

The Embodiment of a Legend

by Jasmine Rios

Photography by

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precise harmony with carnatic music (classical music from South India).

To master the dance form is to live the music. The best known artist to master the artistry of Bharata Natyam is the legendary Guru T. Balasaraswati. She is considered the greatest classical Indian dancer of the 20th century and is recognized for bringing Bharata Natyam out of the temples and into the world audience. During the 1930's and 40's, Balasaraswati performed before some of the world's best known dancers including Anna Pavlova, Margot Fonteyn and Martha Graham, all of whom were great fans. After one of Balasaraswati's performances, Fonteyn was so moved, she had to go up and touch Balasaraswati on the arm. Fonteyn said to her, "I thought I was a dancer."

South India's Bharata Natyam is among the oldest of classical Indian dance forms. Ancient sculptures throughout South India depict the many complex poses used in the art. What differentiates this classical Indian dance form from others is its incorporation of drama, poetry and song. The dance movements all convey a meaning and are performed in

As a master dance teacher, Balasaraswati received the same admiration from her students. Those who studied the art under her tutelage received a wealth of knowledge. One former student of the late Balasaraswati, dancer/educator Kay Poursine of New Orleans, Louisiana, has been called one of the greatest living performers of Bharata Natyam. The Connecticut Press has said, "To watch Kay Poursine dance is to see the characters of Hindu mythology come alive. Poursine [is] one of the world's master interpreters

of the ancient Indian dance form of Bharata Natyam."

Poursine began studying classical ballet at the age of six and continued her ballet training until she was seventeen. During her senior year at Michigan State University, Poursine saw Bharata Natyam performed for the first time. Fascinated by the movement, drama and intricate hand gestures, Poursine realized she had met her destiny. After studying Bharata Natyam in New York City for three years and feeling unsatisfied with her learning experience, she was advised to study with Bala-

Poursine's life pursuit did change from that moment forward. She continued her training with Balasaraswati for multiple summer residencies on the west coast and before long, Balasaraswati invited Poursine to visit her home in Madras (Chennai) to study privately. The invitation was an unexpected honor, for it was unheard of for anyone that was not of Indian descent to be invited to live with someone of such high stature. But Balasaraswati was not concerned with the impressions of others. Balasaraswati ensured that Poursine, her new protegee, was well cared for throughout her visit.

Following her training in India, Poursine returned to the US to further her studies in music with Balasaraswati's brothers, T. Viswanathan and T. Ranganathan and to pursue her MA from Wesleyan University. Upon acquiring her masters, Poursine

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saraswati. In 1972, when Poursine learned that Balasaraswati was in residence at Mills College in Berkeley, California, she decided her next move was to pursue the legendary master. Only, Poursine had no idea whether she'd be accepted into Balasaraswati's class. Despite the uncertainty, she flew to Berkeley in hopes of being among the students selected.

Fortunately, karma was on Poursine's side and she made it into Balasaraswati's summer workshop. Poursine recalls, "Seeing Bala perform and having the opportunity to study with her that summer was life changing. As I returned to New York flying over Oakland, it seemed as if I was seeing a new sun rising in my life."

decided to return to India to perform and continue studying the art form abroad. The Udit Vani in Delhi called one of her performances, "...thrilling...the embodiment of prosodial rhythm..." and The Eenadu in Chennai said, "With tender expression and excellent style, Kay's dance will live forever in the hearts of the connoisseurs."

As an educator, Poursine has conducted numerous university lectures, master classes and workshops for dance and drama students of all ages and skill levels around the world. Poursine shares, "I've loved teaching... I think every student takes away something special in this great art. It is important to broaden the students' understanding of how other people in the world express their emotions about life."

Over the years, Poursine has been approached by many male Bharata Natyam dance students expressing their desire to learn the temple dances that were traditionally, only performed by women. Poursine



shares some of Balasaraswati's thoughts on the subject, "She had firm beliefs about what role men should have in Bharata Natyam. She said, 'they can learn the abstract dance portions, but they should not perform the drama to the poetry... [T]his is inappropriate...almost a sacrilege.'" Poursine adds, "This was a difficult promise and continues to be fraught with problems. I was offered a teaching position in the dance department at Wesleyan in 1979 and I thought the proper thing to do would be to ask for Bala's blessing. At the time, she was in a summer residence with her daughter, Lakshmi. I was invited to her apartment on campus and I remember walking into her living room where she and Lakshmi were sitting and smiling at me. I thought 'Whew... Bala is pleased I'll be teaching her art!' Bala nodded her approval and gave me her blessing, then paused and said very gently, 'Kay

I am so happy you will represent this great art...but I hope you will understand my asking you not to teach any men who come to study. I mean...do not teach them the dances with drama (dances based on bhakti poetry). They can learn the abstract dances (mainly rhythmic pieces). That is alright...but please, do you understand?' I was dumbfounded for a few moments, then my heart responded immediately and I said 'I understand your feelings about this Bala.' She then went on to explain in fuller detail her misgivings about men performing and expressing what was created for a woman's life expression."

Many Bharata Natyam educators disagree with this sentiment and have gone on to teach the dramatic dances to men. However, Poursine has turned down teaching many male students these particular dances to fulfill her promise to her master teacher.

Poursine says, "They are really offended, but it's very personal." She adds, "It's like having a man be taught the part of Giselle."

The history behind why the dramatic dances are so sacred goes back to ancient times. Female Bharata Natyam dancers were expected to perform to absolute perfection. If they did not, the women dancers would have the back of their legs whipped. These dancers were in need of an outlet to release their physical and emotional sufferings. The Bharata Natyam dances with drama and poetry served as their only means to express these inner feelings.

Poursine has many stories to share about the teachings of her mentor Balasaraswati and plans to write a book in the coming years. Poursine shares, "I feel very fortunate to have seen Balasaraswati perform and have her watch and correct me in class. It was a blessing to have found this art and have a great master to learn from."

With the extensive knowledge Poursine has gained over the last thirty years, she passes on the tradition of a great dance form and the legacy of Balasaraswati's teachings each time she steps into a dance studio and lecture hall. On stage, Poursine continues to captivate audiences with her gift, for she is the embodiment of the legendary Balasaraswati. *

To learn more about Kay Poursine, visit www.kpoursine.com.

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