



Samhāra: Nrityagram Dance Ensemble with Chitrasena Dance Company, 26 May, Alchemy 2017, Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre

Reviewed by Protima Chatterjee | June 7, 2017



Samhāra is a magnificent collaboration of two exquisite dance forms from India and Sri Lanka.

Both all-female cast of dancers, the Nrityagram dance ensemble from India performs the graceful and sensuous Indian classical form of Odissi while Sri Lanka's Chitrasena dance company performs the more masculine Kandyan dance style- the two dance companies collaborate

beautifully in Samhāra. Choreographed by Surupa Sen from Nrityagram, Samhāra brings together two ancient and elegant dance forms in perfect unison. The resultant fusion is appropriate for the collaborative spirit of Alchemy- the festival that aims to bring together varied South Asian cultures to a diverse audience in the UK.

In accordance with the norms, the stage setup is that of an authentic Indian classical dance showcase. With no deviations, it has the conventional layout – the musicians, with the lead vocalist are seated to the left of the stage and dancers take to the stage after each piece is introduced by a brief narrative. But what is contained within this usual framework is unique- stunning choreography, exceptional performance and a group of 14 gorgeous dancers and talented musicians.

The opening number 'Arpana' unveils the traditional and devotional ambience of most Indian classical dance evenings. It is an offering to the five elements of nature and starts in the Odissi form with three dancers from Nrityagram dance ensemble. Two dancers from the Chitrasena dance company join in the choreography bringing in a harmonious contrast in movements with their Kandyan style perfectly blending in the choreography. They are two distinct styles of dance with sets of techniques unique to each form. Yet there are brief moments where the visual impact creates moments of ephemeral beauty. As you snap out of these elusive moments, the two forms again stand out with their distinct movements, costumes, beats and individuality. This is the brilliance in choreographic ideas where the two styles are set together in a contrasting yet synergistic design.

'An Ode to Lord Shiva', is one of the key pieces of the evening presented by Nrityagram dance ensemble. It conjures awe and devotion for the mighty Shiva. Through precise and elegant movements, emotive facial expressions and symbolic hand gestures Shiva is invoked - The serpent garland around his neck, the shining tiger skin around his torso, body smeared in ashes, wild matted locks. Sometimes a smile of perfect bliss adorns his face, the perfect lover to Parvati or his eyes burning in rage ready to strike with his trident. The score of the piece ends in 'Om Namah Shivaya' the universal soulful chant while the dancers breathe life into static postures with lights fading out. From this devotional segment, the show moves on to a lighter feel in 'Alaap'. This is the concluding piece where the two companies challenge, welcome and embrace each other through a musical conversation. This is more of a celebration exploring different nuances of camaraderie, from mischief to solemnity, ending the evening in a happy note.

The Nrityagram dancers with their graceful movements, elegant costumes and resonating bells present an enchanting glimpse of Indian culture – a hint of sensuousness blended with devotion and spirituality. The Chitrasena dance company on the other hand are more energetic and folksier in a performance that celebrates Sri Lanka's Kandyan dance tradition. The dancers of the company are like young princess hunters with sensuous and agile limbs. Their leaps cut through the air and they

land with utmost precision. Their rippling torso movements and extended arms like engulfing wings, held out strong from the shoulders, lend the perfect structure and physicality to the choreography. A compelling portrayal of the grandeur and a distinctive aura of the Kandyan style, sure to give some in the audience a run of goose-bumps at times.

A-not-to-be-missed performance, Samhāra calls for more dates in the calendar across international festivals and venues.

<http://abundantart.net/samharanrityagram-dance-ensemble-with-chitrasena-dance-company-26-may-alchemy-2017-royal-festival-hall-southbank-centre/>