



## Review

### **Her Story – Brilliant and inimitable**

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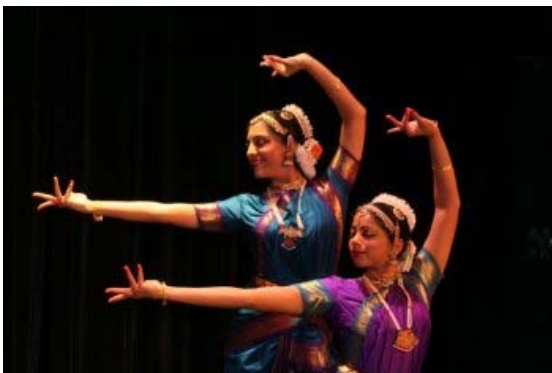
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"Her Story," a Bharatanatyam duet by Srinidhi Raghavan and Sahasra Sambamoorthi took place on February 16, 2008. This reinterpretation of the lives of four women from Indian mythology was a sold-out program that premiered at the prestigious Peter Norton Symphony Space: Leonard Nimoy Thalia Theater in Manhattan. The show captivated the audience from start to finish.

The dance duet started with a *Pushpanjali*. At the very onset, it was apparent that the dancers' coordination, lines and other technical elements were precise as their *nritta* was defined and on point. The dancers then proceeded with a *slokam* on *Devi in Ragamalika*, depicting the eight emotions of the Goddess with respect to Lord Shiva. This invocation set the mood for the theme of the program - that of a woman's unconditional love.



Following the invocation was the central piece of the show where the dancers portrayed the lives of Kaikeyi, Andal, Devaki and Kannagi in four distinct episodes. Recounting pivotal moments in the lives of these women, the dancers explored how these characters transformed the worlds they lived in through their ability to love unconditionally. They described how history has judged these protagonists - condemning, glorifying, questioning, and revering these women for their actions; they then reinterpreted these conventional perceptions and portrayed these epic personalities as women willing to challenge the world for those they love. In each episode, while one dancer remained the protagonist, the other would assume the role of the peripheral characters. Srinidhi took on the roles of Kaikeyi and Devaki while Sahasra portrayed Andal and Kannagi.



As the dancers commenced the central piece, the unique elements of choreography instantly became apparent as they mixed innovative story-telling and theatric techniques with traditional dance in a phenomenally mature and novel production. Each episode started with a brief introduction set to a *swaram*, which specifically suited the respective character's temperament; this introduction was quickly followed by a complex *jathi*. The first *jathi* in *trikala* was the most technically impressive of all and the audience burst into a spontaneous applause right after the dancers went into their *aridhi*. The dancers then proceeded to preface the actual story within each episode with a "monologue" that described the events that were to take place within the narrative. Hearing each protagonist's "voice" tell her own story and justify her actions to the audience not only added a dramatic effect visually and acoustically, but also allowed the audience to appreciate the essence of each character and her role within the show's overall theme. These monologues were woven beautifully with the live music as the orchestra picked up where each character's voice trailed off. Another point of interest was the use of props in the episodes to signify each character's love. Kaikeyi's love for Bharatha was symbolized by her obsession with the crown while Andal's longing for Krishna was depicted by a beautiful garland; a bamboo flute symbolized the only object that allowed Devaki to feel close to Krishna as she lamented her separation from him while the *silambu* marked Kannagi's rage at her husband's unjust death. The use of these props added a subtle yet powerful symbolic element to each story and was yet another testament to the distinctive choreography.

The beginning of the Kaikeyi episode with the description of Ayodhya set the mood for the royal tone of the first story. Kaikeyi's happiness, portrayed by Srinidhi, as she watched the preparations for Rama's coronation, established a celebratory tone in the beginning and set the scene for what was to be a strong contrast later in the narration. Manthara, portrayed by Sahasra, was the perfect depiction of an antagonist. As both characters altercated in the scene where Manthara tried to change Kaikeyi's conviction about Rama, the audience felt drawn into their regal world. Specifically noteworthy was Kaikeyi's and Manthara's debate in the well choreographed '*Sivandha vaai Seethayum*,' where the dancers did justice to each woman's contrasting opinion towards the imminent coronation. As the argument culminated in Kaikeyi's mind slowly filling with doubt, the musical score beautifully matched her mixed emotions. Finally, when Kaikeyi decided to challenge Dasaratha, the music rose in a crescendo in the raga Vasantha, lending to an excellent musical and emotional experience. Srinidhi's assertion and conviction as Kaikeyi and Sahasra's portrayal of the scheming Manthara were delivered with such maturity that the audience felt immersed in the Ramayana as they witnessed one of the biggest turning points in the epic.



Next, it was Sahasra as the protagonist depicting Andal's love for Krishna. The beginning scene in which Periyalwar teaches little Andal the traditions of *pooja* and *bhajan* as he inculcates *bhakti* in her was a fine prelude to his ironic laments later as he grieves over Andal's obsession with Krishna. Sahasra, as young Andal and then as a grown woman seeing Krishna everywhere, brought out the transition from childhood to youth very beautifully. What was it that she did to make us feel that she was a five year old who followed everything that her father Periyalwar did? Was it the way she sat, was it the look in her eyes, was it her childlike movements that followed her father's movements? In Srinidhi's portrayal as Periyalwar; the audience was moved to tears as she depicted a distraught father who fears for his daughter's seemingly unhealthy and blasphemous fixation on Krishna. As he realizes, however, towards the climax of the episode that his daughter had in fact not sinned, there was a palpable amazement amongst the viewers. Srinidhi's eyes effectively conveyed Periyalwar's amazement at the magnitude of Vishnu who was to marry his little lovable and adorable Andal! The beginning and ending of the episode with 'Om Namō Narayana' was yet again an amazing musical and directorial decision..

In the third episode the scene started with the protagonist Devaki (Srinidhi) in her imaginary world with Krishna. It then moved on to Vasudeva and Devaki in prison in flashback, where the heroine gives Krishna away to be taken to Ayarpadi. '*Muzhudum Vennai*' in Kapi was very appropriate for the *sanchari* bhava of Krishna stealing butter. '*Aalai Neel Karumbu*,' a lullaby that followed where Devaki imagines herself singing to Krishna, was movingly portrayed by Srinidhi. As she concluded '*Deiva nangai Yasodhai petrale*,' the depth of emotion she conveyed as she took on the role of 'the mother that never was' struck an emotional chord. Srinidhi's eyes were now able to show the distance of Krishna's physical existence from Devaki who, at the same time, felt His closeness right in her heart all the time!

Finally came the episode of Kannagi with Sahasra as the protagonist. It was a powerful portrayal of the contrast between the innocent Kannagi who, with all love and care gives away her silambu to Kovalan and the raging Kannagi who challenges the king on hearing about her husband's death. The concluding part in which, as per Kannagi's wish, Agni burns Madurai was a fitting finale to this grand episode. The *jathi*, with the *raga Revathi* in the background complemented by the powerful choreography envisioning both dancers - one as Agni and the other, Kannagi - are deserving of special mention.

The dancers proceeded with a *padam* and a *javali* as solos in order to contrast the enormous sacrifices made by these legendary women with those of the average contemporary woman who also expresses her unconditional love, albeit in a seemingly petty manner - an excellent conceptual decision to convey a more worldly portrayal of love! While Srinidhi described a possessive and jealous *nayika* through *Netrandi Nerattile* in Huseni, Sahasra took on the role of the proud and boastful wife in *Smara Sundaranguni* in Paras. Both pieces were hits as the audience roared with laughter. Watching the same spiritual girl who fell for the Lord a few minutes ago take on the role of a worldly dame, proud of her husband, teasing all other women with lowly husbands was delightful. This gentle transition from a heavy main piece allowed the audience to ease subtly into the concluding piece for the show - the *Thillana* in Revathi. The excellent formations and coordination of movements were chiseled even in the fast paces.

While credit for the concept and choreography of the whole show goes to the dancers, that for the excellent artistic direction goes to Usha Raghavan, an acclaimed dancer, choreographer, and director of Kalasagara, UK. Usha Raghavan was also on the *nattuvangam* for the program. The outstanding musical score was written by Sudharshana Arunkumar who, originally from Chennai, now lives in Los Angeles; Sudharshana, who was also the vocalist for the show, mesmerized the audience with her singing. Ganesh Ramanarayanan accompanied the musicians on the mridangam while Suhas Rao was on the violin. The orchestra's coordination was remarkable and the artists served as wonderful accompanists to the dancers. The tasteful lighting by Usha Sambamoorthi and sound by Elizabeth Burke, added to the success of the show.

***Vijaya Venkatesh is the Founder Director of Sundararanga Cultural Academy. A connoisseur of Indian music and dance, she has served Carnatic Music Association of North America, Inc., as a trustee and vice-president for a number of years. She has also supported several cultural organizations in various capacities and continues to promote Indian Fine Arts in North America.***

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