

Local themes, global appeal

In her latest production, seasoned danseuse Bala Devi Chandrashekhar brings alive the life of a Devadariyal, focussing on the spatial and spiritual vibrations that she goes through

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The integration of a scholar and an artiste is a unique meeting place. What comes of it often leave laymen and connoisseurs stunned in equal ways. As people who look up to the arts, often we wish for a more nuanced, scholarly approach, one that also equips us with a language which can be understood in the best ways, enough to take away something from the performance. As an artiste who engages with this system with each one of her works, Bala Devi Chandrashekhar is impressive. She begins where most people stop. She is trained in Bharatanatyam, but she chooses to approach her art with a sense of preservation, tapping into those unusual windows of newer perspectives. At times, she also takes on the responsibility of making the ancient available.

"I think we have to stay in touch with our roots, lest we would be lost. There is a culture we belong to, the reason we are who we are and there has to be a conscious effort to preserve it," says Bala. This week, she brought to Delhi a very special production - 'Brihadeeswara: Form to formlessness through the eyes of a Devadariyal'. Much has been said about Bharatanatyam being once danced by the Devadasi, the nityasumangali married to the lord, dancing and singing in the temple courtyards of ancient Tanjavur. With her choreography, Bala brought alive the very life of a Devadariyal, her special experiences, and the 'spatial and spiritual vibrations', as she goes about her



Layered technique Bala Devi Chandrashekhar ■ R.V. MOORTHY

daily chores. She is constantly under the spell of the architectural marvel, the Brihadeeswara Temple, built by the glorious Chola King, Raja Raja I. The production recently made history as Bala presented it in front of over 100 delegates at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris on 28th June.

Bala began 'Brihadeeswara' under the able guidance of eminent scholars like TN Ramachandran, Kodavayil Balasubramanian and BM Sundaram. The music was composed by Rajkumar Bharathi and script was by PR Venkatasubramanian. The production was in four acts each speaking of her beauty and the grandiose of the tem-

ple architecture. She sways between the astonishment of what she sees with her eyes alongside the formlessness of the cosmic dancer. It also celebrates the nine facets of the lingam, while being inspired by the verses of Tirunavukkarasar, Manikavasagar, Thirumoolar and Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam.

"Brihadeeswara" was conceived to develop an understanding of the physical and metaphysical magnificence of the grand edifice of the 10th century, specially through the lens of a Devadariyal, who is in service of the lord. She was an important component in the temple for a long time. Only after the 13th Century or so did her role start to deteriorate. In a way, I also wanted to bring back the status of her role as in the Agamasrastra, which includes iconography, architecture as well as the temple rituals. I was very intrigued because the temple itself is a UNESCO heritage site. By being able to perform there, in Tanjavur, I think it felicitated my production itself," says Bala.

Honoured with title

In January this year, Bala presented 'Brihadeeswara' in the presence of Rajasri Rajah S Babaji Rajah Bhonsle, Senior Prince of Tanjavur. She received the title 'Thaikkolli', which was last given

to Madhavi, a dancer, by the last Chola King.

Bala's layered technique and unique storytelling abilities are backed by the months she spends with her texts, reading and re-reading them. The New Jersey-based dancer also asserts that there is only so far an artiste can go without looking into where the art came from. "As long as we keep to the technique, tradition and the ambience in which it is practised intact, our work will have depth and value. This includes knowing the music, language, literature, poetry, architecture, and the livelihood of the people who practised it. The West is really looking for a scholarly input in our performances. Messages of this nature is needed today more than any other time. My only wish is that my work stands the test of time, and that it meets all kinds of audience, irrespective of colour, creed, religion or belief. My idea is to take the Bharatanatyam format, be able to dwell into our scriptures which have universal message and take it across the globe. That is when I think this Indian art-form can have its meaning. Our productions must stand the test of a global audience," says Bala.

Art of communication

This is the only way we can communicate, otherwise we will be very closed, exchanging our work only with people who are just practitioners of dance. A production of this nature touches all the allied subjects, such as theatre, music, art history, linguistic anthropology, etc. without which dance makes no sense. The message is not meant only for the subcontinent. It has a humanness that people can relate to. 'Brihadeeswara' talks about the form and formlessness of the supreme energy, whether you conceive it as Shiva or Krishna or Ganesha. We feel that energy all the time and what it embodies," she adds.

Earlier this week, Bala Devi also released her new DVD titled 'Karma - Destiny's Child'. The DVD was released at the India International Centre. The production delves into "the emotions of Karma trapped in his moral dilemmas, the angst and the conflict with which he grew up all his life."

