

TIMEOFF

DANCE

By Susan Van Dongen

We Are All One

A Festival of Faiths finds our common thread in the performing arts.

WHEN Bala Devi Chandrashekar dances, she's trying to be provocative — but not to provoke the base elements of human nature, as our puritanical founders might have imagined dancers would do. As a Hindu, she comes from a faith filled with colorful deities and a spiritual tradition that gives movement and rhythm a much higher purpose than many Western belief systems. Indeed, some of the Hindu deities are portrayed as dancing themselves.

Ms. Chandrashekar, a native of India, draws upon traditions that go back thousands of years. She hopes, through her art, to weave elements of her Hindu heritage to lift the spirit and share her connection to divine consciousness with the people who watch her dance.

"I want to express, through the beauty and sacred (element) of dance, the idea that we are all one," Ms. Chandrashekar says. "This can be greatly expressed through dance. In fact no other performing art can express this so well because it's done in such a vivid, visual form. The very movement itself is a feature of joy — it's part of the sacred arts in India, a symbol of truth."

"(I'm) also trying to convey the harmony with the cosmic rhythm. This is done through conceptualizing the 'celestial beings' or divine entities (in our traditions). We want to portray and manifest them, and this uplifts the human consciousness from the mundane world."

This "lifting up" of hearts, minds and spirits — raising consciousness and realizing spiritual interconnectedness through the arts — is the essence of the Festival of Faiths at Princeton University.

"The goal is to use the performing arts to talk about the relationship between spirituality and art," says Joseph Skloot, a history major at Princeton University who is organizing the festival through the University's Religious Life Center, among other organizations. "One of the extraordinary things I've discovered is that I share a great deal with my friends of other religious traditions. One thing in particular is a love of sacred music."

Princeton University's Religious Life Council, the Office of Religious Life, the Frist Campus Center, the Vice President for Campus Life, the Center for Jewish Life and the International Center will present the Festival of Faiths, a series of music and dance performances beginning with the free *Princeton's Sound and Spirit*, a showcase of sacred music and dance by campus groups, Sept. 18 on the south lawn of the Frist Campus Center at Princeton University.

Princeton's Sound and Spirit is just one of 25 special events celebrating the 25th Anniversary of *TimeOFF* magazine (see www.packetonline.com for details), and includes performances by the Princeton University Cha-



Bala Devi Chandrashekar shares her connection to divine consciousness during her sacred dance performance.

pel Choir, under the direction of Penna Rose and accompanied by acclaimed percussionist and Princeton University faculty member Jon Arrucel, as well as "PUGE" — the PU Gospel Ensemble — and Koleinu, Princeton's Jewish a cappella group, which performs Jewish and Israeli sacred and secular music in Hebrew and English. In addition, the festival will showcase musicians from the Muslim Student Association, the Bahá'í Club and the AGAPE Christian Fellowship. A new group, Princeton Capoeira, will perform a combination of Afro-Brazilian sacred dance and martial arts, and the Klezmocrats — one of Princeton's two Klezmer ensembles — will play traditional Jewish dance music from Eastern Europe.

Ms. Chandrashekar's dance performance, *Sacred Dance and Sacred Thought*, is the second part of the festival, Sept. 21. The three-part Festival of Faiths wraps up Feb. 19, 2004, with a concert by world-renowned musician Paul Winter along with Danny Maseng and his band, Soul on Fire.

"All different faiths express their spirituality through music and dance," Mr. Skloot says. "If we're here to learn about each other and come to a mutual understanding of our neighbor, we need to find the points of conversation and explore these. Music and the performing arts are a couple of the best ways to ask the great questions."

Ms. Chandrashekar was taught that certain movements in Indian traditional dance evoke a transcendental state — opening the door to "answers" from some of these very questions.

"It is all taken from an ancient treatise on dance, 'The Natya Sastra,' which goes back to 1500 B.C.," she says. "We believe that practicing standard dance forms awakens one's spirituality for the divine consciousness, not only for the dancer but to the onlooker as well. (There is no wall) between the dancer and the onlooker."

Acclaimed as a senior artist, choreographer and teacher of Bharata Nrityam Indian classical dance, Ms. Chandrashekar also is a panel artist with the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. She explains the way Indian

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classical dance uses the entire body — leaps, extension of legs, fast footwork and hand movements — to evoke the natural world in her country's mythology.

Trained at the Academy of Bharata Natyam under eminent teachers Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam and Jayalakshmi Narayanan, Ms. Chandrashekar emulates ancient temple sculptures in her dance. Three thousand years ago craftsmen and artists froze such deities in time, and now Ms. Chandrashekar is bringing them to life.

"There are 108 such 'karanas' you'd see on such temple walls in Southeast Asian cultures," Ms. Chandrashekar says. "One of my gurus (teachers) came up with a new set, in fact."

With more than 20 years experience dancing and teaching, Ms. Chandrashekar is in demand as a performer, instructor and artistic consultant. Last year she danced at Princeton University's International Center and was a guest performer for the Cultural Diversity Forum at Rutgers University. She is currently working on a performing arts project through the New Jersey Council on the Humanities in collaboration with Rutgers.

In addition to her artistic endeavors, Ms. Chandrashekar holds three master's degrees in management studies and is an independent management consultant. She lives in Princeton with her husband and two sons.

"(Through dance) we have the ability to bring (higher) consciousness, truth and happiness into the present, to take the onlookers into this same cosmic journey," Ms. Chandrashekar says. "We are the most beautiful of the beautiful of any of the creatures on earth — we are truth. We are all in a state of extreme happiness, which is bliss. We're all born this way but we worry and tarnish this beauty."

"We are all very dear children of the lord. How beautiful these thoughts are that we can take to people. Dance is a way of prayer and it's all directed to praise of the lord."

The Festival of Faiths begins with Princeton's Sound and Spirit concert, on the South Lawn of the Frist Campus Center, Sept. 18, 7:30 p.m. Free admission. The second performance, Sacred Dance and Sacred Thought, features Bala Devi Chandrashekar, in the Frist Campus Center theater, Sept. 21, 7:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$15, \$6/children. The final part of the series features Paul Winter and Danny Maseng and Soul on Fire in the Princeton University Chapel, Feb. 19, 2004, 8 p.m. For information, call Princeton University's Office of Religious Life at (609) 258-3047 or the International Center at (609) 258-5006. On the Web: www.princeton.edu



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