

An Indian Dance Sensation

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A dance form finds inspiration in American tap dance and cultural exchange.

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West and East meet in Pandit Chitresh Das's practice and performance of Kathak, one of the many forms of classical Indian dance.

This blending presents opportunities, but also poses many challenges.

"In the west, there tends to be a lumping together of cultures and it is difficult for people to distinguish folk dance from pop art such as Bollywood and classical dance such as Kathak," says Das.

"There is so much complexity, nuance, and history to the art form that it takes time for people to understand so that they can fully appreciate all of the subtleties."

Das began teaching Kathak in the United States many years ago, beginning at the University of Maryland. Since then, he has taught and toured all over the U.S., including Seattle, the second U.S. city that Das visited.

"It was the first time I had ever seen the show," Das says. "It was an incredible experience."

Das's most recent performance in Seattle occurred last April, with tap dancer Jason Samuels Smith, with whom Das has been collaborating and touring for the past five years.

"We met back stage when we were both performing at the American dance festival," Das says. "We were not performing together, but started jamming back stage."

Das reports that he found a great connection with Smith. "He is a deep thinker in his art, he is very strong in his tradition, and he is always

practicing,” Das says.

Das also reports similarities in the two dance forms of Kathak and tap.

“In the Kathak tradition, we improvise rhythms and exchange at very fast speeds with the tabla player (percussionist),” he says.

“Tap also has an improvisational tradition. It is on this basis that we collaborate and build a tremendous energy.”

This energy has carried them through five years and multiple projects.

“I like to collaborate with those artists who are very open, who are strong in their own tradition and who also believe in Seva (service) to society,” he says.

Das appreciates his opportunities to perform in the United States, despite the challenges of constant travel between India and the U.S. in order to run his dance schools and continue his heavy performance schedule.

“There is also a tremendous openness here and I have found that audiences, even if they don’t understand everything, they respond to the performances regardless, and I have seen a marked change over the years of increasing openness to diverse cultures.”

That openness has resulted in Das receiving the National Heritage Award from the National Endowment for the Arts this past month.

Of this honor, Das says, “The great award is seeing future generations get excited in the U.S. and in India about finding themselves through the art.”

Chitresh Das Dance Company performs on October 17, 2009, at Meany Hall for the Performing Arts, University of Washington, at 15th Ave NE and NE 40th St., Seattle.