

[SLOW EERIE MUSIC]

**CATHY** This is the song *Where Are You?* by Kayhan Kalhor, and it will accompany the upcoming dance performance of choreographer Ashwini Ramaswamy. She's a choreographer of a form of Indian classical dance. But her new project includes a wide range of dance traditions.

It's premiering at the Great Northern Festival this weekend in Minneapolis. And I'm so happy that Ashwini joins us to talk more about her work. Welcome to the program.

**ASHWINI** Thank you, Cathy.

**RAMASWAMY:**

**CATHY** First, explain the traditional form of Indian classical dance that you are so familiar with.

**WURZER:**

**ASHWINI** So the form is called bharatanatyam. And it is from South India. It's a classical dance form that's said to be over 2,000 years old in its roots. But through my work with Raga Mala Dance Company, which is directed by my mother Rani Ramaswamy and my sister Aparna Ramaswamy, we use the form and it's like a language just like any other that evolves with each practitioner over the generations.

So while the language is ancient, it has changed and evolved. And it is very much a form that is vibrant and alive in today's world.

**CATHY** And gorgeous, by the way. So let us talk about this new project, because this sounds very, very interesting. Now, this is a new performance, kind of a reimagining, as it were, of the 1970s novel *Invisible Cities*, is that right?

**ASHWINI** That's right.

**RAMASWAMY:**

**CATHY** Now, not everyone knows a lot about the book. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

**WURZER:**

**ASHWINI** Yes. So it's kind of one of those books where you come into it and the interpretations you take away is very personal to you. I wouldn't say that can really encapsulate the book and its themes in even one conversation. It's extremely philosophical. It's very rich and poetic.

And Calvino is kind of trying to pull, in my opinion, trying to pull out of us ideas of how as humans we can share the world together. But he does so in very clever and interesting ways. So while I love to be able to just explain the book, it's very unique to its reader and I highly recommend just spending a few moments looking, paging through, and taking from it what you want.

**CATHY** OK, so we're on the radio. We can't see the choreography you worked on so hard. But can you describe it to us and how it relates to the book and the themes?

**WURZER:**

**ASHWINI RAMASWAMY:** So in this book, it has this narrative framework throughout that is an imagined conversation between the famed Explorer Marco Polo and the Emperor Kubla Khan. And they have these conversations about these cities that Kubla Khan, quote unquote, "has conquered." And what you realize through the course of the book is that Marco Polo, he might be just telling Kubla Khan anything he wants to hear.

You don't know if what he's saying is real or imagined. And so Calvino is touching upon ideas of imagination, and what is real, and what is not real. And so most of the choreography comes from these conversations. I'm very interested in philosophical discussions, and that's kind of, for me, the most interesting parts of the book.

And then you have the cities themselves, which are-- they're 55 cities, all part of this rich imagined universe. So the choreography is mainly about the conversations, but then you also have the just gorgeously interpreted but also highly imaginative cities that Calvino named the book after. So there's a lot of facets to it.

And then what we have in this work, which is just a huge gift, is projections, and original artwork, and animation by Kevork Mourad, who, when I approached him to collaborate, was delighted, as Calvino is one of his original inspirations as well.

**CATHY WURZER:** Ah, wow. OK, so then I'm assuming-- I should never assume-- but so when you talk about the various lovely the opulent cities written by in the book by Calvino, so is this how you're bringing in different threads of other dance traditions?

**ASHWINI RAMASWAMY:** So I am more interested not just in the dance forms themselves, but in the people creating them. There are three other choreographers, all Minnesota-based, who I've really admired and watched their career trajectory trajectories for several years. And they are Barrett Allgren, who does a form of dance called Gaga, which is an Israeli form, Alana Morris, who is very highly trained in modern dance but is also interested in African diasporic traditions, and Joseph Tran, who is a Breaker. And then I am joined by my mother and sister Rani and Aparna in my choreographic sections.

And so the way that they approach work, in addition to their extremely beautiful dance forms, we really collaboratively went through the book and all the sections and came up with who wanted to do, which sections and what they wanted to highlight so that, really, it becomes one long conversation and really a communal act on stage.

What is it like for all these forms to live together? Just like, what is it like for all of us in humanity to make space for each other and lift each other up?

**CATHY WURZER:** Did you have to come up with kind of a common language around this performance with the diversity in the dance styles and the themes? Does that make sense?

**ASHWINI RAMASWAMY:** It does. And it's all about communication and also about understanding what everyone's voices are and what they need. I feel like when I first started the project, it was very hard to be a little bit standoffish. I wanted to kind be involved in every section.

But I really learned to let the dancers and the amazing choreographers have their own space again to kind of try things. And then when we came together, we united. So everyone's voice is very distinct, but we're able to communicate with each other because of all of the trust and all the time we spent developing that relationship, because it's been several years now in the making.

**CATHY** Well, because it's been several years in the making, this is clearly very important to you. Why?

**WURZER:**

**ASHWINI** I am someone who was born in this country and have a very distinct relationship with my homeland of India,  
**RAMASWAMY:** where I always feel like it's so far away from me because I wasn't born there. And yet, everything about my career is steeped in understanding the philosophy, the religion, the spirituality, the language of a country that I wasn't born in. My mother was born in India and came here when she was in her 30s. My sister was born in India and came here as a toddler.

And so we all have these distinct relationships with two countries. This is a way for me to explore all the things that I feel are me on stage through these beautiful traditions-- the dance traditions, the music, the visual art-- that I have always loved in a way that I feel people will embrace and understand what it's like to be bicultural or multicultural in a way that's, I think, very positive and beautiful.

**CATHY** What's it like working with your mother and your sister?

**WURZER:**

**ASHWINI** I've been doing it for so long it's hard to remember a time before. Because since I was born, they've been  
**RAMASWAMY:** training in this form, and have just done so much for the form, and for our beautiful South Indian artistic traditions to be seen across stages and engagement activities around the world. So I feel the work that we do is just a labor of love and we're so lucky to be able to do it together. And we just love each other so much that it's not all sunshine and roses, but it's the most beautiful relationship I can imagine having.

**CATHY** Because this has been several years in the making, I wonder what you're going to feel like when you finally step  
**WURZER:** out on stage.

**ASHWINI** Usually what I hope happens is that everything floats away and I'm just taken away by the experience. I'm not  
**RAMASWAMY:** worried anymore, it's just unfolding. And it all just feels like it's meant to be.

**CATHY** I hope it is. And I'm sure it will be. This sounds beautiful. Thank you so much for painting such a beautiful picture  
**WURZER:** on the radio for us.

**ASHWINI** Thank you so much for having me. And just before I forget, the performances are this Friday and Saturday at the  
**RAMASWAMY:** Cole Center downtown. And we're close to selling out. So I hope that people get their tickets soon.

**CATHY** Absolutely. I hope they do too. Thank you so much. Best of luck.

**WURZER:**

**ASHWINI** Thank you, Cathy.

**RAMASWAMY:**

**CATHY** We've been talking to choreographer Ashwini Ramaswamy. She's a choreographer. You can go to the premiere of  
**WURZER:** the performance this week. Remember, Friday, January 27, Cole Center in Minneapolis-- tickets still available, but you got to hurry up. You can also see her work on YouTube, just search for The Invisible Cities trailer.