

A Frau's Indian affair

PASSING BY Simone Brero is besotted by all things Indian, particularly Bharatanatyam. In fact, she runs Munich's only school for Indian dance, discovers K. PRADEEP

Every time Simone Brero returns to Germany and that is quite often, she gets 'terribly homesick.' Not surprising, for this German Bharatanatyam dancer is so emotionally bonded with India, its culture, that she has even taken an Indian name, Chandra Devi. She runs the only school for Indian dance in Munich, fully immersed in teaching, performing.

Simone's first-ever exposure to the Indian classical dance literally floored her. She could not take her eyes off the dancer on stage. "I was touched by the graceful movements and especially by the 'abhinaya,' which is completely missing in most of the western dance forms. That was how the search began for a Bharatanatyam teacher, which ended with Shyamala Surendran and Dharani in Kochi," reveals Simone who is a qualified biologist.

For three years, Simone kept shuttling between Munich and Kochi maintaining a rigorous training schedule. "I did my 'arangetram' at the Fine Arts Hall in Kochi. It was a full two-hour performance in the true traditional style. For me it was a wonderful moment."

Small scale dreams

The next year Simone, who had started teaching Bharatanatyam on a small scale back home, created her first own production 'Natyandana,'

group and solo dances of the classical repertoire. "That was an important milestone in my career. But perhaps the best thing to have happened was starting 'Natyadhara,' my own dance school. This was last year and now I have around 70 students, Indians and from other cultures. Here I also have Bollywood dance, with Bhangra workout classes and all that. This I started to attract students, who I feel could be drawn to Indian classical dance. And this has succeeded to an extent. I have two students, Hungarian and French, who are ready for their 'arangetram,' which will be done by next year."

The school has Simone's hands tied. She spends the whole day teaching, then there is the scheduling classes, organising workshops, work on new productions, and of course her own performances. "We focus on the theoretical and practical content of Bharatanatyam. So there are regular workshops like what we had on Indian mythology by my friend Eva-Maria Glasbrenner who teaches Sanskrit at the University of Munich. She is a great source of information and of immense help to me."

Bharatanatyam has moved a long way from the traditional form. Most dancers now concentrate on new choreographed items rather than sticking to the purely traditional. Simone, who will perform in the city on January



WEST MEETS EAST Simone Brero, alias Chandra Devi, feels abhinaya is missing in most western dance forms PHOTO: H. VIBHU

24, is still bound by tradition. "I still do the traditional set of items. Next time, may be I'll be competent enough to try out something of my own. The traditional items that I have given up are the Alarippu and

Jatiswaram. Maybe that is how far I have gone," she says with a laugh.

Whatever be the kind of training or passion it is usually noticed that a dancer's response varies according to

India. I tend to adopt a body language that is typically German. But then the culture in which I grew up makes me bold when on stage. Perhaps some of the emotions, like coyness, that I need to express on stage may be different from that of an Indian dancer."

Like on any trip to India, Simone has some important things on her agenda. On top of the list is selecting costumes and jewellery for herself and her students. "I feel that there is need to emphasise on a well-fitting, pleasing costume. It will help in grabbing the attention of the audience. After all Aharya is one of the four important expressions of 'abhinaya' in Bharatanatyam. For my Bollywood dance costumes become even more important. I don't compromise on that. I want it to be as close, as grand as that of those filmy dance sequences. Every time I come here I get carton loads of costumes stitched and shipped back home."

This time Simone also wants to travel to Trichy to probe the possibilities of getting her school affiliated as a study centre of the Bharathidasan University through the Kalaikaveri off campus programme. "This university offers Bachelors and Masters diploma in dance. I believe they are looking for bases outside India. Maybe my school could be considered as a South European base."