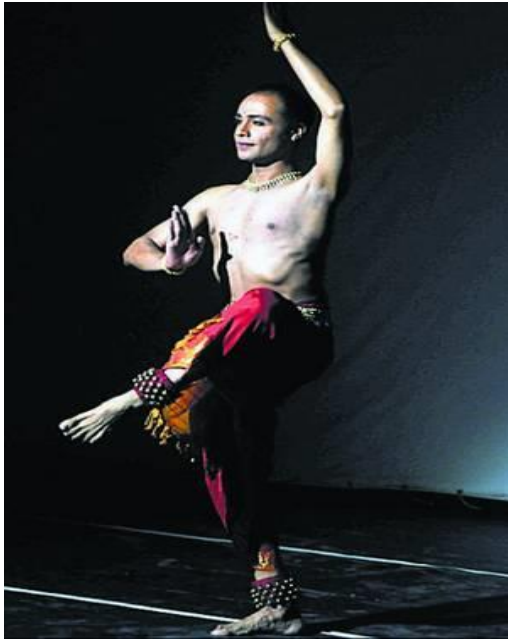


Excellence in motion

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In rhythm Seshadri Iyengar. Photos: Sanjay Nanda, V Sreenivasa Murthy.

REVIEW - two events that exemplified the high standards possible in classical dance. ANJANA RAJAN

Two recent performances in the Capital re-ignited the question why the dance scene is so skewed in this country as to not afford performance opportunities to highly talented dancers, while mediocrity seems to have a free run. Both shows had a soothing tenor increasingly rare in the frenetic world of performing arts.

“Leelayita”, performed by Odissi dancers Shagun Butani, Y. Asha Kumari and Priyambada Samantray at Kamani auditorium, was based on the premise that the traditional works presented deserved to be seen and were fading out of notice because of the importance given to new compositions.

An exquisitely designed stage (Neeraj Sahai) with cyclorama instead of a black backdrop and excellent lighting by Sharad Kulshreshtha added immensely to the effect. Holistically conceived, with attention given to the different aspects of a stage production (décor, costumes, invitation design, lights, stage set), the highly tasteful show was a far cry from the loud, garish presentations one is often treated to in the name of traditional arts.

A single ‘pattachitra’ kind of tree cutout, lighted from different angles, ensured the stage was uncluttered but not empty. In the mangalacharan it was one tree between two sculpturesque dancers, while a third was tantalisingly in its shadow till she made her entry. In the ashtapadi “Sakhi

He" which Shagun danced alone, shadows turned the tree into a whole forest, perfect for the setting of the piece that describes Radha's secret journey into the grove to meet Krishna in the dead of night. This ashtapadi, choreographed by Guru Mayadhar Raut with subtle intensity, was beautifully executed by Shagun — a dancer with profound poise, communicative face and stunning stage presence.

The group compositions were also well conceived, particularly the use of diagonals in the Oriya song. Strong footwork ensured not a tap was out of place. The effortless yet seemingly flawless coordination between the dancers spoke of solid rehearsal, yet the spontaneity remained.

"To Shiva, offering of a fragmented heart" — Shagun's work in progress — brought out interesting formations, combining the gravitas of Shiva with the spirit of high octane tandava. Gurus Banamali Maharana and Gangadhar Pradhan played the mardal, Nimakanta Routray sang, Jawahar Mishra played flute and Jeewan Das the sitar. Surendra Maharana and Niranjana Sahoo were on other traditional percussions.

While Shagun's costume, maroon and white, looked bright, the green in the other dancers' costumes looked relatively dull.

Bharatanatyam

At the India Habitat Centre, Seshadri Iyengar presented Bharatanatyam. If Shagun Butani's group managed to fill Kamani with well wishers, Seshadri, who lives in Bangalore, danced to a sparse but erudite audience. But it was a show to remember, because it has been a long time since anyone presented such a blend of technique and thought in the Bharatanatyam format.

In maestro Lalgudi Jayaraman's varnam in Charukeshi, Seshadri dispensed with the nayika mode and immersed himself in undeviating bhakti, addressing himself to an imagined 'vigraha' or idol.

His jatis, while complex, were musical to the ears with adavus set aesthetically. While jatis too often become vehicles to show off a dancer's agility, stamina, speed — more a decathlon than dance — Seshadri's pure dance segments were aesthetic. Use of the morsing was also effective.

And though he wowed us with his technical prowess — unbelievable speed with clarity of footwork and finished movements, light-hearted leaps — he also left ample space for stillness and calm.

The Tulsidas bhajan "Shri Ramachandra Kripalu", though the singer's accent left something to be desired, was a refreshing and dynamic presentation.

Lights were not always complimentary to the dancer, especially the spot from above, which threw strange shadows on his facial features not of a piece with bhakti.

Yamini Krishnamurti, who in her heyday took performance levels to a pinnacle no one has been able to summit yet Declared, "It was the ultimate in excellence and you are the great hope of Indian classical dance."

The last word, coming from the last word in dance, left Seshadri speechless.