

Gazette.Net

Sri Lankan styles shake up Strathmore

Wednesday, May 11, 2011

by Topher Forhecz | Staff Writer

If all the world is a stage, then Sri Lankans are its choreographers. Through the centuries, folk dances have captured even the smallest aspects of life on the Southeast Asian island and are still performed today.

This weekend at the Music Center at Strathmore, CityDance Ensemble will present "Nruthya Pooja: An Evening of Traditional and Folk Dance of Sri Lanka by Asanga Domask." Choreographed by Asanga Domask, a Sri Lankan native and CityDance's director of administration, the two sold-out shows will feature Domask as well as CityDance's pre-professional group and members of Domask's Sri Lankan Traditional and Folk Dance program.

The show is a blend of folk dances and traditional dances that are rooted in Sri

Lankan cultural beliefs and customs.

A pooja, which is an offering in some manner — in this case, dance — that opens a celebration or religious event, will start the evening.

"The pooja in the concert, in the dance aspect, is it's a blessed dance to get permission from gods, from teachers, from the audience," Domask says.

Domask's pooja, which she will perform solo, is in a style of traditional dance called Kandyan. Dating back to the 4th century B.C., Kandyan is believed to have been danced for seven days and seven nights in order to rid an ancient Sri Lankan king of a nightmare that made him ill.



Photo: Paul Gordon Emerson

Asanga Domask

Vannama is one form in the Kandyan style the dancers used to remove the nightmare. These vannamas imitate the behavior of animals. This weekend, Domask will perform the usuka vannama, the eagle's dance, and six of her 23 dancers will perform the the mayura vannama, the peacock's dance.

The colors of the dancers' costumes — which were handmade in Sri Lanka — reflect the animals they are invoking.

"For example, the peacock has to be blue and green and red and orange because that's kind of the colors of the peacock," Domask says.

The attire consists of a jacket, ornate jewelry, an exposed midriff and a long skirt-like bottom.

The other traditional dance Domask will perform is of a low country style called pahatharata. The dance pays tribute to the wife of a demon who brings protection from evil spirits and disease.

Domask's young students will perform folk dances that celebrate day-to-day activities such as fetching water, harvesting rice paddies in the fields and children at play. Among these performers is Domask's niece Ana Harmsen, who began taking classes last year.

A former ballet student, Harmsen was interested in learning more about her cultural background.

"I really enjoy it because I love the songs and the drumming and the movements," the 11-year-old says.

She feels her aunt, who recommended her program, has taught her well.

"She's done it for a long time, too, so it's really good to learn the movements exactly as they were. She's very patient," Harmsen says.

Dance is an essential part of the educational system in Sri Lanka and Domask has been taking lessons since first grade.

In Sri Lankan culture, it is customary to perform these dances with a drum or other live musical accompaniment. Recorded music rarely accompanies shows.

Domask says every movement has a corresponding word so that performers can sing the steps, in essence creating their own music when a drum is not available.

Kandyan dance consists of 12 basic foot movements called "paa saraba," and 12 foot and arm movements called "goda saraba" that, similar to techniques found in African and

Indian dance, are used as a foundation.

"It's like in ballet," Domask says. "You have to learn certain movements before you do a high jump or leap."

Outside of school, Domask studied these dances with Sri Lankan masters until she came to the U.S. in 1993 to attend school at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Va. As an economics major, she intended to follow in the footsteps of her mother, a banker. Still, she could not resist her roots, and earned a master's in dance from American University in 2006.

Much of Domask's work with CityDance is business oriented and this is the first performance Domask has helmed since joining the organization in 2005. A sense of urgency convinced her to propose the show to Paul Gordon Emerson, CityDance's artistic director and founder.

"Over the years, most of our ancient dance masters of Sri Lanka have passed away, and only a few are there to fill the gap. So I think it's important to train young dancers so we keep these cultural traditions alive," Domask says.

Emerson says producing work like Domask's has been one of the core values of CityDance since it began in 1996. When he started the company, Emerson left behind a career on Capitol Hill. In addition to having worked on more than 20 federal campaigns as well as liaison to the House Armed Services Committee, Emerson served as legislative director to the late House of Representatives member and U.S. Ambassador to Italy Thomas M. Foglietta.

With support from the State Department, Emerson's outreach now exists in movement, and he and his staff are constantly in motion. Since December, his professional company has worked in Israel, Italy and Algeria. This May, Emerson worked on a performance piece with a dance company in Kazakhstan, and CityDance will visit Peru and China in the summer.

"As somebody who believes in the framework of cultural engagement, especially as it applies to international relations," Emerson says, "there are days when I feel like I've been able to accomplish more by being out on the road as a dancer and a choreographer and a head of a company than I was ever able to accomplish as a foreign policy aide."

With Domask's performance, Emerson says the school is fortunate to be able to bring a foreign tradition to American audiences. He has tried his hand at some of Domask's basic traditional techniques, which he says can look deceptively easy.

"After we both stopped laughing so hard that it hurt, she came to the conclusion that it wasn't a style that I was going to acquire anytime soon," Emerson says.

"What I would suggest to any audience member who comes, if you think what you're seeing ... can be picked up in a few hours, think again," he adds, "because this woman has trained her entire life to do this kind of work."

tforhecz@gazette.net

CityDance Ensemble presents "Nruthya Pooja: An Evening of Traditional and Folk Dance of Sri Lanka by Asanga Domask" at The Music Center at Strathmore, Education Wing, Studio 405, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda. Both weekend performances are sold out. Call 301-581-5100 or visit www.strathmore.org.