

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Of UDAY SHANKAR, James Joyce wrote to his daughter: “He moves on the stage like a semi-divine being, Believe me, there are still some beautiful things left in this poor old world”.

Uday Shankar Chowdhury was born in 1900, in Udaipur, Rajasthan, to a Bengali family with origins in Narail (present-day Bangladesh). His father was a noted barrister, while his mother descended from a Bengali noble family.

In 1918 his father moved to Great Britain. Uday joined him in London two years later, when he enrolled at the Royal College of Art to study paintings under Sir William Rothenstein. While he was working in a London theatre--Uday often danced at private entertainment for his friends--he was spotted by the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, an event which was to have a lasting impact on his career.

She cast him as Krishna opposite herself in her ballet Radha Krishna and subsequently took him on a coast-to-coast tour of the United States. Within ten years, Uday Shankar took his own ballet to the US, where he received enthusiastic acclaim.

By the mid-'40s, Uday Shankar was acknowledged as a major figure in the history of Indian dance. He had done pioneering work by liberating Indian dance from stuffy and esoteric convention and created a new form, classical in spirit, but innovative and free. His synthesis of western theatrical techniques and Indian dance made his art hugely popular both in India and the West, and he is rightly credited for ushering in an era of renaissance into traditional Indian temple dances-- known then for strict interpretation despite revival movements--while his brother Ravi Shankar helped popularize Indian classical music in the West.

In 1938, he made India his base, and established “Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre,” at Almora, in the Himalayas, and assembled an impressive group of gifted artists -

musicians, dancers, gurus - to join him, including Guru Dutt, Shanti Bardhan, Simkie, Amala, Satyavati, Narendra Sharma, Ruma Guha Thakurta, Prabhat Ganguly, Zohra Sehgal, Uzra, Lakshmi Shankar, Shanta Gandhi; his own brothers Rajendra, Denbendra and Ravi also joined him as students.

The centre however closed after four years of existence in 1942, due to paucity of funds. As his students dispersed, he regrouped his energies and headed south, where he made his only film, Kalpana (Imagination) in 1948, based on his dance, in which both he and his wife, Amala Shankar danced.

In 1962, he was awarded by Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama, with its highest award, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship for lifetime achievement, and in 1971, the Government of India, awarded him with its second highest civilian award the Padma Vibhushan.

He passed away in 1977.