-award-winning *DESH* and Carlos Pons Guerra's *Mariposa*, a queer reimagining of Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. She is the co-founder of Antwerp-based dance company, Eastman.



Composer: Alap Desai was born into a renowned musical family and established himself as a distinguished figure in the music industry. He received his tabla training from Shri Datta Yende and further refined his skills by studying under the legendary Ustad Alla Rakha Khan Saheb. His artistic brilliance extended to composing and arranging music, breathing life into various art forms and becoming the heartbeat of short films, movies, and television.



Set and Lighting Designer: Willy Cessa has worked as a director, light designer with various artists and institutions, such as le Centre Dramatique Regional des Pays de la Loire, Herman Diephuis, Cie Les Aphoristes, Cie KLP, Esther Aumatell, Fanny de Chaille, Danse l'Afrique danse!, Franck Il Louise and Damien Jalet. In 2007 he met Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in Paris for the project La Zon-Mai at the Cite nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration. Since then they worked together on Apocrifu, bound, Te ZukA, 生长genesis, Shell Shock and Firebird.



Assistant Choreographer and Rehearsal Director: Mira Salat is a multidisciplinary dancer. She is founder of Maati House, working to bring kathak and folk dance to communities of all ages through participation & choreography. Mira trains and is part of the teaching faculty at Pagrah Dance Company. Her recent performances include PDC's *Kattam Katti*, Beeja Dance's *Choogh Choogh* and *Sur Dhara* by Red Lotus Events.

Musicians



Gurdain Singh Rayatt

Gurdain Rayatt is one of the leading tabla players in Europe performing regularly as an international artiste. He has performed at Westminster Hall alongside the Philharmonic Orchestra and Philharmonia and has frequently performed on BBC Radio with the BBC and Sky Arts.



Kaviraj Singh

Kaviraj has been trained under the guidance of his father, Sitarist Ustad Dharambir Singh along with Pt Ajoy Chakraborty and senior disciple of Pt Shiv Kumar Sharma, Ustad Harjinderpal Singh. Kaviraj has garnered acclaim for his work, both in the UK and globally, performing at prestigious concert halls and festivals.



Prathap Ramachandra

Prathap is an internationally acclaimed percussionist who has curated a rare musical practice, making him a prominent member of the UK contemporary music and dance scenes. He has collaborated and performed with Sylvie Guillem and Akram Khan, and at hallowed venues such as London's Royal Albert Hall and Tokyo's Kengawa Kunming Hall.



Vijay Venkat Rahman

Vijay Venkat is a multi-instrumentalist performer and composer. He has performed as a soloist in major musical festivals worldwide and in cross-cultural music productions collaborating with musicians from diverse genres. Vijay has composed for the members of the BBC Philharmonic orchestra and performed alongside them on Vichitra Veena.

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- *“Charan Kanya” by Jhaverchand Meghani (Veni Na chaar Phool, 1928); translated by Urja Desai and Alaap Desai*
- *Excerpts from “Divado Jale” by Chidananda Desai (1993).*
- *Excerpts from “Women of Uttarakhand” by Karthika Nair: commissioned for the anthology Nature Matters (edited by Mona Arshi & Karen McCarthy Woolf, Faber, forthcoming in 2025)*





For more information about Pagrav Dance Company, visit our website:

www.pagravdance.com

You can also follow us on social media for news of upcoming events, productions, and more:

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