

THE HINDU

Sensational Shantala

BY VIBHUTI PATEL - JULY 14, 2012

She performed Kuchipudi slowly, silently and seriously to dance into people's hearts from an American stage.

Paris-based Kuchipudi dancer Shantala Shivalingappa has been a darling of the American press ever since the late German choreographer Pina Bausch, a cherished New York icon, brought her here in 2008 as part of her India-inspired modern-dance production “Bamboo Blues.”

Last year, Shantala danced at the Maximum India festival in Washington’s Kennedy Center, then reprised that all-Kuchipudi programme to great acclaim in New York.

This June, every publication heralded Shantala’s arrival, with the classy New Yorker magazine giving advance notice of her show — twice in the same issue! Not many Indian dancers receive such diva treatment. The reason? Curiosity: This time, Shantala was to dance contemporary solos, created specially for her by Bausch, famed Japanese choreographer Ushio Amagatsu and her Kalakshetra-trained mother, Savitry Nair, who’d collaborated for decades with the ballet master Maurice Bejart. Appropriately enough, the week-long show premiered at Manhattan’s best dance venue, the 420-seat Joyce Theater.

Four solos

The full-length *Namasya* programme featured four short solos. Bausch had created the first in homage to her close friend, now dead, who had been Shantala’s earliest promoter.

For the second item, Shantala requested Butoh master Amagatsu whose work, with his all-male company, she has long admired. He agreed because, he said, he had seen her Kuchipudi.

To round out the programme, mother and daughter created a contemporary piece each, while they were teaching in Bejart’s school in Switzerland, shortly before he died. As the solos became loving tributes to these fine international dancer-choreographers, Shantala tipped her hat to Kuchipudi, her primary passion, and to her guru Vempati, by interspersing the live modern dances with artsy silent videos projected onstage. Filmed by a French dancer-turned-videographer, they connected her Eastern heritage with her Western education.

Performing barefoot, with no set or live music, no ankle-bells or jewellery, in the simplest black (or white) Western costumes, the focus was on the dancer at all times. Shantala opened with Amagatsu’s “Ibuki” (“Vital Breath”), dressed in white pants and short jacket, and moved slowly, through images of a day from dawn to dusk.

Amagatsu's Butoh piece, like most Japanese art, is filled with delicate allusions to nature. To capture that zen tranquillity, artist and audience must together make an inward journey: A far cry from the fast and lively rhythms of Kuchipudi and yet, the hand gestures and the curvaceous movements do evoke Shantala's origins. She says its storyline is not as linear and dramatic as that in Indian dance but it does exist in its subtle depiction of sunrise, water, flowers, sunset.

Meditatively executed to haunting contemporary music selected by Amagatsu, it framed the evening and was followed immediately by video images of the dancer in vividly coloured, full Kuchipudi regalia, sans music, performing slowly, silently, seriously — with not a distracting smile. Shot in partial blowups of her face, hands, feet, it featured *mudras* and *abhinaya* aplenty. It was not a documentary, only a visual artist's evocation of one — with mirrored reflections on a highly polished floor suggesting water, and close-ups that could rarely be glimpsed in a stage show.

Breathtakingly beautiful, the videos served to remind the viewer of Shantala's inspiration: Even as she danced Amagatsu's and Bausch's creations, she acknowledged her provenance and underscored it for the untutored viewer. More mundanely, the videos filled time — needed for costume change — in a performance lasting only an hour, and added brilliant colour to what would otherwise have been a neutral-toned show.

The following piece, simply titled "Solo," and "created with Pina Bausch, during a working residency at Tanztheater Wuppertal," marked a complete change in tempo and style. It was instantly recognisable as an unmistakable Bausch piece from its costume (spaghetti-strapped black silk ball gown) to its fast-paced movements: Running, jumping, whirling. It harked back to earlier Bausch-Shivalingappa collaborations with its long limbed clean lines.

Mesmerising medley

"Shift," Shantala's creation, surprised with its crescendo of Iranian drums, followed by dancing in total silence, then closing with Western music. Nair's solo, "Smarana," offered an intense conclusion. Performed sitting, with back to the audience throughout, it was set to a stunning sitar *aalap* by Ravi Shankar that Bejart had used in his "Bhakti" piece, choreographed to superb Carnatic and North Indian music, in praise of Hindu gods. Emotionally, for Indians in the audience, this offered a most satisfying conclusion. The following morning, one typical review summed up: "Shivalingappa sustained interest and inspired awe" — not mean praise from American critics who were judging an Indian daring to perform in their idiom, on her terms.

Now, Shantala returns to Europe to continue her connection with another revered mentor — through his children. Decades ago, Peter Brook had cast her in *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*. Now, she will sing, dance and act in Irina Brook's adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, and work on Simon Brook's film about his father. After that, she hopes to dance in India for, despite all her internationalism, Shantala identifies herself unreservedly as an "Indian dancer."