

19 And Dance We Did...



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“It is not bad to go wrong”, the eight year old said to me. I thought to myself - she is right. I need to find a way for her to get beyond the mistake!

We then got into the reason that may have caused all the repeated problems in dancing the particular adavu. “Is it just that you are unable to understand it or is it that you haven’t tried it enough times?” I asked. The body has to learn to adapt to the demands of each movement. In the subsequent conversation the little girl and I agreed that it was a bit of both. In a classroom for dance, understanding - or the lack of it - becomes evident immediately to both the teacher and the student.

I dance and teach Bharatanatyam. The dance form has a well defined vocabulary of movement and it is important to learn the basic structures of the dance in such a manner that at a later stage, one is able to roam freely within the technique to express and communicate. Dancing for me is a journey to create a world beyond the spoken word, perceive aspects of life that are (most of the time) enchanting, at others - even painful, but always interesting and exciting. There are stories I want to tell, feelings I want to communicate and experiences I wish to share.

Teaching dance necessitates developing a skill which is evolving constantly. Dance presents new challenges to the teacher because the same movement manifests differently in each dancer. The initial challenge for the teacher and student of classical dance lies in disciplining the body to work in a certain prescribed manner. As in many other classrooms, dance learning initially happens by imitation. A child imitates the movements of the teacher and over a

period of time, the movements of the Dance begin to feel like her own. This is similar to how one learns to speak in particular language. Slowly, the familiarity and ease with the movement increases and the expression becomes more and more communicative. The student now begins to relate more meaningfully with the movement, the dancing space, and the content in the dance.

I find that children connect with abstraction within the movement patterns of Bharatanatyam. They are comfortable to play with these patterns without getting into specific meaning or stories. Even repetition, which is tedious, can be turned into an exciting experience with the introduction of a bit of variation in terms of rhythms, or just by making the child stand in a place different from where he or she stood earlier. Another exercise which I find extremely useful is breaking a movement into smaller units between children in a group. In the traditional teaching of Bharatanatyam, the basic movements have been taught in stages as well. The footwork is learnt first, followed by movements of the body and finally, the hand gestures complete the movement.

Along with the physical practice of a movement, I find that most children’s perception of an “adavu” - or a basic sequence of Bharatanatyam movement - improves if they are able to visualise it. We call this exercise “do it in the mind”. After trying a new movement, the child is asked to close her eyes and try to see the particular sequence danced perfectly in her mind’s eye. Later, when they open their eyes and try it again, I have more often than not been stunned – initially, the dance seems to get free of the glaring



mistakes and later, the perfection that each child saw in her mind's eye begins to appear visibly. The visual memory complements the practice.

Exploring within one's ability to speak with the body can be an exciting and enriching experience. A dance studio is a space where the process of learning has an immediacy which can be rewarding for both the teacher and the student. By their very nature, dance and all performing arts exist in the very moment they are practised in. Therefore, seeking excellence is a constant and unending process. The child learns that the moment of excellence is found - and it can also be lost - almost immediately!

The world around us is constantly oscillating between movement and moments of stillness. Most children are naturally interested in this gamut of movement in people and the world around. In the classroom, a young child can be taught to internalise these movement patterns through dance. The skill to harness this is honed through—observation, imitation, repetition and finally, nuanced practice to turn it into an artistic expression. Beyond the actual learning of dance movements (which are highly codified and standardised in the basic training of classical Indian dance forms), I like to encourage the child to become observant of small nuances in moving things while trying to copy the teacher's dance movements. One can, for example, get a child to watch with care how leaves of varied shapes and sizes move in the breeze.

It can also be extremely exciting - and later fruitful - if the young student learns to analyse the natural logic (or the lack of it) within a certain adavu. In this process, imitation is the first step, followed by a spontaneous analysis and shortly the movement becomes natural for this young dancer. In a dance class, there is training both at the mind level and body level – as both of them have their own “intelligence” and need to be trained to act in unison. This process helps at a fundamental level, to understand the underlying method for learning.

I like to call this “body intelligence”. Very often, one may find that even though the mental understanding of something is complete, yet, actually executing it is far more difficult. The body may resist a particular movement or the mind may just interfere! A similar situation may arise in learning /teaching, a meaning-based dancing (commonly known as expressive dance or “Abhinaya”). Here, the student would have to create characters and their emotions with the help of appropriate facial expressions and hand gestures. Almost everyone expresses emotions through facial expressions yet when one is asked to ‘act’ an expression it seems so much harder, without any stimuli to evoke the feeling. The observant child can be helped to create an imaginary space or person or even a conversation with which she can relate, so that she is able to bring a certain personal quality into a piece of dance.

The immediacy mentioned earlier also infuses an enhanced level of focus and attentiveness for most children learning dance—where repetition does not remain a mechanical exercise but one that leads to what one of my students in all seriousness called “good dance”. Repeated practice or Abhyaasa or Riyaz as an ideal path to excellence has been the guiding principle in the traditional teaching of Indian art forms. Children can, and often do enjoy repetition and practice even more, if one is able to lace it with humour and constant parallels from their world outside the dance floor. At a later stage (surprisingly soon) most children are able to transfer the fundamental concept within this learning methodology to other areas of learning.

Dance does help to build a certain level of awareness and sensitivity. One is constantly surprised at how easily children respond to subtle levels of awareness, be it of physical or emotional. Teaching dance to children is often as energising as dancing oneself.

While working with some young children with special needs—I spent months singing a nursery rhyme



with simple movements. One little autistic girl paid no attention to me for months. I just sang and danced with the other children in the group. One day, as I walked into the room for our usual class, this child walked up to me wordlessly, didn't meet my eyes, picked up my hands and placed them on my waist - just as I had done all these months, then, bent her

head and started swaying. All I could do was to join her and continue the song and dance. Ironically, the song in Tamil was "Aadu Paapaa Aadu, Azhagu Paapa Aadu,--Dance, beautiful baby, dance!"

And Dance we did!



Trained in Bharatanatyam from a very early age by her parents, Prof. C V Chandrasekhar and Smt. Jaya Chandrasekhar, Chitra has travelled long in her pursuit of expression and excellence. Her dance gives expression to her aesthetic sensibility as an artist of our times and her complete identification with the dance form. Chitra holds a Master's degree in Dance and Sanskrit. Her involvement with other creative modes of expression like music and literature give her dance and choreography a wider perspective. Chitra's precision in technique and sensitivity in presentation have been her strengths, much appreciated by her audiences. Her choreographic works apart from the traditional repertoire of Bharatanatyam include Geetagoinda, Samvada — Hathor and I, Utsava, Vismaya Kuncha, Vagartha, Ratiranga and Kunti. Based in Bangalore, Chitra continues to perform, teach and choreograph. She can be contacted at chitracdasarathy@yahoo.com