



Natarajan as Chandramati... outstanding performance.



From 'Dhruva Charitam'... captivating presentation.

# Tradition nurtured with dedication

THE Bhagavata Mela Natakam endured in all its glory in the remote village of Melattur, drawing lovers of art from all over the world. The credit goes to the efforts of S. Natarajan, the son of Natarajan, behind Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanthi Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam at Melattur, says NANDINI RAMANI.

*It was a wonderful confluence of Bhakti and art at the 10-day festival conducted by the Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanthi Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam at Melattur, says NANDINI RAMANI.*

Following the footsteps of the late Natarajan from his family, Ganesa Iyer Narasimha Iyer (grandfather and uncle) and Natarajan, Natarajan carries on the tradition of Bhagavata Natya, even while engaged in his profession at Dubai.

Every month of May brings him every year to rededicate his service at the temple of the Supreme Deity.

The 63rd year festival of this Sangam was inaugurated by art-patron, Nallai Swami Chetty. Padma Subramaniam participated in this festival. The Tirukkarugavur Brothers performed the Mangala Isai.

Every year Natarajan had organised a series of plays which included, apart from the original Natakams, Bhakti Natya — a tribute in music and dance to the great poets of the Bhakti movement by Anupama Kylash (dance) and Musuya Murthy (Music), both from Hyderabad, — Bharatanrityam by Subramaniam, Odissi by Pradyumn of Japan (Nrityagram) and Nritya by Banani Chakraborty (Katakata) and Odissi by Shalini from Mumbai.

The objective obviously was to make the festival a multi-cultural event. The agrahara in front of Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Iyer temple was packed with devotees as well as tourists from various parts of the country and outside. The main attraction is the artistic portrayal of the different scenes of the Natakams presented this year. Dhruva Charitam was a new addition. Prahlada Harischandra

(Parts I & II), Kamsa Vadham, Seetha Parinayam, and the Tamil opera Valli Thirumanam were also presented. With the staging of Dhruva Charita, Natarajan has successfully completed the task of staging all the ten plays of Melattur Venkatarama Sastry, available — a praiseworthy achievement in propagating the dance-drama worship.

Like all the other dramas, Dhruva Charitam has delightful lyrics and musical content, all reconstructed by Natarajan from the original manuscripts. Dance choreography adheres firmly to the authentic mode; the play as such does not offer great scope for abhinaya improvisation or crucial details of enactment.

Tone was set for the play with the majestic Begada Daru (Kunjara) for the entry of Sri Vigneswara. Natarajan as King Uththanapada (described beautifully as Inakulabdhi Poornacandrudu — the full moon of the dynasty), gave an impressive performance. Bhairavi, Kalyani, Atana Kharaharipriya, Mohanam, Vasanta, Varali, Anandabhairavi, Ahiri, Sri and Sindhubhairavi were some of the ragas that came one after another, all beautiful lyrics replete with rasa and bhava.

The main dancers of this troupe, Srikanth and Vijay Madhavan, seem to have imbibed the nuances of Natarajan. In this play, Srikanth as Suneeti and Vijay as Suruchi, the queens of Uththanapada, gave clear proof of their talent.

The interactive sections between the queens (Athanudu), the sad feelings of Suneeti at her son being refused the right to sit on the lap of the king (Entanorva), Suneeti appealing to the

Lord (Murahari Krupa), their tactful usage of the space, were all noteworthy.

The central role of the play, Dhruva, was enacted by little Prasanna, nephew of Natarajan, who won hearts with his fine delivery of dialogue, sensitive facial expressions and keen observation. His involvement even at this young age (nine years) was amazing. For those who had seen him playing around on previous occasions this seemed like a mystical transformation. The credit goes to Natarajan's daughter, Priyamvada Murali (disciple of Chitra Visveswaran), who has trained Prasanna for all the roles he depicted during this festival. The perpetuation of this family tradition along with Natarajan's other brothers and longtime associates like Varadarajan is thus ensured.

Sai from Chennai was another young boy (also trained by Priyamvada), who enacted the role of the brother of Dhruva, with neat dance technique.

Dhruva's prayer to the Lord and the response of Sriman Narayana were narrated in beautiful Sanskrit poetry (Aadhaara Bhootha, etc.) An innovative inclusion was a brief Mallari adapted for receiving Dhruva who is brought in a palanquin with due honours.

The lively presentation of the story of Dhruva concluded with Phalasaruti, wherein, the viewer and listener are blessed with Vairagya, Dhruva Bhakti etc., underlining the faith that the devout Dhruva will be remembered until the moon and stars shine (Aachandraarka).

Harischandra (I & II), discussed at length earlier in this column, always creates a bond between the artistes

and the viewers, with its deep emotional content conveyed through exquisite lyrical compositions. Kumar as Harischandra gave a moving portrayal, especially at the separation of Chandramati after the sad plight of selling her as a maidservant. Srikanth as Chandramati-I was very impressive as she always is. Vijay as Maatangakanya was vibrant.

However, it is always Natarajan who steals the show with his outstanding performance as Chandramati in Part-II of the play. His depictions of Intipani (fulfilling the domestic chores at the brahmin's house) Poyi rara, Inta Proddaayane (Awaiting the return Of Lohidasa), the lamentations on hearing the death of the son, and earlier Medapal followed by the beautiful portrayal of pleasant memories with her beloved speak of marvellous artistry.

It is pure Natya approach clothed in feminine grace and beauty of movements and mudras. Natarajan's capacity to express the different shades of emotions never fails to amaze one. It is apt that he has been chosen for the Sangit Natak Academy Award. There is a lot that the present day Bharatanatyam dancers can learn from Natarajan's technique.

The orchestra of this Sangam has strong vocal support from the Thiruvaiyaru Brothers — Narasimhan and Venkatesan — who are training to reach the high standard of musical quality maintained by the veterans of the past. Narasimhan sang quite well but one wondered if Venkatesan's voice had become brittle.

Prabhakar was too loud and the poor acoustics did not help the singers. Andankoil Babu (violin), Nellai Balaji (mridangam), Delhi Krishnamurthi who rendered timely assistance for Nattuvangam, and the new Granthika or the text reader, Rameswaram Kalyanasundara Sastrigal, contributed significantly to the success of the plays.