

Bollywood dance instructor finds the right moves

HIGHLIGHTS

A Saturday performance by her Cary dance school signaled just how far she has come

Three years ago, Priya Chellani opened Indigo Dance Evolution Academy, focusing on authentic dance from Indian film industry

She was not anticipating the challenges she would face after a successful global teaching career



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BY KATHRYN TROGDON

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CARY — Priya Chellani did not anticipate the challenges she would face when she opened an academy focused on authentic Bollywood dance in the Triangle three years ago.

But an independent performance by her school – the Indigo Dance Evolution Academy – on Saturday was a testament to how far the international dance teacher, choreographer and performer has come in her more than 20 years of experience.

Girls and guys of all ages, fashioned in bright-colored garb, expressed themselves from head to toe to the beat of peppy, up-tempo Bollywood music that pulsed throughout The Cary theater.

Bollywood dance is a style used in the Indian movie industry based in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, India. It often features a fusion of movements from Indian classical and folk dances, as well as hip-hop, jazz, Latin and other global dance styles.

ADVERTISING

“It is so versatile,” Chellani said of Bollywood dance. “I can incorporate any dance style I love or take a fancy to and put it in the context of a Bollywood song. That world of creativity that I can experiment with, that’s what I love.”

Chellani, who is from Mumbai, was discovered when she was a finalist in a national dance competition in India at the age of 15. Offers to choreograph movies in the Bollywood industry began pouring in but Chellani fell in love with teaching.

“My emphasis shifted toward teaching because I just discovered I had a knack for it,” she said.

Chellani opened her first dance academy in India when she was 18, and by 22, she had nearly 2,000 students. She continued to teach thousands in India, Dubai and New Zealand before moving to the United States, where she taught in Atlanta.

But with so much success throughout her career, Chellani was not expecting much of a challenge when opening an academy in the Triangle after moving to the area for work as an administrative accountant.

So when only two students signed up for her first class in July 2013, she was taken aback.

“It was very tough,” she said. “I think it’s one of the toughest markets here but it’s also been rewarding in other ways.”

In response, Chellani tweaked her offerings and began focusing more on raising awareness about Bollywood dance and Indian culture. She also has put effort into making the classes affordable and helping people from all walks of life feel welcome.

“I’m not so interested in quantity, in numbers, but to give them excellent quality training,” she said.

Today, she leads classes in Cary, Raleigh and Morrisville, and also teaches Bollywood fitness classes to corporate clients such as Cisco and Lenovo.

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Priya Chellani

“I like that it is kind of multicultural,” said Durham resident Alicia Boozer, who has been taking classes for five months. “It actually crosses over so many genres of music. There’s pop. There’s Indian. Sometimes we even get a bit of country in there, so that’s fun.”

Students, including 10-year-old Sonika Sankar, described their teacher as patient, polite and always willing to break down dances. In front of her students, Chellani radiates energy, inspiring them to push for more.

“She treats you like you are her own daughter,” said Cary resident Ashima Ale, who has been taking classes for three months.

Chellani reaches 60-70 people per week and continues to incorporate cultural lessons into her classes.

“Even those who come from Indian origin, we are dealing with second and third generations,” she said. “They don’t even know the language. They have little awareness of the culture or the legends or the stories that I have been raised with.”

“To be able to pass something on from my knowledge base and see them absorb and take an interest, that is a reward too,” she said.

In the past three years, Chellani has led more than 50 public and private shows in the Triangle at schools, weddings, business openings and other events.

But Saturday’s performance was the dance academy’s first independent performance, where the school itself put on the show to celebrate the academy’s third anniversary. Chellani said she hopes to continue to put on more independent events in the future.

“I am glad that I could provide a platform where they can feel inspired to do their best and more and raise the bar,” she said. “I really want them to see how much more is possible.”

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