

Dancing with dyslexia

Dyslexic British dancer Aakash Odedra headlines annual Asian festival of classical dance

Deepika Shetty
Arts Correspondent

British dancer Aakash Odedra headlines this year's edition of Samarpana - the annual Asian festival of classical dance.

The Birmingham-based dancer has been making headlines with edgy performances that use the classical Indian language of dance to address his intensely personal struggle with dyslexia.

Next month at Samarpana, he performs in Singapore for the first time his full-length production *Rising*.

The production is noteworthy in that some of the biggest names in the dance world have choreographed solos for him, including Akram Khan, Russell Maliphant and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui.

Rising has been described as a layered production that explores the idea of freedom by presenting a human spirit trapped in an animal form.

The fourth edition of the festival moves from Jubilee Hall at Raffles Hotel to the Esplanade this year.

Samarpana, the brainchild of Singapore-based classical dancer Gayatri Sriram, has come a long way from its quiet start at the University Cultural Centre Theatre in 2012.

It has become an important platform for established dancers such as India's Sujata Mohapatra and rising stars including Odedra.

Its strong programming mix has enabled the festival to travel twice to India.

This year's programme will feature interesting music and dance collaborations.

Multiple award-winning Indian singer Kavita Krishnamurti Subramaniam, who is known for her extensive Bollywood repertoire, lends her vocals to top Odissi soloist Sujata Mohapatra in a production titled *Sur Gati - The Universal Rhythm*.

Mrs Sriram, 42, tells *Life* that the festival is a "little labour of love".

She and her friend Jyoti Rajagopalan Ramesh, who runs an events management company, took a year to plan the first festival. About 1,200 people attended the six performances then.

Last year, most of the productions, including Japanese dance troupe Enra's outing here, saw full houses at Jubilee Hall. This year, they are hoping to draw more than 2,000 dance lovers to the seven events at the Esplanade.

Mrs Sriram, the producer of the festival who also runs the Shrutu Laya dance school, says: "One of our key aims has been to connect with the younger generation and provide them a platform. We want to introduce fresh names and when we invite established singers such as Kavita Krishnamurti, we want her to do something beyond Bollywood."

The fact that the Esplanade has come in as a venue partner this year demonstrates what Mrs Sriram and Mrs Ramesh call "a huge vote of confidence".

They stress that from its inception, the festival has not been about profit or self-promotion.

Mrs Sriram says: "I know how hard the early days are for dancers and musicians. I speak from personal experience.

"You may have the skill and the requisite training, but it can take years to get a launchpad.

"I wanted to create a platform



Aakash Odedra's (left) solos in his production *Rising* are choreographed by some of the biggest names in the dance world. PHOTOS: SAMARPANA FESTIVAL

which could become a stepping stone for young artists who are featured in the same festival alongside well-known performers."

Among those who have benefited are Singapore-based dancer Divya Ramesh, 17, who auditioned for the emerging artist slot last year and performed at Jubilee Hall. She likened the opportunity to a "door being unlocked".

She adds: "Opportunities to perform are not easy to come by. As a young dancer, I need a solid portfolio of solo performances before I can be considered seriously and Samarpana gave me that."

After her performance at Samarpana, she was invited to perform at a prominent dance festival in Chennai and in Ben-

galuru in southern India.

"With critics, senior dancers and scholars attending the Singapore festival, my solo at Samarpana gave me a serious boost," she says.

Leading Indian dance critic Sunil Kothari, 82, who has attended all editions of the festival and will be moderating a panel discussion this year, says the festival has grown by "leaps and bounds".

"Not limiting itself to classical Indian dances, it has extended its scope to Asian dance. Samarpana has carved a niche for itself internationally and is taken seriously not just by dancers, but by critics too."

deepikas@sph.com.sg

Don't Miss...



Sur Gati - The Universal Rhythm
Multi-platinum playback singer Kavita Krishnamurti Subramaniam (left) lends her voice to renowned Odissi artist Sujata Mohapatra's

dance performance. Subramaniam, popularly known as India's Melody Queen, has received several awards, including the top Indian civilian honour, the Padmashree. Mohapatra is acclaimed for her fluid and graceful dance moves.

Where: Esplanade Concert Hall
When: Aug 21, 7.30pm
Admission: \$30 to \$90 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com.sg)

Why Do We Dance? As Menaka, Mohini Or Mahesh? - talk by Dr Devdutt Pattanaik

Dr Pattanaik is an Indian physician turned author whose work focuses largely on an exploration of myths and mythology. In this talk, he will look at the different ways of dancing, the different reasons for dancing and the underlying philosophies of dance.

Where: Esplanade Recital Studio
When: Aug 22, 10am
Admission: \$25 from Sistic

Through The Eyes Of My City

Brussels-based Dutch choreographer Kalpana Raghuraman is trained in the classical Bharatanatyam dance style. In her productions, she is always seeking new ways of artistic expression to look at the realities of today's world. This collaboration with Korzo Theatre, The Hague, is an homage to Singapore and a nod to its cultural richness. It features 10 Singapore classical and contemporary dancers.

Where: Esplanade Theatre Studio
When: Aug 22, 3pm
Admission: \$25 from Sistic

Rising - Aakash Odedra

British dancer Aakash Odedra has worked with leading choreographers such as Akram Khan, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Russell Maliphant.

In *Rising*, Odedra draws on his training in the classical Indian dance styles of Kathak and Bharatanatyam to present a new dance language that critics call "lyrical and graceful" and, at the same time, "brutal and raw".

Rising has been praised for its hypnotic energy.
Where: Esplanade Theatre Studio
When: Aug 22, 8pm
Admission: \$30 from Sistic

Upasana - the LalitAnjali members, led by Lalitha Vaidyanathan, Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy Menon

Led by Lalitha Vaidyanathan, one of Singapore's leading choreographers and music directors, this collaboration with Indian Bharatanatyam dance duo Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy Menon is a homage to the 50 years of friendship between India and Singapore. Twelve Singapore musicians are part of this India-Singapore production.

Where: Esplanade Theatre Studio
When: Aug 23, 8pm
Admission: \$30 from Sistic

BOOK IT/SAMARPANA - THE ASIAN FESTIVAL OF CLASSICAL DANCE

WHERE: Various venues at the Esplanade

WHEN: Aug 21 to 23

ADMISSION: \$10 to \$90 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com)

INFO: Call 9753-0531 or go to www.samarpana.net