

■ Dancer Rina Mehta talks about her journey, differences of styles in gharanas

Finding her feet in Kathak

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focus

When tall, slender and graceful Rina Mehta, disciple of veteran Kathak guru Pandit Chitesh Das, talks about the art form she chose to stick with, her spirit shines through. For U.S.-born Mehta, Indian dance was something that caught her fancy since she was a small girl. Being a Gujarati, her first brush with Indian dances was twirling to *garba* and *dandiya raas*.

Though Mehta was born in the U.S. she says her life has always been split between the two cultures. She did her primary schooling in Gujarat, India and her high school and college in the U.S. Even in college, she opted for exchange programmes in India. An Immunology student, Mehta did her Masters in Public Health from the University of California, Berkeley during which she lived and studied in Delhi for a year. For her Full Bright scholarship, she chose Indian women's empowerment as her research topic and travelled across India extensively.

Mehta participated in many folk dance competitions after that, but always had a special longing to learn classical dance. Her parents could not afford classical dance tuitions at the time, so Mehta, a high school student, took up a part-time job just so that she could pay for her dance classes. Because her working parents could not drive her to the class, she found a Bharatnatyam class at walking distance and started learning the ropes of a classical dance form that originated in the sacred temples of southern India, diligently.

"I don't know how to express it...but I am drawn to Indian classical dance, I can't give you a logical reason. I started with whatever I could," says Mehta when I quiz her about taking up Bharatnatyam. "At that time, Bharatnatyam was what was available. I just wanted to study classical dance and in the U.S.,



Rina Mehta at one of her solo performances

Bharatanatyam is quite prolific. There are many Bharatnatyam teachers and many Bharatnatyam schools in the U.S., unlike any other Indian dance form," she informs.

Mehta found her calling in Kathak in the year 2000, when she moved to San Francisco Bay area to pursue college, after her schooling in Los Angeles. She was looking to continue her Bharatnatyam classes and visited a couple of schools around, but she didn't feel a connection with any of them. That's when a friend suggested Mehta to go watch a Kathak class right on the campus. "I was very hesitant because I didn't want to switch from Bharatnatyam to Kathak, but my friend managed to persuade me to go watch the Kathak class," reminisces Mehta. She walked into Pandit Chitresh Das' Kathak studio at the Telegraph Avenue without a clue that her life would change that day, forever. She was smitten by this 500-year-or-so-old art form.

"I have always loved to dance and I have always loved Indian classical dance. But if it wasn't for my *guruji* (Pandit Das), I wouldn't have been able to take the art form and my study of the art form to the level I have taken it and even think of taking it up professionally," says Mehta with gratitude. Gurus or teachers are very important when it comes to mastering an art form, and Mehta considers herself lucky to be under the tute-

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— RINA MEHTA, dancer

and is now able to make some sentences, owing to the grand preparations it requires to finally become an independent Kathak performer.

Mehta performed her first solo in India at the Little Theatre, Mumbai NCPA on March 7, to a packed audience. The evening saw Mehta dissect the two fames traditions of Kathak dance, the Lucknow and Jaipur *gharanas*, to emphasise the subtle differences between them. The show showcased the technical differences between the Lucknow and Jaipur *gharanas*.

On stage, Mehta skillfully demonstrated

the *nazakhat* (delicacy), *kh ubsoorti* (beauty) and sensuality that is associated with the Lucknow *gharana* which emerged and flourished in the decadent courts and then glided effortlessly into the powerful, speedy Jaipur *gharana* that reminds you of its strong Rajput warrior origins in stance and techniques, leaving the audience in awe. "It is not to say that Lucknow style doesn't have the prowess or speed or Jaipur style lacks beauty and sensuality, both the schools have emphasised and explored these too aspects differently," signs off Mehta.

lage of Pandit Das and to learn the dance form she loves and cherishes in the true *gurukul* tradition.

In Mehta's observation, in the U.S., the infrastructure for classical music and dance is stronger. She says, today, an average classical musician can get a job at Symphony and make a very decent living. "In India or even in the U.S., for Indian classical dance and music, where is such scope? Where is the infrastructure and where is the patronage? The operas and the ballets, they have massive endowments and patronage. This is not just from the government, but even from the society, even if it is not the whole society. I find that piece missing here," she observes.

What Mehta finds very endearing of Kathak dance is that both its depth and width are so great, that one can spend a lifetime trying to explore it. "The dimension Kathak has is endless and one has to master the technique, footwork, pirouettes, dynamic movements, along with beauty and grace. You must also have the knowledge of compositions. Not only that, one has to master *abhinaya* because you are trying to tell a story," explains Mehta.

After studying the art form for 10-12 years, the danseuse feels she has finally finished her ABCs

