



Sukanya Mahadevan

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Bio for Guru ‘Kalashree’ Sukanya Mahadevan – Founder and Artistic Director, Shishya School of Performing Arts, Lawrenceville, NJ, USA

Bharatanatyam is a form of Indian Classical Dance that has a history that goes back over 2,000 years. Its origins can be traced to Temple Sculptures and ancient Sanskrit literature called ‘*Natya Shastra*’ – Book of Dance Theater. Guru ‘Kalashree’ Sukanya Mahadevan, a prominent performer, teacher and choreographer has been involved in this art form since the age of six. She is the founder and artistic director of Shishya School Of Performing Arts, in New Jersey, USA. Sukanya was given the title ‘Kalashree’ by Ganesa Natyalaya (New Delhi, India) and the prestigious ‘Dr. Saraswati’ award by Vipanchee Natyalaya and Dr. Balamurali Krishna music therapy trust fund (Chennai, India), for propagating the art form to the next generation. She was also awarded a commendation, by Voorhees Township in NJ, for propagating this ancient dance in the local communities, here in the US, specifically NJ. She is currently a visiting faculty at Rider University’s world dance program and has recently performed with her students at the Chennai dance and music festival and at the invitation-only International festival at Carnegie Hall, NY.

Sukanya has brought forth this ancient art to mainstream America as well, by presenting it at local events in libraries, Mercer County Heritage festival, Departments of Labor, Transportation, and Immigration. However, her ultimate passion is her students, which is why her dance school is called ‘Shishya’ (means student in Sanskrit). Another unique thing about Sukanya and her school is the fact that students are taught to use their craft for social awareness and justice and follow the ‘Art for Humanity’ motto. The central Jersey chapter of the Rotary Club awarded her

the 'Humanitarian' award. Besides this, she has also won awards for excellence in teaching and choreography.

Sukanya Mahadevan's destiny as a dancer was written when she was in her mother's womb. Her mother was not allowed to pursue her passion for dance and was told constantly that 'Girls from respectable families do not dance!' Her mother vowed that if she had a girl, she will not only be allowed to dance but also thrive in it. Sukanya's journey as a dancer and performer began at the early age of six, as Ms. Sukanya Jaganbabu. She performed her Arangetram in New Delhi at the age of 14. She has performed at leading theaters and organizations in Delhi and received several scholarships in the field. Despite stiff competition, she remained a leading performer with rave critic reviews in local newspapers and publications. Her performances include the *Doordarshan* TV Programs and 'sabhas' (live shows) in major cities like New Delhi, Chennai, and Lucknow. She was a proud performer and scholarship winner, at the prestigious fourth Yuva Mahotsava conducted by Sahitya Kala Parishad, an organization supporting art in India. This culminated in a breakfast with the then Prime Minister of India, Shri Rajiv Gandhi. She has also performed in the major 'sabhas' in Chennai both during and after the December festivals. These include places like Mylapore fine Arts and Narada Gana Sabha. She had the privilege of being taught by maestros such as Shri Bhaskar (Tiruchi, India) Smt. Indira Krishnamurthy (Tiruchi, India), 'Padmabhushan' Dr. Saroja Vaidyanathan (New Delhi, India) and the late 'Kalaimamani' Dr. Saraswati Sundaresan (Chennai, India). While Guru Saroja instilled the love for this dance in her, and brought out the dancer and performer in her, Guru Saraswati taught her the intricacies of teaching, choreographing, nattuvangam and portions of the 'Natya Shastra' to complete her dance vocabulary. The feathers in her cap were when, in 1988, she was invited to perform at the prestigious Chennai Festival's Narada Gana Sabha dance festival and in 1989, paid by the Indian Government agency, ITDC, to perform in the prestigious Convention Hall at Ashok Hotel, New Delhi.

At the age of 21, she arrived here in the US to pursue a master's degree in Computer Engineering, but dance remained in her blood. As a student, in 1991, when 'Bharatanatyam' did not enjoy the fame and prestige it does today in the tristate area, she performed at Swarthmore college and at some local Indian events to showcase her talent and this beautiful dance form. In 1997, with her passion for dance Sukanya began teaching 'The intricacies of Bharatanatyam', to

adult students at the Voorhees middle school CER program. Thus, began her teaching and performing career, here in New Jersey. Pursuing a full-time career at Lockheed Martin in Cherry Hill, did not stop her from using her time in the evenings and weekends to take on students of all ages. These years involved lecture demonstrations and performances at local Indian and American events, churches, schools, and libraries, annual day recitals for the small group of students and performances at places like the Grounds for Sculpture, Rotary Club Functions and Bengali Pooja functions, among others. In 2005, she decided to pursue her passion and take on this art form full time. She resigned from her lucrative job at Lockheed and with only 10 students, she decided to establish Shishya School Of Performing Arts.

Shishya School Of Performing Arts is a dance company and its sole purpose is to educate and qualify students in the art of Indian Classical dance, music, mythology, and dance theater. Today her school boasts of about 85 students and several alumni who have gone on to become dance lovers and performers themselves or come back to the school as part-time teachers. A few of these students who reside in NY and NC, learn virtually. Besides training students to be ardent performers, 'Art for Humanity' is the school motto where many performances are done to create and raise money for awareness of various charitable causes such as American Red Cross, orphanages in India etc. With her students, Sukanya has performed on many stages in NJ and PA, including Tamil Sangham, VishwaRang, Chinmaya mission, Saidham, Bridgewater temple, Guruvayoor temple Thyagaraja festival, Brahmotsavam and other such venues and programs. Sukanya fosters, both the love for the traditional art form through performances, and the inquisitiveness to seek innovation through research and innovative choreographies. To this end, the school has its own blog, You tube Channel, and Blackbox theater setup to encourage students to write, review, practice and perform. Sukanya has also created a community through this school, that celebrates Indian Performing Arts especially 'Bharatanatyam'. All students embrace whole-heartedly a healthy mentor-mentee and camaraderie program (student teacher program) that promotes teamwork and leadership skills. Using dance and music to give back to society either through fundraisers or teaching and imparting the art, comes naturally to the students at Shishya School.

Trained to teach and choreograph this dance form, Sukanya has been teaching Bharatanatyam since 1997. She has since expanded her expertise and conducted extensive research, to write her own curriculum for the different levels of students. Each level includes a traditional item and an

innovative choreography connecting to modern day concepts. It also includes theory from the ‘*Natya Shastra*’ and stories from Indian mythology. She does not focus on just the ‘Nriya’ or dance aspect of this art form but on its whole being of ‘Natya’ or dance theater. She is now actively collaborating with Dr. Neerja Sharma from NIICD, India to curate structured curriculum for students to study theory and practice forms, to be able to take written and practical exams to receive diplomas and degrees from an accredited Indian institution. This collaboration now includes virtual International fundraisers using dance and an online festival called ‘Guru Abhinandan Saroja’. This celebrates both their Guru’s legacy but also the art and its future through the up-and-coming artists all over the world. This event also has an international competition, for which not only does Sukanya function as judge but has also created a professional rubric system to help evaluate the students fairly. Her professional but kind critique is meant to draw the participant’s attention to small nuances that will eventually turn them into true artists. Sukanya also published an article for www.waternote.com on the ‘Guru-Shishya Parampara’ – the teacher-student relationship.

In the US, Sukanya has performed all over the tri-state area, and is a sought after performer and choreographer. She has created and choreographed several dance drama productions for Bharatanatyam, such as ‘RamCharitham and ‘Krishnaarpanam’. ‘Kaa-Na-Nam’ was a unique dance drama performance perspective on a modern day classic, ‘The Jungle Book’. She is currently working on a thematic production depicting the five elements , ‘Panchabhutam’, through the regions in India where Shiva, the cosmic dancer, is worshiped. This production will bring together both the traditional aspects of this theme through the famous ‘Pancha Bhootha krithis’ and the modern-day context of each of the elements and the role they play in the wellbeing of our world. She is constantly invited to curate programs for fundraisers like ‘Dishaa’ by National Institute of Mental Illness (NAMI) and SACHA for frontline workers. She has performed at the prestigious TCNJ Arts Festival and has continued representing the Indian artist diaspora in local NJ events such as the ones from the Dept of Transportation, US immigration offices and Mercer County Heritage Festival.

‘Arangetram’ is a unique ‘Bharatanatyam’ experience where a student decides to challenge herself by training rigorously to perform a solo recital of 3 hours in front of a live audience and supported often by a live orchestra. As a teacher and a conductor of this event, the responsibility

of making sure the student is well trained in both skills and endurance squarely rests on her shoulders. Not to mention that conducting a live orchestra while doing the finger cymbals ('kinkini') and reciting the syllables ('nattuvangam') is a feat in itself. Sukanya has conducted thirty-one of these to date. Included in the 'Arangetram' is a unique wild card item that she and her student pick which is then customized by a music or theme selection that is unique to the student. For e.g., in her recent most arangetram, one student had a special item connecting her Indian and Croatian roots, and the other student danced a dedication to frontline workers. Sukanya's choreography includes both traditional and fusion items that include other dance forms like 'Kathak', 'Ballet' and 'Mohiniattam'. She works with leading artists from the other respective dance fields to collaborate and create these items. In her many years of being in this art, she has had the good fortune of interacting with maestros like Dr. Balamurali Krishna, Guru Rama Vaidyanathan, Shri Narendra Kumar, and the famous singer O.S. Arun.

A proud member of NJNS (an association of teachers and performers in NJ), Sukanya often attends workshops by maestros to hone her performance and choreography skills and often performs intricate productions with them ('Shakthi', 'Sannidhi', 'Rithu', etc.). She also curates workshops with maestros like Shri Narendra Kumar, Guru Saroja Vaidyanathan and Guru Rama Vaidyanathan to enable her students to expand their knowledge of their dance and perfect fine nuances.

In 2020, during the Covid shutdown, students were encouraged to continue their training virtually and Sukanya and her students were invited by SACHA to perform a virtual dance show to raise money for frontline workers. She also performed virtually for the prestigious Vishwa Rang in 2020 where she curated a beautiful Hindi poem to Bharatanatyam. She and her students were invited to participate again in 2022.

Sukanya is currently a visiting faculty at Rider University's world dance program. As part of this team she has taught many topics on dance, but the most important of them all is the one on the Origins of 'Bharatanatyam' and its connection to Hindu religion and mythology.

A proud immigrant from India, a country of rich heritage and traditions, Sukanya has embraced being an American and a New-Jersey resident to the fullest by not only adopting American values but also through her art, celebrating the diversity in our country.