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Sacred Music and Movement, With an Infectious Beat

Ragamala Dance, Outdoors at Lincoln Center

By Siobhan Burke Aug. 08, 2014

You don't generally go to a performance of Bharatanatyam, the classical South Indian dance style, expecting to want to get up and dance. The form inspires a more removed kind of reverence, as something to be admired from afar, like a sacred object. But on Thursday at Lincoln Center Out of Doors, Ragamala Dance, a Bharatanatyam company from Minneapolis, upended that expectation with the New York premiere of "Song of the Jasmine," a soulful, imaginative and rhythmically contagious collaboration with the superb jazz composer and alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa. It was the main event on an otherwise tepid program shared with the Chinese American Arts Council and Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers, a group based in Philadelphia.



Mr. Mahanthappa and the artistic directors of Ragamala, Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy - they are mother and daughter, as

well as the troupe's principal dancers - approach their art forms with a similar eye (or ear) toward blending old and new. Mr. Mahanthappa's composition, played live, oscillated between warbling, wailing improvisations and tightly structured rhythmic cycles for alto sax, guitar, mridangam (two-sided hand drum) and Carnatic flute and violin. The meeting of jazz and South Indian Carnatic traditions was startlingly seamless and marvelously danceable in the hands of the Ramaswamys, who choreographed "Song of the Jasmine" for themselves and three other dancers, Ashwini Ramaswamy (Aparna's sister), Tamara Nadel and Jessica Fiala.



Photo by Darial Sneed for Lincoln Center

A program note elaborated on their inspiration: the eighth-century musings of the Tamil poet Andal, known for her expressions of "deep longing" and "the desire to merge the soul with the Supreme Consciousness." Vague though that may be, it captures the emotional landscape of "Jasmine," where every gesture radiates joy or generosity or a sense of striving toward some higher form of being. Those gestures ranged from bold, daggerlike strokes of the arms, shooting out from the chest, to a fragile, quivering lexicon of the hands that suggested stitching, caressing, planting, gathering and other tender actions. At one point, resolving from appealingly asymmetrical arrangements into a more cohesive group, the five women performed a kind of sewing motion to all four corners of the stage, as if mending the space in front of them.



Photo by Darial Sneed for Lincoln Center

Though the sightlines at the Damrosch Park Bandshell often masked their pattering feet and bell-clad ankles - a persistent shortcoming of that stage - the specificity of their painted hands, particularly Aparna Ramaswamy's, was breathtaking.

The evening began with a less bracing translation of tradition, in the form of five short pieces from the Chinese American Arts Council Dancers and Chinese Arts Dancing Ensemble. Heavier on spectacle than on thoughtful inquiry, these combined brightly colored props, synthesized music and pretty but predictable group formations for what felt like candy-coated folk dances.



Photo by Darial Sneed for Lincoln Center

Kun-Yang Lin's "Be/Longing 2" trafficked in other clichés, those of overwrought contemporary dance: the dancer ferried aloft by her peers, the part where everyone hugs, the pregnant pauses and imploring palms. There are many ways to express longing, some more affecting than others.

Lincoln Center Out of Doors continues through Sunday at Lincoln Center locations; 212-875-5456, lcoutofdoors.org.