

'Want global fame for Odisha's art, culture'

SMRUTI REKHA BARIK, OP

Feted with several national and international honours, Bharatanatyam exponent Bala Devi Chandrashekar has so far performed in over 300 shows in more than 30 countries

Aclaimed Bharatanatyam danseuse Bala Devi Chandrashekar is one of the few exponents worldwide who have released nine critically appreciated dance productions such as Nandanar Charithram, Vishwam - The Omnipresent, Tripura - Divine Feminine, Karna - Destiny's Child, Brihadeeswara - Form to formless, among others. Of late, she has been showcasing her last production titled Padmavati - An Avatar, based on divine love between 12th century poet Jayadeva, writer of epic poem Geeta Govinda, and his wife Padmavati. The US-based Indian American was recently in Bhubaneswar to perform Padmavati at a Bharatanatyam event. She took some time off from her busy schedule to speak to **Sunday POST**.

Excerpts:

Out of all that you're known for - a scholar, performer and a teacher - which one are you the fondest of?

I think none of these can flourish independently; it is an amalgamated process. You cannot be a good guru if you're not a good dancer, or if you don't have the scholarly input to impart to your students. To me, I don't think I can select one, it's all together. And sometimes you are not 100 on this entire forte, you could be 60-40, 70-30 and it doesn't matter.

Who have you always looked up to as your mentor?

I got trained under the tutelage of Guru Jayalakshmi Narayan in Hyderabad and Padma Subrahmanyam in Chennai. And along with them I have had many scholars to guide me throughout and from whom I could learn in the field of literature, music or dance. They constantly study and that makes it more effective for me to stay connected with them and remain a student; because I have always wanted to study

more. The more you get into a subject, you appreciate it and you discover how little you know about it.

Out of all nine of your productions, which is the most cherished and which has been appreciated more by the global audience?

Each of my productions has its own charm as they are based on divine themes. For instance, one is about women power while another is about the story of a warrior. All are pretty diverse and not unidirectional. So it is very difficult to pick one over the other. However, one commonality that I have to cite here is that my productions are not just made for the very wise and the old, they are made for all age groups. Otherwise, they would lose their global appeal. The productions have been designed to pull an impression on all sections of society, not just in India, even abroad despite language and cultural barriers. The operatic and thematic approach of my production is praised globally. All are equally powerful and have stood the test of time for years.

How can we engage the youths who are losing interest in arts, culture and traditions?

I have been performing across the globe starting from a remote village of Thanjavur which is the seat of Bharatanatyam, to villages of Maharashtra, and also in Spain, Berlin, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Singapore and Chile. My objective is to make an impression on their mind that my dance is the replica of the events happening in daily life. Of late, the youths have felt the need of something swift, quick, and something which makes sense and is relatable. This is because there are so many distractions in their life. I strongly believe that my upcoming show at Bhubaneswar will strike a chord with them. I don't preach, it's a platter that I keep in front of the youngsters and they take whatever is suitable to them. The dictating and advising mode has never worked. Today it is very important that we make it very approachable with love and compassion.

What was the definition of struggle and success when you started

off? Has it changed with time?

I think I have come to terms with the fact that all individuals will have their shares of struggle. When you move on a path of Dharma, you will gradually realise that it's not going to be a bed of roses. But I always try to convert my struggles into opportunities. I never give up easily because it has been very difficult for me looking at where I come from. There have been a lot of challenges, challenges from unlikely quarters. Sometimes your comfort zone turns into a challenge and you wonder if this is a dead end. I always believe that you won't find many along with you when you traverse a path of success. For example: A bird flying sky high but alone.

Could you please share your thoughts on your show 'Padmavati'?

Padmavati is the centre of attraction of Jayadeva's immortal classic Geeta Govindam and the production is no exception. I belong to the southern side but I am working on Padmavati, which is a character from the eastern part of India. So I have made shehnai, dhol, and other musical instruments of Odisha as part of my production because it is very important to understand where this poet hails from by showing the anthropological significance. Before delving deep into the theme, I was very much intrigued. Of the Navarasas, Shringara Rasa has much power associated with itself because of its sensuality. Jayadeva and Padmavati had an ordained marriage. You can teach one, 'karm-yog' but you can never teach someone 'bhakti' or devotion. For me, Padmavati is the real avatar; she has shown the way to dedication through 'mritya-shringar'. I have been meditating for this performance for years and I knew that it had to happen here in Odisha.

And finally, tell us about your experience so far in Odisha.

This is my first visit to Odisha. Starting from the driver to all those who I have met so far, all are nice towards me. Here, people are very soft-hearted. I have come to this state for the first time, but it will certainly not be the last. I'd like to return to Odisha again and again and spread the art and culture of this land across the globe.