

Bala, queen of abhinaya

The legendary dancer T. Balasaraswati passed away on 9th February 1984. NANDINI RAMANI, one of her seniormost disciples takes Sruti readers down memory lane.

The occasion has inspired me to share a few thoughts on her in this magazine, in which exactly 23 years ago, Gowri Ramnarayan interviewed me as a prime disciple of the legend (*Sruti* 5, February 1984). With Bala's departure from the scene, the era of unshakeable, deep rooted faith in sampradaya, higher goals of art and utmost submission to the concept of the guru, have withered away. She was an inimitable exponent of nritya and the queen of abhinaya. Sangeeta Kalanidhi, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan, Isai Perarignar, Sangeeta Kala Sikhmani, Desikottama, these are the many honours my revered teacher T. Balasaraswati received in her illustrious career. This year marks her 23rd death anniversary.

For Bala, her art was her life. Her devotion to her guru Kandappa was supreme. Her goal in life was to maintain her guru's tradition in all its purity and dignity. She dare not change anything of her guru's training. She was in awe of him and would not touch a 'tattukazhi' saying, "My mentor is qualified to do so, not me". Such was her total reverence for her teacher. Similarly, she had deep affection for her teacher's son, K. Ganesan, who came under Bala's care as a young boy and started accompanying her in her performances at a crucial moment in 1958 on the instructions of her mother T. Jayammal.

At 57, I look back through the decades of my association with this legend of Bharatanatyam. My father Dr. V. Raghavan gave my sister Priyamvada (the first disciple of Bala at the school run by the Madras Music Academy), and me, immense opportunities to come under the wing of this great artist.

I remember seeing Bala when I was three years old. By then she, along with Nattuvanar K. Ganesan (Ganesa Mama), was already training my sister Priyamvada who started learning in 1951. Officially Balasaraswati's Classical Bharatanatyam School was started by The Music Academy in 1953. I joined dance classes in 1955. As a teacher, Balasaraswati appeared stern, but she taught in a leisurely manner and did not pressure the student to dance according to her expectations. Her outward appearance and the actual training process were contrasting. I have seen Priyamvada, who was her pet student, sitting on her lap in between classes.

In the early years Bala appeared firm and unapproachable, but later on, from the 1970s, she seemed to me a very relaxed person, who however, became emotional at times. As she taught me, I felt a sense of wonder standing in front of Bala and watching her flowing creativity. Seeing me stunned, she always had a word of encouragement and said: "Come on, you can do it".

As she taught, she could not stem her extensive creativity. Many a time she just indicated the crucial note of a sanchari. "How much or how little I give you should be on one side of your mind. It is up to you to sharpen and polish the ideas". Such were the contrasting notes of advice — caution and at the same time a certain liberty extended to the student to explore quietly. Students could not ask or choose items to be learnt from her. We had to accept whatever she taught. With maturity dawned the realisation that her emotional stress grew out of a certain possessiveness about her dance tradition. I learnt to cope with the process as it came from her. Probably that is were Bala and I met with mutual ease and understanding.

Although Bala was very much a part of our lives for over three decades, I cherish the years between 1979 and 1984, when she became emotionally attached to me, particularly after my father's death in April 1979. In the years that followed, Bala was saddened by disappointments in her personal life and the changes sweeping the Bharatanatyam scene. I visited the Music Academy almost every day, and often sat with Bala outside the building that now houses the Teachers' College of Music. With classes going on inside, Bala waited for me and then began an exchange of information, on a day to day basis. Bala poured her heart out on many occasions, expressing her deep emotions and views on the happenings around her. On one such occasion, she was in a sorrowful mood



Bala



Bala (centre) with Priyamvada (R) and little Nandini (L)

and tears were running down her cheeks. I was puzzled and visibly upset at her plight. Wiping her tears Bala looked at me and said: “You are a wife and a mother and now you will be able to understand me much better”. All I could do was to try and console her saying “Teacher, don’t cry, don’t cry”.

Every year from 1972 to 1982, Bala went on a tour of the U.S.A., entrusting to me the responsibility of conducting the dance classes at the Music Academy during that period. Her health started failing in 1983, from when I observed in her an adamant note in her attitude to life — not taking her medicines and gradually becoming weaker by the day. On one occasion, as I sat by her bedside I asked her: “Teacher, why don’t you go to the U.S. for better medical care?” She stared at me, although very weak, and made a piercing remark: “Will you send your mother away like that?” and gestured pointing one finger down to say “This is my place, this is where I belong”.

On another day, Bala made me cry. A stage artist (Komala, if I remember right), an old friend of Bala, was visiting her. By then Bala was too weak even to utter sentences. She gestured to both of us and asked us if we knew each other. Both replied in the negative. She then whispered to Komala that my Akka and I would nurture her art well (“Nallaa vecchupaanga en kalayai”). It was a memorable verdict in her last days. Coming from Balasaraswati, known for her uncompromising, tough nature as a teacher, I felt it was a real blessing from a guru that has given us the strength, courage and loyalty to continue our artistic lives, putting away the varied interpretations pointed to us, and attempts to distance us from where we belong. It is, of course, a well known fact that my father Dr. V. Raghavan remained a strong pillar of support for Bala all his life, and she too had the greatest respect and gratitude for him all her life. Dedicating

both of us to the upkeep of this sampradaya was proof of my father’s deep appreciation of Bala’s art.

Many a time, I accompanied my teacher to Kapaleeswara temple in Mylapore after dance class in the evening. Bala’s favourite was the sannidhi of Goddess Durga. As she stood there, looking intensely at Devi, Bala’s face became charged with spiritual fervour. I often wondered if Teacher was having a transcendental experience with the deity. The next evening, the class would begin with that serene experience and Bala would ask me how I had felt “there”. She would describe in admiration the simple red garb of Goddess Durga, the red hibiscus on Her head, the soft, gentle look of her Devi, showering all her compassion on her. As Bala taught *Trilochana Mohineem* a Dikshitar kriti that I was preparing for the special lecdem at the Music Academy’s annual festival marking Dikshitar’s Bicentenary (1976), I could see Goddess Durga, when the “tall, elegant Bala” stood up to demonstrate “Chandika”. I watched quietly as I could visualise in her majestic pose, the very form of the deity. At that moment Bala called out to me with her typical smile, “Hey, you have been there, haven’t you?” knowing that we had connected our vision of Durga at the temple. What an elevating experience!

Bala always danced for the gods and that is why her dance bore such a divine quality. Her art rose to great heights. While in her early years Bala was masterly in nritta, her approach to abhinaya grew more intense in her mid-years. As she once told me, it was the result of problems in her orchestral group, especially with Kandappa going away to Almora, and the ensuing changes. Then onwards Bala concentrated on her inherent penchant for abhinaya, which she enlarged and honed to perfection. She arose like a phoenix, reigning forever supreme as “abhinaya Saraswati”.

Balasaraswati was as varied in her personal qualities as she was in her interpretative skills. Her life at different stages was influenced by people around her, bringing forth her mixed emotions and reactions, which certainly had a strong impact on us at various points of time in our own lives. But what stands out as most important for me is Bala’s utter faith in Priyamvada and me, as her sincere disciples, which she demonstrated in so many unspoken words whenever she felt liberated in her thought and action. Those are the soul-filling moments of life for a loyal student.

Priyamvada and I were fortunate to have her as our guru — she from 1951 and I from 1955. It was a long and memorable association for us with this legend of Bharatanatyam. ■