



ARTS STAGE SYDNEY

Tales of wonder from a land beyond



Usha Ramanujam Arvind

October 06, 2016 / by Usha Ramanujam Arvind / 0 Comment

Rasika Dance Academy's Katha Vismaya was a spectacular to behold

Art for a purpose has been the founding principle of Rasika Dance Academy. Through annual full-length productions, it aims not just to inculcate the glorious traditions of our ancestors, handed across generations, but also raise awareness of core societal issues.



Shivathandavam

In doing so, Guru Manjula has endeared herself to an ever expanding cohort of emerging artistes while always supporting worthy causes.

Quite like its predecessors *Adharam Madhuram*, *Kshetram*, *Sacred Grahas* and *Navarasa Bharata*, Rasika's latest opus *Katha Vismaya* enthralled the packed auditorium at UNSW with its engaging narrative, depth of storytelling and sheer opulence. As the dancers showcased their emotive and technical prowess, integral to the creative fabric was the live orchestra, special effects, innumerable costume changes and spectacular props. Rasika's extended family never fails to set new benchmarks each year. This time, the spectacular was in aid of the Resourceful Australian Indian Network (RAIN).

Designed to mesmerise and executed to perfection, *Katha Vismaya* was an extraordinary show that brought to life the mythology and folklore of ancient India through the format of Bharatanatyam.

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"When we recreate the first through the medium of the second, you have a veritable feast for the senses," Manjula told *Indian Link*.

"Growing up on rich mythological stories, particularly those relating to womanhood, one of my primary objectives has been to relay these stories to the audience, who in turn will gain an insight into our profound classical tales in a simplified form and experience the grandeur in my productions."

"Every part of *Katha Vismaya* has these inspirational elements embedded within." she added.

Depicting tales of wonder from a land beyond, Manjula also offered the audience an opportunity to experience two completely different formats in the two clear segments, through two contrasting musical experiences – traditional *margam* in the first half, accompanied by live orchestra, and innovative dance ballet in the second with pre-recorded scores. Besides conception and choreography, the show also saw Manjula reprising her role as key performer, entrancing the audience with flawless pieces.

Opening with the customary *pushpanjali* to Nataraja, the lord of dance, and invocation to Ganesha, the god of good beginnings, the production also paid obeisance to Saraswati, the patron of fine arts.



Manjula

Following the introductory pieces was a dedication to feminine energy. Sthree Shakthi as embodied in

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the tales of Sita, Radha and Draupadi, epitomised unswerving loyalty, unstinting love and staunch determination. Devoid of props or costume changes, the focus was entirely on the skill and mastery of the danseuse over the art form. Exceptional performances by junior and senior students, culminated with Manjula's portrayal of motherhood. It was matched by soul stirring renditions by a live orchestra specially chosen and arranged by the legendary Balaji Jaganathan and performed by Nirupama Raman and Anand Dixit on vocals, Balaji Jaganathan on violin and Sivakumar Sethupathi on mridangam, with Manjula and Lalitha providing nattuvangam.

In contrast, the second part of the show, Vismaya, dramatised mythological tales from the Hindu pantheon in one non-stop, high voltage production. Set in modern times, the story unravelled through a *kshetradanam*, or journey of spiritual learning, that two young children, raised abroad, undertake with their grandmother in a bid to explore and understand the magical mystical past.



Scene after scene unfolded as the trio traversed the length and breadth of India, revisiting the story of Shiva and Parvati, Ganesha and Murugan, Lord Ayyappa, ten avatars of Vishnu and in particular the mesmerising tale of Krishna. While each segment outdid the next, the high points of the second half were no doubt the elaborate delineation of Ayyappa's abode, Thaye Yashoda, Shiva Thandavam and Kalinga Naarthanam.

Incorporating drama and dance, Shiva Thaandavam was the centrepiece of the *Katha Vismaya*. Daring props and stunning light effects matched consummate performances by Manjula's senior-most students Lalitha Bala and Madhu Jayaram. No less spectacular was Anitha Vytheswaran's immaculate rendering of Kalinga Narthana Thillana – Thaam them tharana, with bold choreography encompassing a gamut of emotions and wide range of tempos. Refreshingly delightful was the performance by the mother-daughter duo of Manjula and Sagarika as Yashoda and little Krishna.



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Katha Vismaya concluded with a contemporary rendition of Maithreem bhajatha reaffirming fundamental unity in all our rich diversity – a proud celebration of multiculturalism. Deeply uplifting, it was a journey to remember.

“We started rehearsing for the project five months ago, and everyday has been a learning curve for me. Choreographing Kalinga Narthanam and Shiva Tandavam, was an exhilarating experience by itself, as I was not just choreographing the dance, it was the set, props, costumes, everything had to come together to make an impact,” Manjula revealed. “More importantly, teaching over 35 young girls, in the 5-8 age bracket, and initiating them into the rich world of Hindu mythology was a profoundly satisfying experience.”



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