

Om

Communicating Devotion and Diversity through Bharatanatyam

by Pavithra Srinivasan

The Palmer museum of Art, in the Pennsylvania State University, USA, organized an exhibition called *Devotion and Diversity* in June 2004. I was invited to perform and represent the cultural and devotional heritage of India. The organizers requested me to explain: *What is the symbolic meaning behind this South Indian classical dance form called Bharatanatyam? How is it culturally and spiritually Significant?*



Classical art forms offer a rich and diverse medium to explore one's cultural heritage leading to the appreciation of beauty and wisdom in life. Any means of communication is an art and the message conveyed is knowledge. When the purpose of message is to invoke passion, the art form is considered base, whereas when message is of unconditional love, truth, and glories of the Lord, the art form becomes sacred. Classical dance in India has always been revered as a sacred form of art.

Bharatanatyam, an ancient dance form of South India, portrays the very essence of sacredness. It is highly devotional in nature and the body and mind are disciplined to serve a vehicle for offering prayers to the Lord. This art form is believed to have been handed down by the Lord himself. The *Natya Shastra*, considered to be the oldest text on dance and drama, was written by *Bharata Muni* over 2000 years ago. Bharatanatyam is a combination of *Bha* for *bhava* or expression, *Ra* for *raga* or musical mode, *Ta* for *tala* or rhythm, and *Natyam* for dance and drama. Bharatanatyam borrows extensively from Indian epics, mythology, and scriptures. The episodes are set to lyrics and music while the dancer gives expression and life to these stories.

Thaiya Thaiyee Thaiya Thaiyee
Thaiyum Thath Thath Thaiyum Thaha
Thaihath Thaihee Thaihath Thaihee

The diverse audience seemed to enjoy the visual beauty of the *nritta* aspect of the dance form, appreciating the symmetrical patterns in movement of the limbs, postures, rhythmic footwork, the *aramandi* and *attami!*

Pathaka, Thripathaka, ardhapathaka, ...

As I demonstrated the hand gestures as an integral part in the language of Bharatanatyam, I noticed that some of them raised their hands to try a few *mudras*: elephant, lotus, deer, and peacock, seemed to be their favourites!

Abhinaya is the other important component of Bharatanatyam. It is the ability of the dancer to communicate the content of the story through body language, movement of limbs, stance, gait, and most of all the face. The unfoldment of the aesthetic flavour, *rasa*, in dance is described by the verse:

yatho hasthas thatho drishtih yatho drishtisthatho manah
yatho manas thatho bhavah yatho bhavasthatho rasah

Wherever the hand goes, the eyes follow; wherever the eyes go the mind follows; wherever the mind goes the emotions and feelings, *bhava*, are evoked; wherever the *bhava* is evoked, the *rasa*, aesthetic flavour is communicated. Love (*shringarm*), anger (*roudrum*), surprise (*adbhutam*), disgust (*bhibhatsam*), laughter (*hasyam*), compassion (*karunyam*), valour (*veeram*), fear (*bhayam*), and peace (*shanta*) are the nine *rasa* or aesthetic experiences. The *bhavas* depicted in the dance revolve around these nine *rasas*. Art is complete only when communication is complete. The quality of communication depends on the quality of emotions felt.

Subsequently, I danced to *Kannan madhura geetham*, in raga *hamsanandi* and *adi tala*, showing the devotion that overwhelms the entire universe on hearing the melodious flute of Lord Krishna. Having followed my elaboration of Bharatanatyam's various aspects, many in the audience were now readily following the unfoldment of the story!

The sanctity of the dance form has been symbolised by the manifestation of Lord *Shiva* himself as *Nataraja*, the king of dancers. He is an inspiring symbolic representation of the art form. His form depicts the Lord's exquisite face, which radiates knowledge and serenity, while his lithe body shows the balanced dance of creation and resolution. The drum he holds represents the sound of creation, while the fire he holds symbolizes resolution. The lotus upon which *Nataraja* stands is the human heart and the *Muyalaka* demon upon whom he dances is the individual caught in the bondage of worldly existence. His left foot and the hand of benediction denote the freedom of the individual who has surrendered unto his feet.

The whole vision of spirituality can be unfolded in dance. The Lord is the dancer and the dance of joy, *ananda*, is his manifestation. Just as the dancer remains untouched by any role that she portrays, the Self, which is the source of all experiences and knowledge, is distinct from any of them and is *limitless*. The entire drama of life is only a play of roles displaying various emotions and moods that characterizes their living, whereas the core person as a devotee remains unchanged, thus living in freedom and in harmony with the world.

Concluding my presentation with a *Thillana* in raga *kadanakudhugalam* and *tala adi* I offered my prayers and thanks to the Lord for this invaluable culture that keep me alive and gratitude and love to my parents and teachers for blessing me with this sacred art to nurture and share with the world.