



PHILAN M. EBENHACK

Geeta Raaj Karkera

Dancer, choreographer, teacher and founder of Nritya Academy Geeta Raaj began taking dance lessons in her native India at the age of five. Winning the intercollegiate competitions at the Bombay University Youth Festival earned her modest recognition as a dancer. She learned three forms of dance, including Bharathanatyam, which she teaches at the Orlando Mandir Hindu Temple. "It is an ancient classical dance form of India," says Raaj. "It is 'yoga in movement.' It allows us to express our feelings."

She studied at the most prestigious dance academy in Mumbai, and in her early teens, she worked with the National Cadet Corps, teaching dance to a small group of underprivileged children. Married young, she began working and attending school full time.

"Seeing my potential at 21, my Guruji blessed me with permission to teach officially at the Music Triangle in Santacruz. My very first arangetram, a dance debut or graduation of a student, was in 1978. Today I have 110 such arangetrams to my credit."

Raaj moved to Florida in 1990 and lived in Ocala until 1998, when she relocated to Orlando. At one point, Raaj was the only local source for instruction of the sacred dance form. "In the early '90s, I was the only mobile-unit guru for Bharathanatyam in Central Florida," she says. "I taught in Ocala, Gainesville, Lake City, Jacksonville, Orlando, Lakeland and Tampa. I covered a distance of a thousand miles a week imparting this art."

Not only has Raaj dedicated her life to teaching her craft, but she continues to study it as well. "What I know is a drop in the ocean. Consistent acquiring of knowledge is necessary to be able to choreograph and teach and I visit India every year to learn from the knowledgeable."

You can call Raaj at 407.265.9959 or email geetaraaj@gmail.com. **oam**