

Ideal Stage for Better Performance

V.P. Dhananjeyan,

Founder President, Bharatakalanjali, Chennai

Ambience

Bharatanaatyam is an intimate theatre art nurtured in the temple precincts of South India. The natural temple ambience gave the performer and the onlooker a serene sublimity while entering that area. This divinity transported the feelings of both the performer and the audience.

To bring this ambience alive, a bronze statue of Sri Nataraja or some other deity with Oil lamps lit are kept symbolically. But this is made a routine feature without looking to other aesthetics or a good stage. It is therefore necessary to have a comprehensive idea of how this aesthetics ambience could be created for which both the performer and organizer should contribute equally.

Stage

"A place of work is a place of worship"

This should be borne in mind in keeping the stage atmosphere, well ventilated with fresh air (if it is not AC theatre). Once the stage is made dust free, it is the stage staff and artists, not to allow any other person on the stage including VIPs during and before the performance.

For a solo Bharatanaatyam performance a minimum area of 30 feet length and 25th feet depth is ideal for a trouble free movement, and space utilization concept incorporated into the system of our dance. Generally a dark coloured thick clean back curtain covering the whole length give, a depth to the stage and dark colour at the back does not clash with the colour of the costume. Any other light colour would clash with the costume, which mars the aesthetic beauty of the costume, and distract the onlookers eyes too.

The same colour wings, and baton flies should be neatly tied covering / top' of the stage and sides. Basically no unwanted objects should be visible from any side of the stage and the audience could see the performer and the accompanying musicians only. Nothing else should be visible from the seats. So the back curtains should be arranged in such a way to cover the whole of back stage.

It will be preferable to have these dark coloured curtains, wings, and flied with close frills instead of plain surface. The frills cover the wholes in the curtain material and the thickness arrest the light rays escaping through the gaps.

It is always better to keep the back curtain free of any distracting motifs, banners or clustered flowers. Hanging any kind of banners on stage is terribly obtrusive and objectionable. The dancers should not allow any organizer to do so and should take interest in keeping the stage devoid of such objectionable objects.

Stage decoration can be minimal, confining to the borders of wings and flied with traditional motifs or suggestive designs to go with the themes of the dance presentation. Very loud, multi-coloured hangings spoil the aesthetic beauty of the dance and they also take away the lights and the audience eyes will be often focussed on this lighted object cutting short their concentration on the dancer. They will miss some of the best expressions of the dancer.

The lighting

For a Bharatanaatyam performance on proscenium stage need good lighting especially on the face of the dancer. Front lighting with amber colour washing is ideal to keep a neutral light. A natural flame light effect will retain the colour of the costume and texture of the face and body colour of the dancer. Side lights and back lights will give added depth and dimension to the stage and thus emphasizing the bodyline of the dancer. As far as possible no lights ray should fall on the curtains and the curtain should remain unlit to give the dance space a focussing platform.

Wherever special lighting is not available plain halogen lights hung from front above and not hitting the eye of the dancers, may be considered.

While operating the lights, the technicians should avoid dipping and dimming while a sequence of dance is being performed. The special effect spots can be judiciously operated while starting the dance with a pose or ending a dance with a pose. Bharatanaatyam dancers execute facial expressions, interpreting the meaning of the song throughout the Varnam, Padams and Jawalis. Certain expressions are done in a static position and this should not be mistaken for a pose and dim the light or just keep a spot. If done so, the viewers will miss the intensive expression on the face of a dancer.

It is advisable that the dancers should check the lights and its positions before hand, so that an even light is provided to accentuate the facial expressions. The organizers should also facilitate for a technical rehearsal before a show. This is done for the success of the performance.

Audio facilities

Normally for a Bharatanaatyam performance there will be minimum five musicians. Vocal, Nattuvangam, Mridangam, Flute or Violin or both, Tampura (original or electronic). So minimum six good mikes (two for mridangam to cover both sides). An extension Power plug board seems to be necessary these days since all musicians need the support of the electronic Tampura. A few - at least four monitor speakers on both sides of the stage is very essential for dancers and musicians to hear the audio output and adjust their voice and instruments. Sound clarity enhances the enjoyment of the performance as a whole. But a medium range of audio amplification and sound balancing is better for listening. Loud amplification spoils the quality of the music. Therefore the operating

technician must insist on a sound check before the show. The placing of the speakers contributes to the audio output quality and listening comfort. If there is compere, either a hand mike or standing mike should be provided. It is the duty of the artists to give the list of required stage equipments well in advance to the organisers and it is the bounden duty of the organizers to provide the dancers and musicians whatever they request for. Ultimately the success of the performance is the aim of both parties concerned.

Other requirements on stage

A raised platform of 9 to 12 inches, which could seat five to seven musicians comfortably on the right hand side of the stage, is generally preferable. This platform should be covered with good soft carpet and the mike should be preferably placed on this platform to avoid picking up the foot stamping sound. However, the mike should be placed on padded sponge.

Dressing room facilities

People often forget the need of the artists; especially a clean, spacious green room with toilets, mirrors and fans are basic requirements for the dancers. A proper dressing room should have good mirrors with bright lights, tables and chairs, facilities to hang clothes and costumes, benches or tables to keep the ornaments. If the flooring is not clean, a clean carpet or mats will protect the costume from dust or other dirt while dancer draping the long sari or dhoti. The dressing room should be close to the stage. The music from the stage should be heard, if not, a speaker should be provided, so that the dancers know what is happening on the stage. As far as possible no outsiders should be allowed into the green room and disturb the artistes before or during intermission or in between items.

Other important points to remember

1. Serving refreshments on stage and dressing room should be avoided.
2. Smoking anywhere near auditorium or stage affects the throat of the singer; hence special care must be taken to keep smokers away.
3. Nowadays the beepers and mobile phones in the auditorium disturb the audience and the artists, so either there should be prior announcement or display board to switch off these gadgets.
4. Video and photographers can cause nuisance to the audience and dancers; so they should be kept in one place and strict instructions should be given, not to move in front of the audience, get on to the stage and the like.
5. The same way the photographers also should be seated in one place, and should not be allowed to move around clicking while the performance is on. Flash photo disturbs both the dancer and the audience.

6. People walking in and out during performance are a hindrance to both artists and the other members of the audience. So as a courtesy to fellow Rasikas people should avoid this practice of walking in and going out during the performance. However if one is planning to go early, they should be seated near the exit and push off without anyone noticing their exit.
7. The same rule is applicable to dignitaries as well. Late comers could enter when there is black outs in between items or interval.
8. It is actually an insult to the artists if the audience walks away while the final "mangalam" is being performed. People should wait until that benediction is over.
9. A void talking and making noise during performance. If one is with a child who is likely to make noise or cry, better sit at the back and any time take the child out, so that no one complains about the child.

It is very easy to understand and enjoy a classical Bharatanaatyam performance if people could adhere to these disciplines and concentrate on the performer.

Dance productions

Requirement for professional large scale dance productions are different and depending upon the complexity of the production, stage dimension, lighting and audio requirement changes. Need more technicians to work on stage with proper stage, light and audio designers and engineers. In professional theatres these special technicians are available. The dance choreographers, directors and stage managers should work with these technicians well in advance or give lighting design chart, sets design and audio design early enough for them to study the requirement and familiarize with the production details. Most of the western professional theatres are fully equipped. Unfortunately there are very few professional theatres in India, which may be sufficient for big western kind of dance or music productions. But they are not good ambience for Bharatanaatyam performance, which requires more intimate space for really getting the aesthetic joy from the performance. With available facilities we can make best use of them, by\ creating Indian aesthetic around the arena of dancing.