

Kalanidhi Narayanan: Dance of the Intellect

Shani

"We bow to the energetic Shiva, whose body movement (Angika) is the phenomenal world, whose articulate expression (vachika) constitutes all verbal expression, and whose ornaments (aharya) are the moon and the stars"

Thus Nandikeshwara's Abhinaya-darpana describes the relationship of Shiva's dance with creation and the entire cosmos.

In this day of gender equity, Shiva may well have changed gender. And if he did, then he undoubtedly resides at Abhinayasudha in Madras, in the persona of Kalanidhi Narayanan, the current reigning nurse of the satvika abhinaya idiom of this age-old dance form of South Indian, Bharata Natyam.

It is her eyes that arrest you first with their piercing quality. Then suddenly they burst into warmth and welcome and usher you to her private world where ancient nayikas (heroines) cavort with their sakhis and gossip about their neighbours, where other nayikas speak of the abundant love for their lords or where devotees melt in bhakti (devotion) at the sight of their ishtadevatas. Welcome to the beautiful world of Kalanidhi Narayanan.

Kalanidhi has created a refreshingly original use of the abhinaya idiom in dance, but one that remains deeply rooted in the classical metaphors of the dance's past. And it is this contribution that has been recognised by eclectic students, scholars, rasikas and patrons. It is this that has yielded to her innumerable accolades and awards including the Padma Bhushan, the

Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Kalaimamani, Nritya Choodamani and the emeritus artist fellowship from the Department of Culture.

What is this approach that Kalanidhi has been able to create in abhinaya and what are its main components? And how does Kalanidhi's abhinaya set itself apart from the stylised abhinaya of the Kanchipuram dasi tradition?

To the viewer the chief difference is that Kalanidhi does not simply narrate the padam (lyric) to the audience. Rather she enters the various multiple characters of the piece and enacts the piece with reactions, inflections and the appropriate mood. A "kai" (idea in dance with appropriate hasta gestures and angika stance) is seldom repeated and she slowly unfurls the idea she wishes the rasikas to grasp, with great technical finesse. In her style of anavarna (slow unveiling) abhinaya the audience is not spoon-fed the abhinaya, rather they are expected to participate in the performance with the senses and their intellect and be led onto the idea in its various shades and ultimately reach the moola (basic idea) of the concept that the artist is trying to communicate.

To assist her method of anavarna abhinaya, Kalanidhi has adopted a definite technique that pervades all her work. At the base of this approach is the complete study of the sthayi bhava (basic persistent mood) of the particular piece which she is elaborating. This sthayi becomes the base line of reference throughout the delineation of each piece.

To the sthayi, Kalanidhi has added three main ingredients that complete her style: First is contextualising the piece. In this process Kalanidhi examines various specific factors: What is being said in the poem? What is its context? What is the reason for saying it or expressing that emotion? What is the listener's reaction to the statement?

The second tool she employs is of sub-textualising the piece: In this process she examines several other related factors - What is the heroine's age, her social standing, her economic status, her family background, her surrounding, the exact intensity of her feelings, the basic rasa the piece is to create, the range of emotions that the heroine tides in the piece, all these factors make for the sub-textualising of the padam.

The third is the method is conversationalisation. In this method she

conducts a continuing dialogue within herself about the various reactions of the characters in the padam. Through rational conversationalisation she carves the characters almost in flesh and blood and the viewer can virtually see several of these character floating around her she enters one persona and, in a flash, attains another and another and yet another. The fluidity of her transitions and the amazing dexterity of attaining particular characteristics appropriate to various separate characters is the specific hall mark of her style of abhinaya.

Of course, she is blissfully content to just dance. Any dialogue about her intellectual approach to dance is almost coyly brushed aside as a mere divine gift. That is what makes Kalanidhi such a gift of the dance to the dance - indeed a *nidhi* (treasure) of *kala* (art).



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