

# A CHOREOGRAPHER INNOVATES

A LIVING LEGEND IN THE BHARATANATYAM WORLD, DR LAKSHMI RAMASWAMY HAS CHOSEN PARROTS AS A THEME FOR HER 21ST PRODUCTION. BY JAGYASENI CHATTERJEE



The dancer holding the gesture of a parrot

**IT'S NOT ALWAYS THAT** a town girl from down south in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, makes a mark as an international Fulbright Fellow, layers it with years of dancing experience, bakes it with being the first doctorate in Bharatanatyam in the University of Madras and spices it up with a series of awards and accolades. But senior dancer, researcher and choreographer Dr Lakshmi Ramaswamy has made it possible.

Creating a stir through her wide range of dance productions and nurturing prominent performers, she has carved a niche of her own in the field of dance academics as one of India's most promising teachers contributing to the field of Bharatanatyam. From Tamil Sangam poetry to the epics, Bhakthi period in South India to compositions on folklores, this Doordarshan Top Grade Artist now takes to parrots as a theme for her 21st production.

Ramaswamy began learning dance at five. After her marriage, she came under the tutelage of Padmasri Chitra Visweswaran. After a few years, she established her own institute Sri Mudhraalaya, an academy for

Bharatanatyam, now 23 years old. Her journey so far has seen an array of awards and titles from various organisations including the Acharya Kala Bharathi (Best Guru) by Bharath Kalachar in 2016. As a Fulbright scholar, she has enthralled the audience at the Ethnic Dance Festival in San Francisco and her neo-classical work, 'Sculptor's Dream', was judged the best choreography at the International Dance Alliance, Chennai Chapter, in 2002. Her choreographic works include 250 solo numbers and 20 productions.

The idea of parrots was not a recent one. "My love for nature comes from my town away from bustling Chennai. Parrots were quite a common sight on the trees then. You no longer see it now. The parrot encounter became stronger when I would watch the busy parrot astrologers on the streets on my way to school with clients waiting to know their future. In fact my grandfather's house had a big painting of Suka Maha Rishi (depicted as a parrot headed sage) talking to a small boy, she shares. Her parrot stints continued when she started her own institute Sri Mudhraalaya, Chennai

in 1994 and found the little ones trying to imitate her just like how a parrot does. "So, with all these parrot experiences put together, what I had to do next was to come up with an experimental piece on parrots," says Ramaswamy.

The experimental piece thus formed depicted a mother goddess who has a parrot near her ears. For devotees it is the parrot that acts as a messenger taking their prayers to the attention of the goddess. Performed as a *varnam* (central piece) in a Bharatanatyam repertoire, it received huge appreciation and that encouraged her to delve deeper into the subject. Two years of research work gave shape to a full-fledged production and she named it 'Suka Marga' (a repertoire on parrots).

Talking about her upcoming production, the dancer-choreographer says, "Did you know there was a temple song on parrots sung as part of the ritual in kancipuram? Indian lives have encompassed parrots in various ways. The production shows the charming and chirpy parrots as a symbol of intelligence and an evolved being." ■

*(Suka Marga, partly supported by Ministry of Culture, India, will be premiered on January 26, 2018, in Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai)*