

[Maya Rao: Grand Dame of Kathak](#)

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Can you be in your teens and be too old? She was already 14, which is far too old to learn classical dancing in India, where dancers tie the bells on their ankles by the age of five or six. The young woman received a lot of opposition from her parents who were giving dance lessons to her younger sisters but felt she was past the age for frivolities. But Maya Rao, who had never been interested in bharat natyam, had been seduced by the charms of a kathak performance in her native Bangalore. She was stubborn and persisted till her parents gave in.

Today Maya Rao is one of the leading lights of kathak, a dancer and choreographer who has been honored with several awards including The National Academy of Dance and Music Award, The Sangeet Natak Academy Award for Choreography and the Karnataka State Award. She was invited to the Soviet Union as a consultant choreographer on the ballets "Shakuntala" and "Ramayana." She has performed and lectured all over the world, and more importantly, brought this thoroughly North Indian dance form to South India.

Indeed, when Rao, who was born in 1928, was growing up in Bangalore, it was hard to even find a kathak teacher. Recalls Rao ruefully, "There was only one teacher, Sohanlal, and he left for Bombay to join the film industry!" So anxious was she to learn kathak that she found herself a lecturer's job in Jaipur and again began her kathak lessons.

Then fate smiled on the young dancer in the form of a dance scholarship in 1955, which enabled her to pursue kathak with the great gurus in New Delhi. She is

the only South Indian to specialize in kathak under the two gurus, studying the Lucknow style with Padmashri Shambu Maharaj, and the Jaipur style with Sunder Prashad. She synthesized the best of both styles to create her own unique interpretation of kathak.

Maya took to performing and lecturing in India and many countries. She received a Soviet scholarship, and is the only Indian with a post-graduate certificate in choreography from the Soviet Union. She and a boy dancer went to Moscow for three years and studied there. She recalls: "We had access to the Bolshoi Theater and all the good theaters. Our institute was called Lunarchasky Theater Institute where we learned methods of choreography. It was considered the only one in the world giving a systematic training in choreography."

She found the Soviets to be very interested in India and all things Indian when she went there as consultant to their productions of "Shakuntala" and "Ramayana." Rao visited the Soviet Union once again in 1981 as a member of the jury for the International Ballet Competition. She observes: "They had a lot of respect for Indians. When I went earlier there was no talk of religion, but later a few churches had opened and the people were taking an interest in our religion also. They would always ask questions about the meaning of Ganapati and Siva."

In 1964 Rao founded the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography, the only institute in India devoted to kathak choreography. The precise and systematic choreography she had studied in the Soviet Union was turned to good use, reviving the ancient Indian traditions-the natya tradition, which is total theater-dance, music and acting. She notes, "I have always thought of running it on two levels: one is training and one is performance. We have a small performance unit because we popularize what we study in the classroom."

In 1987 she moved to Bangalore and started the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography there, with the assistance of the Karnataka Government. In a way, popularizing this Northern art form in the South is her life's work. Students from Kashmir to Trivandrum come to her school on state scholarships or from other organizations.

Asked if kathak is now a popular dance form in the South, Rao says, "Earlier

people liked it but there was nowhere to learn it. I have seventy good students, and we have given shows in Trivandrum." Even in this home of bharat natyam, the response has been positive. She has also taught students who came to India on Rockefeller and Fulbright grants from the U.S. and Canada.

Recently the New Jersey-based India Classical Dance Society came to her and asked her to bring a ballet to the U.S. She and her troupe brought "Vikramaditya," of which nine shows were held in the Midwest and the East coast.

Rao always goes back to the past to research her material and has done several historical and mythological dance dramas including those extolling Southern dynasties.

When I spoke with Maya Rao, I got the sense that kathak pervades her life, for she is performer, teacher and dance historian. Is kathak being well-preserved or is it being eroded by all the modern innovations?

Natya Shastra was the root for both bharat natyam and kathak, and both are of the same period. Kathak, which flourished in the North, was in the direct eye of the typhoon of invasions. Says Rao, "The dance form also underwent a mute period for 2 or 3 centuries. When it was revived by the Moghul emperors it became a secular kind of dance. But there are several actions which still have a strong Vaishnava touch.

"In the Hindu period the dancers used to wear ghagras or saris. At the Muslim court they had to adopt the durbar dress, which was the Peshwaz worn over churidhars, seen in the Moghal paintings.

The costume changes have over the years been adopted by kathak dancers, mainly because the peshwaz is more comfortable and also allows viewers to see the intricate footwork which gets obstructed by saris and long ghagras. Rao uses all three costumes for her dancers-saris, ghagra-sari and the peshwaz: "We have a special program called 'Kathak through the Ages' which is to enlighten as well as entertain."

As other classical Indian dances, kathak too has a religious base and starts with an invocation, the Ganesh Vandana. Notes Rao, a staunch Hindu, "We have several parans or rhythmic patterns based on Ganesha, which are recited or sung, along with accompaniment on the tablas. Similarly there are verses dedicated to Siva and Saraswati. There's a special invocation for Krishna, who is the patron saint of kathak dancers."

How much is Maya Rao inspired by Hinduism in her quest for dance? She says, "Although I like kathak as an art form, Hinduism is my main inspiration." Rao is a member of the Advisory Board of the Kathak Kendra in Delhi and goes there twice a year. She takes along her troupe to the North, and audiences get to see the perfect kathak of her Southern dancers. She says, "My main goal is to propagate kathak."

Lavina Melwani is a journalist of several publications in the US, India and the Far East. Born in Sindh, she grew up in New Delhi and has lived in Hong Kong and Africa. She currently resides in New York with her husband and two children.