

[Balasaraswati's Legacy Lives On](#)

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Daughter Lakshmi Continues Work Of Preeminent Indian Dance Artist

As dusk falls on pradosham - once every fifteen days according to the Hindu calendar, it is said that Lord Siva dances for all his celestials and Parvati sits on the throne, enthralled by his performance. This event from Hindu tradition is marked with joyous celebrations at the Kapaliswara Temple in Mylapore, Madras, and the Deity is taken out in colorful procession. Recalls Lakshmi, daughter of India's legendary dancer T. Balasaraswati, "It used to be a beautiful sight. My mother, grandmother and I would never miss this event. The temple was dedicated to Siva and Parvati, who is also known as Karapangambha - the Devi who is the granter of all boons. My mother was a very religious person but she never compelled us to be religious. We always went to the temple, it was just a part of daily life. And today, although America is home now, I still miss the experience of going to the temple regularly."

Lakshmi, herself a talented dancer, comes from a long line of illustrious artists: her grandmother and great-grandmother were both noted musicians, and her great great grandmother a renowned dancer. Her uncles were well-known singers, and her mother,

Balasaraswati, has been regarded as the Queen of Dance, one of the great dancers of the century. Balasaraswati had received several awards for her particular style of bharata natyam and her unmatched singing, including the Padma Vibhushan, presidential awards as well as the Deshakottam Award from Shantiniketan. Lakshmi is dancing in her mother's footsteps, but try to compare the two, and she shakes her head vigorously: "I am just a mole. She was a mountain."

Although Lakshmi never learned dance formally, she seemed to absorb it by osmosis, growing up as she did in that enriched environment of music and dance. She was her mother's right hand on all her tours, her constant companion and her assistant in teaching. She says, "I loved teaching and being her assistant was one way of learning indirectly."

One of the most vivid memories Lakshmi has of her mother is during her first American appearance at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in 1962. Her performance was mesmerizing. Lakshmi recalls, "she was performing there for a week. On all seven days, the great dancer Ted Shawn honored Balam by flying, the Indian flag. Her dancing was memorable. On the last day, it was at its height. Ted Shawn couldn't control his emotions; he came to the stage, knelt down and kissed her hands in front of thousands of people. It was a beautiful moment."

Since the 1960s Balasaraswati and Lakshmi visited the US regularly and established a dance school in California which had a steady growth of American students. Around this time, Lakshmi finally embarked on a professional dance career. She says, "Dance is my mother's gift to me. Seeing her commitment all those years, I had unconsciously imbibed it. The commitment was there all along, but I started flowering at a later stage. I'm happy it happened that way because as you grow, you treasure these things more."

Lakshmi is married to American businessman Douglas Knight, who also has a great affinity for Indian music. In fact, he learned Carnatic

Ethnic dancer La Men, Balasaraswati and innovative dancer Ted Shawn at Jacob's Pillow, 1962, where Bala was a smashing hit music from her uncle, T. Ranganathan, at Wesleyan College. Knight went on to receive a PhD in ethnomusicology and trained to be a performing artist on the mridangam. For the past 25 years Knight has been playing the mrudangam at all of Lakshmi's concerts. The couple has a ten-year-old son, Anirudhha, who is already showing a talent for music and dance.

Balasaraswati died in 1984, and in 1985 Lakshmi created the Balasaraswati School of Indian Music and Dance in Stockton, New Jersey, with a branch in Madras. Says Lakshmi, "Preserving her work is a serious commitment for me. Knowing the value of it, the richness, the greatness, I feel a responsibility not to let it die out. I want

the younger generation, especially Indians, to know it."

What makes Lakshmi's dance so special and reminiscent of her mother's work is her tremendous range of expression and her vast repertoire of dances. She has performed at several organizations, including the American Dance Festival, the Smithsonian, The Asia Society, Harvard University and Columbia University.

Last December Lakshmi was honored with South India's highest award for a dancer, the Nritya Choodami by the Krishna Gana Sabha in Madras. She is also the recipient of three prestigious grants from the US National Endowment for the Arts in recognition of her "exceptional talent." These grants not only provide her funding to build up her repertoire but also offer matching funds for her performances.

Lakshmi would love to awaken the interest of Indian Americans in Balasaraswati's work. She says, "the American grant is doing wonders for me. They realize the value, that's why I'm asked to do this. Balasaraswati is a household word amongst Indians, yet they should know what she did, and their children would be enriched by it. Bala's work was not cinematic or 'filmy,' it was unique. This is people's chance to see something which may be lost forever."

And so, Lakshmi dons the bells on her ankles and continues to dance in India and the US, teaching the younger generation and thus hoping to keep alive this uniquely Hindu dance form and the legacy of her mother, Balasaraswati.

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