

Move with the best

HK's growing love of Indian dance forms will get a boost as leading exponents of the classical Kathak and trendy Bollywood dancing arrive in the city next week. **Carmen Ho** reports.



Muchakarla Rajesh (center) of Rajesh Dance Institute, Hong Kong, says local enthusiasts are probably drawn to the several different rhythms of Indian dance forms.



French-born Bollywood dance exponent Gilles Chuyen will give a workshop in Hong Kong on Feb 22.



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Aditi Mangaldas, Kathak dancer-choreographer

Hong Kong residents seem to love things Indian — be it cuisine or couture. Take Indian dance, for example. Its different classical forms and particularly Bollywood dancing enjoy a following that extends far beyond the city's Indian community, comprising only about 0.4 percent of Hong Kong's total population. Fans include members of both local Chinese and expatriates some of whom won't mind picking up a move or two themselves.

Over the past few years, dance studios have popped up around the city, giving lessons to both hobbyists and serious enthusiasts of classical Indian dance forms as well as Bollywood-style dancing, inspired by mainstream Indian movies.

“The interest has grown a lot over the past nine years that I have taught here,” says Uday Kumar Sathala, a Bollywood and Indian dance instructor and choreographer who is also the founder of Feel the Beat Dance Studio in Mong Kok. “Indian dance is a very different style of dance compared to Western dance, and people always want a different style.”

Sathala says that his most popular class right now is a mix of semi-classical and traditional Indian dance forms. It may look classical but isn't really.

“Indian dance is different from Bollywood,” he says. “There are more hand gestures and facial expressions. Bollywood is a fusion, a mix of Indian with Western styles. We can use hip-hop and jazz, but also facial expression to go with the meaning of the song. It's a sort of freestyle.”

“Bollywood dance is about being joyous. They have taken a lot of elements from different Indian dance forms to make something new, and this style has reached people all over the world,” says Aditi Mangaldas, a leading dancer and choreographer of Kathak, a classical Indian dance form characterized by interpretive hand gestures and rhythmic footwork.

Originating in north India, Kathak is one of the six major classical Indian dance forms. Scholars trace the tradition of this dance form to 400 BCE, and its long history stems from the tradition of storytelling in ancient India. Kathak moved from Hindu temples to the royal court and went through several transformations owing to the Muslim and British influences in the subsequent years.

Mangaldas will be performing a mixture of classical and contemporary Indian dance at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center as part of the India by The Bay festival of culture later this month.

She is hopeful of drawing a bigger audience than her last performance in Hong Kong in 2006 did, as many more people seem to have fallen for the charm of Indian dance in the last decade.

Hong Kong local Tina Chan, who has been attending Bollywood dance classes on weekends for a year, is looking forward to the performance. When asked why she is drawn to Indian dance, Chan says the expressiveness of the movements makes her feel happy, attractive, free and full of life when she performs.

“I think Bollywood dance is a great choice for beginners to get a feel of Indian dance styles because it's a good mix and has some familiar Western influence. I'm interested in learning more traditional Indian dance forms too,” she says.

Muchakarla Rajesh, a renowned dance instructor who has taught Bollywood and Indian dance in Hong Kong for more than a decade and is the founder of the Rajesh Dance Institute in Hong Kong, says Bollywood dance is popular also because it is easier to learn than classical Indian dance forms.

“If you really want to master classical Indian dance, you need to give it at least seven years. It's not easy to learn and needs many years of practice. If you don't start learning as a child, it's hard

to handle the basics,” he says.

“But there is increasing interest I think because it's very attractive and has different kinds of rhythms. The steps, the beat and music are very different from other types of dance popular in Hong Kong,” he adds.

Mangaldas is looking to expand awareness regarding the repertoire of Indian dance styles that people in Hong Kong have access to. “Dance is an international language. Although Kathak has roots and history in India, it can reach out to different populations,” says Mangaldas.

She sees dance — even classical dance — as a growing art form that is constantly being reinvented. And she welcomes respectful, harmonious change.

“The only way to preserve something is through conservation with exploration,” she says. “You need to have a sense of the contemporary. You have to be open to change and the pulse of today.”

She emphasizes that Indian-style dancers can be from anywhere in the world, not only India. For instance, Gilles Chuyen, who will be giving a workshop on Bollywood dancing at the India by the Bay festival, is French.

Rajesh's view is rather similar. “My students are mainly Chinese. Some have learned with me for many years and have gone from

beginners to becoming professional dancers,” he says.

“When you've gone through rigorous training and you really know the dance form, you can begin to break boundaries,” says Mangaldas.

She started dancing at the age of 5, was trained by leading gurus Shrimati Kumudini Lakhia and Pandit Birju Maharaj. Mangaldas is now looking to break new ground by using her knowledge of Kathak to evolve contemporary dance and combine it with the spirit of the classical.

“I come with an open mind. I'm making this journey hoping to perform here more often and build an audience. The audience profile I'm hoping to see in Hong Kong is one that includes Chinese people, the expat community and the diverse populations that Hong Kong represents,” Mangaldas adds. “As a dancer, I'm a communicator. Some things are universal — it doesn't matter who you are or where you are.

IF YOU GO

India by the Bay 2017
Bollywood Dance Workshop
 By Gilles Chuyen
 Feb 22
 Ovolo Southside Hotel,
 64 Wong Chuk Hang Road
Kathak Dance
 By Aditi Mangaldas
 Feb 24
 Asia Society Hong Kong Center,
 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty