

Thullal across borders

PERSONALITY

Thullal artiste
Hartmut Schmidt
on why he took
up the art form
as a profession.

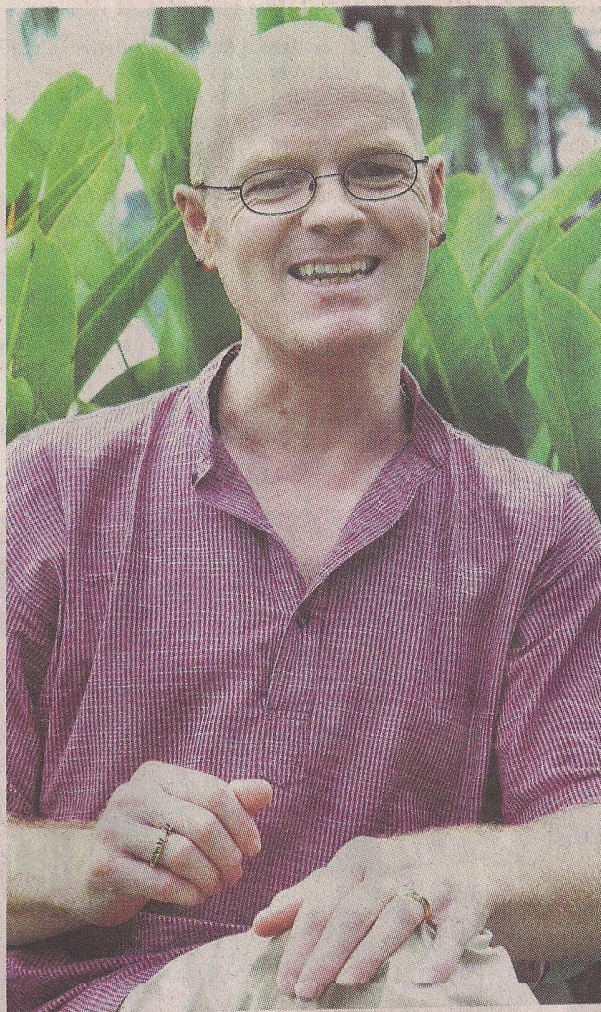
NITA SATHYENDRAN

By all means and intent it is a typical Seetankanthullal performance. And just like any other professional Thullal artiste, this one too is dressed in the traditional flouncy costume complete with anklets et al. He prances around the stage singing, dancing and even joking with the audience. Then what's the twist you may ask? Well, the artiste who is narrating in colloquial Malayalam the tale of Markhandeya, from Kunjan Nambiar's 'Anthakavadam,' is a German!

Meet Thullal *kunstler* [artiste] Hartmut Schmidt a.k.a. Harianu Harshita, a Kerala Kalamandalam-trained Thullal performer who is perhaps the only such professional in Germany. A recipient of the Gisela-Bonn Award of the DIG (German-Indian Society) and the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) for his extraordinary contribution to Indo-German friendship, Hartmut was in Thiruvananthapuram recently for an Ottanthullal performance organised by ICCR in association with the Goethe-Zentrum of the German embassy.

"I have always been interested in dance and have studied contemporary dance such as jazz and ballet, when I chanced upon a book on dance forms in India. I was immediately drawn to Thullal because it is a mixture of singing, music, dance, mime and audience-interaction; exactly what I was looking for," says Hartmut, a former electrician who hails from Freiburg in the Black Forest region of Germany, in his slightly-accented Malayalam.

"I began corresponding with Kalamandalam and at first they kept asking me whether it is Kathakali that I



ERASING CULTURAL DIVIDES: German Thullal artiste Hartmut Schmidt. PHOTO: C. RATEESH KUMAR

wanted to study instead. But I was sure about Thullal from the very beginning and I came to the institute in 1991 where I began learning the art form under Kalamandalam Geetanandan. Admittedly, it was hard work. I was clueless about much of the dynamics and rituals involved in the guru-disciple relationship that is the foundation of Indian dance, not to mention the language and the sahitya. But fortunately for me there was a sahitya teacher called Mohankumar who helped me a lot by painstakingly translating everything into English," adds the artiste who later trained under the likes of Kalamandalam Devaki, Kilimangalam Vasudevan Namboothiripad, Kalamandalam Gopinathprabha, Kalamandalam Divakaran Nair Asan (from whom he

began learning Parayanthullal) and now Kalamandalam Prabhakaran, with whom he has performed in Germany a few times.

Hartmut has also trained in the mizhavu under Kalamandalam Isvaran Unni. Since his arangattam at the Melpathur Auditorium in Guruvayur on April 3, 1992, where he performed 'Garuda Garbha Bhangam' episode of 'Ramanucharitam,' Hartmut has been regularly performing Ottanthullal and Seethankanthullal in India, Germany and Switzerland.

Parayanthullal

However, it is the rarely performed Parayanthullal that Hartmut specialises in.

"Although it is of a much slower tempo and has much less hasya than the other two, I chose to specialise in Parayanthullal

purely because it is more restrained and more philosophical. I don't believe in performing only certain episodes to keep the audience amused. However, unfortunately, I don't get the opportunity to perform Parayanthullal outside India simply because it is very difficult to get coconut shells, which are an integral part of the costume," says the artiste who knows how to perform six stories in Thullal - 'Ramanucharitam,' 'Kalyanasou-gandhikam,' 'Pulindimoksham,' 'Gajendramoksham,' 'Anthakavadam,' and a part of 'Krishnaleela.' And in his native country, Hartmut performs these stories in German!

"I've translated each and every word from these stories into German. Thankfully, German words of the same meaning seem

to harmoniously fit into eight of the 10 Indian talas. Of course, the stories have to be edited to about 45 minutes. At first it was a challenge to get Thullal across to audiences in Germany because they were not used to this kind of story-telling but they caught on well enough," explains Hartmut who also teaches Thullal to students at the Loretta school in Freiburg, including his son, Janmurali.

Next year he will also publish German translations of the Thullal stories together with Professor Niklas of the University of Cologne.

"I am determined to do as much as I can to promote and keep variety alive in Thullal. And if that means learning all the 30 or so stories, then so be it," emphasises Hartmut as he signs off.