



IN STEP

As she carries forward the legacy of her mother, Kathak dancer Dr Maya Rao, daughter Madhu Nataraj speaks about her friend, philosopher and guide to **Ramya Srinivasan**

Nestled in a busy street in Malleswaram, Bengaluru, the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography is almost hidden like a gem. We climb the steps to be welcomed by the beautiful Madhu Nataraj, resplendent in her purple and golden ensemble with a huge *bindi* adorning her forehead. Against the backdrop of the rhythmic beats of her students in pink, we settle down for a hot cup of traditional South Indian filter coffee.

Nataraj is the daughter of Kathak dancer and octogenarian Dr Maya Rao, recipient of the President's Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. Nataraj herself was named one of India's 50 Young Achievers by *India Today* magazine in 2006 and, more recently, received the Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar from the Sangeet Natak Akademi. While her mother set up the first choreographic institute in India in 1964—Natya Institute—Madhu brought her American training in

contemporary dance to the mix and founded STEM (Space.Time.Energy. Movement) Dance Kampni as part of the Natya Institute in 1995. Over 200 dancers train in the dance programmes but only 10 of them are selected every year for the exclusive choreography programme.

Although she gave up performing in her 40s when her daughter was born, Dr Maya Rao, at the age of 86, is still actively involved in choreography and

Ma never pushed me on any decision. When I chose dancing, she simply told me, "In life, you will always have situations when you are forced to choose between money and creative satisfaction. Just be sure that you are prepared to handle those." She was the kind who would silently wait at the end of the tunnel for me

works eight hours a day. "She used to have a 19-inch waist," says Nataraj. "She gave up performing when she could not maintain that form." As she delves deeper into her mother's life and their relationship, their intimate bond become increasingly apparent. Excerpts:

Ma was not allowed to dance in her childhood. Those were pre-Independence times when an anti-dance movement was underway and the art was frowned upon. Ma was passionate about Kathak but her father did not want her to dance. He was an engineer and had no inclination towards the performing arts. This changed when he watched a performance by veteran choreographer Uday Shankar and he began to appreciate the beauty in it. He then allowed a dance teacher to come home. Ma was allowed to learn dance but not perform.

Ma promised her father she would not perform—a promise she thankfully never kept! When she studied for her master's in Maharani College, she would carry a mandolin case, pretending to play the instrument, but she would end up performing. Tragically, she lost her father when she was just 16 and the financial burden of the family fell upon her and her elder brother. Dance came to the rescue as she began to earn by teaching the art.

Ma had to travel miles to learn Kathak. In the 1950s, she shifted to Jaipur seeking Kathak gurus, but most of them had migrated to the Hindi film industry by then. After learning Kandyen dance for a couple of years in Colombo, she got a lucky break when she became the first person to receive an Indian government scholarship to study dance and trained under Padma Shri Shambu Maharaj of the Lucknow *gharana*. She was so phenomenal that he asked her to partner him in just six months. She also trained under Shri Sunderprasad of the Jaipur *gharana*.

For me, dance was an integral part of growing up and I would sleep next to the tabla. I learnt everything through osmosis, but this was in stark contrast to Ma's experience. In the 1960s, she went all the way to Russia to learn choreography. She speaks fluent Russian to date. She was also chosen to consult in the Bolshoi production of *Shakunthala*. This experience was immensely rewarding to her and she still recounts Russia as a favourite among the places she has travelled to.

Ma founded the Natya Institute in 1964 in Delhi after her return from Russia. She was bent on creating a pedagogic methodology for dance and knew the power of structure in promoting arts. She was also keen on adapting Kathak for the Indian dancer. The comprehensive course includes studies on the Indian and world history of choreography, anthropology and architecture, among others. In 1987, the institute was moved to Bengaluru and the course was converted into a degree affiliated with Bengaluru University.

I never wanted to become a dancer. Although I learnt dancing as a child and could identify complicated rhythm patterns when I was just three, I never wanted to pursue it as a career. Since my childhood, I have met doyens who were very committed but struggled financially. I always thought I would contribute to dance from the periphery. Between the ages of 15 and 19, I refused to dance and even when I graduated in commerce, I tried everything from painting and writing to theatre, with the exception of dance.

The universe has a mysterious way of bringing you back to your roots. When I was 19 years old, I attended a workshop in Delhi, which had some famous dancers as participants. I attended a course on 'improvisation' by Sarah Pearson, in which she challenged us to use the index finger and create 30 movements. She concluded, "If you can create 30 movements with just three joints, there is no end to what you can create with your entire body." Till then, I had always thought of dance as instructional and set in stone, but a new thought germinated in me: "Can we ever be short of creating?" Immediately, I called Ma to tell her that I wanted to learn choreography.

My father waited 15 years to marry Ma; they married when she was 36. They met in true *filmi* style, when Ma put together a performance in Maharani College and a musician failed to turn up. My father was a proficient musician who could play 12 instruments. He agreed to perform and the rest was a 'choreographic *netra milan*', as Ma calls it. Even after their wedding, dad stayed in Bengaluru and Ma was busy in Delhi with the Natya Institute.

My father was like Santa Claus to me. I stayed with Ma in Delhi and dad used to visit twice a year on Diwali and

my birthday, with loads of gifts. He was a dynamic yet difficult person who was very opinionated. The long-distance relationship meant that a lot of responsibility fell on Ma's shoulders and I admire her for the way she carried herself. Dad passed away when I was just 26 years old. It was one of the toughest moments in Ma's and my life. Seeing a strong person like that disintegrate was heart-wrenching. In moments like these, Ma and I stood by each other, silently and strongly.

Ma never pushed me on any decision. When I chose dancing, she simply told me, "In life, you will always have situations when you are forced to choose between money and creative satisfaction. Just be sure that you are prepared to handle those." She was the kind who would silently wait at the end of the tunnel for me. She is extremely responsible, caring and patient, but she can be stubborn. She always told me and her students that one does not have to be aggressive to get something; it can be achieved with grace and without loss of dignity.

Ma advised me to take risks and question the status quo, and to focus on the experience rather than the result. I remember an incident before my board exams. The culture in Delhi, then, was academic and children would be goaded towards writing IAS entrance exams and mothers would coax kids to finish their meals to get to their homework. At this time, the Bolshoi Company came to perform *Swan Lake* and Ma asked me to come and watch it. She said, "You may flunk your exams tomorrow but there will be no Soviet Union left in a few years and I doubt you will ever get to experience the same production quality." She was absolutely right as the experience was unforgettable.

Ma always put the studio first. Irrespective of whether the studio made a profit or not, Ma continued to take only her usual salary. When I was growing up, Ma would shuttle between the studio and home, and I remember carrying my homework to the studio. However, by the age of 12, I had travelled to 18 countries. She took me along whether she had to travel third class or stay in a five-star hotel. The gamut of experiences I had was incomparable.

I never felt the burden of being in her shadow because our styles are different. Ma's presentation is traditional Kathak but my production vocabulary is contemporary



and deals with themes like feminism and drug abuse, and delves into the realms of the philosophical and mystical. As we have both retained our maiden surnames, some are not aware of our connection. Both of us have the same value system but the choreography approaches are different and the copyrights are separate.

Ma and I are both voracious readers. While dad introduced me to *Amar Chitra Katha*, Ma introduced me to Enid Blyton and Charles Dickens. We are both tea addicts and share a common passion for travel. Whenever we save money, we splurge it on travel rather than jewellery. We also share a common craze for Kanjivaram saris. I still stay in the same apartment building as Ma's, though I often travel to Mumbai as my husband lives there.

Ma was a pioneer in whatever she did. She got a lot of flak when I brought in the contemporary aspect but she was always of the opinion that being in India, which offers a unique confluence of tradition and modernism, one should be open to both. Mothers usually promote their children but she never did that. I might have been the 250th student to debut from the institute and had to train for four years before doing so.

Ma always says, 'If you fall, just get up, brush yourself off and go on.' That summarises her approach to life. There is no time to sulk. But the beauty is that she never lost her feminine instinct while doing so. ❀