

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# WHERE **body** MOVEMENT **is art**

Finding a new dance idiom:  
Jay of Attakkalari

**THERE** are schools for modern art, cinema and even theatre. But none if one wants to take up contemporary dance. To fill that lacuna, Attakkalari was set up by a group of creative individuals to offer a course in contemporary dance that includes training in sound and light technologies. What is more, the dance school also enables youngsters to earn a living from doing what they love most.

Jaychandran Palazhy, the creative director of Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts in Bengaluru, speaks in between rehearsals with his repertory, to **Ratna Rao Shekar** about his journey from classical Indian dance to movement art that he says is more suited to the world we live in

**Photographs: Dr M Vivek**

**Y**ou leave the larger space that is the chaos of Bengaluru to enter a quiet lane in Wilson Gardens to confront a modest gate that declares, 'Attakkalari'. From the start, this does not look like a conventional dance school where graceful doe-eyed girls practice adavus to the beat of a guru's nattuvangam.

Here the guru is the unconventional Jaychandran Palazhy in a track suit, who holds

no baton or stick, but turns a tape on and guides the dancers to create movements for a new piece he is choreographing. The workshop where the repertory is rehearsing that morning is in fact a tin shed, and one of the students (doe-eyed maybe, but physically strong and athletic) walks up to say, watch out for the iron rods placed against the walls when you get up. These iron rods, one presumes, were part of the garage that the shed originally was!

"We have dispensed with the

term 'dance'. We are bringing a host of multimedia experiences to the stage where movement is the centre of a performance. We want to develop contemporary cultural expressions in the performing arts," says Jay as he sits down after a bout of rehearsals.

He calls his dance 'movement art'. Attakkalari in Malayalam, his mother tongue, means 'performance in an arena'. In a city that is the hub of information technology, it is interesting that Attakkalari performances use so





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much of new media and digital art technologies. In fact the tag line on Attakkalari brochures and its website reads, "physical wisdom, innovation and technology".

Jay, who moved from his native Kerala to Chennai seeking to find an expression for his creativity, trained under the Dhananjayans in bharatanatyam, worked with dancer Chandralekha in her productions, and learnt both kathakali and kalaripayattu. Yet, after an almost 10-hour day of dedicated practice when he cycled from his dance school to another folk performance, he would find himself dissatisfied with Indian classical dance.

"I have nothing but reverence for Indian classical dance. This is

our civilizational knowledge, the repository of our ancient culture. But I needed to go beyond traditional dance. To see how I could give dance a new meaning and reach out to an audience in a contemporary context," says Jay. Who wants to sit through hours of performance that a classical dance-drama like kathakali, for instance, entails, he asks. On a psychological level too, the human being today is caught in a web of conflicting emotions that a traditional society on the path to globalization throws up, and traditional dance or drama fails to address these concerns. "Each of us has a ladder against which we work. Mine was just different," he says, not denigrating any tradition.

"Though I instigated the setting of Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts, I was not the only person behind it. It was set up in collaboration with writers and artists, with people from cinema and other visual arts, all of whom felt the pressing need for a contemporary expression in the performance arts," says Jay after we move out into his office. The Attakkalari Centre was founded in 1992, and combines art forms like modern dance, ballet, yoga and kalaripayattu movements, with the innovations of choreographers and those from the digital arts from across the world.

After his training in classical dance at Chennai, the restless Jay moved to London where he studied modern dance and later formed his own dance company. "I needed the distance from the quirky Dravidian culture of South India with its preponderant influence of cinema to evaluate myself as an artist and see what I wanted to do," he confides. He speaks of the allure of the familiar landscape – a concept

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that so fascinates Orhan Pamuk and James Joyce – which Chennai held for him for some time.

"I draw my roots from my tradition. From Kerala where I grew up and Tamil Nadu which gave me the dance training. But I needed to see other forms of contemporary dance – Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Caribbean, African and Brazilian dances. I wanted to see how dancers and artists were engaging with modern times," he says. Artists, like writers, need to look widely. Was not even Picasso influenced by African sculptures, he queries.

Classical dance forms were for him like a beautiful golden box, and he wanted to find a new way of engaging with the contemporary

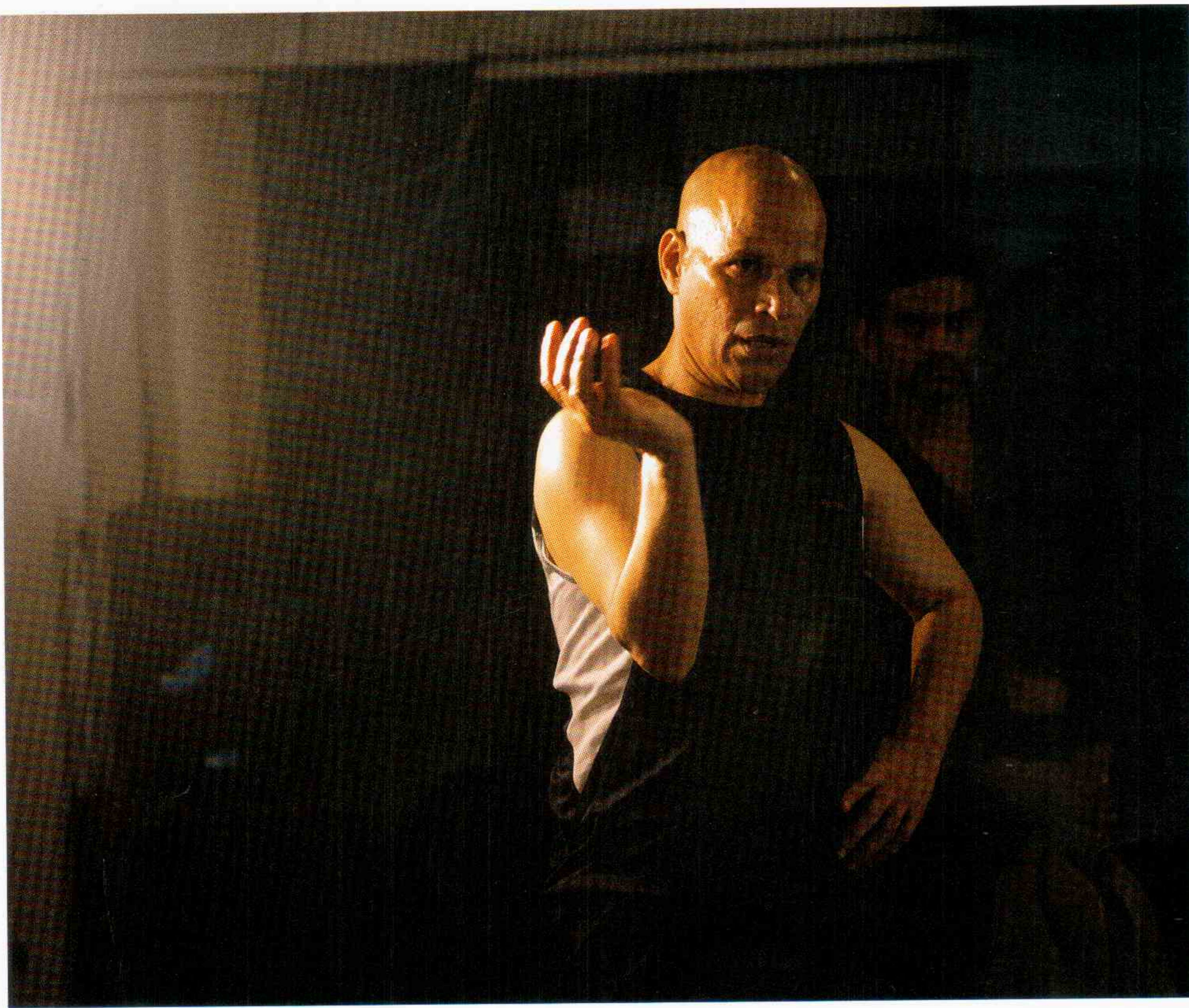
world. "Our attempt was to be informed and influenced by our heritage, our languages, our folk traditions but not to copy or derive anything from them. We wanted to evolve a new idiom, a language more suited to our world," he says. This in time might evolve and be called the Attakkalari style of contemporary dance, you tell him, and he nods with self deprecation.

We in India especially have access to and oscillate between suspended spaces: the modern and the traditional. "The dancers too straddle a difficult time. Even their imagination is suspended between these two worlds. We have to find an expression for this dilemma of the contemporary vs traditional," he muses, explaining that the

dancer expresses this dichotomy through body movements, through drama, through multimedia supports. Unlike in classical dance that relies on abhinaya or facial expressions, in movement art facial expressions are kept to a minimum to support abstractions. Emotions are expressed through the body, and originate from the spine.

"A good contemporary dance performance helps you to understand the world. It enriches your experience of the world you live in," he explains.

The ultimate effort of course, as with any art form, has to be an aesthetic experience. The audience, having no framework of reference, sometimes does not understand what is going on on the stage



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during an Attakkalari performance, but you need to train yourself to understand this art too, says Jay firmly. It's like training your tongue to taste and like different cuisines – you may be familiar mainly with idli and dosa, but a cultured person needs to taste everything.

Sometimes the performance is not even a site-specific work. In an ode that the Attakkalari repertory had composed for Pina Bausch the great dancer, the proscenium was no longer the conventional stage where the audience sat on chairs with the performers on stage. In Hyderabad, the performers moved from one Qutb Shahi tomb to another, as did the audience who didn't know where among the seven-tomb complex they would perform next. In one city they performed on a rooftop, and yet another performance was held at a railway station!

If the body is a microcosm, it occupies a space that is macro. "The dancers sculpt in time and space. The atoms in your body are

connecting to the architecture of space. We are carving our bodies in multiple layers of space," he says.

Initially it may be difficult to follow what the dancers are doing or the ways in which their bodies are used to convey a concern. But Jay demonstrates vignettes from his next production, 'Meidwani', in which his young dancers, both men and women, hold steel pots and cut into space, sometimes alone, sometimes together, to convey the fluidity of relationships between men and women in a contemporary world.

Not only has Jay helped to define the grammar of a different kind of performance that you might call contemporary, or the Attakkalari school, he has also helped to build an economy around the form. The centre now offers a diploma in Movement Art and Mixed Media that allows those who want to pursue dance professionally to either go into academics or choreograph their own productions, by giving them the necessary skills.

"We don't want our dancers to be dependent on handouts. They should be able to stand on their own," he says with pride.

This is the only school of its kind in the country. In fact, says Jay, when you want to study contemporary cinema you have schools like the Film and Television Institute in Pune or the Ray Institute in Kolkata, or if you want to study modern art you have institutions like MS University, Baroda, or the JJ School of Art, Mumbai. For classical dance there is a Kalakshetra for bharatanatyam or Kalamandalam for kathakali – but none for learning contemporary dance. The one-year course at Attakkalari Centre will soon be upgraded to a three-year course, says Jay with pride.

There was a time when his repertory would travel to Kerala and his mother would ask him to take care of his dancers. "These days she tells them to take care of me!" he says with the satisfaction of someone who has seen his institution grow healthy in the one decade of its existence.

He may have organized dance and movement biennales in Bangalore for the past so many years, bringing choreographers and young dancers from all over the world, but even now audiences have to be coaxed into theatres in India to watch a contemporary dance performance. "But at least we have exposed them to these forms," he says.

It has been a long journey, says Jay, who is more comfortable working with his repertory than talking about his life. But he confides that it has been a fulfilling journey in the sense he has provided a platform and a means that will enable others to take up dance professionally.

As for himself, he has seen how dance has helped him to transcend the limitations of the body to feel the unity of body, mind and spirit. "I may keep my room messy or I may be an untidy person. But this space where we perform is sacred. Because it is this space that your body works in, and enables you to cross over to that greater and larger universal space."

