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PanAsia

“Sita, Gentle Warrior”
Devi Dance Theater,
Somapa Thai Dance Company, and
Santi Budaya Indonesian Performers
Dance Place
Washington, DC
November 21, 2015

by George Jackson



Fun could be had watching “Sita” and trying to sort out the sources of its diverse dances. Sorties of foot stamping were followed by displays of finger splaying. Sword play contrasted with skirt swaying and with the wafting of veils. Poses that seemed to plant the dancers’ weight firmly into the ground were followed by leaps as if into a saddle that lifted bodies off the floor. Once upon a time the classic dance traditions of Southeast Asia may have shared an origin, but they became distinct. This performance by dancers based in America but trained in the movement techniques of India, Thailand or Indonesia was a singular collaboration to highlight similarities and differences within one choreographic work. At the piece’s center is Sita, heroine of India’s saga, “The Ramayana”. She is the daughter of Mother Earth and the abducted wife of a king. This production’s devisers see Sita as “the ideal woman – adored yet misunderstood”. They have her provoking dialogue between custom and change concerning feminist issues. How far did they advance towards their ambitious goals – artistic and philosophic?

The stance that seems to be basic throughout Southeast Asia leans the torso slightly forward, turns out the hips, bends the knees and sets the feet apart. Such a position can be very stretched, extremely taut and open or it may be supplely suggested, just hinted at. It can serve to launch the body into a variety of foot motions, from vigorous stamping to gentle treading. An arm can emphasize, or not, its shoulder, elbow or hand, and the hand can be flexed fully at the wrist or partly at the knuckles, halfway along the fingers or closer to the fingertips. Not only is the potential for elaboration possible at each anatomic joint, but purpose too, such as the joy of pure design, the response to musical rhythm or story telling are approached differently by the distinct dance styles and substyles. All in all, emphasis on the arms and hands is more usual than in Western forms of dance, but especially so on the island of Bali with its fancy finger work.

Nilimma Devi assumed the role of Sita initially. She is a mature woman whose personal movement norm seems to be a soft version of India's full bodied classicism. When warmed up, though, Devi seemed to infuse her actions with what I can only call Isadora Duncan plasticity and flow. As the spectacle proceeded with its dance, narration, vocal as well as instrumental music and visual projections, the persona of Sita seemed to spread itself to the many other women and girls dancing on stage. The few males in the cast usually did demon dancing or martial arts.

In most scenes the different dance styles were kept separate but juxtaposed. Fusions were rare, for which I am grateful. Only in the final ballabile, with everyone on stage, did the dancers of different traditions actually intermingle. In one scene there had been a small female corps of "skirt" dancers. They held and manipulated the lower part of their saris or long aprons as would a Western waltzer handling the skirt of her voluminous ball gown. I'd not seen this before in any Southeast Asian dance and afterwards asked about its origins. It turns out that this skirt dancing was adopted on the spot to prevent tripping.

Choreographic credit for "Sita" goes to Devi and to Anila Kumari. While story and message became submerged as the work evolved, the dance contrasts continued to intrigue. After the conclusion of the spectacle, Nilimma Devi was given the Pola Nirenska Award for Lifetime Achievement in Dance by the presenting organization Washington Performing Arts and its advisory committee.

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