

**DANCE**

# Dr Ananda Shankar Jayant expresses the joy within

DECEMBER 19, 2019 17:04 IST

**UPDATED:** DECEMBER 19, 2019 17:04 IST

**Dr Ananda Shankar Jayant on how dance helped her come out of despair**





It is often quoted that one can't set foot in two boats and try to travel. Dr. Ananda Shankar Jayant's journey runs contrary to this adage. She pursues her passion and profession with commitment and dedication. "It was my mother who cherished a desire to see me dance, while my father wanted me to qualify for Indian Railway Service so that I'm assured of a steady income which keeps me from compromising on the art's front," she says candidly.

Today Ananda is at the peak of her career as a senior officer with the Indian Railways (traffic) as well as a performing artiste and choreographer. While being a successful professional she has pushed her passion beyond the boundaries of art if her choreographies and her other activities in the field of art are anything to go by. Her dance ballets are quintessentially Kalakshetra, her alma mater, be it in costume designing or stage décor or group dynamics.

In a tête-à-tête on the eve of her ballet "Tales of the bull and the tiger" in Delhi, Ananda recounts her voyage through smooth and rough seas, emerging unbeaten at the end of the day.

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"I attribute it all to my dance which stood by me through the dark patch in my life when I was diagnosed with cancer. My art was my source of will power to get out of my despair and rise up more creative than before. That is when I started allied art activities like convening the prestigious Natya Kala conferences, taking dance lec-dems both abroad and within Indian, authoring a book on Kuchipudi dance which I learnt and performed along with my Bharatanatyam and releasing a dance practice App-Natyaramba."

Her solos being a class apart, it is her group works produced under the banner of 'Shankarananda Kalakshetra' her school, that have risen to fame. "My background in choreography is mainly from Rukmini 'attai'(Arundale) at Kalakshetra. She would compose and choreograph ballets for each group with us literally in front of her. We would learn first hand about the movements on stage, the costumes to be designed, the décor and everything that would go into the making of a ballet from music to dance. I was highly influenced by her style. After my solo performances which is usual for an emerging artiste,

the charm of group work and the aesthetics involved captured my artistic spirit. In 1981, I went on stage with my first choreography 'Krishnam Vande Jagadgurum'. This was a formal Bharatanatyam based one with Sanskrit text wherein I brought the Bhagavad Gita on stage. Then I ventured into experimenting with the contemporary with whatever technology was available then. In 1992, I produced and performed Jonathan Livingston Seagull. It came under the contemporary genre both in content and form. It resonated a parable where the birds took main stage-an abstract form, very English in its tenor with regard to costume and jazz music. The success of this ballet made me confident to try my hands at new subjects and in 1985 I did 'Buddham Sharanam Gacchami' on the life and teachings of Buddha. Here again I moved out of the Bharatanatyam costume. In between, I was doing my solo works (Ekaharya) like Thyagaraja Ramayanam, Gitopadesam and so on."

It was a back and forth travel through the terrain of contemporary, traditional, abstract and concrete as far as her works are concerned. With "What about me?", she brought in poetry and other elements where the content was contemporary (relevant to this day) but the form was Bharatanatyam. Her Navarasa looked at the artistic moods in abstract symbolism without pegging the nine emotive moods on stories as it is usually done.

"This production was kind of perennial. It travelled across the globe as it could connect to varied audiences. Here I took to both the traditional and contemporary," explains the artiste. "Darshanam-an ode to the eye" traced the outer, physical eye to the awakening of the inner eye; "Mohana" on lord Krishna was an ensemble work where each piece could be a standalone; in 2007, Ramadas keertana took the form of "Sri Rama namam entha ruchi ra" where the ahaarya (costume) remained simple unlike in Buddha. The "Panchatantra-dancing tales" was a neo-classical work, an experiment in humour with a mix of Indian folk and classical music where the movements of the body conveyed the story and the costumes were suggestive and simple. "Kavyanjali - ode to Tagore" stood on the pillar of music and poetry-a mix of Telugu Bengali. "Sri-the goddess within" was again within the traditional using existing verses.

Endowed with tremendous creativity, it wasn't a surprise that Ananda Shankar was bestowed with the Padma Shri, Sahitya Akademi Award, Kalaimamani from the Tamil Nadu government, Kala Ratna from Government of Andhra Pradesh, the Vishwa kala Bharati awards very early in her dance career. "I bowed to the accolades with the same grace as I did to my illness. I never said, why me?" she sums up.

RANEE KUMAR



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Printable version | Jan 23, 2021 4:18:29 PM |

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