

Bala Devi Chandrasekar



Profile

Bridging cultures through Bharatanatyam

By Sreelatha Rajan



Devi Chandrasekar is a New Jersey-based Bharatanatyam artist and teacher who has trained under Padma Subrahmanyam. She is the artistic director of the New Jersey based Bharatanatyam school Shree Padma Nrityam Academy of performing Arts Inc. As an artist who has a penchant towards Indian philosophical works, she constantly brings together major thematic productions like Uddhava Geeta, Vishwam, Brihadeeshwara, to name a few. She also works in collaboration with theatre, dance, and South Asian studies for various universities in the United States. She has served as a Fellow and Artist in Residence at The Carl A. Fields Center at Princeton University.

As a performer, Bala Devi has toured over 35 countries including venues like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, UNESCO, the 2024 Paris Olympics, and Broadway. Bala Devi received the Kalaimamani from the Government of Tamil Nadu in the year 2012.

Can you briefly describe your dance journey?

I come from a family of academics. I have been a good student right from my school days right up to my MPhil degree. I also learnt dance and music from my childhood. I was about seven years old and we were in Hyderabad when I started learning Bharatanatyam under Jayalakshmi Narayanan. That was in the Pandanallur style. Later, I learnt from Padma Subrahmanyam, in Chennai. I have also learnt Natya Sastra and the karanas from her. I have travelled with her across India, participating in her productions like Valli Kalyanam along with her group.

There is only so much that a teacher can do for you. One has to evolve as an artist through one's own efforts. Marriage took me to Dubai and to United States and I continued to dance. I was also teaching a lot of Indian students in these places.

After my degree, I worked in the corporate sector for 22 years as a Human Resource professional. All through the time I was balancing my dance and my corporate career. I have always wanted to delve into the depths offered by our ancient texts and depict them in visually capturing ways. So, I shifted my career to focus only on the arts.

I believe that my corporate background helps me articulate well. I also have a partner who could support financially. Bharatanatyam as you know is an expensive art form to pursue.



I see myself as a soft ambassador taking these treasures to societies across the world through the powerful medium of Bharatanatyam, forging cultural ties. I have toured extensively in USA and Europe and now in South East Asian countries and through my work I engage with different societies across the world. I work with universities and also with theatre groups incorporating movements based on our ancient literature.

You said that you engage a lot with the universities in US. What do you teach them and how do you engage with the students who come from diverse backgrounds?

In the US, I live close to the Princeton campus. I have worked with various universities collaborating with South Asian Studies, anthropology, theatre and dance. I have given lectures and taught courses at the universities in the United States. If you look at the student population there, they span all continents and through this course, they get an exposure to our ancient texts like Upanishads, and the Bhagavat Geeta. These days, the modes of learnings are much different. Some learn online, some may come offline for lectures. The class is a floating population. So, the students who show up for the class, they are the really interested bunch. They have beautiful questions. Our ancient texts are foreign to them and they are eager to learn more. There is a dual mode of learning through my lectures - they get the gist of the philosophy and a visual treat.

Among the faculty, there are lot of academicians and professors who take active interest in arts. I think at a very high level, all subjects coalesce. A great algorithm, I would say is a work of art.

Can you talk about how you give life to your productions?

My family has been academic and pious and in both sides of my family we have a lineage of scholars. We also have strong roots in Tanjavur and Umayalpuram. A good production always starts with a solid text. I would have been exposed to some texts through listening to an upanyasam or a music concert. Once the idea takes root, I look for scholars to guide me through them. I look for scholars who have deep knowledge of Sanskrit and the texts. The people who are scholars in these are not available in our cities. They live far away from fame and are happy to share their knowledge with an artist. They don't even look for remuneration. For example, in the creation of my production Brihadeeshwara, I took the help of scholar T.N. Ramachandran and the work of Kidavayoor Balasubramaniam who has spent his life studying the kalvetu of the temple.

I go for a full operatic music with various instruments as they help with adding drama and variations which is very essential when you are a solo artist doing multiple characters. I primarily work with Rajkumar Bharati for music and other leading percussionists for the rhythm. I also focus on the aesthetics a lot, be it the costume or the lighting.



Most of my work is digitised, hence all aspects have to be excellent and I travel across the world performing for various sahridayas. My productions offer wholesome entertainment and my audience need not or can be completely uninitiated. I demand nothing of my audience. Yet I find that they usually are allured by some or many aspects of the production – spirituality or literature or costume or aesthetics. Such is the power of art.

How do you choose the subjects for your productions?

I have worked on profound productions such as Nandanar Charitram, followed by two major margam based releases – MLV Favourites and Krishna Arpanam. This season, I released a traditional margam, showcasing specific compositions of the illustrious brothers, An Ode to the Tanjore Quartet.

Most of my productions stem from years of active research. For example, for the most acclaimed production of mine – Uddhava Gita – Lord Krishna's Last Message, I worked for three years. The production explores essential factors contributing to our spiritual progress, including yoga, jnana, scientific analysis of bondage and suffering, bhakti and liberation. I have had the opportunity to present this production at various prestigious venues and events, including the Global Gita Conference in 2015. This production exemplifies my approach to Bharatanatyam, which involves extensive research into ancient texts and collaboration with renowned scholars to extract profound messages that resonate with contemporary society. Uddhava Gita set the stage for my subsequent productions, all of which aim to educate audiences on various dimensions of subjects they may not have contemplated before.

I have multiple projects running along with Bharatanatyam margam creations and they feed into each other.

You mentioned that you work as a Movement Consultant. Can you elaborate on that?



I have studied the Natya Sastra text extensively. Learning with guru Padma Subrahmanyam definitely means learning about her path breaking research on karanas. Natya Sastra details the anatomical aspects. It gives us the movement vocabulary – major and minor limbs, 108 karanas, angas, prathyangas, stances and more. I worked with a New Jersey group who were staging Arabian Nights to help them in the movement. We worked on the head movements and other face movements like eyebrows and eyelashes. The production was staged across New Jersey quite successfully. One another interesting work was based on a Hebrew literature, where a man who doesn't have hands has to save a drowning woman. So, both hands are not to be used.

In all these instances, I relied on the text and constantly aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In essence, that is Movement Consulting.

How do you see yourself in the coming years?

I am not someone who makes grand plans, yet I keep working and creating. I know that all I have learned so far is just a small fistful, while an entire ocean remains to be explored and experienced.



(Sreelatha Rajan is a rasika and a writer who loves languages)



On January 5, 2025, Bala Devi Chandrashekar's latest digital work, An Ode to the Tanjore Quartet, was released at the TAG Dakshinamurthy Auditorium, Mylapore. The DVD was released by Nandini Ramani and received by Priya Murle, President of ABHAI, with Nalli Kuppaswami Chetty and K.N. Ramaswamy as guests of honour. Nandini Ramani emphasised the importance of documenting traditional works to prevent their loss, while Nalli Kuppaswami highlighted the DVD's value in the digital learning era. Ramaswamy spoke about the contributions of great nattuvanars like Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai. Priya Murle praised Bala Devi's commitment to tradition, ensuring its accessibility to young dancers while supporting Indian artists performing in the USA.

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