

THE HINDU

DANCE

When Odissi met Kandyan dance

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‘Ahuti’, a collaboration between Nrityagram and Chitrasena Dance Company, was an aesthetic offering in every way

Over the years, Nrityagram, in the able hands of Surupa Sen and lighting designer Lynne Fernandes, has evolved its own aesthetics of presentation. Their latest production ‘Ahuti’ was no exception. This collaboration with the Chitrasena Dance Company was characterised by stunning visuals, inspired choreography and an evocative soundscape.

‘Ahuti’, the Sanskrit term for ‘offering’, was just that. An offering to the audience, the forms of Odissi and Kandyan dance, and to the pliable, athletic bodies that create this art. The choreographic brilliance of Surupa Sen and Heshma Wignaraja lay in the moments of transition, where dancing bodies melted and morphed through light and shape before our very eyes. Just when the mind understood a line that the dancers created on stage, it evolved into a curve, then a circle, and with the blink of an eye it became a dissolving square. Lynne Fernandes’ eye for colour aided the magic, sometimes washing the dancers in a dramatic blue, and at others, lighting them like temple sculptures from sides, accentuating their silhouettes.

Visual treat

After ‘Samhara’ (2012), the earlier collaboration between the two dance companies, ‘Ahuti’ is the second joint production. The statuesque dancers of the Chitrasena are no strangers to the Indian audience, and it was a treat to see two male dancers in this production (Kushan Milind and Akila Palipana) in addition to female dancers, Sandani Sulochani and the exemplary Thaji Dias. Drummer Waruna Sri Hemachandra enhanced the Kandyan dance portions with his precise playing. The

Nrityagram ensemble embodied the Odissi form in its most aesthetic avatar, traversing the stage with the characteristic, sinuous grace of the form.

The performance, structured into four main pieces, began with a Sankirtana that highlighted different aspects of Vaishnavite mythology. Opening with two dancers in opposite directions occupying a fierce, rooted chauka positions, the piece set the tone for the kaleidoscopic movements to come. This was followed by the Purna Aarati, where the dancers assumed a jigsaw-like formation in Lynne Fernandes' hazy soft-lit oeuvre, undulating ever so slightly, to emphasise the movements that operate laterally in the Odissi body and vertically in the Kandyan one. The conclusion of this piece demonstrated a contrast between the majestic chariot of Puri Jagannath being pulled forward by all the dancers in the quietude of the instrumental music. The third piece, Ravana Tandava stotram, began with a solo section by the agile Thaji Dias, representing the character of Ravana in an ode to Kandyan dance and Sri Lankan traditions. Shaivite iconography was further explored through the piece as Pavithra Reddy joined her on stage. The final piece, 'Aalaap', was an excerpt from 'Samhara'.



Chitrasena Dance Company at 'Ahuti' | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

When asked whether she conceived this production as a fusing of ideas or as a conversation, Surupa Sen clearly chose the latter. Yet a closer look at the production revealed that the understanding of form has been dissected in choreography to its most basic units, and this exploration is what ties together this collaboration. At the surface, there are similarities — for example, the square, squatting strength of the chauka is almost directly mirrored in the Kandyan seated posture known as ‘mandiya’ coming from the word ‘mandala’ (an ornate religious design that employs geometry).

Yet the beauty of this conversation is in the contrasts — the graceful tribhanga meets the heaving chests and undulating spines of Kandyan. The superimposition of lateral and vertical movements created a matrix on stage that invited us to perceive the dance simultaneously as one coordinated effort, and as two distinct styles of movement. The contextual aspects of these forms further revealed themselves through the production — Odissi derives inspiration from sensual temple sculptures and divine apsaras, while Kandyan, a traditional form, is always practiced in rituals by men. Thus the conversation abstracted itself into that — between line and curve, woman and man, lateral and vertical, Indian and Sri Lankan.

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