

My Kathak Journey

by Shriya Bansal

“Today is one of the most important days of your life. You have worked very hard to get where you are. Stay focused, calm, and believe in yourself. I am sure you will make each of us proud.”

It was July 2, 2016, and those words were spoken to me and my fellow dance students by our teacher, Guru Sheetal Dhanani, as we stood in the wings awaiting our entrance onto the stage of the Hemmens Cultural Center in Elgin, Illinois. Over 700 people filled the auditorium, including family members, friends, and other students of dance. They had come to see us demonstrate our expertise in Kathak, a beautiful Indian classical dance form.

As a young child, I loved to dance to the devotional songs that were sung in the Hindu temple during festivals. As the priest led the worshippers in song and prayer, bells sounded every few minutes, calling God to accept the prayers of the people, and I would happily dance along. At four years old, such jumping around was considered adorable, and fortunately, my mom would catch me before I could make a scene and disrupt the prayers. Soon, however, she decided it was time for me to start taking dance lessons: If I was going to be dancing, at least I would be dancing well. And so, every week at a studio near my home, I learned the basics of Kathak.

Kathak (“khaTOK”) originated in ancient Hindu temples as a means of telling religious stories through music, movement, and facial expressions. Over time, it evolved as a form of highly choreographed entertainment that emphasizes self-discipline, confidence, and physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Music is played on traditional percussion instruments such as the mridanga and tabla. In addition, dancers

wear brass bells, or ghungroos, around their ankles. The bells serve to emphasize the dancers’ beautiful and complicated footwork. Young dancers may start with 25 bells on each foot; as their skill at controlling them improves, more bells are added. Like the bells in the temple, they remind us that God is with us as we dance.

A Passion for Perfection

I began my Kathak journey by learning simple footwork and spins. Each new skill was combined with the previous one and the combination mastered before I moved on to more sophisticated variations created, for example, by speeding up the music. Each year, I demonstrated my newly mastered skills at recitals. Annual exams, held in the studio, ensured that I had satisfied the criteria for each level. Graduates of the studio who had performed at a very high level critiqued the younger students’ performances, providing us with valuable feedback.

Finally, after 10 years of lessons and recitals, it was time to prepare for my own graduate performance, known as a Visharad (“vishAHR-ahd”). Over the course of a year, through weekly three-hour rehearsals, my three classmates and I worked to perfect the performance that is considered one of the greatest honors of our lives. Done well, it would reflect not only the dance form we had mastered, but also our cultural heritage.

Preparing for the Visharad brought more lessons. Practicing with my fellow dancers taught me the importance of teamwork, because if even one person was unable to execute a step perfectly, our performance would lack coordination and finesse. For this reason, we often spent several hours repeating one five-minute sequence to ensure that each dancer perfected her movement with every beat. This practice had a profound impact on our skills.



HEMANT PATEL



HEMANT PATEL

We also learned to grow from criticism. Our guru set high expectations, but she also taught us to persevere, to continually improve, and through it all, to maintain our passion for dance.

Through this shared experience, the other dancers and I became ever closer. Avnika and Anisha were friends I had known since childhood, but I found a new friendship with Neeva as we laughed at our sometimes clumsy attempts to perfect our techniques. We all shared the pain of practicing for hours while wearing the (by now) five-pound ghungroos, their imprint etched into our skin by the end of class. Together we sweated, and we cried the same tears when we erred as our teacher watched. We wanted her to be proud of us. We wanted all of her hard work—and ours—to be meaningful.

Dance as Metaphor

Now, onstage, our guru began to call our names. One by one, we took the stage and performed the requisite prayer to bless the bells before tying them on our feet. Our performance began with Saraswati Vandana, a beautiful melody named for the Hindu goddess of wisdom. The dance, which combined the devotional phrase “Om” with advanced footwork, was meant to signify the wisdom we had gained over 10 years of study.

The dances that followed represented various holidays and festivals from Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Through dance, we hoped to portray the common thread that exists among religions—namely, their beloved traditions. We wanted to demonstrate that respect for these traditions could help bring cultures, and ultimately people, together.

We performed nine dances in total, each incorporating a variety of movements, music, hand gestures, and facial expressions: The Lucknow Gharana featured dramatic facial expressions, reflecting the heavy influence of Persian and Moghul courts on Indian culture. Other expressions and mudras, or hand gestures, suggested traditional Muslim greetings.

The Jaipur Gharana represented Shivaratri, the Hindu holiday honoring Lord Shiva, the transformer of evil to good. It featured a series of traditional dances followed by intense footwork that demonstrated our technical mastery of Kathak. This 15-minute-long piece required both perseverance and strength to complete. For a Christmas-themed dance, we combined graceful ballet-style moves with Kathak, as we danced to the music of “Carol of the Bells” with underlying tabla beats. Snowflakes swirled around us as we danced.

Each dancer also performed a solo that emphasized her particular strengths. Mine depicted the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi, which honors Lord Ganesha, the giver of fortune and remover of all obstacles. My teacher chose this lyrical dance to highlight my gracefulness. It incorporated hand gestures meant to convey the shape of Ganesha’s elephant head, and the chanting that is often heard throughout Indian cities on this holiday. The performance culminated in a blur of rapid spins and footwork which, combined with fog and light, created a swirling blend of purples, oranges, and reds.

From the first time I took to the dance floor to my debut on the Visharad stage, Kathak has become an important part of my identity. In school and at community events, Avnika and I have performed numerous Kathak dances that we choreographed ourselves. In addition, I have started teaching younger students at the same dance studio where I studied. I hope to inspire in them the same love for Kathak that I have. ■



Shriya Bansal is a junior at Fremd High School in Palatine, IL, where she runs cross-country and plays badminton. Shriya also loves playing the violin in the school orchestra. In her free time, she enjoys biking through forest preserves, reading novels, and, most of all, dancing.