

Space for change

LEELA VENKATARAMAN

DANCE Three recent events in New Delhi highlighted how new ideas are accommodated in established notions of authenticity in today's India. LEELA VENKATARAMAN



Global vision Scenes from Padmini Chettur's "Pushed" and Shobana Jeyasingh's "Faultlines". Photos: Adil Jain

With loose anchoring in fixed localities, was "Contemporary Indian Culture in a Globalised World" more a question of "cultural hybridity rather than cultural purity?" Deliberated by scholars during the ICCR International Seminar celebrating 60 years of the ICCR and 122nd birth anniversary of its founder Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, or illustrated through dance in the Ignite Contemporary 'Indian' Dance festival by Gati, or featured in inter-disciplinary discussions on Erotica in Indian Art and Literature at the Jawaharlal Nehru School of Arts and Aesthetics, the critical discourse touched on how established notions of 'authenticity' accommodated new ideas in today's India.

The "sacred and the profane" distinction, and the recent Indian scandal and censorship in reactions to the erotic, with the "tawaif" and "mahari and temple art erotica" references by Sunil Kothari and Santosh Kumar Malik respectively, made one wonder where the erotic resides? What happened to the bald-headed male body of late Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra when he evoked the image of sensuously glorious Radha with her luxuriant tresses in "Kuru Yadunandana," the ashtapadi? How did the film-patented preoccupation with the glamorous female body relate with the unglamorous Balasaraswati mesmerising audiences with evocative sringar suggestions?

Gati's Ignite festival showcasing icons and emerging artistes of Contemporary "Indian" Dance both in India and abroad, made out a case for new ways of approaching dance creation, pedagogy and practice, through explorations voicing personal and collective imaginations, with active encouragement from the state, institutions and the public. What is the concept of Indianness, one wondered watching the spirited performance by international dancers of Shobana Jeyasingh's Company on its maiden India tour.

Regarded the most intrepid of Contemporary Dance pioneers, Shobana Jeyasingh, a Chennai-born, Bharatanatyam-trained Indian, now a U.K. citizen, has evolved a vigorous hybrid movement style wherein the Bharatanatyam impulses are interred in a larger dance vision not polarised by ethnic identities — evolving out of a concern, located in the constantly changing London environment, for "making rather than performing dance". With her initial physical literacy in Bharatanatyam (and working, largely, for years with Indian Bharatanatyam-trained bodies), her search while locating body as sight for discourse, resulted, without conscious volition, in deconstructing the Bharatanatyam body and its narrative.

"Faultlines", a visceral group work, reflected the globalised character of constant shifting and blurring of identities through a hurricane of changing movement formations — the push, pull, lift, and balancing thrusts showing no respite or repose from the unending movement restlessness. Awesome professionalism, blended with a movement energy making even the viewer sweat. While the initiated eye noted the passing Bharatanatyam phrases (impeccably rendered by Madrid born Avatara Ayuso), the power in every movement of Devraj Thimmaiah, and the live appearance of the sari-clad soprano Patricia Rosario OBE, no Indianness characterised this unique creation, unmistakably located in the salad bowl or melting pot (as one would have it) of globalised culture.

"Bruise Blood" inspired by music composer Glynn Perrin's radical remix of Steve Reich's 1966 classic come out, and the incredible beat boxer Shlomo, in the bustle and energy-filled movement start, threatened to become self-indulgently excessive till the live beat boxer's appearance. After that the vocalisations into the microphone in a sound blend not excluding "Takita takadhimi" held one in such thrall that even the dance became by the way. Altogether a

novel experience for many Indians!

Incredibly intense in the almost meditative bodily control and concentration, Padmini Chettur's "Pushed" had some viewers gripping the edge of the chair, fearing the taut production moving from one movement transition to another, weaving a severely non-classical movement fabric in a seamless, linear, non-narrative, would snap out of control any moment.

The choreographer's idea of "moving the emotional from the tangible subjective to the intangible objective" through the anger, pain, pleasure, happiness, sorrow, love and lust purely through transaction between bodies and performing space, was understood only in parts by the audience.

Unselfconscious openness

Impeccable inner timing characterised strongly etched, breath-taking movement collages of six pairs of walking legs, or back-to-back squatting bodies moving like a creature with eight legs, or interwoven feet connecting bodies stretched on the floor, moving in a snake-like coil. The uncovered wing space seating dancers waiting for entry, flowing into performance area, evoked a sense of unselfconscious openness, of bodies sans any decorative element. The vilambit slowness flowed from Padmini's long tenure under late Chandralekha, though her vision is very different from her mentor's contemporaneity, anchored in a recognisable Indian identity. Costume aesthetics need change.

A reconstruction of Mary Wigman's dance by Fabian Barba at the British Council brought back old world pre-1930 echoes of Contemporary Dance in Germany, often called "Hindu Dance" as Sadanand Menon pointed out.

Meticulously structured and with opportunity for interaction, the Gati endeavour brought out the complete polarisation between the classical and the contemporary worlds, with few classical dancers barring Justin McCarthy interacting. Kamani's packed young audience for Shobana Jeyasingh comprised faces unfamiliar to Indian classical dance performances. And the odd established classical dancer's presence was detached formality. Where is the dance discourse in this polarised face of contemporary India in a globalised world?