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Chitresh Das' Personal Story; Bringing Kathak From Calcutta to California

"My tabla player called to say he would not accompany me as a result of a dancer-musician exchange we had had on stage the previous night, in the Kathak tradition of improvisation, which he felt had insulted him. Standing in front of a huge window, my anger and frustration rose at the thought of a missed opportunity, and I shot my fist through one of the frames. I collapsed onto thousands of pieces of shattered glass and was rushed to the hospital where they removed a two-inch jagged piece and operated on my wrist. The tendon of my right hand was severed, and it was not yet known just how much use of my hand I would regain. My guruji came, and when he saw me, he melted into tears, which he wiped with the corner of his dhoti. I never believed that the man who taught me with such an iron fist could weep. We wept together." That was Chitresh Das 20 years ago, still in India, on the eve of his first big potential "break" - joining a famous American dance company in an all-India tour.

A lot has happened since then - his hand healed, he came to the US with only his tabla, bells and eight dollars in his pocket, married an Anglo-American dancer, taught at schools and colleges, formed his own dance troupe, fought off its early critics, forged it into a premier company, eventually secured world acclaim and recently divorced. All this time, he never stopped dancing - day after day strapping 12 pounds of bells around his ankles and pounding wooden floors to the unforgiving, forceful tal beat - ka taka ta taka taka ta...The fire that drove the fist through the window is still there, but it's tempered. It still drives him - and those who train under him - but the red anger has softened. It's now more a white fire, and his dance reflects this brilliance. Chitresh is 44, medium height, strong and so full of kinetic energy you wonder how he gets his body to go to sleep a night. "I was sitting on the floor right in front of him," relates Kali Nalluran, who watched him dance at the Concord Siva Temple in California recently. "You could feel the floor vibrate from his feet stamping to the perfect tal, beat. He has very amazing facial expressions. You can feel him dancing. He's very alive, so much energy. You can tell he understands everything he's doing. All his small muscles throughout his body were moving in sync. So much intensity."

Chitresh's deepest vision is to plant Kathak in American soil. It is that goal that has brought him the highest hurdles and biggest hurts. The members of his troupe, the Chitresh Das Dance Company, are all female and white Americans. He and Kathak are Indian and Hindu. In the early days, a deep cultural crevasse lay between them. And most of the troupe's early critics threw them in it, ruthlessly. Their words cut deep. But his dancers refused to admit defeat and decided to improve instead. To make a long story - of hard work - short, the company did improve, and as clear proof, were recently selected to join the 1989 National Endowment for the Arts US tour. That's serious recognition.

His Early Days in His Words

The following excerpts are from his autobiographical sketch. Discipleship and The West. "The first time I saw my guru was in zamindar's palace where I was taken by my mother, father and Govardhan Swami, a monk from the Ramakrishna Mission, to see a male disciple perform Kathak dance. Everything seemed mysterious and lavish, from the polished marble floors to the huge sparking chandeliers. Everywhere there was the fragrance of itar, a rare Indian perfume, and of rose water. We walked down the corridors and through the darwaza, a grand doorway. When we passed into the immense palace hall, I saw it was filled with men, some of them reclining on white cotton and velvet bolster pillows. Some were swaying to the sounds of tabla, chewing silver-wrapped paan and exclaiming their appreciation with 'aha!' and 'kya baat.' Afaque Hussain of the Lucknow gharana (school) was playing a tabla solo with the accompaniment of the sarangi (stringed instrument). To the left of the musicians, sat two men. One of them, smiling proudly, was Khalifa Wazid Ali, father of Afaque Hussain. The other man, whom I thought so princely, wore a black sherwani (Nehru) coat and two large diamond earnings. He was Pandit Ram Narayan Misra and he would become my guru.

"I waited with anticipation for the day he (my future guru, Pandit Misra) would come to our home. My parents had selected [him as] the man whom I would study under for many years to come, and on this occasion, at ten years old, I would be formally chosen as his disciple. I was brought into the room. When I went close and touched his feet, he put my eyes as though he could see right inside me, and asked me if I would study dance. I said yes.

"It would be dark when I woke up and strapped almost five kilos of bells around my ankles. I did my pranam, touched my guruji's feet and began my practice. I would

dance from four until seven A. M. Guruji would have me start with a slow tatkar (basic footwork). Soon the pace would increase…As the sky grew pale light, I would begin to dance compositions of various types, with fast turns and crisp stances. I would have to recite compositions without sounding out of breath. If I showed any signs of breathlessness, I would be severely reprimanded. I danced on a polished concrete floor in a space approximately five feet square. Losing balance or accidentally touching anything was absolutely forbidden. In this way I learned to be constantly aware, developing the span, focus and intensity of my attention. Guruji would say, 'When you practice, dance in such a way that the sound of your bells and the room become one'…After lunch we would take a short rest and then my afternoon practice would begin. This schedule continued through the summer in temperatures over one hundred degrees, and in one hundred percent humidity. The fans would be turned off so that I would build stamina."

Thirty years later, Chitresh still wields that steely stamina as he determinedly welds his fast-footed Kathak dance form onto America's performing arts establishment.

"Kathak" is one of India's six recognized dance forms. Whereas Bharatya Natyam is South Indian, the oldest, most stylized and conservative, Kathak is North Indian, the youngest (1500's), most theatrical and liberal. Its structure is dramatic, based on powerful and unyielding tals, or rhythms. "Kathakas" were a community of artists whose profession was storytelling while entertaining. Kathak dance grew out of this. Dancers would travel gypsy style, come to town, gather the village folk and, for hours, drum, dance, sing, and mime - bringing to life stories of Hindu Gods, Goddesses, human heroes and heroines. Though Hindu-born, Kathak received its greatest patronage from the wealthy Muslim nawabs, rulers. A class of Kathak dancing girls emerged, entertaining in palatial settings. Kathak's patron king is a Muslim Wajid Alik Shah, himself a Kathak dancer. "The combination of the two - Hindu and Muslim culture - is Kathak," explains Chitresh.

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