

Bharatnatyam Exponent On Why West Aches For Indian Classical Art Forms

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On her brief visit to Mumbai, US-based Bharatanatyam expert Bala Devi Chandrashekar talks about her recent performance at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, and why the West aches for Indian classical art forms



Bala Devi Chandrashekar trains student Sanya Iyer

On June 28, as Bala Devi Chandrashekar recreated a slice of history dating back to over 1,000 years on stage, the setting couldn't have been more ideal. Before her was a packed auditorium of art aficionados and diplomats, and behind her, a mammoth projection of Thanjavur's Brihadisvara Temple — the Bharatanatyam exponent, scholar and teacher was at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, where she presented her 90-minute long production, Brihadeeswara: Form to Formless, through the Eyes of a Devaradiyaal."

The choreography was an encapsulation of her research-based approach to the classical dance form, which she combines with literature (the bol or words for the performance dip into the ancient Sangam literature), art history (the devaradiyaal, or the young girl given as a gift to the temple, is shown mesmerised by its exquisite architecture and fresco paintings), music (the production is set to the music composed by Rajkumar Bharath) and theatre (the show is scripted by PR Venkatasubramanian).

"One can't imagine what the UNESCO platform is like! [Despite the language and cultural difference] local Europeans could connect with the performance instantly. When your subject has depth and value, you don't have to do any gimmickry. I had no intention of diluting the performance; I presented it in its purest form," says Chandrashekar, when we meet her at the Chembur residence of her 16-year-old disciple, Sanya Iyer, for whose arangetram ceremony she is in Mumbai.



Ahead of the arangetram ceremony in Chembur. Pic/Suresh Karkera

Iyer, who has been under the mentorship of the artiste since she was four, is one of her students at the SPNAPA Academy of Performing Arts in New Jersey, of which Chandrashekar is the artistic director. "The West is aching for something that is intellectually intriguing, spiritually enlightening, musically beautiful, and visually a treat. I call [our classical art forms] India's soft, strong power, and I want to be an ambassador for that — to take universal messages from our scriptures that are more needed in the world today than ever before," she says.

Having performed and spoken about Bharatanatyam in over 30 countries, Chandrashekar, who divides her time between the US and India, feels that the future of the art form is safe, provided the young generation gets the right guidance. "We live in a diverse world where you need an anchor to who you are. And what better way to carve your identity than with the music and dance of your culture?" she asks.

After the kind of response she received at the UNESCO headquarters, Chandrashekar tells us that she hopes to take the production to some of the best museums of the world, "where they really care for preservation". "At the end of my performance in Paris, a lady came up to me and asked, 'Did you do a prayer here?' and I said, 'Yes, Indian classical dance itself is a prayer; it's a prayer through dance'."