



## Art Ambassadors

# In league with the aces

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***When one reminisces about the dance of Bharatanatyam couple Anuradha and Shridhar, and tries to capture its essence, a lasting memory is that of an impeccable stage presentation with an overt spiritual appeal.***

A fine balance of technical expertise and poignant abhinaya, their dance mirrors the best in the art. Truly the first dance couple of Karnataka, what has hitherto been inaccessible to even seasoned teachers of the state is now theirs — the Shridhars have been selected as faculty for the prestigious Natya Sangraham camp at Tamilnadu in February.

This puts the Shridhars in league with classical dance giants such as Kalanidhi Narayanan - the prima donna of abhinaya, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Chitra Visweswaran, and the Dhananjayans. Anuradha and Shridhar will be sharing space with Leela Samson, director, Kalakshetra Foundation, and veteran dance guru C V Chandrashekar. The annual residential camp held by Natya Rangam, the dance wing of the premier Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai, is unique in concept and format, and is held in high esteem by dancers, scholars and critics, for its thought-provoking inputs for dance teachers.

This glory has not come easy to the Shridhars. Although their Khechara Academy of Bharatanatyam is a sought-after institution for its traditional

moorings, Anuradha and Shridhar have proved over time that they are not only committed practitioners of the art, but are artistes, as distinct from being mere dancers, before they could garner the privileged slot. That they are accomplished choreographers, and go in-depth into every aspect of production from music and costumes to textual support has given their recitals a rare, wholesome appeal.

Satvika Abhinaya is the topic given to them for this year's workshop being held at Thennangur, about 60 km from Chennai, for three days from February 4. Among the four abhinayas (the art of expression) - aangika, vachika, aaharya and satvika, the last refers to the involvement of feelings and emotions, and consequently, more difficult to portray.

Unless there is a deep sense of involvement in the dancer, the rest of the dance is rendered meaningless, because even the basic posture of the dancer depends on identifying with a particular situation or character. "What is shown on the face has to be felt from within. The dancer has to experience the feelings for the abhinaya to have any meaning, else it becomes mechanical. The body language too, whether it is a mere gait or nritya (movement of hands and feet to rhythm and speed), needs this inner force for proper depiction," says Shridhar.

Natya Rangam is the dream destination of every performer and teacher. Besides the annual camp, it holds a thematic dance festival, which is both a challenge and a recognition to a dancer. It selects a topic and handpicks artistes of merit to work on the theme in-depth. The best in the classical dance field have held stage here, including Vyjayanthimala Bali, Krishnaveni Lakshmanan and Bhriha Bessel. And the Shridhars, again the only ones from Karnataka, have performed at the senior slot of the thematic festival for many years, presenting exclusive pieces such as Mahaveera Karna, Laya Bharatam, Katha Bharatham, and Bharatam Samanvayam.

"Nritya should grow from mere stamina building and maintaining lines to an internal experience intrinsic to abhinaya," says Anuradha, whose comely, gentle dance is a perfect match to the vibrant and dominating presence of Shridhar.

The couple has, over the years, metamorphosed from superior dancers to imaginative choreographers, where they have been able to look into the layered emotions of the varied characters with empathy, and project it with dramatic effect. Bharatha Shapatham and Dhritarashtra — two solo pieces of Shridhar - are instances of apparently unidimensional characters brought to life through meticulous study and imagination, reflecting as much Shridhar's emotional and intellectual identification with the characters.

Whether in India or abroad, they have performed at forums that matter. The

popularity of their Mahabharatam, Kannada Sahitya Darshana, Karnataka Vaaggeya Vaibhava, Kavya-Chitra-Geeta-Nritya among others, vouch for their broad canvas.

At Khechara, teaching dance is an all-encompassing affair. Nothing is done on a piecemeal basis. It is a slice of Indian culture that one gets here. Reading stories from the epics and the Bhagavatham is a must for the wards. Singing is an integral part of the classes. Each item is taught in detail - from the meaning of the lyrics to the textual context, and the profile of the characters. An annual trip to a temple town is part of the joy of learning at Khechara. Their wards match their teachers, step to step, making their productions well-knit, synchronised affairs.

When the Shridhars hold centrestage at Natya Sangraham, it will be as much the regional ethos of Karnataka that they will be representing.