

[The Best of Both Worlds](#)

Category : [November/December 2001](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 2001

CULTURE

The Best of Both Worlds

Shantala Shivalingappa is fluent in seven languages, a master of modern dance, ballet, two classical forms of Indian dance and Shakespearean drama and has a Master's degree in anthropology. She's 24. What's next?

Lavina Melwani, New York

lassiwithlavina.com

Saris and Chennai may be worlds apart, but there is a young Hindu dancer who seems to have made both her own. An accomplished classical Indian dancer, she is equally at home with Shakespearean theater, ballet and modern dance. Maurice Bejart, Bartabas, Pina Bausch are noted names in the contemporary dance arena, and she's performed with them all, touring internationally.

When she was only 14, she was chosen to play Miranda in Peter Brook's production of The Tempest. Now, ten years later, she is Ophelia in the acclaimed director's Tragedy of Hamlet, which is currently touring in the US, Europe and Japan with an international cast including Adrian Lester, Natasha Parry, Naseeruddin Shah and Rohan Siva.

Meet Shantala Shivalingappa, 24, a child of the East and the West. She may have grown up in the heart of Paris but a passion for Indian dance courses through her veins. The daughter of an Indian dancer and a UNESCO official, Shivalingappa moves with grace between both worlds.

Though was born in Chennai, Shantala has lived in Paris all her life. Her Hindu upbringing has helped her maintain her cultural roots while adapting to the West. She speaks French, Spanish, Italian, English, Tamil, Telegu and Malayalam. She also has a Master's degree in anthropology achieved through her fieldwork on the gurukulum system in India, researching the dance school of her teacher.

Dancing is very much in her genes. Her mother, Savitry Nair, is a kuchipudi and bharata natyam dancer from the School of Kalakshetra in Chennai. Nair, who came to Paris 30 years ago to do a comparative study between Indian dance and ballet, has worked with noted French choreographer Maurice Bejart. A teacher of classical Indian dance, Savitry taught Shantala bharata natyam at a young age and initiated her into kuchipudi, training

At age 13 Shantala was a solo dancer in the ballet, "1789" choreographed by Maurice Bejart for the bi-centenary of the French Revolution. She toured Europe with Vempati Rayj Shankar under the guidance of Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam, performing kuchipudi in France, Switzerland, Italy and Germany. She performed kuchipudi at the Avignon Festival in the South of France and as part of Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam's troupe for the World Theatre-Music Festival in a tour

of the Netherlands.

In a role far removed from that of a kuchipudi dancer, she toured Europe at the age of 14, playing Miranda in Peter Brook's production of *The Tempest*. Years later, audiences in New York got to see her dance solo in Zhingaro Company's exotic *Chimere*, directed by Bartabas. Shantala traveled internationally with this company for three years. She also danced in the French classical play, *Surena*, by Corneille and performed as a guest dancer in Pina Bausch's production, *O Dido*. Next year, she will be dancing in Germany, Paris and Belgium.

She credits her mother for the eclectic paths her career has taken: "I've been put into the milieu of Western theater and art as well as classical Indian dance, performing for mostly Western audiences." "When I first started learning kuchipudi, my dream was to bring it to Western audiences, to people who didn't know about it. I wanted to share the joy and beauty of kuchipudi with everybody.

"Shantala Shivalingappa's incomparable grace and extreme dexterity have already won over the audience," states one review of her kuchipudi performance, written for *Le Meridional*, Avignon. In fact, the young dancer has received nothing but glowing press coverage all across Europe.

Kuchipudi is a classical dance style from South India that evolved in the state of Andhra Pradesh, in a small village which gave it its name. Like all Indian classical dance, it originates

from the NatyaShastra, a 2,000-year-old treatise by Bharata Muni that covers every aspect of Hindu dance and drama.

For Shantala, it is much more than dance. "It is a spiritual experience," she says. "When you reach a certain level, there is some connection with something higher."

She spends at least six months of the year in India, training with her musicians and putting together shows, then performs the rest of the year in Europe. Currently she is totally immersed in Shakespeare, traveling internationally playing in *The Tragedy of Hamlet* by Peter Brook. The play premiered in Paris, then on to Seattle, Chicago, Berlin, Vienna, London and Tokyo.

Shantala says playing in *Hamlet* is "a great learning experience, because it's a wonderful company with people coming from different places and different backgrounds, each one very rich and very generous." Peter Brook, known for his nontraditional casting, has given her speaking roles. She has received training in martial arts, singing and voice training on the sets.

When asked how she faces all the challenges, she replied: "I think all of the know-how I have comes from my dance training, because Indian dance is very theatrical. In Indian dance, even though we don't speak, we are telling stories, and the whole body has to express the feeling."

When Shantala is asked what it's like to live as an Indian in Paris, she said she loves the intense, animated lifestyle of the French people, and in turn, it seems, they like all things Indian. "They love Indian food," she says. "They also like the Indian music, dance and clothes. It's a fabulous place for the arts. Wherever I've danced in France or in Europe, I've found there is a huge response to Indian dance and music. People really love it. And though they can't understand the language or the stories, their hearts are totally open. They will receive it straight. It's very, very satisfying."

If asked about her lifestyle and Hindu heritage, she replies: "Actually, I think I am much more Indian than many people my age in India. Yet, at the same time, I am very Western in many ways as well. I really love the situation I am in, moving between both. I love both places, and I wouldn't want to choose between them."

The Shivalingappa family's day begins with lighting the lamp and prayers in their home shrine. "For us, Hinduism is more than a religion, it is a complete way of life," says Shantala, who wears a Ganesha image around her neck and is a vegetarian. Although there are no easily accessible Hindu temples in Paris, devotees that I know often gather in a hall for pujas. On her travels to India, Shantala visits temples.

Perhaps Shantala's devotion to Hinduism is expressed best through kuchipudi dance. "All Indian dance is first a prayer, a sacred form of art," She explains. "This is why one has to have that spirituality to be an Indian dancer: It is a spiritual experience. We light the lamp and we are dancing for God, and that comes through in the dance. This is why people are so touched. When Indian dancers come to class, they bow to Nataraja and touch their guru's feet. Only then does the

dancing start.Ã

Author Lavina Melwani, a popular free-lance correspondent, was born in Sindh, 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.