

The Living Tree

Reviews (March 30, 2001)

[Members' comments on *The Living Tree*, the dance theatre production]

The unique feature of this beautiful dance drama is that although based on a simple story in a rural setting, it has many serious and powerful messages to convey. The story revolves around an innocent young girl who grows up in a prosperous village under the care of her brother and sister-in-law. She spends her days lovingly nurturing a tree in her yard and develops a deep sense of affection for the tree. The tree, adorned with its magnificent foliage, joyously responds. The sister-in-law finds this relationship wasteful and awkward. Much against the wishes of her husband, she successfully connives to get the girl married to a man in a far away place. The girl is forced to break her intimate relationship with the tree. Ironically, the innocent bride entrusts the care of the tree to her sister-in-law who promptly abandons it. In a short time, a drought befalls the village, the tree becomes emaciated, the brother falls deathly ill, the village is impoverished, and internecine fights break out. The girl learns of this catastrophe, hurries back home and nurtures the tree. Her loving care revives the tree; her brother recovers, the drought is ended, and the village is saved. The messages are readily apparent. Human life is intimately connected to its environment. Environment responds to human actions. While many among us do not care for or appreciate nature, fortunately there are many others who do. Neglect and abuse of the environment are wrought with disastrous consequences. Material poverty arising due to a lack of concern for the ecology may eventually lead to depraved human behavior. Nature however, is benign and forgiving and allows for immediate redemption.

The elegant choreography accompanied by fascinatingly rhythmic music conveyed the complexity of these themes through extraordinarily graceful and fluid movements. Exquisite costumes and sets in pleasing colors were a treat to the eye. The drama was embellished by thoughtful narratives which enabled easy comprehension. This is wonderful theatre indeed. A uniformly high level of performance by the artistes makes it very difficult to single out a particular great role but Krishankshi Sharma as the domineering sister-in-law does stand out.

(P. S. Ayyaswamy, *Broomall, PA*)

I thoroughly enjoyed the dance drama *Living Tree* jointly organized by Sruti and TAGDV. I liked it perhaps for the same reasons a lover of "traditional" Indian music and dance may not have liked it. The event was a bold experiment aimed at fusing different forms of music and dance and a big hit among our children. I wish Sruti sponsors many more such 'Trees'.

(R.Sivakumar, *Blue Bell, PA*)

Given that most of our dance dramas are based on themes from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata or the Puranas, it was refreshing to see a drama based on a secular theme. An experiment such as this is apt to evoke comments both in favor and against it. I liked the overall effort and the effect it created although I felt at times certain aspects of it lacked dramatic force and artistry. The commentary, for example, was in general good but tended at times to be somewhat preachy and sanctimonious, which took away the poetry from it. The opening sequence was rather gloomy and lacked visual impact. The scene depicting the violence to the tree was very effectively conceived and carried out. Dancing and acting were generally good. Krishnakshi Sharma, as the girl's sister-in-law, gave an outstanding performance. Mahalakshmi, I felt, was miscast in the role of the girl. Her performance was rather disappointing.

Narendra's choreography employed several dance styles, from Bharata Natyam to ballet to Bhangra. And to match it, Narasimhan's music also employed different sounds to make it rather non-denominational. Some may justify such mixing of styles on the grounds that the theme is universal. I have some reservations about such a view. Universality comes from the theme, not so much from the style or the medium employed to present it. A story does not become universally appealing just because it is written in English. One could bring out all the universality staying within a particular genre that is competent or using only those genres that are organically related to it, rather than by using completely different (I am almost tempted to say alien) ones. I am certainly not against experimentation and innovation, and would even welcome it when

the story line demands it. In this particular case, however, I felt there was no compelling reason to mix various styles. Well, that is a matter of never ending debate, of perennial tension between classicism and innovation. There are no winners in that battle, I am afraid.

(H.Y. Rajagopal, Media, PA.)

The *Living Tree* was unique among the various dance dramas I have witnessed so far. It is customary in choreographing a dance drama to choose a particular form of classical dance whether it is Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Kathak or Odissi. However, in *Living Tree* we witnessed brilliant demonstration of the various classical dance forms as well as the folk dances including the western Waltz, etc. For a purist, this symphony of different dance forms may be objectionable. But then, fine art when delivered in its original form is always enjoyable. The performing artists, though trained in Bharatha Natyam, had no difficulty in gliding from one dance form to the other. Narasimhan's scintillating music and Narendra's inspiring choreography captured the emotions of the various scenes of the drama resulting in a memorable experience. The stage setting, the props, the choice of bright colored costumes all added to the beauty of the dance drama. *Living Tree* left a memorable impression among the audience. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Needless to say, SRUTI had a sold out audience for the evening. Kudos to Narendra and his dance troop.

(P. Swaminathan, Ambler, PA.)

Living Tree was a stupendous show. The direction and performance were flawless. The organization of the event was very professional. The acoustics could have been slightly better, but overall a very enjoyable performance.

(Nitish Chowdhary, Princeton, NJ.)