

Fall-Winter 2019

Ballet Review



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Michael Trusnovec in *Aureole*.

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The eighth annual Dancing the Gods Festival of Indian Dance was presented by the World Music Institute under the expert curatorial direction of Rajika Puri. As has been the custom over the years, Puri offered an information-packed lecture/demonstration. This year she spoke about what makes a great Indian dancer. She began by mentioning that God is the greatest dancer – for in Hindu belief, Shiva created the universe through his dance.

That original dance may be a hard act to follow; however, the 2019 festival offered two distinct programs over two nights at Peter Norton Symphony Space featuring Kalanidhi Dance, a refreshing and talented kuchipudi dance ensemble, and Sujata Mohapatra, a highly recognized odissi soloist and master teacher. Both programs delighted and astounded the audiences with their demonstration of technical precision, wide range of expression, and spirited energy.

When Kalanidhi's artistic director and founder Anuradha Nehru promised a rasa-filled program, I thought she was merely quipping. But no, the company was performing an evening length work titled *Rasa: Evoking the Nine Emotions*. The work, she then explained, would demonstrate the nine rasas, or emotional flavors of human experience, as set forth in the *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts dated between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. According to this Vedic text, the main purpose of art is to evoke rasa, thereby leading the audience to a state of transcendence from the mundane. Kalanidhi Dance gave a refreshing and polished performance of this thoughtfully conceived choreography.

Nehru structured the dance to portray each of the nine rasas through characterization of a dramatic episode from the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. Following each dramatic scene, the particular emotion was rendered through abstract, or pure, dance – *nritta*. In this way,

the choreography incorporated *nritya* (narrative dance) and *nritta* (pure dance) to offer a complete dance experience.

It is worth noting that these “pure dance” segments are not abstract in the Western sense. They are clearly composed of Indian dance patterns of movement that reflect the mood of the rhythmic and melodic accompaniment as well as micro movements of the face and upper body that convey subtle overtones. They simply do not involve a dramatic aspect.

An opening prologue had each of the nine dancers leap out of a kneeling semicircle formation and animate into one of the nine rasas. The dancing evolved into energetic, rhythmic steps, squats, and leaps with fully articulated arm and hand movements and the added excitement of varied, moving group formations. Afterward, the nine rasas – love, humor, fear, sorrow, heroism, disgust, wonder, anger, and peace – were cleverly enacted in nine brief scenes from the *Ramayana* that afforded the viewer the full arc of the story's narrative. From the budding love of Lord Rama and Princess Sita after he wins her hand through a contest of strength before her father Shiva, to the fear experienced by all when the demon king Ravana abducts Sita and steals her away, the rasas were portrayed with heart and skill by the nine ensemble members, who range in age from sixteen to forty-two.

The appealing, pale, petal-colored dance saris with pleated central panels in darker shades, also designed by Nehru, were skillfully accessorized to differentiate various characters without requiring a major costume change. Black shawls, which foreshadowed the kidnapping of Sita, were incorporated into the movements of a chorus of fearful women. Coarse, black, messy wigs were worn to humorous effect in the portrayal of the repulsive, disgusting demon creatures that inhabit the forests that separate Rama from Sita. Gold-trimmed, black vests smartly identified Rama's brave warriors that fight the dread Ravana and his demon army for the return of Sita.

The recorded music, by award-winning composer B. V. Balasai, used an unusual array of instruments to create innovative sounds, new melodies, and stirring percussion that noticeably amplified the shifting moods. A particularly twangy sitar section perfectly captured the sense of fear and paralysis evoked by four swaying and drooping dancers, who were repeatedly pulled to the floor in a state of depressed enervation.

The final Ramayana scene reunites Rama with Sita as they return home and establish a peaceful kingdom. The choreography reflects this harmonious state with the formation of pleasing kaleidoscopic group designs. This is a rewarding aspect of Kalanidhi Dance, as we so rarely see large group choreography in classical Indian dance, which is primarily performed as a solo form. The ensemble moved around in a circle like a graceful solar system with Rama – the still point in the center. Eventually three dancers bowed to form an inner circle around Rama. The other five dancers knelt down low to create an outer circle. This called to mind a lotus bloom opening its petals before our eyes. How could one but be moved by this sublime unfolding of beauty?

For the second program, Sujata Mohapatra gave a solo recital following the traditional odissi *margam*, or format, of works choreographed by her guru and father-in-law, the legendary Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. The sounds generated by her four master musicians from Odisha – droning harmonium, ethereal flute passages, throbbing percussion, and energetic fiddling – seemed to coax Mohapatra onstage from the opposite side. Bearing flower petals in her cupped palms, she walked languorously, sinking into each hip. Arriving at the center, she turned to face the audience and continued forward to descend to the earth in a deep plié for the *mangalacharan*, or invocation.

This composition takes its inspiration from odissi's ancient roots as ritual worship of the gods in the Jagannath Temple in the state of Odisha. In this salutation to mother earth, the guru, the audience, and the specific chosen de-

ity, the dancer consecrates the ground as a microcosmic representation of the universe. Mohapatra held her unshakable plié as she undulated her petal-filled, clasped hands drawing a generous circle in the space before her. After spilling the petals as an offering, she bowed and touched her forehead to the floor in a supreme posture of humility. She rose to dance homage to Lord Rama, dance-acting his characteristic attributes of fierce warrior and ace archer. Finally she broke into a joyous pure dance sequence moving in all directions with crisp step work jingling her anklets as her arms drew graceful arcs all about.

The following *pallavi*, which means “blossoming,” is a pure dance composition that reflects the flowering of the melody. Mohapatra adopted a posture of playing the *veena* (a South Asian instrument with seven strings and long, fretted fingerboard). From that pose she danced a form of call and response with the musicians until the choreography let loose with an explosion of fast rhythmic step work that landed her opposite the musicians in a kneeling pose holding her imaginary *veena*.

The two *abhinaya* works that followed showed how Mohapatra's skill and mastery transforms into magic. *Abhinaya* is the mimetic art of leading the viewer toward empathy with a character. *Dheere Sameere* (Gentle Breezes), the first *abhinaya* piece, was developed from verses from the *Gite Govinda*, the twelfth-century opus by the saint-poet Jayadeva. This epic poem, describing the love of Radha for Lord Krishna, was traditionally sung and danced by female temple dancers, called *maharis*, in their daily service to Lord Jagannath (form of Vishnu) in his temple in the coastal town of Puri in Odisha. In this song, Radha's *sakhi* (confidant) tells her that her lover Krishna yearns for her and awaits her along the banks of the Yamuna River.

The choreography, again by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, provided an exquisite platform for Mohapatra to glide from character to character. After entering the stage as Radha, she soon transitioned to portray the *sakhi* who

dances a description of Lord Krishna, lying down in a paradise of flowers beside the Yamuna and anticipating a night of lovemaking. Mohapatra's eloquent hand gestures evoked birds, butterflies, and the rich surrounding landscape. In the final section of the dance, she was once again Radha gracefully ornamenting herself in preparation for meeting her ardent lover.

The second abhinaya piece, *Shabari*, was the showstopper. According to the Hindu story, Shabari was a frail, aged, tribal woman who felt immense devotion for Lord Rama. Having waited her entire life for an encounter with him, she finally meets her Lord in her aged state. The choreographic gem by Guru Ratikant Mohapatra (Sujata Mohapatra's husband) captures this moving encounter between devotee and deity. Mohapatra brilliantly embodied the elderly Shabari with her bent over posture and trembling gestures and lips. Then in a full-pivot turn, she transformed into the upright, powerful, and benevolent Lord Rama.

Sujata Mohapatra's character transitions were instantaneous and complete as she rendered their nuanced interactions changing back and forth. In a humble act of devotion, Mohapatra, acting as Shabari, feeds Lord Rama an assortment of berries – but first tastes each one to assess its sweetness. Nothing can describe the expression of distaste creased upon her face as she bites into a tart one! The audience was in awe of this inspired portrayal.

To conclude the program, Mohapatra danced *Ardhanariswara* – a composite half-male/half-female form of the deities Shiva and his wife Parvati. Performing this thrilling duet with the capable young dancer Soumya Bose, Mohapatra danced the deity's soft (*lasya*) left half complemented by Bose's strong, athletic (*tandava*) right half. Together they swirled in this classic depiction of the twofold nature of divine energy by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. The excitement was fed by the devotional hymn that describes Lord Shiva's attributes set to drama-building music by Pandit Raghunath Panigrahi. It was a pitch-perfect high

note on which to complete the evening and this festival of dancing gods.

Bologna

Alessandro Bizzotto

The ballet season of the Teatro Comunale in Bologna opened in 2019 with a classic among the classics: *Swan Lake* in the staging by Riccardo Nuñez from twenty-five years ago for the Teatro San Carlo of Naples. The corps de ballet from Naples performed. Odette/Odile was the virtuoso principal of the Dutch National Ballet Maia Makhately, opposite rising Italian star Alessandro Staiano, currently a soloist at the San Carlo.

The Teatro Comunale, with its four tiers of boxes, a small royal box, and gallery with a ceiling looked stunning, yet smaller than I had imagined. When the green curtain (perfectly matched to the new green seats) rises, a kind of safety curtain painted with a reproduction of Mikhail Vrubel's *The Swan Princess* appears as a background for a short prologue. Then, as act 1 begins, a Klimt-like set design hits the eyes – green and blue trees as the legs on the side, with gold, green, and red costumes.

The pas de trois boasts a sprightly but sometimes brittle cast, with Sara Sancamillo and Claudia D'Antonio teamed with Salvatore Manzo, whose variation was fiercely danced.

Staiano had a princely attitude, but it was not easy to understand where his reluctance came from. When he meets Makhately's Swan Queen, he is stunned, slightly bewildered. Makhately, for her part, was coolly enchanting: pale and gorgeous. She dazzled with technical assurance and glamorous allure. Her flustered Odette had a still-human yet creamy charm. After the White Swan pas de deux, the audience looked ecstatic.

The swans were not always a model of unity, but their legwork was refined and there was a fair amount of talent among the soloists, particularly in the character dances of act 3. The partnership between Makhately and Staiano is a solid one and, surprisingly, it reached its peak with the Black Swan pas de deux.