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Review: Aparna Ramaswamy, Solo and Symbiotic at the Joyce

By Siobhan Burke

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[Aparna Ramaswamy](#) is a founder, director and standout member of [Ragamala Dance Company](#), a Minneapolis troupe specializing in contemporary interpretations of Bharatanatyam, the classical dance form of southern India. Watching this ensemble, the eye often goes straight to Ms. Ramaswamy's impeccable technique and incandescent beauty. Even when surrounded by others, she could be the only dancer onstage.



Aparna Ramaswamy performing in at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday. CreditAndrea Mohin/The New York Times

In “[They Rose at Dawn](#),” she shares those gifts as a soloist, though she’s not alone. This four-part suite, which had its world premiere at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday, pairs Ms. Ramaswamy with a live Carnatic music ensemble, whose five members — on flute, violin, mridangam (two-sided hand drum), nattuvangam (cymbals) and vocals — fill the space with music as lusciously as she does with movement, in such a way that the two seem inseparable, entirely symbiotic. (The original score is by Prema Ramamurthy, and the choreography primarily by Ms. Ramaswamy.)

“They Rose at Dawn,” Ms. Ramaswamy’s Joyce debut, is in some ways a radical programming choice for the theater, a departure from its often highly produced fare: just the essentials, no bells or whistles, except for the actual bells on Ms. Ramaswamy’s ankles, a traditional accessory that turns floor-slapping footwork into jingling percussion. She performs against a black backdrop for the full 75 minutes and wears a single costume of red and gold silk. The musicians, facing her, sit on one side of the stage, leaving the other open for her entrances and exits. The only superfluous element is an expository voice-over that swoops in between sections and tells us what to see. Why not let the dancing speak for itself?

Ms. Ramaswamy has a specific if sweeping theme in mind: women as “carriers of ritual and culture” and “the primordial source of all creation,” according to the program notes. She enters with a handful of flower petals and deposits them reverently at the front of the stage. At different points, she could be a warrior, mother or goddess, a yearning lover or protective leader.

More fascinating than these character portrayals, which at times seem too consciously layered on, like masks, rather than viscerally felt, is her physicality in itself: the sharpness of her hands as they burst into lotus-like shapes, the spring of her jump, the subtle bobbling of her head atop an otherwise still body. Through her dancing, the music’s textures come into view, from the crispness of the flute and heft of the drum to the peace of near silence.