Rukmini Devi Remembered
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BOOK REVIEWS

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Two large-format photo books present the life of one of India's greatest dancers and fine-art educators

South Indian dance enthusiasts should greatly appreciate these two latest offerings from Kalakeshetra Publications in South India: Rukmini Devi, Bharata Natyam and Rukmini Devi, Dance Drama. Rukmini (1904-1986) was the founder of the Kalakshetra Foundation of Chennai, India, including its College of Fine Arts, today the world's leading school for Bharatanatyam dance (www.kalakshetra.net/). The books are hefty, nine by 14 inches and running 270 pages plus each (Kalekshetra Publications, Rs. 2000). Bharata Natyam is an introductory text, followed by contemporary and retrospective articles by and about Rukmini. There is an abundance of photos, mostly in black and white. Dance Drama is a photographic account of her stage work from 1938 to 1986. The overall impact is like stepping back in time to the early 1930s, when she revolutionized South Indian dance, then moving forward through her illustrious 50-year career to her death in 1986.

The book's creator, C. Nachiappan, undertook the work late in his own life, following his entry into sannyas, Hindu monasticism. He is now known as Koviloor Swami and is influential in the Hindu world. He writes in his introduction, "I came into contact with Rukmini Devi when I was studying in the Besant Memorial School at the young age of 12, not realizing that it was she who would become the catalyst in bringing out my talents in art and photography." He worked as her personal assistant, set designer, lighting expert and photographer, recording all of her dance dramas through 1976. The book's photos are mostly from his collection and the early work of Conrad Woldring.

Rukmini explains in one article, "I never knew Madame Blavatsky (founder of Theosophy), but grew up under the influence of Dr. Annie Besant. I met her when I was fourteen. She then, as afterwards, appeared to me a person of tremendous

power and light." Just two years later, Rukmini married Dr. Besant's close associate, the then forty-year-old Dr. George Arundale, causing an outcry among her orthodox brahmin community.

Rukmini's initial talents lay in music. During her travels with Dr. Arundale, she became interested in ballet, and then at age 25, in Indian dance. The dance form now known as Bharatanatyam was originally called sadir, and performed by the temple dancers, the Devadasis. "Still under the spell of ballet, " explains the book, "in 1929 she went to see the performance of sadir by two sisters in Madras. That program was pristinely classical and not one of those vulgar versions adapted by many of the Devadasis whose preserve sadir was in those days. Many of the Devadasis had become courtesans and were not too highly regarded by the conservative society. However, that particular program converted Rukmini totally and she 'was never the same person again,' according to a friend. She herself reminisced once that she was 'ushered into a new world of rhythmic beauty and meaning.' It became a personal challenge for her to disseminate knowledge of 'this beautiful and profound art that had been restricted to a few specialists.' "

Rukmini Devi undertook serious training in the dance at the relatively late age of 30 but became a master of the form. She established not only the dance school at Kalekshetra, but several related institutions as well. She was instrumental in adapting Western stage sets and lighting techniques for the Indian performances and generally succeeded in bringing dance back into respectable repute.

Rukmini Devi said in a speech on All India Radio, "In old India, art was part of the scheme of everyday life, and that was where the Indian genius showed itself. But nowadays art is something to be displayed. In the old Indian homes, even the kitchen vessels were beautifully shaped, everything in life was beautiful and picturesque. That creative spirit of beauty has to be reborn in India today. The great past is never out of date, as greatness and beauty are eternally true."

Rukmini Devi, Bharata Natyam and Dance Drama, designed and produced by C. Nachiappan (Koviloor Swamy), Kalakshetra Publications, 84 Kalakshetra Road, Thiruvanmiyur, Chennai, India 600 041.