

The Kuchipudi Dancer

Nilimma Devi, 69,
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Institute of Dance & Related
Arts in Silver Spring

I was born in 1944 in Peshawar. Culturally it was a very Muslim area. Then the partition [of India] came in August 1947 and it became Pakistan. We were minority Hindus in that region. My father never thought we would have to leave, but things began to deteriorate and he sent us to India, thinking the family would come back when things were less rowdy. That day never came.

We went from living a very indulged childhood to all living in one room in Delhi. My father couldn't hold a job, so we moved from place to place. When we were 6 and 7, my sister and I would walk to a dance school in the market. Within the Punjabi community, dance was a taboo socially. My grandfather couldn't stand the word dance; it was right next to prostitution. But my mother was always talking about the great dancers in Indian history.

By the time I was 13, everyone was saying, "Marriage, marriage, marriage." All I had in my head was "dance, dance, dance." My father got sick and was bed-ridden, so I would get up and work at a school and come back to nurse him. In the evening, I would go to the dance



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institute. For two hours, I would be in bliss, soaked in my own sweat.

The first time I saw [the classical dance] Kuchipudi, I was a teenager. I was totally blown away. I saw a man impersonating one of the most beautiful women I had even seen. He was 40 and broadly built—but when he got on stage, it was some kind of magic.

So I threw myself into my dream. Every time there was a letter from my grandmother saying that a boy had proposed to me, my mother would ask quietly, “Are you interested?” But I was not interested in marriage at that age, and my parents did not pressure me.

One day, I was introduced to a Peace Corps volunteer. He started coming around a lot. He talked to my aunt, my aunt talked to my father. My father went to the library and brought me books about American divorce rates. But in 1968 I became a bride and came to America.

I ended up in Madison, Wis., teaching University of Wisconsin extension courses in dance and theory. I was 25 when I got married. I thought I was too young to teach, but right away the Asian theater department was knocking on my door, and I began to think about how I could bring this dance to an American mindset.

Most Indian classical dance is an invocation to one god or another. The mythology and poetry and ritual are so heavily interwoven. I can try [to] express the mystical level of religion. I can dance to Sufi poetry in Persian, to black spirituals, to poetry written by Buddhist nuns. My culture makes me more willing to see a larger human family.

Social issues have always been important to me, especially the status of women. Somewhere along the line, Indian women started being shown as weak and timid. Once when I was teaching, a girl asked me, “Why does [the character] have to be shy?” So I said, “OK, now she’s not shy.” All you have to do is take her veil away and make her walk. ■

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