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Simple, understated and elegant dance recital



Renjith Babu and Vijn Vasudevan —Photo by NAVIN MEDIWALA

On October 26th at the Kaplan theater (Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center), Houston audiences were treated to a rare display of simple, subtle and brilliant Bharatanatyam in the traditional Maargam format. Renjith Babu and Vijn Vasudevan, rising young stars from Chennai, India trained in the Kalakshetra format, presented 'Sammargam' – a breathtaking two-hour Bharatanatyam performance that was stunning in its simplicity and elegance.

The dancing duo began their performance with a 'Pancha Deva Stuthi' in Ragatalamalika. Extolling the various aspects of Ganesha, Shiva, Devi, Vishnu, and Surya, this piece set the tone of superb execution and coordination for the stellar performance that followed. Moving effortlessly through the pancha nadai (the five basic beat patterns) with unhurried and deliberate movements choreographed in a unique yet scrupulously traditional style, the duo also brought into the performance various ways to express devotion, such as lighting lamps, offering flowers, fanning the deity using a chamaram (feathered fan), and blowing a conch.

The perfect synchrony and harmony of the dance was an absolute pleasure to watch.

The central piece for the evening, the classic varnam Swami Naan Undan Adimai composed by Papanasan Sivan in Ragam Nattaikurinji, Talam Adi, upheld the classic Kalakshetra tradition, with perfect geometry, subtle and effective abhinaya, and the added dimension of wonderful on-stage chemistry and coordination. Renjith's immense power and fluidity of movement was matched only by Vijn's subtle and mesmerizing expressions.

Brilliant and unexpected choreographical twists underscored the stark adherence to tradition in this marathon piece, in which synergy and symmetry were taken to new and unexplored heights. So mesmerizing was the abhinaya that the lack of sanchari-s for the sahitya-s in this piece went completely unnoticed and unmissed.

In a well-planned change of pace, the next piece was the Devarnama Chikkavane, performed by Vijn, in which two gopi-s exchange exasperated notes on little Krishna's very grown-up antics. Vijn made the audience smile in sympathy for the frustrated gopi-s, and her portrayal of precocious little Krishna was expertly charming. Renjith's solo piece followed, a powerful and disciplined rendition of the popular Idadhu Padam Thookki, in praise of the Cosmic Dancer Nataraja.

The Surdas bhajan that followed, in Ragam Chandrakauns, Talam Adi, in this writer's opinion was the highlight of the evening, if one could pick a highlight out of a uniformly excellent presentation. Renjith and Vijn, who are partners in life as well as in dance, portrayed the flirtatious approach of Krishna towards Radha, and Radha's initial no-nonsense response, followed by her succumbing to Krishna's practiced charm. Krishna's boyish antics, Radha's sarcasm, and their eventual romance alternately brought laughter to lips and tears to eyes.

A snatch of Thillana during this piece created a burst of rhythm that was unexpected and unconventional, yet superbly timed and positioned.

The duo chose to end their recital with a composition of Guru C. V. Chandrashekhar, in which pure dance sequences set to melodious swara sequences reached a calm crescendo in a quest for the light of knowledge to dispel ignorance.

Brought to Houston by Samarpanam, headed by Artistic Director Padmini Chari, with the co-sponsorship of Bharathi Kalai Manram and Silambam Houston, 'Sammargam' reminded us of the power and beauty of pure, undiluted and traditional artistry.

- Dr. Lavanya Rajagopalan

Dr. Lavanya Rajagopalan is the founder and Artistic Director of Silambam Houston, a premiere non-profit arts organization and dance academy in the Greater Houston area.

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