

Ep.92 Sushmita Pati Podcast Transcript

How Kala the Arts Connects and Engages Diverse Audiences

Maria Lloyd

Hello everyone and welcome to the My Local Marketer podcast.

I'm Maria and today I'm speaking with **Sushmita Pati**, Artistic Director and CEO of Kala the Arts, an arts and education charity that celebrates and promotes South Asian dance and culture.

She's also a curator, choreographer and maestro of Odissi Classical Temple Dance which she introduced to the UK in 1986. So without further ado, Sushmita, thank you so much for coming on and welcome to the podcast. How are you?

Sushmita Pati

I'm good, Maria.

Thank you for finding the time to interview me.

Maria Lloyd

My pleasure.

Well, we were talking before we started that we've been trying to get in the diary for a little while.

It's just calendars haven't aligned.

But fortunately, they've aligned now.

So I'm so excited to have this opportunity to speak with you today and learn more about Kala the Arts.

Could you please explain about Kala the Arts and what that actually is?

Sushmita Pati

So Kala the Arts, as you said, it's an arts and education charity.

It's also a dance company as well.

We work with many people.

So it's like grassroots to international audiences.

It started in 1998.

And it was with a few people who were interested in having this organization so that it covers things in the dance sector,

which is more diverse dance, bringing in diverse dance and also taking that to schools as well.

How we actually inform the next generation about a dance form, about the creativity and storytelling.

Sushmita Pati

The storytelling is a very important part of what we do.

And also when we started and lots of schools got involved, a lot of communities got involved.

And it also started with me performing in many places in Hampshire, all over the place, including taking some performances to London as well.

The work was more to do with not just Hampshire, but other parts of the country as well.

So we did workshops, we did residencies.

So we recruited artists from abroad.

Sushmita Pati

We would interview them, organize the work permit, the legal side of things, and they would come.

We would have dancers from Germany, dancers from India.

They would stay in Basingstoke and they would deliver some of the work and create the work as well.

It sort of grew into museums being very interested in our work.

We create work, we produce work, and that goes to many areas, like, for example, communities, to venues, to schools,

and also like outdoor performances, which we have been starting, started in the last six years.

Sushmita Pati

So there is various strands to the work.

So there's a community we work with.

There are education sectors we work with.

We work with venues.

We work with many, many artists.

Last year, we worked with nearly 95 artists.

So something that started as myself has grown and grown and grown.

Maria Lloyd

It sounds as if you started because there was a real gap to fill and a need for educating people, like you said,

the next generation.

But even though there was that need, I'm still surprised with how quickly it spread.

Is that just through the community, the community is just well connected and it was by referrals that you got into the schools?

Sushmita Pati

I would say a lot of it is to the artists we worked with, because the artists are very, very diverse.

So one simple incident was we had an artist from Germany who worked with us for 10 years.

And when she would visit schools, they would be expecting an Asian dancer.

And when she would deliver the work, they would be so, so happy.

And they would start booking the person for the next one.

So it was interesting because we changed that.

Anybody can do it.

When we started the classes in Basingstoke, I remember most of the students were from the white population.

Sushmita Pati

And there was one or two South Asian.

I think the reason they did it is because they had done ballet.

It was closer to ballet for them.

Sort of feel, well, this is just the next one in case if you don't want to continue with ballet.

And they learned for many years.

And then they would travel and do like certain outdoor events.

People would be thinking of having South Asian community representing South Asian dance.

But our dancers were all from different walks of life.

Very diverse.

So again, that was something which was very noticeable.

And also now as well, compared to other classical forms,

Sushmita Pati

what we see actually appeals to many people who are not necessarily from the South Asian background themselves.

Like yesterday, we had a dancer, her background is Iranian,

and she has taken on the form and she was performing in Dredding near the town centre.

So there was an event called Rathiyatra and she was performing and her performance was the best, I must say,

amongst all the South Asian communities who were there.

And she was doing something very specialised and very relatable to what the festival was about.

Maria Lloyd

Why is it that Odissi, the dance form in particular,

is so able to cross these cultural boundaries and be picked up quite easily by different groups?

Sushmita Pati

It feels very meditative, the dance form.

It's also very yogic in the sense like there's yoga movements as well.

And possibly the music appeals as well.

And also sometimes people like to see something they have not seen or they want to try.

So it has that element as well.

So it's not that readily available because we don't have a huge amount of artists in this style.

Since I have been involved, I can see so many artists actually come.

And there are many performances now.

There are many classes as well.

Sushmita Pati

Like in Reading, we have a class.

And that class takes place on Oxford Road.

It has attracted many people because it's quite centrally located.

Maria Lloyd

It sounds as if, based on your description just then, a dissy dance appeals to people because it has some familiarity.

If you said it's like yogic, meditative, the music, it sounds as if in one way it's familiar, but it has a twist.

And people tend to like that something that's familiar, but then slightly different because they've not tried it before.

Would you say that's right?

Sushmita Pati

Absolutely.

And it's interesting because this year, at two hour parades, we are inviting two of our dancers.

They are not South Asian and they have been doing this form for some time, but they also do belly dancing.

So I've invited them to do their belly dancing, but also it'll be a comeback for them to do their classical ODC class again.

And both of them love to perform.

And they're both English ladies.

They studied with us for many, many years.

But they also dance in other forms as well.

So we are inviting their group to perform belly dancing.

Sushmita Pati

We'll just see if they can actually do something together in terms of cross styles.

Maria Lloyd

So do you ever fuse the different types of dances and create something totally unique?

Sushmita Pati

Yes, we have.

We have done with contemporary dance.

So I worked with a couple of contemporary choreographers and we had a youth company a few years ago.

So we worked at the Haymarket.

We performed a couple of pieces and that included a contemporary version to it.

So the The dance was choreographed by Kathy Seagos.

She's a great composer in contemporary dance.

So we both worked together and she worked with the youth company and they created two productions.

Sushmita Pati

Also, we have toured performances which has contemporary music element.

I composed something last year, which was centered at the V&A.

So the narrative is taken from the yoginis of Orissa, but the music, the thinking behind it, the performance itself is highly contemporary.

Maria Lloyd

You've already touched on it a little bit, but speaking about how Odyssey is very good at crossing different cultural boundaries,

how do you actually promote Odyssey or Carly the Arts more broadly and get it in front of different people?

Sushmita Pati

I think it definitely it's easier to promote in bigger cities because there's more happening and London being one of them.

But having said that, what has been quite interesting is when we have shared something outdoors, it definitely has attracted more people.

And also where it has been part of a bigger event.

It has also attracted because they're not coming just to see this form, but also there are other things alongside.

And then the audience get to see this and then they inquire about the form and a performance, etc.

Sushmita Pati

But alongside, we have taken this performance and toured it to smaller venues.

The plan is to definitely tour nationally, to produce something locally and tour nationally.

So that is the stage we are at.

But sometimes the barrier becomes that we have lack of artists who live in this area.

So they have always been either London-based, because the majority of the work is there still.

And trying to see if we can get more artists to develop work locally so that we are able to share it widely and make

Sushmita Pati

it also available to, say, libraries.

Not just one-off, but probably a series so more people can see the transform.

Maria Lloyd

Really interesting.

I can totally understand how if you do something in public, instantly more people have eyes on it.

Leads me to a couple of different questions, actually.

Firstly, what type of events, these big events that you mentioned, do you find work well for what you do?

One is we have actually performed as part of a festival.

Sushmita Pati

So let's say there is an existing festival, which we take part every year.

As part of that festival, we have produced a piece for 20 minutes, half an hour, and we have taken it there.

And the response has been really good.

We have also created our own events, which is Diwali Lighting Time, which is our outdoor events.

And prior to the event, we also have workshops.

So that people engage in this.

And the workshops takes place in the business and in Reading.

So it takes place in those business units or in museums.

Sushmita Pati

So it is accessible and different people as well, because the way it's marketed, anybody can actually come and join those workshops.

And sometimes they have taken information about the event at those workshops and then come along as well.

Maria Lloyd

You mentioned a couple of challenges earlier.

One of the challenges you mentioned is finding artists to do all these performances.

So getting performances is not necessarily an issue, but finding artists can be a challenge.

Could you go into a little bit more about what other challenges you've found over the years?

And if you have any different sort of challenges now compared to before?

Sushmita Pati

The challenges also has been when we started with schools, it was more like hit and run.

It's just one off.

You just need to excite them.

The magic has to happen.

From that, we became more of a seriously known organization.

So which means we work with them.

We develop the work with the children, with the families, and then they learn lots of skills.

And then either they perform that somewhere or they execute that in the school.

Same thing applies again with producing of the work.

Sushmita Pati

So we would love to actually produce more work to create an area where artists are living and breathing the arts.

If they can achieve that, that would be amazing.

Also, we are looking at a space in Basingstoke where we can have a continuous production.

I think it's about artists living the arts, actually creating work continuously.

We are trying to do it in a shop unit so that box of buys can see it, so it becomes part of everyday life.

That's the idea, but I don't know how much luck we'll have.

Maria Lloyd

That would be amazing.

I love the idea of you performing the dances when you have shop windows, if you have your own space, because that for a start would be so eye-catching.

You'd be grabbing attention left, right and centre.

You must get so many questions from people, especially over the years, if they don't know anything about Odyssey or colour the arts.

So what sort of questions do you tend to get about your work?

Sushmita Pati

We still get, we are having this event.

Would you like to come and perform for free?

That definitely happens quite a lot.

And then we have to explain to them, we are a very small charity and, you know, our performers are professionals,

so they will need a fee.

We've changed the mindset.

So now they know you can't ask for free.

That's the first thing.

We had a little bit of setback because of COVID.

We had many, many students who wanted to learn, but I think because of COVID, everything changed because everything was at a stop for a couple of years.

Sushmita Pati

So like any other organisation, arts organisation or other organisations, we can see that has just coming back in a way.

Maria Lloyd

With COVID, you said that was a bit of a challenge.

So was it not so easy for you to pivot and just say, we're going to do lessons across Zoom?

Sushmita Pati

We did a lot of talks, actually.

We had a series of sessions with museums, teachers, all that training actually took place during COVID online.

And they were very, very successful, which meant a lot of elderly people also joined.

Which doesn't happen face-to-face.

And also we could keep the recording of them, which we could share internationally.

But what we find is in terms of learning,

COVID learning probably is a little bit difficult because this transform is still something people have not seen enough of.

Sushmita Pati

So we didn't gather many new audiences through COVID.

So majority of the people who come and learn with us, they are mostly people who have been learning with us face-to-face.

Maria Lloyd

That makes sense, actually, because not only do you develop that rapport face to face,

but there's more chance of people happening on you by chance if you're in a group and you're face to face rather than online

where you have to be going on a specific link or signing up to a specific course.

Sushmita Pati

And may I also say that the role of the organisations is also to make people happy.

So the happiness you will not get online.

Online has its own, you know, when you're just informing someone about some issue, people want to find out.

Definitely, it's a great medium.

And as I said, for people who can't travel and people of a certain age, definitely, I think both has its own place.

Maria Lloyd

You must have picked up so much from a business perspective.

So I'm really keen to know, how have you developed Kala the Arts as a business over the years?

And how have there been any sort of twists or change in how you've seen the business direction at all?

Sushmita Pati

For some reason, I had not looked at it as a business earlier.

I would be very honest.

It was more like a vision and also feeling how we can clarify even the vision and reach people and also develop the creative

process.

But also within the organization and the people who are part of it as well.

How do we make them creative and creative?

Also, the next generation, how do they understand that creativity is such an essential part of everyday life, not a luxury.

Sushmita Pati

We diversified in terms of areas.

So we're operating in Hampshire first.

And Reading did not seem very far away from us, Berkshire.

So we started with some smaller workshops.

There was quite a demand as well.

So not just Reading, but also Slough, those areas as well.

So wherever there was some quality work, we would actually try and reach out to those areas and develop the work.

At the moment, for example, we have this reading sort of lighted up.

Sushmita Pati

But that also came because we had many partnerships.

So once the partnerships were quite steady and there was an interest, there's a demand,

then it's possible to develop a big festival like we do now.

It shifted from being just a dance class and reaching out communities and schools into actually developing larger events and managing the logistic of those

events and also reaching out to many, many outdoor artists.

Maria Lloyd

How have you found that step up to dealing with the logistics and the organising?

Is it that you've got to have a team around you now because there's so much to do?

Or is it you just focus on one project at a time?

So because most of them are very familiar, it's manageable.

Sushmita Pati

It's quite a challenge, I must say.

But also what has happened is since the last three years, we have become a national portfolio holder of Arts Council,

which has allowed us to actually increase our staffing because the staff bring different skills.

So what we found was having different staff

Actually meant we could do different projects but rather than moving from one project to another we just work in a continuous manner so that say for

example like our outdoor events we have to literally plan a year in advance and find out who the partners are etc and then

Sushmita Pati

do all the logistics and then prepare it and then obviously towards the end last two months the marketing and everything happens.

Maria Lloyd

Interesting so you're much more focused now on like the longer term it's not

At events, it's your planning a year out to make sure all the events are in there.

You know exactly what you're working on for the next year.

Sushmita Pati

But then there are some surprises as well, I must say.

So if we have capacity, we will take them on.

Maria Lloyd

I'm pleased that you mentioned you're a national portfolio organisation.

So many congratulations on that because it is not easy to get a status.

As part of that, you mentioned developing the right partnerships as well.

What is your process for finding the right partnerships?

Do you have a specific process or list of questions?

Sushmita Pati

As we are an arts and education charity, we have always found that education sector has been quite aligned with what the work we do.

And then the museums, the museums is another one, because, again, there's a lot of outreach work with the museums.

And so that, again, has been a gradual process, I would say.

Libraries as well.

So these are spaces we have always shown work to those audiences.

And also sometimes we have done something and somebody has looked at it and this can be actually have the company perform in that area

Sushmita Pati

and over a period of time.

So it's like we're not continuously looking for partners, but the partnership has taken place because they are looking to develop their audience.

So we have helped them develop their audience.

Like, for example, Pavilion Dance, a regional dance organization based in Bournemouth.

They asked us to come and do a project with them.

It took about nearly three years from conversation to actually delivery.

And then what we found is we helped them develop their audiences.

Diverse audiences because they were finding that's the area they want to develop and they want to use this organization to help them achieve

Sushmita Pati

that in terms of getting the right people in and so they're increasing their capacity could you go a bit more into detail into that please

Maria Lloyd

with how you actually help an organization to develop its audiences to get a more diverse audience in again is there a process that you do how do you

help them to achieve that

Sushmita Pati

I think one of them is the performance, because also people look at us as a diverse organization and the product, what you're selling.

Also, we recommend them doing workshops and residencies prior to the delivering of the work, because that attracts a lot of people and we continuously market with them.

Strategically as partners.

We don't have a huge audience following in our social media, but we have many streams.

Like for example, there's various WhatsApp groups and we put it on a website.

Sushmita Pati

So many ways.

And also television companies, interviews, wherever there's a possibility.

We have a whole list of marketing things.

We advise them.

So they try and do that.

And perhaps sometimes if you have a certain brand,

People just probably, if they're interested, they'll just come along.

But we actively promote it as well.

Maria Lloyd

So it's a combination then of just your mere presence and telling everyone about what you're doing with the organisation,

but then helping the organisation to get in place processes like the workshops where they can actually start to engage with people and have

a bit more conversation with them on another level.

Sushmita Pati

Yeah.

And at the moment we are working with one national organization, but I think the deal has not been finalized.

So obviously I'll keep quiet.

But again, we are helping them shape their diverse audiences as well.

And there are many venues across all the conversation has started already.

So possibly we'll see some results in like six months or a year because some of these things take a long time.

Maria Lloyd

Is there an average with how long it takes?

Because you mentioned that the other project you did was three years.

I don't know when you started this one, but like you said, it could be a year.

Is there a reason for that?

Is it just people are busy with different times of the year in their own programme?

So it's just catching each other at the right time.

Is there a reason for the lead time?

Sushmita Pati

I think two things.

One is we having that staff dedicated to do it.

For example, taking some of our work and performing it in many, many venues requires somebody, a dedicated staff to do that.

So we are planning on that, but we have not got there yet.

So we have done some performances, but I really would love to share some of that work to other venues.

And those venues plan a year or two years in advance, especially if they don't know the organization that well.

It takes time.

Sushmita Pati

And it's like building that trust, building that confidence, like with a sponsor as well.

You know, sometimes the sponsor also you need that time.

Unless there is a recommendation, somebody recommends you and then that helps as well.

Maria Lloyd

So it's a combination of you actively reaching out to people to suggest doing a collaboration and then people,

I imagine when people come to you and ask to do it, it's much quicker.

But is it when you're reaching out and getting people in line, especially the bigger ones, that can take a bit longer?

Sushmita Pati

Absolutely, absolutely.

And plus also, if you think about from a venue's perspective or festivals, they already have a group of people they program every year.

So trying to change that can be a lot of work.

But once you have had that relationship and they've realized that it was very successful and that your work fits in with their criteria,

there's a lot of boxes to tick, I'll be honest.

That all has to also match at the same time.

Maria Lloyd

I can see why it can take a while sometimes.

Now, we should wrap up in a couple of questions, but I really want to ask you about what you do for Reading.

So you organise the Diwali parade.

Could you say a bit more about how you organise that and how it's progressed?

Sushmita Pati

So we did a performance for Reading Museum outdoors during COVID.

And interestingly enough, that was the only day we could perform.

This was in 2020.

We performed at the ruins.

And I think we had only 50 people.

There were some counsellors, Reading counsellors, and there were staff from the museum.

And I think from that, people saw it and it was an opportunity to see that could become more of an annual event,

the performance alongside RAID.

Sushmita Pati

So RAID has sort of approached us and so they're quite happy as well.

So we worked together for the first one.

So the first one happened in a very small area near the town centre.

And it was fully packed with audiences, amazing performances.

And then we did the parade.

But we were quite cautious because it sounds like that was the first one.

So there's a lot of lessons to be learned.

And then it became better and better every year.

Maria Lloyd

Could you go into a bit about those lessons and what lessons?

You said there were quite a few lessons to learn at the start.

What did you find out and how did you change that for following years?

Sushmita Pati

Sure.

So one of the things was actually the pinch points.

We had to learn where the pinch points are because people can get very excited.

But again, at the end of the day, we have to make sure we have to cover those pinch points.

Also, the length of the performances and parade had to determine.

It's not too long because you lose those people as well.

And also deciding on sort of what artists, that is down to quality arts.

That's our vision.

For example, every year, the parade has a theme.

Sushmita Pati

So this year, for example, the theme of the parade is being human.

Let's not just get carried away with the AA.

Let's be kind.

Let's remember the things which matter to us the most.

Let's take a pause as well.

It's like helping each other.

That's another thing.

Maria Lloyd

Oh, that's such a lovely topic to have for this year and very apt, as you said, with AI.

When you started Kala the Arts all those years ago, did you vision yourself at this point?

A national portfolio organisation working on these multi-year projects?

Sushmita Pati

I think, Maria, probably my vision was to have it earlier.

It probably is a bit later, I think.

COVID did not help, but COVID helped in other ways because I think people noticed how hard we worked.

It's not just myself, but the team.

And I think we are always said by many sponsors that Carl actually gives a lot more for the money,

which is nice to hear.

And also, I think there is definitely some areas we would love to develop

We still haven't got the number of audiences we would like to reach digitally.

Sushmita Pati

That's definitely something we would love to do a bit more of so that some of the audience reach we feel we might not

still have.

And locally we are, in terms of nationally, there are people out there, we can reach them through other ways.

Continuously thinking of what courses can we devise?

How do we even use AI to our advantage?

Interestingly enough, sometimes our reports we do on AI as well.

So there's room to improve.

Maria Lloyd

It's lovely how accessible you are and how you are so focused on opening Kala the Arts and the Odyssey and the other forms

of dance that you do up to a much wider audience.

So I'll be interested to see where you go on that next part of your journey.

Now, do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to leave our listeners with today?

Sushmita Pati

I would say they can come and join us for various things.

We don't just do dance.

We do visual arts as well.

Call of the Arts is not just about performances and classes, but it's more than that.

And it's a lifetime of learning.

You know, how can we do things together?

Also, we have not ventured so much into businesses.

So if there are business and they want us to come and talk to some of their employees, we can also do that.

But also organizations based locally.

So how the local can engage with us and find out about each other.

Sushmita Pati

I think that's the message.

Maria Lloyd

I think that is a lovely place to leave everyone.

Lovely.

Thank you so much for your time today, Sushmita.

I've really enjoyed talking with you and finding out more about Carl of the Arts.

And yes, I highly recommend you all check out the Carl of the Arts website and exactly what a ditty dance looks like.

Thank you so much.