

Sensitive, sensuous Shobana — the filmstar-dancer

S. Janaki

The Nritya Choodamani title was conferred on dancer Shobana on 5th December 2007 on the inaugural day of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha's 52nd Art and Dance Festival in Chennai.

There's never a dull moment when Shobana is on stage. A powerful dancer, she is blessed with the requisite attributes of a 'nartaki' — an expressive face, stunning looks, remarkable stage presence, intelligence, creativity and a passion for the art. Her 'manaseeka guru', famous Bharatanrityam exponent Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, who has known her as a child, affectionately declares that Shobana is a 'complete artist' — accomplished actor and dancer, well versed in music and aspects of laya.

Born on the day of the spring equinox on 21st March 1966 in Kerala, Shobana Chandrakumar is at the age of 41, an achiever in two fields — dance and cinema. A winner of the best actress award many times for her varied roles in films, with two national awards for *Manichitra Thazhu* and *Mitr, My Friend*, Padma Shri from the Government of India, Shobana has now added to her kitty the coveted Nritya Choodamani award for dance.

Born into a family of dancers, Shobana is the niece of the legendary Travancore Sisters Lalitha, Padmini and Ragini, who made it big in films, and on stage as well, with their popular dance-dramas. It is but natural that Shobana followed in their footsteps and started learning Bharatanatyam at a very early age.

She learnt her first dancing steps and adavu lessons to the rhythmic beats of guru K.J. Sarasa's tattukazhi. Later, after five years of intensive training at the Chidambaram Academy for Performing Arts, under the guidance of Bharatanatyam exponent Chitra Visweswaran, Shobana made her formal debut in Chennai in 1984. "She was a very intelligent, hard working and gifted student," says Chitra.

She has attended workshops and worked under the guidance of Padma Subrahmanyam who has choreographed special items for her. This could be a reason for Shobana's dance reflecting the flavour of this teacher many a time.

After her arangetram Shobana performed extensively

Shobana



CHITRA

in India and abroad. She was invited to dance at the inauguration of the Music Academy's annual music and dance festival in 1992. Over the years she has performed in several music and dance festivals in India. Her recitals abroad include the World Malayalee convention in the U.S.A., and a concert in Kuala Lumpur in the presence of the King and Queen of Malaysia. Her dance tours have taken her all over the U.S.A, Europe, Southeast Asia and Australia. Shobana has staged many fundraising

COVER STORY

performances for building and reconstruction of temples and halls in the U.S., Malaysia, and Sri Lanka.

Shobana was introduced to films by Jaya Chakravarthy, mother of another star-dancer — Hemamalini. She made a brief appearance as a child star in a Telugu film first. In 1984, the year she made her dance debut, she received a break in films too and for the first time played the lead role in a Malayalam film, *April 18*. She has acted in more than 225 films in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Hindi alongside top leading actors.

Shobana divides her time between acting and dancing. “Both are an integral part of me. Being an actress helps me know the pulse of the public and keep pace with the changing trends. As a dancer, I try and go with that pulse but, at the same time, adhere to rules,” says the star-dancer.

Shobana founded her dance school Kalarpana when she was just 20. She feels, “When you start teaching early, the next generation learns faster.” The aim of Kalarpana is to organise art festivals in different parts of the country. This will include performances by national and international artists to raise funds to teach poor children, extend support to the physically disabled and create awareness about the environmental movement. Kalarpana has more than ninety students on its rolls.

The talent of the younger generation excites and inspires Shobana to experiment and choreograph dance to different genres of music — classical, folk, fusion. With her penchant for laya — she can play the mridanga (and the flute) —



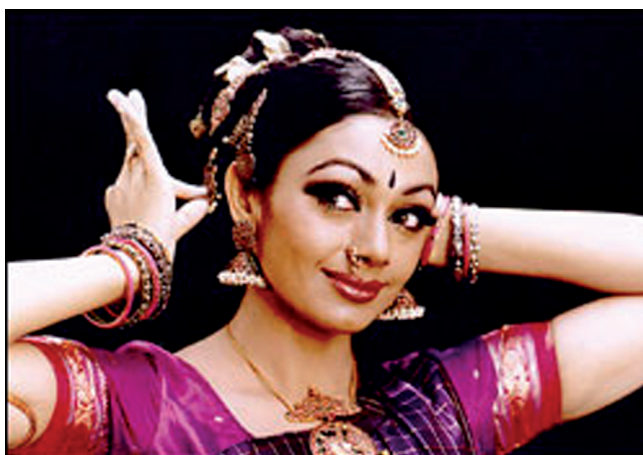
COURTESY : THE HINDU



The little dancer

COURTESY : A. VASUNDARA

costumes for her dance-based films is more traditional than what she sometimes wears on stage.



Shobana has worked on collaborative ventures with maestros like Valayapatti Subramaniam (taval), Zakir Hussain (tabla), Vikku Vinayakram (ghata), Bikram Ghosh (tabla/rhythmscapes) and U. Shrinivas (mandolin).

Drawn towards novel themes, she has choreographed many thematic items and dance theatre productions. She presented a dance item titled “Emergence of India as a World Power”, on the request of the Andhra Pradesh State government, and presented it for Bill Clinton on his visit to India.

Shobana is a sensitive artist with a flair for entertainment. Her abhinaya is more dramatic than subtle, her dancing and choreography are often cinematic — packed with vibrant, eye-catching, colourful images. She has a strong grip on laya and punctuates her sensuous, graceful movements with sudden pauses, sharp movements, striking beats, twirls and leaps, and sculptural poses to suit the nuances of the music and the tala. Her eye for aharya is intriguing — she has an array of glamorous, opulent costumes. Her choice of dance costumes for her dance-based films is more traditional than what she sometimes wears on stage.

Shobana is an ‘A-Top’ grade artist of Doordarshan. She has starred in music and dance videos.

She is a good communicator — flamboyant and extrovert and seems to carry on a casual conversation through dance with her audience, as many critics have said. As she mellows with age and moves towards introspection as she performs, her dance can acquire an added dimension of quietude. ■