

DANCE SEMINAR : A RESUME OF PERFORMANCES

by
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THE Dance Seminar organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi from March 30 to April 7, 1958, was a unique event in the annals of Indian dancing.

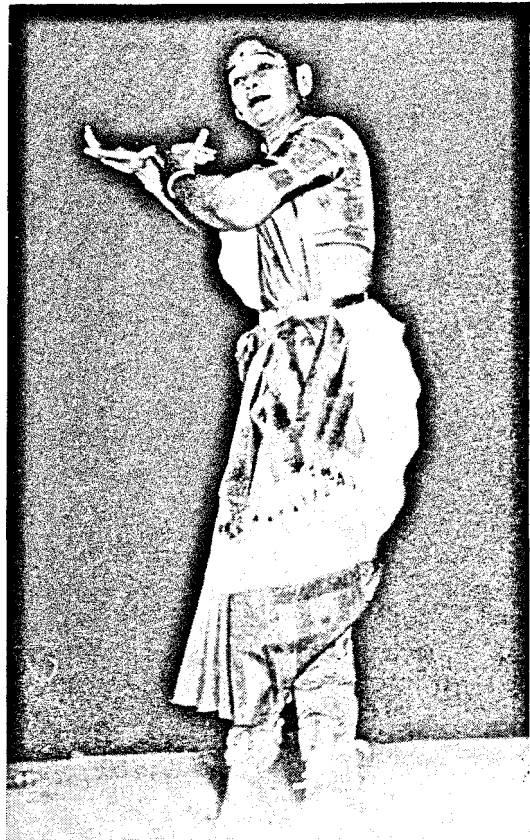
The Seminar's comprehensive and broad-based planning made it possible for scholars and exponents to exchange their ideas and pool their knowledge on the various schools and styles of Indian dancing—classical and semi-classical—with their all-possible regional and formalistic variations, highly developed, well-structured folk dances and modern dance-dramas.

The papers read and presented at the Seminar were accompanied by demonstrations which punctuated and stimulated the discussions. Together with these demonstrations, the Akademi had arranged public performances of the dances every evening at the Capital's open-air theatre at Talkatora Gardens. These performances, in their range and quality, were impressive and unfolded many facets of the problems connected with the art of dancing. They also indicated future trends and suggested likely measures for organising the art in a more effective manner.

Some Problems

This resume of the dance performances attempts to specify some of the problems, especially in regard to the dance-dramas, on the basis of the analytical data of the shows given during the festival.

Out of a large number of solo and group dance items, belonging to different regions and styles, and representing variations of form and content, the Bharata Natyam, Kathakali and Manipuri Ras were the highlights of the seven-day dance festival. Among the folk and semi-classical varieties the most interesting ones were the Mahou Naga dance of Manipur and Ottanthullal dance of Kerala.



Smt. Bala Saraswathi giving a solo performance of Bharata Natyam.

Smt. Bala's Performance

A full-length solo performance of Bharata Natyam by Smt. Bala Saraswathi and Kathakali by Guru Kunchu Kurup were outstanding items. Smt. Bala's dancing was marked by exactness of movements, precision of gestures and a masterly control of *Abhinaya-Mudras* which displayed something of the



Guru Gopinath and his disciple in a Kathakali dance pose in "Rambha Pravesam".

spirit of classical sculpture. Pure dance sequences, interspersed with the narrative of mimic dancing with eloquent pauses and broad close-ups of facial *Abhinaya* formed the general pattern of her dance art.

The two great Gurus of Kathakali—Guru Kunchu Kurup and Guru Gopinath—presented episodes from Mahabharata displaying the most outstanding specimens of Kathakali dance. With elaborate and highly dramatic mime, sculptured poses, and in between them the narrative dancing, fantastic and mask-like facial make-up, the huge billowy dresses and large crown, flashing with fast, sudden movements and intensified recitation, these Kathakali dance items provided wholesome enjoyment.

However, I have always felt that Kathakali dances can be presented to the North Indian

audiences with greater communicability and effectiveness if short commentaries in Hindi can be introduced during the intermissions in the story recitation. These intermissions provide ample scope for the introduction of such commentaries and they can be better adjusted to this requirement, without in any way disturbing the original scheme of dance.

Naga Dance

Mahou Naga dance of Manipur provided an experience in rhythmic beauty. The dancers, standing and moving in geometrical compositions, swung their bodies in a pattern which seemed to fill the stage with the melodies of orchestral music. The whole technique of movements and compositions was conceived and followed with great precision.

Ottanthullal, as one-man dance-drama, seen in the Capital for the first time, was an interesting number. The actor-dancer of Ottanthullal sang, danced and gesticulated with a great gusto, inter-relating his functions as singer, dancer and actor with exquisite harmony. The accompanying chorus provided the orchestral music and supplemented the singing by the main actor.

Dance Dramas

Kalakshetra troupe of Madras presented *Kutrala Kuravanji*, a dance-drama in Bharata Natyam style of dancing. This dance-drama was produced by Shrimati Rukmini Devi Arundale, herself a great exponent of Bharata Natyam.

Kuravanji dramas portray symbolically the longing of the soul for God. These pieces have delicate and poetic charm, like the dramas based on the Krishna legend, and written in the *Vaishnava* tradition. This production, with graceful tempo, suiting the spirit of the theme, and with expressive accompanying music, was a pleasing experience.

"Dekh Teri Bambai"

The Indian National Theatre, Bombay, produced a dance-drama, *Dekh Teri Bambai*, depicting the life on a typical day in that city. Choreography and direction had been done by Parvati Kumari.

It was a sort of 'masquerade' performance,



A Naga dance of Manipur. (Below) A sequence from the dance-drama, "Kutrala Kuravanji", presented by the Kalakshetra troupe.





A scene from "Ramayana", a puppet ballet, presented by the Little Ballet Troupe, Bombay.

with characters presenting imitative dances, making lifelike gesticulation, forceful entries and exits and crossings of the stage with great speed and gusto, with the rhythmic beats of the accompanying orchestral music.

This ballet had not chosen classical or classical-based dance compositions for the portrayal of its story. The story itself was from modern life. As such, it took a bold step and promised to widen the artistic scope of the modern Indian ballet. Some of the dance sequences were rich in mimetic quality and suited the story situations.

Art Conventions

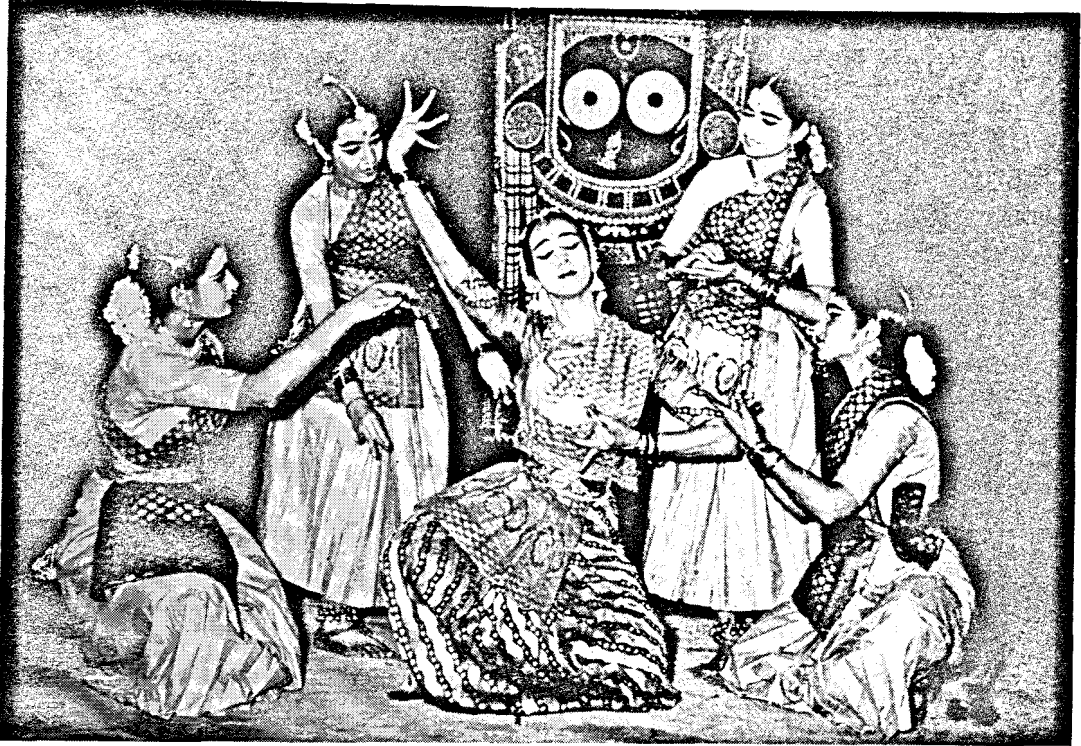
But, as a whole, it was unable to integrate new dance creations with the traditional art of dancing; sometimes, there were complete breaks from the tradition. This violent break with the entire heritage of an art form was a serious matter and even the most original and brilliant experiment cannot afford to break with the past in such a fashion. Here in this connection, I would also like to say that the art conventions and devices

of one art-form cannot be employed in another in a mechanical and unimaginative way, as seemed to have been done in the case of this ballet, by employing and importing the art devices of film.

"Ramayana"

The Little Ballet Troupe of Bombay presented its famous piece—Ramayana, a human puppet ballet, composed and directed by the late Shanti Bardhan, a great imaginative choreographer of our age.

This ballet presented the story of Rama in eight scenes, starting from the return of Rama from Janakpuri after his marriage with Sita and concluding with the battle between Rama and Ravana. The scenes had been so conceived and constructed that they caught the climatic points of the story and created charming stage pictures and tableaux. With colourful and aesthetically designed setting and the entire stage landscape, these tableaux became all the more pictorially rich and effective. Human characters dressed like dolls, wearing dramatically expressive masks, moving about on the stage in dancelike movements and presenting



A scene from "Geet Govind" presented by Shrimati Mrinalini Sarabhai and party.

short pantomimic story sequences and gesture dialogues, created a great spectacle of fantasy. Versified narrations and songs based on folk melodies had been so chosen and sung that they enhanced the mood of the play.

Its stage-craft and many presentational devices were of a high artistic standard and suited the character and the tone of the play with puppetlike human actors. A small platform-stage in the rear portion of the stage proper, with a hanging curtain to cover and uncover it, was a most imaginative stage device.

It is used to introduce new characters and new scene-sequence, at the significant and climatic point of the scene being enacted on the main acting area, with such a great theatrical skill that the stage-designer creates the effect of the revolving stage. Another successful device is the use of two story-tellers for a number of functions. They act as stage-hands, bringing and carrying away the requisite properties on the stage; handling the curtain of

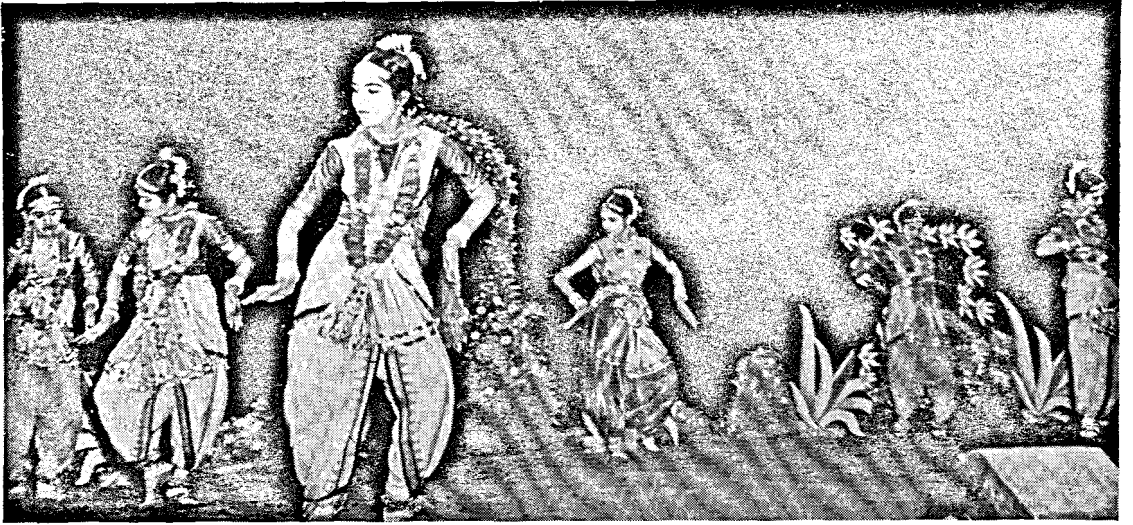
the 'miniature' stage; and in the capacity of narrators, they sum up the preceding scene and comment on the events and characters of the drama, and introduce new scenes in dramatic verse, accompanied by brilliant gesticulation.

"Geet Govind"

It was a fine idea to have planned the adaptations of Jayadeva's *Geet Govind* in three styles of dancing: Bharata Natyam, Odissi and the third in a mixed style.

Darpana, of Ahmedabad, presented *Geet Govind* in Bharata Natyam style. Smt. Mrinalini Sarabhai, the producer of the dance-drama, also acted the main role of Radha.

This ballet interpreted this classic difference from its traditional approaches. There was an emphasis on its spiritual meanings and motives. But, this conception of the play deprived it of its whole charm that comes from the very



A sequence from Odissi dance-drama, "Radhika", presented by the National Music Association, Cuttack.

human love between Radha and Krishna. In this production, Krishna was conceived as an abstract spiritual idea. So, he never appeared on the stage, though was referred to constantly by the *dramatis personae* and in the chorus recitations. This not only resulted in robbing the piece of its human element, but also made it dramatically weak.

The production, in slow tempo and a graceful simplicity of stage designing, indicated a definite direction in experimentation. Some of the scene-compositions and groupings of characters were pictorially rendered. The singing of Sanskrit verses was good and filled the stage with rhythm.

"Radhika"

The introduction of a Kathakar, sitting all the time on the apron stage area, to narrate the story of each scene in dull and undramatic voice, was a serious production defect. Kathakar was firstly only repeating the dramatic function of the chorus and secondly, by holding the action and the well-built tempo, was jarring on the histrionic sensibilities of the spectators. The theatrical devices cannot be employed mechanically, without determining their relevancy and congruence in a particular production.

The National Music Association of Cuttack

presented a ballet, *Radhika*, not an adaptation of *Geet Govind*, but an independent composition based on it—borrowing the story, situations and verses.

The Odissi style of dancing with soft, lyrical, rhythmic content was most appropriate for this theme of immortal love. This style of dancing, developed with the ritualistic religious life of the temples, has awakened the enlightened spectators for some years to its charm and suitability for dance-drama productions. The production in the present series of dance-dramas further confirmed its dramatic capabilities.

The dancer-actors while dancing converse in expressive gestures appropriate to the content. The dance sequences, mingling in one another, create pictorially effective tableaux and stage pictures, almost similar to the medieval paintings, especially of the Kangra School.

"Geet Govind" in Manipuri Style

The production followed traditional line, with flats and built pieces to create the locale. This aspect needed more imaginative handling if Odissi had to be exploited for creating ballets of higher artistic standards.

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan of Bombay

presented another variation of *Geet Govind*, depicting the romance story of its author, Jayadeva.

This dance-drama, though announced to be presented in Manipuri style, based its compositions to depict various story sequences mainly on Kathak, and other mixed varieties. Asha Parekh, in the role of Padma, created some popular appeal with her vivacious dancing. But, the whole drama was loosely constructed and there was very little co-ordination between the requirements of the story and the functions of dancing. The music also served more faithfully the dance than the drama of the story.

“Malati Madhava”

The Bharatiya Kala Kendra of New Delhi made a bold attempt by presenting a full-length dance-drama in Kathak style based on the Sanskrit classic of *Malati Madhava*. Shri Lachhu Maharaj was responsible for its dance-compositions and direction; and Dagar Brothers created superb orchestral music for the piece. This experiment in Kathak style of dancing was interesting and significant in many ways. It convincingly demonstrated the rich *natyā* element in Kathak and directions of its proper utilisation in our dance-drama productions. In fact, for the first time, all the art elements of Kathak dancing were given such dramatic motives and an execution nearest to a theatrical performance.

The greatest praise, however, should go to the music composers, who gave such dignified music, suiting this classical theme. Music—both vocal and instrumental—greatly increased the expressiveness of the dances and heightened the drama of the story.

One serious drawback of this production, like others, was, however, the adaptation of the original work to the present form. The story narrated in small disjointed scenes could not create the effect of totality. Therefore, in spite of the best acting and dancing, the players did not emerge as ‘characters’.

General Observations

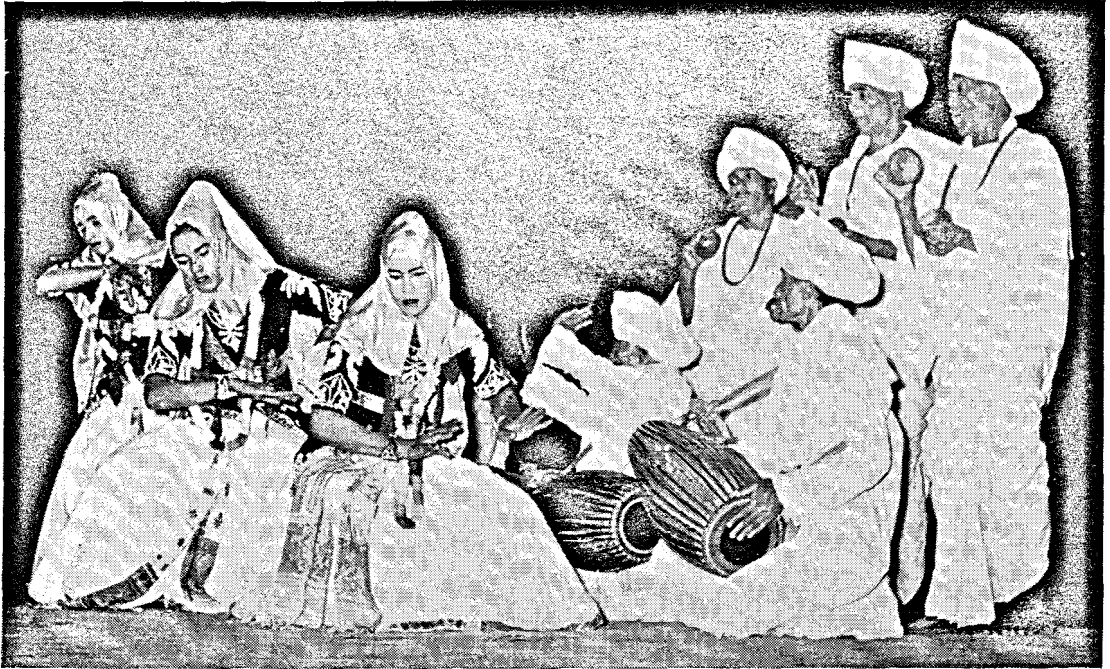
These ballets and dance-dramas and a few more that have been produced during the last few years, point out some general problems and drawbacks and also indicate the likely direc-



A scene from the Kathak dance-drama, “Malati Madhava”, presented by the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, New Delhi.

tions of future work in this particular field of theatre activity. Experimental work in dance-drama and ballet productions during the last decade is, no doubt, encouraging, but we have now reached a stage where fuller appraisal of the work has become necessary.

The creation of new dance patterns and styles to treat modern subjects and themes is the most fundamental problem of our ballet productions. There is no doubt that if dance-drama has to become a vital link of our art life, we have to introduce new themes emerging from our contemporary social and cultural life, apart from the traditional themes lifted from the epic *Kavyas* and *Akhyanas*. And to suit and portray these themes, new dance-patterns, essentially of mimetic nature and of dramatic value will have to be evolved. Imaginative and talented choreographers will have to widen the use of existing gesture vocabulary and create new gestures and action symbols. The new resources of presentational art and dances will be put to the service of our ballet productions. It cannot remain a disintegrated



Satria dance of Assam.

ensemble of dance sequences with very little dramatic value and mimetic action—balancing the elements of the story and the dance.

This introduction of modern themes and new dance styles is a delicate matter and needs a creative vision and a sense of historicity about the dance traditions. Introduction of new elements and motives in the current practices and of any art form can become meaningful only if they are artistically integrated with the art traditions. This is more true in the case of theatre arts than any other art form; because theatre arts are more deeply rooted in traditions and there is certain continuity in them; they are never completely new. Therefore, any new experiment in dance-drama and ballet can acquire artistic conviction only by accepting and adhering to the traditional discipline and practices of all our theatre arts—the dance, acting, music and drama.

Weak Scripting

As regards the scripting of these ballets and dance-dramas, the whole dramatic conception and treatment is often weak and

faulty. The divisions of the story in scenes and action units, their proportional relationship and order, conception and portrayal of dramatic characters, their mutual relationship and relative places in the story are not contrived so as to awaken and strengthen the dramatic potentialities of all the dancing and singing imported in the enacted story.

The spoken word—or the *Sahitya ansha*—in the form of poetic narrations, songs and verified dialogues is also weak in literary content and faulty from the point of view of the language, metre and rhythm. Even *Panchtantra*, the classic of our modern ballet production, has these weaknesses of script and spoken word material. These defects do great damage to the constitution of drama and the whole rhythm of production is disturbed.

It is, therefore, absolutely essential that we rehabilitate the playwright to his position and make him the doyen of all our theatre activity. It is he who will transform and shape the story material of the ballets and dance-dramas effectively and give imaginative verses and poetic compositions with rich

imagery and rhythmic value. In the absence of playwright, these elements are being neglected and we are emphasising other secondary elements of our productions with the result that the whole balance is constantly disturbed.

Undramatic Dancing

The third point in this connection is the question of making the dance styles and patterns more dramatic. They have to be imported with a certain motive of drama so that they become conversational and capable of representing action in mimetic movements. All dancing, in our dance-drama, has to become more dramatic and all drama has to become more dance-like, if it has not to degenerate into a bad mixture of the two arts—dance and drama.

Most of our dancing in ballets and dance-dramas does not fully serve the needs and requirements of the story. It is often less interpretative. This emphasis on the interpretative and dramatic character and value of the dances, however, does not mean that the pure dancing has no useful role in the dance-dramas and ballets. It is extremely useful and effective in creating and enhancing the mood of the play, in giving proper context and meaning to the interpretative dancing. But it has to be employed proportionately and at proper places.

Music and Recitation

Music—both vocal and orchestral—and recitation have to become functional than mere decorative. They have to acquire a real dramatic significance. The present character and role of music—the vocal that provides the *Sahitya* for the dance-drama or the ballet, and the orchestra, serving as background music, accompanying all the dancing and gesticulating done on the stage—is not of a serious dramatic utility; it is often only a decorative appendage or just a device to enhance the emotional content of

the story situation, or for bridging the otherwise unrelated action sequences. Music is also insisting for an isolated, independent status, and refusing submission to the dance and drama content of the piece. It is often not fully integrated with the dance, with the result that both have their separate entity in our productions. We cannot create effective and convincing drama—whatever its form and variety—if all the components of this composite art retain their separate entities. It is, therefore, extremely necessary that we discover the dramatic possibilities of the vocal and instrumental music employed in our dance-dramas and expand the areas of co-operative activity with the dance.

Dancer-Actor

One of the greatest problems in further developing the ballet and dance-drama is the problem of the lack of genuine dancer-actors. Our dancers appearing in ballet and dance-drama productions are good dancers, but they are bad actors, at least they have lesser qualities of the actor and are incapable of growing into characters. They do not feel the need of 'preparing characterisations', as Stanislavski has put it, or transforming themselves into other characters, because they adopt all roles to their own personal appeal. They are not able to relate their dancing to the story-situations and the characters of the piece and make their dances expository and conversational. They often forget their basic commitments as a character and begin to present dance sequences to the audience without any reference to the play and other actors standing on the stage.

So, the whole question is the preparedness on the part of the dancer-actors to submit to new discipline if they have to fulfil the new role of actors in ballets and dance-dramas. We have to develop a class of actor-dancers who are able to portray characters and give preference to the story-situation and their dramatic character and mould their dancing accordingly.