

Mythili Kumar - 25 years as a professional dancer

I began my dance training in Bharatanatyam in Mumbai at the age of eight under Sri C.S.Kunjitham and was performing by the age of eleven. My real interest, however, was only kindled in my teens when a master teacher, Sri C. R. Acharyulu came into town to give a Kuchipudi workshop. When our family moved later to New Delhi, I encountered hectic days of learning and performing at various venues with Sri T. R. Devanathan in New Delhi. Then, during a 6 month break before joining college, I had the opportunity of going to Chennai and learning with Smt. Indra Rajan. The next years were devoted to college but I still had the time to learn and perform Odissi under Guru Srinath Raut. Our family's next stop was Hyderabad where I learnt Kuchipudi. Thus my residence in different parts of India allowed me to study these three classical dance styles. I simultaneously obtained a master's degree in Foods & Nutrition. I also have a second master's degree in Nutrition from the University of California, Davis obtained as a result of being awarded a Rotary International Fellowship in 1978-79 when I came to the United States.

It was in Hyderabad that I began to dance professionally, independently taking charge of my own orchestra, deciding my repertoire and choreographing pieces. The early years of pre-professional dancing helped me as I toured several parts of India, receiving critical acclaim in the mid-70s. Sri P. Vaman Rao, a close friend and journalist put my name in his column so frequently, that it was embarrassing. I learnt music, worked with various scholars, including Manchala Jagannatha Rao for Kshetrayya padams, and eminent scholar Sri T. S. Parthasarathy in Chennai. Vocalist Prema Ramamoorthy whose association with me began in 1975 helped me in composing music for my first full-length dance production, Rama Charita Geetam by Sri Papanasam Sivan. My teacher, Smt. Indra Rajan with mridangist and composer Sri Pandanallur Srinivasan enriched my repertoire of Jatis, Varnams and Thillanas. My Odissi teacher made frequent trips to Hyderabad to enable me to perform Odissi, Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, all in one performance! I taught and presented my first group of students and performed their dance debuts in Hyderabad. It was a busy and exciting time until I left for the U.S.

After settling down in San Jose with an extremely supportive husband, I began teaching dance in 1980 since performance opportunities unfortunately were few. My ambitions in performing after marriage were minimal and I was also pulled into using my background and working full-time in a research laboratory and subsequently became a dietitian/nutritionist. However when my first child arrived in 1983, it was easy to give up on my nutrition career and comfortable to slip into teaching dance around my baby's schedule. By that time, we had also presented our first arangetram with local musicians which established our reputation for excellence in the community. Many of our students were in demand to perform at various community functions as well. With the help of Vasanthi Kannan, (mother of our youngest student Radhika Kannan), we had an exciting time doing the choreography for a Pongal festival, the first Tyagaraja aradhana of the Bay Area, a Bharatiyar festival, Tagore songs, etc. and by 1985 a group was chosen to

perform at the first Asian Dance Festival and the 1986 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

A trip by my teacher, Smt. Indra Rajan to the US stimulated my interest in reviving my performance career. Therefore, in 1984 I toured the United States and Canada with musicians led by Smt. Prema Ramamoorthy from India, and performed in sixteen venues. In May 1986, goaded by a friend, Meera Rao, I ventured into my first dance production with my students, "Shiva-the Cosmic Dancer" presenting the varied manifestations of Lord Shiva. Vasanthi Kannan with Meera Rao and Priya Jayachandran enthusiastically composed the music and my husband Kumar joined in the singing. We had a group of volunteers who made props, we used gobos for the first time and Kumar's stage management helped present a spectacular show that some in the community still remember. The president of the Asian Heritage Council, May Chung introduced me to the granting world that I was unaware of until then and we received our first grant from the Arts Council, Silicon Valley. There was no looking back because each year we continued to get support from them as well as the California Arts Council and we kept producing consistently each time tackling a new theme and doing new choreography (see list under Abhinaya). Vasanthi Kannan was always ready to compose new music for every new production giving me the freedom to create new pieces.

In December 1986, I visited Chennai after a lapse of eight years not expecting to reenter the dance world. A casual visit to scholar Sri T. S. Parthasarathy got me an unexpected opportunity to present a dance demonstration, "Aspects of Shiva-Tandava," at the prestigious Madras Music Academy (India) which was received with critical acclaim. The following year, Smt. Y. G. Parthasarathy invited me for the first Margazhi Mahotsav Festival and I was enticed back into performing despite the demands on my time from my two children. In 1989, I went on another solo performing tour with musicians from India, including Smt. Prema Ramamoorthy and Sri Adyar Lakshman who had also taught for a month-long workshop in San Jose in 1988. It was fortunate that in 1988 Smt. Kalanidhi Narayanan also came to San Jose to share her expertise in abhinaya and continued to do so in workshops in 1991, 1993 and 1995.

In 1990, we finally decided to make the company a non-profit organization. More musicians had settled in the Bay Area and the last ten years have been an exciting time as I have researched and choreographed for several group and solo productions. Since 1993, with the remarkable abilities of Carnatic vocalist Asha Ramesh, experienced singer for dance as well, we have been able to present spectacular shows and collaborative productions.

The various scholars in the Bay Area, Sri H. Ramamoorthy (Sanskrit scholar), Smt. Saraswati Mohan (Sanskrit scholar), Smt. Kausalya Hart (Tamil faculty at the University of Berkeley), Sri T. N. Narasimhan (University of California, Berkeley), and Smt. Usha Gupta (Hindi professor) have been of invaluable assistance in deciphering ancient texts. I have called upon our temple priests, Pandit Srinivasacharyulu and Pandit Ravichandran to compose lyrics. Sri R. Radhakrishnan has showed his creative abilities in composing

Tamil lyrics on demand!.Sri Yendluri Ramarao has helped obtain the meaning for innumerable Annamacharya compositions.

As I look back on these 25 years of my career, I can see how these accomplishments were dependent on so many people, First and foremost my parents: my father for constantly arranging performances and acting as my publicity manager despite my protests; my mother for helping me backstage and cooking for the innumerable orchestras over the years; my husband with his constant support, encouragement, enthusiasm, and tolerance for my irritability and procrastination during the choreography process, and my children for sharing me with so many students without complaining. Further, the musicians who helped bring my ideas to the stage; Shanta Raman who has constantly given her creative suggestions and ideas for various productions; Kamal Nair whose support I could count upon always whether I did a solo performance or an Abhinaya production; and the larger community of parents of our students. Finally, my students who have over the years suffered my irritability and moods uncomplainingly because of their love for their art and who have been the medium and inspiration for my choreography.