

Revisiting a spiritual odyssey of the past

Brihadeeswara - Form to Formless gives a glimpse of the 11th century temple through the eyes of a *devaradiyaal*

● N Ramesh

The audience at the auditorium in the South Zone cultural centre (SZCC) were transported back to the 11th century, in a recently held classical dance performance titled 'Brihadeeswara - Form to Formless' - through the eyes of a *devaradiyaal* (temple dancer). The soulful music accompanied the performance cast its spell each and every member of the audience.

Bala Devi Chandrashekar, a Bharatanatyam exponent based in New Jersey, who choreographed and produced the solo thematic presentation set up against the monumental Peruvudayar temple aka Brihadeeswara temple, performed it at Thanjavur, last week. "*Devaradiyaal*, as the name suggests, is one who has dedicated herself to the eternal service of the Lord and one who leads a pure life. This unique production celebrates the way her devout soul is immersed in the spiritual fervour pervading the spell-binding edifice built by Raja Raja Chola," she says.

The performance celebrated the physical & metaphysical presence of this magnificent temple through the untarnished celestial and devotional eyes of a temple dancer and the ultimate unification of a soul with the supreme energy. A sense of completion was added to



Bharatanatyam exponent from USA, Bala Devi Chandrashekar felicitated in Thanjavur

the production by its music composed by musician Rajkumar Bharathi. It was scripted by P R Venkatasubramanian. The popular dancer adds "The production was presented under the guidance of renowned scholar T N Ramachandran and historian Kudavayil Balasubramanian and musicologist B M Sundaram. It celebrates the intertwining of the spatial and spiritual vibrations experienced by the temple dancer, as she goes about her day to day life in the hallowed architectural wonder the Brihadeeswara temple." As the composition flowed, it touched upon the temple as a

metaphor by highlighting the *Thirumurai* hymns of Sundarar and Thirugnana Sambandhar. It celebrates the nine facets of the main deity whilst extolling and deriving inspiration from the verses of *Tirunavukkarasar*, *Manikavasagar*, *Thirumoolar* and Sekkizhar's *Periya puranam*.

Act 1 of the production begins with a lyrical description of the beauty of the temple dancer - in *ragam ataana*. As she goes about her day in the temple, the celebratory sounds of the Lord's procession outside draw her to join the same and she becomes one with the proces-

sion - this part is choreographed in a mallari form in *gambeeranaatai* ragam, set to *triputa thalam*, *misra jathi*. The second act describes the temple dancer's devout life. In the aura of the rendition of the *Tevaram*, she sees the lingam as 'aadavallaan' — as fondly referred by the King, and aadavallaan was the kuladeivam of Raja Raja Chola. It also features Tirumoolar's Tirumandiram.

Act 3 depicts how Brahma and Vishnu see a jyothi illuminating the lingam, a streak of light with no apparent end and they seek to contain the power of the same trying to find its edge. After many years of a futile attempt they yield to the formless infinite presence of Lord Shiva and sing his praises in the *Potru Isaittu Padal* of *Thirunavukkarasar*. The act also visualises the climbing to the first tier of the *Vimana* of the great temple, filled with the depiction of *karanas* with specific combinations of *karanas* with *angahaaras*, some of which are showcased in this act. In the fourth and final act, among other things the dancer sees the fresco paintings at the temple as a visual poetry. One striking painting of Kailai ula of Sundarar and Cheran strikes the dancer. Her sentiments are brought out through the lines of *Thirunavukkarasu's Thevaram*.

The precise forms or mudras and the serene performance gave the audience an illusionary experience of 11th century.

Visual poetry

The composition weaves the connection between the physical, metaphysical, lyrical and spiritual significance of each facet of the magnificent structure in four different acts. The production was presented under the guidance of renowned scholar T N Ramachandran.

