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In Conversation With Dr. Ananda Shankar Jayant

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Nirmala Garimella
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Dr Ananda Shankar Jayant, is celebrated as one of India's leading classical dancers, choreographers and dance scholars. Performing in the two classical styles of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, Ananda, imbues to the technique and grammar of her dance, a sparkling quality that bristles with life.

Dancing with joy, Ananda, has polished her art to a fine pitch, where, the rigor of her training meets a finely tuned intellect that effortlessly bridges traditional structures with contemporary inputs.

Imprinting her own vision of joy, beauty, values, myths, spirituality, and life experiences, to an impeccable training, Ananda's life in dance has seen her transcend the physical, and lead her audience on a spiritual and ethereal journey.

Her natural grace and vivacity draws her audience into the vivid and vibrant canvas of her dance, leaving them deeply touched. With an acclaimed and intense body of work that spans rich mythologies, historical chronicles, searing commentaries on topical issues, philosophical enquiry, poetry, story telling, and humour, Ananda, constantly stretches the boundaries of artistic endeavour, using the grammar and idiom of the classical dance format, making her presentations at once contemporary and evocative.

Engaging in every aspect of dance, Ananda, is a prolific solo and ensemble performer, a much loved teacher and Guru, a critically acclaimed and brilliant choreographer, and is a sought after motivational and leadership speaker and writer.

As the Artistic Director of Shankarananda Kalakshetra, Ananda leads an acclaimed ensemble, besides training and presenting the next generation of Bharatanatyam artists.

Endowed with a natural flair for team playing and organisational acumen for collaborative work, Ananda has presented some of India's signature festivals and conferences.

A TED speaker in 2009, Ananda's TED talk is now ranked as one of 50 Amazingly Motivational talks on Youtube as well as one of 12 Incredible TED talks on cancer.

Ananda holds a Masters degree in Ancient Indian History (where she topped her university), a M.Phil in Art History and a Ph.D in Tourism. She actively lectures on breast cancer support and advocacy issues, having successfully battled the illness over the last two years.

A senior officer of the Indian Railway Traffic Service, Ananda is currently posted in Secunderabad India.

As an artist, before you ascend on stage is there any kind of ritual, mindfulness or thought that comes to you that is intrinsic for any artist?

The necessity for complete focus and mindfulness is an imperative. Each artist has different practices and methods. I warm up the body and go silent before the performance, and prefer not to meet people ahead of my performance. Quietening the mind is intrinsic to focus and a small personal prayer helps. My group together hold hands and say some select shlokas.



Can you share with us what you will performing on February 20th in Boston?

I plan to present an excerpt of my ekaharya - mono drama work Thyagaraja Ramayanam , a Kuchipudi Tarangam , and maybe Gitopadesam

As an artist you have performed for charities? Why is it important?

I think as artistes we are uniquely placed to use our art for service
Maanavseva is doing yeoman service in the field of cancer advocacy and support. When Dr Sastry Dwiwedula, suggested this program ,as a fund raiser, I immediately accepted, knowing how important these interventions and services are for bringing awareness to the poor in India

With your personal battle with cancer, what inner strength drives you to keep dancing?

I think my inner strength is derived from dance, not the other way round.The power of an innate passion I believe is what helps you ride out challenges and setbacks of life.We need to encourage the young to pursue and nurture their talents and gifts. Most often they are dropped by the wayside in the chase of a career!

I was particularly fascinated to know that you combine western art forms with the classical dance of India? How do you choose these inspirations? for eg Jonathan Livingstone and Jazz

Well Dance has always been my biggest communication tool
So when I choose a story to portray in dance, I am aware of the ramifications of the story itself, and the visual that emanates thereof

For Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, I chose jazz music, finding that it conveyed the spirit and sense of flight, which is the essence of the story.
On the other hand, Carnatic music, which I tried initially, seemed more akin to keeping time, especially with its tala structure and inherent rhythm. Hence I chose Jazz.. There are no hard and fast rules.. just what works , and that is intuitive. For my other dance theatre work Dancing tales.. Panchatantra, we used a melange of music, that ranged from the classical to the folk genres of India, representing the gait and mood of the character we presented. So music becomes the bedrock of the idea that helps in the visual presentation in dance

You have touched a sensitive topic on gender in your productions? Do you think some of our classical stories perpetuate that aspect?

I presented my dance theatre work What About Me ? on issues of gender.I cross referenced, modern gender issues like dowry, rape, etc, by presenting similar stories from myths.
I do not agree that our classical stories perpetuate these myths. They are stories, with all its colors and shades..and interpretations . It is upto us to choose the interpretation .And that, I think is the beauty and power of our myths,

Finally as a dancer can you share some advice on what young dancers in the US may keep in mind as they pursue this in their lives?

Well First step ... stay the course.
No short cuts help .. practice is a dire necessity
Read and research before you present anything new
keep abreast of what's happening in the field,
And commit to excellence



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