

Dance review: 'Nocturne' an enchanting journey from dusk to dawn

REVIEW: Ashwini Ramaswamy holds the stage with confidence in ensemble piece "Nocturne."

By CAROLINE PALMER Special to the Star Tribune

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Ashwini Ramaswamy

It's no secret that the Ramaswamy family is full of talent. Matriarch Ranee and daughter Aparna, the co-artistic directors of Ragamala Dance Company, have led the Minneapolis-based troupe to acclaim around the world.

Daughter Ashwini is always a dependably striking presence as a soloist in Ragamala works but this weekend at the Red Eye Theater she owns the stage with her powerful Bharatanatyam creation, "Nocturne."

Inspired by her late grandfather, a renowned entomologist, Ashwini's vision of the mysterious moonlit realm, as witnessed on Thursday evening, begins with delicate hand gestures that evoke fluttering insects. But these are not the only creatures of the night she summons up. At times Ashwini's fingers become talons or claws. In more romantic moments she is waiting for a different kind of being, a lover, to emerge from the shadows.

Ragamala members Tamara Nadel and Jessica Fiala, as well as Ranee Ramaswamy, join her for the work which also features a dramatically rich musical composition by Shubhendra Rao (sitar), Saskia Rao-de Haas (cello) and Rajna Swaminathan (percussion).

While Ashwini is the featured performer she skillfully integrates the other seasoned dancers, especially her mother, who summons a mystical energy through her deliberate ritualized movements.

Ashwini drew upon the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Jorge Luis Borges, the Tamil Sangam poets and the Vedas (sacred texts) to build the three movements of "Nocturne." The first, "Luna/Chandra," depicts the emergence of wildlife after sundown. "Rapture/Pramodya" shifts

into the deepest hours of night and "Invocation/Yaman" nods to the early morning hours, believed to be the best time to connect with the divine.



RAGAMALA DANCE
Ashwini Ramaswamy

It's easy to imagine the sections as a journey from twilight to dawn. Ashwini's choreography is grounded — she has a strong presence and the other dancers reflect her emphasis on graceful yet decisive strength in their own movement. So as "Nocturne" gives us a glimpse into a secretive world, the work also confirms that confident inhabitants rule it.

"Magic realism" is a technique often used in literature but through "Nocturne" Ashwini imports the concept into the dance world. On stage we see unfold the rational thought behind her carefully considered movement, yet the overall effect is one of utter enchantment. For one hour we are transported into an exquisite dream state, one that exists deep in the heart of night.

Caroline Palmer is a Twin Cities dance critic.