

CHITRASENA DANCE COMPANY

The Chitrasena Dance Company was established in 1943 by Chirrasena. He was a pioneering dancer on the world stage, internationally known for establishing a modern Sri Lankan tradition of dance and popularising it worldwide. The Chitrasena Dance School was the centre of new forms of arts and culture from the 1940s and became a cultural haven to leading artists of that period who travelled from across the globe, including film stars, performers and dancers Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, Nurtan and Ravi Shankar.

THE HISTORY OF OUR DANCE

Kandyan Dance is a ritual-dance tradition that only evolved into a performance art in the 20th century. Its origin can be traced back to pre-Buddhist times, and since it was maintained through oral tradition, it is quite clear that the ritual theatre, like all living artforms, has been changing over the years: discarding some elements and absorbing others, adapting and progressing.

It was only in the 1930s, with the emergence of Chitrasena, a virtuoso in the traditional dance forms of Sri Lanka and the first professional stage dancer of his country, that this ancient artform was given new life. Chitrasena, determined to keep the ancient dance forms alive in a world that was rapidly changing, adapted and refined it to suit the modern stage.

Today, his dance school and Company have not only nurtured his legacy but taken it forward into the 21st century. They are reputed for being the pioneers and revolutionists in the dance sphere in Sri Lanka – experimenting without compromise and using traditional dance language and form to create cutting-edge contemporary dance theatre.

Photos: Lukshmanan Nadaraja

THE PERFORMANCE

The Chitrasena Dance Company brings a fresh perspective to a 2,500 year-old dance tradition with *Dancing for the Gods*.

With this exciting new production, the third generation of the Chitrasena family and their dancers and drummers bring to the modern stage one of the world's oldest dance traditions, infusing contemporary stagecraft and choreography into a 2,500 year-old ritual to create a compelling performance for the Sydney Festival. *Dancing for the Gods* explores the diversity in the different forms of belief and worship within Sri Lankan traditional dance, from the demon dancer driven by pulsating drum beats, to an homage to Ganesha (God of Knowledge and Remover of Obstacles), to more reflective pieces on contemporary issues and achieving inner perfection and oneness with the Gods.

Our dance is sacred not simply because we celebrate the Gods, but rather because we source energy from each of these different belief systems. Given their ability to tap into these various forms of energy, our dancers become healers, invokers of blessings, and sources of inspiration for those who are suffering.

The Chitrasena Dance Company was the first Asian dance company to visit Australia in 1963. The Company did a second tour of Australia in 1972, and now returns over 40 years later with *Dancing for the Gods*, choreographed by Heshma Wignaraja.



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DANCING FOR THE GODS

CHITRASENA DANCE COMPANY | SRI LANKA | AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE

DANCING FOR THE GODS

CHITRASENA DANCE COMPANY
CHOREOGRAPHY BY
HESHMA WIGNARAJA

YORK THEATRE
SEYMOUR CENTRE
8-11 JANUARY
80MINS NO INTERVAL



RITUAL

Gara Yaka (Demon God)

An age-old tradition of seeking the blessings of the gods and the gurus; The Kattadiya (the ritual master) summoned the demon Gara Yaka to bless this auspicious occasion of sharing our ancient dance; to bless this beautiful theatre; and to bless you the audience and the artistes to begin this evening's performance.

DANCER: AKILA PALIPANA
RITUAL MASTER: SUSANTHA RUPATILLAKA

DANCING FOR THE GODS
RITUAL – RITES – REFLECTION

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CHOREOGRAPHER
HESHMA WIGNARAJA

DANCERS
THAJI DIAS
GEETH PREMACHANDRA
DAYAN CHAMPIKA
AKILA PALIPANA
SANDANI SULOCHANI
UPEKHA KAUSHINI
NUWAN RANJITH PRIYANGA
(VES/SINGER)

DRUMMERS
SUSANTHA RUPATILLAKA
PRASANNA RUPATILLAKA
UDAYA PRIYA KUMARA
WARUNA SRI HEMACHANDRA

RHYTHM COMPOSITION
PIYASARA SHILPADHIPATHY
& RAVIBANDHU VIDYAPATHY
(BERA NADA CHALANA)
PRASANNA RUPATILLAKA
(PANTHERU MATHA / MOKSHA)

ASSISTANT RHYTHM COMPOSITION FOR PANTHERU MATHA
WARUNA SRI HEMACHANDRA
& HESHMA WIGNARAJA

MUSICIANS FOR MOKSHA
SINGER: SRIYA KARIYAWASAM,
VIOLINIST: MAHINDA SENEVIRATNE,
FLUTIST: PRIYANTHA DASSANAYAKE
DRUMMERS: PRASANNA RUPATILLAKA,
WARUNA SRI HEMACHANDRA

OFF-STAGE ANNOUNCEMENTS
ARJUNA WIGNARAJA

MANAGING DIRECTOR
UPEKA CHITRASENA

Bera Nada Chalana (Movement to the Drums)

The Demon God completes his duties by bestowing positive energy on the dancer before departing. The dancer then emerges into the village performance setting, where the gurus of the different traditions are ready to accompany her on their drums.

In step with the rhythms of Sri Lanka, this dance piece celebrates all the indigenous sounds and brings to life the movement language of our island. Celebrating the idea of duality, the distinct contrast of sound and movement of the two most popular traditional dance styles of Sri Lanka – the Kandyan and Ruhunu – becomes evident in this item. The dancer has to be highly skilled in both dance techniques to be able to bring to life the opposite energies while maintaining a harmonious coexistence within the piece.

The item premiered in 2001 and was originally choreographed by Vajira Chitrasena for Upeka Chitrasena and later re-staged by Heshma Wignaraja in 2009 for Thaji Dias.

DANCER: THAJI DIAS



RITES

Ganapathi Vannama (Ode to Ganesha)

We move from the worship of a pagan demon to celebrating Lord Ganesha, God of Knowledge and Remover of Obstacles.

A Vannama is a descriptive dance composition from the Kandyan dance tradition deriving inspiration from nature, legend and folklore. This item is based on the Ganapathi Vannama, one of 18 Vannams of the tradition. Here, the descriptive poem about Lord Ganesha is brought to life through a creative composition, using the abstract language of the Kandyan dance technique, original folk melodies and three types of traditional drums.

DANCERS: GEETH PREMACHANDRA,
DAYAN CHAMPIKA, AKILA PALIPANA

Pantheru Matha (Stories of the Pantheruwa)

This creation revolves around the folk musical instrument Pantheruwa. The Pantheruwa is believed to be the anklet of the Goddess Pattini, a deity worshipped by both Buddhists and Hindus of Sri Lanka. Pattini is thought to have brought her partner back to life, given her unconditional love for him. There's also a belief that Gods used this instrument to celebrate victories in war, and at a human level our ancient kings employed pantheru dancers to celebrate victories in the battlefield. We celebrate a deity shared by most Sri Lankans. Is the Pantheruwa an object of war victory, or an object of the past that can be a connector in the future? The Pantheruwa, its shape and the ideologies behind it, drive this work.

DANCERS: THAJI DIAS, SANDANI SULOCHANI, UPEKHA KAUSHINI



REFLECTION

Moksha (Perfection in this Lifetime)

This piece is a reflection on how dance becomes a form of worship. Moksha meditates on dance, which is seen by the more orthodox as a distraction from pursuing enlightenment. However, dance as a meditative act was part of the belief system of the founder of the Chitrasena Dance Company:

"Why do you repeat? To emphasise, to bring home a point. Why do you hold on? Because you know it will otherwise change. How can you grasp something which is elusive? This is the beautiful paradox of the dance and of life. When you know it, you can glimpse the permanence within the impermanence."

The item was developed as an exploration on the meeting point between Kandyan dance and music: how musicality can be re-fashioned and woven back into traditional Kandyan dance. Moksha draws from rhythms reputed to be from King Narasinghe's court, temple sounds, mnemonics and a traditional ode – The Asadrusa Vannama – a unique Vannama that describes the qualities of the Buddha.

DANCER: THAJI DIAS

Kankaari Aara (A way of the Kandyan Ritual)

This piece maps the evolutionary journey of Kandyan Dance – from ritual to stage.

It opens with the traditional Ves dancer supported by Kandyan drums and chants evoking the traditional ritual setting. The complete regalia of the dance priest's costume is showcased. It is believed that the sacred head-dress that elevates the dancer to a higher state of being was only worn by an honourable and true worshiper of the dance tradition.

The piece then develops into a Kandyan duet that shows off the next phase in our dance history where the path was opened for the female dancer in a form that was originally danced exclusively by males.

The dancers return to stage for the final section which is about the rhythm of feet pounding on the floor, competing with the pulsing beats of the drum. Here, dancers and drummers engage in a showdown, each trying to outdo the other.

What starts off as duel between dancer and drummer evolves into a single union – in perfect synergy and harmony – reaching an uplifting and climactic end.

DANCERS: NUWAN RANJITH PRIYANGA,
GEETH PREMACHANDRA, DAYAN CHAMPIKA, AKILA PALIPANA, SANDANI SULOCHANI, UPEKA KAUSHINI