

Footloose and Fancy Free - Globetrotting with Sunil Kothari

New York Diary: Erasing Borders Dance Festival

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I arrived in New York from Toronto, after attending Dance Intense workshop for eight days. New York is the 'Maximum City.' It is in many ways like Mumbai. Author Suketu Mehta has written about it in such an engaging style that if you are a Mumbaikar, you live with the city every bit of what he has so graphically described. Asian Cultural Council Director Cecily told me that currently Suketu Mehta is teaching a course in journalism at NYU and she would arrange a meeting with him.



Aroon & Jonathan

Photo: Gina Kaur

I have in my previous article already written about the most dynamic, (I suspect she rests hardly for four hours!) Aroon Shivdasani, the Executive Director and the life behind Indo American Arts Council Inc., (IAAC), who had already roped me into the most successful Erasing Borders Dance Festival which was flagged off on Friday the 14th August 2009 at Dance New Amsterdam venue at 6pm. More than 60 lovers of music, dancers, choreographers both American and Indian Diaspora as well as visiting artists were already there. Jonathan Hollander, Artistic Director of Battery Dance Company and also co-founder of IAAC, moderated the discussion on Mathematics and Rhythm (organized in collaboration with ArtsAhimsa and Chhandayan) when a lec-dem was planned with that ace percussionist Pandit Samir Chatterjee, (Hindustani music, tabla), young Bala Skandan (Carnatic music, mridangam) and Prerana Deshpande, a Kathak exponent and a senior disciple of late Rohini Bhate, from Pune. It was followed by demonstration of Kathak and Prerana and I were in conversation with each other on Rohini Bhate's contribution to Kathak and related aesthetics as Rohini had explored.



Samir Chatterjee



Bala Skandan

Photos: Niyant Dalal

Samir Chatterjee has an amazing knack of explaining complex things of tala and rhythm in a lucid manner and with demonstration, he involved all present into counting the beats of teen tala and led us all gently to various elements of geometrical progression of tala, laya. Bala Skandan explained similarities with Adi tala. Prerana spontaneously joined in illustrating concept of time cycle in the Indian system of rhythms and the mathematical process of composing rhythms. All were so well tuned that the audience loved it, at times asking questions for clarification and contributing to the discussion. Jonathan observed that the lehra played on sarangi to the accompaniment of Kathak dance sounded to him the same. The dancers, the percussionists, some members of the audience and I told him vociferously that it was not so. Lehra can be played in any raga. As a matter of fact, Madam Menaka was the first one to introduce lehra in several ragas. Jonathan admitted: "Oh, in that case in New York, I think I listen to lehra only in one raga" and all enjoyed the remark with a sense of humour. His observations from the point of view of western musicians and choreographers were interesting as both the similarities and the contrasts were brought out during the discussion.



Prerana Deshpande
Photo: Niyant Dalal

Prerana showed a few excerpts of Kathak of Rohini Bhate's recordings and explained how at the suggestion of late Mohan Rao Kalianpurkar, Rohini had choreographed talamalika using several talas in succession. It was fascinating to watch her demonstrate, singing, explaining and then dancing. Rohini had sound knowledge of talas and had explored Ashta Mangal and several complicated talas in a highly aesthetic manner. In abhinaya numbers also she would add a doha, a couplet which would enhance the sthaya bhava and embellish it with nuances. 'Baithi soche Braj bhama nahi aye ghanashyam ghiri ayi badari' thumri with a doha comparing the inner state of a nayika separated from the nayak with nature, was performed with great feeling. In an intimate baithak like ambience, it created quite an impact. A seasoned dancer well trained by Rohini, Prerana extended her understanding of her guru's contribution with her own individual approach. With a commanding stage presence coupled with humility, Prerana won over the audience with her dance. We decided 'to keep the audience hungry' and kept the principle of 'less is more.' Maya Kulkarni, a senior Bharatanatyam exponent, recalled her association with Rohini Bhate when Maya was also learning from Guru Parvati Kumar in Mumbai and an interesting explanation followed on the hasta mudras used in Kathak.

Prachi Dalal, the Director of the Festival, is a Kathak exponent, trained by late Madhurita Sarang in Mumbai. Last year, she with assistance and guidance of Rajika Puri, Uttara Asha Coorlawala and others, single handedly had planned the festival, which was a runaway success and proved what an asset Prachi is on the dance scene in New York. In spite of the recession and few sponsors, Aroon Shivdasani, Jonathan Hollander and Prachi Dalal have managed on a modest scale to organize the festival in an innovative manner. Prachi has basic humility and an ability to enlist support of participants which goes to make such festivals a big success. Hardworking, managing her duties at Rubin Museum where she is looking after arts events, practicing, dancing and also managing household with her doctor husband Kedar, Prachi has done Indian Diaspora dancers proud.

The next event was an interactive program designed for children (4-10 age group) of dance, music and story telling on 15th August at Rubin Museum of Art. Sangita Rai, Sonali Skandan and Radha Virupaksha performed three different Indian classical dance styles. And guest workshop instructor was Kavita Bafna whereas interactive material was by Little Ustads. I could not attend it as there was a reception at Indian Consulate for Independence Day, where at one go, I met most of the acquaintances and leading lights of New York.

Battery Dance Company studio on the fifth floor on 380, Broadway was the venue for workshops on 18th August. Prerana Deshpande conducted the workshop on Rhythm and Movement giving simple examples, showing how body moves in Kathak, the gaze, the graceful hand movements and also how to take chakkars. Her sound grasp over time cycle and arriving pat on the sam was interesting to watch. Ten to twelve dancers, both American and Indian Diaspora, participated from diverse disciplines of Modern, Kathak and Bharatanatyam.

Preeti Vasudevan, a Bharatanatyam dancer trained by Dhananjayans, now settled in New York, choreographing and extending new horizons in contemporary dance, involved the participants in warming up exercises, so necessary for dancers. It focuses on technique and injury prevention. Preeti has a way with dancers, enthusing them with laughter, making them undertake difficult movements gradually, and making them aware of their potential. Her own understanding based on how she studied Bharatanatyam and what would help dancers by such exercises is commendable. Gone are the days when dancers went straight into stamping the feet for basic adavus, the technical exercises of Bharatanatyam. Awareness about the human body helps a lot to dancers. Preeti's own growth as a dancer was evident in her movements and conducting workshop.

Inevitable, as we all now know, is now the presence of Bollywood dance. Not feeling shy about it or intimidated by classical dance techniques, today dancers love to study how Bollywood dance vocabulary is evolved and how it could be practiced. Rujuta Vaidya made the exercises easy to grasp, and with analytical approach gave a workshop showing how to make body flexible, move effortlessly to the beat of the Bollywood music and it generated peppy exuberance. It was interesting to see the participants negotiating in diverse techniques: Kathak, Bharatanatyam and warming up exercises. The title Erasing Borders seemed absolutely apt.

The major event of course is always the open air Free Lunchtime Performance in collaboration with Battery Dance Company's Annual Downtown Dance Festival at Chase Manhattan Plaza near Wall street. This was Battery Dance Company's 28th Annual Dance Festival. The venue is fascinating with high rise skyscrapers all around and even when it is 12 noon, no sunlight blinds anyone and in the shadow of the tall buildings, with backdrop of glass walls, people sitting on chairs and all around, hundreds standing and watching, the festival creates a festive celebratory mood. Last year, The New York Times dance critic Alistair Macaulay had covered Erasing Borders Dance Festival for two successive Sundays with acute perception. It established the festival firmly and no wonder, this year also from his comments, one can see that Indian classical dance forms have cast a spell on him. I shall quote from his review a few excerpts later on.

The performances opened with Rahul Acharya and Nandini Sikand's duet in Arabhi Pallavi by Sakshi Productions, in Odissi style of Guru Durga Charan Ranbir. Tall and statuesque Nandini and wiry, with slim figure, Rahul Acharya performed with élan and had interesting mirror image movements. The sculptural quality of Odissi was arresting, as was the music. The dhyana shloka describing the form of Arabhi was striking in its depiction. Rahul has incorporated Kelucharan Mohapatra's flexibility in his torso movements, adding a delectable texture. Holding Nandini's hand when he made an exit, the male-female duet looked stunning. It indeed also looked exotic in a venue which is exotic.



Rahul and Nandini



Shrinidhi and Sahasra

Photos: Gina Kaur

I shall first dwell upon the classical forms. In Bharatanatyam duet Tillana, Shrinidhi Raghavan and Sahasra Sambamoorthi juxtaposed their movements in excellent sync evoking images of Divalakshmis of South Indian bronzes! There were exquisite sundari griva-attami movements, perfect alignment of lines, mirror images, good understanding, covering of space and description of Bhuvaneshwari Devi towards end and they concluded the Tillana with punch. The structure of Bharatanatyam form shone through their execution in a delectable manner.



Prerana Deshpande
Photo: Gina Kaur

Prerana Deshpande presented 'Chaturang,' four colours, four different ragas, four talas 14, 11, 9 and 16, saragam, natvari thumri 'Thumak nachat chalat bajat mridang chalo sab sakhayan' and ending with Tarana. Chaturang number is rarely seen nowadays in Kathak performances. It was a connoisseur's delight. Dressed in an elegant costume, Prerana's Kathak stance was different. Slow, gradual unfolding and highly aesthetic in approach, enhancing Rohini Bhate's approach, Prerana performed the number with dignity, becoming one with the dance, oblivious of the Plaza and skyscraper or the crowd. She filled the palette of Kathak with colours of beauty. Bravo Prerana!! For the uninitiated such Kathak would naturally look anachronistic, but a form imbued with such subtlety and depth created quite an impact.

Of course, the finale had Garba and interspersed with Bollywood dance the most popular 'Dola re dola' song from film 'Devdas' was performed by two lovely dancers with zest. And when Dandiya raas, the stick dance with four boys and four girls, dressed in black and red costumes with glittering zari, took to the stage, one was almost transported to a village square during Navaratri. Performed by artistes, most of them naturally Gujaratis, of Sa Dance Company with choreography by Payal Kadakia and music by Sur Madhur Productions, the Plaza turned into a chowk for Garba and Raas, and many from the audience joined to participate. The children who came from a school to attend the show had a field day.



Sa Dance Company



Audience participation

Photos: Gina Kaur

'In the Blind,' performed by four female young dancers of Infin8 group, in the Pop/Hip Hop style was highly enjoyable. Pooja Dhargalkar, Rachna Giovani, Neha Jindal and Nekee Pandya danced in a disciplined manner. It reflected the aspirations and expressions of the young generation. Wearing ties, white shorts and black skirts, they danced the theme of 'crashing down of economy,' meltdown, working as full time white collar class, carrying black briefcases, incorporating Hip Hop and Pop movements, sliding on the table, falling on the floor, jumping and moving with energy. The audience applauded them cheerfully.

In Modern dance segment was an excerpt of 'Noor' by Felicia Norton, choreographed by herself and Sasha Spielvogel. It was narrative in nature dealing with the story of a spy woman. Her fascination for India, seeking peace, dancing with a blue piece of cloth waving in the sky, using two chairs, a suitcase, shot dead, suggesting freeing of the soul; her dance had violent movements as well

influences of Yoga movements. It was a narrative in story form.



Paul Charbonneau



Emily Watts

Photos: Gina Kaur

Highly enjoyable were two choreographic pieces by Hari Krishnan, a Bharatanatyam dancer (disciple of Kitappa Pillai) and also a choreographer of contemporary dance, inspired by classical techniques in which he is thoroughly grounded. He is now based in Toronto with his dance company inDance. He has introduced humour in dance and a certain irreverence which is quite appealing. In 'Mea Culpa,' a take off on Ted Shawn's Dance of Shiva, dancer Paul Charbonneau danced with abundance, taking off his clothes, displaying black net stockings, striking poses of Lord Shiva with abhaya hasta and entertained the audience. Well trained in contemporary dance, using Indian dance movements he succeeded in displaying humour without offending any sensibilities. In 'Firecracker,' also choreographed by Hari Krishnan and danced by Emily Watts, to the clever use of sollus, the mnemonic syllables, its recitation, echoes and rhythm, the movements had a quality of firecrackers, in sync with sound of sollus. The dancer moving effortlessly on the stage, at times using Bharatanatyam movements, extensions of legs sideways or executing a fragment of teermanam created hybrid kinetic movements. Both contemporary presentations by inDance company were refreshing. After the event was over, the crowds did not move. They interacted with the participating dancers. Jonathan announced other events, Prachi gave details about the finale, Aroon as is her irrepressible style invited audiences to go through the website of IAAC and join for other events including International Film Festival to be held in November. The joyous mood was infectious. Dance critic Alistair Macaulay from the New York Times was seen making notes, scribbling in his notebook and indeed his review in New York Times boosted the morale of the organizers and participating dancers and choreographers.

The grand finale was at Elizabeth Foundation for the Art gallery on 20th August at 7pm. Festival of Indian Dance met the Erasing Borders Exhibition of Contemporary Indian Art. Indian Diaspora dancers and choreographers responded to Indian contemporary art of the Diaspora and created a unique experience. This was indeed interaction between painters, sculptors and dancers. The objects of art displayed inspired dancer Sridhar Shanmugam, who weaved in his ways dancing around a series of shoes placed on the floor, some of them were filled with water. Sridhar twice or thrice dipped his palm into the shoes, took water out and poured in his other palm, danced around, had his palms painted red, feet were also painted. The juxtaposed movements were quite abstract in nature.



Sridhar Shanmugam



Ritushri

Photos: Niyant Dalal

Ritushri, a brilliant young Kathak dancer from Kolkata, currently on Asian Cultural Council grant, dressed in black also danced around the shoes, dipped her palms into water, gathered it in a plate, had three small lamps lit, returned to a wall on which Haresh Lalwani's mirror sculpture in round was kept. Her footwork was exquisite. She moved to hanging scarves, performed there creating abstract patterns and juxtaposed Kathak to objects of art coalescing with diverse elements of dynamic movements and stood still blowing off tiny lamps.

In another area on a swing was placed a sculpture of a half body with two feet painted in red earth colour. Sahasra Sambamoorthi danced on the theme of the lovers on the swing, happy together with the memories of union and then infidelity on part of the lover that caused anguish and expressed sentiments evoking unhappiness. She danced silently with expressions of deeply felt emotions.



Sahasra Sambamoorthi



Preeti Vasudevan

Photos: Niyant Dalal

Preeti Vasudevan excerpted a section from her work in progress 'Savitri,' to vocal music accompaniment. Creating her own costumes, looking like body painted with colours, Preeti moved with her lithe figure and at one point sat next to the singer placing

finger on her lips and the singer stopped singing as if her voice was lost. Very abstract in nature, the choreography and her dance were impressive. This was an additional dimension to the Festival which brought visual artists, sculptors and dancers together, when dance was performed to the backdrop of paintings and along with sculptures in presence of the visual artists.



Uttara Asha Coorlawala
Photo: Niyant Dalal

There was a closing party with wine and Indian dishes including Gujarati dishes of Khandavi and Muthia supplied by a restaurant run by an Indian caterer. The artists met freely and generated synergy. Aroon Shivdasani and Prachi thanked Uttara Asha Coorlawala, who was a co-curator of the festival, a coach for performances at the gallery and had along with Rajika and Prachi painstakingly gone through more than 80 applications. Prachi thanked Rajika Puri for her assistance and overall suggestions. All who had lent support including innumerable artists, the gallery people, those who provided the dance venues, the caterers, the advertisers, the sponsors were praised and thanked. In spite of the meltdown and recession, the spirit was kept high and the second edition of Erasing Borders Dance Festival was mounted successfully. To me it was like 'Transcending Borders Dance Festival.' It has now become an important landmark in New York's annual calendar. Indo American Arts Council, Battery Dance Company and the dancers and artists deserve praise for coming together and 'extending' the borders of dance.



Dr. Sunil Kothari, dance historian, scholar, author, is a renowned dance critic, having written for The Times of India group of publications for more than 40 years. He is a regular contributor to Dance Magazine, New York. Dr. Kothari is a globetrotter, attending several national, international dance conferences and dance festivals. He has to his credit more than 14 definitive works on Indian classical dance forms. Kothari was a Fulbright Professor and has taught at the Dance Department, New York University; has lectured at several Universities in USA, UK, France, Australia, Indonesia and Japan. He has been Vice President of World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific (2000-2008) and is Vice President of World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific India chapter, based in New Delhi. A regular contributor to www.narthaki.com, Dr Kothari is honored by the President of India with the civil honor of Padma Shri and Sangeet Natak Akademi award