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CULTURE

Dance is my Heartbeat

One of South India's fine classical dancers relates her artistry to teaching, religion and the care of children

Kalyani Giri, Houston, Texas

It's a home where the Gods reside comfortably. An intriguing array of Ganesha figurines bounteously occupy shelves and tables. The sacrosanct Sri Lalitha Sahasranamam chant drifts through the air like a wisp of audible fragrance. Rendered golden by the first rays of early morning sun seeping seductively through the huge bay windows, a magnificent bronze sculpture of the celestial dancer of Thillai, stands majestically with left foot raised in dance sublime.

"Whenever I see this particular pose of Lord Siva Nataraja, I feel a renewed faith in the effect of the arts in one's life, that dance truly is a divine art," says Rathna Kumar. She only recently returned to Texas from India where she recieved the prestigious, Madras Music Academy's "Dancer of the Year 2000" award. At this moment, the very popular Houston performer, choreographer and dance guru is immersed in yet another of her multiple roles that of housewife, performing her morning puja. At the conclusion of her worship, she is sharing

her thoughts with me, but by no stretch of imagination is our interview uninterrupted! The phone is constantly ringing.

Diminutive and blessed with a bone structure that would have pleased Bharatha, the author of the South Indian dancer's bible, the Natya Shastra, Rathna was truly born to dance. A fully qualified expert in the South Indian dance forms of bharatha natyam and kuchipudi, she began her training early. At the age of three, seated on her mother's knee, she was enchanted with a performance by the great bharatha natyam danseuse Kamala Laxman, whom to this day, she deems her greatest inspiration. At four years of age, Rathna became the student of Kalaimamani Dr. K.J. Sarasa, a recipient of the coveted Sangeet Natak Academy Award for excellence in teaching. Rathna's arangetram, or first formal stage performance, took place at the early age of eight.

She soon became fascinated with kuchipudi, another South Indian dance form that originated in the village of Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh. She started formal training in this style in 1961 under Padma Bhushan Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam, India's best-known kuchipudi maestro. Rathna's keen intelligence and love of both dance styles compelled her to distinguish the difference of each and to excel at both.

At the peak of her dance career, which included several recitals abroad, Rathna married her childhood friend, Anil Kumar, an engineer, and permanently moved from Chennai to Houston, Texas, in 1975. At that time there were only a few hundred Indians living in the USA. Many had not even known of the dance style called kuchipudi. As the first student of both

her gurus to have moved to the West, she felt the need to teach what she had learned. Thus was born, the Anjali Dance Company, eventually enriching the lives of hundreds of students.

Rathna Kumar is very religious. "I start my day with prayer," she says. "So do Anil and our sons, Chetan and Kedaar. On Mondays, I do my Siva worship, and on Fridays I maintain a fast to invoke the blessing of Santoshi Ma. I very strongly believe in God. Throughout the day, in the course of teaching dance, I'm praying to various deities. It is not possible to dance an art form mechanically. You need to have blessings from God to perform this task on Earth. I've been raised a Hindu with strong roots and beliefs."

A tireless teacher, Rathna spearheaded a teaching program called "Talking Hands" in schools for physically and mentally challenged children. This program uses dance mudras (gestures) as a communication tool for the speech impaired. She also introduced ethnic dance as a credited subject at the University of Houston.

"With Indian dance," Rathna explains, "if you teach it as an art form and try not to put too much emphasis on religion, especially when you teach non-Hindu students, it is still hard to get away from the many rituals that have been worked into the teaching and performance of it. All classes begin and end with the namaskaram, a salutation to Mother Earth, and an apology for the harsh

act of stamping your feet on her. Namaskaram is also offered to God and to the audience whose blessings are sought."

As a traditionalist Rathna is uncompromising in her quest to preserve the art form in all its purity. "I think the influx of Indian movie dances have done much to stunt the spread of the classical arts," she laments. "Thank goodness they're transient! But Indian classical dance is time tested. It has been around for 4,000 years. Its foundation is strong, so it shall continue to prevail. And from the West, people like Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis were excited by the exotic nature of Indian dance and incorporated it creatively into their styles. The influence of the East has always held great fascination for Western dancers, and this will also continue."

Rathna has, however, collaborated with performers from other schools of dance. Regarding the idea that following tradition cancels out the possibility for innovation, Rathna explains: "The basic format of bharatha natyam is the same in every school. Each school, however, has its own way of interpreting and expressing dance movements. Yes, I do like to retain the classical dance idiom, but there is ample scope to be creative and innovative within the parameters of the art form."

As a very hands-on mother and teacher, deeply involved in providing a loving, nurturing environment to her children and students alike, Rathna has some strong ideas about today's youth. "Corporal punishment is like the death penalty, completely wrong," Rathna says succinctly. "Even disruptive children don't deserve it. I also believe that dosing out Ritalin to hyperactive children is wrong. As a teacher, one has a strong moral responsibility to instill the values of self respect, tolerance and compassion in young people. There are so many negative feelings going around, so much of violence and drug abuse in schools these days. Parents owe it to their children to spend quality time with them, listening to their views without condemnation, but with love and gentleness. We have to guide our kids, if we ourselves are not stable and our kids grow up in a dysfunctional home, society pays the price. Children are a reflection of their parents. I see this all the time in my students. Hindu children have such a fine religion, they must be proud of it. I tell them, 'Don't take the drastic step of converting to other religions before you give yourself a chance to understand your own first.'"

Rathna is a recipient of several coveted awards: Unesco's Dancer of the Year Award (1970), the Kala Vipanchee Award (1998), Texas Institute for Arts in Education Award (2000) and the Houston METRO's Community Service Award (2000) to name a few. "Dance is my heartbeat," Rathna concludes. Now, the

doorbell is ringing, and Rathna's first students of the day are arriving, removing their shoes at the door and rushing forward to touch their guru's feet.

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