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Poetry of movement

SOMA BASU





UncompromisingPriyalatha Arun bharatanatyam dancer.Photo: G. Moorthy

Singapore-born Bharatanatyam danseuse Priyalatha Arun enthralls Madurai with her performance

Priyalatha Arun grew up in Singapore watching her idol and Indian actor Vyjayanthimala dance in films and on stage. “I never missed her stage performances in Singapore. She has everything a dancer can ask for, dancing toes, grace and charm, big eyes, the dedication and mastery in the arts she pursued,” says Priya.

Belonging to a family of lawyers, Priya too became a barrister. But that didn’t mean she let go her passion for dance. At the age of eight she enrolled herself in the Singapore-India Fine Arts Society (SIFAS) and started taking classes from teachers who came from Kalakshetra, Chennai.

In just five years, she says, she was ready for arangetram and quickly gained recognition for her performance. “I think I

was born to dance," she smiles as her dancing career never looked back even as she multitasked, as a barrister, as a wife and a mother and a stage actor.

Sadly, she says for most Bharatanatyam students in Singapore, both in the past and now, the love for dance culminates with the arangetram. Though the arts are not usually remunerative, Priya never allowed it to take a back seat in her life. She continued her *sadhana* and took Bharatanatyam to a new meaning in a foreign land. "I was the first in my family to practise law, dance and act together, and luckily, found the support for all three," she says.

Uncompromising

Though Priya is a purist and does not like to mix up the traditional dance form with the contemporary. But living in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society and to be able to reach out to a larger audience she consciously chose to take up different themes.

Given the dwindling patronage, Priya's experiments began by keeping the dance form intact but fitting it to different music. Teaming Bharatanatyam with poems of Chinese courtesans and songs from the Chinese opera struck a chord with the mixed audience. A diehard romantic, Priya chose love poems to dance to. "Love transcends language but has the same theme and understanding anywhere in the world," she says. "It also made everyone aware of the importance of *abhinaya* in Indian classical dance," she adds.

She has performed for audiences in lands as far as Russia and Australia U.K and South Korea and India. She has also founded an English theatre company called World-in-Theatre.

Priya is in Madurai on an invitation of the INTACH, Madurai chapter. She says it was her dream to dance at the Meenakshi Temple, and she fulfilled it. For the INTACH evening at Thiagarajar College of Engineering, Priya was accompanied by V.Balakrishnan from SIFAS. The performance began with a *pushpanjali* in Raga Naatai with a verse in praise of Goddess Meenakshi.

This was followed by a *Varnam* in Raaga Kamas, where the story of Meenakshi's birth, her schooling in the arts, her valour and her marriage to Lord Sundareswarar were enacted.

The next two items were *padams* - one in praise of Lord Muruga and the other, "Aadal Kaaneero" that depicted the playfulness of Lord Nataraja. The evening ended with a fast paced *Thillana* in Raga Ameer Kalyani with a verse paying homage to Madurai Meenakshi.

With over three decades of experience of dancing both at home and abroad, Priya says, she cherishes her performances in India.

"Here," she says, "the connectivity is instant and the people show a keen interest in movement and rhythm, expressions and emotions." While Priya moves seamlessly from one role to another, she is constantly looking for ways to rope in younger people into following or practising traditional art forms. As a woman, she says, she has been lucky, but adds, "Women are leading everywhere, they can do whatever they set out to."

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