

Innovation within tradition

Dance and dancers reflect the social mores and intellectual progress of society. They are the products of culture and tradition. In the brief history of the past 50 years when dance has been set free in Indian society, one finds the radical changes in society being reflected in the evolution of artistic expression. When the dancer community was looked down upon, it was the erotic padam and javalis which were in fashion. After the shackles were broken, devotional kritis and religious themes opened up a new area for the newcomers to the field.

The liberal Nineties has seen dance going beyond words to explore space and body energy. The themes are becoming bolder and rigid confines of style and disciplinary boundaries are smudged resulting in the turn-of-the-century mindset which questions male supremacy, flaunts feminism and accepts the complexities of the modernist era. The bewildered connoisseur awaits the next onslaught in the name of experimentation.

In this context, it was refreshing to see two young dancers Lata and Gita keep well within tradition in an innovative approach albeit to a weather-beaten subject. The sisters presented the inaugural show of dance presentations 'Vaibhogame' and 'Savitri' during the Spring Festival of Mumbai's Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha on March 16 and 17. While the first was a celebration of life, the latter was defiance of death. 'Vaibhogame' described the weddings of celestial maidens Sita, Rukmini, Valli and Meenakshi, while 'Savitri' stands alone and rock-like for the ideals of marriage. The lyrics penned by Krishnaswamy, the well known film-maker, were in Tamil. The music is composed by Shyam Joseph in Carnatic ragas liberally interspersed with sparkling swara patterns and thillanas to enliven the narrative. Singers like Unni Krishnan, Trichur Ramachandran, Saishankar, Rajkumar Bharati and S. P. Ramh have lent their voices. The female voices which included Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi gave a dramatic and trendy colouring but did not detract from classicism. The overpowering brilliance of S. A. Srinivasan's mridangam literally carried the show, rendering other sound effects quite unnecessary. The absence of a live orchestra was compensated by a

professional quality recording. In fact, it seemed the right thing to do as the audience were treated to music by star singers with perfect balance of sound impossible to achieve in an open air pandal like the performance under review. Dancing to taped music is a strain for most dancers because it demands rigorous practice and exactitude in timing. It is to the credit of Lata and Gita that they rarely missed a beat, and did not lose the spontaneity and involvement during the narrative sequences.

Trained by the dancing couple Narasimhachari and Vasanthalakshmi, the dancers displayed their disciplined training in dance and knowledge of the Sastras in their imaginative choreography. The lack of 'ayata' mandala during the nritta portions imparted a frothiness to the brisk footwork that one associates with Kuchipudi. The judicious use of lokadharmi in abhinaya seemed justified as it matched the lyrics which were in simple

colloquial Tamil. Their artistic background and vast experience on the stage were evident in their treatment of the heroines. The rustic naivete of Valli was sharply contrasted by Meenakshi who having conquered the world, meekly surrenders to the god of Love. The spiritual and philosophical overtones of a theme like Aurobindo's 'Savitri' were handled with maturity and depth. The multi-talented sisters displayed a cool performing demeanour and remained unfazed by the inadequate stage facilities like the absence of wings and spotlights. The presentation would have been enhanced with improved lighting, simple props and appropriate costuming.

Dancers in general must also take greater care to check that the background is not festooned with sponsor banners which (like the stage under review) destroy the aesthetics of the presentation besides distracting the eye and clashing with the colours of the costume.

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