



SEEKING THE DANCER WITHIN



Odissi dancer Jyoti Rout believes that dance is so much more than just a set of movements. Through her years of performing and teaching, she has delved into the true meaning of the self through dance.

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"After all, what is dance? It is about counting time, drawing in space and projecting from your mind," said Jyoti Rout, explaining why collaborating with different dance forms isn't as difficult as a lay person would think.

Jyoti, a renowned Odissi dancer and teacher, was recently in the City to hold a series of workshops on classical dance. The highlight of her visit was her jugalbandi performance with well-known Kathak dancer Mangala Bhatt on Saturday evening at Our



Sacred Space, Secunderabad. A shared cultural background might make collaborations between different Indian classical dance forms easier, but Jyoti has, over the years, performed with ballet, jazz and flamenco dancers as well. She smiles when asked about how the fusion works. "Physically, the forms are different. At a little more subtle level, the core, they are absolutely the same. My work with diverse art forms has taught me that," she says.

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Getting to the core of what dance is forms the basis of Jyoti's approach to Odissi. "My aim is to find who the dancer is, inside. Dance is like becoming one with yourself, understanding who you are. Sometimes, when I teach my students, they ask me: 'Should I keep my hand like this? Should I express more happiness?' I tell them that they are still worried about the technical side, but the essence is missing."

Explaining how to get to the essence of the dance, she says, "You first have to give 100 per cent to every movement — 100 per cent of life, 100 per cent of you. Only then can you go beyond the step."

Jyoti certainly knows a

thing or two about training dancers. In 1993, she set up Jyoti Kala Mandir in California. The close-knit Indian community there has come to appreciate how her teaching goes beyond just giving their children a grounding in dance. "The people see how my students approach life — how they approach relationships, how they take on responsibilities. There is a struggle between Indian values and American values. I believe that my work is not just a job, it is a responsibility," she says.

That her students occupy a very special place in her heart is obvious. She speaks of a student who followed her for six years back and forth from India to the US. "This student was around 45-years-old when she saw me perform. She later told me that after the performance, she went to the bathroom and cried for three hours straight. She told her friends that she had to meet me and learn from me." For six years, the student faithfully followed her guru. "There was nothing else in her life. She put in a lot of effort. There was no limit. She used to have a lot of difficulty

remembering the steps because her mind was not focused. So I decided to create a new dance style for her, so that her love for the dance, her passion, would show," Jyoti says. Now, a proud Jyoti adds, the student learns complex dance pieces and makes them look effortless!

Most teachers will tell you the earlier you start learning a dance form, the better. Jyoti agrees, but she is quite pragmatic about it. "It all depends on the student and the teacher. If you start early, the digging is done, the seeding is done. But a 13-year-old does not know heartbreak. They will not know the pain of someone walking out on them. Every dancer will understand and learn according to their situation," she says.

She ends by praising her students. "There is no competition in my school. The students hold each others' hands, they help each other through problems. The thing is that there is no reason for one person to fail and one to succeed. That leads to an unbalanced performance. I want everyone to shine, equally."



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