

My Hero: Pandit Chitresh Das

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My hero. No one can define this phrase except for one's self. To me a hero is someone who makes you happy and amazed, crazed and excited. You can fear your hero sometimes, but only out of due respect and the desire to look outstanding in the eyes of this one person.

Who is my hero? My hero is simply one-of-a-kind. He has inspired and reached the hearts of thousands upon thousands - one of them being mine. Pandit Chitresh Das is the only hero I have ever had. He is a kathaka, one who tells his stories through the traditional Indian dance of kathak. He definitely has an extraordinary story to tell. Pandit Chitresh Das came to the United States with only eight dollars in 1979, yet he has become one of the most celebrated dancers in generations. He founded the Chhandam School of Kathak Dance where I now learn this art form from Pandit Das' direct pupils. I do not know anyone who can dance like him, even though he is sixty-six years in age.

Recently, I was promoted from my position as a mere student to a member of the Chhandam Dance Youth Company. Getting into this elite group was definitely not easy. I had to pass a difficult audition critiqued by many of Chhandam's finest dancers. In order to overcome the audition and to maintain my spot in the Youth Company, I had to apply the third of nine principle of Chhandam, riyaz, or systematic practice, to my daily schedule. Becoming a part of the Youth Company has given me many more chances to work with Pandit Chitresh Das, or as his students call him, dada-ji.

Dada-ji is also a loving, playful man. He always makes us laugh in class, between each exercise. He always makes funny jokes about life, but there is always a moral behind what he is saying. I always think of him as a child at heart, despite his age. He makes us work hard and pushes us, but only because he cares for us and our dance. He emphasizes practice and enforces it in every class. If we ever do get injured he always sees to it that someone helps us with whatever we need.

Dada-ji is an amazing person. He and a group of his pupils, the Chitresh Das Dance Company, tour around the world and put on shows for all audiences. Dada-ji himself has performed in a variety of countries, ranging from his home country, India, to his most recent performance in Australia. One of the most popular shows that Dada-ji takes part in is the India Jazz Suites. In this show, Dada-ji and Jason Samuels, an African-American tap dancer nearly half of Dada-ji's age, perform an element of kathak called savaljavab, or question and answer. Dada-ji dances kathak footwork in a specific chhand, or rhythmic pattern, questioningly, and Jason replies with his own tap footwork in the same rhythmic pattern. This show is performed yearly in San Francisco. Last year, it was even taped and broadcasted on national television.

This year, a once-in-a-lifetime event occurred. Dada-ji organized a great production called Traditions Engaged. In this large three-day event, a few of India's many traditional dances came together in one plaza to perform together in contrast with one another. This was a great show to attend and was all made possible by the mastermind himself, Pandit Chitresh Das. Dada-ji has had an impact on many people. Not only have Indians come to Chhandam to learn from Dada-ji and his pupils, but there have also been some Caucasians and a few other minority nationalities. In addition, Dada-ji teaches dance to many girls in the Red Cross District in India. These girls are so grateful to Dada-ji, as am I.

Pandit-Chitresh Das has created a phenomenon and has affected so many people just through his dance. He is focused, has a straightforward attitude and the willpower to teach others about a great dance form. Dada-ji is a fun and fatherly man and cares about all of his students. He is and will always remain my sole hero.