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Jham!

Image Source:
Courtesy Nina
Rajarani Dance
Sun, 2014-03-23

Jham!

Srishti – Nina
Rajarani Dance
Creations

The Bhavan Centre,
London

Sunday 23rd
February 2014

Reviewed by Katie
Ryan



GALLERY

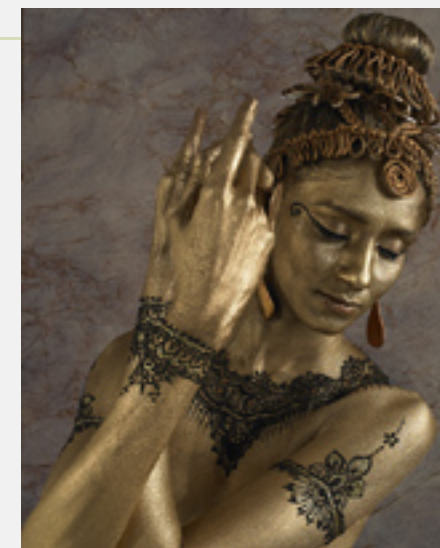


Photo: Simon Richardson
The Avatara Project

A play on words between the dance bol and the idea of a musical jam, Shrishti's latest production adds the art of beatboxing into the bharatanatyam melting pot. Virājam - a salutation to Shiva - opened the program with Sooraj Subramaniam claiming the stage with his characteristic grace and fluidity. Ilyas Raphaël Khan's beats complemented the traditional ensemble of Y Yadavan (vocals), RR Prathap (percussion) and Kartik Raghunathan (violin), but seemed somewhat of an afterthought compositionally. Next a reworking of Nina Rajarani's 2006 piece Kadala...is it love? demonstrated Yadavan's skill in creating an evocative atmosphere. A vocal alap hushed the Bhavan crowd and echoing violin pizzicato lent a dream-like quality to Rajarani's opening image of a nayika plucking at petals. Reworked from a sextet, this solo suffered from a limited use of space, but beautifully conveyed the metaphor of a love that defies containment like a fragrance gradually dispersing.

In two traditional items, Rajarani aptly portrayed a wealth of characters. First, was a sweet javali in which one felt her experience teaching numerous girls provided rich material to draw on as the naïvely flirtatious maiden who bites her finger as she smiles at a young man in the street, and is outraged when the village gossip starts. This was a hit with the audience, whose chuckles gave way to hearty applause as the dancer coyly exited. Purandara Dasa's Devarnama emphasized the idea of great power being assumed by the meek. This was illustrated through the humbling of Yashoda as Krishna reveals the universe within his muddled mouth, and the submission of King Bali to Vishnu's dwarf avatar Vamana. Doing what traditional repertoire does best, this item celebrated humanity and divinity whilst telling a good yarn.

Two more excerpts from Jham! followed in the second half. In Ūrjam, the positioning of the musicians in four corners around dancers Jahnvi Sheth and Devkee Vadukul was a refreshing spatial change. A balanced energy built between the four musicians improvising around the themes of a pallavi. The two young dancers were a little tentative but executed their steps well, gracefully swooping from sculptural poses into deep lunges. However, the static formation and repetitive movements started to drag. The program note for Utsarjam hinted at a risky, improvised finale which drew the audience in as Pratap's bols at break-neck speed were countered by Khan's bold beats, Raghunathan left his violin momentarily to respond to Yadavan's soaring vocals with Howlin' Wolf's famous refrain "I asked for water, she gave me gasoline", and there was the surprise appearance by lighting designer Stuart Walton providing a funky bass-line. Unfortunately the excitement and confidence in improvising an aural landscape was not replicated spatially. The performers huddled together with dancers Subramaniam, Sheth and Vadukul breaking away to play it safe with set routines that lacked the spark of spontaneity.

Although understandable that the Bhavan - a haven for classical bharatanatyam which can claim Rajarani amongst its most successful alumni - wanted to include traditional repertoire, the programming decision to intersperse excerpts from Jham! with other items felt fragmented and would have been stronger as two distinct acts. Even so, Rajarani's solo work displayed depth, and her continued collaboration with Yadavan in Jham! demonstrates a commitment to creating accessible bharatanatyam.

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