

PROGRAMS EVENTS GRANTS

Devi brings performing, education background to advisory role

Art is an essential element of a flourishing society, says Nilimma Devi, one of the 17 councilors at the Maryland State Arts Council. “It is not a peripheral matter. When you’re talking of art, you’re talking of education – art is education.” For emphasis, she recalls Einstein having said that his most significant learning came through art. “Art creates plasticity of thought,” she says.



(Continued)

Devi’s background reveals her enduring efforts to merge artistic endeavors into other realms. She is a performing dancer and choreographer, who runs a dance school – devoted to the Kuchipudi style of Indian classical dance – at her Silver Spring home.

The school – Sutradhar Institute of Dance & Related Art (SIDRA) – has an affiliated dance troupe called the Devi Dance Theater, which features Devi as one of its six principal dancers. Its repertoire includes original works that Devi has created, as well as traditional pieces. The troupe has performed at such venues as the Kennedy Center, the Smithsonian Institution’s Freer Gallery and Discovery Theater, and the Strathmore – an arts center in Bethesda.

At the Kennedy Center, for instance, Devi presented a commissioned program called “Walk the Sky” in 2002. The performance celebrated the life and poetry of Mahadevi Akka, a 12th century “radical woman in feudal India,” she says.

She also teaches at George Washington University and other colleges in the region, while continuing to explore the cultural influence of dance. At George Washington, she still conducts a course that she initiated 10 years ago – “Gender and Indian Classical Dance.” The class includes a dance lab and a culminating performance.

Lyrical style

Devi describes Kuchipudi as lyrical. It requires quick footwork to express the nuances of complex rhythmic movements. A Kuchipudi performer presents flowing lines – the torso is not used as a single unit, she says. It’s more about achieving fluidity through the graceful integration of arms and legs into movements. Hand gestures and mime are also significant.

Though some people associate Kuchipudi with dancers maneuvering brass plates underneath their feet across a stage and balancing pots of water on their head, Devi considers these exhibitions to be gimmicky. She usually doesn’t include such acts in her performances.

Devi came to the U.S. in 1968. She and her husband moved to Madison, Wisconsin, because he had enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin to study Indian medieval history.

She arrived with the expectation that she'd be liberated from the cultural, religious and gender-oriented perceptions that made some styles of dance taboo in parts of India. Devi's uncles and a grandfather, for instance, considered it to be vulgar. Wisconsin, however, was a place where "people didn't care that much for ballet."

At Madison, she met the professor who headed the university's Asian Theater Department. He had first-hand familiarity with Indian and Japanese cultures, as well as expert knowledge of Japanese Noh theater – a traditional form of theater steeped with the flavor of central Asian dance and mime performance.

The professor asked her to teach a dance class, which she did. "I kept teaching and learning," she says. "I was successful at it." She was soon teaching other dance classes at the university.

She also traveled with the aid of several small grants to Kenya, Indonesia, India, Cambodia and Iran, where she pursued her study of dance. "Dance can be a bridge between people of different cultures," she says. It's "like a handshake" between people.

Interacting with other cultures is second nature to Devi. As a young child, she lived in Peshawar with her family. Peshawar was a town in northern India near the Afghan border that became part of Pakistan. Today, Peshawar has notoriety as a Taliban-occupied town.

'We were refugees'

In the aftermath of the momentous 1947 partitioning of British India and the ensuing conflict between Pakistan and India, "we were refugees," Devi says. The family moved to Delhi, where they were stranded because of the catastrophic floods that struck India then. "There were 10 of us living in a room."

Eventually, her father joined the Foreign Service and the family went to Kabul for two or three years. ("It was the first time we saw snow," she says. "It looked like salt to us.") The family then went to Iran when her father had been assigned there. A year later, health issues forced her father to move his family back to India. They settled in the southern region of the country.

Devi had started with dance when she was five. Her mother, who had an appreciation for Sanskrit poetry, sent her to dance school. When the family lived in Delhi, Devi's mother had the family cook accompany her to the school, miles away from their home. Later, Devi's aunt showed her pieces of choreography that she had learned at an Indian finishing school. It was extracted from the influence of Uday Shankar, who had established a cultural center in the late 1930s in India. Shankar, the older brother of the prominent sitarist Ravi Shankar, danced with Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova during the 1920s and then formed his own international touring group.

Devi first saw a Kuchipudi performance in the mid-1960s in Hyderabad, the South Indian town where her family was residing. She had heard about the controversies regarding its place in Indian culture – it wasn't exactly classical, it wasn't exactly folk – but had never seen it.

“There was this 40-year-old balding man who impersonated the queen in this dance drama,” Devi says. “I was blown away by his artistry.” The performance – a classic tale of love, betrayal, anguish and joy – produced “the whole gamut of emotions, she says.

Up until the 1930s, Kuchipudi performances were always dance dramas – group interpretations of classical epics and poems in Sanskrit and Telugu. Kuchipudi had moved from a rural stage to become urban theater, Devi says. Also, dance dramas were going by the wayside as solo performers emerged.

Prime performers

Women would eventually become the prime performers of what had been an art form reserved for males. The Brahmins – an influential upper-tier group in Hinduism recognized for their savvy and knowledge – had been the traditional presenters of Kuchipudi since they popularized it in the South Indian town of that name during the 17th century. “It had come out of oblivion,” she says.

Following this first experience with Kuchipudi, Devi found a guru to teach it to her. A Kuchipudi guru, she says, can trace his lineage back to the 17th-century. Kuchipudi was avant-garde even then.

“Oral culture is very strong in India,” she says. Though language is important, she adds, it is the guru – a person of great stature – who is responsible for the transmission of ideas and the passing down of tradition. And, as she would later learn from a professor in Bombay, it is the transmission itself that becomes “a center of creativity.”

Soon after she embarked on her study of Kuchipudi in India, Devi was en route to Wisconsin. She moved to Maryland after a split from her husband; she decided to go where her daughter was attending college.

Devi opened her dance school in the late 1980s while living in the Bethesda/Rockville area of Montgomery County. About a year later, she received a grant from the American Institute of Indian Studies, which enabled her to return to India for a year to study the role of creativity in Indian classical dance. Operations at the dance school went on hold for the year.

Upon her return to the U.S., she felt energized, she says. She wrote a series of academic papers that focused on her research. In 1992, she presented one of the papers to the Congress on Research in Dance, a national organization that promotes dance scholarship. Titled “The Communal Embrace,” the paper discussed dance in the Indian immigrant community. She later presented a paper about hand gestures in classical Indian dance.

In 2006, Devi was invited to join the International Dance Council (Counseil International de la Danse). She received a Maryland Traditions award in 2007.

Diversity of cultures

Of the 50 students at the Institute during a typical session, about 50 percent are Indian, Devi says. The other half represents a diversity of cultures – Korean, Russian and Caribbean, for instance. Classes blend yoga, creative writing, storytelling and music. Some also include the choreography of an Indian style of martial arts: Thang-ta, which means swords and spears.

For young children, Devi offers a “lotus buds” class. The students use hand gestures to transform themselves into birds, alligators, deer and frogs, she says. She also offers an adult class, “In Pursuit of the Goddess,” which incorporates poetry and philosophy with a strong dance regimen.

“The ancient poets-philosophers in India sang about the inherent divinity in man,” Devi says. “They called it Tat Tvam Asi – ‘That thou art.’ They also recognized a power of transcendence in the arts.” Such a power, she says, “allows one to come closer to that divinity (within).”