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August 11, 2011

The dance of devotion

SAVITHA GAUTAM

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DANCER'S PERSPECTIVE: Bala Devi Chandrashekar

The story of Nandanar, one of the 63 Nayanmars, has been beautifully depicted in the 37 verses of Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam. Inspired by those verses, Gopalakrishna Bharati wrote 'Nandanar Charithram.'

The tale of Nandanar, whose intense devotion to Lord Siva led him to the sanctum sanctorum of Chidambaram, has held the fascination for most classical dancers as it works on many levels – social, emotional and spiritual – and lends itself to myriad interpretations. What’s more, it is musically rich and lyrically deep.

“It is one of pure devotion crossing barriers, with the Lord himself making the impossible, possible. That’s the reason why I chose to present this poetic masterpiece through adavus and jathis. It offers immense possibilities for me as a dancer and a choreographer,” says Bala Devi Chandrashekar. The Bharata Nrithyam dancer first presented ‘Nandanar...’ during a fund raiser in New Jersey three years ago. She presented it to the Chennai audience during the December Season 2009. And now her performance is available in a DVD format, complete with two audio CDs of the songs.

“It was a revelation, a spiritually enriching experience all the way,” says the elegant and poised senior disciple of Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam during a recent chat. For somebody who straddled three careers – that of management consultant, a dancer-choreographer and Artist in Residence at the Carl A Fields Center, Princeton University -- taking on ‘Nandanar Charithram’ looked daunting initially. But Bala loves challenges and so she decided to “turn the pages of history and choreograph the timeless compositional gems.” She says, “It was not just retelling a tale; it was about comprehending the social milieu of the time and tracking the spiritual quest of Nandanar.”

Though Bala began the Nandanar journey on usual lines --- choosing the songs, choreographing and looking into overall production values – she soon realised the layers that the story had to offer for exploration. “I made several trips to Chidambaram and met scholars and laymen who could throw more light on the life and times of Nandanar.” Armed with the knowledge, Bala set about giving vent to her creativity, and the geetha nrityam took shape.

Says Bala, “Bharathi’s mastery over literary and musical forms is captured beautifully in NC. He has employed a variety of musical styles such as darus, irusollalankaram, themmangu, sindhu, dhandakam, ananda kalippu and kummi, besides the Maratha-influenced and folk-inspired songs. That gave me a lot of scope to create a fresh idiom.”

The icing came in the form of mridangam maestro Karaikudi Krishnamurthy, who readily accepted her request to play the mridangam and compose unusual jathis. “He had played only for one recording... for Padma Subrahmanyam. It was indeed a privilege.”

As for the music, Bala zeroed in on 27 songs including gems such as ‘Varugalaamo,’ ‘Natanamadinar,’ ‘Sivaloka Nathanai,’ ‘Aadiya Paadattai’ and ‘Yarukku Ponnambalam’ which were rendered tunefully by Padma Shankar and Kuldeep Pai.

The going was not easy at times for Bala, who had to shuttle between the U.S. and India. Her commitments as artistic director of Shree Padma Nrityam Academy of performing Arts Inc. (SPNAPA) at Princeton, and teaching at the Princeton University, left her with little time to work on her project. That’s why Bala is so thankful to husband Chandrashekar, whose strong and silent support eased many tense moments along the way. “He takes care of many things”. As for

the future, “I have something interesting on anvil. You will hear about it soon,” Bala says with a smile and a twinkle in her eyes.

(‘Nandanar Charithram’ - one DVD with Bala’s performance and two CDs with music - is produced Swathi Soft Solutions and priced at Rs. 750. Part of the sales proceeds goes towards old age homes. For details, visit www.kalakendra.com or call 24984050. For more information, log on to www.spnapa.org)

Keywords: [Nandanar Charithram](#), [Periya Puranam](#)

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