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Indian, Sri Lankan dance collaboration comes to Santa Fe

By Megan Bennett / Journal North Reporter
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India's Nrityagram Dance Ensemble will perform in Santa Fe on Thursday. (Courtesy of Akhila Venkat)

SANTA FE, N.M. — Since it was founded 28 years ago, members of Nrityagram Dance Ensemble have fully dedicated themselves to mastering a thousand-year-old dance form from Eastern India.

In its dance village, or dance school, located outside of the city of Bangalore, the performers live among their teachers. With years of training, they are able to learn not only the movements, but also the longstanding oral history and philosophy tied to the form.

That's according to Surupa Sen, one of the ensemble's first dancers, and now a teacher and director with the group, which is famous for performing traditional Odissi dances.

"Each of these styles has an ethos connected with it," Sen said of various kinds of Indian dances in a phone interview from Bangalore.

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“... Each part of India speaks a different language or lives a different way or dresses a different way. For example, if I am from Southern India and I’m learning Odissi, which is a tradition from Eastern India, then it is almost like learning a language from another country.”

“It becomes a part of your life, and life becomes your art, and art seeps into the life,” she went on to say about training to learn the dance form.

Odissi originated in the Indian state of Odisha. Traditionally performed by women, Sen said the dance form relies on emotional execution, but also has a very defined and specific structure based on sculptures seen in Hindu temples.

“It’s like sculptures from Indian temples coming to life,” said Sen. “It’s a very beautiful, very sensual form, but it is also based in spirituality.”

The six-person Nrityagram ensemble will perform in Santa Fe Thursday alongside members of Sri Lanka’s Chitrasena Dance Company, backed by traditional musicians.

The country-crossing collaboration is the result of working and basically living together for a period of eight months, building a repertoire.

“It’s the first of its kind, really,” Sen said of putting Indian and Sri Lankan dances together. She described the performance as building “emotional layers” to a finale.

The beginning and opening numbers are performed with both groups together. She described the first as a dance evoking a mother deity and which honors the four elements: air, water, fire and earth. The second one she called the “Dance of Pure Joy.”

The two middle performances are only the Nrityagram dancers, according to Sen. One of those numbers is a solo of hers in which she depicts a male character “singing his lament of how he damned himself for hurting his lover.” In Indian dance, she notes, there aren’t rigid gender roles in which male and female dancers play only male or female characters.

The two Sri Lankan performers are professionals in Kandyan dance, traditionally performed by men. In this performance, however, Sen said the two women perform the dance style alongside her group. She described Kandyan as a more masculine style, with plenty of large jumps and other powerful movements.

“It’s a perfect offset with the Odissi style, which is very grounded and sensual,” she said. “In some way, bringing together of those two forms has been extraordinary thing.”

If you go

Nrityagram Dance Ensemble featuring Chitrasena Dance Company

WHEN: Thursday, 8 p.m.

WHERE: Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco

TICKETS: \$36-\$94. Tickets can be purchased at ticketssantafe.org, by phone at (505) 988-1234, or at the Lensic Box Office.