

Dance review: Indian dance performance conveys beauty through mastery of technique

Review: She gave new life to the ancient South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam.
By SHEILA REGAN Special to the Star Tribune

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Aparna Ramaswamy starred in "They Rose at Dawn," an evening-length solo performance.

Aparna Ramaswamy has spent a lifetime devoted to the perfection of Bharatanatyam, an ancient South Indian dance form. Tapped at a young age to become the protégé of master choreographer and soloist Alarmél Valli, Ramaswamy has split her time between Minneapolis and India, deepening her knowledge of Bharatanatyam while nurturing her own voice as a dancemaker and performer.

With "They Rose at Dawn," an evening-length solo performance presented over the weekend by Ragamala Dance Company at the Cowles Center for Dance and Performing Arts in Minneapolis, Ramaswamy soared as a soloist in her prime of life, channeling her deep understanding of technique in a captivating performance.

Even in the tiniest movement, Ramaswamy's whole body was engaged. A flick of her finger corresponded completely with what happened with her neck, her stomach or toe, and this was

true for every single moment of the evening. Never did Ramaswamy lose her complete focus and control.

At the same time, she showed a mastery of shifting rhythms. With her feet acting as a percussion, Ramaswamy used her body as an instrument in harmony with the four musicians on stage. One moment she'd be articulating her wrists in quick small swirls and then suddenly she'd break out into large, sweeping gestures in a kind of attack.

While she was the sole dancer on stage, Ramaswamy was not alone.

Performing with her were four musicians, including Raneer Ramaswamy, the soloist's mother, with whom she co-founded Ragamala. Playing the nattuvangam, a percussive instrument, Raneer Ramaswamy occasionally did vocals, showcasing her deep, articulate voice, which sounded a bit like scatting in the jazz tradition, fast and urgent. Vinod Krishnan, the main vocalist, propelled the complicated score forward, along with Rajna Swaminathan on the mridangam (another percussive instrument) and Anjna Swaminathan on the violin.

"They Rose at Dawn" drew on spiritual themes, with a particular focus on the feminine as a vessel through which to reach the divine.

Stylistically, the feminine was presentational, meticulously sculpted and shaped. Emotions, too, were curated, refined and demonstrated.

Ramaswamy's work moved not away but toward tradition, allowing the technique to stir the audience. Breathing new life into a centuries-old form, "They Rose at Dawn" evoked a spirituality and emotion that comes through rhythm, shape and precision, which ultimately transfixed the audience.

Sheila Regan is a Twin Cities dance critic and arts journalist.