

DANCE

Well-sculpted performance

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Rising to the occasion: Bala Devi Chandrasekhar

In "Brihadeeswara", Bharatanatyam maestro Bala Devi Chandrasekhar delved into the depths of the famous Thanjavur architectural marvel

The multi-dimensional production, 'Brihadeeswara – Form to formless' was more than dance and drama on stage. It adhered to the Natya Shastra in letter and spirit. But that is what is expected of Bharatanatyam maestro Bala Devi Chandrasekhar's thematic presentations. They are never singular in the sense of concentrating on dance and music like the regular performances one gets to see. Her productions are true to the word 'Natya', exploring the range of raga, taal, prose, poetry and myriad other aspects of dance including storytelling.

Myriad facets

Her latest presentation which was premièred at the UNESCO delved into the depths of the famous Thanjavur architectural marvel– the temple of Brihadeeswara (lord Shiva) through the eyes of a Devadasi (Devaraadiyal/temple dancer). Set to four acts, it begins with customary salutation to lord Ganesha in Naata raga (traditional introductory raga) and launches into an eulogy of the ravishing beauty of the Devaraadiyal. This is juxtaposed to the structural beauty of the majestic temple. The statuesque Bala personified the temple dancer. Her exquisite postures and coy expressions were admirable.

As the temple dancer she undertook the 'Kallaiula' (Mallari) with grace and lithe movements emulating the various musical instruments as she danced to their rhythm as an auspicious welcome to the processional deity perched on a palanquin up to the threshold of the sanctum. Lines from the Thevaram as if sung by priests interlaced the solo dance. With eyes brimming with piety at the sight of the lord from afar, Bala made for a picturesque depiction of the entire scene.

Parallel to the unparalleled physical beauty of the Devadasi, stands the imposing temple structure with the number five as a metaphor for five elements, five doorways to the sanctum, five syllables of the Panchakshari (Om namah Shivaye) and so on which were brought out with astounding clarity of mudras and ingenuity by the artiste. Right from the sculpted guards (dwarpalak) on either side of the main temple to every sculpture on its stone edifice had a significance that was extolled by song and dance.

The teermanam with Om namah Shivaye refrain was done with a flourish. Bala's springiness was something to be admired as she executed agile footwork taking up the entire stage space with lightning speed as she traced the varied taal, rhythmic patterns and pace (gati) that were so pivotal to this solo presentation. It was like an amazing demonstration of how diverse taal could be integrated and woven into the fabric of the theme without a crease! Despite the linearity of this dance form, the artiste used her own virtuosity in body kinetics – a small spiralling move of the torso (kulukku) that lent an aesthetic touch and authenticity to the persona, viz Devadasi, the chief narrator.

Sacred space

The inner sanctum of the towering Shiva ling (Brihadeeswara) is the most sanctified of the five elements – the Akasha (space). This sacred space is again apposite to the soul of the Devadasi who is literally in the service of her lord Brihadeeswara. Her devotion transcends the mundane just like the Akash tatwa (space aspect).

She visualises her lord in every worldly chore she undertakes as part and parcel of her duty. Her only worldly desire is to have a glimpse of the cosmic dancer in action. She has a vision wherein she sees His consort Uma leading the taal (rhythm) to the divine dance. The masculine dance of lord Shiva could have been brisk and wrought with more footwork patterns at this juncture, but Bala's was a simple structured dance with optimum footwork and jumps. The narrative goes on in this manner filled with various anecdotes that dot the temple history – the Raja Raja Chola and his family who are chief custodians of the temple, the frescos that convey a thousand stories of the monks and poets – all devout Shiva bhakts to whom the lord revealed Himself at different junctures and showered them with immortality.

The folk song of the gypsies – the tribal devotees so dear to lord Brihadeeswara – to tilting raga was a pleasure to watch and the wrap up with traditional tillana wherein the Devadasi is shown as absorbing the five-syllabled mantra and the mighty edifice, her own physical beauty and transcends to the stage of ultimate reality which awakens in her innermost being and frees her from all worldly shackles. The form merges into the formless divine. To be able to encapsulate an epic-proportioned narrative into a time-bound performance is commendable.

The briefing in English did serve its purpose to the non-Tamil audiences but not to a desirable extent. India International Centre played host to the show.