

New notions in classical dance

August 17, 2017 @ 5:20pm



Umesh Shetty

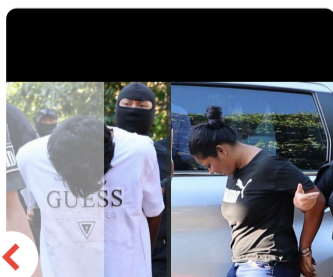
"IT'S by Malaysians and for Malaysians," says well-known dancer-choreographer Umesh Shetty.

Speaking on the Inner Space Dance Company, which is the professional performing arts wing of the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA), he adds: "There are currently five full-time dancers with the company, who are trained in three major Indian dance genres – kathak, bharathanatyam and odissi – as well as contemporary dance."

For him, it's an exciting prospect since not all dancers can claim to be trained in a variety of dance forms. The full-time company dancers are TFA-trained Dr Dhanya Thurairajah, Hemavathi Sivanesan and Shonabushani Velusamy, with Aswara-trained Ng Xinying, and Mohammad Khairi Mokhtar.

Clearly it's a muhibbah spread that's reflective of our country's diverse potential and people. The dance company went dormant as some of the various performers were busy with their initial projects and works.

FEATURED VIDEOS



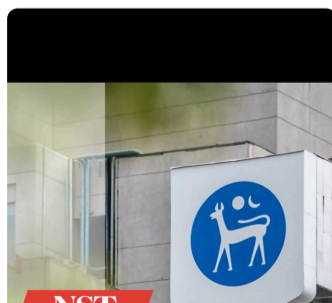
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a premiere show next month.

UNWAVERING PASSION

Umesh, 45, has been making waves with his inter-cultural and intra-cultural works for the past 20 years since returning from Australia after completing a performing arts degree. He himself is trained in bharathanatyam, odissi, kathakali and folk dance at the TFA, guided by both his father Gopal Shetty, a pioneer of Indian classical dance in the country, and TFA founder Swami Shantanand Saraswathi.

Umesh later trained in kathak with India's Pandita Rohini Bhatte, Pandit Briju Maharaj and Saswati Sen.

In Australia, he trained and performed in western contemporary and classical ballet. Currently a teacher and one of the TFA's directors, performing arts lovers may recall his choreography and performances in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Lady White Snake, The Legend Of Mahsuri, Swan Lake, Butterfly Lovers, Varsha and Inside Out, among many others.

POTPOURRI OF DANCE GENRES

As the artistic director of the Inner Space Dance Company, Umesh says the dancers will push the boundaries of traditional dance norms, in terms of creation and presentation, without losing sight of the inspiration that Indian culture holds.

"It's about creating new works while exploring well-loved themes and ideas in a totally original manner, breaking down perceptions and notions of what dance is. "We offer dance students the chance to pursue the arts as a career, with dance being the primary focus," he says.

With that, come August, dance lovers will get to see a quintet of dancers performing full repertoires in kathak, odissi, bharathanatyam and the contemporary dance form. "It's not a fusion of the genres but it'll feature the authenticity of each in totality," he explains at a recent chat at the TFA library room in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur.

"It's intense work, with four months of choreography followed by two months of rehearsals leading up to a show, every six months. That's the plan. "We hope to perform in Australia with a new commissioned work by the end of the year end," he adds with a generous smile.

INTENTION BEHIND MOVEMENTS

Dance for Umesh is more than the "how" of a movement but also the "what" behind it. He says: "The process of making a choice in a movement is from the intellect to the physical, as well as from the emotional to the spiritual."

For Umesh it is imperative to gain a solid foundation in the genres of dance first. "Then, it's about what moves you," he says.

"At the very heart or inner space, of every dancer, is that desire to use your deepest emotions and nothing else, as the only language of your expression," adds the Kuala Lumpur native as he runs his fingers through his luscious pepper-and-salt mane.

This, he explains, is inline with the upcoming show's theme and title: Inner Space Dance Conversations.

"It's conversations with the dance genres. Usually, the repertoire is concerned about the various sections, like in odissi it starts with mangalacharana, sthayee, pallavi, abhinaya, and then moksha. In the premiere show, there will be no stops between the sequences so it builds on an awareness of the movements, of an expansion of the vocabulary within the genre.

"That's what I am aiming for with all the genres," says Umesh of the upcoming performances. Those well versed in Indian dance art forms will realise the subtle transformations, although dance lovers in general will appreciate the various movements and interpretations.

MOVING TO INSPIRE AUDIENCES

The versatile choreographer hopes that the premiere of the dance company will help bring the classical Indian dances closer to a wider audience, as the bill crosses genre boundaries.

"While kathak and bharathanatyam dances have a night's performance to their genres, because of live music accompaniment, the odissi and contemporary repertoires will be performed in one night," he says.

Besides Umesh, other choreographers contributing to the works are Mavin Khoo, James Kan, Paramita Maitra, Ng and Mohammad Khairi.

Guest artistes include Nadina Krishnan, N. Shree Vidya and Rohini Shetty.

"It is ultimately a group of performers who want to work and create inspiring and moving works of art together from the innermost centres of their being, and hopefully it will also touch the inner space of the audience," says Umesh with a subtle glint in his eye. BY SUBHADRA DEVAN

Inner Space Dance Conversations

When: Bharathanatyam – Aug 19-20, 8pm.

Where: Shantanand Auditorium, TFA, 114-116, Jalan Berhala, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur

Call 03-2274 3709 for admission.

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