

Kolima's Dance Class

by Malini Srinivasan

I remember dozens of *chappals* and shoes piled up at the entryway of the flat, emitting a fragrant fog of damp leather. Bombay after the monsoons always felt moist, and smelled slightly of mold. Before you entered the flat, you could hear the crisp sound of wood striking rhythmically against wood and girls laughing and chattering in a jumble of Hindi, Tamil, English, and Marathi. Inside the main room of the flat, bare of furniture and floored with unforgiving cement covered by mosaic tiles, about twenty dance students dressed in *salwar kameez* lined up in rows at the back of the classroom. Four dancers started their dance steps, *theermanam adavus*, coming toward their teacher as they danced to the rhythmic syllables “*tei dit dit tei*.” Every so often the teacher would correct a student, “Baito! Sit! Lift your elbows.” When one line of dancers reached the front of the classroom, the next line would start.

Conducting this rigorous Bharatanatyam drill was none other than my grandmother, whom we all affectionately called Kolima, seated on the floor on a straw mat, her spine straight as a young neem tree. She wielded a wooden stick, and kept the beat against a rectangular wood block on the floor. The block had been chiseled into a smooth arc through the beats of countless dance classes. At night, the same straw mat became Kolima's bed, the wooden block her pillow, the arc in the wood revealing the sole hint of comfort. Kolima wore nine-yard silk saris, softened by years of use. I remember her in rich, saturated Kancheepuram colors: plum, blood orange, mustard, all edged in gold. She wore traditional jewelry—seven diamonds at her nose and ears, and a long, meticulously applied U (Vaishnavite caste mark) on her large forehead.

Komalavalli, my grandma, was born around 1921 to a Brahmin (priestly caste) family in Kombakonam, a small town in central Tamil Nadu. She began learning Bharatanatyam when she was seven years old from Sri Tiruvallaputhur Swaminathan Pillai who was then teaching at her school. “He taught with a ‘katai’



Kolima

Photo courtesy of Malini Srinivasan

(stick). You had to do it very correctly. They would lift and place the feet. It made holes in the ground. Then it was all mud; only afterwards they put cement and fixed the holes,” she told me laughingly. Kolima learned with Tiruvallaputhur Swaminathan Pillai until she was twelve. “Then it stopped. Why? Because in the old days they would not allow you to dance in public. We could only dance up to age twelve, that was all.” At that

time, Bharatanatyam was still strongly associated with the Devadasis, or courtesans, the traditional practitioners of the dance. Brahmins considered it immodest and immoral for a woman to “display herself” on stage, so the few who learned were only permitted to dance until they reached puberty.

At age fifteen, Kolima got married and moved to Bombay. One of the first Bharatanatyam teachers in Bombay, she

began accepting students around 1941, but with strict limitations. Although her husband permitted her to teach, she was never allowed to go on stage, or even to attend the performances. “We should only be looking after him. Someone else would take over to conduct the performance. I would not even go to the program, not even to see it.”

My grandfather Krishnamani died of colon cancer in 1962. By any measure this was a terrible loss for Kolima and her four children: they were left without a stable income. Widowhood, however, gave a certain space for Kolima to focus and develop her art and the dance school. Bharatanatyam became a primary element of Kolima’s life, and, by extension, her children’s. Kolima established the Gitanjali Dance Academy in 1964, one of the first schools of its kind in Bombay. She taught my mother, Radha, who brought the dance with her to Maryland when she moved to the United States with her family in 1974. My mother taught dance in the basement of our suburban home and put my sister and me on stage for talent shows and Indian cultural events.

Every summer, my sister and I would happily dance in Kolima’s class, despite sulkily resisting dance lessons with our mother back home. In Bombay, there were so many students of all ages, nobody seemed to feel self-conscious or shy. The class was rigorous and repetitive, but not without respite. Even when the students danced, they would carry on a playful repartee with each other, which continued after class. If Kolima singled you out in the class, it was as often as not to comment on how well you were doing something: “*Besh, besh*” she would say!

In this atmosphere, my sister and I blossomed, free from scrutiny or judgment. This was exceptional for us, especially as we grew older. As American girls in India, we often were painfully singled out, either stared at and glamorized or criticized for our “bad” behavior. Trips to India made the awkwardness of adolescence feel more acute, as we were subtly and directly instructed to



Malini and her older sister, Ranjani.

Photo courtesy Malini Srinivasan

hide any signs of developing womanhood. But Kolima had her own views on us and did not judge the changes we were going through. She loved to see our American clothes and especially liked to see us wear stylish sleeveless shirts, considered by the other adults as too risqué for Bombay. Kolima once watched me dancing and (within my earshot) said to my mother, “she looks like Parvati Devi,” the Hindu Goddess. It was a phrase I turned around in my mind for years to come, a voice to counter the confusion and self-loathing of adolescence.

In Kolima’s class we felt like dancing; it was the natural thing to do. It was also, in some ways, the only thing to do. During class, all the efforts of the house would focus around the dance. My aunts would be busy in the kitchen making coffee and perhaps frying some hot *vadas* for after the class. Often my uncles would watch the class or help with the tape recorder. All my cousins would be dancing, and we wanted to be where they were. Plus, there were the students, many of whom had become part of our extended dance-family. So though no one put pressure on us to learn dance, the gravitational force of Kolima’s house led to the dance floor.

Abhinaya (mime, the use of facial expressions and hand gestures to tell a story) was Kolima’s forte. Her approach to facial expression paralleled her relaxed attitude toward everything else; it emphasized natural, ever-changing expressions and lacked any kind of rigid formality. Watching Kolima demonstrate mime, her students developed an internal sense of expression rather than a set of formally learned faces and eye movements. I remember hearing her questions, “How would you call Krishna? Call him!” I would call him with my face and my hands and I could, for brief moments, feel his playful resistance.

In the still mornings, if I arose early enough, I would find Kolima in her *puja* room, chanting in a misty and fragrant semi-darkness. It was a precious and peaceful hour that slowly transformed into the bright bustle of joint-family life and the dance class. But Kolima seemed to retain that peace of dawn and bring

it with her everywhere. Her dance class was largely shaped by her personality. Her open-mindedness, her generosity, her love for both the dance and for her students shone through every aspect of the class.

Kolima died in October 2011, ending an era in our family’s life, but surviving as a continual source of love and inspiration. In my daily dance practice, as I learn from my guru, and interact with my students, I continue to interpret and understand what I learned from my mother and grandmother. Much of what I express through dance comes from seeds that were planted long ago, without my knowledge or will, couched in memories of childhood play. I hope that through continuing to dance, learn, and teach, these seeds will have the chance to germinate. Every day, new memories surprise me.

Malini Srinivasan is a dancer, teacher and choreographer based in Queens, NY. She works as a teaching artist with City Lore and Symphony Space. (See related story on p. 22)

www.malinisrinivasan.com