

Universal grace

US-based danseuse Bala Devi Chandrashekar is opening a branch of her bharatanatyam school in Kochi

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KOCHI: When Bala Devi Chandrashekar walked into the lobby of a five-star hotel in Kochi, she caught many eyes with her grace and elegance. She was clad in a saffron and gold Kanjeevaram saree, adorning earrings and a necklace embellished with rubies and emeralds.

A bharatanatyam exponent and founder of Shree Padma Nrityam Academy of performing Arts Inc. in New Jersey, US, Bala is now expanding her art to Kerala. She is now busy laying the groundwork for a centre in Kakkanad, which will be inaugurated on January 5. Her former student Vidya Hari will be the director of the establishment. Bala is also an associate scholar at the University of Pennsylvania.

“Kerala is known for its history with art and culture. I thought it would be appropriate to have a centre in Kochi. The institution will not be just for students. Scholars of literature, art, music and theatre are welcome too,” she said.

Bala has adopted an intellectual approach towards the art form. She borrows her subjects based on ancient myths and texts and does intense research on them. Afterwards, she collaborates with renowned scholars to craft it into a performance form that contemporary art audience can enjoy. So far, Bala has produced eight critically-acclaimed productions, including ‘nandanar charithram’ and ‘krishna arpanam’.

Having performed all over the world, she is amazed by the power of Indian classical art forms. Bala remembers a pregnant woman walking up to her after a performance in London. She had suffered three miscarriages and complained of pain. “I feel that your touch might make me feel fine,” the woman said. Bala hugged her, only to find out later that the woman delivered a healthy baby. “That was a soul-stirring experience for me,” says Bala.

Bala grew up in Hyderabad and trained under Guru Jayalakshmi Narayanan and Dr Padma Subrahmanyam in Chennai. She is academically inclined too, holding a M Phil and three masters degrees in management, public administration and human resources.

In 1992, she left for Abu Dhabi with her husband. There, she kickstarted a corporate career while teaching dance. Bala also taught business ethics in the Dubai branch of the City University of London. In 1999, the couple left for New Jersey, where she started her academy.

Bala’s journeys have taught her that art is beyond boundaries. Once a Bedouin invited Bala to perform ‘Uddhava Gita’, chapter 11 of the Srimad Bhagavatam in Spain. He said, “I called you because Uddhava is my guru.”

“I don’t think art can be compartmentalised as belonging to a particular country or region. You don’t have to have an Indian heart or mind to produce art. It comes from the soul. Many a time, non-Indians have connected deeply with my art. The subject matter in all our epics is meant for people everywhere. It is universal because it transcends religion and caste,” she said.