

## The Lingalayam Dance Company

# Exploring human expression but struggling with a theme

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The Lingalayam Dance Company's recent performance of *The Courtesan's Daughter* at the Seymour Centre in Sydney, Australia provided audiences with an opportunity to experience the intricate beauty of classical Indian dance. Founded in 1996, the company's entered its fifth season with yet another new work.

The 10 female dancers of this Sydney-based company, bedecked in richly colored costumes and jewelled headpieces, performed in late July for a total of three shows. Accompanied by a live orchestra under the direction of Aravinth Kumarasamy, the dance unfolded to the sound of five musicians seated on-stage playing Indian drums, flute, and a string instrument, the Veena.

Choreographed by the company's founder, Anandavalli, *The Courtesan's Daughter* utilises the techniques of two of the Asian sub-continent's seven traditional dance forms—Bharatha Natyam and Kuchipudi. The oldest of the seven, Bharatha Natyam, is a Hindu temple dance. Its origins lie in the words of the Natya Sastra, a text written in the 2nd century BC by a Hindu monk who codified the technique. The historical preservers of Bharatha Natyam were Devadasis, young girls sold into sexual bondage and committed to the worship of a particular god in the temples. After moving into the royal courts and eventually falling into disfavor, temple dance moved further away from the practices of the Devadasis when Bharatha Natyam underwent a revival in India during the 1920s and 1930s as part of the broader nationalist movement of the period.

Kuchipudi also draws its lineage back to the Natya Sastra. Emerging from the region of Andhra Pradesh, it utilises many of the same basic elements as Bharatha Natyam, although its practice is not directly associated with the Devadasis. During the 18th century and afterwards the art form began to incorporate various aspects of the dance dramas that were becoming popular at the time. Addressing lighter themes, the Kuchipudi is performed at a faster tempo than Bharatha Natyam.

*The Courtesan's Daughter* addresses the historical origins of classical Indian dance by using the form's technique to explore its practice. In doing so, the piece touches upon a range of Bharatha Natyam and Kuchipudi's components and associations—sensuality, theatricality, physical discipline, religious worship, sexual servitude and the oppression of women.

*The Courtesan's Daughter* tells the story of a young woman's discovery of her talent as a dancer of the classical Indian forms.

The tale begins during the celebrations of the 28-day Indra festival in the city of Puhra, where the character, Manimekalai (Apirami Arthieswaran and Ritika Ramasamy, old and young versions respectively) lives. The time period in which the story is supposed to unfold is never made explicit.

In the opening act of *The Courtesan's Daughter* six females dancers moved across the stage engaged in playful exchanges with each other and imaginary onlookers. A slightly bouncy gait carried the dancers through their flirtatious interactions, with the foot in a flexed position, the knee of the moving leg in an exaggerated bend, and the dancers' limb raised significantly off the floor each time a step was taken. The overall flow of the movement was made smoother by the rhythmic quality of the stepping and the sensuous side-to-side shifts in the head, a distinctive feature of Bharatha Natyam.

Deeply affected by the dances of Puhra's maidens, Manimekalai is enraptured by an unexpected vision of her mother, Madhavi, dancing. Unknown to Manimekalai, Madhavi was a famed temple dancer. She abandoned dance after becoming pregnant with Manimekalai as the result of an ill-fated union between herself and a married man. Sometime shortly after Manimekalai's vision, the young woman comes upon her mother dancing. Madhavi, who has rejected dance for years, has been suddenly overwhelmed with the need to perform as part of her daily propitiation to the Hindu god Shiva.

During these sections of the piece—a series of solos by old and young versions of Madhavi (Anandavalli and Abirami Senthikumar, respectively)—the dancing assumed a more stately quality. In the first of the sequences, displaying a body shape characteristic of Bharatha Natyam, the dancer's back was held erect, her knees slightly bent, and her legs turned out. The figure loomed confidently, creating patterns in the space by assertively carving out the air in close proximity to her body with her limbs. Circular arm shapes constructed out of strong angular bends at the joints amplified her presence.

### Highly stylised movements

These movements are an example of Bharatha Natyam's highly stylized nature. Instead of moving through space with broad, sweeping motions like other dance forms, the body of the Bharatha Natyam dancer tends to carry more tension. Through the use of particular movements that are intended to communicate specific

ideas, the dance form is designed to narrate stories, rather than directly explore abstract themes.

The piece continues with Manimekalai discovering that the talent and passions that inspired her mother also exists inside her. Her grandmother, Chitrapati (Aruna Sampath-Iyengar), encourages her to pursue this and begins training Manimekalai in the classical forms. Upon discovering her daughter's pursuits, Madhavi's pain over her own past causes her to forbid her daughter to dance anymore. Manimekalai must choose to break with her mother or abandon the dense band of copper-toned bells that all Bharatha Natyam dancers wear around their ankles.

There are several sections in *The Courtesan's Daughter* in which the granddaughter, mother, and grandmother are on-stage involved in an unspoken "dialogue" over their conflicting emotions. Anandavalli primarily used Bharatha Natyam's "expressional aspect" during these scenes. In this "aspect", rotations in the wrist, spacing between the fingers, and arches in the joints transformed the hands into instruments capable of communicating whole sets of ideas. This is complimented by a codified set of highly specific facial expressions and movements, with special attention given to the eyes.

The dancers' performances were particularly captivating during one of these scenes. The grandmother appeared angry, pleading with her daughter to reassess what happened to her in her life. Intense emotional and physical fulfillment, contradicted by unhappiness and even a hint of embarrassment, seemed to tumble through Madhavi's body as she recalled her dancing. Overwhelmed by the past, Manimekalai stood struggling with confused uncertainty.

*The Courtesan's Daughter* draws towards a climax with two group sections. During the first of these the city's maidens are undertaking dance lessons. While Manimekalai is performing a solo, Madhavi enters, making the final demand, vocally, that her daughter cease dancing. The scene quickly shifts into the closing act.

This final section, a portrayal of the ongoing festivities in the city, seemed to draw more from Kuchipudi than Bharatha Natyam. Involving complex patterns of footwork, this technique added lightness and speed to the dancing. The work ends with Manimekalai making her way through the dancing bodies of Puhra's maidens. She removes her bells and slowly follows a Hindu monk off the stage, down through the audience, and according to the program, "to the path of Nirvana".

While perceptive in many ways, *The Courtesan's Daughter* seemed unable to effectively deal with the broader social and cultural question that emerged organically within the dance—the vulnerability forced upon temple dancers as a result of the conditions under which they practice their art. After all, it was not the experience of dancing itself that made Madhavi abandon her bells, but her position as a mistress, the social context of her relationship with a man, and the psychological pain that resulted. The dilemma that Madhavi's daughter is in, is an indirect expression of this fact. However, having framed the story in terms of Manimekalai's individual choice, Anandavalli has left herself no avenue to grapple with these complexities.

As a manifestation of this difficulty, the choreographer resorted

to the use of dialogue to resolve complicated thematic junctures or connect different sections of the dance. One example is Madhavi's vocalized expression of anger at her daughter's dancing. However, the mood captured in the choreography prior to this did not indicate that Manimekalai's mother would react in such a unilateral manner to her daughter's pursuits. The tensions built up in the dance through the movement until this point emptied themselves into a few words. The viewer was left with an easy, but unsatisfactory resolution.

The same problem manifested itself in the conclusion of *The Courtesan's Daughter*. Anandavalli employed the concept of religious devotion, as personified in the Hindu priest, in order to draw a finish to the dance. While this figure appeared at the very beginning of the dance—he walked across the stage just prior to Manimekalai's first vision of her mother dancing—his emergence as the central character (and religion as the central idea) in the concluding scene was not developed in the prior choreography. The ending to *The Courtesan's Daughter*, therefore, felt artificial and oversimplified, with the dance form itself appearing to be the root of the problem.

Choreographically, however, *The Courtesan's Daughter* succeeds in its ability to sensitively capture the complexities of individuals' emotional responses to their personal conditions. The "expressional aspect" of classical Indian dance is unique in its ability to represent an entire range of feelings and ideas with what is often treated in ballet and modern dance as a more secondary, and by implication, more limited expressive tool—the hands and the face. Anandavalli's capacity to use this technique to reveal the psychological experiences of characters in the dance, and to make those experiences accessible to an audience, is a major achievement. By presenting the aesthetic components of classical Indian dance in such a perceptive manner, the Lingalayam Dance Company contributed to an expansion of the performing arts' dramatic vocabulary, giving artists and audiences new tools with which to explore the realm of human expression.



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