

SHEELA UNNIKRISHNAN

A dedicated teacher and choreographer

Anu Bhaskararaman

Born on 13 April 1970, Sheela Unnikrishnan grew up in Chennai and was initiated into dancing at the age of 11. She learnt the art of Bharatanatyam from guru Railway Sundaram (senior disciple of mridangam maestro Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer) in the Melattur style. Sheela's parents dreamt of her becoming a medical practitioner. However, time played its role in absorbing Sheela into dance. Sheela along with her sisters, Shobha and Sharmila, had her arangetram on 7 February 1982 and continued to learn and perform Bharatanatyam along with her guru's troupe in and around Tamil Nadu. Sheela also learnt Carnatic vocal music and the Harmonium from guru Dakshinamoorthy.

Introduced to yoga by her father to develop her stamina and health, Sheela also shone in academics and was a role model to her younger siblings. By this time, a school topper in higher secondary, she had also passed the Bharatanatyam higher grade exams (conducted by Govt. of Tamil Nadu) in first class as well as Carnatic vocal in the lower grade.

After the demise of her Bharatanatyam guru, she took up teaching Bharatanatyam to her juniors in guru Sundaram's Villivakkam branch. Later, upon her mother's advice, she started Sridevi Nrithyalaya (SDN) in 1987.

Sheela joined Kuchipudi Art Academy in 1990 and came under the tutelage of Kuchipudi maestro Vempati Chinna Satyam and underwent intensive training for seven years. Sheela says that she imbibed the talent of bringing out anga-suddham while training her students in Bharatanatyam from guru Sundaram and the nuances of aesthetic choreography from her Kuchipudi guru Vempati. Today, her students are making a mark in national and international



Sheela with her sisters at salangai pooja



With their Bharatanatyam teacher Sundaram at their arangetram



forums, and four of them have been honoured with the prestigious 'Balshree' award. A talented choreographer, Sheela has received critical acclaim for her group thematic presentations and dance drama productions by critics and connoisseurs alike.

In 1992, Sheela took up a job as a dance teacher in Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan (PSBB), K. K. Nagar, to support her family yet remained focused in running Sri Devi Nrithyalaya with the same determination and motivation. She worked in PSBB for 22 years and resigned her position a few years ago.

With 18 dance dramas to her repertoire, Sheela had the privilege of presenting her first dance drama, *Bala Ramayanam*, at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in 2005. Winner of several prestigious awards and accolades, she was awarded the Acharya Kala Bharathi in 2015 by Bharat Kalachar and Natya Kala Mani in 2017 by Kartik Fine arts, amongst several others.

Sheela is married to Unnikrishnan and they have a son, Srijith. ■

Presenting *Bala Ramayanam* to Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam at Rashtrapati Bhavan



Receiving the Acharya Kala Vipanchee from Natarajan as Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna and Kamala look on With her mentor Dr. S. Raghuraman



Interview

You have learned Kuchipudi as well as Bharatanatyam. Has learning an additional style influenced your Bharatanatyam choreographies? If yes, how?

I have been told numerous times that knowing Kuchipudi influences Bharatanatyam choreographies. This may be true for many reasons. Our Melattur bani incorporates prominent dramatic elements and fluid movements that could resemble the aesthetics of a Kuchipudi presentation. Also, since mahaguru Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer was a mridanga vidwan, the rhythmic rhetoric takes a high pedestal in our compositions, which sometimes resembles the rhythmic musicality of Kuchipudi. My guru Vempati Chinna Satyam used to mention how he was moved by Rukmini Devi Arundale's neat, geometrical Bharatanatyam, with a clean araimandi, all of which he absorbed and implemented in his style of Kuchipudi to make it aesthetically more pleasing. Taking my Master as a pioneer, I have adopted a semblance of some of its postures and movements wherever necessary.



Shobha and Sheela in Kuchipudi

I also feel that all our classical dance forms are interconnected yet interestingly independent. When we take the different banis of Bharatanatyam, we find certain beautiful aspects that might resemble the aesthetics of other classical dance forms. When we adapt and imbibe with a sense of aesthetic discernment, the audience and the dancers enjoy another dimension of this inherently beautiful art form.

You started teaching at 18. How would you say your teaching style has evolved over the years? What was your experience teaching from such a young age?

Yes, I started teaching at 18, unaware of its depth and not equipped enough to be a teacher. My Bharatanatyam guru



Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer

Vempati Chinna Satyam

**Sheela Unnikrishnan
in conversation with
Anu Bhaskararaman**

used to come to my house in Villivakkam to teach me, my sisters, and a few more students. In 1987, when he stopped coming (due to personal reasons), we were left without a teacher, especially since North Chennai hardly had any dance teachers. Students came to our house every week only to be disappointed that classes did not happen. I was the eldest of the lot and the only one to have completed the higher-grade Bharatanatyam exams. My mother Suguna, without knowing much about the intricacies, but sympathising with the students, suggested that I conduct classes for them and help them keep in touch with their practice. That's how it all began. I had dreamt of becoming a medical practitioner and turned out to be a teacher. As the number of students gradually grew, we decided to name our school 'Sridevi Nrithyalaya' (SDN) to give it an identity of its own.

Today, I wouldn't encourage my students to begin teaching with half-baked knowledge. Looking back, I wonder how I had the courage to embark on this expedition with whatever little I knew! Time has brought me to where I am now, and I feel like it was my destiny, and it happened without much thought or planning.

It has been 32-plus years of teaching, and as a teacher, I constantly keep myself open to learning from experiments, experiences and, mainly, my students.



displays our classroom sessions and candid discussions on various aspects of dance. This series was well received, and the channel has grown with over 3 lakh subscribers. All these are not commercial endeavours.

Also, owing to my deep-rooted love for Tamil, we started the *Musical Margazhi* project, compiling all the verses of *Tiruppavai*, *Tiruvembavai* and a tutorial series *Praarambham*, amongst others.

As someone who doesn't like to compromise on quality, I am particular about several aspects of the video. I am blessed to have well-wishers like Kuldeep M Pai, my sister Shobha, my son, Sriji, Harinie Jeevitha and all others in my student-cum-staff team, whose suggestions I always consider before uploading a video. Success, if any, can be attributed to the team's effort and supreme grace.

How has your immense popularity on social media impacted your class/your dance productions?

I don't know if I would say I'm 'immensely popular'! Besides being a small source of motivation for the students, social media doesn't play any role in our class or among students. It doesn't impact how I approach the art, teach, or



As a classical dance group with over one million YouTube viewers, how did you capture the attention of a wider audience on social media? Did you set out with that aim?

I did not start our channel with any specific aim. I was interested in showcasing glimpses of my students' performances. In a way, I wanted it to be a documentation of their progress. As someone who likes exploring technology, I choose the content of the videos and edit them. I never outsource the editing process because it might not come out the way I want it to.

Initially, I posted excerpts of my students' solo performances and SDN's group productions. After people watched our videos, there were persistent enquiries regarding my teaching methodologies. In April 2017, I thought of using YouTube as a medium and started the *Tapasya* series, which



choreograph. Maybe because of its reach to a considerably large group of people, sometimes, we get the privilege of seeing a full house in auditoriums, which has become a rarity these days. But even that, I feel, cannot be attributed entirely to being popular on social media.

How do you help young dancers connect with the themes of classical pieces (and with the art form in general)? How do the pieces translate to a modern setting?

Besides the theme of sringara where the nayika pines for the hero, in today's day and age, sometimes it's quite a challenge to make the students understand what bhakti is too! We go through a preparatory process to make the students appreciate the culture, decorum, values and ideologies of the past and connect them to the dance pieces. With my students, we sit and converse with experienced artists and well-wishers, take them on road trips, visit temples, listen to music, and watch old movies together. All these, in a way, make the students reflect on the thought processes and themes. And these days, children and youngsters read books, appreciate literature in many forms, channelise their creativity in several ways and question us boldly, which will also make them think rationally and appreciate the ideologies of the past. With age and experience, they will expand their understanding and make the pieces their own by placing themselves in that context and building the theme thread using their creative interpretations.

What are your thoughts on taking up art as a full-time career, the avenues available and sustainability given the sheer number of dancers that exist?

While we can decide to learn an art, taking it up as a full-time career is often an unforced organic process that may or may not happen eventually. However, if one entertains that aspiration, one should do one's practice continuously.

What a person wants to achieve by being an artist varies by the individual. Whatever one seeks from art is possible through tremendous hard work and, most importantly, patience. They have to be prepared to endure several tests in the process and hold on to the art.



...Parvathi Parinayam

How many hours of practice would you recommend for young dancers? What is the regular training regimen for your students at your institution? What are certain elements that are the focal points of your training?

I wouldn't specify a number for practice as not everyone has the same energy and tenacity. Each individual should decide based on their strengths and weaknesses. However, going a little beyond their maximum ability each time can work wonders.

At SDN, we have about 12 batches of students, with one-hour classes twice a week. The students are strongly advised to practice every day from their first day. The teaching methodology at SDN is slow-paced, and even in a batch of 10-15 students, each student is given individual attention. We generally take about four to five years to complete adavus for a student, patiently waiting for them to bring in anga shuddhi, body control and stamina. We do not delve much into the theoretical aspects in the initial years and only focus on giving them the scope to taste the joy of dancing. As the students advance, they are gradually taught theory.

The most important lesson that I like to teach my students is self-analysis. When they can identify their flaws or



Invocatory piece on Ganesa



shortcomings and closely observe their peers' dancing from an analytical point of view, progress becomes easier.

What are your inspirations for your productions? What is the role of your students in choreographies/group productions?

All our dance drama productions are inspired by guru Vempati Chinna Satyam. The simple approach, cohesive screenplay, and appealing and realistic appearance of the characters of his dance ballets have always mesmerised me. My sister Shobha and I loved attending his Kuchipudi classes. On many occasions, we attended classes from 9 am to 1 pm and again from 4 pm to 7.30 pm. He taught us all for



free. He is the one who taught me that art is for the rasikas, and even a layperson should be able to enjoy it. I strive to the best of my ability to follow him while choreographing dance dramas.

I gave only three Kuchipudi performances under Master, all of which I treasure. But the lessons I learnt in the process are many. I am still in awe of the attention and amount of practice he gave, even if it was a small role I had to perform. Master always insisted on regularity and punctuality, which are ideal factors that make a group production successful. All students must assemble on time and be present for rehearsals, which demands utmost commitment and cooperation from the parents. Taking my Master as my idol, I always ensure that I keep the class ready before the arrival of students, even if it is as early as 5 am so that we can begin rehearsals on time.

The role of students in a dance drama or group production is immense. I am blessed to have students who follow my ideas and thinking, understand my expectations, and studiously learn and execute my choreographies. Students like Harinie Jeevitha, Bhairavi Venkatesan, Mridula Sivakumar rightly grasp my train of thought and make my choreographic process easier and enjoyable. A crucial aspect of choreography is that, while I am choreographing, the student who stands in front of me has to be a blank page on which I can write; if they are already filled with preconceived ideas, then it becomes a hitch! Choreographing is a mutually motivating process – the choreographer's ideas motivate the dancer; how the dancer understands and presents it motivates the choreographer.

What motivates you as an experienced, senior dancer who has achieved as much as you have?

Stepping into Sridevi Nrithyalaya and seeing my enthusiastic, students who work hard and try to gain my appreciation and approval, irrespective of their age, instantly motivates me. I am blessed to have my passion as a profession, which is a huge motivation.

Observing the path that Sridevi Nrithyalaya has travelled since its inception motivates me. People have come, and people have left. But the institution has proven to be beyond all of us. I do not fix goals for myself because the path motivates me more than the goal. *Natyam, moksha, sadanam* is our mantra, and I wish to walk the path of that sadana until my last breath.

If you had to pick only one, what is a memory from your career that you cherish?

I always cherish my decision to resign from the dance teacher position at Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan School. Even though my family persuaded me not to do so, keeping financial concerns in mind, I felt it important to devote my time entirely to SDN. That brave step that I took that day, I feel, was the turning point in my career.

(The author is a dancer and freelance writer)

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