

# Indian dance icon will make festival debut

By John Gessner

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The International Festival of Burnsville will welcome home an icon on Saturday, July 16.

Indian American dancer, choreographer and teacher Ranee Ramaswamy will give her debut performance at the festival, which has been held at Nicollet Commons Park since 2006.

Ramaswamy, who lived in Burnsville from 1981 to 1998, can be forgiven for not noticing. The early days of her career were filled with residencies at area schools and private lessons in bharatanatyam – the classical dance of South India – taught in the basement studio of her former Burnsville home.

She went on to form the Ragamala Dance Company in 1992 and discover the world as it discovered her. Her choreographic work has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Lincoln Center in New York and others. Fellowships and awards too numerous to list are dotted with names like Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundation.

Her appointment to the National Council on the Arts was courtesy of President Barack Obama.

And now the 70-year-old Minneapolis resident is returning to familiar turf to perform selections from “Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim,” choreographed by Ramaswamy and her daughter Aparna. Ranee will perform two solo pieces and three other dancers will perform two group pieces.

Their evocation of the human and divine merging at the Ganges River will begin at 3:15 p.m., sandwiched between the festival-opening Parade of Flags and a taiko drum show at 4 p.m.

“I had not heard of” the International Festival of Burnsville, Ramaswamy said. “That was surprising to me. I thought this was the first time they were doing it.”

It took a nudge from an old friend to get her on the bill.

Ramaswamy said she met longtime Burnsville resident Godan Nambudiripad in 1981, three years after leaving India for Minnesota with her former husband and Aparna. After becoming friends the family moved to a house near Nambudiripad’s in Burnsville.

Nambudiripad served on the board of the Ragamala Dance Company when it formed in 1992 and accompanied the group on an eight-city tour of India, Ramaswamy said.

She said Nambudiripad, a former president of the India Association of Minnesota, contacted her and planners of this year’s International Festival of Burnsville to try to get her on the program.

“He’s been such a helpful person to everybody,” she said. “The entire community values Godan’s presence.”

### **A dancer’s journey**

Ramaswamy started dancing at age 7, but gave it up for about a decade before moving to Bloomington in 1978. Friends in the Indian American community pressed her to perform, and an opportunity arose.

“I don’t remember much,” Ramaswamy said, “but I put it together and I performed at the Coffman Union at the University of Minnesota. The people who saw it liked it, and my interest continued to build.”

Some friends asked Ramaswamy to teach the spiritually infused bharatanatyam to their children, which planted the seeds of her Ragamala Training Center.

Ramaswamy had a career-changing experience in 1983 when she and then-8-year-old Aparna took classes from Indian dancer and choreographer Alarmel Valli, who came to the U of M for a two-week residency.

Impressed by Aparna, Valli offered to teach her back in India, Ramaswamy said. But Mom insisted on coming along.

“I said, ‘I will start all over again because what I have seen in you I have never seen in my life,’ ” said Ramaswamy, who calls Valli “by far the best in the world.”

Yearly four-month training pilgrimages to Chennai, India, began, with Aparna and later her younger daughter Ashwini. The annual trip has been whittled to two weeks, Ramaswamy said.

Today Aparna is co-artistic director of Ragamala Dance Company and Ashwini is marketing director, dancer and choreographer, their mother said. Both graduated from Burnsville High School and Carleton College and today are in the high school’s Hall of Fame.

“Burnsville has a long memory for me,” Ramaswamy said. “You name a school, and I’ve been there. In those days there were these good school residency programs. Now they are not anymore. That actually launched my career.”

It’s far from over.

“We still have bookings three years from now,” Ramaswamy said. “Something we must be doing right that people are interested in our work still.”

Bharatanatyam is part rhythmic dancing and part gestural, emotional storytelling infused with a longing to unite with and personify God, Ramaswamy said.

“Hinduism is a very creative religion. ... When you choreograph, the distance between God and you is not great,” she said.

“A man. A woman. A stone can be God. You can decree nature in God. You see your spirituality is in every living being,” she said.

Age is no barrier to perfecting that, Ramaswamy said.

“So I am not stopping. I’ve been dancing here for 40 years nonstop, and I’m still going.”