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## Miramonte student makes professional dance debut at Lesher

By Ashley Dong



Avya Poddatoori Photo provided

Rising Miramonte High School junior and basketball player Avya Poddatoori, 15, has spent most of his summer in his living room. Since June, he and his dance teacher have rehearsed Bharatanatyam, a form of Indian classical dance, for five hours every day. This intense rehearsal schedule is to prepare Poddatoori for his arangetram-his debut as a professional dancer. The show on July 29 at the Lesher Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek is free and open to the public.

"I can't wait to show everyone the dances I've been working on for the past year," Poddatoori said.

Bharatanatyam is an art form used to portray Hindu gods and religious stories. Poddatoori described it as a "stronger version of hip-hop" but "more deep." This style of dance is typically performed by women - male Bharatanatyam dancers are rare. The stigma around being a male dancer used to discourage Poddatoori. Eight years ago, when he first started dancing, Poddatoori would not have been excited to perform in front of hundreds of people.

"I was embarrassed," Poddatoori said. "The first thing they see is the makeup and the outfit. I was always wondering what people would think about me. I wouldn't tell anybody about [my dancing]."

But, as he's matured as a person and a dancer, his outlook has changed.

"Some part of me still likes to hide it from people. But now, I'm more practiced and knowledgeable about this type of dance, so I feel confident performing for anybody," Poddatoori said.

Typically, Poddatoori takes his dance lessons over Zoom with his teacher, who is based in India, for two-hour lessons three times a week. But, to prepare for the arangetram, his teachers Shyamjith Kiran and Viraja Kiran are visiting and staying with his family.

As a male Bharatanatyam dancer himself, Shyamjith understands the struggles of being a male dancer.

"People think the dance is meant for females, but we've always been taught that there is a feminine and masculine side to the body," Shyamjith said. "When a male dancer needs to portray a female goddess, he will sink into that character and be what that character demands."

Poddatoori's hour-and-a-half-long show will consist of seven dances, each one with a unique story behind it. "The stories all have meaning. Even though I don't believe in the gods, I believe in the stories and the morals they express and the values they entail a human should have," Poddatoori said.

Poddatoori's favorite character to portray is Shiva, the Hindu god who creates, protects and transforms the universe. To play him, the dance requires emphatic and aggressive movements. "It makes me feel powerful. In a way, it's a little egotistical," Poddatoori said.

Beyond giving him a chance to play a powerful deity, Bharatanatyam has played a crucial role in Poddatoori's self-development. "I've learned to always pursue your dreams no matter what other people think. Number two, to always be happy. Number three, to always trust your family," Poddatoori said.

Poddatoori has a strong family base of support. His siblings, two of whom are Indian classical musicians, helped him cultivate a love for the music, and his mother, Vineela Poddatoori, used to be a Bharatanatyam dancer herself.

"I am so proud of him. He has so much more talent than I ever did, and he's a beautiful dancer. I hope that he loves it as much as I did," Vineela Poddatoori said.

Although he only entered the Lamorinda schools two years ago, Poddatoori has made many close friends.

"Avya is a fun-loving guy," said Caleb Elkind, Poddatoori's close friend. "We're so proud of Avya for the hard work he's done, and we're excited to support him on his show. I can't wait for the amazing standing ovation I know he'll get and I know he deserves."

As of July 13, 563 people signed up to attend the event. RSVP here: <https://avya.org/>

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