

Dancing between worlds

Thoroughly American Metroplex kids explore their Indian heritage in a traditional and colorful way

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Backstage at Will Rogers Auditorium, it's sensory overload. The narrow hallways are teeming with kids of all ages wearing elaborate costumes in lime green and bright blue, hot pink, electric orange. Their voices bounce off the tile as they chatter, adorning themselves and each other with the trappings of traditional Indian dance - tying on elaborate headwear, slipping heavy bracelets over their wrists, placing colorful bindis on their foreheads and draping beads and shiny necklaces, one after the other, around their necks.

They jingle lightly as they walk, their costumes covered with beads and tiny mirrors. Then they abandon their backpacks full of jeans and T-shirts, kick off their Crocs and flip-flops, and pad barefoot to the stage for rehearsal.

"1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8, and then turn around, then we go all the way to the back."

"1-2-3-4, then we do the diamond."

"You slide out that way. No, that way."

Their teacher, Ranna Jani, her long hair loosely braided down her back, floats through the chaos of her groups practicing in the close quarters of backstage. She's mothering her dancers, tying on parts of their costumes, answering their questions, kissing their cheeks. She is unrushed, not betraying a single moment of nervousness or distraction.

"Can I get all the minors over here?" she calls out - not loudly, not forcefully, but the kids hear her and follow. Immediately, the smallest ones separate themselves from the tangle of giggles and costumes and circle around.

Balancing act

The dancers, all of Indian origin, live in cities all over the Metroplex. They were born in the United States, part of the first or second American-born generation in their families. But their parents, wanting them to maintain a connection to India in their all-American lives, have involved them in Jani's Aradhana Dance Company to learn the traditional dances of Gujarat, the Indian state where many of their family members still live.

On this Sunday afternoon, the dancers are performing at a fundraiser for a new Hindu temple in Fort Worth. There are opening prayers, dances, a play that celebrates Lord Krishna. Meanwhile, there's a gun show next door in the exhibit hall and, a few buildings over, a world-championship miniature horse show. It's East meets West, a blending of cultures and lifestyles. It represents the sort of balance that Jani has been striking for decades, since she and her husband, Rajni Jani, moved to Texas from India - the same balance she is helping her young dancers find in their own lives.

Jani has always danced, but she got serious about teaching 20 years ago when her son Alap was 8. She started teaching him, and in 1992, she founded Aradhana and started accepting more students. Today, parents find her by word of mouth, enrolling their kids from as far away as Plano. And her dance teams have become known for winning big at the biggest annual national competition.

Every summer, Gujarati organizations from across the United States send dance teams to the Raas, Garba and Folk Dance competition hosted by FOGANA, the Federation of Gujarati Associations in North America. At the July competition - the 30th annual contest - dance groups from across the country gathered in Richardson, where Jani's students won in several categories, beating out teams from places such as New York and Charlotte, N.C. It's part of a winning tradition for Jani, who has become sort of a celebrity in the Indian dance world. Almost every year, her students win for dancing, for choreography, for costumes.

A matter of choice

The group's strength is Raas dances, folk dances that depict stories and celebrate Krishna, and that's mostly what they're performing at Will Rogers. Jessica Bhandari, 15, considers it the Hindu version of, say, a Christmas play that might celebrate the birth of Jesus. Dancers move constantly across the stage, pairing off and moving into elaborate formations. They up the visual excitement with dandiya, lightweight sticks that they twirl, toss and hit together to reinforce the rhythm.

Backstage, Maitry Shah is leading three boys around, one of whom is her 9-year-old son, Dilan. Dilan and his older sister are the second generation of the Shah family to be born in the United States; their mother grew up American, too. But she learned to do traditional dances when she was a child, and she wanted her kids to have the same connection to the family roots, even though so much of their lives are thoroughly American.

"These kids were born and raised here," Shah says. "They do tae kwon do and karate and sports - and then they do this." This year, she was impressed that her son and his friends chose to devote their summer to a heavy schedule of dance practices, giving up camps and other activities.

"Nobody's doing it because somebody told them they have to do it," she says. "They understand the commitment and what it involves."

Jani's students have practiced in warehouses and community centers. Before the family added a studio to the back of the house, the dancers arrived at 6 a.m. on summer mornings to practice in

the back yard before the heat became unbearable. They perform at community gatherings, arts festivals, fundraisers. And they work hard, especially in the spring and summer, when they prepare for the FOGANA competition.

'A physical connection'

After all these years, Ranna Jani never has charged for the lessons. Students pay for costumes and contest registration fees, but the lessons are free.

"I could have [charged], but I felt like I was doing community service," she says.

Besides that, it's a personal mission for Jani. She has danced since she was a child. "I think it's in my blood," she says. "All my sisters did it, my mom did it." In 1978, when she left India to join her new husband in Texas, they planned to go home after three or four years. Instead, they stayed: Jani found herself falling in love with American life and learning how to build a life that embraced both her native country and her new home.

Early on, she realized that some of her friends' children were embarrassed about their cultural identity.

"Their kids told them, 'Mom, don't dress Indian when you come to school to pick me up,'" she says. "I didn't even have kids then, but that's when I decided: I'm not going to have my kids be ashamed of being Indian."

When her son Alap was old enough to appreciate the culture lesson, she started teaching him traditional Indian dance. Then she started teaching other kids, founding her dance company out of her Overton Park home. Now there are dozens of kids learning dance at any given time. Many of them start when they're 5 or 6 years old and continue through high school, taking their skills with them to college to join dance groups at their universities and making Indian dance a lifelong connection to their heritage.

The next generation of Janis has carried on the tradition. By the time Alap Jani went to college, he was hooked: He founded a student dance team at Stanford that is still going strong, even though he has gone on to medical school and started his residency. (The team's called Basmati Raas, a play on the basmati rice that's common in Indian dishes.) And Ami Jani, who has been dancing since before she started school, has turned her passion for the arts into a lifelong pursuit. She graduated this year from Washington University in St. Louis, where she majored in international studies and minored in dance - and now she's using her knowledge of cultures and dance to help her mother teach and operate the dance school.

"It's hard not to be completely assimilated into the culture," Ami Jani says. "The only way to be proud of a culture is to feel like you're part of it. By knowing how to do these traditional cultural dances, you feel like you're part of that culture. You have a physical connection to it."

In high school at Fort Worth Country Day School, Ami Jani was the only Indian in her class, but she shared so much of her heritage, she says, that her closest friends became "fairly good experts

on Indian culture." There were henna parties for her birthday, Indian dancing at school talent shows, a Bollywood-themed junior prom and the sense of sharing among friends with different backgrounds. And the Janis have taken their children to India many times, letting them absorb the place and the culture and get to know their extended family.

"I'm very grounded in my American background," Ami Jani says, "so I don't think I could ever live anywhere but the United States. But I'm still proud of my heritage - both sides."

World movement

Onstage at Will Rogers Auditorium, it's a flurry of color as the dancers move as a group, twirling bodies, jingling costumes, flashing bracelets and necklaces, their bare feet slapping against the scuffed stage. For the finale, 16 dancers fill the stage, shimmering and sparkling in the stage lights.

When it's over, they file back into the dressing rooms, breathless, grabbing small bottles of water and blurting out where they messed up, when their jewelry almost fell off, who accidentally dropped their sticks. And when they leave the dressing rooms, they've changed back into Dallas Cowboys and Texas Longhorns T-shirts and they're fiddling with their cellphones. They've left their costumes behind to slip seamlessly back into American teen culture. It's an effortless transition, and it's one they'll be able to make all their lives.

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