

Indian dance fiesta

Two new festivals and a bigger push on classical dance at this year's Kalaa Utsavam

Deepika Shetty

Indian dance is gaining new ground with audiences here. Coming up are two new dance festivals and this year's Kalaa Utsavam. Esplanade's annual Indian festival of arts, will also boast a strong dance component.

The dance delights kick off later this week with Dance India Asia Pacific, followed by a new dance festival Samarpana in the middle of next month and Kalaa Utsavam in late November.

After seven successful years in the United Kingdom, Dance India comes to the Asia-Pacific for the first time as Dance India Asia Pacific. This dance education programme, which also incorporates performances, is organised by local arts company Apsaras Arts in collaboration with Milapfest, the United Kingdom's leading Indian arts development trust.

In a sign of the increasing interest in Indian dance, Dance India Asia Pacific's two ticketed performances this week, featuring renowned dancers Leela Samson, Aditi Mangaldas, Shantha Rathi and Arushi Mudgal, have already sold out.

About 250 people are expected to attend the workshops, while 440 people will attend the two sell-out shows.

Singapore-based Indian dancer and choreographer Gayatri Sriram's Shruti Laya Dance School in Singapore is presenting the Samarpana dance festival next month. With seven performances over three days, Mrs Sriram expects to draw at least 2,000 people to the first edition of the festival.

The Esplanade's Raga series, which showcases Indian performing arts, and Kalaa Utsavam too have grown over the years, from presenting four performances in 2009 to six in 2010 and nine last year.

Ms Rajeswari Ramachandran, 38, programming officer at the Esplanade, who leads the Kalaa Utsavam programming team, told Life!: "There has always been a good appreciation for classical Indian dance in Singapore. However, interest is possibly growing due to more students learning the art form and the entry of new arts groups."

Indeed, three long-running institutions teaching and promoting Indian classical dance and music here have reported a consistent surge in numbers. At the Bhaskar's Arts Academy, more than 1,000 students head to the studios at the Stamford Arts Centre for more than 200 classes in Indian classical music and dance each week. Dancer and choreographer Santha Bhaskar and her husband K.P. Bhaskar, have helped grow the teaching arm of this performing arts group from just 40 students in the early 1950s.

With the recent support of the National Arts Council's seed grant, Apsaras Arts, which was formed in 1977, now has a full-time dance company. Just this year, its dance productions toured the UK, Sri Lanka, India and Cambodia. In addition, it has had several sold-out performances at the Esplanade and reports 70 to 80 per cent attendance for most of its productions.

Over at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society at Starlight Road (Sifas), things remain busy. There are about 450 students learning dance at the society, which was founded in 1949. Every year, they get between 70 and 80 new students.

In 2003, the society launched its annual Festival of Indian Classical Music and Dance, which includes about four to five ticketed concerts at the Esplanade and more than 40 free concerts at its own auditorium. The attendance at the concerts has grown from 2,500 in the first year. In the last four years, it has drawn between 8,000 and 10,000 people annually, not just from Singapore but Malaysia and India as well.

Apart from the festival, the society presents at least two dance concerts by renowned artistes annually.

One such performer who was hosted recently is the acclaimed bharatanatyam dancer Alarmel Valli, whose experiences performing in Singapore span about three decades. She told Life!: "In the early years, I remember dancing in halls with very basic amenities, where performances were essentially community events drawing largely the South Indian community."

"Over the years, I have seen a happy metamorphosis in the Indian classical dance scene in Singapore. It now appears to have been quite successfully integrated into the mainstream dance environment, drawing a mix of people and enriching the rich cultural tapestry of a complex multi-cultural society."

Marketing professional and arts lover Sarita Sriram said when she moved to Singapore 11 years ago, there were few Indian classical performances.

Said Ms Sriram, 45: "The classical Indian dance scene has evolved both in terms of the audiences and the artistes."

"I see more non-Indians in shows, many of whom are not entirely familiar with Indian dance but appreciate the grace or the spiritual dimension of Indian classical dance. The artistes too have grown, so we see classical Indian dance forms used in a contemporary context or to address contemporary themes such as ecological and gender issues."

One such dancer who has consistently raised the bar through her shows is Singapore-based contemporary dancer and choreographer Raka Maitra.

She says that there was a significant well-informed and critical audience for Indian classical dance, particularly bharatanatyam, well before the new Indian migration in the late 1990s, which led to an increase in shows.

Maitra, 41, said: "One only has to look at the history of Sifas, Nrityalaya, Apsaras and the work of renowned Singaporean dancers such as Madhavi Krishnan and Priya Arun. The market for Indian classical dance in Singapore, though not large, has always been more developed and viable than the one in India, where we do not have paying audiences for classical dance, it is all by invites."

"Since the late 1990s, there has indeed been a proliferation of shows and festivals, which I sometimes feel serve mainly the vanity of the newcomers to the Indian-Singaporean dance scene."

Apart from vanity, some feel the number of competing dance events could impact attendance in the long run.

Said Dr Chitra Krishnakumar, president of Soorya (Singapore), an annual festival held here since 2005: "There is appreciation no doubt, which is reflected in the number of dance festivals as well as events. But with so much happening and too many concerts of a similar nature, I feel things could get tough as the audience which generally patronises these events is usually the same."

But for some, competing events have resulted in accidental discoveries.

Ms Wong Yi Lin, 41, a business development consultant, for instance, got her first introduction to classical Indian dance at the recent Sifas event featuring a film and performance by Alarmel Valli.

"I have no knowledge of Indian classical dance and ended up going for it after hearing about it from Dr Vimala Selvadurai, who is actively involved in Sifas. Watching the film on Valli's life, and recital afterwards really opened my eyes to the grace and beauty of Indian classical dance. I found it truly a celebration of life and felt I could connect with it even though I knew nothing about it."

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Key performances

Dance India Asia Pacific 2012

What: This dance education programme for students, teachers and performing Indian classical dance artistes makes its first South-east Asian stop in Singapore. Some key Indian dance practitioners, including Leela Samson and Aditi Mangaldas, will be teaching and performing. It will end with two performances at the Esplanade on Friday and Saturday, tickets for which have sold out.

Those interested in the supplementary programmes can e-mail dance.india@apsarasarts.com.

When: Saturday to Sept 4

Where: Goodman Arts Centre, 90 Goodman Road
Admission: \$30 a workshop or \$120 for six workshops
Info: Call 6221-2606 or go to www.apsarasarts.com/danceindiaaap

Samarpana - The Asian Festival Of Classical Dance

What: Connecting the present and future of classical dance, Samarpana showcases prominent dancers in collaborative pieces. In addition, it provides a platform for upcoming talent. The festival features seven performances over three days. These include one by Singapore-based dancer, choreographer and founder of the festival, Gayatri Sriram, whose piece is a literary collaboration with Indian author and diplomat Pavan Varma. Dancer Priyadarshini Govind and TM Krishna will feature in a bharatanatyam-Carnatic music collaboration.

When: Sept 14 to 16

Where: UCC Theatre, National University of Singapore
Admission: \$30 to \$150 from Sistic (go to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)
Info: Call 8201-4757 or go to www.samarpana-festival.net

The Asian Prom

Dance lovers should not miss this fascinating visual arts exhibition which puts the spotlight on dances of Asia, particularly Indian dance forms. Look out for Indian artist S. Sivabalan's colourful canvas featuring a Kathakali dancer. Kathakali, a stylised classical Indian dance-drama, is known for its elaborate make-up.

When: Till Sept 5, 10am to 7pm (Monday to Saturday), 10am to 6pm (Sunday)

Where: The Gallery of Gnan Arts, 01-17, Tanglin Shopping Centre, 19 Tanglin Road
Admission: Free
Info: Call 6737-3550

Circular Ruins by Raka Maitra

Based on a short story by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, this collaborative work by contemporary Indian dancer Raka Maitra will include live music, dance and installations by visual artist Zai Kuning, Indonesian dancer and choreographer Fitri Setyaningsih and musician Mohammad Riduan.

When: Nov 2 & 3, 8pm

Where: Drama Centre Black Box, 100 Victoria Street, National Library Building

Admission: \$23, \$13 (students and senior citizens) from Sistic



Festival founder Gayatri Sriram (left) will perform in Samarpana and Shobana (above) will present dance musical Krishna. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF GAYATRI SRIRAM, SOORYA GLOBAL FESTIVAL OF INDIAN DANCE AND



Epic Ramayana prior PHOTOS: ESPLANADE

Kalaa Utsavam 2012
What: Esplanade's celebration of Dance India Asia Pacific 2012, presents temporary dance performances by the dance repertoire of the epic Ramayana. The Dance Ensemble in collaboration with the Singapore Dance Company will perform the epic Ramayana in a series of three performances. The first performance, 'Sita's Magic', is a production inspired by the Ramayana. This latter is a series of four and eight performances. **When:** Nov 23, 8pm
Where: Esplanade Theatre, Samhara by Nrityagati, 100 Victoria Street
When: Nov 28 & 29
Where: Esplanade Theatre, Nalanda by Bhaskar's Arts Academy, 100 Stamford Road
When: Dec 2, 8pm
Where: Esplanade Theatre, Sita's Magic, Forest of the Gods
When: Dec 2, 3pm
Where: Esplanade Theatre, Sita's Magic, Forest of the Gods
Admission: \$15 to \$150
Info: Call 6828-8383

Soorya Global Fest

Music
Celebrated Indian artist presents Krishna, a classical, folk, contemporary and engineering for this award-winning Resul (2008) and it has become a famous film persona. **When:** Feb 8, 2013
Where: To be confirmed
Admission: Price to be confirmed
Info: Call 9389-0000

Sifas Festival Of Indian Dance 2013

What: This annual festival of Indian Fine Arts Society (Sifas) is a showcase of the best talent, both international and local in the field of Indian performing arts to-day. Urmila Satyanarayanan (right), a leading exponent of bharatanatyam in India, will perform next year.

When: March 18 to 20, 2013
Where: Esplanade Theatre
Admission: There will be a special rate at the Esplanade and Sifas Auditorium
Info: Call 6299-5921