

## KAMALA CESAR

### Embracing the world's arts

Janaki Patrik

*Kamala Cesar, Artistic Director, Lotus Music and Dance, 109 West 27th Street, 8th Floor, NYC, U.S.A.*

Lotus Music and Dance, located in the heart of Manhattan, is familiar to many international artists, whether first-time visitors or frequent travellers to the city considered by many to be the arts capital of the world. Kamala Cesar, Founder and Artistic Director, her staff and Board of Directors have developed this small organisation from its unpretentious origins into an active and welcoming mecca for traditional, mainly non-Western music and dance, including many Indian performing artists.

Kamala Cesar's story is an American story, because it reflects the immigrant, multicultural nature of the United States. It is also a New York City story – one of survival, luck, resourcefulness and a policy of welcoming the constant stream of artists for whom the Big Apple is their first port of entry. Starting with the simple goal of preserving the Bharatanatyam tradition of her guru T. Balasaraswati, Kamala has expanded the mission of Lotus to include the opportunities which have “come to my doorstep”, as she says. Classes and residencies taught through Lotus Fine Arts by Indian masters – including Alla Rakha, Birju Maharaj, Kalanidhi Narayanan, Durga Charan Ranbir and Anita Ratnam – attest to a history of presenting the best which the world brings to Lotus.

Born in Brooklyn, one of the five boroughs of New York City, Kamala started her college education at New York University, but moved to



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Berkeley, California in 1969 after only one year at NYU. In 1972 Kamala started to study Bharatanatyam with T. Balasaraswati at Mills College in Oakland, California. When Kamala studied with Balasaraswati in India for a few months in 1983, Bala expressed the wish that her style should be represented by a school in New York City. Fulfilling her guru's wishes, Kamala helped to establish the Balasaraswati School of Indian Music and Dance. With Kamala as Director and Bala's daughter Lakshmi Knight as Artistic Director, the Balasaraswati School existed in New York City for several years after Bala's death in 1984. Kamala taught at a variety of studios in Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn, as well as at the Indian Consulate, where Consul General Nazareth, former Director General of the ICCR, made artists

welcome throughout his tenure. Tiring of the constant commute between far-flung studios, Kamala eventually consolidated classes in the Manhattan studios of famous tap dancer Henry LeTang. In 1991, LeTang went to San Francisco for what was supposed to be a short project with the Broadway show *Sophisticated Ladies*. When LeTang decided not to return to New York City, the opportunity to take over his studio presented itself to Kamala. Taking advantage of this fortuitous opportunity, Kamala made one of the many shrewd moves which have established Lotus Music and Dance as an enduring institution.

In 1989 the Balasaraswati School was transformed into Lotus Music and Dance, an organisation with an expanded mission and expanded space needs. “Initially the organisation was there only to continue Bala's style. As I began to understand how it had been passed down from generation to generation, it seemed important to keep it alive. Having studied with someone like Bala, who made you realise how much meaning (this art) had in her life and to society in general – as a cultural asset, I began to see that all cultures have traditions which are special and valuable. It made me look at my own cultural background, of which I had no knowledge.”

Kamala had been told as a child that she was French-Canadian. The expansion of the mission of Lotus Fine Arts is interwoven with Kamala's discovery of her own cultural heritage. Recovering her own past, Kamala has helped others to preserve the unique artistic riches which they bring from all over the world and bequeath to

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future generations through classes and performances at Lotus. "I didn't even know until I was in high school that I was part Mohawk (a native American tribe in the northern part of New York State). When I moved from California and back to New York to start the Balasaraswati School of Dance, I started to visit the Mohawk reservation to learn what it means to be Mohawk. It was difficult to find people who knew the Mohawk traditions. People like my mother, whose own mother had died when she was very young, had been taken as young children from the reservation and put into boarding schools by missionaries. They were not allowed to speak their native language, the missionary motto being "Kill the Indian to save the man". When my mother graduated from high school, she was sent back to the reservation. Her tribe did not accept her, because she could not speak the language and did not know about Mohawk traditions. I was also not in contact with my father's Philippine background – there was an unspoken

assumption that learning English and assimilating was the only way to become American."

Kamala met (Mohawk elder) Tom Porter and started to learn about the Mohawk "Long House" tradition. She connected with her Philippine heritage through Potri Ranka Manis, who was searching for a space to teach her traditional dance. A Filipino martial arts group which was already renting space at Lotus studio directed Potri to Kamala. "It was so organic, because I never would have known about or appreciated the southern Philippines – my father's origins, so different from the north Philippines... and to have it all just come to me."

The fortunate circumstance of acquiring a centrally-located studio space in Manhattan in 1991 coincided with Kamala's expanding vision of her own heritage and of the importance of preserving all cultural traditions.

"When we got the space, it seemed like it had to be inclusive, because there were so many people, who had the same needs. Lotus grew out of

a need. People can feel that they are special and important. People who have dedicated their lives to trying to keep a tradition – there should be recognition of their time, energy, commitment, dedication. I try to make my Board understand that it's about a much larger need which we fill. We need to pay attention to this – that we are a society of immigrants who need their culture to have a 'place'."

While a variety of Indian dance and music styles still form the core of the classes, concerts and school programmes offered by Lotus, artists from many other cultures work with Lotus Fine Arts Multicultural Music and Dance Studios – as teachers, performers and lecturers. The list of countries whose arts have been included on Lotus's roster spreads far beyond the organisation's East Indian roots: Tahiti, Japan, Brazil, Bulgaria, Syria, the Philippines, Korea, China and Burma to name a few. "Over the years I have responded to whoever appears. The exchange with the other person – what happens and whether

A picture collage reflecting the multicultural focus of Lotus





it continues – a lot has to do with the other person's willingness. It requires that you feel you're part of a family – part of a team. That's the only way Lotus can work – it has to be a more communal cooperative idea, because it's very difficult to keep the momentum going, and it takes the efforts of a lot of people."

One of the early renters was the Spanish Flamenco dancer Andrea Del Conte. Del Conte's role expanded over a period of almost twenty years – from renter to performer in Lotus' school programmes and productions to Board member and staff member – Arts Education and Booking Coordinator. Flamenco classes continue to be among the most popular taught at Lotus. Del Conte's recent and premature death is much mourned in the organisation. Her work is being continued at Lotus by members of her company Danza Espana.

The distinguished sitar player Daisy Paradis, a senior disciple of Ali Akbar Khan, is another early and enduring contributor to the mission of Lotus. After returning to New York City in the later 1980s, Paradis began to arrange Indian music programmes at Lotus, which formalised into the Sangeet Series. Many outstanding Indian musicians have performed in this series, including Aashish Khan, Budhadev Dasgupta, Krishna Bhatt, Partha Chatterjee, Mitali Bhawmik and Sumitra Guha.

The New York *Ramayana*, conceived and nurtured by Kamala through its various productions, provides another example of the creative benefits of the welcoming and inclusive policies of Lotus. A chance referral to Lotus led to master Burmese dancer U Win Maung teaching a workshop there in the mid-1990s. The relationship blossomed, and U Win Maung approached Kamala

about presenting the Burmese version of the *Ramayana* (called Yamayana in Burmese). Subsequently Potri Ranka Manis mentioned that her dance style from the southern Philippines included a version of the *Ramayana* in its repertoire, and the concept for a multi-cultural *Ramayana* performed in several traditional dance styles was born. Each of the versions of the *Ramayana* Lotus has presented has been enriched by the guru-s and dancers who have performed and choreographed this great pan-Indian epic: U Win Maung and his Burmese Shwe Man Thabin Theatre group, Odissi dancer Bani Ray and the Trinayan Collective, and Potri Ranka Manis and her Filipino troupe Kinding Sindaw. Linking the episodes of the *Ramayana*, narrators including Jaan Freeman and Rajika Puri have used a variety of techniques to help audiences to follow the story.

Coming back full circle to her multi-cultural American roots, Kamala has transformed the Native American Indian Pow-Wow into Lotus's signature annual Drums Along the Hudson – an international meeting ground of traditional drumming and dancing. In 2001, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs requested proposals for large outdoor events. Lotus proposed a Pow Wow at Inwood Park on the northern-most tip of Manhattan, originally a Lenape Indian village and the last remaining old-growth forest in New York City. Lotus's initial event revived an annual pow-wow which had been celebrated in Inwood Park for decades, until funding died out in the mid-1980's. Drums Along the Hudson was so successful in 2001, that the New York City Parks Department suggested it be expanded to incorporate other local community performing arts groups. In the second year, Lotus invited an African-American group from the neighbourhood near Inwood Park,

Indigo Arts West African Dance and Drumming. Now attracting thousands of people, Drums Along the Hudson has evolved into a celebration of New York City's multi-ethnic riches. In addition to groups whose names reflect Native American heritage – Onondaga Nation Smoke Dancers, Seneca Nation Buffalo Creek Dancers, Mohawk Singers and Dancers – the festival now includes groups from all over the world, whose immigrant artists share their cultural heritage with fellow-New Yorkers. Carioca Capoeira Art / Brazilian Drummers and Dancers, Momo Suzuki / Japanese Folk Dance and Taiko Drummers, Kinding Sindaw / Filipino Dance and Drumming from Mindanao, Hawaiian Express / Hula and Tahitian Dance and Drumming, Andrea Del Conte Danza Espana Flamenco, Seema Iyer Bollywood Dancers, Balinese Gamelan Dharma Swara, New Zealand's Kahurangi Maori Dance Troupe, Bermuda's Warwick Gombey Dance Troupe, Yulshey Lankyen Tibetan Song and Dance and Song Hee Lce Korean Dancers and Drummers represent only a small list of the groups who meet on this Native American "stamping ground".

Lotus Music and Dance celebrated its twentieth anniversary on 5 December 2009 with an extravaganza including 55 performers from all over the world, who have taught and performed at various times during the two decades under the auspices of this small organisation with a big reach. Rising above funding problems, defying the voracious appetite of big real estate to eat up studio space, and keeping its eye on artistic excellence, Lotus Music and Dance thrives. Still rooted in its Indian dance origins, Lotus embraces the whole world's arts.

(Janaki Patrik is the Artistic Director of The Kathak Ensemble, and Friends/CARAVAN, Inc. 2010)