

A Dance Village: Nrityagram

Nancy Zrymiak is fascinated by traditional Indian dance.

Precision, strength, passion, grace, control, beauty, magic; I could go on and on, yet I cannot find the perfect word to describe the Nrityagram dancers. Last November I had a chance to see three of the dancers perform Odissi at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bangalore. Odissi is a classical Indian dance described as “a synthesis of the ancient and exotic and modern and intellectual. Odissi creates an illusion of sculpture coming to life.” The dancers capture this description perfectly. This dance troupe tours the world and they are world class. I have never seen such synchronicity; they dance as one.

Nrityagram dance village is 35 km northwest of Bangalore and is home to the dancers. They live together in their small sanctuary – an ashram to dance really -and practice almost every day. The public can visit the village and watch rehearsals most days.

When you arrive at Nrityagram you leave behind the noise and turmoil of the city. Breathe in the fresh air. Whisper, don't break the silence. Follow the winding stone path under trellises and trees. Enjoy the sight of a small statue on a ledge or many scattered atop a grassy pitch.

Village life is all encompassing and includes yoga, meditation, Sanskrit and



Photos by Nan Melville (1), Nancy Zrymiak (2)

intense dance education. Each dancer strives to grow to the height of their spiritual, intellectual and artistic potential. They commit themselves to dance and the ways of village life for years.

The three hour rehearsal starts by taking the dancers through a series of seemingly effortless movements. After half an hour, sweat soaks their clothing and we begin to understand the difficulty and strength required to perform these unique movements.

This day, five women and two men rehearse. Some are stronger and more experienced than others. They instruct and help each other. This type of Indian classical dance is so detailed; it is incomparable. The dancers must train their brain to connect to every muscle in their body – to move independently

of one another – that is how in touch with their body they are.

At one point the instructor spoke to two of the dancers, asking them to only move their torso. “Left side up, down; right side up, down. Just move your torso, it is not necessary to move your neck or lower body.”

Then she asked for the opposite, “Move only your lower body without moving the upper. They do not have to be connected.” And then she stood up and demonstrated the movement with incredible ease, her upper body completely still.

Much emphasis is on the eyes and facial expression, as the dancer always tells a story. Fingers and hand movements, and every muscle follow along to do their part to create perfection.

The dancers live in simple surroundings, and grow most of their own food. There is a temple, an outdoor yoga center, and of course the dance studio. They live in small round huts. The buildings are architecturally appealing, made of stone and wood. Flowering bushes and trees abound and add to the natural, calming ambiance.

It is certainly a sight to behold; tranquil, serene, euphoric, and relaxing, the entire day was simply marvellous! ❁

