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Novel cocktail of styles

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Dance Tagore's 'Chitrangada' infused Manipuri, Odissi and Kathakali elements in an unusual presentation. NITA VIDYARTHI



Innovative: Rabindranath Tagore's Chitrangada. Photos: Nita Vidyarthi

'Chitrangada,' the popular dance-drama of Rabindranath Tagore has been performed innumerable times. But the one staged in the Horizon Series at the Satyajit Ray Auditorium, Rabindranath Tagore Centre ICCR, Kolkata, was special as it was perhaps the first one to be performed in three different dance styles, Manipuri, Odissi and Kathakali.

The narrative with its songs offered ample scope to use nritta, nritya and abhinaya. So the use of different dance forms by the three principal characters, Arjun, Surupa and Kurupa (the two personalities of Chitrangada), were an exploration of a different vocabulary but with a unified spirit within.

The Mahabharata allows liberal interpretations and redefinitions of man-woman relationship through the nuances of emotion and self-esteem.

Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur, is brought up as an able warrior-like son by her father, the King (as he has no son). She is trained to take over her father's responsibilities. The story unfolds at a time when a wandering Arjun, after a penance and vow of 12 years of celibacy, comes to Manipur and meets Chitrangada.

The warrior princess (Kurupa) discovers the woman in her and falls in love with him, only to be rejected. Her lack of physical beauty shatters her and she questions her self-esteem. Overtaken by confusing emotions, she seeks the help of Madan (Anangadev) and with his cooperation transforms herself into a beautiful woman (Surupa) to whom Arjun gets attracted. When Manipur is attacked by dacoits Chitrangada saves the villagers, who refuse the help offered by Arjun. Finally she reveals her identity and declares that she is Chitrangada the princess, neither a 'Devi' nor an ordinary woman.

Arjun realises that though external beauty attracts, it is ultimately the person's qualities that matter. He respects Chitrangada for her qualities and accepts her. This is the essence of Tagore's drama, which offers a refreshingly new look at womanhood and was well captured in the present production. The structure of the drama had been retained and so were the songs.

Fine opening

The presentation opened with a fine group dance choreographed in Manipuri style, adorned with chalis and bhangiparengs, accompanying the song, 'Guru Guru Guru Ghana Megha Garajey,' when Chitrangada (Kurupa) and her sakhis prepare for hunting.

As the story unfolds, the elements such as movements from Lai Haroaba (Maibi dance steps in 'Amar Ai Rikta Dali'), Thang-ta, sankeertan and raas leela were visible especially in the group choreography.

Suman Sarawgi, as the warrior princess, tried her best to portray Kurupa with some able Thang-ta steps and Parengs, which the role demanded. Some lovely lasya elements were the primary source of creative inspiration in her execution of solo numbers. However, audience's response and empathy depend to a large extent on the facial expressions in a dance drama, which Suman lacked at times. The abhinaya flowers when accompanied by emotional essence or rasa and Suman should work more on it to do full justice to her role.

Graceful and distinctive

Sharmila Mukherjee, a seasoned Odissi dancer from Bangalore, ruled the stage as Surupa (the transformed beautiful princess) with her graceful choreographic expressions, stylised movements and distinctive abhinaya with emotions blossoming with appropriate eye movements. Her dramatic skills were enhanced with the co-ordination of mudras or stances, some beautiful Bhramaris, especially Kunchita –Bhramari and Anga-Balayita.

Kalamandalam Piyal, a competent Kathakali dancer trained in Kerala, portrayed Arjun with a sensitive and skilful use of the dynamic form. Even though foot movements were limited, hasta mudras were used in good measure, sometimes in an elaborate series, as a reflection of the emotions. The vigorous shaking of the upper torso in 'Eki Trishna, Eki Daho' and movements of facial muscles to express anger in 'Ashanti Aaj Hanlo Eki Dahan Jwala' were dramatic but could have been a bit restrained.

There were some pleasing duets too. The team work of the well trained sakhis needs special mention as does the costume. The appeal of the production lay in the incorporation of the different dance forms with decorative passages, so smoothly blended, and minimal props such as the three Manipuri umbrellas placed at different heights. A presentation worth watching.

The production explored a different vocabulary but with unified spirit.



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