

Honoring the impulse

Anjal Chande's 'The Next Cup of Tea' dance-theater show indulges in the little performances of our daily lives

By Lauren Warnecke
For the Chicago Tribune

'How are you?" is a question we ask each other constantly, usually followed by, "I'm good," or "I'm fine. How are you?"

No. but really — how are you? That's what mixed media performing artist Anjal Chande asked herself in September 2016; more than seven years later, she's ready to tell us.

"I'm angry," Chande said in a Feb. 15 rehearsal of "The Next Cup of Tea" — clenched fists, standing just shy of the top rung on a bright orange stepladder. Before then, the ladder was turned on its side. Chande spent several minutes seated on its edge, tapping her feet to the crescendo of a piano played by recent Chicago transplant Sharon Udoh.

Chande may or may not say or do these things in "The Next Cup of Tea," running March 8-16 at Steppenwolf's 1700 Theater. The performance is one of a handful featured in Steppenwolf's LookOut Series highlighting experimental Chicago artists. Chande received additional production support from the Museum of Contemporary Art.

"I was interested in a process that was about observing what was surfacing on the daily," said Chande in an interview after the rehearsal. "I didn't necessarily know what I wanted it to be, but I knew how I wanted the material to generate."

That material is often variations on a handful of themes: Chande's grandpa, money, growing up in the suburbs, the so-called "model minority" — to name a few.

For 17 years, Chande has worn multiple hats in Chicago's dance scene. She founded Soham Dance Space as an alternative to more rigid approaches to Indian dance training; the nonprofit has additionally served as a community hub, rehearsal space and a vehicle for Chande's choreographic work. The latter manifested in about 2014 with "Pay No Mind," a trio about cultural expectations, conformity and assimilation among the South Asian diaspora — specifically among second-generation immigrants.

"The Next Cup of Tea" is less about something than "Pay No Mind." Rather, it's a way of working.

A departure from conventional "dance making," Chande uses an improvisational score with a handful of anchor points for Udoh to follow. She allows herself to indulge in the little performances of our daily lives, like making tea or telling a story about her family. Chande might perch over or upon a table (designed by David Ofori-Amoah) that has been hand-crafted from brightly colored wooden slabs that slide brilliantly together. She might scatter pieces of bright orange particle board all over the place—as if looking for a particular piece from a giant puzzle. She might toss a playground ball into the audience, hum a tune, balance precariously on a wobbly barstool or draw from a deep well of Bharatanatyam vocabulary. To this, Chande adds an extraordinary collection of musical musings started in 2016, interpreted live by Udoh, who sits on the perimeter of their proverbial sandbox.

"I was so restlessly drawn toward manipulating objects," Chande said. "And then I moved."

Starting in August 2017, Chande spent a year in Berlin on a U.S. Fulbright Scholarship.

"It was wonderful to be far, far, far away where nobody knew me," Chande said. She spent countless hours alone in a dance studio. "That's where my comfort connecting with my own style of moving emerged with more clarity and confidence."

Beginning in the early 1990s, Chande trained with guru Hema Rajagopalan and later danced professionally with Natya Dance Theatre, Chicagoland's longest-running and largest Indian dance organization, founded by Rajagopalan. Chande studied nattuvangam (rhythmic recitation) and abhinaya (the Indian art of expression) under renowned gurus Seetaram Sarma, Indira Kadambi, Jayanthi Subramaniam and Bragha Bessell. She plays tabla and other percussion instruments.

"The Next Cup of Tea" is aimed at choosing from all or none of those attributes in Chande's artistic bio, depending on what feels right in the moment. The important part is to honor the impulse, meaning a story Chande tells through words, or even stillness — taking a deep breath one can't help but feel with her — holds the same value as a story told with her eyes, hands, torso and feet using skills she refined over decades.

"In a way, it was cutting the cord of this identity of being a dancer,"



Anjal Chande's solo dance-theater "The Next Cup of Tea," part of Steppenwolf's Lookout Series. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

Chande said. "I'm not a dancer first and a musician second, this third and that fourth," she said. "That hierarchy influences what permissions you give yourself. I realized I just want to be an artist. Everything gets to be in my pallet. I don't have to judge why I, as a dancer, am playing with a teacup or a stool."

Saying yes to those instincts is, in part, why Soham Dance Space

will close in September. Before then, Soham will host an arangetram recital — a graduation of sorts for Chande's two current Bharatanatyam students — plus several community engagements in Soham's Pilsen studio.

"It's been such a deep honor to be in community with all the creative people in Chicago," Chande said. "Artist-run initiatives are really

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needed, but the contradiction or inherent challenge of an artist-run space takes a lot of creative energy."

Chande isn't quite sure what's next. She feels like "The Next Cup of Tea" is finally finished, but is open to continuing to perform it. She likes making things. She enjoys doing physical activities. She's learning woodworking; she might do that for a while. Whatever happens, she's honoring the impulse, and letting her gut lead the way.

"The Next Cup of Tea" runs March 8-16 at Steppenwolf 1700 Theater, 1650 N. Halsted St.; tickets are \$11-\$33 at 312-335-1650 and steppenwolf.org