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Self-Portrait

Adyar Lakshman Shares Early Life, Later Lessons

Friday, 1944. Springtime was blooming into summer. The small lad excitedly wiggled together with his brother and friends on an open-air stone temple pavilion near Thanjavur. Shirdi Sai Baba bhajan time. As their throats quavered with celestial tones, curls of sandalwood incense wafting from the inner shrines began to dance. Devotees, distracted from formal worship by the young chorallars, amassed in a rainbow sea of saris and black hair braided with white jasmine flowers.

Adyar Lakshman was then only 10. His mother had passed away and his father, a poor schoolteacher, had remarried and hoped music careers would save his sons from ordinary education. One day, 'With the force of a divine wind, a Mr. Doraiswamy heard Lakshman sing and, securing elated blessings from his father, suddenly whisked the boy away to Madras. The young vocalist landed at Kalakshetra, the abode of the Goddess-like dance star Rukmini Devi. This one-woman army had amassed an arsenal of artistic talent at her coastal fortress. From here, she fought and finally defeated a puritanical Western-elite bent on convicting dance as a harlot's sport and exorcising it from India.

Her powerful vortex of cultural training was Lakshman's total universe until 1959 when he finally left to teach and travel world-wide with Vijayanthi Mala's troupe. In 1969, he opened his own dance school, Bharata Chudamani, in Madras. He is currently visiting in the US, instructing. His contact is Mrs. Padmini Chari (713) 937-4705.

HINDUISM TODAY: Could you reminisce a little about your days at Kalakshetra?

Adyar K. Lakshman: Rukmini Devi accepted me as a student when she heard my beautiful singing, stating strongly that I will be useful for the center. Months later she suggested I take dance. I hesitated. Then she said. "This is just a physical exercise; it will be very helpful," I couldn't refuse. I was in the hands of Rukmini. I took mridangam, dance and vocal. One unforgettable instance was when Rukmini was with some visitors watching me teach. I wasn't aware of them until she said. "Look at the born teacher."

HT: Why did you, eventually give up performing for teaching?

AKL: That's a good question. I also wonder why. Although I gave it up, I should have continued. But after I came out of Kalakshetra, I thought there was a necessity to become a teacher more than dancing.

HT: What is your key in teaching?

AKL: Rukmini used to say it's not necessary to actually teach. Just being yourself will create the atmosphere. The dance teacher should not have other worries while teaching so that full energies and concentration can be forwarded to the student. Another point, we Indian spectators always stress beauty instead of dance. But it's not necessary for a student to be beautiful. If they work hard and are consistent in dance practice, that brings beauty and grace. When the dancer sweats, a radiance appears on the face. I feel the dancer becomes more beautiful through the excellence of the dance.

HT: Is Bharata Natyam stylized solely for women?

AKL: No, for everybody. Everyone won't agree with me, but I feel a male dancer can bring out the female aspect and a female can bring out the male aspect. A dancer must be that way. But a male dancer must not suddenly become effeminate

in real life and go into a sitting posture like this...No. Should not. Also, Rukmini never allowed a male character to be dressed as a female.

HT: You have your own school?

AKL: Yes, dancers come from different countries like Russia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and US. One girl, Uma Iyer, came from California to train last year and did very well. Indian people, wherever we go, we can never leave our culture. Although one can't get the same atmosphere in a foreign country, these students learning outside India are especially intelligent, eager and hard working.

Through Our Eyes

He was more a part of my family than a teacher. One day my mother went to him and said we just couldn't pay for more lessons for me. 'Never mind,' he replied. He thought me for years like this. All he really wanted from me is hard work, because he is putting so much of himself into my training."

- Jayanthi Sridharan has studied with Lakshman for 16 years.

He's very fun, makes others laugh. As boys, we slept in the same thatched hut, ate together, played together, danced and learned together. One day Rukmini Devi asked him to take the role of Manmata, cupid. But he doesn't look like a cupid. He laughed and said to Rukmini, 'I look like Hanuman, monkey-faced. Why do you choose me?' he loves everybody. So helpful. He's also an amazingly talented person. He has a love for teaching. Wonderful musician and teacher. He plays the mridangam, composes music for dance and is a good singer. He's perfect guru."

- Celebrated dance maestro Mr. K. Kunhircaman was a boyhood schoolmate of Adyar Lakshman at Kalashetra School, India.

He knew everything about everything. Not just dance. I could ask him anything. I think that's really neat how someone can be so inspirational. That's the word, inspirational. He totally, constantly wanted to push me forward. In classes, if other girls were dancing and I was just sitting, he would say. 'Uma, why are you just sitting there? Why don't you get up and dance with them?'"

- Uma Iyer, 19, US's 1991 Ethnic Dance Festival's solo Indian dance finalist, travelled to India last year for advanced training with A. Lakshman for 6 weeks.

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