

Review: Skilled ensemble from India gives Victoria a rare look at an ancient form of dance

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The Nrityagram Dance Ensemble wrap up a two-performance run at the Royal Theatre on Saturday night, giving Victoria audiences a rare chance to witness an ancient form of Indian dance.

The company journeyed here from a village outside of Bangalore in southern India. The Nrityagram Dance Ensemble specializes in Odissi, a form of Indian classical dance dating back 2,000 years.

The troupe's devotion to this venerable art form is unquestionable. Led by artistic director Surupa Sen, the dancers are students of the Nrityagram school located on 10 acres of farmland. For eight hours a day, six days a week, they not only study dance but Indian philosophy as well.

Hosted by Dance Victoria, the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble presented the Canadian premiere of a 70-minute work titled *Khankanā: The Sound of Dancing Feet*. Never before seen outside India, it consists of four pieces choreographed by Sen. One of the world's leading Odissi dancers, she performed a solo segment, *Dhira Samiré*, and also joined the troupe's band on tiny *manjira* cymbals.

Odissi is rooted in a rich tradition that's unfamiliar to most North Americans, and would no doubt take a lifetime to fully understand. The dancers and musicians dramatize stories from Hindu literature.

Dhira Samiré, for instance, is based on a poem about a love affair between the gods Radha and Krishna taken from the 12th-century work Gita Govinda. On Friday night you could hear the sound of Sen's bare feet slapping the stage floor and the bells ringing on her legs as she danced in a manner both highly stylized and deeply lyrical. Her arms and hands fluttered like butterflies or birds as she twirled to a violin melody whose plaintiveness recalled Celtic music. The sound of a bamboo flute intertwined around this sinuous dance like a vine.

Essentially, Odissi dance is based on three basic positions. For the chouka (a “mother of the world” pose which, to my mind, is the most powerful) the body is presented as a squarish shape, with the legs in a distinctive squatting position, feet placed wide apart. There's also the abhanga, a standing position with the weight carried mostly on one leg, and the tribhanga, in which the body is posed in a “S” shape.

Although it's a gross simplification of what the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble offered, one could detect these elemental poses throughout the performance.

The five female dancers wore colourful costumes — red, purple and orange — with loose dhoti-style leggings. Some segments, such as the closing Sridevi section, called for exaggerated facial expressions, in particular, a smiling, wide-eyed look accentuated by black eye-liner. The animated looks on performers' faces (perhaps lost to those sitting in the back) was integral to this style of dance, variously signalling joy, sensuality, bemusement or flirtatiousness.

Touring dance troupes typically perform to recorded soundtracks, so it was a rare pleasure to see musicians onstage. This highly accomplished quartet was particularly notable for its percussive chant-singing. Rohan Dahale, accompanying himself on mardala drum, provided staccato vocalizing of sufficient virtuosity to be the envy of any chart-topping rapper. The movement of the dancers often matched these rhythms with a precision nothing short of jaw-dropping.

The movements in Odissi dance are said to be reflected in ancient sculptures in India. During the performance this thought often came to mind. One didn't have to be versed in Indian literature and mythology to realize that the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble was presenting something uniquely mysterious, eternal and beautiful.

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