

Undercurrents

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Route to roots: Divya Devaguptapu.

Divya Devaguptapu on returning to the performing circuit

Bharatanatyam dancer Divya Devaguptapu, born to Telugu parents, brought up in Mumbai and Chennai and now based in San Diego in the U.S., says, “I cannot thank America enough for two things. One, for that’s where I met my husband, my biggest source of strength and support, and two, for making me realise where I belong; for sending me back to my roots.” Divya had taken up a lucrative corporate job in the U.S. after completing her Masters in Electrical Engineering from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. After seven years of sporadic performances and dancing during her lunch breaks, she finally “called it quits with Engineering”.

Divya, currently in India to perform at the Chennai season and in New Delhi at the India Habitat Centre on January 9 (7 p.m.), says the proliferation of Bharatanatyam dancers in the U.S. notwithstanding, Bharatanatyam is still not part of the mainstream there. “It is still viewed as an exotic dance form from India. Even though there are over a dozen teachers of Bharatanatyam in most cities, especially in mid-sized to bigger cities, learning the dance form is mainly restricted to the South Asian community.”

A teaching/performing artiste with Young Audiences of America, she has been taking art education to schools. “I work with a diverse group of children from KG-12th grade. I am also one of the Board of Directors of Indian Fine Arts Academy of San Diego, a non-profit that promotes Indian classical arts within the community by organising performances and lec-dems of world class dancers and musicians,” she says.

Divya’s interactions with dancers from other genres help her reach wider audiences. She has collaborated with Contemporary and Ballet dancers, including choreographers Patricia Rincon (Head of Dance Department, UCSD) and Peter Kalivas (Director, PGK project). “We have worked together and it is an interesting learning experience working with contemporary dancers. I learned a lot more about body kinetics and effective usage of body,” she notes, adding, “I had a lot to share with them too about our dance form.”

With the pressures of the education system and a global tendency to financially analyse every activity, a successful artiste requires a logic-transcending passion. Divya was apparently born with such a streak. Enrolled at five to learn Bharatanatyam under Kamala Iyengar, who taught in different areas of Mumbai, Divya “wanted to dance all week”, and her mother obliged by transporting the child across the city to all the classes. Later she came under the tutelage of Minal Prabhu, an alumna of Kalakshetra, Chennai. Divya’s parents then shifted to Chennai so Divya could further her training under the illustrious Dhananjayans.

“My family had no association with Chennai (we are from Visakhapatnam),” narrates Divya. “However, my father resigned his job in Mumbai and our entire family moved to Chennai only so that I could pursue my dance seriously.”

She continued to spend every possible moment absorbing the art. “I would go all seven days a week and join every class — right from tatta adavu to the senior varnam level classes. Even if I wasn’t dancing or there wasn’t a class, I would simply sit and watch whoever was dancing. Bharata Kalanjali (the Dhananjayans’ institution) was like a second home. A lot of the items I learnt simply by watching other classes and sitting through rehearsals.”

Strange then, that there was still a quandary. Divya found it difficult to “break into the ‘sabha scene’,” although she toured extensively with her gurus and got solo opportunities too. “Part disillusioned with Chennai sabhas and part unsure of how I saw myself — dancer or engineer — I took off for foreign shores.”

That might have been the end of the Bharatanatyam story, but it turned out to be a new beginning after all. Now, devoting herself full-time to Bharatanaytam, Divya has made it a habit to spend four months a year in Chennai, where she performs and also creates new work with the help of musicians and scholars. While she feels her America experience has influenced her in many ways and taught her “attention to detail and professionalism in all aspects,” of the art, she retains her belief in “the timelessness of the structure of the margam.”

At the Habitat Centre this coming Wednesday, she presents, among other compositions, a pada varnam “based on an abstract philosophical concept – Omkara the sound of Aum.”

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