

Teaching the intricacies of Indian dance

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Dressed in a brilliant peacock-blue sari, Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan is surrounded by a sea of reds, pinks, greens, oranges and golds in the costumes worn by her students as she leads them through classical Bharatanatyam Indian dance movements.

To her students and their parents, she is called Guru Kamala (Teacher Kamala) or Kamala maimi (aunt), and in her winter years she is passing down her extensive knowledge of the traditional dance to young girls.

Kamala has her students focus on the mudras, the expressive hand movements that help tell a song's story, as her students practice in a [Port Jefferson](#) home recently. Then, she moves to footwork, asking them to practice an intricate rhythm of shifting steps, some done in a three-beat that's so quick, the extra beat is more easily heard than seen.

"I must have been a dancer in my previous life because dance came easily to me," Kamala says, noting that she started taking lessons at age 31/2. "It continues even now," she says. But these days, she is less flexible, and it's harder to spin. "It's more difficult during the winter because of old age," she explains. "It is hard to dance during that time. The [arthritis](#), it pains."

Kamala has been teaching Bharatanatyam dance in [New York](#) and [New Jersey](#) since the mid-1970s, when she first journeyed to the United States from [India](#) and taught at [Colgate University](#). In 1980, she moved permanently from [India](#) to [New York](#) and now, at 78, lives in [Mastic](#) and teaches these special dances to private students. A widow, Kamala has a grown son who lives in California.



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She's well known in Indian dance circles from her days as a child star in Indian films, explains

Sridevan Krishnaswamy, 52, whose daughters have taken lessons from her. Recently, he and his wife hosted the dance lessons in their [Port Jefferson](#) home, where they have a dance studio. Sridevan says parents of Kamala's students rotate hosting the lessons.

Kamala began performing at age 5 and appeared in nearly 100 movies produced in [Bollywood](#) - first silent movies and then "talkies." "She's the [Elizabeth Taylor](#) of India," Sridevan says.

She specializes in the vadhuvor style of Bharatanatyam, which is based on choreography developed by teachers from a village near [Chennai](#) (formerly Madras) and is known for its grace and structural poses. "My teachers taught me so much," she says. "My repertoire became so large, I am able to choreograph whatever new songs I get now." (See a vintage video of Kamala demonstrating Bharatanatyam on [YouTube](#); go to bit.ly/13ztJBL.)

Among the honors she has received in recognition of her dancing is India's Padma Bhushan award, an honor bestowed on her in 1970 by the government for distinguished service. In this country, she was named a 2010 National Heritage Fellow by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) in the traditional and folk arts category (1.usa.gov/UZZwvj).

Although Kamala mostly teaches these days, she occasionally performs and often dances alongside her students. "When I teach the dance, I tell them the story to get them acquainted with the emotion of the person and the situation," she says. "I give them a good picture so they can perform well."

Kamala is famous for her flexibility, stamina and the emotion she brought to her dances, Sridevan says, and as a teacher, "she's a taskmaster."

She agrees. "They have to watch my face as I show them the movements for anger," Kamala says of her students. One girl demonstrates; with her body arching back, she extends a leg and brings her hands to her eyes with three fingers extended and two circled to frame her face, part of a finger language that Guru Kamala says is similar to sign language. "Then I say, 'Show me how you show you're angry, depressed, happy' and watch them to make sure they learn the movement."

Many of her students have grown up in America, with only summer trips to India to visit grandparents. They gather for several hours most Sundays to practice, learning more about their Hindu religion and traditions through the dances. The Bharatanatyam dance got its start as a temple dance in the South India state of [Tamil Nadu](#), as dancers worshipped the gods by telling stories about their lives and deeds, explains Kamala.

The style is now one of India's more popular classical dance forms. It carries a whole vocabulary of strong glances and hand gestures that express complex ideas and emotions. A dancer's eye contact, finger positions and poses can mean thousands of different things in certain combinations. The rhythmic dance elements combine with the dramatic gestures to tell the stories. In a performance, often there's narration of the story before the dance begins so viewers understand what they will be watching.

The students' mothers often record the lessons so the girls can refer to the tapes as they practice at home. Kamala asks them to practice an hour every day, or at least two or three times a week. "I tell them crisp hands, not sagging," she says. "They must show the feeling, the expression on the face combined with the right movements."

Her students are mostly girls from ages 5 to midteens, and she prepares them for their graduation ceremony, an onstage performance called an arangetram, which means "ascending the stage." They perform a series of seven to nine dances backed by a three-piece orchestra from India. The dancers wear elaborate silk costumes with traditionally styled gold temple jewelry and decorative hair ornaments.

The girls say the arangetram is akin to a bat mitzvah, because it signifies that training is deemed complete. Sridevan says the cost for the ceremony can rival any fancy party. When lessons, costumes, musicians, hall rental and food are figured in, the arangetram can run from \$4,000 to \$20,000, he says.

Of the five girls taking a lesson at Sridevan's home one weekend, four had performed their arangetrams and one is preparing for a fall graduation.

Sruthi Sridevan, 17, Sridevan's daughter who is a senior at Vandermeulen High School in [Port Jefferson](#), has been studying for 10 years with Kamala and had her ceremony in 2011. "This is the only form of dance I like to do because it's fluid and picturesque," she says. Her ceremony lasted about 4 1/2 hours, including speeches and an intermission, she says, and her performance of the dances she learned lasted more than two hours. For five days before the ceremony, she practiced about four hours a day with the musicians to build her stamina. "I was very nervous," she recalls. "It's a lot, to prepare to perform the dances by yourself in front of an audience." She felt ready, though. "Guru Kamala makes you do each dance five or six times before finishing the class."

Rucha Acharya, 19, of Dix Hills, so loved the costumes and presentation when she attended a friend's ceremony that she decided to learn the dance form when she was 13. "I practiced every day at home," she says. "I loved it. But I still don't know the language -- most of the songs are in Tamil [spoken in southern India] and I don't know any, so Guru Kamala tells me how to express this so I understand it properly."

The spectacle of the dance and the stories they tell are what attracts Poorni Arunachalam, 16, of [St. James](#). "There must be something about this dance," says the Ward [Melville](#) High School junior who had her arangetram in 2010. "It's been around for 3,000 years so there's something keeping it alive. . . . It's so appealing. . . . You get to express yourself in so many ways."

Last fall, Kamala joined her students for a performance in Queens. It featured the first half of a classic temple dance story, an epic Sanskrit poem. They plan to stage a public performance of the second half of the story later this year, she says.

Kamala says she'll continue teaching as long as she can, and hopes someone will produce a film about her life. "Art is always about our dreams, and in my lifetime I want to do a videotape story of a dancer; to film it in India with the temples, rich culture and music, and on [Long Island](#). That's my little dream."

Indian dance lessons

There are several places in the metropolitan area that teach classical Indian dances such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, as well as [Bollywood](#) style. Among them on [Long Island](#) is the Young Indian Culture Group, which also serves Queens. For information, go to bit.ly/WHacIA.

Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan gives classical Bharatanatyam dance lessons through her Sri Bharatha Kamalalaya dance studio. For information about classes and costs, contact her by email through Sridevan Krishnaswamy at sridevankrishna@yahoo.com. Classes on [Long Island](#) are generally held Sundays. If a group is organized, Kamala will travel to the group. Fees vary, but an hourlong solo lesson costs \$75.

View a Bharatanatyam dance online at bit.ly/kUFd.

[< back to article](#)