

- NINA MOINI:** Ananya Dance Theater in Saint Paul is known for making dance about the world around us, tackling questions about power, injustice, and social change. Now, the company is turning its attention to recent crises here in the Twin Cities, focusing on Operation Metro Surge over the winter. Their show, called *PREM / Love: An Occupation* is premiering this Saturday at the Southern theater in Minneapolis, and the company's founder and choreographer, Ananya Chatterjea, is here with me to talk about it. Thanks for being here, Ananya.
- ANANYA CHATTERJEA:** Hello, thank you.
- NINA MOINI:** I want to start with the title *Prem*. I understand it's a Bengali word for love. Why was this the perfect title for you, in a piece that is about, really, a difficult time for many people, in Minnesota?
- ANANYA CHATTERJEA:** Yes, thank you. So *prem* is a Bengali word, which is normally used to describe personal relationships of love. But my mind goes back to the time on one of the coldest days in winter, when the people kept coming at the rally. They just kept coming and kept coming, and to show up with that kind of ferocious love is something that has held my imagination through this time, and I wanted to explore what it would mean if love, instead of being this personal relationship, was, in fact, a force that holds us all together.
- NINA MOINI:** Yeah, you're referring, of course, to large protests that occurred in Minneapolis, in the Downtown areas, people coming from all over, when it was extremely cold during the winter months in protest of some of the federal actions that they were witnessing. This work is responding directly to what happened in what the Trump administration called Operation Metro Surge, but I know it also touches on the crisis after the murder of George Floyd. What did you and your dancers experience or observe during those experiences that made you feel like it was something that you needed to make art about?
- ANANYA CHATTERJEA:** So of course, we were part individually of all the protests and the community action that happened after Operation Metro Surge, after Line 3, and also, of course, during Operation Metro Surge. But something about how quickly or how we had these organizing methodologies in place that allowed us to spring into action right away, when Operation Metro Surge happened, talks to me about the kind of leadership, especially in BIPOC communities, how people have known how to spring into action, how to reach out to each other, how to watch out for each other, especially in the signal groups in the neighborhoods, where people would watch for a certain time and pass on, like it was a relay of watching for each other. So I feel like the long history of organizing really helped us to respond quickly, effectively, and be there for each other.
- NINA MOINI:** And as a lifelong dancer and choreographer, I know that you know the way that art and music and dance can move people. Can you describe for us a little bit, just since we're talking here, and people can't see right now, what kind of dance would they see? What does it kind of look like? What are the costumes?
- ANANYA CHATTERJEA:** So the dance chart's an arc, an emotional arc, going from the chaos and disorientation that we experience in the beginning through a period of grief, through this rising of resistance, and then brings us into this exploration of what happens in the aftermath of the big revolution. How do we extend this love to liberate us into the future? So it works through the kind of rhythmic play that is typical of my choreography, and also goes into this breath flow and yogic extension that helps us expand the imagination to thinking about how love can be public love.

This public love for each other can be this force for the future, for organizing us into a future. The costumes designed by Annie Cady use color, but you know, the inspiration of streetwear that brings us out. And my collaborators, the composer Greg Schutte, designer Mina Kinukawa, Director Dipankar Mukherjee, and film designer Darren Johnson all have helped to make this kind of arc of the show an overarching, cohesive, emotional narrative.

NINA MOINI: What was that like? How did you all come together and meet or what? Tell me, again, what that first meeting, everyone together was like. I'm sure there was so much energy.

ANANYA CHATTERJEA: Yes, indeed. Actually, the first meeting was with me, with my dancers, when we were experiencing, right in the middle of it, getting ready to come to rehearsal, and then checking in with each other after rehearsal, what we going to do. And then as the collaborators came in, there was, as you say, the surge of energy, because people felt so connected.

One of the guest performers in the work is a fabulous artist and a long time collaborator, Mankwe Ndosi, who also speaks about how this work feels so close to skin. And she has written this song about public love, that we invite the audiences to move with us and sing with us. So it spreads from the artists on stage to the audience. There is an invitation to join all of us. The process was also like that, this kind of beginning at the center and spreading out, you know?

NINA MOINI: Mhmm. And you're also a dance professor at the University of Minnesota, so you interact with students, as well, about the role of dance in social justice, connection with others, healing, maybe even physical healing. What would you want people to learn about the connection there? Because it's always been throughout history. Is it as strong now?

ANANYA CHATTERJEA: It is even stronger now, because dance is about energy. It's energy that moves us. If people are called to justice, to show up like they did, it's not because of money. It's not because of fame. It's because their hearts move them to do it, right? Like to show up, like the way people did, it was a heartfelt call. It was a response to a heartfelt call.

So I invite students into what I call social justice choreography, which means both a thematic focus, but also an understanding of how the creative process must work, so that we are actually listening to each other and listening with each other, moving with each other, seeing each other, and also seeing the world around us. So that is entering dance from a different door, not for the sake for the sake of virtuosity. But if there is virtuosity, it comes from the extreme need for endurance and perseverance in the face of difficulty. So it comes from a point, you know?

NINA MOINI: And with that in mind, what do you hope audiences walk away from this performance feeling or thinking, especially if they were not having a front row seat to history or seeing in their neighborhood directly what was going on during that surge?

ANANYA CHATTERJEA: Yeah, so I think that this is my love letter to the Twin Cities and to Minnesota. So I offer it with great humility and with great love to the people of Minnesota, Makoce, and I hope that even if they did not personally see it, I'm sure, they've heard stories of what happened at that time. And the work doesn't try to tell a direct, logistical story, but it tries to capture the nervous and emotional map of those times, of what happened in our communities. So it is an offering with love, and I hope people hold on to the emotional high points in the work, and they feel seen, they feel seen in the struggle, because everyone had a role to play.

NINA MOINI: Ananya, thank you so much for coming on the program and sharing about this. I'm wishing you a wonderful time with this, beginning here on October 10. Thank you.

ANANYA CHATTERJEA: Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: That was Choreographer and Artistic Director Ananya Chatterjea. Ananya Dance Theater's *SPREM / Love: An Occupation* runs, again, October 10 through the 17th at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis.