

A festival of veterans by veterans

Ravi Shankar, Birju Maharaj, Kishan Maharaj, Damyanti Joshi and Rohini Bhate graced various programmes in Delhi in what was a fitting finale to a festival of veterans. Leela Venkataraman writes....

The Kathak circuit in the Capital this past week has been very vibrant with many leading artistes making an appearance.

With the most eminent figures of the art world in attendance was the function "Raas Gunjan" at Kamani for the release, by Pandit Ravi Shankar, of Pandit Birju Maharaj's book on Bindadin Maharaj's thumris. While the Kathak gurus have always been pictured as squeezing out the last ounce of juice of feudal privilege from the disciples, here was an example of instant knowhow on an important aspect of dance being made available in the most painless fashion to all practitioners of Kathak. Culled with great care from a variety of sources, not excluding Birju Maharaj's mother who from the cloistered seclusion of zenana recaptured lyrics she had only heard sung, the book, very modestly priced, offers about 35 songs (comprising thumris, bhajans, hori, dhamar etc.) out of the approximately 5,000 works said to have been penned by Bindadin Maharaj. Little explanatory notes by Birju Maharaj of the age of the nayika, the time of year and the season and the exact situation visualised in the song, should prove of invaluable help to the dancer in the abhinaya interpretation. Along with the book were taped versions of some of the songs made available. Vani Jayaram's singing of the thumri "Bihari ko apne baskar paoon" was followed by a brief Bhav Batana demonstration by Pandit Birju Maharaj to the lyric "Shyam Kahe gaaho gaaho" in Raag Sarang. The subtle gestures visualising the Gopi keeping off (while wanting it) the teasing Shyam showed a transformation that the dancer's male form did not in any way make less convincing.

Deepak, the younger son of Birju Maharaj sang "Mohe gagharia kaaha ko phori re Shyam" in Misra Kedara. He has obviously inherited the father's musical talents. Kishan Maharaj released the cassettes.

Fittingly, the proceedings began with a solemn reference by Pandit Birju Maharaj to the just departed Gopi Krishna.

Few Kathak dancers have utilised the full potential of the hands in communicating a dance message as Prerana Shrivallabha. In her programme for an exclusive audience at the French embassy, Prerana again showed what a sensitive artiste she is. The Tarana in Bahar raga, which in the nritya, continued the Spring and Nature imagery introduced in the opening verses from Kalidasa's "Ritu Samhara" was not exceptional. The rendition of "Itu Geeta Ghungat Gheli Chala" Padmakar's poem, really picked up towards the end, the dancer's use of the two hands to show Krishna and Radha as one identity, very evocative. The pataka hand, one facing the audience the other the dancer, separated and coalesced to express a point on Sambhogra sringer in a way that uninformed people may have found difficult to understand

But Prerana's subtle art is never visualised with the gallery in mind, which is why it retains its understated aesthetics.

The real depth of the dancer came out in the last number where all the elements of pure dance were used in an abstract choreographic reflection of a French poem "The Earth" by Yves Bonnefoy, which revolves round poetic images of hands "touching bare stone, wind and fire, cry of birth and eternities of desire". The two hands twined together, with fingers interlocked, touching, separating, shooting off in diagonal or straight lines to meet again, orbiting space to meet over the dancer's head — were in constant dialogue, the gamut of Kathak pure dance from Thaata to Tatkar brought out in the process. The dramatic halts after chakkars, the change in tempo everything was suggested, but never stated. A fine example of innovation within tradition and an indication to dancers of how much there is even within the evolved traditions to challenge seeking minds.

Another very unusual evening sought to discover the commonalities between Tap Dance and Kathak. Organised by the USIS at its Kasturba Gandhi Marg premises, the programme featured US tap dance expert Jane Goldberg, with the Kathak side being contributed by Shovana Narayan. The "Tap Goddess of the lower east side" as Jane Goldberg has been called, in her "Rhythm and Schmooze" gave a hilarious account of the history of Tap dancing developed in the 20's, 30's and 40's by famous African-American dancers. Keeping up the fast paced tip-tap while punctuating it with commentary, both informative and entertaining, the dancer regaled the packed audience with the verbal side swipes. Touching on "racism" and "sexism" and wonder whether Tap dancing was started by the blacks or the Irish, she finally arrived at the conclusion that it was perhaps the Jewish women who started it to while away their time while Moses went to the mountains!

Spiced with limericks like "Mister Hussain, You are driving me insane" (attributed to George Bush) and peppered with delightful comments like the one about the Tap dancer who had a beloved in what was East Germany, who, though a contortionist, could not climb the wall to escape to the West. Naughty comments were tossed off nonchalantly even while making the admission that she had been informed of the highly "conservative" nature of Indian audiences. "If you cannot liberate the world, at least liberate the ground you stand on" was what her mother had told this Tap dancer who claimed to take off from where Bathsbeba, after her wanderings, had left. The frothy remarks apart, one got a picture of the historic origins of tap dance, the slide projection catching glimpses of John Bubbles,

Bill "Bojangles", Ginger Gogers, Fred Astaire (she had always dreamed of a partner-like him), the "All Women's Tap Show" dancers Honi Coles and others. Matching her twinkling feet to the rhythmic variations produced on the tabla by Shakeel Ahmed Khan, Jane concluded the first part of the show.

Shovana Narayan has all the élan and style one could wish for in a dancer and by concentrating on footwork and the ability of pure rhythm to evoke mood and ideas, she tried her best to connect with Jane's presentation. The Tatkar permutations and a short gat sequence with a few Tukras and Juglabandi caught the essence of what the occasion required. But the next item with the students was totally unwarranted in a time-bound programme. What could that item prove that her solo rendition had not already stated? With so much happening in the Capital thanks to Shovana's overindulgence I missed the crucial part of the evening — with Tap dance and Kathak juxtaposed in a comparative study.

The busy performance and training schedule at the Kathak Kendra often does not allow time for reflection on serious aspects of the dance. What are the factors to be kept in mind in costume designing? Can the dancer experience the aesthetic aspect of "rasa" while performing, or is she, as the creator, only capable of experiencing artistic joy? What are the problems faced in the stage presentation of Kathak programmes? What is Nayika bhed? How does the mythical representation differ from the realistic? In the workshop being conducted by Birju Maharaj at the Kathak Kendra with lectures by experts, all the topics mentioned above are being discussed, with students being encouraged to ask questions. A fine opportunity for education on the finer points of the dance!

Kathak Kendra's annual Mahotsav, clashing with a whole line of programmes in different places in the metropolises, could draw only truncated attention — one slipping out of other performances to catch glimpses of the Kathak fare at the Kamani as and when possible. This year only veteran gurus were featured.

On the second evening Vijay Shankar seemed caught on the horns of a dilemma in his recital, overawed by the presence of Kishan Maharaj, the percussionist, providing accompaniment for him, and his guru Birju Maharaj seated in front. Vijay was not his usual confident self. Having a renowned tablaist as accompanist is a temptation for a dancer but it has its inherent problems. An old school tablaist and a renowned soloist at that is less at home with the Kathak structure of today, which has, in the last half a century, changed a great deal. At his own pace, while bringing out the "dayan" and "bayan" tonal differences in tukras, Kishan



Veterans delight... Pandit Birju Maharaj and Rohini Bhate in New Delhi.

Maharaj was the maestro one very well knows him to be. While trying to follow the dance, he seemed on less familiar ground and his differing emphasis on mnemonics hindered rather than helped Vijay Shankar. The recital thus became a confused medley, the "sama" found in the parhant, eluding Vijay on more than one occasion in the dance rendition. The understanding between dancer and percussionist was absent. The tatkar the dancer started with, the khanda, Misra, Sankerna woven into the chatusra rhythm, the sequences with the "Dha" emphasis were all well conceived. But the dancer in him remained confined and even the "Gopi cheerharan" gat was self-consciously rendered.

As a contrast, and giving proof of the vast change in Kathak was Damayanti Joshi's recital capturing all the old world charm of this dance tradition. In its vilambit start in the Thaata, there was a reposeful quality, the ability to hold a moment in eternity, remarkable. The bent knee, the distance between feet and the stances were somewhat different from the very erect body of the Kathak dancer of today. Damayanti's concluding tatkar was a thing of beauty, its piercing clarity and endless permutations of rhythmic arrangement, remarkable. Here was serenity of a type, Kathak of today rarely portrays. Not once did the dancer go to the mike to speak as is done today.

The fare on the concluding evening of the Bindadin Mahotsava featuring Manjushree Chatterjee, Rohini Bhate and Pandit Birju Maharaj, illustrated better than any other session, the enduring qualities of assurance and depth which years of living with the art form can bestow.

Apart from vintage Shambu Maharaj

tukras being rendered, Manjushree's authoritative and tightly knit parhant with its clarity and tonal music, gave her recital a special dimension. The Ganesh parhant ending with the mridanga bhangi, the artistry of the "Na Dhin Dhin Na", the Gat Nikas with the graceful dipping down and straightening up walk, the Ghungat Gat, Chakradhar tukras with the elongated or "meend" syllable, were all in the typical Shambu Maharaj vein. So was the leisurely treatment of Thaata, almost a dispensable part of the recital today, or meriting only fleeting attention. Subhash Nirman gave the necessary percussion support.

Rohini Bhate's exquisite grace is the external covering on a steel like strength and firmness in laya, characterising her art. A true disciple of Lacchu Maharaj and Mohan Rao Kallianpurkar representing both Lucknow and Jaipur gharanas, Rohini's Kathak combines self-contained equipoise with intensity. Rare sequences like "Dha Ta Ka Thunga" portraying five types of Krishna and Radha, the Amad visualising the iconic images of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati — all composed by Lacchu Maharaj, regaled the audience.

The Simhavaloka Paran, the Gopuccha, Paran-Amad, the tonal variations of the ankle bells in the Tatkar, delighted. Carrying her tall figure, at this age, with a light-footed ease, Rohini also used her hands evocatively. The Mugdha who burns her palm trying to put out the lamp in the embarrassed shyness of being partially disrobed by the embrace of the newly wedded husband, made for a sensitive portrayal. "Yehi karan sundar hath jale", says the poem about the heroine who has left behind childhood, but is yet not an adult. The

"Makhan Chor" as visualised by Kallianpurkar was another delicate-gat. As devised by Lacchu Maharaj was the "Nathni Ched-chad". When the dancer concluded with the Bindadin composition "Aise Ram jagat hitkari", one had the feeling of an organised recital in which the excellent accompanists with Madhuri Joshi's tuneful vocal support, were as disciplined as the guru.

To state that Birju Maharaj made his avid fans ecstatic would be no overstatement. Flashing like lightning across the sky, the dancer positively sparkled. Erupting in brilliant flashes of rhythmic permutations in the Uthan in Teental, the dancer handled the percussionist with respect and diplomacy. Kishan Maharaj had found his match and with two stalwarts, the recital could not but be challenging. In the delicate Thaata, one saw minimal movement, but the feel of rhythm running its course through the dancer's body, even in the frozen moments, never ceased. The free flowing abstract sequences drawing mnemonics from a keen sense of observation of daily life, caught laya even in the "beep" of a signal travelling across the wires.

The Ginti-tihai Gopuccha from 8 to 1, was a mixture of art and craft. In the thumri "Balmare chunariyan mai Lal Rangade", the lai (red) emphasis was dilated upon in the abhinaya which portrayed red symbols like the still red eyes in the early morning, the bindi, the hair parting, the mehendi-adorned hand and the glow of the fire. "Dekho hori ke Khelaiyaa kaise ban ban aye", a Bindadin Hori in Desh, ushered in the end on a right note. In the Dhamar tal sequences the Juglabandi had Kishan Maharaj sprinkling his own compositional pearls. A fitting finale to a festival of veterans.