

In the 1990s and 2000s, there were several occasions a year in Vancouver when one might attend a Bharat Natyam *arangetram*, or find dance recitals by exponents of Bharata Natyam or Odissi, and once in a great while, a fine Kathak performance. Vancouver was for that brief shining period, home to a number of excellent, dedicated Indian classical dancers.

However, the cultural landscape appears drastically changed with Indian classical dance becoming more and more of a rarity.

Imagine then the dance lovers' joy at experiencing two exquisite performances within the space of a couple of months by Vancouver Bharata Natyam artiste Sujit Vaidya.

It has been revelatory watching Sujit Vaidya's evolution and audacious growth as an exponent of this ancient classical dance form. I was in the audience when Sujit performed his *arangetram* in 2009 under the tutelage of Vancouver veteran Jai Govinda. That was a prodigious feat because Sujit completed his entire dance training within three years, having come to the dance form as a mature student.

Since then, we have been witness to Sujit's progress in leaps (not just figuratively) and bounds, and been entranced and delighted by his performances and marveled at his growth in technique, form, and showmanship in each successive recital.

Sujit has constantly been pushing the traditional boundaries of his chosen dance form to express and explore themes not touched upon in the classical Bharata Natyam repertoire. With growing confidence and his own queer lived experience, Sujit has explored and choreographed programs on the themes of gender fluidity and same sex attraction—performances brimming with frank eroticism and sensuality, while being rigorously grounded in classical technique and style.

In this respect, he has returned to the fearlessly seductive *shringar rasa*-imbued Bharata Natyam of the *devadasis* before it was brought back from the edge of extinction and sanitized by well-meaning society matrons. They turned it into the genteel classical form we're accustomed to seeing since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (The *Devadasis* were the original exponents of Bharata Natyam—the sacred whores, the temple dancers dedicated to the gods, used and abused by their patrons, the patriarchs and priests.) Over 300 years of British colonization, Victorian prudery permeated the subcontinent and sanitization was necessary to revive the dance form in a manner that was palatable for “polite” society.

Ever the showman with finely developed aesthetic sense, Sujit's striking stage costumes and jewellery are an integral part of the performance. When he took to the stage at the Surrey Arts Centre on May 10 to perform SAMAR (Summit/kama), he was clad in a vibrant crimson Kanjeevaram *veshti*, a saree whose royal blue *pallu* (end piece) he artfully draped to form the frontal fan. Beautiful gold temple jewellery: chunky necklace and bracelets, enhanced the dramatic colours of his stage attire.

Let me enumerate the *margam* or traditional Bharata Natyam program that Sujit danced sublimely in his most recent performance SAMAR:

His invocative *alaripu* was in praise of Lord Shiva—he who holds the beautiful waters of the river Ganga in his matted locks, with his consort Parvati ever at his side.

The *alaripu* segued into a *varnam*, the main event, if you will of a *margam*, wherein a story is enacted and how affecting this is depends on the dancer's expository skills and their nuanced portrayal of the characters. In this particular *varnam*, the *naayika* says to her beloved, Brihadeeshwara of Tanjhavur: "Don't you know what my heart desires? I long for a glimpse of your beautiful form. There is no separation between us. If you are all pervading, then I'm a small part of you. My heart overflows with love for you, so come quickly and embrace me."

It gave way to an enactment of the 24th Ashtapadi, set the morning after Radha and Krishna have made passionate love. A completely dismantled Radha tells her lover Krishna, "Look at what you've done to me all night. Now soothe my body with your hands as cool as sandalwood paste. Draw designs on my breasts with deer musk. My eyeliner is smudged because of your long and passionate kisses. My hair is disheveled and the flowers in my hair have withered because of your passionate embrace. Krishna, reapply the kohl to my eyes, braid my hair and put me back together."

The *varnam* presents a test of the exponent's dance skills, athleticism, stamina, and artistry. And Sujit was a joy to behold as his expressive *abhinaya* brought to life a *naayika* in the throes of passion, filled with ardour and overcome with desire. He was virile Lord and lover, he was Radha, stretched out in post-lovemaking languor. But more than anything, the *bhakti* (devotion) of the dancer was manifest and he appeared to be in a divine trance. Several times Sujit smiled beatifically, involuntarily, essentially at one with the Lord of the Dance. Talking about the performance with another attendee, we both concurred that we had never before seen Sujit smile so much during a performance. There was nothing performative about those smiles, they were an involuntary expression of his joy at being lost in the dance, and therefore a privilege to witness.

The concluding *thillana* essentially pulled together the narrative themes of the *margam* and brought it to crescendo. And then, there was stillness and quiet for a long moment as the 90-minute experience sank in. Then Sujit folded his hands in thanksgiving and the enrapt audience burst into wild applause.

I must commend another important feature that Sujit has made a part of his presentations: that of having live accompaniment for the dancer/s. In the past, a vocalist and nattuvangam/concert master flew in from the USA as the live musical elements to his performances, but now we are fortunate that all the members of the accompanying orchestra are Vancouver residents. So deep appreciation for Arno Kamolika – nattuvangam, Shriram Rajgopalan – violin, Sheema Balakrishnan – vocals, and Vancouver stalwart Curtis Andrews on the mridangam. For a good twenty years, we witnessed Bharata Natyam performances done to pre-recorded music—now, with these excellent musicians, we are spoiled and would never want to attend another recital performed to a soundtrack!

Sujit Vaidya is Vancouver's dance treasure and we wish him all artistic fulfillment and success. It will be a treat to see what he attempts next.