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CULTURE

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Dancer, teacher and choreographer Menaka Thakar does it all and much more

Neeta Dave, Ontario

I met Dr. Menaka Thakkar after a 20-year lapse and expected to see an East Indian lady posing as a typical North American, her Indianness recognizable only by her facial features. I was pleasantly surprised to find her clad in an elegant silk sari with a big red bindi glistening on her forehead. I learned that Menaka has always remained faithful to her Indian attire. Of course, I thought, how else would an international emissary of Indian culture to the West dress?

Menaka Thakkar is a world-renowned dancer, choreographer and teacher who specializes in three classical forms of Indian dance: Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kuchipudi. Originally from Mumbai but now living in Toronto, Menaka is an adjunct professor of dance at the prestigious York University. She has received numerous awards in India and Canada over the last 37 years and has earned an honorary doctorate of literature from York University for her manifold contributions to dance. Her extensive performing career has taken her throughout

India, Europe, North America, Japan and South East Asia.

Perhaps most significantly, Menaka is the artistic director, choreographer and principle performer of the Menaka Thakkar Dance Company and the founder and director of Nrtyakala: The Canadian Academy of Indian Dance. The Academy was begun in Toronto in 1975 with the twin aims of providing systematic training in classical Indian dance and creating awareness of Indian culture in Canada. She has done this through her performances and through lecture-demonstrations, which she has given extensively in Canada, the US and Europe.

In 1982 Menaka expanded Nrtyakala's activities by organizing presentations by eminent exponents of several different classical forms. In 1992 Menaka took her senior students to perform in eight cities in India as part of her "20th Anniversary in Canada" celebrations. Now in its 25th year, Nrtyakala has established itself as a highly reputed school of traditional Indian dance as well as an important center for innovative and experimental choreography. Currently, it has about 130 students spread over various levels.

Genevieve Grady is a modern dancer from York University. She joined Menaka's group when she was offered a role in a performance. Genevieve stresses, "Dance is the thing for Menaka. If you want to define Menaka, 'dance' is the only word! For Menaka, dance is a spiritual experience. I have never met anyone like her--so fully focused, disciplined and perfect."

With Nrtyakala, Menaka has given a new twist to the typical Indian system of training. The ten-year program is divided in two phases. Menaka explains, "Here in North America, students experience several graduation ceremonies. When the kids go from kindergarten to grade one, they 'graduate.' Then from primary to secondary schools, they 'graduate.' Again at the end of high school, they graduate!" Following this pattern, she has introduced a unique program of a Junior Arangetram, where students who have trained for five to seven years perform a debut recital. After this, if the student studies for another five to seven years, they perform their Senior Arangetram. This is the official graduation ceremony of all Indian dancers.

The Academy's post-graduate training is spread over a period of four years. It includes teacher's training and education in conducting dance performances. In the two international dance competitions in Bharatanatyam held so far in the US, two prizes were awarded to the students of Nrtyakala: first prize in 1987 to Malini Moorthy and second prize in 1991 to Natasha Bakht. The total number of students who have graduated from Nrtyakala has reached 126.

Originally from India, Shruti Malhotra has been learning from Menaka for the last eleven years. Shruti says, "Menaka is a strict and demanding teacher, but that is what makes her dance challenging and precise. By her work, Menaka has forged a solid platform for ethnic dance in the mainstream."

Menaka's Brother Rasesh is an avid reader who narrates and translates into English the Sanskrit stories behind Menaka's

creations. This helps hold the interest of non-Indians and Indian children who barely understand the language. Shruti affirms, "The translations make all her work more meaningful for my generation. We do want to know our culture."

Menaka points to family as the key to all her achievements. A theosophist lawyer father and ever-understanding mother taught moral values and inspired their children to make a difference. Menaka received her Bharatanatyam training first from her elder sister, Sudha Thakkar Khandwani, and then progressed through the years under guidance from eight accomplished dance gurus. Sudha is still actively involved in her sister's work.

Menaka and her dances have appeared in documentaries, such as a recent film made by the CBC television network for Prime Time News. In the experimental domain, she has successfully explored nontraditional themes, new musical structures and innovative use of space in group choreography. More significantly, she has created expanded dance vocabularies arising out of a synthesis of Indian and Western dance forms. This has resulted in collaborations with such well-known Canadian choreographers as Grant Stratae, Robert Desrosiers and Claudia Moore.

Nrtyakala will celebrate 25 years of its founding in August, 2000. Students and admirers of Menaka organized two special shows of tribute to this outstanding artist on September 20, 1997, to mark the completion of 25 years of her work in Canada and 35 years of her performing career. This occasion was attended by over 1,000 well-wishers. In June, 1998, she

was given the President's Award by the Indo-Canadian Chamber of Commerce for her contributions in Canada.

The students respect their role model and follow her example. They consider the school a holy place and always wear a bindi. Menaka repeatedly emphasizes that the work that you do--the art you perform--is respected everywhere you go. She says that if you consider your work as worship, others will respect you and your work.

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