

Indira Kadambi's Bharatanatyam Recital

A Review (June 8, 2002)

By S. Amalan

SRUTI, The India Music and Dance Society, organized the grand performance by Indira Kadambi's troupe in the Philadelphia region of Pennsylvania on June 8, 2002. The troupe was a small and dedicated group with a solo dancer and three musicians. Such performances with a solo dancer are not very common around here, and I realized how educational it could be to watch a solo dancer perform.

With a well thought out format, the entire performance was a sequence of neatly arranged pieces, each one set to bring out a primary and fundamental aspect of Bharatanatyam, which when viewed in progression evoked the feeling of seeing a dancer deeply rooted in tradition with no affinity for gimmickry.

The first piece following the Pushpanjali was the Kirtanam, where Indira enacted the dance of Lord Nataraja. She brought out the role played by the Lord of dance as well as the Gods that accompanied Him with musical instruments in a fine manner. This simple and uncomplicated piece was followed by the Varnam in thodi, set to Adhi Shivanai – a Dandayudhapani Pillai composition. In this Varnam, the dancer portrays Lord Shiva through the heart of a lovelorn nayika. A conversation of sorts where at one end the nayika postures to demand why she should be scared of acknowledging her love for the Lord, and at the other end inquires earnestly if her Lord will come to her wearing the garland of victory, and her emotions in between that allowed the clever use of bhava to portray the internal state of the nayika. Though it provided a glimpse of Indira's abhinaya skills, the Varnam still left us unprepared for what was to come in the second half of the evening.

The two devarnamas of Purandara Dasa were undoubtedly the high points of the performance. Indira was mesmerizing in her ability to relate the experiences and feelings of the gopikas and the pranks and postures of child Krishna. She also switched between the characters with ease. The first piece consisted of the gopikas discussing Krishna's (the child's) pranks that were all too indicative of an adult, begging the question "Is He really a little boy?" - Chikkavane ivanu in Ragamalika. Whether Indira was representing the gopika complaining that Krishna misbehaved with her when she refused to embrace him or the startled and annoyed gopika who complained that she mistakenly embraced him assuming him to be her husband, the facial expressions portrayed by her were quite real. The result was an audible appreciation by the audience, a sure sign of having evoked the rasas that the dancer set out to achieve. A classic demonstration of what is called the saattvika aspect of abhinaya – relating to the inner psychological states and mental feelings, which when expressed, create the relevant mood or emotion in others.

The second part of this back-to-back offering was the portrayal of Krishna and his complaints about the gopis – the other side of the story, so to speak. Describing his troubles, Krishna complains about how the gopis take him to their houses, make him sit on their beds and kiss him all over until his body shivers. This piece where Krishna's frustrations are brought out was set to Gokuladali Naniralare in Keeravani.

The Padam and Ashtapadhi that followed depicted the feelings of the nayika for Krishna. In the Padam, the nayika is taking leave of Krishna because her husband has come for her. She assures Him that her feelings for Him will always be intimate regardless of the distance and asks Krishna to not forget her, the depiction of which evoked empathy in me for the nayika, a sadness in seeing someone not get what she wanted. The Thillana was a composition by Madurai Krishnan in Simhendramadhyamam, the sahitya piece of which was in praise of Lord Muruga who revealed the mystery of the Vedas to his father Annamalai.

Indira's dance was performed with conviction. There is a sense of confidence and authority that is depicted in the sudden and arresting pause she provides after a brisk sequence of movements, a technique she peppered throughout the performance in various places. This technique, done to a perfect rhythm, gave the impression of mastery of the art form, much like the technique employed by vocalists who have an emphatic 'landing' with the beginning of a tala cycle after rendering sophisticated and speedy kalpana swaras that span several cycles.

It was a performance that came together in all the important aspects – the dance, the descriptive introduction that preceded every piece, and the accompanying orchestra. I specifically mention this to appreciate the enjoyment one experiences when the different aspects of a performance come together without forcing the audience to separate these aspects in order to look for the saving grace! T V Ramprasad's deep voice enriched the performance with the necessary variations in amplitude and Sri Hari Rangaswamy's mridangam offered the naadham that rounded out the audio aspects. This too I mention in order to contrast some distracting experiences I have been through where the drumming was more akin to beating on a tin can - though keeping pace, yet distracting in its departure of tone. Absent such harassment, the orchestra provided beautiful accompaniment that embellished and enhanced the dance performance. Shoba Sharma on Nattuvangam, and V. K. Raman on Flute comprised the rest of the orchestra.

Such solo dance performances that one gets to see in this part of the world on rare occasions are quite educational while being entertaining. By concentrating focus, one gets to see the many aspects involved and learns to appreciate the art more with that additional knowledge gained.