

# Indian Dancer Charms With Style, Charisma

By James Wierzbicki

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St. Louis' Indian community — and its community of Westerners who take interest in Indian culture — seems to be growing. Concerts of Indian music these days are both more numerous and better attended than they were a decade ago. And there are far more dance events.

Sujata Vinjamuri's Kuchipudi Art Academy — one of the city's two schools of Indian dance — mounted a production Saturday evening in the auditorium of the Art Museum.

Performances by students took up the first 45 minutes; in addition to pleasing the parents of the participants, they demonstrated that Indian dance — even on the most fundamental levels — is a lot harder than it looks. But most of the evening was given over to Shanta Rati Misra, an expertly trained and apparently quite versatile dancer from India who now makes her home in Singapore. Shanta Misra, of course, made it all look easy.

As I like to point out when I write about Indian artists, I am no expert in these matters, and I am at a loss to explain the difference between the *bharata natyam* style that is most often shown on St. Louis stages and the

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## DANCE

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*kuchipudi* style that was represented Saturday. Indeed, with my Western eyes I tend to notice only the styles' similarities, those common elements that are obvious and perhaps even superficial.

Yet I am not blind to natural grace, or disciplined virtuosity. Nor am I immune to the power of eloquent pantomime; although I have little understanding of the historical context or theological meaning of the various parables that typically made up the second halves of Shanta Misra's pieces, I never felt that I was not getting at least some of the message.

*Kuchipudi* is a subtle form of Indian dance-drama, and its story-telling techniques depend less on bold posturing or detailed hand gestures than on slow, soft upper-body movement.

But Shanta Misra, even within the style's narrow expressive limits, is communicative to the extreme. It is tempting to say that she is as convincing an actress as she is beautiful a dancer, but that would be to miss the point; for in *kuchipudi*, dancing and acting are inseparable. Shanta Misra is simply very good at what she does. Her charisma is low-key and contained; still, it makes a great impact.