



Lecdem and Performance... by Viviane Tourtet Graduate of Ecole du Louvre and Sorbonne University Former Senior translator and deputy editor of Nouvelles de l'Inde, Embassy of India, Paris Art therapist

A very special performance at the Embassy of India, Paris, thanks to Bala Devi Chandrashekar!

A few minutes only after Bala Devi Chandrashekar started to speak, I noticed the quality of silence in the hall of the Embassy and I knew that I was going to attend, like the entire audience, a very, very special performance. Something was in the air that made this event different and it has been different indeed!

Bala Devi Chandrashekar is not only a Bharatanatyam dancer and a research scholar but she is also a Professor of Practice and Artistic Director of SPNAPA Academy of Performing Arts, in Princeton, New Jersey. She has released 8 productions based on her researches that have been applauded throughout the world by renowned scholars and art critics. All of them convey the relevant messages of ancient scriptures to our today's world in loss of sense.



Her introduction underlined the importance of the ancient Sanskrit Hindu treatise called Nāṭyaśāstra dealing in 36 chapters with dance, music, theatre, literature, aesthetics. But above all, this treatise attributed to Bharata Muni and supposed to have been written sometime between 500 BCE and 500 CE explains that the main goal for an artist is not her/his performance as such but to be able to communicate her/his feelings, her/his emotions to each and everyone in the theatre so that the latter be transported into another world. She/he then experiences her/his own consciousness as if she/he was in the middle of the action described by the artist, this is called the Rasa theory.

It just so happens that for my master's degree in art history at La Sorbonne university, I studied the the Rasa theory as Indian art cannot be experienced without this essential element. Yesterday listening to Bala Devi Chandrashekar, I regretted not to have known her at that time!

But the real emotion came afterwards once she started acting, I am purposely using this word rather than dancing as this great lady of dance succeeded in transporting the audience in the footsteps of a Devaradiyaa in a subtle production titled « Brihadeeswara - form to formless », a four acts production based on the guidance of Dr T.N Ramachandran and historian Dr Kodavayil Balasubramaniam. The extract presented by Bala Devi nurtured the audience with the pristine beauty, both of this famous temple and of the Devaradiyaa whose soul and mind are totally devoted to the Lord. We could feel as if we were all Apsaras

and Devatas, admiring her statuesque beauty, witnessing the form of the temple and the Lord's formlessness. Through her, we could feel us drawn to the Divine, ready to get up and join the Devaradiyaa in her ecstasy, in her desire to unite with the Supreme Energy. Little by little she enters in the temple, first accompanied by the devotees, then alone, with great devotion and humility, she penetrates the sanctum sanctorum and there, the audience can just but remain silent to let her at her union with Lord Shiva.

From the silent, peaceful atmosphere of the temple (let us recall that the Brihadeeswara temple is a UNESCO World Heritage site), Bala Devi took us on the Kurukshetra battlefield, thousands of years back, witnessing with a shaky heart, eyes getting wet the fabulous destiny of one of the main character of the Mahabharata, Karna.

The audience was totally breathless, blinded by Karna's brilliance, taking part to the huge battle while being helpless, sitting on the chairs, seeing the arrows that flew through the air with fulgurance. At the same time, each of us was touched by this hero whose life, after having been abandoned by his mother Radha at birth, cursed by his archery guru, Parasurama, devoted his life to friendship, charity and courage. These values speak to us, even today. But what Bala Devi Chandrashekar showed us is the significance of dharma in our life, the righteousness of our actions we are committed to do.

A really fabulous performance thanks to a deep knowledge of the ancient texts, a thorough study of the characters she enacted and to a vibrant abhinaya (the expressive techniques) that made the audience voiceless, moved and definitely fascinated. A few dancers, mostly Bharatanatyam dancers, were present at the event who hailed the performance.

With great sincerity I must admit that in the thirty years I have worked at the Embassy of India, Paris, I have never seen such an abhinaya, such a detailed representation of Karna's attitude, trapped in moral dilemmas, such a perfect balance between technique, grace, playing and intellect. We would like to see such performances more often! Thank you Madam for sharing with us your knowledge!