

Drawn by a passion for dance



Enjoying an adventure From top left: Natalia Butyrskaya; Olena, Aymeric (music student from France), Tanya and Nicholyn; Sasha (in red) and Murielle ; Mariann Adasz and (right)Eva Berki ; (extreme left) Krishnamayi (aka Christine Nunez).

Enthusiastic They came to Chennai from all over - Russia, Chile, France, Hungary and so on, to learn a classical art form. Read on to find out what it means to them... Rupa Srikanth

It is not uncommon these days to see foreigners on Chennai's streets looking at home in ethnic clothes and braided hair. Strike up a conversation and one will be greeted with vigorous head shakes and other 'Indian' mannerisms. This is the culturally-adapted foreigner (CAFO), living here to learn Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi or Carnatic music.

Indian classical music and dance are well-respected outside India, but they have not yet gained a mainstream stature. So how did the foreigners know about them? Some like Sasha (Russia), Olena (Ukraine) and Eva Berki (Hungary) say it was the colourful, larger-than-life images in Hindi movies that caught their attention first.

Tanya (Belarus), a fourth year student at Kalakshetra with a Ph.D. in Mathematics, says she was intrigued by an 'Eastern' dance that she saw back home, and searched the net all night to find out about the dance in which, 'the hands spoke a language.'

The foreigners are a passionate lot. They have to be, if they have braved family disapproval, financial constraints and cultural barriers to come halfway round the world to learn. Each of them has a different story.

Krishna bhakti

For Krishnamayi, 33, (aka Christina Nunez) from Chile, who has been with dancer Sailaja for six months to learn Kuchipudi, Krishna bhakti drew her to it. According to her, "Dance has expression for the eyes and the heart, spiritual involvement and corporal movement. It is full religion."

Natalia Butyrskaya (Russia) who learns Bharatanatyam under dancer Meenakshi Chitharanjan and is also pursuing an M.A. in Bharatanatyam in Madras University, says that she was attracted to this form, "by its capacity to create a world in itself."

She explains, "When an individual dances, she is alone, in a neutral costume and without any setting. Everything that she shows, she creates herself with subtle movements and gestures." She started learning dance at 21 when she came to India with her father, who was working with the Russian consulate. She had her *arangetram*, studied Tamil language and literature in Moscow, came back on a posting with the consulate in 2006, and has been here since.

For Murielle (29), the tall, long-limbed beauty from Reunion Island, France, Bharatanatyam's link to theatre was the main attraction. "I was excited to see that you could tell something without words! In the West, we have lost the link with God and with devotion; we need to believe in something higher. It exists in India and in dance, and that is its beauty."

For some, coming to India altered their personal lives forever. Sasha, who trained with veteran Nirmala Ramachandran in Moscow and Chennai and now trains with Professor C.V. Chandrasekhar and dancer Manjari, met and married a Frenchman in Chennai and has stayed on for more than a decade. Tanya too found her life-partner in Chennai - an Indian.

And how do they associate themselves with the culture that Bharatanatyam or Kuchipudi represents, where devotion and love are the dominant themes? While Tanya feels that expressions are more about life experiences and that her portrayal of a love-struck heroine has improved since her romance and marriage, Sasha feels that 'sringara' is a universal phenomenon that anyone can relate to. Since devotion was already a part of her life, as a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, she says it was easy. But generally it has not been so easy; some 'observed and learnt,' while others had to push themselves to emote strongly. Murielle has a refreshing point of view, "While it is nice to play a heroine and to think about the romantic side when no one has the time for love today, the gestures initially meant nothing

and their meaning only dawned on me much later. In the beginning, I thought that everyone on the street was dancing!”

Olena, a trained nurse and a third year student at Kalakshetra, found in Bharatanatyam a way of connecting with theatre, music and rhythm. On the cultural front, she says, “When you come to a place, you become the place like a river!” About handling the subjects and emotions, she feels, “When you get involved with the subject, emotions will flow from inside.”

There are some young students such as Nicholyn (South Africa), second year Kalakshetra, and Katya (French Guyana), learning under Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, whose ancestors were from India. While they have a head-start, yet they have faced similar cultural awkwardness regarding squatting on the floor, eating with the hand and emoting. For them, learning dance and learning the culture are inseparable.

Then, they are two 22-year old friends from Hungary, Mariann Adasz and Eva, who have come for a 10-month stint with dancer Meenakshi Chitharanjan. Inspired by Hungarian dancer Panni Somi, they learnt Bharatanatyam for seven years before heading to India.

A new language, different teaching methods, high rentals and alien food are the roadblocks they face, as they speak about what Bharatanatyam means to them.

Most of them have been funded by ICCR or by the Indian Embassies abroad. While most feel that they may not be able to make a career out of the classical arts, they all agree that this will always be an important part of their lives. For now, they are enjoying “the big adventure!”

<http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/dance/drawn-by-a-passion-for-dance/article941497.ece>