

Born to Dance

August 19, 2014



At first glance Shakkthi Kannan comes across like any other 12-year old. At dinner time, frantic efforts to complete a class project for school is followed by a good-humoured pillow fight with her siblings. Yet this little lady has some big credentials under her belt as a Bharathanatyam dancer.

Shakkthi commenced her training in this ancient dance form in 2005 at the tender age of three and half. "Sometimes I didn't know what I was doing when I was small, then I started enjoying as I grew older," she says. Currently Shakkthi is training under Meena Elankumaran, Nadanalaya Academy of Indian Classical Dance.

In March 2010, Shakkthi had her first opportunity to perform in India at the age of eight to become the youngest participant selected from over 950 applicants for a solo performance at the annual "Mayilai Natyanjali" dance festival in Chennai. The festival is dedicated to Lord Nataraja on the occasion of Maha Shivarathri. The audience included over 2000 people and an even greater number on live television.

The next opportunity to perform in India came during December-January 2010-11. The time of the year coincided with the Tamil calendar month "Margazhi" (December) and is a period when the city of Chennai is abuzz with music and dance recitals. Shakkthi became the youngest artist from Australia to present a two- hour solo dance recital at the annual Dance Extravaganza at Vani Mahaal.

She impressed the audience with her grace, abhinaya and stage presence. This performance was highly praised by the legendary dancer/choreographer and Padmashree Adayar K Lakshman, who was the guest of honour. For the young dancer, the exposure sparked a thirst for more such opportunities.

A further year of dedicated training and encouragement from her gurus saw Shakkthi back at Chennai with her family as she was invited to perform at an impressive ten sabhas during the 2011-12 Margazhi season. This is believed to be an unprecedented achievement for such a young resident of Australia. Her schedule during this time was packed with back to back performances over the course of only a few days at prestigious venues. She mesmerised her audience with a repertoire which included items such as Pushpanjali, Alarippu, Jatheeswaram, Thodayamangalam, Krishna Satham, Sivam Padam, and so on.

A smiling face, crisp execution of adavus, sense of rhythm and timing as well as an impressive range of emotions made her spark of genius at the events. She also demonstrated her ability to adept at fast and slow paced numbers. Several accolades followed as she danced her way through the Margazhi season. At the conclusion of her performance at the Rani Seethai Hall, Shree Vaari fine Arts conferred a Merit Award on her for her "histrionic talent in Bharatnatyam".

In the midst of all this, a very special occasion was the opportunity to perform at the sacred Thiruvaduthurai Adheenam where she was accompanied by her nine-year old sister Abhiraahmi. The sisters danced in unison under the grace of Lord Nataraja in the presence of the guru of this ashram and a large audience.

The Mount Waverly-based girl says she found the humid weather of India a bit tiring but nonetheless braved even ill health to perform on stage.

Interestingly, during Shakkthi's performance at the Music Academy, she was approached by a Tamil Film producer Govindan to star in a movie. After a lot of persuasion by Govindan, the shooting was held for two days in Chennai for the movie "Esapatukkaari", where Shakkthi plays the young heroine (who is a singer cum dancer). The film was released last October.

In Melbourne, Shakkthi continues to perform for various events. She has done solo appearances at a variety of programmes such as the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization's Dance Show – a fund raising event to raise funds for a children's orphanage in Sri Lanka; Unity in Diversity festival organised by the Victorian Multicultural Commission and Federation of Indian Associations in Victoria, International Dance Show at Presbyterian Ladies College, Senior Citizens Fellowship – Deepavali Celebrations, Talented Young Musical Ensemble, Muthamizh Vizha organised by Eelam Tamil Organization, Monash Council's Multicultural Festival and Knox Council's Cultural Diversity Show to name a few.

Most importantly, Shakkthi is now part of DANCE to GIVE, an initiative by the artistic children of Melbourne, sharing their talents to support destitute, disabled, and orphaned children in India and Sri Lanka through classical Indian Dance.

And despite the hectic schedule with school, dance lessons, gymnastics, chess and athletics training, she has also found time to learn Western and Indian Classical violin as well as Carnatic Vocal music and gives regular performances in these arts.

As for the secret to her success, her parents Kumuthini and Kannan acknowledge her gurus have a played a vital role not only in training Shakkthi in the dance form but also in providing her with the proper guidance and encouragement which has instilled her with a great deal of confidence.

Shakthi has carved a niche for herself as an accomplished dancer at a relatively young age. Yet one cannot help feeling that what has been achieved thus far is only a tip of the iceberg in terms of her potential. On August 23, she will be performing at the Rowville Secondary College Performing Arts Centre as part of GIVE events.

The program will be in aid of "Arivagam" – a home for mentally impaired and physically handicapped children in South India and the "Children Benevolent Fund", this provides assistance to wider groups of children in dire need of nutritious food, medication, rehabilitation and basic education in North East Sri Lanka.

In the years to come we can happily look forward to seeing this child blossom into an even more accomplished dancer and making valuable contributions to the art of Bharathanatyam.

(TIW exclusive)

(Shakkthi performs at the Rowville Secondary College Performing Arts Centre on Aug 23)