

SHANTA AND DHANANJAYAN

Together every step of the way

The Dhananjayans' names are inextricably linked with Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra – probably even more so than if V.P. Dhananjayan had not left Adyar's iconic institution of classical dance back in 1967, after being identified for years as the institution's star performer, the parting of ways complete when wife Shanta left three years later.

Today, still superbly preserved, and still dancing on the performing stage, besides globetrotting to teach students and teachers in several parts of the world, Shanta and Dhananjayan, among the seniormost Bharatanatyam duos anywhere, utter the name of their alma mater with reverence and gratitude at every available opportunity. Permanent, however, seem the wounds inflicted over four decades ago by the opprobrium that attached itself to them when Rukmini Devi's favourite pupil of the time decided to sever the umbilical connection.

Their Bharata Kalanjali, within a stone's throw of Kalakshetra, is among the leading Bharatanatyam teaching

institutions. Its alumni have dance schools in the U.S.A., the U.K., Japan, Germany, Spain, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia.

These teachers visit Bharata Kalanjali regularly for reorientation courses, while the Dhananjayans are invited to conduct short and long term courses in these countries. Perhaps their greatest success overseas has been the Natya Adhyayana Gurukulam, a summer dance camp they have been conducting since 1988 at the Sachidananda Ashram at Yogaville, Virginia, U.S.A.

A setback has been the closure of Bhaaskaraa – the model Bharatanatyam village the Dhananjayans started on 20 acres of land near Payyanur – following prolonged litigation by locals opposed to the project. The other great disappointment of their life has been the decision by their talented younger son C.P. Satyajit to give up a career in Bharatanatyam in favour of one in professional photography.

In addition to teaching and training Bharatanatyam dancers and teachers, the couple have composed and performed many solo and dance-drama productions to critical acclaim over the decades, taking their art to



PUSHPA VISUALS

V. Ramnarayan

far corners of the world, and often venturing into bold collaborative projects. Examples of the Dhananjayans' original selection of a variety of themes spiritual/ mythological as well as secular/ contemporary, imaginative conceptualisation, and choreographic skills are several group or dance drama productions like *Chandalika*, *Dasavataram*, *Ekanta Seeta*, *Ghanashyam*, *Jungle Book*, *Kumarasambhavam*, *Magdalene Mariyam*, *Nandanar Charitam*, *Purush* and *Sanghamitra*. Through it all, Dhananjayan's prowess as a composer of songs for dance in Malayalam and Sanskrit has grown steadily.

Dhananjayan is now 72 and Shanta 68. Of the two, Shanta is calm and laid back, very much the quiet sheet anchor of the partnership, while Dhananjayan has been outspoken, ever ready to take up causes and shout his views from the rooftops, though he too seems to have mellowed. A great champion of male dancing talent, he has encouraged a whole brood of men-dancers known for their masculine style. Both have a way with young people, a nurturing attitude that tends towards quiet persuasion and soft-spoken encouragement of talent.

Both are known for their excellent technique and abhinaya,

COVER STORY

thanks to the rigour of Kalakshetra training and the inspiration provided by the many towering personalities there. A deep interest in the Sanskrit language, the great epics and purana-s, and the classical history of India invests their artistic practice with depth and dignity. Shanta is more musically equipped, a very good singer herself, and an accomplished nattuvanar, strong without being flamboyant. As a dancer, she is said to have the feminine grace of some senior Kalakshetra alumnae like Ambika Buch and the late Krishnaveni Lakshman.

They have both aged gracefully, though the more volatile Dhananjayan can still bristle with righteous indignation in the face of what he sees as injustice or disrespect to art and artists or make patriotic calls to his compatriots on issues of national importance. Dhananjayan is famous for the many letters he has written to newspapers and people in power, demanding action on a wide range of problems, including the menace of smoking in public places and lack of civic pride among all classes of society.

Castigated forty years ago for his decision to leave

Kalakshetra, Dhananjayan – with wife Shanta – has gone on to propagate the art he learnt there far and wide, making original contributions including the creation of new dance mudra-s and entering into collaboration with practitioners of other dance genres. Several pioneering initiatives by the couple raised eyebrows, as when they sought to defy the domination of the dance scene by sabha-s – which demanded fees from the artists for giving them performance opportunities – by doing corporate shows back in the 1970s, when such things were unheard of, but today there is no questioning their elder statesman status.

Honours and awards have come their way steadily, crowned by the Padma Bhushan in 2009. Typical of Dhananjayan, he is said to have turned down earlier awards, asking that his seniors in the field be recognised before him. As an erstwhile member of the committee of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, he was also instrumental in making a strong case for honouring some stalwarts from the south who might otherwise have been overlooked.