



## Resurrecting Karna

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BALANCING ACT Bala Devi Chandrasekhar

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**Bala Devi Chandrasekhar's recent portrayal of Karna was a moving experience.**

The character of Karna, the valiant yet star-crossed hero of Mahabharat, has intrigued many artistes and writers across centuries. Senior NRI dancer Bala Devi Chandrasekhar's recent portrayal of Karna was a well-researched, in-depth version of this fatalistic character whose life and nature tugs at one's heartstrings eliciting nothing but admiration and a sense of justified wrath at the injustice meted out to him. True to the tenets of Natya Sastra, Bala Devi adopted the theatrical aspect of dance set to Bharatanatyam format where the nritta element figures in sollukattu (mnemonics) set to varied tala and ragas. It was rather rare for a female dancer to personify a forceful male protagonist as this.

Adopting the mono-drama technique, the artiste built up the persona of Karna, from cradle to grave, his traits, his strengths and foibles, his actions and responses to situations that finally shape his destiny. The dance element was also as unusual as the role she enacted. Set to 50 ragas within different beats (tala cycles), the dance per se was a blend of chari and karna (leg movements) with appropriate gaits for each of the characters she emulates including Karna as also the emotion shown by that particular character at the time. The traditional pattern of Ganesha vandanam in Gowla raga to Adi talam was followed by girl-child Prutha's (Kunti) introduction in Sahana raga (Roopaka talam). Prutha's imploring the Sun god in Surya raga set to Khanda Triputa tala, the bee-stinging Karna as his guru Parashurama's head rests on his lap episode in rare raga Sucharita, Karna's end in Darba and Kunti's wailing for her son in Shivaranjani and Krishna's final blessing in Revathi in verse form. The more gripping episodes like the art of warfare contest between Kaurava and Pandava brothers which is set only to pure rhythm: jatis (mnemonic series) in Misra Jhampa tala to a Mallari (dance miming processional deity with paraphernalia), announcement of war and combat with Abhimanyu in Adi tala jath, Karna's last fight in Khanda nadai (pace) underlined the scenic significance of the narrative. As usual, English voice-over carried forward rest of the story. So too were compelling emotions set to suitable raga. In short, the production was scholastically perfect.

Glimpses of guru Padma Subramanyam was evident in Bala Devi's moves, especially the leisurely walk circling the stage during the sancharis, the calculative, languid footwork and gesticulations, under-the-breath grunts, depicting sword or arrow wielding and such other peculiarities which were at once unique as well as queer to the dance aficionados. The lyrics in chaste Sanskrit enhanced the production.