

INFO CENTRE

Articles, Interviews, Previews, Reviews, Profiles, Events, News.....

Review

The Melattur Magic

Text & pics: T S Gopal, Chennai

e-mail: teessgpal@hotmail.com

May 25, 2006

The heat, dust and fatigue of a night's bus travel from Chennai to Kumbakonam and on bumpy roads to Melattur thereafter, were all forgotten when one saw the pandal erected to stage the 66th Bhagavatha Mela Nataka Mahotsav that began on 18th May evening. A festive atmosphere was in the air, and the cloudy sky and blowing breeze were a welcome change. The hospitality of the hosts filled the heart and the hungry stomach. As a first time visitor to this festival it was with great expectations I waited for the evening.

The much acclaimed Prahladha Charithram was to be staged by a group of artistes who kept alive from days of Venkatarama Sastry, the 500 year ancient tradition of Bhagavathamela against great odds of rising costs, cash crunch and degenerating values over the years. Hundreds who come from different parts of India are sheltered and fed for the duration of the festival as guests.

The event this year was of special significance as Melattur Natarajan, who in real life plays a lead role in keeping the movement alive was to don the role of Leelavathi for the 50th time on stage here. Natarajan had faced many challenges in conducting the event over the years and the nature also posed one when heavy rains hit the village an hour before the scheduled 10 pm start. As the rain water flowed down the street where the stage was set, wet the chairs beyond the pandal and seeped down the loud speakers, foremost in our minds was, would the play begin at all or end up as all night Varunadeva Mahatmiyam?

The Nadhaswaram vidwans kept playing melodious music notwithstanding the rains adding impromptu ragas to wait for rains to stop and artistes to arrive. Thus the Thirukarugavoor Brothers enthralled us with bonus krithis like Ksheera sagara in Devagandhari, Nagumomu, the Purandhara dasa song 'Govindha Ninne' in Raaga Shiv Kalyan, Chinnanji Kiliye and their uncle Madurai Somu's evergreen 'Enna Kavi Paadinalum.' The rains stopped and the function began at 12 midnight after felicitations to Natarajan. Encomiums were showered on him by well known Bharata Nrityam exponent Padma Subrahmanyam and S Balakrishnan on behalf of Nruthyodhaya and others who were closely associated with the Bhagavathamela over the years also followed - from the sponsors to the flower supplier.



The inaugural dance drama Prahladha Charithram began with minimal stage props as the emphasis was on music, dance and total involvement of the artistes and audience. The play was held on a stage facing the temple on the street lined on both sides by the quaint tiled roof houses. Crowds thronged on the 'thinnais' and behind windows. To the residents of the houses it was an annual night long family function and moments of togetherness with the audience. Every heart and door opened for the guests to rest. The whole ambience was a mix of music, dance, fun for kids, and divinity in the air as Lord Varadaraja himself was watching from the open doors of the temple the unfolding of the purpose of His avatar. A unique setting for a unique art in changing times and tastes.

Telugu was the court language in Tamilnadu from the times of Vijayanagara rulers till rulers from Maratha. Hence Prahladha Charithram was in Telugu. However, ignorance of the language was not a handicap at all as the emotions displayed was of universal language. All one needed was an alert eye and a sharp ear. In over five hours of non-stop action on stage, not a moment of fatigue for the artistes or the spectators. Every time Leelavathi appeared on stage, it was all grace and charm. Natarajan and gender factor were forgotten. Neither age nor hectic offstage hospitality could stale his infinite variety of abhinaya on stage as Leelavathi. From the sweet smile and drooping eyelids and full flow of abhinaya in every movement, it was Leelavathi all the way. To choose the most moving scenes would be like choosing which grain of sugar tasted sweeter. Still the scene where she tries to melt Hiranyakasipu's cruel heart recalling Prahladha's growing up with fun and frolic, stood out for its emotions expressed through abhinaya and bhava of a loving mother. The grunts of ridicule of Hiranyakasipu also despairs her. The way she showed how Prahladha spun the top on his palm and rolled it down the ground was a classic example of what abhinaya could do - turn a child's play to a piece of art.

The genius is in genes. Kumar, the younger brother of Natarajan as Hiranyakasipu was every inch the character he played and his eyes expressed more emotions than gestures. The turmoil between hunger for power as a King and failing love as a parent, was very well brought out in every word, every movement of the eye and the limbs. The scene where the sage forebodes of things to come to the parents was outstanding because of Hiranyakasipu's anguish, Leelavathi's helplessness and Prahladha's unmoving adherence to Narayana at any cost. I recall the feeling of wonder and admiration on the face of Padma Subrahmanyam when the emotionally charged scene was enacted.

Comic interludes and Prahladha-Teacher episodes helped major artistes go for make up retouch, rest and also a cup of tea from the street tea shop set up impromptu. It was nice to watch Hiranyakasipu, moustache and red eyes et al, very human and hungry, refueling with a cuppa and rusk, ready to storm on to the stage. A therukoothu environment where mortals walked with Gods and demons! Plastic cups of tea passed around for the group of singers led by the Thiruvaiyaru Brothers while the music was on. Amusing moments when the long pearl ear ring hung loose and Hiranyakasipu tried to set it right before his turn to deliver a song came. This was the most charming part of such drama. Informality and no critics around.

A subtle ending of the play without having the gory entrails of Hiranyakasipu spread on the stage by the Lord, showed innovation and understanding, More so, when kids and weak hearted were around. The verbal challenge of the King and the angry grunts of the Lord only enhanced the expectations of the spectators, anticipating the worst. The people on stage fanning and trying to restrain the Lord growing in strength and anger only added to the drama. Quite a few almost on the verge of fear, were moved to touching the feet of the person who portrayed the Lord! Such is the power of faith.

The watch showed six in the morning and no one felt tired. I was filled with wonder. How expressive Bharatanatyam is and how effective it is too in spreading the message that good always triumphs over evil, said in subtle ways through arts with least dependence on stage props and publicity hype.

The dust, the political party flags, badly lit streets in the night is what Melattur is, like any other small village in South. Still over sixty years of music, dance and devotion, has added a vibration in the air that will never die as long as people like Natarajan and his colleagues are

The inaugural dance drama Prahladha Charithram began with minimal stage props as the emphasis was on music, dance and total involvement of the artistes and audience. The play was held on a stage facing the temple on the street lined on both sides by the quaint tiled roof houses. Crowds thronged on the 'thinnais' and behind windows. To the residents of the houses it was an annual night long family function and moments of togetherness with the audience. Every heart and door opened for the guests to rest. The whole ambience was a mix of music, dance, fun for kids, and divinity in the air as Lord Varadaraja himself was watching from the open doors of the temple the unfolding of the purpose of His avatar. A unique setting for a unique art in changing times and tastes.

Telugu was the court language in Tamilnadu from the times of Vijayanagara rulers till rulers from Maratha. Hence Prahladha Charithram was in Telugu. However, ignorance of the language was not a handicap at all as the emotions displayed was of universal language. All one needed was an alert eye and a sharp ear. In over five hours of non-stop action on stage, not a moment of fatigue for the artistes or the spectators. Every time Leelavathi appeared on stage, it was all grace and charm. Natarajan and gender factor were forgotten. Neither age nor hectic offstage hospitality could stale his infinite variety of abhinaya on stage as Leelavathi. From the sweet smile and drooping eyelids and full flow of abhinaya in every movement, it was Leelavathi all the way. To choose the most moving scenes would be like choosing which grain of sugar tasted sweeter. Still the scene where she tries to melt Hiranyakasipu's cruel heart recalling Prahladha's growing up with fun and frolic, stood out for its emotions expressed through abhinaya and bhava of a loving mother. The grunts of ridicule of Hiranyakasipu also despairs her. The way she showed how Prahladha spun the top on his palm and rolled it down the ground was a classic example of what abhinaya could do - turn a child's play to a piece of art.

The genius is in genes. Kumar, the younger brother of Natarajan as Hiranyakasipu was every inch the character he played and his eyes expressed more emotions than gestures. The turmoil between hunger for power as a King and failing love as a parent, was very well brought out in every word, every movement of the eye and the limbs. The scene where the sage forebodes of things to come to the parents was outstanding because of Hiranyakasipu's anguish, Leelavathi's helplessness and Prahladha's unmoving adherence to Narayana at any cost. I recall the feeling of wonder and admiration on the face of Padma Subrahmanyam when the emotionally charged scene was enacted.

Comic interludes and Prahladha-Teacher episodes helped major artistes go for make up retouch, rest and also a cup of tea from the street tea shop set up impromptu. It was nice to watch Hiranyakasipu, moustache and red eyes et al, very human and hungry, refueling with a cuppa and rusk, ready to storm on to the stage. A therukoothu environment where mortals walked with Gods and demons! Plastic cups of tea passed around for the group of singers led by the Thiruvaiyaru Brothers while the music was on. Amusing moments when the long pearl ear ring hung loose and Hiranyakasipu tried to set it right before his turn to deliver a song came. This was the most charming part of such drama. Informality and no critics around.

A subtle ending of the play without having the gory entrails of Hiranyakasipu spread on the stage by the Lord, showed innovation and understanding, More so, when kids and weak hearted were around. The verbal challenge of the King and the angry grunts of the Lord only enhanced the expectations of the spectators, anticipating the worst. The people on stage fanning and trying to restrain the Lord growing in strength and anger only added to the drama. Quite a few almost on the verge of fear, were moved to touching the feet of the person who portrayed the Lord! Such is the power of faith.

The watch showed six in the morning and no one felt tired. I was filled with wonder. How expressive Bharatanatyam is and how effective it is too in spreading the message that good always triumphs over evil, said in subtle ways through arts with least dependence on stage props and publicity hype.

The dust, the political party flags, badly lit streets in the night is what Melattur is, like any other small village in South. Still over sixty years of music, dance and devotion, has added a vibration in the air that will never die as long as people like Natarajan and his colleagues are