

Making the move for passion and change

We caught up with Danseuse Neena Prasad and Thomas Vo Van Tao, her French student about love for the art and breaking stereotypes



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Neena Prasad and Thomas Vo Van Tao

By Aathira Haridas

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KOCHI: Danseuse Neena Prasad has been redefining Mohiniyattam and breaking stereotypes for a long time now. She has brought together a new system of pedagogy, infusing freshness to the art form. Her nonconformity to rules has helped her carve a niche, while also mentoring future talents.

She strives to bring the Malayali identity into Mohiniyattam. “My style reflects a deeper devotional technique. It is not rooted in idols, but in the transformation of the whole body into a spiritual aesthetic realm. It is all about stretching the

canvas,” says Neena, who was in the city to shoot online dance sessions for NatyaSutra Online, an art and culture learning platform.

During the pandemic time, when artists found it hard to conform themselves home, Neena’s focus was on research. “Our lives are tied to the stage. Not being able to perform was frustrating,” she says. Neena will also launch her second book, a compilation of her Mohiniyattam techniques. Christened ‘Mohiniyatta Bodhini’ the text targets students. Neena also works towards breaking gender stereotypes surrounding the classical art form. “Mohiniyattam has known as a female dance form for too long. I want to break down this though,” she says. French national Thomas Vo Van Tao, one of her male students, is being effortlessly trained in the dance form. Thomas has been Neena’s student for the past seven years. “He is my first male student. It is not easy to perform Mohiniyattam. The grace has to come from within. And he is a brilliant performer,” she says.

Thomas teaches Mohiniyattam in France and is in town to perform with Neena for the shoot. For him, Mohiniyattam is a passion. “The gender aspect never affected me. What saddens me is the fact that there are many male students in Kerala who are passionate about Mohiniyattam but cannot learn it because of the gender stereotype,” says Thomas, who adds that not knowing Malayalam has never been an issue. “Dance is my passion, and my expression,” he says.

Thomas, who started learning Bharatanatyam in France as a kid, found his calling when he came to Kerala and started learning Mohiniyattam. “I have finally discovered the dance form that suits me. It is slow-paced, with medium tempo and has many lyrical aspects and curvy movements. Mohiniyattam brings me happiness,” he says. Thomas hopes to make Mohiniyattam more popular in France. “It is a challenge teaching the dance from there as more people aren’t really informed about it,” he says. Except for two, all his students are French nationals.

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