

At CityDance, Asanga Domask assures future of traditional Sri Lankan dance



Video: The Sri Lankan choreographer presents a program of Sri Lankan traditional and folk dance, complete with ornate costumes and traditional drums.

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So much of human culture has vanished from the world, will surely vanish still, will fall away as if it never existed. In the long view of time, our voices and our footprints are not as durable as we may think.

This is especially true in the realm of dance, where physical touch and memory are the purest means of transmission. Break the human chain, and the living art can die. Ask a Cambodian dancer to tell you how few teachers survived the Khmer Rouge, and how close that nation's dance tradition came to extinction.

Dictators aren't the only threat; there is also the simpler, ubiquitous danger of change. In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere in the 21st century, the rich heritage of traditional dance is fading. Those old dances are no longer popular, and fears have grown that some may be lost. The master teachers are dying.

But doubters can rest assured: As long as Asanga Domask is at work, Asanga Domask assures future of traditional Sri Lankan dance.

Domask learned to dance while growing up in Colombo, on the island's west coast. In 2010, after earning a master's in dance from American University, with a focus on preserving the dances of her homeland, she launched a program on the traditional and folk dances of Sri Lanka at CityDance Center at Strathmore. It was here that she and her students presented a highly professional and deeply moving program this weekend.

There was a quiet grandeur to Saturday's evening-long affair, titled "Nruthya Manjarie" (it means "a bouquet of sacred dance with immense beauty") in CityDance's intimate Studio Theater. Sri Lanka's deputy chief of mission was in attendance. Wine and brownies were offered at intermission, and the stage glowed with battery-powered candles. There were 11 works on the program, some gentle, some vigorous, but each was a swirl of past, present and the bounty of life.

Just taking in the costumes alone — bright, silky wrapped skirts and fitted tops, trimmed with sashes, ribbons and brocade — felt like the textile equivalent of "Babette's Feast," with one shimmering delicacy following another.

Domask is a transcendent dancer who carried a whole world with her onstage in her solos; the lightness of her arms and power of her wide-legged squats suggested ocean breezes and a rootedness to the land. But most of the program was given over to her students. In "Hansa Villa," an ancient Kandyan dance that honors the swan, the dancers wore long, billowing white skirts, like romantic-length ballet tutus. But these dancers' undulating torsos, the way their bodies rippled like water, made ballet swans look stiff and two-dimensional in comparison. In "Pol Mal Nade," a villagers' tribute to the coconut tree, one of the young dancers circled and entwined her hands like flickering flame, drawing your gaze with a hypnotic effect.

The rhythmic complexity was fascinating throughout the evening, with bare feet stomping busily and soft, fluttering fingers adding counterpoint. This was full-body dancing, and everyone — grade-schoolers to teens — made expressive use of hips, shoulders, hands and necks. Their discipline was impressive. The high spirits and confidence with which they performed was captivating. And what you took away was an abiding sense of joy.