

Rivers Concert Combines Dance with Activism

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Special to India West

San Jose, Ca- For those complaining that classical dance is too “classical,” there was an antidote in the Abhinaya Dance School’s fall concert, “River’s – a mystical journey,” presented at the Mexican Heritage Theater here Nov. 15-16.

The dance drama fuses tradition and modern-day activism to create a refreshing production that leaves a lingering aura among fans of the art form, as well as piquing the interest of those who want their art to mean more than just a sensory pleasure.

Abhinaya’s dancing maidens took a slight detour from the oft-told stories of gods and goddesses to take up the cause of India’s biggest and most controversial dam project, the Narmada dam. Build on the Narmada River, it has displaced millions of tribal people and is fiercely opposed by environmentalists who say benefits flowing from the dam are limited.

The beautiful danseuses showcased the unheard cries of the poor tribals as the corrupt and apathetic government official, played deftly by Rasika Kumar, quashed their protests and forced them out of their homes and livelihoods.

“These are the forsaken people whose lives and hearts have been broken in the name of progress,” narrated Mythili Kumar, the school’s founder and artistic director.

While immediately sensitizing its audiences, the dance drama did not lose its gentleness as Rasika’s choreography fused the tempered movements of its skilled dancers with an excellent display of Abhinaya.

“It’s so inspiring to see the passion of these dancers. They are acting and dancing at the same time. I can feel the spirit of the cause even though I’m so distant from it,” Dora Henderson, a communications professional and ballroom dancer who came to the show to learn more about Indian dance, told India-West.

Also pleasantly surprised by the modern twist to the show was Lakshmi Raghavan, a Cupertino, Calif.- based computer engineer.

“It’s a visual treat and it got me thinking about something that is real, that is current and immediately relevant to so many of us,” she said.

Complementing the dancers in every move were the vocals by guest artist Babu Parameshwaran and local talent Rita Sahai, while N. Narayan on the mridangam and kanjira, Shanthi Narayan on the violin, Ragavan Manian on the flute and Rani Gutala on tabla created an eclectic mix of percussion and melody.

The music gained brilliant temp and matched the boisterousness of the vignette about the river Yamuna. Told with sculturesque poses, the episode was an audiovisual spectacle as Anjana Dasu, embodying the holy Yamuna, harmonized her movements with the playful steps of the young Krishna frolicking her banks.

Dasu, a nuanced dancer with glowing stage presence, made the most of her role as the joyous mother and playmate.

In the penultimate moments of the show, Rasika took to the stage once again as river Kaaveri. Almost as sure as gravity in delivering flawless performances, she set the stage for a pulsating grand finale where all the dancers matched beat to end in a symbolic confluence with the ocean.