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Footloose and fancy free with Dr. Sunil Kothari

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First edition of Kalaashish Dance Festival: Nritya Ganga

Photos: Ashwani Chopra

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Asavari Pawar, daughter of London based celebrated Kathak exponent Pratap Pawar, the first gandabandh shishya of Pandit Birju Maharaj, organized under the aegis of Kalaashish, a dance festival at Delhi's ICCR Azad Bhavan auditorium featuring late Kathak exponent Arjun Mishra's son Anuj Mishra and his troupe, Belgium based Odissi, Bharatanatyam and contemporary dancer Sooraj Subramaniam and Polish modern dancer Andre Kamienski, and leading Seraikella Chhau dancer Shashadhar Acharya and his troupe in a two day festival.

On the first day, it was Asavari's father Pratap Pawar who performed traditional Kathak. He has turned 70 and in his honour Asavari began this new institution with a series of performances. On second day, she began with Shiva stuti displaying the technique she has mastered under guidance of her father. She has a charming and endearing personality, free from any attitude and displays a certain range of innocence. In Bhairavi Tillana choreographed by Pratap Pawar, her troupe excelled in performing energetic Kathak with aplomb.



Asavari Pawar



Asavari Pawar's troupe



Sooraj Subramaniam



Sooraj Subramaniam & Andre Kamienski

The Odissi performance by Sooraj Subramaniam was the highlight of the evening. With a commanding stage presence, a sensitive face and a sculpted body, he brought out the quintessential quality of Debaprasad Das bani, having had a sound and thorough training under Ramli Ibrahim at Sutra Dance Academy in Kuala Lumpur. Sooraj's technical prowess was eye-catching. His chauka was flawless and with chauka bhramari he established at once what command he has over the Odissi form. The resolutions were perfect. There was an added element of the movements of the eyes which captured one's attention. The tribhanga, three body

bend, the circular movement of the torso and pleasant expression were aesthetic. It also had definite sensuous quality which enhances Odissi form. That he has invested the form with his own individual grace was refreshing.

Besides the nritta, in abhinaya "Sangini chanha" of Banamali's gem of a song, Radha asking gopi to look at the beauty of flute holding Krishna, Sooraj delineated appropriate expressions becoming the song. The impersonation of female character was smooth minus any effeminacy. The interplay of footwork to the Odissi music highlighted the joyous mood. The description of various flowers like Bakul and the beauty generated with decoration, the graceful pose with peacock feather, the son of Gopa, Gopanandana, surpassing the beauty of Madan, Kamadeva, were depicted in exquisite manner. Sooraj draws curves in space with his body and arms, with eyes that move in directions creating a formal beauty. He has a visage which gives an impression of a brooding person but it transforms once the face gets animated.

His duet with Andre Kamienski, displayed his virtuosity and modern dance technique using basic stance of Kathak, mnemonic syllables to the accompaniment of tabla and the two dancers, almost like jugalbandi, responding to the movements facing each other and at times falling on the floor taking yogic positions, extension of body, sounds of claps, other dancer creating sounds by striking various parts of the body and matching parallel movements. Both dancers acquitted themselves well in their duet.

Anuj Mishra from Lucknow with his well trained troupe of female dancers including his wife and sisters and a male dancer lived up to his reputation as a brilliant dancer. His group choreography with Shiva stuti, using Ravanastotra, Kavit and intra-forms like aamad and various tihais et al was in perfect sync. The chakkar oriented approach was replete with artistic inputs. The quick changes of costumes, the thumri with grace of Lucknow gharana, all stood in good stead. He won rounds of applause for technical taiyyari and flawless execution.



Anuj Mishra & troupe



Shashadhar Acharya & troupe

Shashadhar Acharya is a name to reckon with in the Seraikella Masked Chhau dances. Trained by his own father and legendary Kedarnath Sahoo and Vikram Kumbhar, he has made Seraikella Chhau well known with his innumerable performances and workshops. He is currently teaching at Triveni Kala Sangam. The numbers he presented of Ratri and Radha Krishna were charming, visual poetry with exquisite masks and melodious music. Unfortunately, for the last number of Chandrabhaga and Surya, on account of technical fault other music started playing midway and had to be curtailed. But overall the two female dancers and others did a good job. The costumes have been well designed and looked regal.

Asavari deserves congratulations for mounting such an interesting festival. With more experience and coordination, the 2nd edition of Kalaashish promises to be an interesting event in the Capital's crowded dance scene.



Dr. Sunil Kothari is a dance historian, scholar, author and critic, Padma Shri awardee and fellow, Sangeet Natak Akademi. Dance Critics' Association, New York, has honoured him with Lifetime Achievement award.

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