

Journey inwards with the siblings of soul

An Indian family shares its spiritual side, writes **Michelle Potter**

Dancing figures are an intrinsic feature of temple sculpture across Asia and have provided inspiration for the growth of formal dance techniques and dance costuming across the region.

This is noticeable from the classical forms of Khmer dance, inspired by the carvings and sculptures of Angkor, to the headdresses worn in some Javanese dances, which look back to temple friezes.

Indian dance is no exception and Canberra theatregoers will soon have the opportunity to see a unique example of dance that has grown in part from a study of temple reliefs in Odisha (more commonly known as Orissa), an eastern coastal state of India.

Intensely Soul: Transformational Odissi Dance and Music is a program created by the brother and sister team of Nirmal Jena and Pratibha Jena Singh. The program will feature a diverse range of acts, including solos, duets and a live music piece. But what makes this program particularly unusual is its celebration of the legacy of Jena and Jena Singh's father, Surendranath Jena, who during his lifetime, pioneered a unique style of Odissi dance. Some have labelled Guru Surendranath Jena's practice "transgressive", but his children say he did not intentionally challenge any convention or notion.

"He began an intensive search for the truth in Odissi dance and music," they say, "because he was not entirely satisfied [though respectful] with the way Odissi was being revived following the end of British colonial rule in India.

"He analysed his own experiences, as well as the lifestyle and folklore of the people of Odisha. He also studied the many temples and temple reliefs and ancient manuscripts containing vast information and detail on why and how dance was pursued. In this process, any consciousness of modern social mores or conventions became secondary."

But in Guru Surendranath Jena's quest to create original and authentic Odissi works, he came to be viewed as something of a rebel by some, and even as someone who challenged traditional

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notions of femininity.

His first pieces of choreography were powerful and demanding and startled many because they went against the tide and were performed by both male and female dancers. But the Guru was undeterred and pursued his goal of choreographing works that spoke powerfully and that he believed could be, and were, danced by both male and female performers.

Nirmal Jena and Pratibha Jena Singh suggest the dance their father pioneered is capable of delivering a transformational experience to audiences. The Jena approach to dance and music is not designed for the senses only, but for the soul, and it prioritises

an inner energy they describe as the "power of the soul as the essence of wisdom, emotional and spiritual resilience".

They also believe their Odissi style is "a way of life, where age and life experience create fertile grounds for a richer arts practice". This they see as different from much contemporary Western dance, where there is an association with the body beautiful – "young, well-sculpted bodies", as they put it. Their father's work invites audiences to come on a transformational journey, "a journey into the universe within".

To take that journey, there is no need to have a background in or familiarity with Indian dance.

"Each person who comes to our presentation will come with their own insights and experiences and take from it whatever appeals to them," they say. "Like our father and guru, our goal is simply to share our family art with those who get a buzz out of dance and music – the arts – as a way of life."

Nirmal Jena and Pratibha Jena Singh will also conduct a Canberra workshop in the Jena style of Odissi dance.

■ *Intensely Soul*: September 15, 7pm, James O. Fairfax Theatre, National Gallery of Australia. Bookings: 6240 6528, eventbookings@nga.gov.au.

■ Workshop: September 16, 12.30-2.30pm, Canberra Dance Theatre Studio. Bookings essential: odcsydney@yahoo.com.au.



Nirmal Jena (left) and Pratibha Jena Singh are transported through dance.