

Mind the body

ANJANA RAJAN JULY 15, 2011 00:00 IST

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in step with culture Seshadri Iyengar in performance. PHOTO: S. SIVA SARAVANAN

Chat As Seshadri Iyengar prepares for his performance in New Delhi this coming Monday, he speaks of his beliefs and motivations.

Just under a year has elapsed since Seshadri Iyengar, a dynamic Bharatanatyam exponent based in Bengaluru, performed at New Delhi's India Habitat Centre to a sparse crowd. That such talent should travel so far to be exhibited to so few seemed definitely regrettable. However, Seshadri, a disciple of Padmini Ravi and other gurus, stirred up a euphoria of sorts with his stupendous mix of technique and emotion, dynamism and stillness. He returns to the Delhi stage on July 18 with a performance at the same venue under the HCL Concert Series, 7 p.m. Included in his repertoire will be a varnam that bridges today's world with the nayak-nayika tradition and a new piece recently learnt from Guru Padma Subamanyam. In this email interview, Seshadri — also a practising homeopathic physician — shares his thoughts on the science and art of life. Edited excerpts:

Social conditioning often discourages boys from joining dance classes. What are your thoughts in this context?

To begin with it's very important for us to understand that “dance” is beyond “form” and “gender”. It's come to my understanding that in the recent past, boys who have taken to dancing have done so with the intention of taking dance as a profession and are very clear about it. In most cases the parents are supportive.

These days dance is seen everywhere — schools, colleges, TV, films — and is well appreciated. The gender ratio has been largely equal. One reason why boys might not be encouraged is the economy. Will dancing fetch enough returns! Some believe that dancing makes men effeminate and this is unfortunately popularised by characters in films. I suppose one should pause and think that not all effeminate men are dancers.

In the past men have been part of every dance ritual. And when we look at the scriptures and the Gods... We see Nartana Ganapati, Nataraja, and Krishna — all men dancing; whilst Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati played instruments. My point is, our nature is to dance. And dance is our nature.

What drew you to choreograph the varnam selected for your upcoming performance, and how have you approached it?

This is a tana varnam composed by Rajee Narayan in raga Dharmavati and tala Adi. This is clearly a Nayika-based varnam. My understanding is: When it comes to the Lord who is the Purusha it's obvious everything around, such as the humans, nature itself, the animals and plants take the role or the form of Prakriti or the female gender yearning to be united with the Lord. A dance performance is successful when there is a soul-to-soul communication, and the physical form is just a medium, be it male or female. This belief guided me to choose this varnam. And the choreography and the ideas just came in and I enjoyed this process.

The piece opens with the male protagonist who walks into a temple and comes eye-to-eye with Lord Krishna's idol. Instantly, he has an intuition of his past life and sees himself as a gopi enjoying the company of the Lord. Being one with him is attaining moksha in itself. But he now asks the Lord what wrong he did then, for which he is reborn now and has to go through the turmoil of another birth: Sami niku i apalapaiemikopamura.....

How did you start training? Was there a point when you decided you wanted to be a professional?

Like with most other kids, dance started as an extracurricular activity. Mom noticed my interest in dance and thought it would be a good idea. The turning point was when I did my arangetram and people started noticing me. Group and solo performances followed. By then I realised that I'm in harmony when it came to dance; it became my second nature. It was a clear choice over medical practice. Opportunities to work with professional Bharatnatyam and Contemporary dance companies in U.K. and USA followed and 15 years went by travelling and dancing.

I must mention that coming with a Vazhuvoor mindset and background, which is the most liberal, free spirited and yet vibrant in form, nurtured me all through.

Do you find your practice of homeopathy harmonious with your pursuit of Bharatanatyam? Do you use your art in health awareness projects?

Homeopathy was without doubt the system of choice. I grew up with its benefits and I strongly believe that a holistic approach is essential; for life forms are not mere body parts fixed together; as believed by the some other systems. Homeopathy believes in treating the vital force that animates our body, and not the body parts. And true communication in dance is not physical but more dynamic. Thus I found parallels. I do combine several disciplines in a Mind and Body fitness programme – Dance-Yoga-Pranayam-Meditation and Medicine. Homeopathy has been defined as an art and a science, and dance too is an art and a science.

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