

# danceviewtimes

writers on dancing

November 11, 2014

## 7 in a Row: Indiadance

**Symposium; Embassy of India; November 5, 2014**

**Dakshina's 11th Fall Festival; Harman Hall; November 6-8, 2014**

**Malaysia's Sutra Dance Theatre; Terrace Theater, Kennedy Center; November 9, 2014**

**Washington, DC**

**by George Jackson**

© 2014 by George Jackson



This spell of seven events in succession left me wanting more. Given the current dance scene in DC, I'll likely get my wish. The symposium, led by Alicia Adams (organizer of Kennedy Center's Maximum India Festival in 2011), posed the question of collaboration to those doing Indiadance. Answers showed that the artists involved, as well as their audience, are thinking not just about the interactions of movement, music and staging. Entertainment and education issues also influence choices. Some choreographers and composers are concerned about their obligation to the past plus consequences for the future. Dancing isn't just for the body but also for the mind or, as they say in India, for the spirit. What emerged in the performances that followed the symposium often juxtaposed the traditional and the individual.

Anita Ratnam, on stage at Harman Hall the evening of Nov. 6, has power. The lift of her torso when she asserts herself is imperial. The stances she takes - often in wide, 2nd position turn-out with a deep, rock-solid plié - leave indelible images. Ratnam has worked in Chennai, India and around the world to bring Indiadance up to date. The results reminded me of the 1920s and '30s, but perhaps I need to reset my clock. In an underwater dance, Ratnam lay stretched on the ground, her torso pulsing supplely like Mary Wigman did in her gentler solos. For a dance of blossoming, Ratnam used her arms and hands to spin silken strands into surrounding space, like Tilly Losch had done in her "Hand Dance". Wigman, Losch and other Western dancers incorporated Eastern influences into their modernism at the beginning of the 20th Century. Ratnam, starting in the historic India she inherited, has journeyed westward and forward to arrive at similar stylizations. Her third dance was a detailed retelling of the Ramayana epic. Although this long narrative might seem to Westerners slightly reminiscent of Ruth St. Denis, wasn't Ratnam radically streamlining traditional India pantomime? The choreography had an art deco appearance and the dancer herself as Prince Rama and other figures was being subtly ironic in her gender bending as well as convincingly impressive!

Collaborating with Ratnam were two musicians and a director. The composer Anil Srinivasan accompanied her on a

western instrument, the piano. It sounded impressionistically apt. The singer Sikkil Gurucharan vocalized and gestured in the Carnatic manner (a droning, rhythmic, often melancholy melodiousness). Hari Krishnan, a dance scholar who doubts the authenticity of Indiadance, directed.



Contrasting on this first program was a young couple, Renjith Babu and Vijnna Vasudevan. They delivered traditional Bharata Natyam with a spring in their step, a lilt in their tapping, and a sparkle in their eyes. He does bravura jumps. She can tease by just stretching. In choreography by Chennai teacher C.V. Chandrasekhar, they moved in parallel and as attracted, attached partners. Bharata Natyam is the most popular of India's heritage styles and may be compared to Vaganova or Russian ballet technique. Both styles try to achieve a sharp, open and symmetrical use of body anatomy.

The free, 6 PM program on Nov. 7 in Harman Hall's downstairs Forum space began with a set of demonstration dances. Five girls, local students of Indiadance, performed in unison yet each with the emphasis of her own personality. The focus was topside at first, with heads and/or eyes and/or shoulders plus arms shifting side to side. A slight yet distinct nodding of the head also became apparent. Then the vocabulary of the lower body called attention to itself – sit positions, foot tapping, little jump steps. The main feature of this early program was soloist Ramaa Bharadvaj. Talking dance and dancing either concepts or stories, she reaches out to the audience with a welcoming warmth. Bharadvaj's spiral leaps have the effect of embraces. She punctuated a long tale of friendship by having her protagonist, a poor man, wipe tears from his eyes – tears of joy. Happy ending!



Emotions and abstractions were featured at the 8 PM program on Nov. 7, with musicians tackling the topics first. The star performer was Alif Laila. She played the sitar – an instrument with many strings for plucking that are stretched from a compact and hollow wooden body over a long neck. Laila was accompanied by percussionist Nitin Mitta and by Sangeeta Bulbul Agrawal on a secondary string instrument (or tanpura) which has fewer strings and is used to mediate the pitch. What I heard first was tonality, the somewhat different, non-European harmonics of this music. Then, progressions and patterns emerged. Rhythms (simple and complex beats), pacing (sometimes building to great speeds) and volume (louder, softer) contributed to the sound shapes. The first composition, “Raag Hemant” was meant to be suggestive of not just a season of the year, “autumn”, but a particular time of day, “evening”. The moods conveyed were supposed to be “pathos and joy”. There certainly was urgency! A second composition, “Dhun” was lighter in mood. It is intended to evoke romance and can suit anytime of day or night. In all this music, formal as well as sensual values mattered, and excitement was both sparked and contained. Sorry, I can't be more specific about what fascinates me in this Indian world of sound but am eager to hear more.

The dancing that followed the music session tried to present nine emotions in 45 minutes. Titled “Navarasa – Expressions of Life”, it was group choreography by Dr. Ananda Shankar Jayant. Indiadance has a vast repertory of extraordinary solos. Successful duos are fewer in number. Where, though, are the corps de ballet passages that use the classical steps and stances of Indiadance as astoundingly as ballet does its vocabulary? The good doctor attempted to

do group work but deployed Indiadance movement without finesse. Her patterns have diversity yet give no sense of growth, of development. Moreover, she made her personable, hard-working nine women (including herself) look rather like a chorus line. Pride, sorrow and seven other feelings were dangled before us like wet scarves that were then hung up to dry.

More demonstration by students started November 8th's early program. It was additional evidence that sound Indiadance is being taught locally. Featured was a wiry young male soloist from Vancouver, Sujid Vaidya. He danced "Varnam", the story of a maiden who learns the meanings of love from Lord Kirshna. The choreography by A. Lakshman, Vaidya's Bharata Natyam teacher in Chennai, is one of the remarkable, self-sacrificing solos that are the treasures of today's Indiadance (the music was by Shri Laigudi G. Jayaraman). Vaidya is fast, sharp, sensual. He did tire a little but it was a long dance, almost continuously in high gear.

The final Dakshina festival program, the night of Nov. 9, seemed a family affair. It was more sentimental in character than an artistic event, despite the participation during the second half of composer-pianist Srinivasam and singer-chanter Gurucharan. Two quartets on Shiva thematic were performed by Dakshina dancers Nithya Joseph, Valli Sanmugalingam, Medha Swaminathan and Sudha Radha Krishnan. Both foursomes, "Panchaksharam (5 Syllables)" in Sheejith Krishna's choreography and "Shivoham" by Rama Vaidhyanathan, were respectably decorative and technically Bharata Natyam. Unison and semi-unison movement predominated. I wanted more daring in these pieces and even a bit of disturbance. After intermission, the venerable V.P. Dhananjayan and his wife Srimathi Shanta appeared separately, each in two solos. This teacher-dancer couple from Chennai is considered to be the Bharata Natyam style's current grandparents. Although shaky for his first number, Dhananjayan had warmed up and relaxed for his second solo. She was more vivid at first. A corps of eight women, presumably students of Dhananjayan and Shanta, danced briefly.

Coming from Malaysia, Ramli Ibrahim's Sutra Dance Theatre on Nov. 10 brought a soft and supple quality of movement to the traditional steps and stances of Indiadance. Innovations turned up in the floor patterns and poses of Ibrahim's choreography. Expression, though, seemed less intense, less individual than what I had been seeing earlier in the week. The staging by Sivarajah Natarajan of the six dances that comprise Ibrahim's "Krishna, Love Re-Invented" involved slanted lighting and vaporous atmospheres, yet depictions of acts of love remained rather cool.

These dancers' pliancy is probably due their training in Odissi, a stylistic alternate to Bharata Natyam. If the latter is like Vaganova ballet, Odissi resembles Bournonville ballet i.e., Danish dance classicism. A source for Ibrahim's elaborate groupings of bodies and complex poses is, undoubtedly, the erotic sculpture on India's temples. He is also able to animate these images with putty-pulling effects i.e., plastique movement reminiscent of Massine's symphonic ballets. The composition of the Sutra troupe – two men and six women – more than dramatic necessity seemed to determine that there are two Krishna figures on stage. The Krishna of the young Jagatheyswara is a vigorous god, whereas Ibrahim's is a cautious gentleman of a certain age.

Audiences for these seven events were of decent size and varied ages, though the majority attending were of Indian heritage.

*Photos, courtesy of Dakshina, from top:*

*Sujit Valdya*

*Renjith Babu and Vijn Vasudevan*

*Alif Laila*

Posted at 09:34 AM in [George Jackson](#) | [Permalink](#)