



The LEELA KATHAK DANCERS are the performance group of the Prabha Rustagi Memorial Trust. Urmila Nagar, Senior teacher of Jaipur Gharana Kathak Dance in the Kathak Kendra in New Delhi before her retirement, is their well loved Guru.

So, who is Prabha Rustagi?

Prabha Rustagi was the first Kathak teacher in the Northwest. The wife of a U WA professor and mother of two children, she had been trained in instrumental music, tabla hand drums, and Kathak dance as a youngster. Her marriage at a young age and early pregnancies kept her too busy to develop into a performer of dance but as her children grew she began to teach Kathak to her own daughter and to other children of Indian friends who knew of her ability. In the early 80s her youngest child graduated from the University of Washington as an engineer, and moved into a job, marriage and a child of her own. Prabha, encouraged by her friend Shantha Benegal, began to develop her dance for performance. Whenever in India, she studied with a great young dancer, Durga Lal. She was terribly saddened when, at the peak of his career, he died suddenly of a heart attack.

In her search for a new teacher, Prabha found Urmila Nagar, a renown dancer from the Jaipur Gharana, the same style as Durga Lal. Prabha practiced hard and became a well known performer in the NW. Shantha Benegal, vocalist and Annie Penta, tabla player became accompanists for Prabha, and their group, LEELA, performed many time in Folklife, Diwali celebrations, the Children's Museum and in many schools, community centers and libraries. Her natural grace and expressive ability won her many admirers and her love for teaching and children made her many friends in outreach projects.

She continued to teach dance and in 1994, when ovarian cancer took her from us, she had 13 dedicated students. Parents of students, her widower and many other admirers and friends formed a non-profit organization, the Prabha Rustagi Memorial Trust, and asked Urmila Nagar, her Guru in India, if somehow she would continue to teach the students. Urmila-ji's response exemplifies the depth of the guru-student relationship. She said. "If they are students of Prabha's they are my students. Of course I will come and teach them." She came the first year in 1996 and has loyally returned every year since.

In 2001, the name of the dancers was changed from Dancers of the Prabha Rustagi Memorial Trust to the LEELA KATHAK DANCERS. This name still keeps Prabha's memory alive for those of us who knew her and it pays homage to the wonderful commitment and artistry of the only teacher these present dancers have ever known, Guru Urmila Nagar.