

performance

CELEBRATING A CONFLUENCE OF DANCE

Danseuse Bala Devi Chandrashekar's popular dance festival, *Sangam*, returns to the city a day after she performs her latest piece, *Padmavati*, for the second time



Sridevi Nrithyalaya's Ahobilam! Ahobalam!

THIS WEEKEND SEES the return of the *Sangam Festival*, a much-anticipated dance fête curated by *bharatanatyam* exponent and scholar, Bala Devi Chandrashekar at *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan*, Mylapore. The *Sangam Festival* has always aimed to preserve, promote and present works of world-class Indian classical artistes with a larger focus on South Asian Arts. An exponent, research scholar and a passionately committed teacher — Bala is known for her distinct scholarly style. She is known to take on subjects based on ancient philosophical and literary texts, backed by intense research, collaborating with renowned scholars in those respective fields, carving out messages relevant to the contemporary world and actively presenting them across the world. Bala, through her classical dance, strives to interpret messages in a classicism that is vivid and simple and communicates across geographies, cultures, languages and religious beliefs. We caught up with the renowned danseuse for a quick chat to find out more about the upcoming edition of the festival.

Do tell us a bit about the *Sangam Festival*?

Truly, the inspiration to curate a festival under *Sangam Festival* banner is my revered guru, Dr Padma Subrahmanyam whose scholarly work in the field of dance has inspired me and all my productions. My guru has always inculcated in me a deep sense of interest in bridging the gap between theory, practice, and presentation based on ancient Indian texts and remaining a student for one's lifetime to be able to learn, imbibe and present. Over the last 15 years, the *Sangam Festival* has presented several artistes in India and the USA and has actively supported over 10 productions from its inception.

How did you curate the festival?

The idea of curating this dance festival was to have a model wherein substantial learning happens for all the participants and to evoke an interest in the theory and practice of this art form both for practitioners and art connoisseurs. This, along with the joy of sharing each artiste's work, was a core feature in the selection process.

What can we look forward to?

It's a half day festival and begins with an illustrated talk on the Thanjavur *baani* with a lecture, demonstration and performance by *bharatanatyam* exponent and scholar, guru Lakshmi Vishwanathan. This will be followed by a performance by *kathak* exponent Vidha Lal, immediately after which, Sridevi Nrithyalaya presents *Ahobilam! Ahobalam!* choreographed by Sheela Unnikrishnan.

What is different about this year's *margazhi* festival?

It is almost like a rebirth of the vibrancy of the *margazhi* festival, especially after the pandemic; we could see a sense of complete freedom to move and engage with lectures and performances with great enthusiasm. While many of us did keep to our online presence, the joy of meeting co-artistes and sharing our work is something very special at this *margazhi* festival.

Your opinion on the dance scene in Chennai?

The dance scene in Chennai is entirely organic, with artists working on several projects. A well-researched production has always stood the test of time in the Chennai

margazhi season. There is always a serious commitment from *sabha* secretaries, selection committees, sponsors, etc. to honour and acknowledge good work by any artiste who brings value to the traditional art forms. We are very optimistic that this trend will continue and good artistes will always be able to present their unique work to art connoisseurs in the city.

When can we see you perform next?

I will be performing *Padmavati* — *An Avatar*, today. This is a solo operatic thematic production of a temple dancer, who is the cynosure of the immortal classic *Gita Govindam* by Jayadeva. I performed it earlier in the month and I'm happy it was received very well. This, of course, is followed by the *Sangam Festival* tomorrow.

Padmavati — *An Avatar*, 4.30 pm onwards, December 30, at Kartik Fine Arts at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, East Mada Street, Mylapore. The *Sangam Festival*, 10 am onwards, December 31, at the same venue.

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Bala Devi Chandrashekar

Lakshmi Vishwanathan