

Captivating Bharatanaatyam by Chitra Visweswaran

Chitra Visweswaran, the vivacious dancer, reputed teacher and talented choreographer gave a scintillating Bharatanaatyam performance on October 10, 1992 at the Plymouth-Whitemarsh High School. Chitra brought to the evening a rare combination of refinement, perfection, creativity, grace, stamina and sprightliness. She prefaced each piece with a brief talk-demonstration. She emphasized that to her, Bharatanaatyam was a refined form of communication with aesthetic tones. It was clear from her flawless and enjoyable Abhinaya (expression of emotion) that she lived what she said. She built up a unique rapport with the audience who frequently applauded her apparently effortless and natural Bhaavas (facial expression) and joyous Nritya (rhythmic aspect of dance). It is no wonder that she has been given the titles Kalaimamani, Nritya Choodamani and the Padmashri award.

Chitra's performance was preceded by a Vandanam composed by G.N. Balasubramaniam, melodiously rendered by her husband, R. Visweswaran. The evening's recital commenced with an Anjali--an offering of flowers through the idiom of rhythm and an invocatory piece--Aanandanartana Ganapatim Bhaavaye in which Chitra depicted a devotee meditating on the dancing Ganesha.

The major number of the evening was the Padavarnam in Shanmugapriya raaga and Aadi taala--Devamunivarum Thorum Paadam Jagannaathan, which invoked Lord Venkataachalapati. The lyrics and music for this number were composed by the famous violin maestro, Lalgudi Jayaraman. In this piece, Chitra, very beautifully blended the rhythmic and mimetic aspects of Dance. She used rhythmic patterns and the lyrics as a frame-work to give the audience vivid visual pictures of mythological stories. She expounded with ease and perfection, the ten Avatharaas of Vishnu, the story of the slaying of the evil serpent Kaaliya by Krishna, the

story of the destruction of Mahaabali's pride by Vaamana and the Vishwaroopadarshana that was granted to Arjuna by Krishna. This piece was crisp and the emphasis was on Bhakti Bhaava which Chitra portrayed very effectively.

By far the most enjoyable piece that evening was the Padam in raaga Sauraashtram and Aadi taalam--Adhuvum sholluvaal. In this piece, Chitra interpreted lyrics and created and told stories about the Uttamanaayika who is betrayed by her lover, Lord Kaartikeya. Chitra was at her best with Abhinaya in this piece and her depiction of a group of village women gossiping about the slighted Uttamanaayika received repeated applause from the audience.

The next piece was a Devarnaama in Raagamaalika and Aadi Taala--Neen Yako Ranga, Ninna Nang Yako, a Dasirkriti that highlighted Bhakti through Nindastuti. In this piece, Chitra vividly narrated the stories of Prahalaada, Draupadi Vasthraapaharanam in the court of Dhritharaashtra, and the story of Dhruva. The devotee uses these stories to convey to Lord Krishna that he has no need for the Lord himself and that the efficacy of His name was sufficient. Chitra was so effective as a narrator through dance in this piece, especially the humiliation of Draupadi and Krishna's timely intervention, that she moved the audience to tears with her expressions.

The last piece was a brisk Tillaana in Ranjini raaga and Aadi taala in which Chitra gracefully and immaculately presented poses from South Indian temples. She aptly concluded her performance with verses from the Vedas.

There is no denying that Chitra is an extremely talented exponent of Bharatanaatyam and is a treat to watch. It is hard to be part of her audience and not be drawn by her overall charm as a performer. Chitra excels in Abhinaya, has very good Angashudham and rhythm. She covers the stage well during her performance, she has a good stage presence and her choreography is commendable. She also relates well to her audience.

However, if one has to search with an extremely critical eye for aspects of the performance which could do better with a little more attention in a danseuse of the stature of Chitra, it would have to be her occasional indulgent Nritta. In an effort to make her Nritta look exuberant and joyous, Chitra, in rare instances, comes across as

being a wee bit too aggressive. This apart, her performance, can be rated among the best ever witnessed in the field of Bharatanaatyam.

Chitra's husband, R. Visweswaran provided melodious vocal support for the performance. It was obvious that he is a musician with class. His proficiency in vocal and instrumental music and Hindustani, Carnatic and Western music are laudable and difficult to emulate. The Chitra and Visweswaran husband and wife team would be unsurpassable if the latter used his voice a little more powerfully when supporting Chitra's dance performances.

Chitra was accompanied on the mridangam by Shankar Jagadesan who did a commendable job. A.V. Unnikrishnan provided good support on the flute and a special mention needs to be made of Chitra's student, Priyadarshini Ramchand who very impressively vocalized jathis throughout the performance. She also handled the Nattuvaangam adequately. Our local artist, Dinakar Subramaniam joined the troupe on the taanpura.

Overall, Chitra and her troupe gave the audience a splendid Bharatanaatyam performance and a memorable evening.

Kala Menon