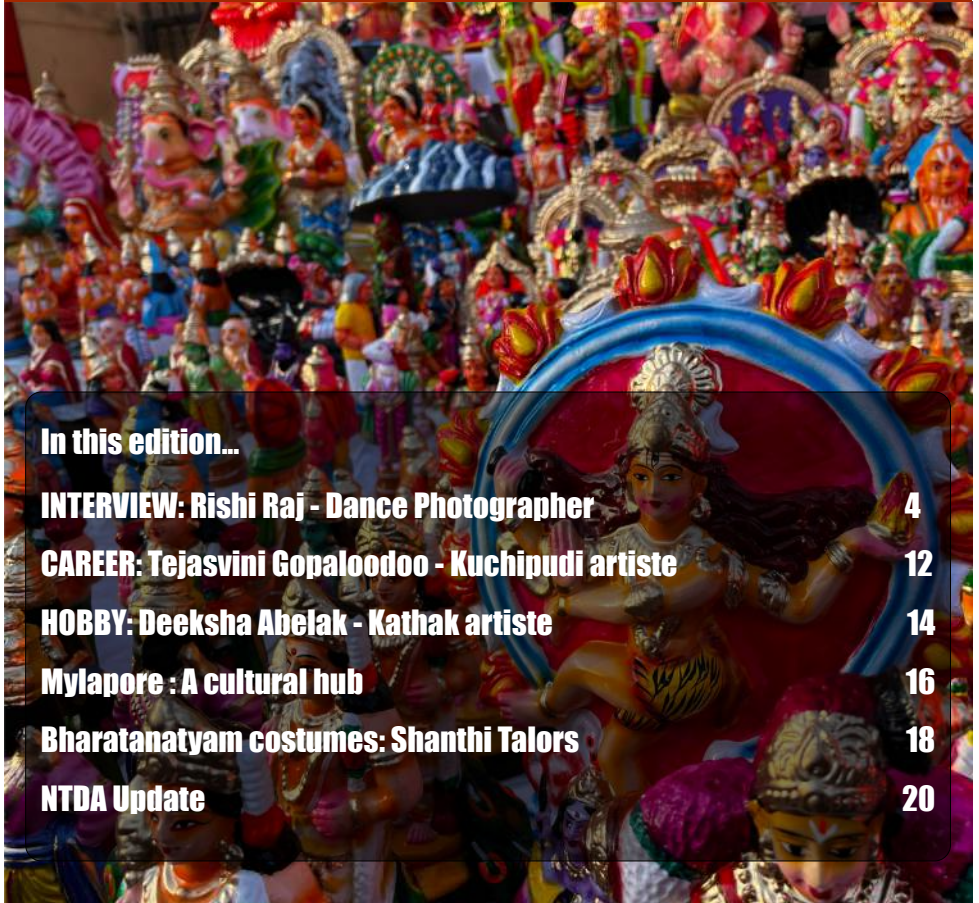


Nartana

AN INSIGHT INTO INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS IN MAURITIUS

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2 FOURTH QUARTER 2022



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THE OFFICIAL SEASONAL
NEWSLETTER OF THE
NRITYA TEJ DANCE ACADEMY

EDITORIAL

Doors are beautiful and mysterious creations. It can be a barrier or an opening. How beautiful I find this purpose of doors.

We close the doors for security and privacy, and we open doors to look at and embrace opportunities. They set boundaries.

They act as essential organs of our home. Yet a doorway can have antagonistic roles. Letting in the cool breeze of summer and the harsh wind of winter. Allowing our pets in to comfort us, and giving an access for intruders.

Can you imagine your house without doors? No way to go outside, and see the world. The suffocation of always being inside. A restraint to our freedom.

I have seen many doors...

The ancient one, full of wisdom, yet a bit rusty often accompanied by a shrieking sound when opened or closed.

The barn door that roars "adventure", yet rustic in quality, adding character to a place.



The aluminum door that has now become ubiquitous are modern, cold, and yet classy

The broken door, that cannot be closed properly, but with some creativity, can still offer some privacy and thus still has a purpose despite its condition.

The glass door shut yet open.

I have seen many doors...

Some led to beautiful places.

And a few had to be shut to cast away the ugly and mean.

Some doors had to be knocked on to seek help.

While some never responded to my pleas.

Some I admired from far.

And some I look forward to opening one day.

Not from the outside, but from the inside... welcoming in the deserving ones.... providing them, in turn, with opportunities.

T.B.

*Artwork: Picture taken at Raintree Hotel, Alwarpet.

About Nartana

The Nritya Tej Dance Academy (NTDA) was founded by Mrs Tejsree Bhangeeruthee Beharee in 2016. Its mission is to propagate Bharata Natyam in the Mauritian community. "Nartana" is an extension of this effort, and tries to encompass Indian Classical Arts in general. It seeks to bring together artistes and raise awareness about the greatness of the art form as well as pinpoint concerns about hurdles that artistes face. As of November 2022, Tejsree is a member of the International Dance Council, CID (UNESCO). If you are interested to share your views, please contact us on tejsree0505@gmail.com or +23059106036. You can find more about NTDA on the web site : www.nrityatej.com

In this edition

This third edition of Nartana follows a recent trip to Chennai by the editor. The core of this edition is inspired by this trip, and this has been depicted by the cover picture of Gollus (South Indian term for dolls and figurines of deities) taken on the streets of Mylapore. Thus an article is dedicated to the neighbourhood of Mylapore, which is a melting pot for classical arts. The data collection for the flagship article on "Dance and Photography" was actually done in Mylapore itself. This particular article recounts the journey of the upcoming dance photographer, Rishi Raj and even goes further to explain a few techniques that he uses to obtain the perfect shot. Moreover, while still focusing on Mylapore, the interview of the owner of the famous dance costume store, Shanthi Tailors, is also part of this edition of Nartana. Some aspects of Bharatanatyam costume design are discussed.

Staying true to the core values of Nartana, two local artistes are presented, namely Ms Tejasvini Gopaloodoo (Kuchipudi) and Ms Deeksha Abelak (Kathak). The former pursues Indian classical dance as a career while the latter practices the art as a hobby. Their views and beliefs are showcased in their respective interviews.

We end by giving an update on what NTDA has been up to since our last newsletter.

Editor's note: The Mylapore angle of this edition seek not to be a comprehensive guide for artiste and enthusiasts but rather to be a spark that inspires them to visit Mylapore for themselves...

INTERVIEW

Rishi Raj

Dancer | Photographer | Dance Photographer

After a really hectic day, while sipping a well deserved tea in a hotel room in Chennai, I was browsing social media and some photos of an Indian Classical Dancer caught my eye. These photos were taken while he was performing, and the snaps were taken in transition: the movement was changing from one pose into the next, the in-between picture that were captured made the dancer look rather clumsy. I actually knew that dancer to be an excellent artiste and in my humble opinion, these pictures did not do him justice. I shared my thoughts with my husband, while we were winding down for the day and just after having put baby to sleep. He casually pointed out that since we were in Chennai, then why not look for a dance photographer to ask for his opinion on the matter? One



name immediately came to mind—Rishi Raj. He is the Chennai-based dance photographer that I have been following on Instagram for quite a while. I took a chance, and I contacted him. To my surprise, he responded positively and he agreed to an interview.

What follows is the outcome of a meeting we had in the open-air hall of Kapaleeshwarar temple. Hope you enjoy the read.

Who is Rishi Raj?

Rishi Raj is a Chennai-based dance photographer who comes from the North of India from Bihar. Since childhood, he had a love for the arts, more specifically painting. His father was a teacher and his sister was well versed in arts; this passion painted Rishi Raj's childhood, shaping him into an artist. His involvement in the field even won him many awards. After his 12th grade, Rishi Raj told his father that he wanted to pursue his studies in a field related to the arts. One of his senior teachers suggested that he went to Kalakshetra, as it is an institution that teaches many art forms. And hence, the young man packed his bags and ventured for Kalakshetra, not with the idea of learning dance, but rather for the "mixed arts". Once there, he was given a form to make his choice of courses. He was helped by a senior student, and the latter, in a fateful deed, ticked all the boxes. As a form of triage, the tutors at Kalakshetra





started with an audition, and he was quickly taught some 'ta tei tei ta' dance steps. The tutors were very happy with his demonstration and decided put him in the dance batch. After a full semester, Rishi Raj surprised himself by getting the highest marks. And just like that, Rishi Raj's destiny unfolded and made of him a Bharatanatyam dancer after four years of intensive learning at this very highly esteemed institution.

A family of strong father figures

At the age of two, Rishi Raj's mother passed away, and since then, his father gave him all the love and support he needed. He was very open to his son's career choice, and he even enrolled him in one of the best art schools in Bihar. Rishi Raj's father used to take him to art competitions, and he never hesitated to buy his son's art material. He nurtured his son's passion to the maximum of his ability. However, as Rishi Raj's journey to Kalakshetra was about to start, his father fell sick, and the latter could not accompany him. But this did not prevent his child to go and fulfilling his dream. So, a 16-year-old Rishi Raj accompanied by his grandfather who was already in his seventies, set foot in a new city where everybody speak a language they were yet unfamiliar to. His grandfather managed everything and encouraged him to learn, and supported him financially.

How did your journey in photography begin?

Rishi Raj explains that it was not a spontaneous choice. Because he was already involved in the arts since childhood, he already had an innate taste for the arts, and it was only natural to him to explore more. He used to observe and study the choice of colors in the dance costumes

brought by Shrimati Rukmini Devi Arundale, and he liked to attend the dance dramas organized by Kalakshetra, during which he very much enjoyed the play of light and its effect on the dance and the costumes.

He was in his third year of study at the Kalakshetra, and his friend from the visual department was selling his camera. Rishi Raj had some money that he received through a scholarship from the institution itself, and he used that money to buy his first camera, and since then, there was no looking back. Through the lens of this camera, he started by capturing the dance dramas of Kalakshetra. He was greatly encouraged by his friends, seniors, and teachers. They were his best critics as well. They would advise him on the lighting, and where editing would be needed. Rishi Raj explains that, though his support group had no technical background in

"Imagine growing up in Kalakshetra in two art fields: dance and photography. I was in the correct environment to learn"

photography, they had the aesthetic sense, and their eyes have experienced the beauty of dance of so many great artists. Hence, their advice and corrections were precious to the blooming artist. In his own words: "Imagine growing up in Kalakshetra in two art fields: dance and photography. I was in the correct environment to learn". Early on, he had the opportunity of capturing the cream of the cream among artistes, like Shrimati Leela Samson, and Shri Dhananjayan, amongst others. Kalakshetra prepared him in every way for this newborn passion of photography; from the dance dramas to the dance costumes, Rishi Raj was very well inspired. Moreover, he had strong pillars of support. He mentions his friend Sanjwala Parvati Sakshi, whom he lovingly calls SaPaSa (from the musical notes). She helped him a lot, with the sincerest compliments and critics and her advice on color, lighting, and editing was invaluable.

General photography vs Dance photography

After his education at Kalakshetra, Rishi Raj's adventure continued at the Isha Foundation.

There, he taught dance for a year and a half, and further explored his photography skills. He was groomed by one of his seniors Dhivya Nayeck. The beautiful scenery of the place and of the Adi Yogi, churned the creativity in him. Rishi Raj believes that creativity comes from experience, it is not something that needs to be taught. He explains that originality is creating, while creativity is taking the juice out of it and presenting it beautifully. He states that people often ask him how he captures the perfect frame of dance so well, even though he never pursued a course in photography. This made him realize that the dancer in him helps him to anticipate the movement. If a movement is done on the right, it is very often repeated on the left. Hence, if he misses one side, he still has the another symmetrically similar side to capture. But the aesthetic sense should be there all the time. One should not focus only on the technical side, but they should trust their instinct and let the creative side reign to capture the beauty of the subject. Lately, Rishi Raj has been mentored in photography by Amar Ramesh and Lakshmanan S. Rishi Raj was once asked by his mentor, how in his mind, he would describe photography, to which he answered that his mind thinks like a dancer, and knowing his dance makes him a good dance photographer.

Capturing moving dancers- diving into the rhythm of counts

Rishi Raj points out that no matter how fast the dancer is moving, all movements can be cut into portions, and the knowledge of the rhythmic progression of these movements allows him anticipate when the dancer

"I have bad times in my life, but I do not struggle, I learn from it".

will pause, and subsequently gives him a window to take the perfect shot. For example, if it is a jumping shot, he does not proceed by taking a series of shots, but instead, captures his subject in one click, all by following the talam of the step in his mind. He is confident that talam and photography are good partners. This technique has helped him in wedding photography also, where he foresees the body language of the bride and the groom and captures them beautifully.

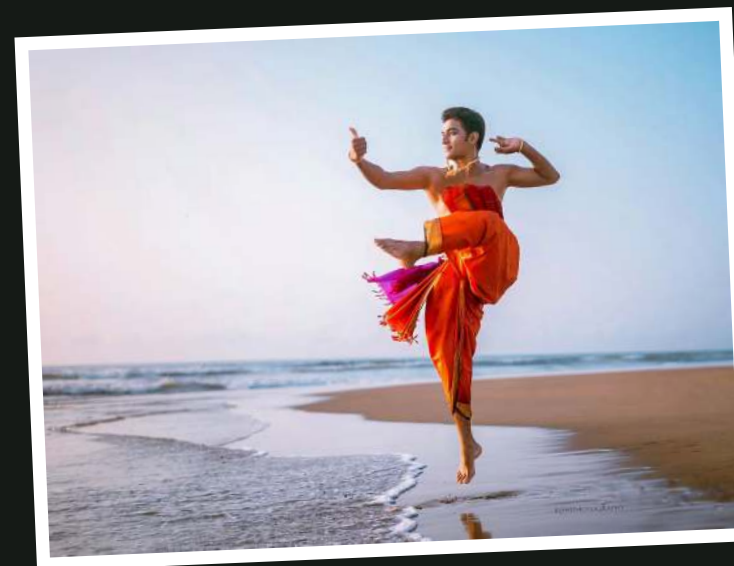
Capturing emotions

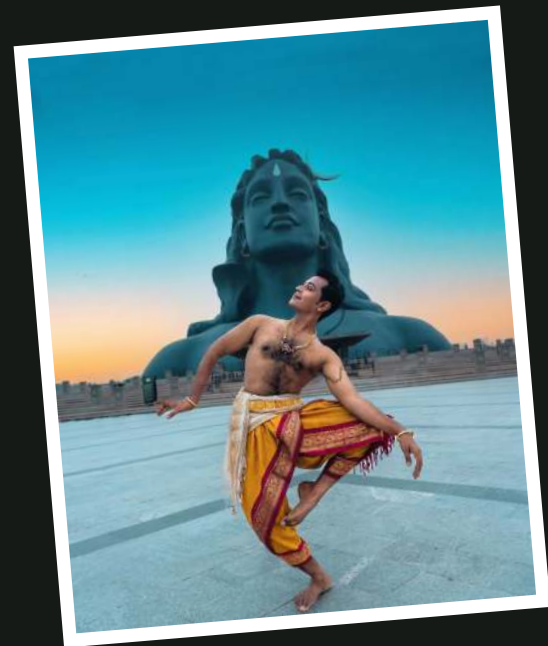
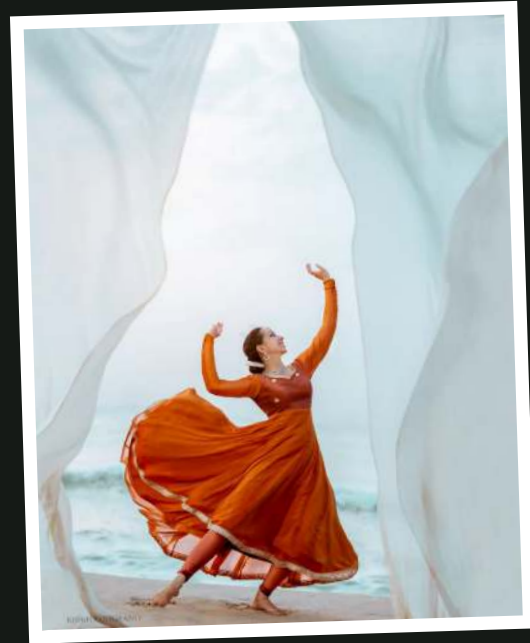
According to Rishi Raj, a perfect shot is not just about standing and taking a pose; the perfect shot comes from emotions. Emotions should ooze out of the the picture. As a result, very often, even if the clarity of movement is not as good as it should be, the connection between the dancer and his/her emotions results in a great photo.

To end, Rishi Raj goes on to say that dance photographers are rare compared to wedding and wildlife photographers. It is because dance photography is not financially lucrative. Nevertheless, he wishes to focus his career on dance photography so that people can see the virtuosity of Indian classical dance through his eyes and enjoy and admire it. Rishi Raj hopes that in the future he may showcase his work through art events and expositions, however, he believes that, for the moment, he is "a work in progress"... something very humble of him to say.

He believes that there is no struggle in art. There are just phases. While some phases are meant to be enjoyed, some others come to teach us valuable lessons. It is up to us to make the most of the situation. "I have bad times in my life, but I do not struggle, I learn from it". T.B.

*Photos reproduced with permission





CAREER

Tejasvini Gopaloodoo : A Kuchipudi Artiste

Her movements flow with such ease and lightness, that it makes the eyes yearn to see more, thus aligning the mind and soul to tread the path of happiness



About Tejasvini

As an Art lover, more specifically as a classical dancer, I haven't stopped practicing my favorite art form, which is Kuchipudi dance. What started as a baby step at the tender age of three has become the passion of my life. I have 27 years of experience in learning Kuchipudi dance. Still, it seems so less. I have always been so engaged in following my passion that at times I even lose track of time. These 27 years seem so short, and I feel very determined to learn more and dive deeper into the great ocean of the Kuchipudi Classical Dance.

On the way to studying her passion

This passion of my life steered me to travel from Mauritius to India which is the source of Indian classical Dance.

Finding the right guru is probably the best thing that can happen to an aspiring disciple and to that advent I have been blessed all through. During my stay in India, my Guru, who is extremely popular amongst his students for being a mentor and guru par excellence instantly took me under his wings and molded me into an outstanding performer.

Whenever I want to learn something, my Guru is the one to whom I turn without any hesitation as I know he is the one who would guide me onto the right path.

Pursuing the art form I love academically, I completed a certificate course and diploma course in Kuchipudi dance conducted by Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University Hyderabad, attended, and performed in lecture demonstrations and workshops, and completed my Masters of Performing Arts in Kuchipudi Dance with Gold Medal.

Duty and Gratitudes

I wish to upkeep this rich tradition with the blessing of my Guru and parents. I enjoy being engaged in the promulgation of this Art form as it makes me lose all track of time and makes me feel blissful. I would still turn to my Guru for his right teaching.

I wish to devote my time to spreading the knowledge and happiness of practicing this amazing dance that takes one to a peaceful world. I am determined to keep learning and making this Indian classical dance

famous in Mauritius.

My journey in learning Kuchipudi Dance has been natural and unhurried. "It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves"- Shakespeare.

"I would like to devote my precious time in pursuance of learning Indian classical and would always seek the guidance of the right mentor."

I consider myself fortunate enough to have got the right opportunities at the right time which have made me take up dance as a career.

I never get tired of coming up with new ideas such as choreographing several compositions of various great composers. I intend to pursue further my studies on Indian classical dances as I believe there is never an end to learning any subject or art form that one is passionate about. For that, I seek the blessings of great experts in this field to shed light and guide me on the right path.

"I would like to devote my precious time in pursuance of learning Indian classical and would always seek the guidance of the right mentor."



HOBBY

Deeksha Abelak: Kathak artiste

Editor's note...

After COVID, many people are opting for extracurricular activities to fulfill wishes that were on standby due to a fast and hectic everyday life. One of these activities is dance. For some, it is a passion, and for others a healthy activity going side by side with their job. The benefits of learning dance as a hobby are numerous. It provides a healthy lifestyle both physically and emotionally; it is a way to channel excess energy and burn out frustrations and calories. For those who have had the opportunity to perform, it has developed their self-confidence and has inculcated a discipline in their life – which dance practice demands. All in all, learning dance as a hobby is like having a good companion that will keep raising one's morale during tough times, and will celebrate with one, in happy times. Dare I say... dance can be the Sam to your Frodo...



The dentist and the artist

I am a dentist and have been practicing since 2013. Dance and painting have always been my passions. I used to dance with friends for music days at school and with my sister and cousins at family events (we never had to hire entertainment 😊). I learned different dance forms for short periods at different stages of my life. For example, I learned Bharatnatyam when I was in high school, belly dance in 2013, and contemporary dance in 2020. But Kathak is a dance form that after starting in 2016, I carried on with learning it. I find it so beautiful and inspiring as an art form. There is also so much to learn about it that I can't get enough of. An interesting paradox is that the more I learn it the better I feel about my dance, but also the more I learn, the more I feel that I know little!

A passion and career that balances well

My hobbies and career help one another. I normally have dance classes and rehearsals for dance shows after my work hours and on Sundays. It helps in the sense that when I am dancing, I forget about work stress and when I go back to work the next day, I go fresh and motivated to start the day. The other way around is also true. When I had dance exam stress or any issues regarding dance shows, going back to work the next day and enjoying what I do would make my day better.

P.S. I hardly watch TV and Netflix is not part of my everyday life. 😊

Dance has helped me in many ways. Most importantly, I have a sedentary position at work and whenever I took breaks from dancing, I used to get lots of body pains. Dancing regularly, especially the movements we do in

“My hobbies and career help one another.”

Kathak, helps to stretch, and counter the effects of some bad positions while working. Dancing is

a very good physical exercise as well. I've also noticed that I do not suffer from terrible period pains when I dance consistently and that's great motivation! Additionally, I do not need to try hard to keep fit, I just do something I enjoy!



Mylapore: a cultural hub

I enter the locality, in a rickshaw zigzagging in between pedestrians to make its way, the hot humid air on my skin, the buzzing sound of shoppers around, and traders installing their goods from chappals, to clothes and fruits, brassware, and flowers in the street market adorn the alley as if giving an introduction of their city. I make my way to Kapaleeshwarar temple. It is one of the famous temples of the city. The main deity is Lord Shiva. The temple is a symbol of Dravidian architecture which was relocated by the Tuluva dynasty between 1491- 1570 CE from the seashore of Mylapore. During the evening, it is even

busier as we near prayer time. It gives me the tickling feeling of a festive moment. While some people are buying flowers for the temple's deity, others are queuing up at a counter to handover their shoes before entering the temple, some are discretely taking pictures of the temple's grandeur and some others are meeting on the temple's veranda to chit-chat before heading to their prayer rituals.

And just as if I were experiencing a well-controlled chemical reaction, out of this hot humid air and buzzing sound, a lovely melody precipitates, making my mind and soul feel at home. I am

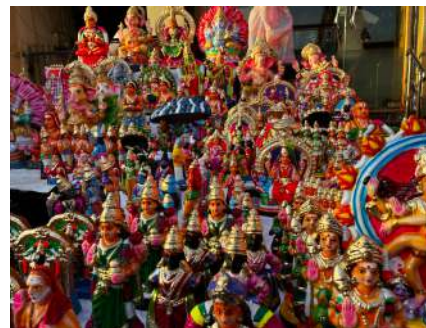


at peace. I am in my haven.

Welcome to Mylapore! The one-stop shop for South Indian classical dancers.

Mylapore is one of the oldest parts of Chennai, and it is also known as Tirumayilai, where thiru means holy.

Mylapore comes from the Tamil word Mayil Aarparikkumoor, which means Land of the peacock scream. There was a time when peacocks used to roam the area freely. But now, we feel their presence only through sculptures on the walls of the temple.



Mylapore used to be the commercial and intellectual hub of the city of Madras in the late 19th century and early 20th century. It was a nest for

British- educated lawyers and statesmen. It is now the cultural hub of the city, inviting Indian classical musicians and dancers for cultural events. During December, Mylapore further lights up, with the music season which is being held in the various sabhas like the Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, the Madras Music Academy, and the Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan Auditorium amongst others. These events attract people from around the country and even from abroad to attend and even participate.



Just outside the temple, around the temple's deity chariot, there are various shops, which sell dance accessories: costume, jewellery, books, and many other dance-related materials.

If you are a Bharatanatyam dancer, I urge you to go and experience Mylapore. The place carries history, holds opportunities, and it is the home for dance materials. While you are at it, do stop by the restaurants nearby to relish a traditional south Indian dish. It will be all worth it.

T.B.





Bharatanatyam Costumes

For my first visit to Chennai, one of my Gurus, Mrs. Jotee Dabee, introduced me to a shop known as Shanthi Tailors. It is found in the heart of Mylapore, and it is the ideal shopping place for Bharatanatyam lovers. Today, I want to share the history of this amazing shop, where you can get all Bharatanatyam-related materials, from practice saree to costumes, jewelry, books, CDs, and many more.

I met with the owner of the shop, Mr. Shiva Kumar, who was kind enough to share about Shanthi Tailors.

About Shanthi Tailors

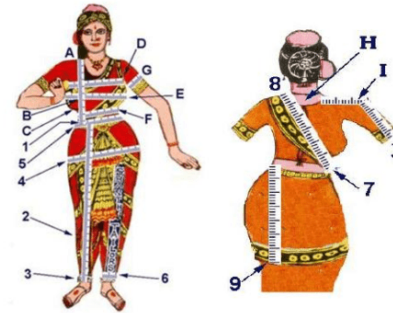
Shanthi Tailors is a 56-year-old shop that opened for business in 1967. From day one, it was only a dance



costume shop for Bharatanatyam artists. After its first decade of existence, Shanthi Tailors had already developed a wide range of clientele ranging from Chennai to other states in India and even outside India. At that moment, the initial owner of the shop, and the late father of Mr. Shiva Kumar decided to expand the business to more dance-related materials. Thus, it became the place for Bharatanatyam artists, where one could get everything under one roof. This change exposed Shanthi Tailors to nearly 128 countries in the world, and it now has more than 300 international shipments per month.

Different styles of Bharatanatyam costumes

I took this opportunity to ask Mr. Kumar about the different styles of



Bharatanatyam costumes

The style and design of the costume change as per the progression of items from the Margam (dance repertoire). The repertoire usually opens with an Alarippu and a Jatiswaram. These items require a lot of araimandi (half-sitting) and muzhumandi (full-sitting) positions. These pose some limitations on the design of the costumes. Hence, it is advised to go for shorter fans to allow ease of movement.

However, a varnam is a longer item having both the nritta (pure dance sequences) and nritya (expressional dance) phases, and therefore, body-fitted costumes with pant style could be used.

Padam and Javali dance items, if based on female Goddesses, then could require a skirt costume.

To summarise, the styles of Bharatanatyam costumes are based on what is most suitable, and not only on looks. Though there is an influence of contemporary trends, the traditional look remains the most widely used, and the most in demand. However, if a dance outside the repertoire is being performed, artists very often

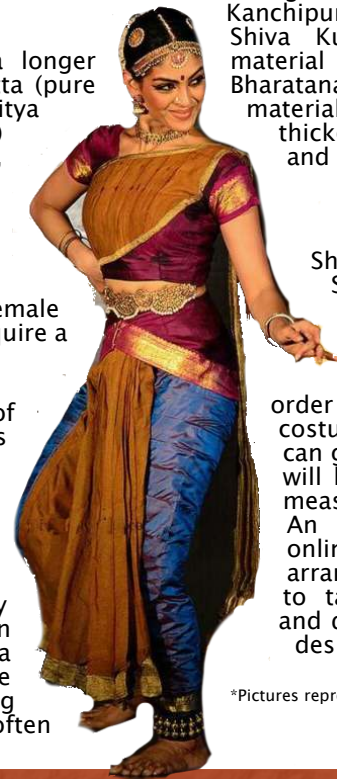
innovate and personalize the costume as per the choreography's needs. "We are only a receiver and do accordingly."- states Mr. Shiva Kumar.



For children, girls wear a skirt or pants for the bottom, but, they do not have a separate pleated chest pleat for the top. It is already included in the blouse. As for men, for the past ten years, it has followed two patterns: the dhoti and the cross fan. At the top, it is either bare chest, or they will wear a long blouse. But slowly, men are also experimenting with the designs.

However, one factor that binds all Bharatanatyam costume irrespective of age and gender, is the Kanchipuram saree. As per Mr. Shiva Kumar, it is the best material to make the Bharatanatyam costume. The material is more durable, thicker, looks richer on stage, and flows with the dancer's movements.

As an ending note, Mr. Shiva Kumar explains that Shanthi Tailors has had a website for the last 25 years (shanthitailor.com). If one needs to place an order for a Bharatanatyam costume internationally, one can go onto the website, and will be given a chart on the measurement requirements. An appointment for an online call can even be arranged so as to be guided to take the measurements and decide on the costume's design. T.B.



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Nritya Tej Dance Academy - An Update



(Video Recording at MBC)

This year, after two years of the pandemic, the Nritya Tej Dance Academy presented its fifth annual show entitled 'Balakrida- Games of Yesterdays'. It is a Bharatanatyam dance drama, bringing to us a glimpse of 'les Jeux d'antan'.

It was presented by students of Bharatanatyam, with experience ranging from 3-12 months. Some students were more experienced (more than 3 years). The show was presented on stage on the occasion of the Certificate Giving Ceremony held at Domaine Reets, and was also recorded and broadcast on National Television.



(Certificate Giving Ceremony)

The name of the show is inspired by a poem by Rabindranath Tagore entitled "Playthings" which is about the happiness that children derive from simple things. Balakrida is the Sanskrit word for "Playthings". The concept of the show revolves around childhood games from a simpler time. The intent behind the choice of this theme is to use Bharatanatyam as a medium to communicate a story that is engaging to a Mauritian audience from different communities and age groups. It is to be noted that the Mauritian audience is not very familiar with Indian classical dance and even less so with dance dramas. A simple yet nostalgic concept was deemed an appropriate and unpretentious format to achieve this – both for the audience and the beginner students.

Bharatanatyam has a Margam/ repertoire, and half of this repertoire is used in this show as the backbone of the show. The Bharatanatyam choreography follows the theme of childhood games. While the theme is an original creation, the actual dance performances are set and codified items – in other words, proper classical Bharatanatyam, albeit one at a student level.

The show presents a few games through a conversation between a mother and her daughter. The mother tells her child about the childhood games she used to play.



(Live Performance at IGCC)

The students of NDTA also performed on the stage of the Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture (IGCC) on the occasion of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav to commemorate 75 years of independence of India.