

Luise, Art, the ADF, Money (and me)
a memoir, by David Manning

Thank you, Luise—I never dreamed I'd make into an American Dance Festival program. You and your mischievous friend Ganesh work in mysterious ways indeed.

Over the course of 30-plus years—spanning both coasts—I knew Luise in many capacities, with friend being the constant thread. This essay focuses mostly on the origins of that friendship, right here at the American Dance Festival.

I first met Luise at the ADF in the summer of 1978. I was doing the marketing and press work for the first season at Duke and Luise was managing a troupe of renowned South Indian musicians and dancers, headlined by the legendary Balasaraswati.

There is a tiny insect with origins in South India that has a highly infectious bite. Most people are immune to it but it has a profound affect on those who are susceptible, usually Americans from the West Coast or Northeast. Once bitten, these people are suddenly consumed with a desire to devote the rest of their lives to the study of *bharata natyam*, or mrdangam, or *venu*. And, indeed, properly learning any of these arts does require a lifetime of total devotion. There is in fact a saying in Madras that goes: “once bitten, forever smitten.”

Bala had a little box of those bugs and from time-to-time turned them loose. Certainly she had unleashed the biggest one on Luise, but other ones had also been sprinkled among the students who rounded out the contingent.

For reasons I didn't know until much later, Luise was dealing with a crisis among her charges that summer involving a most intriguing tale of mystery, suspense, romance, life, death and the ongoing survival of many generations of artistic heritage. But in keeping with—indeed, to illustrate—Luise's impeccable sense of discretion, I won't reveal the details.

Luise, in fact, could be discrete to the point of circumspection. For example, she kept telling me in significant conspiratorial tones—as if she had inside knowledge that I'd won the Nobel Prize—that the director of the ADF, Charles Reinhart, otherwise known as Charlie, had recommended me. But I didn't learn just what I'd been recommended for until at least six months later.

Meanwhile, my office that summer was a large, high ceilinged classroom in the East Duke (or was it West Duke?) building on East campus. The most hectic part of my job had been during the months leading up to the Festival opening. In spite of the maelstrom of press kit materials, the papers piled on the room's dozens of student deskseats, the illegible scribbles on three full walls of blackboard ... once everything was underway, things were relatively ... *relatively* ... calm and cool there, removed from the heat and activity outside.

With my encouragement, Luise took to my office as a place of refuge, grateful for my understanding that something stressful was going on without my having the foggiest idea exactly *what* was happening. In short, I first came to know her as just another overworked, overextended, underpaid arts administrator. She'd come in, sit down, exhale an exhausted sigh, thank me for the brief moment of peace and quiet, and say something

like “you have no idea what’s going on.” She was right, I didn’t, but sympathized nonetheless. Besides, I liked her.

At one point in the summer she sought a restaurant recommendation for Sebastian’s birthday. Not knowing she could practically have bought any restaurant in town, I offered choices based on keeping the price low. She later told me that was proof to her that I saw her as a friend, not as access to Bala’s fame or her husband’s fortune.

A music concert presented my first exposure to the vast artistic treasure beneath the enigmatic tip of the iceberg. Bala sang the vocals and her renowned brothers accompanied on flute and drum, plus a supporting cast. I had never heard Carnatic music, much less the legendary family’s own distinctive style. At the end of the concert I told Luise that the music had rewired my brain. “Yes,” she said as matter-of-factly as if I’d noted that ice cream tasted sweet, “that’s what it’s supposed to do.”

A piece of the puzzle fell in place when I learned that Bala was in the hospital with a heart attack and her place on stage would be taken by her daughter, Lakshmi. Charlie—who had a great appreciation for both the past and future in dance—noted with sincere awe that we were witnessing the passage of a family artistic tradition from the seventh generation to the eighth (you’ll see the ninth this afternoon). I still recall observing a very distinct purple aura around Lakshmi as she danced that night. When I noted that to Luise she said “yes, it’s supposed to be there,” as if saying purple auras were part of the act. She might also have mumbled something about lighting effects, but I’m not sure.

Luise had this way of insisting on extraordinary standards and at the same time treating the extraordinary as ordinary. That’s because great art was, to Luise, the bottom line, and everything else was nonsense. Though she rarely if ever performed in public, Luise was one of Bala’s most accomplished students. Judging from impromptu kitchen demonstrations, she was a powerful performer. But she wasn’t in it for the glory, she was in it to experience it, taste it, learn ... to give her entire sense of being over to something ... someone ... sublime. Everything else was nonsense.

On the one hand she was a partner through marriage to one of the country’s great philanthropic fortunes yet by birth granddaughter of one of the country’s pioneering labor leaders. World traveler and homemaker, Brooklyn art student turned *bharata natyam* dancer ... she didn’t want to be known as anything other than herself, and I think that was the essence of our friendship: that I initially knew nothing of her complex roles and identities, only that she was just one more harassed but devoted administrator, deeply committed to her art and artists.

That, of course, was also the essence of her relationship to the ADF and Charlie. I recall once when I was in the New York office doodling a “family tree” of modern dance, Charlie came by and suggested adding a banyan tree off to the side representing Bala. However, Charlie did not present Bala for her place in either eastern or western dance but for her place in the global pantheon of great dancers.

Shortly after that summer’s festival, Suzanne and I headed to San Francisco, chasing a 20-year delusion that we could somehow survive pursuing a creatively unlimited, logistically impossible, financially impoverished, multi dimensional dance-theater vision. Luise was already a friend and Sam soon became a new one. I gradually learned what no one at the ADF ever suspected: that Scripps was “Scripps,” as in, you know, *Scripps*.

I also eventually learned what Charlie had recommended me *for*: Luise and Sam wanted me to direct their organization, Asian Traditions/the Balasaraswati School of Music and Dance. Knowing virtually nothing about Asian Traditions or South Indian music and dance, I demurred. Eventually, however, I realized I was not being hired to dance or play the *mrdungam*, and I did have rent to pay on both an apartment and a studio, so I took on the job part time. (With Luise's prodding—"everyone else asks"—we did eventually approach Sam for Synergic Theater funding, and he helped us out for many years, but that's one of many different stories.)

At one point, Luise and Sam visited Charlie on a trip east. Charlie had been on the phone, angry about a choreography grant rejection. Sam never said word, but when they got home, he surprised Charlie with a check for the rejected amount. But Charlie still hadn't connected the name Scripps to the name Scripps. He was not, after all, a Californian.

When Sam and Luise were moving to New York. I suggested that perhaps it was time to blow their cover and Luise agreed. I called Charlie from the Asian Traditions office in Oakland and spilled the beans. Yes, Sam was grandson of newspaper magnate E.W. Scripps. You could almost hear Charlie slap the side of his head all the way from New York to California. He was grateful for the information and knew exactly what to do with it. Luise already had a very high regard for both Charlie and the ADF, rooted in a longstanding artistic association rather than a financial one. She and Sam trusted Charlie and genuinely felt that he did *them* a favor by creating first the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival choreography award, endowed by Sam, and then the teaching chair we are celebrating here today, half endowed by Luise.

Note that her own name is not conveyed in her half of the endowment. Rather, for her own part she wanted to honor Bala in particular and great teachers in general. Everything else, after all, was nonsense.

Luise once told me that a gift is not something to keep but to pass along. She was a gift to my life, and I hope that in some small way my rambling remarks here have helped pass something of her along to you.

For many years, David Manning and his wife, Suzanne White Manning, co-directed the Synergic Theater (synergictheater.org), which was founded at Duke in 1974. He is currently working on a memoir: *How to Live Like an Artist Even If You're Not One*.