Dance Review: Dances of India get Ringling series off to a horizon-expanding start

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The Nrityagram and Chitrasena dance companies combine forces to showcase both ancient and contemporary Indian dance in Sarasota

For this year’s Art of Performance series at The Ringling (formerly dubbed New Stages), organizers chose an international theme, booking artists from around the world to share the contemporary music, dance and theater of their respective countries. Friday night, the first of these — Nrityagram, a dance company from India, performing in collaboration with the Chitrasena Dance Company of Sri Lanka — took the stage at the Historic Asolo Theater and set a high bar for the dozen programs to follow through the end of April.

To the Western eye, trained to esteem ballet or hip hop, the dances of India may seem alien, with their groundedness, complex stylization and greater activity of the torso, face, arms and hands. The music, played live on unfamiliar instruments like the harmonium, the bamboo flute and a Sri Lankan drum, by artists sitting cross-legged on the stage, is rhythmic rather than melodic, the vocals serving more as punctuation than narrative. The detailed makeup and brilliantly-colored, layered and skirted costuming accentuates rather than exposes body parts.

Nevertheless, even the most skeptical and uninitiated audience member is likely to be won over by the cohesive whole of this intriguing combination of rhythmic precision, athletic ability and deeply expressive emoting. It calls for stamina (long poses with bent knees), precision (dozens of mudras or hand positions, limb movements and upper body movements), perfect timing (played out constantly...
with the feet and accentuated by bells on ankle bracelets) and feeling (the “heart and mind” emotions expressed facially). The mastery of each of these elements made this presentation truly impressive.

Nrityagram, founded in 1990 by the dancer Protima Gauri, is considered one of the foremost companies of India, performing all over the world and on an annual tour to the U.S. Gauri converted 10 acres of farmland outside Bangalore to create a Gurukula (school) entirely devoted to preserving and furthering the eastern India Odissi style, originally a sacred ritual dedicated to the gods and considered one of the oldest dance traditions in the world.

Odissi features languorous limbs, rhythmic footwork and sinuous upper body movement. On the other hand, Kandyan Dance, the style performed by the Chitrasena company — danced here by two men and two women, but originally by men alone — is more masculine, angular and untethered, with deep plies in turned out positions alternating with jumps and rotating aerial barrel rolls. These two companies first collaborated in 2012 and have now refined a fascinating interchange that combines their age-old traditions with contemporary evolutions.

The program began, as is the custom, with a movement prayer, “Sankirtanam,” in which four members of the all-female Nrityagram troupe personify wandering minstrels singing and dancing in front of the most revered Indian god, Lord Krishna. (In deference to Western audiences, each piece on the program is preceded by a brief introduction and explanation of what is to come.)

This segued into “Shankarabharnam Pallavi,” which explored the various dimensions of the traditional Odissi style’s vocabulary, beginning with slow, sensuous movements and pantomime and building to a crescendo of intricate patterns. The singing of lead vocalist Jateen Sahu became a compelling instrument in itself, urging the dancers forward and freezing them momentarily in silent pauses, melding music, movement, and to my mind, audience, into one.

Inspired by a poem from the “Gita Govinda,” written in Sanskrit in the 12th Century by the poet Saint Jayadeva, “Dhira Samire” was based on a romantic ballad reflecting the religious belief that all humankind is feminine energy (represented by Radha, Krishna’s beloved) constantly seeking union with the sole male godhead (Krishna). In this solo, Surupa Sen, the artistic director and
primary choreographer for Nrityagram (she also played percussion with the musicians), portrays a jealous Radha, angry with Krishna’s flirtatious behaviors with other woman, receiving a message that her beloved awaits her.

“Poornarati” brought together four female Nrityagram dancers with two men and two women from the Chitrasesna troupe in an explosion of color, athleticism and pulsing cadence, accentuated with finger cymbals and hand bells. In one snapshot moment a female Odissi dancer at the rear center of the stage writhes sinuously as the other dancers, splayed out to either side of her, mimic pulling her with a rope in a metaphorical tug of war, invoking the male and female forces in the universe.

The final piece, “Alap,” featuring dancers from both companies in a fluid but electric interchange that combined, challenged and layered their respective styles, showcased the Odissi dancers’ undulating torsos, the Kandyan dancers’ combination of power and control and the masterly facial expressions of both and transcended any barriers to understanding.

It is a credit to The Ringling and a privilege to local audiences to be able to view such an authentic and highly accomplished display of a dance form rarely available to American audiences. With a program of flamenco dance (Casa Patas, Nov 6-7) next up on the Art of Performance schedule, I hope more local dance aficionados will avail themselves of the opportunity to broaden their horizons.