

A Unique Arangetram

Malini Srinivasan, a young Bharatanatyam dancer, was about to enter the stage with flowers in her hands for the pushpanjali when the power failed. The venue was the auditorium at the basement of the Siva-Vishnu temple in Washington and the occasion was her arangetram or formal debut.

After the initial confusion it was decided to hold the performance in front of the Siva sannidhi (shrine) on the upper deck, where the rays of the evening sun were streaming in through a vaulting skylight in the roof. The audience of over three hundred had to sit on the floor and the orchestra ensemble consisting of the mother, daughter, son and daughter-in-law of the Washington-based Jayamangala school, had to perform without mikes.

As the light started fading the performance continued in the light of the temple kuthuvilakku-s (oil lamps) and scores of candles. The dancer was highlighted with the help of two powerful torches focused on her face. The

carved pillars behind formed a beautiful backdrop.

The experience was aptly described thus by a member of the audience: "There could be no doubt that Nataraja had granted Malini the opportunity to perform in his direct line of sight. The fading light helped to focus on Malini's glowing face lit up by the kuthuvilakku-s and torches. The absence of mike ensured that there was no chit chat, there was pin-drop silence and suddenly an ethereal atmosphere prevailed. As Malini danced, the wooden floor transmitted her rhythmic patterns directly to the audience who literally 'felt' the jati-s. The audience rapport was total. The thundering ovation after every piece was a spontaneous reaction by the appreciative audience who were mesmerised by the spiritually elevating experience of watching dance in the temple without the supporting artificial paraphernalia generally seen on stage."

"Truly every member of the audience felt transported to the era when



Malini, dancing in the glow of the oil lamps

Bharatanatyam was performed within the temple precincts. The light and shade provided by the oil lamps created an aura which was described by the viewers as "mystical, magical, enchanting". The coincidence that the dancer happened to perform right in front of the Siva shrine made it a 'natyanjali' in its truest sense. Without the harsh glare of halogen lamps and the blare of the mikes, the dance and the music stood out in their natural form— rich and mellow. When the dancer concluded the recital with

a tillana the audience wanted the dance to go on and demanded that she perform the jatiswaram which was earlier omitted from the programme. Malini probably created history by dancing the jatiswaram after the tillana!

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that they had had an experience of a lifetime and it was agreed that Bharatanatyam should be seen in such an ambience to comprehend its spiritual appeal.

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FEBRUARY 2004