

Drive East

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The Drive East Festival of Indian Music and Dance pushed the envelope of possibilities with some bold choreographic ideas and supercharged dancing. Some were more successful than others but ultimately, they were all challenging acts of creativity spawned by intrepid curiosity in tandem with respect for tradition.

The concert series, now in its fifth year, is a production of the Navatman organization, a hub for Indian classical music and dance education and performance in New York City. Each night of the week-long series at Dixon Place, a Lower East Side venue, was programmed with three successive concerts featuring solo and ensemble performances of today's foremost Indian performing artists from around the world.

After attending the first two evenings, I asked some of the dancers in the audience which performers they felt were a "can't miss" and why – then scheduled the rest of my festival attendance accordingly. By the end of a superlative week I felt like I had been passed from one knowledgeable guide to another. They had offered strong opinions and their advice was unbeatable.

The week began with a formidable performer and exponent of odissi dance, Sujata Mohapatra. She is a disciple and daughter-in-law of the famed Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, noted for his instrumental role in the twentieth century reconstruction of the odissi dance form and for founding Srjan, an institute for classical dance training in Odisha, India. Since her guru's passing, Mo-

hapatra and her husband, Ratikant Mohapatra, carry on the teaching and operations at the institute, keeping the tradition alive.

Mohapatra transported the audience through her dancing and choreography to Odisha, the land of temples, where the poses are carved into the temple walls and the dances were performed as devotion to Lord Jagganath, a form of the Hindu god Vishnu. She began with the traditional invocation to Lord Jagganath and entered the stage sinking into each hip as she stepped forward, her cupped hands holding loose rose petals. From a deep plié, she spilled the flower offering to the god, then stood up to pound out dance rhythms amplified by her ankle bells. Along with the sensuous dipping into a displaced hip or a *rond de jambe* with an added hip lift, she demonstrated power through her gestures and complete control in the many single-legged postures and promenades.

Next she offered a *nritta* dance item, or pure dance, which developed into a call and response relationship with the music – each phrase growing more complex and speedy. Lyrical movements were initiated with her



Sujata Mohapatra. (Photo: AJ Sharma, Dixon Place)

mere gaze and followed through with an expansive arc of the torso and curved arms. Commanding rhythmic footwork took prominence as the competition with the drummer's phrase work became the focus.

The narrative work *Oriya Abhinaya-Kede Chhanda*, depicting the mischievous pranks of Lord Krishna as a little boy, showcased the depth and range of Mohapatra's *abhinaya*, the mimetic aspect of Indian dance that moves the heart. She transitioned from enacting Krishna's mother as she discovered her inability to nurse her baby to intensely physical scenes of wrestling destructive demons. One moment she played the willful toddler (Krishna) with his ear yanked by his disapproving mother; the next she became the divine child opening his mouth to give birth to the sun, moon, and

piece in the odissi repertory. *Mokshya* means liberation or awakening, and it is an ecstatic expression of at-oneness with the divine and the universe. Mohapatra moved about the stage assertively using the space in a display of jingling and stomping rhythmic phrases and generous arm movements. Then she drew the energy inward to convey the composure and power of the Mother Goddess, Devi, and dissolved from regal pose to pose. As the vocals chanted the final "Om" – a syllable that is said to contain all the sounds in the entire universe, she assumed a final, deep *plié*, becoming a vision of the supreme source of life.

Dr. Janaki Rangarajan, a strong and talented *bharatanatyam* artist, presented a solo dance-theater production called *Unravelled*, a daring exploration of the female character



Janaki Rangarajan. (Photo: Himanshu Darji, DP)

stars. Finally, her face was overcome with the sublime satisfaction of a mother who recognizes the divine nature of her child. Her seamless progression through these distinct characters and states of emotion was masterful.

In true odissi fashion, the program concluded with *Mokshya*, the traditional ending

Draupadi from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. Rangarajan choreographed this boundary-bending piece in a quest to unravel the layers of this character who is so central to the literature of the country and culture that she is worshipped as a goddess in South India and Sri Lanka.

In addition to dancing the demanding four-act work, Rangarajan spoke a contemporary script by V. Balakrishnan. In act 1 (Soul's Monologue), Draupadi's soul reflects on her mortal existence and revels in the freedom of having left her body and the painful suffering it endured while alive. Rangarajan's movements exuded strength and athleticism as she moved aggressively about the stage in expansive warrior lunges. She used quieter moments of *abhinaya* to deliver the spoken word and then returned to a lively stomping rhythmic sequence performed in *demi-plié*.

Act 2 (When Time Stopped) revisits the famous scene in which the five Pandava brothers (to whom Draupadi is married) lose in a game of dice to their Kaurava cousins and must

forfeit their wife Draupadi. In a deeply humiliating spectacle, Dussasana (one of the Kauravas) forcibly drags Draupadi by her hair into the court to be publicly disrobed. In the literature, Draupadi prays to Krishna to spare her and he responds by providing an endless sari that can never be removed.

Rangarajan created a compelling movement motif as she spun to the drumbeat as though her sari was being unwound. She danced sequences of abhinaya in which she seemed to lose stability and consciousness and crumpled to the floor. After repeating the spinning sequence, she became Dussasana – grabbing, yanking, and pulling the resistant Draupadi. Again as Draupadi, her tensed body was dragged into public by the Kauravas. She emerged from this debasement in a state of liberation as she commanded aloud to Dussasana, “Pull off the sari and set me free!” She stamped her feet and flicked her hand backward with disdain then moved through goddess and warrior poses as she transcended her physical situation.

In act 3 (Wild Flower), Rangarajan conveyed a touching interaction through words, dance, and mime in a back and forth enactment of a young girl and her grandfather who discover Draupadi’s dead body in the Himalayan foothills. One character is young, innocent, and curious; the other is old, wise, and assured. While dancing as the young girl, she integrated a unique swivel and lift of the hip that was unusual for bharatanatyam choreography. Evidently this is a movement innovation that she and her guru are experimenting with.

Between each act, Rangarajan gave an explanation of what was to come revealing her own burning questions about the Draupadi character. As she introduced act 4 (The Politics of Draupadi), she explained that in the state of Tamil Nadu, rape is treated as the fault



Christopher Gurusamy. (Photo: Radha Ganesan, DP)

of the victim, who is then required to walk on fire to cleanse herself.

Rangarajan opened the act dancing as a devotee paying homage to the Goddess Draupadi. Then she danced as a rape victim being forced to walk on burning embers. But this young victim prefers not to be deified like the Goddess Draupadi. She feels that this idealization of Draupadi has effectively silenced her; she chooses instead not to forget her suffering or to be reticent about it. Rangarajan’s final poses expressed her contemporary viewpoint, which intelligently adds to our current conversation.

Christopher Gurusamy offered a solo recital of bharatanatyam on an evening showcasing

male performers of Indian classical dance. Originally of Perth, Australia, Gurusamy is a graduate of the renowned Kalakshetra Institute in Chennai, India. It was fascinating to see this genre of dance that was historically a matrilineally inherited profession performed by a male body.

His precision, power, and generous range of motion created a bold and breathtaking combination in the opening invocatory works. From the outset, Gurusamy offered his body and his dance to Lord Shiva with captivating, single-shoulder isolations coordinated with head and eye movements. In a flash, he slid horizontally along the floor on the side of his thigh with propulsive force and then rose to pound throbbing rhythms into the floor while in *plié* on *demi-pointe*. He let loose with spritely leaps that flew upward like fireworks then drew sweeping side bends with his torso and arms that pushed the expected range of motion.

Gurusamy danced these expositions of *nritya* as a sublime offering to the deity. His *abhinaya*, too, was a sincerely felt conveyance of emotion so that when he volleyed between the two with growing rapidity, the two merged into an expression of total rapture.

Gurusamy completely charmed the audience in two selections that were mostly *abhinaya*. In *Kshana Maduna*, choreographed by his mentor Srimati Bragha Bessel, Gurusamy (as Krishna) wooed Radha to a love bed of flowers along the banks of the Yamuna River. He moved from this convincing enactment of emotional expression to walking a circle around the stage, in which one moment he played Krishna leading Radha to their love bed; then, pivoting a half-turn, he was Radha following her beloved. He repeated this movement-generated character switch back and forth as he traveled the circle. It was brilliantly conceived and exquisitely realized.

In *Oh My Lovely*, again choreographed by Srimati Bragha Bessel, Gurusamy stole everyone's heart – though not that of his girlfriend (in the piece). His confident strut and swagger as he attempted a rendezvous with one of his

many girlfriends was met with rejection. The dance was a platform for demonstrating his range of emotional contrast as he mimed pulling out the stops to entice the girl, her cold snub, his initial pain and disbelief at her rejection of his advances, then once again his unflappable self-assurance as he continued onto his next entanglement. It was a joy to watch Gurusamy bring his incredible talent, dedication, soaring spirit, and heartfelt love to this performing art form.

In a unique and highly successful collaboration, South Korean kathak dancer Jin Won and master performer of Korean traditional dance and drumming Sue Yeon Park interwove two cultural expressions in the service of transcending boundaries and locating common ground. Their union of Indian kathak and Korean *seungmu* forged an affecting new expression.

The two artists performed *Invocation* together, merging elements of their particular dance traditions in a stirring request for divine blessing. Preceded by the knock of struck wooden blocks (similar to Japanese dance), the two women processioned onto the stage accompanied by the haunting shamanic sounds of overtone singing and *didgeridoo* in music composed by Rushi Vakil and performed by Seth Pincus. They wore long monk's robes – one black and one white – with trailing sleeves that grazed the floor. Within their sleeves, the dancers held a slender wooden stick in each hand to manipulate the movement of the flowing fabric.

Park, in a sheer black robe, assumed a static position with arms upstretched as she stood upstage on a raised platform, while Won, dressed in white, traced a circular path around the stage. Arriving in the center just downstage of the platform, she removed a long white scarf from her costume and positioned it on the ground trailing down the center of the stage. Won performed prostrations and narrative *mudras* on the cloth, which, according to shamanic Korean tradition, represents a path to the spirit world. Gathering up the silken fabric, she hugged it against her body



Jin Won. (Photo: Himanshu Darji, DP)

and then used it to stir, spin, sweep, collect, and offer up as a gift to the deities.

The seungmu solo danced by Park is a traditional Buddhist monk's dance that is designated as a principal Korean Intangible Cultural Asset. It was a breathtaking embodiment of spiritual energy. Again wearing the sheer black robe over a long underdress and a crisp, white hood, she manipulated the long sleeves like giant bird wings. Her robed figure rose and settled energized by inner bursts that flung and spiraled her sleeves in all manner of shapes, like a primeval creature, to the ceremonial droning of horns and flutes.

The drum beat took over as she opened an arm sideward and slowly bent her body far back, then followed it with the other arm in a sequence of turns. The dance often leads the performer to a large Korean barrel drum for

a rousing percussion solo that ends the dance. Park placed her sleeve sticks on the ground, sat down, picked up a wooden block and stick, and played until the stage went dark.

In keeping with the multi-cultural theme of the program, Won performed a kathak solo inspired by the poetry of Kabir, a fifteenth-century freethinker and mystic who had both Muslim and Hindu followers. *From One Comes Infinity* speaks of the search for infinite peace through one's inward journey. Kathak tends to be a more abstract style of dancing and Won exhibited elegant grace bolstered by crisp precision as she combined a regal composure with liquid arm movements above the emblematic spins and rhythmic foot percussion.

The two artists closed their program with another innovative joint effort combining the percussive traditions of Indian kathak and Korean seungmu in a joyous celebration of creative energy. Park wore a multihued traditional Korean dress with empire waist, full silkskirt, a golden yellow over-apron, and sash tied in a large bow in the back. Stationed at the giant painted Korean drum onstage, she alternated pounding rhythms on the drum with others beaten on the drumsticks. Won spun about twirling her sequined, full-skirted, lime-green dress to the strong drumbeats. She danced a tapping sequence in response to the drumming, which began a back and forth percussion conversation between the two. Their exchange offered surprise and subtlety building in speed and intricacy to an ecstatic swirl of sound and motion.