

Artist Column

PADMA VIBHUSHAN

Pt. Birju Maharaj



Pt. Birju Maharaj was born on 4 February 1938 in Lucknow, where his father, Acchan Maharaj, recognized his talent and took him under his guidance. His uncles, Shambhu Maharaj and Lachhu Maharaj also taught him Kathak at an early age.

His father died soon after leaving nine-year-old Birju under the guidance of Shambhu Maharaj. The following years were full of struggle and household goods were sold to make ends meet. He spent about ten months in Mumbai learning from his uncle Lachhu Maharaj. At the young age of thirteen, he was invited to join Sangeet Bharti in Delhi to teach Kathak. Soon he established himself as a good dancer and dedicated teacher.

Pt. Birju Maharaj had given a new dimension to Kathak, by experimenting with his technique in the application of dance dramas, which has today become a very successful medium for mass propagation. As a choreographer, he was the finest in the country. His bold and intellectual compositions in traditional themes we are brilliant, whereas his contemporary works is also refreshing in concept, crisp and entertaining.

Since the early days when he choreographed pieces like Makhan Chori, Phaag Bahar, etc., his work appreciated by the audience and the choreographer never stopped bringing out new themes, each a masterpiece in itself. In the seventies, full length mythological and historical dance dramas were the norm. Some of them were Katha Raghunath Ki, Krishnayan, Ropmati Baajbahadur. Mughal themes depicted were Darbar-e-Salaami, Shaahi Mehfil, etc. In the 1980's some excellent abstract and purely rhythmic compositions were made -Laya Parikrama, Naad Gunjan, Ghunghru Sangeet, etc. The trend has continued. Humorous ones like Samachar Darpan, File Katha and sensitive ones like Anamya were appreciated for their unusual ideas. The list is endless as he spends every day in creating something new and giving shape to another new idea.

Pt. Birju Maharaj was a superb drummer, played nearly all drums with ease and precision; he was especially fond of playing the Tabla and Naal And to play all string instruments, Sitar, Sarod, Violin, Sarangi with ease, though he never underwent any formal training. He was also a singer par excellence, having command over Thumri, Dadra, Bhajan and Ghazal. He possesses the unique quality of an in-depth understanding of Laya (beat) so finds it easy to compose new pieces. He was fond of creating tihais especially Ginti Ki Tihai. Not only in India, he was also known abroad, nearly all over the world. Even in the early part of his career, he was part of cultural troupes sent abroad by the Government of India to represent India at various festivals. He had extensively toured all over the world i.e. Russia, U.S.A, Japan, U.A.E., U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Austria, the Czech Republic, Burma, Sri Lanka, etc. for performances as well as lecture-demonstrations.



Contributions to the Film Industry

Pt. Birju Maharaj has directed, composed music and sung for two classical dance sequences in the film 'Shatranj Ke Khiladi' (The Chess Players) directed by Satyajit Ray. He directed and composed a music piece for the film 'Dil To Paagal Hai', as a jugalbandi. Madhuri Dixit performed

the dance on this piece in the Kathak style, with a contemporary touch. In the film 'Gadar', he choreographed a group dance based on the song 'Aan Milo Sajana'. He choreographed, composed music and was the male lead singer for the song 'Kahe Chhed Mohe' in the film Devdas. This dance represents a true portrayal of bhaav as performed by Madhuri Dixit, in the classical style. With incredible contributions in the field of Kathak, Maharaj ji passed away to heavenly abode on 17th January 2022.

Awards and Honour :

- Sangeet Natak Akademi Award
- Padma Vibhushan by Govt of India
- Nritya Choodamani Award by Sri Krishna Gana Sabha
- Kalidas Samman by Madhyapradesh Govt.
- Lata Mangeshkar Puraskar
- Honorary doctorate from Indira Kala Sangeet Vishwavidyalaya
- Honorary doctorate from Banaras Hindu University
- Sangam Kala Award
- Bharat Muni Sammaan
- Andhra Ratna
- Nritya Vilas Award
- Adharshila Shikhar Samman
- Soviet Land Nehru Award
- National Nritya Shiromani Award
- Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavana Award

Film :

2012 - National Film Award for Best Choreography for Unnai Kaanaathu (Vishwaroopam)

2016 - Filmfare Award for Best Choreography for Mohe Rang Do Laal (Bajirao Mastani)

