

In my first Kuchipudi dance class Nilimma Devi told me the story of a king who came across a sculpture that moved him and inspired him to learn to sculpt. This king sought out the person who created the sculpture and asked to teach him to sculpt. They said “It is great that you want to learn to sculpt but before you learn to sculpt you must learn to paint. So the king left out and found the greatest painter in his kingdom and asked them if they could teach him to paint in order to learn to sculpt. They said “Well, before you learn to paint, you must learn to play music.” The king then sought out the most respected musician in his land and asked him to teach him to play music, so he may learn to paint, so he may learn to sculpt. He said, “that's wonderful! But before you learn to play music, you first must learn to dance.” That is where it all begins; training your body to do what you want it to do.

I was very inspired by that story and today I have the esteemed opportunity to sit down and talk with dancer, choreographer, and educator Nilimma Devi. Nilimma is the founder and director of the Sutradhar Institute of Dance and Related Arts as well as the dance company “Devi Dance Theater.” For nearly 25 years the Sutradhar Institute has offered classes in classical Indian Kuchipudi dance, martial arts, and yoga. SIDRA's mission is transcend cultural and gender barriers with re-imagined and innovative choreographies and to nurture and encourage artists to overcome language and cultural boundaries through dance. Through these classes and the Devi Dance Theater Nilimma brings aspiring and talented dancers to an array of venues with unique compositions that not only speak of ancient philosophies and stories but that are rhythmically intricate and beautiful. Nilimma currently serves on the Maryland State Arts Council and her work has won many awards such as recently the 2013 Lifetime Achievement Award by County Executive Ike Leggitt.



What do you say to people who say they can't dance?

Out of all the forms of art that manifest themselves, dance is an art form that becomes part of the creator. In other words the dancer and the dance can not be separated, they are one. To Dance Is Human as Dr. Judy Hanna has titled one of her books. So, when people say they can not dance, they have forgotten part of themselves, and there is a disconnect between themselves and their core essence. I then tell them that there is an opportunity here where they can embark on a discovery of who they are.

Kuchipudi is a dance tradition that originated in Andhra Pradesh India and it is practiced by male Brahmin dancers that perform “dance dramas”, which usually begin with a prayer or invocation, and tell a story through dance and song then conclude with a blessing of the audience and stage. Am I right? On your website it says “the dance style known as Kuchipudi is many things.” What is Kuchipudi to you?

Kuchipudi is also a name of a village. For us dancers it is a 17th century egalitarian movement in classical theater and dance . During its beginning, it faced much opposition as male brahmins were prohibited to perform on the stage. Sidhendra Yogi started this movement and for 300 years it flourished and nourished the society of Andhra Pradesh. For me, Kuchipudi today means, 'to keep the open spirit of the classical form together'.

What makes Kuchipudi dance different than other styles of Indian dance and what drew you to this style of dance?

All the other classical dances emerged out of the temples or royal courts in India. This style was not performed in the mandapas of the temples or the royal courts of the feudal society. Also it had a sense of discipline, control, and yet, joy that was attractive to me.

4. SIDRA is a non – profit dance institute which was founded in 1988 and is located in Silver Spring Maryland. Will you talk little about how it began and what is it like

directing the Sutradhar Institute?

From Choreography where you design movement in space using rhythm, poetry, and mythology to directing an art institute is a new challenge. I learn everyday and the rewards are very fulfilling as I see the community of dancers and their families learn a lot more than just dance.

5. What's new and can you talk about the performances you have coming up?

Besides the upcoming summer camp we are working on three beautiful projects which are percolating. "Arise and Awake" is project that has been inspired by the 12 movement phrases of the sun salutations of yoga and the poems of light and nourishment of the sun. "Sita: Gentle Warrior" is a collaborative work with two other Southeast Asian dancers from Indonesia and Thailand that articulates the emerging strong voices of women that crosses the barriers of traditional patriarchy in society today. "Weaving Life" is a dance choreography that brings together poetry and movement to express three different cultural traditions through the theme of weaving.

I urge those who are interested in learning more about Nilimma Devi, Devi Dance Theater and the Sutradhar Institute of Dance & Related Arts to please visit www.dancesidra.org

*Much Love & Thanks – Jeremy Michael

