

A DANSEUSE WITH TELLING EXPRESSIONS

Anushree Madhavan talks to Mumbai-based Kathak dancer Sanjukta Wagh, who is known for her powerful expressions on stage

PHOTOS: PRAKASH CHELLAMUTHU

When you watch Sanjukta Wagh dance, it is her expressions that you notice first. You can understand the story through her dance even without any narration. The Kathak danseuse from Mumbai was recently in *Namma Coimbatore* to perform at the Isha Yoga.

Sanjukta has had a fairly long association with dance. A disciple of Rajashree Shirke, she started learning Kathak at the age of six. "I am one of the senior-most students of Rajashree Shirke as I was fortunate enough to be in the first batch of her dance school," said Sanjukta who has trained under her teacher for 22 years.

With a keen interest in *abhinaya* and telling stories through the dance form, Sanjukta believed that she is a dancer and rebelled against the idea of an *arangetram*. "At the age of 24, I thought of putting up a two-hour show and I succeeded. But I

learnt that there is lot more than just creation and choreography," she said.

She later explored dance through various methods. "I was pursuing my masters in literature and I simultaneously began researching on dance," she said. It was then that she came up with a choreo-poem. It was based on the poem 'For Coloured Girls', written by African-American poet Ntozake Shange, where she portrayed a dual role of a girl from Benaras and from Los Angeles through dance.

The nimble-footed danseuse is also trained in contemporary form and ballet from London.

"At one point I wanted to know the language that my body spoke.

Since I was young I have been practicing Kathak but I wanted to learn more about my body and learnt these two dance

forms, which I must say is very diffi-

cult," she quipped.

Learning other dance forms, however, does not mean that she tries mixing the dance forms in her choreography. "I have learnt contemporary dance for a year and Kathak for more than 22 years. I adopt the methodology of contemporary dance form but retain the techniques of Kathak. I just want to push more boundaries as I believe classical dance is an expression," she explained. It is like how each person speaks English differently.

After poems, she went on to explore the works of Kabir Das and choreographed pieces on his couplets. "I did two productions called *Akath Katha* and *Bheetar Bahar* and tried improvising the couplets with my dance," she said.

With so many performances it is difficult to choose one that is close to her heart. "But I cherish the one I did on Marathi Vaarkari poems called *Ubha Vite Vari*. It dealt with Lord Vitthala waiting on one foot for his devotee to meet him when it was raining. In this



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performance I danced in an area of one square foot. I also collaborated with carnatic musicians who played the *Ghatam*, *Kanjira* and *Mridangam*," she reminisced.

Sanjukta felt that audiences abroad are more appreciative than the domestic connoisseurs. "Every dance piece has a reason, story and energy. When you perform the body becomes the carrier of all energies that other dancers who performed the piece experienced. For example, people feel that doing the *chakkars* (spins) in Kathak is difficult. Once there is a focus all the energy comes to you and you can do it easily and that is very special when you perform," she said.

Her dream as a dancer is to have a knowledge park of dance where energies from different discipline come together, as when these energies are sustained, she believes a transformation occurs. "I now run an institute called Beej and I want this to grow as an art village which is democratic and where people come together to cross their boundaries," she signed off.