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I am fortunate to associate with Kalakshetra and Rukmini Devi Arundale
 - Padmasri Adyar K. Lakshman



Recently the famous Bharatanatyam Guru, Kalaimamani recipient, Sangeeta Natak Academy award winner, Padmasri Adyar K. Lakshman has visited Denver for 3 weeks. He has provided his vocal support for the dance performance of his disciple Mrs. Puja Allepalli's Bharatanatyam Margam. It was a fabulous program that went on for about 2 hours. Mr. Lakshman has worked for the famous Kalakshetra in Chennai, and has been teaching this classical dance form to many people across the globe for over 40 years. DesiShades has an opportunity to interview this great artist during this visit. Here are the excerpts from the interview.

DesiShades: Namaste Lakshman Sir, We are so fortunate to have you, a multi-faceted artist to visit Denver. The recent performance by your disciple Puja was really fabulous with the greatest support from you. We look forward to see such programs from you in future. Will you be coming to Denver again?

Lakshman ji: Yes I should be coming again. I have been coming for so many years to US, and planning to visit Denver. Last year we planned to do this kind of program, but we could not do. This year everything worked out well, and we were able to do it. I am happy is that, a good student of mine is here and propagating this art.

DesiShades: Please briefly tell us about yourself, like how did you develop your interest in Bharatanatyam?

Lakshman ji: I developed the interest later only. My father was a school teacher, so he wanted us to become well-known musicians. In our young age, he used to arrange a tuition master for music. That was his dream. My father had a friend who used to work as manager at Kalakshetra. Rukmini Devi had asked him to find young boys, and he visited our town for this purpose. We were living in Vandavasi, a historical place which is about 75 miles from Madras. He convinced my father to send me, my elder brother K Ramarao to join Kalakshetra. I had another friend living in the same town, who has Lakshygyana. Lakshygyana is the talent to reproduce the thing we see/hear at once. Lakshnagyanam is more methodical or theoretical way. Three of us were admitted in Kalakshetra in 1944. I had never seen Madras till then. Kalakshetra was in Adyar near Theosophical Society. We had greatest opportunity to meet stalwarts in Kalakshetra. We were too small to know their greatness then. We had the best opportunity to go to all the teachers, and learn from them. There were Kalakshetra, Besant Theosophical high school and Arundale Training School, all run by Rukmini Devi, who was the chief of all these organizations. We thought we will have music classes, but Rukmini Devi convinced us to take dance classes. I was never exposed to dancing, that too classical

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dance. I replied to her that, the dance is for just for women, without much knowledge. She told that is not true, but this is just another kind of physical exercise and insisted me to learn that. Then I said I would do it, if it would be a better exercise than Baski's and Danda's. Even today, I remember these were the exact words, I told to Rukmini Devi. Then I started, continued and progressed with music, dance, mridangam and nattuvangam same time. Rukmini Devi's idea was to train the youngsters, so when they come up, they will be useful for Kalakshetra. It somehow worked out. I used to contribute to Kalakshetra in their programs. Unknowingly I developed interest in Bharatanatyam, learned and worked there for 15years. After 15years of service, I left Kalakshetra for little extra earning, joined another institution, where I worked for 10years. Then I started my own institution with the name Bharata Choodamani. I am now running this school, without expecting any state or central government aid.

DesiShades: There are different styles of this dance form, for example Tanjore Style, Vazhavor Style etc. Can you tell the difference between these styles?

Lakshman ji: For a long time, there used to be 5 styles of Bharatanatyam – Tanjavur, Vazhvoor, Pandanallur, Kancheepuram and Kattumannarkoil styles. There are stalwarts from these schools, and they instructed their students their own way. I don't know the exact difference between these styles. Rukmini Devi wanted to have the best among these five styles, and she was told PandaNallore to be the one. She invited Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai to come to Kalakshetra, stay there and teach. He was old, but was a great teacher. Rukmini Devi already has something in her mind, so she was able to judge which is best and which is not. She refined the Pandanallur style, with the consent of Mr.Pillai to get the best movements, and we call it as Kalakshetra style. Many people learnt Pandanallur style, but nobody tried to correct it, but Rukmini Devi did the best job to refine the style, and made it popular and got appreciations from the teacher (Sundaram Pillai) himself. There used to be criticism, but the teacher did not mind the refinement, and Rukmini Devi never minded the criticism. Later the other styles indirectly adopted the Kalakshetra style. When I joined Kalakshetra, I directly jumped into it.

DesiShades: Can you share some fond memories of Madam Rukmini Devi?

Lakshman ji: Sure, when I attained a standard, she wanted me to teach the youngsters. I was the youngest teacher in dance. She used to call me with my full name "Lakshmana". She liked to call everyone with full name, never likes to cut short the names. She called me in a morning, said "Lakshmana, you know, you are a pupil teacher". She gave me a designation. I think it has more sense to call me pupil teacher, as I was teaching and also learning. I think the selection of pupil teacher suits everyone; even today I think I am a pupil teacher. When you teach, you learn something, so you are a pupil, and where the student learns, you are a teacher. Then she was so curious to see me teaching, not just alone, but she brought half a dozen visitors along with her. I was about 22yrs of age then. She was so humble to ask if she can come and watch me taking the class. I started my first day class, and she was observing the class. At the end of the class, I heard here telling her friends, "Look at this young boy, he is a born teacher!!" These words are enough for me, from a great person, framed in my mind. I didn't need any certificate, but the affection from her. I admire her of certain great qualities. I have all the fresh memories of her.

DesiShades: Students from Kalakshetra are so successful in profession and life. What is the specific teaching pattern or syllabus in Kalakshetra, which makes them so successful?

Lakshman ji: Kalakshetra has a strict syllabus. They never expedite the lessons for anybody. Everyone has to go through the same pattern in the regular way. After four year, they students will go to post-graduation level for 2 yrs. There are many great teachers in Kalakshetra, everyone has their own way. Everyone has their own way of composing the items. I have my own way of teaching and composing. People, who see my compositions, feel they are very tough, and challenging. The corrections are never ending, the more-and-more you do, and the more scope for beautifying. You can raise the standards of the students by correcting them. This is Kalakshetra style. The compositions are very tough.

Puja: Lakshman Sir is a sharp observer; nothing can escape from his eyes. He notices every intricate detail. His compositions are extremely tough. We know how we struggle to practice the composition.

DesiShades: You have multi-faceted talents, in Nattuvangam, Bharatanatyam, Mridangam and Vocal etc. How do you balance between different things?

Lakshman ji: I have worked hard in everything. I have practiced all different things. It was easier for me to compose and teach, but for the students, it is often hard. My students say 'Lakshman Sir, please don't make the composition complex'; and but whatever simple I try to make it, it turns out to be complicated. My students like my compositions. I have a student from Malaysia who also know other contemporary dance forms well, who learnt an item from me. He happened to see the same item from another composer. He expressed that there is no comparison between these two compositions, and this one is really impressive. I try to keep each of my compositions to be different from others. In learning and rendition you can see this difference. I let the senior and experienced students to improve the compositions on their own. Bring in your own ideas, have an idea, form an idea and put that in practice, and then dance. You will be appreciated by the audience. Dance has a way of improvement; there is no limit to the creativity.

DesiShades: How did Bharatanatyam help you for your career? How long should one practice before they

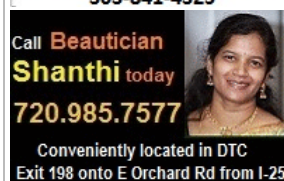
Lakshman ji: Whatever I taught from Kalakshetra me helped me. One should put the mind into the art. Dance with concentration is very necessary. If the mind is somewhere, they can not get the right movements or bhavas. The students should practice so many times. Learning, Practicing, Performing are different aspects of the dance. One should practice till they dance perfectly. There is no certain number of practices. Few years ago, I was asked to teach for a troupe for 6days. I was teaching 5 days, and on 6th day I asked everyone to perform solo. Everyone performed, and among 15, only one performed perfectly. I got the greatest satisfaction to see this one perfect performance from my students.

DesiShades: Can you share the experiences with some of your colleagues and other associates?

Lakshman ji: This is a difficult question. One of my colleagues in Bombay has seen all compositions by Kalakshetra. She said that my compositions are a model to others to compose an item. These are the feedback I got from some of my colleagues.

DesiShades: You have received the greatest honor Padma Shri from the Central Government. How did you feel after receiving this award?

Lakshman ji: I don't feel anything special, because I receive these awards. I am the same before and after receiving the awards. My teachings are spread all over, and government has recognized it. It is good.





DesiShades: What is your memorable performance?

Lakshman ji: I danced along with Rukmini Devi in a classical ballet, Kuravanji Kumarasambhavam. Dancing with her is a real good experience. I was nervous, how she feels when I do something. She was doing Parvathi role, and I was doing Vatu, a young Brahmin role. When I was going nearer to her, she was telling why you are so near to me, and other time, she says, why are you so farther from me. The adjustment on the stage is so spontaneous, and I learned a lot from her which was so enjoyable for me.

DesiShades: Madam Rukmini Devi has started Kalakshetra with great ideology. Do you think they are being fulfilled today?

Lakshman ji: I am very fortunate and honored to be in Kalakshetra. She provided so many great artists to perform with. Being in Kalakshetra and Studying under great teacher is a great achievement.

DesiShades: What does it take one to be a good dancer?

Lakshman ji: One should be a very good student, and understand the teacher. The students should accept take corrections from teacher, without any hesitation. Students have no right to criticize the teacher, only the teacher has the right to correct the student. Dancers should know how to recite the wordings, singing, at least some extent of nattuvangam and moreover practically to render without any mistakes. Practice makes the perfection.

DesiShades: What do you think about the current trends of dance today?

Lakshman ji: It has changed a lot, we can not compare the current trends with past. The students are more demanding from the teacher. I think the students should have humility to learn from the great masters. The students should know the teacher's greatness, and be humble to get the teachings from the teacher.

DesiShades: You have a greatest treasure with you now. How do you plan to Preserve it and get it to the next generations?

Lakshman ji: The art will be preserved by teaching them. The art will die with the teacher, if he/she will not teach it to others. Whatever given to students is alive even after the teacher and the students' life.

DesiShades: Thanks Lakshman Sir, Thanks for spending so much time for us. We will meet you next time you will be in town.

Lakshman ji: Thanks for a short interview. I know it is never ending discussion to talk about these different things.

Puja: Lakshman Sir is very humble, and never accepts his greatness. He is highly experienced, strict teacher, at the same time he demands perfection in nritta and abhinaya from the student. I still struggle with most of the items that I have learnt from him to present those perfectly. I never feel like I performed to his greatest satisfaction. When I took up Kalakshetra style, he started me from the basics, drilled me to a great extent. He teaches with a lot of affection and intensity. He is the greatest guru for me.

DesiShades: Thanks so much for the great interview. We would like to see many such wonderful performances from you.