

## Indian Dance – Musings by Mythili Kumar

At the start of every arangetram, I usually give a small welcome speech to the guests sharing some thoughts about the dance form, the arangetram process, the student and so on. Often, I present my observations on the dance form and its practice in the countries we, as immigrants far away from the place where this art form was nurtured, have adopted as our homes. At this time, I am astounded by the globalization of this art form, and the tremendous influence that India has wielded and can truly boast about in the creative dance realm of the world today.

Today, we are facing fierce competition from the popular cultures of Bollywood music and dancing. There is an overwhelming difference between the immigrants from India in the 70s, 80s, 90s, and the new millennium. The first wave of immigrants to the US had a fervent desire to keep their children exposed to the fine arts of India, indeed compel them to learn what they themselves were denied while growing up in India as they struggled to just finish their degree, advance their careers and pursue the immigrant's dream of making it big in America. With the introduction of Bollywood fashions, music and dance into the Indian mainstream including the vast middleclass, the new wave of immigrants however, do not particularly care or wish to know about the classical arts. Their entertainment needs are more readily fulfilled by the vast choices of movies, DVDs, and CDs available in their midst. It is only an individual child's desire to learn through having seen some other older friend or relative perform that sometimes motivates this generation to pursue classical dance lessons for their children. Often, this interest fades during the children's teenage years when even in school, what is preferred is the popular Bollywood dancing with its particularly vulgar gyrations of the body, tacky lip synching of words and total mishmash of classical, folk, and street style dancing which is represented to the mainstream population as Indian culture, to our dismay. Add in traditional costumes and it looks undeniably Indian to the masses. In fact, the class on Indian dance that I teach at the University of California in Santa Cruz every fall for the last five years attracts over 40 students, most of whom enrolling because they have heard about Bollywood dance and wish to learn that. Once enrolled and introduced to the majesty of the classical traditions, they are literally bowled over by the difference and their interest for further study is stimulated.

For many students and their families the primary reason for continuing the classical dance is the allure of the arangetram which becomes a valuable achievement to write about in college admission essays. In many parts of the US, this has indeed become the norm, where the arangetram becomes a lavish, inordinately expensive graduation extravaganza with the actual dancing being of dubious quality. The dancer is rarely to be seen in any dance classes after that day. Several troupes of visiting musicians from India begin making rounds in the summer months as early as May and going through October, providing live music for arangetrams across the country from Seattle to Florida, and San Diego to Boston. These are conducted by teachers of varying schools, styles and quality and the only common factor is that they are all lavish affairs. And although the arangetram – a Tamil word meaning 'ascending a stage' was a ritual that found description in the ancient Tamil classic, **Silappadikkaram**; it has had various

manifestations in the US - Ranga Pooja and Ranga Pravesham for Kuchipudi dancers; and now even some Odissi dancers have followed suit. The arangetram is thus an attractive goal to aim for and the sooner it is achieved, the sooner the student can resume her academic pursuits without hindrance. In all my introductory speeches, therefore, I reiterate that the arangetram is only a beginning; it is merely a stepping stone. It is like a junior high school graduation, not even akin to a high school one because in the latter, you embark on a university path where you live and begin to make independent decisions. In an arangetram where you have learnt some fundamental pieces that comprise one 'margam', you have merely taken a sip from the vast ocean that constitutes the tradition of Bharatanatyam. You have only begun the journey of learning the nuances and intricacies of this dance. The dedication, sincerity, and humility that was required for the training process prior to the arangetram has to be sustained for many years to attain the elusive **perfection** of this art form.

New themes, contemporary dance, making our art accessible to the mainstream, are all issues that come up often as we propagate Indian classical dance in the USA through our teaching and concerts. We have several choices to make as we continue to choreograph and present both new and traditional work. Yoga and Indian dance movements, including our language of gestures, are often incorporated into choreography by modern dancers. Indian music has been used by Western artists while creating new pieces. For example improvisational music composed by world-famous maestro Zakir Hussain has been used by the San Francisco based Alonzo King's dance company. Shakespeare productions all over the US from the Ashland Shakespeare festival to theaters in San Jose have all incorporated Indian dance and music in their plays. While this is indeed encouraging, yet, it is still hard to lure the average person to an Indian dance event. Many invitations are received by our school requesting us to perform at community fairs, festivals, banquets, weddings etc. Because of the classical nature of the art form and its sacredness, we decline many of these if our primary condition of '*no food or drink while we perform*' is not met. Unfortunately, this also limits our exposure to the mainstream. As a result, we have consistently been giving demonstrations in various schools and libraries throughout the Silicon Valley for over 25 years as a way of educating the youth to learn and appreciate this dance form. An extravagant festival of dance at Carnegie Hall in New York in September 2008 brings together famous artists in many different styles of Indian classical dance with the aim of educating and entertaining general audiences through performances and workshops in parks and community centers. With the extraordinary amount of talent in the San Francisco Bay Area, we must also strive to consistently present such events here with local artistes to achieve this goal of recognition in the mainstream population.

This tradition of dance requires a lifelong commitment and I am both grateful and happy that I have been able to serve it to some degree and contribute to its propagation among the youth and other audiences in the Bay Area.