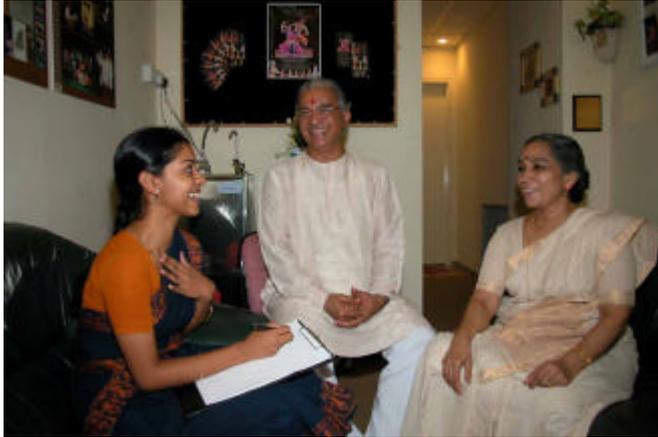


Lavanya Raghuraman's (Lavi) interview with the Gurus, Padmabhushan awardees, Sri V.P. Dhananjayans (VPD) and Smt Shanta Dhananjayan (Shanta)

Lavi: Namaskaram, Anna & Akka.



Q 1: Lavi: What are your tips for effective practice for students in a foreign environment like Singapore as against the Indian conditions?

Ans: VPD: As far as our classical dance and music is concerned there is no shortcut for practice, whether in India or else where, the more you practise the better one progresses. The best tips I can give/recommend are

- (1) spend at least one hour a day practicing the fundamentals
- (2) go slow on learning items until one reach a stage where he or she can interpret the same item differently with thorough knowledge of music, lyrics and intricacies of rhythm
- (3) Watch good dancing even if one does not practise.
- (4) If one cannot get time to go to a teacher every day, at least practise mentally the adavus or items spending a few minutes of solitude thinking of your dance or music lessons.
- (5) Classical dance students must expose themselves to classical music as much as they can and this will give them good impetus to dance as well. This can be realized only by experience. Those dancers who have musical knowledge seem to be better dancers always.
- (6) Read a lot about dance and dancers.

Q 2. Lavi: What are the prospects and impediments of a youngster of today aspiring to choose dance as a career?

Ans: VPD: Like in all careers the prospects depend upon one's caliber as a dancer. But people should realize (self realization) that dance being a visual art, there are certain criterion and qualities to a dancer - impressive good looks, good body line plus all the other ingredients such as Tala, Laya, Expression, etc.,. The one who does not posses these should take to other rolls instead of performing. Person without an impressive demure can excel in teaching and make a good career. Certainly there is a good prospect for a disciplined, devoted and dedicated dancer. Absolutely prosperous career.

Impediment in the way is the dubious nature of one's approach and attitude. Secondly, one has to wait to mature in the art, people expect very quick result, so when they do not get quick acclaim and quick money they get frustrated. Another impediment in the way is lack of knowledgeable patrons or promoters of classical art. The society has lately developed a wrong notion that dancers don't need money to survive, so they are very reluctant to remunerate the professional dancers. We have to wipe out this terribly wrong attitude of the patrons and promoters.

Q.3 Lavi: What about a dual-career?

Ans: Shanta: We cannot agree to this. Dance and music need full attention and by dividing attention between two, one cannot do full justice to either. We have seen people who started dual career and finally settling in one. Mostly successful artists chose only art as their career and forget their other career totally. But I can advise to have supportive part-time career until such time one establishes as a full time successful artist.

Q.4.Lavi: Anna, The audience turn out in foreign countries (Singapore) for dance is larger than at home (Chennai). What could be the reason for that?

Ans: VPD: At home, dance events are rampant and people have to choose where to go. Also audience can see a dance performance if not today, tomorrow. Because of this attitude at home connoisseurs choose their favourite. So, sometimes even stalwarts face empty halls.



But in foreign countries, the immigrant audience anxiously waits to have their cultural connection reinforced. Once they are out of the motherland, they seem to develop more affinity towards culture and art. Moreover for the immigrants, the occasion also becomes a social gathering to exchange notes. The immigrant parents also feel that their children can be exposed to mother culture only through these events. Therefore, these events become a purposeful outing for them. Though initially their motive is aforesaid, over a period of time they become excellent connoisseurs, much better than people at home ground.

Q5.Lavi: In Bharatanaatyam, how relevant is the Margam format of presentation, for today's proscenium theatre & audience and for tomorrow as well?

Ans: VPD: The margam format is only probably 200 years old. There has been changes according to time. It becomes relevant for the performer with reference to his time. If one could hold the audience with any kind of format, old, new or experimental, that becomes relevant for that period. If the Alarippu- Tillana format has survived for 200 years, that means it has passed the test of time. It is very judiciously designed format to cater to the interests of all kinds of audience. We have seen the changes taking place for the last fifty years, why, we ourselves have evolved different types of solo and duo presentation, which the discerning audience has accepted and we have survived over fifty years now. So, anything done with authenticity and aesthetically beautiful and communicative becomes relevant for any time, past, present or future. All depends upon the caliber of the performer.

To quote an example, people have been complaining about Varnam being too long in a Margam format of a general solo Bharatanatyam performance. Once, in late 1990s during December festival season we deliberately performed only a Varnam for the whole evening's programme (one & half hour), no one stirred out of his or her seat saying too long. At the end, audience not realizing the time, waited for the second half of Padams & tillana. When I reminded the audience that the time is up to go home, they expressed their disappointment of finishing a programme with just one Varnam. Here the audience did not feel the long Varnam; they still wanted the rest of the format to continue. So, by the caliber of performance if one can hold the audience, a Margam or any path of presentation can be relevant for any time.

Q.6. Lavi: Who is an ideal teacher. Can you prescribe ideals for a teacher?

Ans: VPD: An ideal teacher is one who could carve a dancer out of a rock. People who can bring out the hidden spark in a student and make it shine. This is the philosophy. Practically a teacher should be patient, caring for the student, and never be satisfied with the progress one could instill in a student. Never be prejudiced, encourage wherever it is necessary, but not praise a student in front, but should compliment on her/him to others in her/his absence. That means the student can get the compliment indirectly from others, not directly from the Guru. When teaching a good student, there should not be any monetary consideration and no reservation whatsoever. Should take the student totally into confidence, try to understand the problems, counsel them, if any. A teacher should be able see the best in a student and mould him/her accordingly, so that her/his shortfalls are not exposed to others. Undiluted love and care should be given without any preconditions. A true teacher will never exploit the student in any way.

Of course, the student also should reciprocate and surrender totally to a teacher and give respect and love like one's own parents.

Shanta: I think the relationship is reciprocal, a Guru should not expect anything, except the pleasure of seeing the student perform well, settle in life well. I would go to the extent of saying that not even the common respect to the teacher, we should expect these days of changing life style. Be happy and satisfied with what you can do to a student, do not think what they can do for you. That is my philosophy. I think we have been always true to ourselves and so far no love-hate problems with our students.

Q 7. Lavi: What do you think of the students in Singapore and their involvement in learning in comparison with students at home (Chennai)

Ans: VPD: The involvement of students is becoming lesser and lesser in India also. Students have no time to practise the art subject since majority of them are in pursuit of lucrative career (hypothetical consideration). No doubt on their genuine love for art, but they are or they are made to think, that art subjects cannot fill your belly. So it is being used as a medium to project one's personality and if one is affluent, they use it to come to limelight and public attention and recognition by publicity, etc. I think



students have their limitations here; the parents have no time to run around with their children and take them to classes as often as it should be. Yet I find some of you are really good or even better than students trained at home. I think you people concentrate more intensively, making use of the limited time-frame for learning. Whereas at home, they take it for granted that it is always available at their beck and call. So the learning process becomes slow. The eagerness to exposure is lacking at home whereas you are all very eager to learn, see us perform, listen to our lectures with rapt attention, because, this kind of opportunity is rare for you.

We have learned a lesson from our life's experience: be sincere to your chosen career as a dancer (artiste). If we try to project our art the best way, the art will project you. Do not use the art to project the self. The art is great; we are only the practitioners of art. So art comes first and artist is only a shadow of the art.

This is how we have always thought and practised. And we have no regret or any sort of frustration. We have been very satisfied and sense of fulfillment makes us happy to teach without any reservations whatsoever. Lavanya, you would have felt this when you were practising at our classes at alapana, Singapore or at Bharatakalanjali, Chennai or at Yoagville, Virginia, USA.

Lavi: Namaskaram, Anna, Akka.