

Innovative Rangapravesha

By Poornima Ramaprasad

'Bha' stands for Bhava, 'Ra' stands for Raaga, 'Ta' stands for taala and natya stands for nrutya. The combination of bhava (expression), raaga (tune), taala (rhythm) and nrutya (dance) is the divine art form called Bharatanatyam. So saying, Kumari Chinmayi Bettadapur mesmerized the audience on her debut performance (Rangapravesha) on Aug 13th 2006 at Louis.B. Mayer auditorium in Santa Clara, California. Chinmayi has put in 7 years of effort learning this artform in Bangalore, and after a hiatus of a few years, a couple of more years of rigorous training in Kalakshetra style to get to this level. She has learnt Bharatanatyam with top line Gurus including Gargi Panchangam and Savitha Sastry of Bay area. She performed her 'Rangapravesha' under the guidance of Guru Smt. Savitha Sastry who learned under the Dhananjayans in Chennai. Guru Savitha Sastry said that Chinmayi's regular practice, her utmost devotion and love for the art are the main reasons contributing to her success. Her parents Usha and Ramesh Bettadapur were proud of their daughter's achievement.

The first item in the lineup was a 'Mallari' in raaga Nagaswarali and taala Misra Jhampa. In this piece, the dancer invokes the blessings from Gods of all four directions for success and to remove any obstacles in the path to success. In this dance, Chinmayi exhibited perfectly rhythmic body movements and footwork. This was followed by a prayer to Goddess Saraswati.



This was followed by Nriyopahaara, which was the main piece of the evening. In this dance, the dancer danced to the story of Muruga. Muruga's lover, the heroine, asks her friend to go and get him for her, which is when they get into an argument over it. The friend brings up all the undesirable traits in Muruga, Shiva – his father, Parvati – his mother, Ganesha – his brother and Krishna – his uncle. But the heroine cannot bear to hear bad remarks about any of them and argues on each of their behalf, to which finally the friend gives in saying that she was just testing the depth of the heroine's love for Muruga and leaves to go fetch him for her. Chinmayi played both the roles of Muruga's lover and her friend. The backdrop changed colors to depict

the change of role. But the expressions of love and respect on one side, sarcasm and teasing on the other came out so naturally that the role she was playing was perfectly understood without having to look at the color on the backdrop! This was a detailed dance with all elements of pure dance and showcased Chinmayi's versatility.

After a short break Chinmayi came with a brand new costume for yet another dance depicting a different story of Muruga and his beloved wherein the heroine is upset about Muruga being affectionate towards another woman and is seen talking passionately with her! She questions him and tells him that she has been waiting for him for a month and has not even eaten due to the anticipation. She continues saying his love is only meant for her and cannot be shared with others. Although a section of the audience might have thought that it was a little out of place after the previous dance item, it was meant as a continuation of the story from the Nrityopahaara where the heroine is waiting for Muruga's return as she has sent her friend to fetch him. In this piece, Chinmayi's mature expressions were praiseworthy, where we can say that the heroine brought out two different angles of her love and possessiveness to Muruga.

Have you heard of the dance competition between Shiva and Parvati that has supposed to have taken place at Chidambaram? It is believed that the competition went on and on for days without anybody losing. Finally with the intention of quelling any trace of ego attached to winning, Shiva lifted his leg over his head in a dance pose to which the astonished Parvathi was unable to match and had to accept defeat. This piece, 'Yaraadinar' in raaga Saraswati set to Adi taala was the next in line. Chinmayi portrayed both Shiva and Parvati's roles. Her masculine expressions and 'taandava nrutya' of Shiva versus the very feminine dance of demure Parvathi were convincing and proved her good control over footwork and abhinaya.

Purandaradasa's 'Chikkavanene ivanu' depicted the story of the very naughty Krishna troubling the Gopika girls, and the Gopikas discussing how embarrassing it was to get into trouble because of him. Be it the role of the naughty Krishna or an embarrassed and annoyed Gopika, the audience saw perfect execution by Chinmayi.

The Jayadeva Ashtapadi, 'Sakhi He', is all about the first meeting of Radha and Krishna. Radha describes to her friend all the nuances of that romantic evening and how Krishna's charming words had entranced her. The Srungaara rasa came to the brim in this dance and left the audience wondering if she really was Radha.



The Thillana in raaga Nagavalli gave a befitting grand finale to the program. There was a mridanga interspersed with khanjira jati session, both played by the mridangist and Chinmayi danced the same jatis rhythmically immediately after. This was like a jugalbandi between the Instrument and the dancer, and was very interesting. The audience was totally out of words and gave a standing ovation, which was a well-deserved one. They saw a seasoned dancer in Chinmayi rather than a debutante.

Although she broke the traditional trend of an Arangetram, which normally consists of a jatisvara, varna, padam, etc, the change was very welcoming. 'Nriyopahara' in place of a varna was well received. The costumes and make-up were intricately done and added color to the program. The idea of the dancer coming over to the side stage and depicting the story with dance gestures as her Guru introduced the story was great and made it interesting and understandable to the normal audience. Chinmayi's poses and hastas were carvedly perfectly. The music group led by Guru Smt. Savitha Sastry on the nattuvangam, Deepu Nair on vocal, Ramesh Babu on Mridangam, Subha Narasimhan on the violin and Muthu Balasubramaniam on flute did a superb job and added value to the program.

Few shortcomings could still be sighted. Most of the pieces that Chinmayi performed set the viewers to a romantic mood. This could've been alternated with 'bhaktirasa' and other 'navarasas'. Emphasis on 'Nritta' was not as much as on 'Abhinaya'. It seemed as though the choreography for the 'Nritta' could have been more challenging for a dancer of her caliber.

May God bless Chinmayi with a wonderful dance career.

(Poornima Ramaprasad follows both classical music and dance with passion and interest. She thanks Smt.Pushpa Ramanuja, an accredited Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher in the bay area for providing her inputs on various technical terms in this review)