



Leela Samson is a dancer, teacher, writer, and choreographer of Bharatanatyam who has been deeply influenced by the visionary Rukmini Devi Arundale, the founder of Kalakshetra. The recipient of numerous honours, she has trained several students who are now accomplished dancers and teachers in their own right. She has been the subject of two documentary films, 'Sanchari' and 'The Flowering Tree'. Leela has also made her cinematic debut in 2015 with the renowned Tamil director Mani Ratnam, in the film 'OK Kanmani', which has also influenced a Hindi re-make, co-starring alongside Naseeruddin Shah. Showbiz had the opportunity to talk to this one-of-kind maestro, and we are delighted to share her thoughts with our readers.

A PREACHER OF HER PRACTICE

So this has been your fourth visit to Bangladesh. How has the experience been for you so far?

I have always felt welcome in Bangladesh. I appreciate the audience very much because they are special, in the sense that those without the knowledge of the subject, tend to be sensitive as well.

Having been a part of Kalakshetra for so long, what do you think it has to offer to the world?

It is like any other art institute, free from limitations. Like the founder, Rukmini Devi Arundale, it has shaped great minds, with a great sense of patriotism and a strong belief in our ancient text, culture and heritage. It has taught us to appreciate the various houses of worship and accept nature as it is. During the national struggle, even the 'bhajans' they sang were teaching the residents about hygiene and everyday life. To term Rukmini as only a dancer would be a gross undermining. She was a great soul

and I'm lucky that she was my guru. Kalakshetra is not about giving to the world, but rather the people in it. The dance is an added blessing which helps magnify the larger concept.

With the ever advancing media today, how do you maintain the atmosphere to withhold the fast-paced young generation?

I think the key is to be sincere. The world we live in is one big village, and many are curious to explore, therefore, children will come and go, and we have no control over them. But should they choose to return, we must always welcome them with open arms.

Would you enlighten us about your new venture into films?

It was an experience of quality, working with some of the best in the industry. I was offered the film by such a renowned director as Mani Ratnam, whom I couldn't turn down. It's like Satyajit Ray offering you a

role and you simply cannot refuse. Besides, as I was free, I wanted to take a break from dancing and try something new.

What was the reason behind starting the Spanda Dance Company?

Being a soloist myself, I believe my students needed Spanda. They did not want all the focus on them individually at the same time. The life of a soloist is rather tough and lonely and I did not want the burden to weigh heavy on them.

Your Bharatanatyam troupe includes international dancers. Could you enlighten us about them?

There are two boys in the troupe, who are Canadian and Australian citizens and are completely committed to the art form. The fact that they were born and brought up abroad, yet, managed to nurture the cultural roots with the help of their elders and execute their "Indian dream", deserves much appreciation. It's an abso-

lute joy to have them.

Should it be encouraged to teach the students to compose?

Absolutely not! It's like encouraging your children to write poetry like Rabindranath Tagore did. Yes, you can encourage them to write poetry, but like Tagore, is based on thin premises. Whatever he did was his specialty, there is no way we can replicate that. In order to write, you need to be able to speak that language. It's not essential that you have to become like someone. However, it is necessary that you stay inspired.

You have a way with your words when you write. How much are you involved with writing?

I do enjoy writing, but I'm afraid of what I might say. If I write, it will be the truth about my life, and it is not necessarily pleasant. But I intend to write on Dance because I feel strongly connected to it, not

only because of how much I appreciate it, but also because I come from a background which has nothing to do with dance.

Could you tell us a little about your parents? My parents were simple and loving people, I believe I've inherited that quality from them. It's not in my nature to discriminate. My mother was a Catholic and my father was Jewish but they respected all religions.

Do you have any future plans?

I am too old to make plans and set dreams. Life is too fragile for that. Behind all the sweat and tears, I'm happy with what I do. If I can bestow the hope with which I lead, upon someone, that itself will be gratifying for me.

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Interviewed by
Lubna Marium & Rafi Hossain,
Narrated by Minam Haque

