

My Journey With TFAS

- *Sudha Devulapalli*

"Rrrring", rings the phone. I pick it up and hear a voice, "Nenu Prabha Raghunath. Can I speak to Mrs. Sudha Devulapalli?" I reply, "Yes, I am Sudha". Prabha aunty introduces herself and invites our family to their house for dinner. Thus started a journey that I paved for myself in 1991 when I moved into Edison aspiring to spread the art of classical dance imparted by my great Guru Smt. Uma Ramarao and nurtured by my parents Sri Yerramilly Subramaniam and Smt Kamakshi Yerramilly to the younger generation of New Jersey. At that time we had meager finances, no references, and no connections but had lots of enthusiasm and spirit to do something. On that eventful night, Raghunath uncle and Prabha aunty extended their warm hospitality to our already homesick family. They told us about TFAS-Telugu Fine Arts Society. They made us understand how TFAS was instrumental in bonding Pravasa Andhras with their native land-Andhra Pradesh. Many children of the TFAS members have had the opportunity to be exposed and experience our rich culture, be it music, dance, drama through Deepavali, Shankranthi, and Ugadi functions. In fact both my sons Nikhil and Neeraj look forward to TFAS events because they can connect with their Telugu friends without feeling alienated in this foreign land.

Well, coming back to my original train of thoughts, that night's dinner ended on a very positive note when Raghunath uncle asked me to perform for the Deepavali function. I was overjoyed and my happiness knew no boundaries. I still remember nervously performing to an elite audience of art lovers. I performed Gaapathi stuti, a tharangam, a javali and finally ending with a Tarana in Kathak. My performance was appreciated but most importantly I struck a long-lasting relationship with some very warmhearted people. These families have silently supported me, gave me a vision to start my dance school and helped to establish the Kalanjali School of Dance. The encouragement came in the form of student references, appreciating my amateur work at that time by attending some of my student's performances, and giving me opportunities to showcase my work. I thank

several wonderful people such as Kidambi Raghunath and Prabha, Nirmala and Paramjyoti, Vijaya and Ramkrishna Chalikonda, Bhavaraju Murty, Janani Kocherlakota, Karra Lakshmi, Syamala Dasika, and Prasad and Seeta Avatapalli -- the list can go on.

One of my earliest performances was when I was asked to choreograph Padmavathi Kalyanam written by Smt. Syamala Dasika for Telugu Culture Center. Through this performance I came across some very talented Telugu girls like Komala Mallapaka, Sri Sudha Avatapalli, Ajanta Jonnalagadda, Leena Vangipuram, Renuka Ati, Hema and Rama. They later became my students and brought fame to me.

TFAS plays a very important and crucial role in encouraging aspiring artists like me. I am sure many dance teachers must have showcased their talent on TFAS stage and gained recognition. So many dance schools have been established and are very successful. Any classical dance form is a performing art and it is very necessary for the students to exhibit their skills. TFAS has never hesitated to provide a platform for these young aspiring dancers to exhibit their talent.

Likewise TFAS promotes young talent too enthusiastically. One such instance is the memorable performance of Vasu Gutti. His performance was so brilliant that it inspired many youngsters who were born here to feel that with proper will and hard work they are no less than artists from India. Sadly we lost this young talented boy who succumbed to an accident.

My students have felt very fortunate that because of the efforts of TFAS they are constantly exposed to the expertise of many eminent artists like Padmasri Vempati Chinnasatyam, Shobha Naidu, Manju Bhargavi, Alekhya Punjala, Sandilya, and Pasumarthi Venketeswara Sarma and a very young dancer Smitha Madhav recently.

My major breakthrough came when I was asked to present a dance drama 'Meera Ke Giridhar' by the TFAS President Dr. Janani Krishna. I was amazed that a Telugu association they did not hesitate to promote Hindi dance drama for fund raising. It spoke of their spirit of integration and the will to embrace an art form in any language. The event was a success. The families

of my north Indian students established their bond with TFAS, and since then they never shied away from allowing their children to perform for TFAS. The following year I received an award for my humble service to TFAS.

Through my association with TFAS I had the fortune to meet many important and accomplished people in my life. One such person was Dr. Vempati Chinnasatyam garu who was then touring USA. I had the fortune of hosting some of the artists in our home. It was truly a rewarding experience to host such eminent artists. In return my children received their blessings and I had the opportunity to discuss some dance related topics with them. That year New Jersey had the privilege to witness two beautiful dance dramas choreographed by Vempati Chinnastayam garu: Ramayana and Ardhanariswara.

Then came along another valuable association with Dr. Uma Eyunni who was then actively involved with TAGDV. At her request I choreographed the Inaugural Dance for TANA 2002. She wrote a beautiful dance drama Rati Vilapam which I presented in TANA. This alliance with TAGDV led to an introduction to Mr. Damu Gedala, the current president of TFAS, and then to many opportunities for my students to perform for TLCA, TAGDV, TANA, ATA and the Hindu temple in Bridgewater, NJ.

I also cannot forget the opportunity given to me by Mr. Ramakrishna Seethala to present a 45 minutes dance ballet Seeta Swayamvaram for Deepavali celebrations in 2004.

TFAS also extended its support to my 12 year old son Neeraj an aspiring singer who loves to sing Telugu songs. I am sure some of my dear students like Alekhya Uppala, Amulya,

Apurva and Bhargavi Amu carry many fond memories of their association with TFAS.

On a parting note, one of my students said during her arangetram speech, "My journey of dance began with a pushpanjali on TFAS Stage". During these 10 years there has never been an occasion when I have not performed in a TFAS function.

Beyond celebrating Telugu festivals TFAS involves meeting people, exploring your roots, listening to people chatter in Telugu, and escaping to motherland for a little while.

TFAS has a group of hardworking community leaders striving to preserve our rich culture and heritage so that the subsequent generations can benefit.

I wish TFAS a very happy 25th anniversary celebration and many more years of success. Jai Andhra Janani.



Make every moment precious.



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