

BY H.M. CAULEY

Ask Ivan Pulinkala to give you a few stanzas from “Grease” or “West Side Story,” and he’ll remember the songs he learned growing up in a family centered around music. The 36-year-old learned to play the piano and sing at an early age, and was introduced to musical theater through his father, who managed one of the biggest acting companies in his hometown: New Delhi, India.

“Yes, I was in ‘Evita,’ ‘Grease’ and lots of Broadway shows,” says Pulinkala with a laugh.

But the moment he discovered dance, acting and singing took a back seat. Though he earned a business degree from Hindu College in New Delhi, he headed to California, where he received another degree in dance. In between performing and choreographing both in the United States and India, Pulinkala took a teaching job in Kentucky. But six years ago, he moved to Midtown and embarked on a new stage in his career: creating a dance program at Kennesaw State University.

“At the time, Kennesaw offered just some dance classes,” says Pulinkala. “I started a dance minor in 2005 that had 140 students, then wrote a proposal to the Board of Regents for a major that started in 2009. Now, we have more than 80 majors.”

Joseph Meeks, dean of KSU’s College of the Arts, selected Pulinkala for his dream of a vibrant dance program.

“We were seeking someone who had both the short-term and long-term vision to create the program,” he says. “He has been phenomenal. He has created the fastest-moving, fastest-growing program that I have ever experienced in my entire career in higher education. It is just overwhelming. He not only has established a strong academic program, but he has actively engaged the university and the community in his vision.”

Including the community in the program was one of the first steps Pulinkala took when he arrived in Atlanta. Through the advisory board he established, he made connections with the Atlanta Ballet that have led to a mutually beneficial partnership.

“It allows their company dancers to enroll in KSU’s undergraduate program and also exposes our students to the pro-

“Chakra,” performed by the KSU Dance Company at the Kennedy Center in May 2010



JUST DANCE

KSU dance director Ivan Pulinkala leads the university to new heights

fessional world,” he says. “Our dancers have performed twice with the ballet, and they can take classes at any of the ballet’s locations.”

In its short life span, the KSU dance program has collected numerous accolades on both regional and national levels.

“For the last four years, we’ve been accepted to perform at every gala concert of the American College Dance Festival,” he says. “For the last two years, we’ve represented the Southeast at the national festival. In May, our students were at the Kennedy Center, and this summer, they were in New York. Our short history has been quite incredible.”

Junior dance major Priscilla Curtis

was in high school when she first met Pulinkala and took a class with him. His enthusiasm brought her to Kennesaw.

“He is such a good teacher, always exciting and so inspiring,” she says. “It’s obvious he cares so much for us. He’s always excited to teach, and he’s obviously a genius—teaching us, choreographing, studying—and yet he never gets stressed out.”

Outside the classroom, Pulinkala, whose specialty is modern and contemporary ballet, keeps his hand in choreography, including three pieces he’s completed for the Atlanta Ballet. He spends one weekend a month at the University of Alabama, where he’s working on a doctor-

ate in higher education. And just a few weeks ago, he officially became a U.S. citizen.

“I could have kept my green card forever, but there are a lot of benefits to becoming a citizen,” he says.

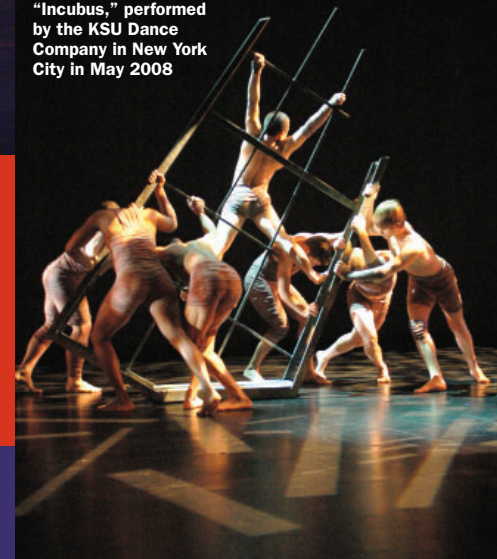
In January, Pulinkala’s dance program will mark a key milestone when it moves into two new dance studios across Chastain Road from the main campus. It’s a major step forward for a program that’s been packed into one studio in the recreation center.

“It just shows that the future of dance here is very bright,” he says. “There’s a real opportunity to develop a nationally recognized program.” **SP**

Ivan Pulinkala



“Incubus,” performed by the KSU Dance Company in New York City in May 2008



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