



Just for life!

WHAT IS YOUR NAME? Ananda Shankar Jayant. **WHERE DO YOU LIVE?** I live in Hyderabad, India. **WHAT DO YOU DO?** I am a professional dancer. I perform two classical dance styles of India, Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi. I also teach and train young aspirants of dance. Besides, I choreograph, and also direct and produce, dance productions which are both traditional and contemporary. Further I'm a senior officer in the Indian Government. I work for the Indian Railways. **THE THEME FOR THIS ISSUE IS "AILLEURS". CAN YOU GIVE US IN YOUR OWN WORDS, AS MUCH AS YOU WANT, A PROJECT, AN IDEA OR SOMETHING THAT TAKES YOU "ELSEWHERE"?** My passion for dance is what takes me "elsewhere". I'm under treatment for breast cancer since July 2008. However, by shifting my mind from my cancer to my dance, I was able to dance weeks after my surgery, and also dance between chemo and radiation cycles. It was difficult, but by continued focus and attention to my dance, I was able to tune out of cancer and tune into my dance. **WHERE ARE YOU NOW?** I'm now in Hyderabad, getting ready for a dance performance in Mumbai this Saturday 14th November. **HOW LONG ARE YOU GONNA BE THERE.....** My home is in Hyderabad.. **WE'VE BEEN DOING CLAM FOR TEN YEARS NOW... IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'VE DONE FOR THAT LONG?** I have been dancing since I was 4 years old! That was 4 decades ago! **AND WAS IT WORTH IT? ABSOLUTELY..** I believe dance saved me from myself! **CAN YOU IN SHORT WORDS DESCRIBE YOUR TED EXPERIENCE SO FAR?** It has been a mind blowing experience ... WOW! What a spread of ideas, and what depth! My mind is still buzzing! It also gave me so much hope for our planet. **WHAT FUTURE BECKONS FOR INDIA?** India is growing and with its very young and educated population, alongside a vibrant democracy, India is the land of the future. **AND FOR YOU?** I believe that we all write our own futures... mine is to dance across the globe! Mine is also to share my art and my story with all others so diagnosed. **IS THERE ANY QUESTION YOU WOULD HAVE LIKED ME TO ASK YOU?** What has been the support from your family? I have been blessed to receive great support from my parents who worked very hard to train me in dance. Post marriage, My husband Jayant has been a great support, and now with the cancer, his positive energy and attitude is what saw me through. I am a product of multiple cultures. My school education has been at St Ann's High School, Secunderabad, and later on at Kalakshetra. I have thus imbibed the best of both worlds, and am a true cosmopolitan. My passion for dance began early in life – a chance meeting at the Subramanyam temple in Secunderabad, when I was 4 years old – a comment that 'This child's eyes are large – you must teach her dance', had my mother Subhashini Shankar enroll me with Smt Sharada Keshava Rao. I later trained with Sri KN Pakkiriswamy Pillai (brother of Sri KN Dandayuthapani Pillai) who then taught dance in Hyderabad. Invited on a scholarship to Kalakshetra, after winning the All India Gold Medal for dance in the Junior section, I joined Kalakshetra, Chennai at the age of 11 years. During one of our summer vacations when we visited our grandparents in Chennai, during the hot summer of Madras in May. My mother and I wended our way nervously into the courtyard of a building in Tiruvanmiyur. We waited outside the office, after having sent in a message, eagerly waiting to be called in. But we were not summoned inside. Instead, the very person we wanted to see came out to greet us. The lady was none other than Rukmini Devi Arundale, the Director of Kalakshetra. After the traditional namaskaram, I remember asking her naively to bless me to be like her someday. "No, no, I bless you to be greater than me", said the beautiful lady, swathed in a maroon silk saree, with her freshly washed hair falling down on her shoulders. What a blessing! This is really one unforgettable experience of my life. She, Rukmini Athai, had made the decision for my parents and me. She scoffed at the worry of my parents about putting me into a hostel. She promised them that I would be safe and well looked after. I was admitted into Kalakshetra, to take up dancing full time. Such was the force of Rukmini Devi's personality that it affected all who came within her radiating aura. I joined Kalakshetra, exchanging pinafores and school bags, maths and science classes for Pavadai – Davani and dance classes. It was a sea change! Life in a hostel for most students in the first few months can be traumatic – and for me the different life styles that I was encountering in a matter of a few days were enormous. Yet, Kalakshetra, enveloped me in their bosom, with lots of love and affection; that the transition from convent school to traditional Kalakshetra was ultra smooth. At Kalakshetra, and being part of the coveted concert section, and participating in the various dance productions, in various roles, I imbibed the aesthetics, the group dynamics, stage design, lighting, entries, exits group choreography etc., inherent in the Kalakshetra training. I spent six years at Kalakshetra, learning Bharata Natyam, Carnatic music, veena, dance theory, philosophy etc., and acquired a Diploma and a Post-graduate Diploma in Bharata Natyam. I also learnt the grace of a firmly executed movement, the need to perfect the bodily stances and thereby forget the body and rise above it, to think,

to create, to go beyond and to ascend to realms of a higher consciousness. On my return to Hyderabad, I also learnt Kuchipudi from Sri Pasumarthy Ramalinga Shastry. Simultaneously I started teaching. Interested parents wanting me to teach their children and my own interest in sharing my art – made me a teacher of dance at the age of 17 years. I began with six students and grew up with my young students. They call me 'akka', elder sister. My dance school in Hyderabad, Shankarananda Kalakshetra, now has about 80 students and the relationship is that of a large family, a true guru-sishya (teacher -student) relationship. My students learn to balance the traditional with the modern, the static body with the soaring mind. They experience the freedom to feel, to know, to break all bonds, all barriers, in an effort to touch one's self. **Question 2...Reg studies.** Since I joined Kalakshetra at the age of 11, I still had to complete my school. However, Rukmini Athai wanted me to study dance full time. This meant that I had to study privately. My interest in academics was something I refused to give up, in spite of full time training sessions at Kalakshetra. I completed a private matriculation from Madras University, a Pre University and BCom degree from Delhi University through correspondence! A desperate need to experience college life and to be a Postgraduate seized me, and I enrolled in MA (Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology) Osmania University – I went on to top the University, do a M.Phil as a UGC Research Fellow on the topic 'Development of Bharatanatyam – Role of Kalakshetra'. During this time – as on any University campus in India - the preparations to take the UPSC Civil Services Exam were at fever pitch – Friends goaded me to take the exam – and I did so- and was selected in the Indian Railway Traffic Service and posted on South Central Railway. A completely male dominated work force learnt to say 'Madam' – and mind their p's, q's in my presence! Shouldering official responsibility was wonderful – you see – I had brought this nice harmonious feminine touch to the male bastion of the Railways, I had burst through! My smile helped – but they soon realized that this was one woman – sheathing her iron fist in velvet gloves!! My affair with academics continued – I went on to receive a Ph.D degree for my thesis "Promotion of Tourism in India – Role of Railways". **Question 3.. reg dance as my language.** The six years at Kalakshetra, taught me a way of life – where dance transcends mere skill and becomes one's very persona. My parents were great inspiration. The very fact that they pulled a high performing eleven year old out of school, to pursue dance, with schooling being utterly nebulous, trusted me enough to complete my education on my own, and backed me throughout, in spite of middle class worries about money – knowing fully well that this chosen career could well not be highly paid, is a great blessing and speaks of a family's commitment to the art. In today's global world I am a composite of many cultural influences. My memories and life's experiences need to be reflected in my language – which is dance. My personal, political and social concerns need to find voice in my dance – for that's the way I speak, the only language I know. I as an artiste cannot live on the external fringes of society, irrelevant except as mundane entertainment. Sometimes I feel we artistes live on another orbit. My dance cannot just be pretty, beautiful and artistic. I need to voice my concerns. I need to integrate my artistic voice into the fabric of society. Thus I questioned myself: - Can I divest myself from the problems that surround me?- Can I live in an ivory tower and be just a pretty dancer?- Can I relate to traditional poetry with contemporary sensibility? What About Me?, which premiered in 1999 was my reaction to the scarring gender issues, that surround us. - Can I be inured and unaware of happenings around me? Can I eschew and ignore gender issues, racial and religious violence, and caste polemics? - Is dance a mere bread winner, a performing profession? Or is it my life breath? If it is my life breath, then I told myself, I cannot divide myself into neat compartments – espouse and speak up for causes dear to me but not relate them to my dance. Sure, to me dance exists on multiple levels, the physical, the esoteric and the spiritual. Sure, I relate indelibly to the jeevatma – paramatma theory and the bhakti bhava (devotion) in dance, training as I did from Kalakshetra. But, this search, this quest is a personal one. Yes, my art will lead me to spiritual upliftment, but my dance has also to touch base with the issues that surround me. I cannot look at the burnt face of a dowry victim and not allow it to find a voice in my dance. Not only have I dealt with gender issues, but also with a fun production like Panchatantra. My belief is that dance is on one level my spiritual journey, but it is also my greatest communication tool. My dance is my best language. And yes dance really is my life breath! Why? How can I answer, why or how we breathe?!! **Question 4 Reg office and school.** I'm the Honorary Director of Shankarananda Kalakshetra. I have other staff and teachers who also run the institution. My office was and is a very different world from my art world, however I find the differences healthy. My treading two such different tracks, me in both work spaces...I bring the organization and systems of bureaucracy to my dance and carry my sense of harmony, aesthetics and egalitarianism of the art world into my Office space. But nothing, nothing whatsoever comes in the way of my dance. I continue to perform, teach and choreograph. I have been teaching since I was 17 years. I like to teach, as that is the only way your art gets its mirror, and it is the only way one's art can continue. Teaching dance to young aspirants at my dance institution Shankarananda Kalakshetra, rejuvenates me. I pass on a tradition to a younger generation and am very gratified to see youngsters make



stunning debuts, and strike out as performers and teachers. Besides it is fun to teach and choreograph, see patterns and designs emerge out of nothing – see ideas take shape and see minds engaged in dialogue through art. To me that journey of the mind is precious. **Question 5 reg Cancer.** After feeling a small lump in my left breast on the very eve of going to USA for a Kuchipudi Conference, I went immediately to get a mammogram done, and left the following evening to USA. On my return after 2 weeks, my husband met me in Mumbai, and slowly told me that the biopsy was malignant. He had fixed up my appointment with the Doctor the very same evening, of my return. Like all others, initially it did upset me when quite suddenly, I was diagnosed with cancer of the breast. But then, it was really for a brief spell. I decided not to allow something as transient as an illness to takeover me and my mind. The very same evening I came home and told myself and my family 3 things. a) I will ride this out, and I won't allow the cancer to ride me. b) I will not say Why me? I will not ask God or anyone, if I was being punished for something. c) This is only one page of my life and I will not allow this to impact the rest of my life. Further, I unburdened myself from the secrecy associated with it. I myself told the world about it. This way, whoever came to see me came with cheerful faces and not with tears!. I told myself, that it has got to be handled like any other disease. It is not so insurmountable that I succumb to it and give way to pessimism. This thought entered my mind and I got ready for the surgery like I go about staging a new choreographed piece. It is this very positive outlook that helped me come out of a major surgery and within 3 weeks, I conducted and presented a five-day Sangeeta Natak Akademi national dance festival on one hand, while rehearsing with my students on the other. Actually I was less worried about the therapy rather than the gap it was likely to create in my scheme of things. And that is because of the long-drawn process of treatment. My husband Jayant had something really nice to say at this point. That I should take this period as a holiday.. I did precisely this. Even during chemo therapy my husband's advise, of "Think of it as Amrutam, or nectar", really helped. I have been giving full-fledged dance performances soon after surgery, during chemo therapy and during radiation also. I also am conducting regular dance classes at my institution Shankaranda Kalakshetra. **Question 6. Reg dancing during therapy.** Both my Doctors and my family have been great support for me. They never stopped me.

I was advised to listen to my body. If I felt I could they didn't stop me. On the other hand my family went all out to support me and be with me during such programmes. My mother in law, shifted to our home to take care of my diet, which needed to be a highly nutritious diet. They even accompanied me during my programmes. A lot of emotional support from my sister, mama and mami, and friends, helped. **Question 7 reg strength.** My biggest source of strength has been my husband Jayant Dwarkanath. He has never allowed me to lose faith. He himself has been so confident and sure, that it gave me immense strength. Sometimes when I would be miserable (esply during chemo therapy), he would cheer me up. Never once has he shown despondency. His strength has been supreme. Further, he never stopped me from dancing, or doing anything I could. He never made me an invalid. On the other hand he would goad me to be up and about. This helped in a big way, as I never felt I was a patient undergoing a lengthy treatment. All this helped me in not going into self-pity, or guilt complex, or frustration, or any ill-feelings. Only, patience, positive outlook towards a healthy future. I never questioned: Why me? Did I ask myself the same when I got awards like Kalaimamnai or the Padma Shri? So when I could take those with pride why can't I take an illness with equal acceptance? I would like to request all women over 35/ 40 years of age to take their health seriously and go for periodic check-ups. A mammogram after 35 years is an absolute must. An early diagnosis is the greatest gift you can give yourself or your loved one. So, men, instead of buying your wife/ girl friend/ sister/ mother/ mother – in-law that special dress or gift, gift her a mammogram, once every year. This is the best gift you can give any woman.. **Question 8.. reg people I have met.** I have indeed met some of the greatest people... Shri APJ Abdul Kalam, His Holiness Dalai Lama, MS Subbalakshmi, etc. Dancing at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, or in the presence of His Holiness Dalai Lama, was magical. I have also performed at the Angkor Vat, at the 3rd Ramayana festival in Cambodia, to an audience of nearly 30,000 people. Some of these memories are unforgettable. **Question 9 reg other hobbies.** Other than dance I love Carnatic music. Though I have learnt it only singing at home. I have learnt the veena and am keen on pursuing it. I had done everything.. fiction to philosophy. I'm now also the co-ordinator of a breast cancer support group.

