Purush: Expressions of Man
Category : February 1996
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 1996

Purush: Expressions of Man

Dance Troupe Dazzles Audiences With Poise and Power

It was June, 1994. Jonathan Hollander, artistic director of Battery Dance Company of New York, faced a crisis. With no salary, no health insurance and a second daughter just born, he was forced to consider dissolving his dearest love and livelihood, the Dance Company. Friends and colleagues echoed in refrain, "Of course. You must get a realjob. You've finally come to your senses!" But Hollander did not let doubt and adversity defeat him. Instead, he went to work, danced, and eventually created one of the most significant cultural presentations of the decade, Purush: Expressions of Man.

It was Battery Dance Company's major International Cultural Exchange Project of fall, 1995. Purushwas a survey of classical and contemporary dance styles performed by leading male dancers and musicians from India and the US. This unique production toured North America in September-October 1995, following its Indian debut at the Music Academy in Madras and its US debut at the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival in New York City. It was a rare showcase of, and tribute to, the beauty and power of male dance, especially Indian, which has in modern times been overshadowed by its female counterpart. It was presented in some 30 performances in the US and a few in India.

Hollander recounts how the seed concept of Purushwas formed, "I was enraged, inflamed by the presumption that my life had been nothing more than an extended chapter of self-indulgence." Core questions plagued him, "Why does a man dance in a society which does not respect the art form, where the rituals of dancing have been left behind, where the amassing of wealth and power are the respectable goals for a man? How and why does a man believe in himself and find the rationale for dedicating himself to the art of dance? I interviewed my dancers. I interviewed my musicians. I found in their creative answers a strength and a positive sense that the exploration of the emotion of movement and music is a life-giving enterprise that supersedes the search for status, power and money." The first result of his soul searching was his dance creation, Testimony to Nataraja, which became the only non-Indian performance in Purush.

Purushwas jointly curated by Hollander and Anita Ratnam, founder-director of the Arangham Trust in Madras, India, in consultation with Indian dancer and teacher Indrani. Together they selected five of India's superlative male dancers: C.V. Chandrasekhar, Arjun Misra, Pasumarthy Vithal, Sasidharan Nair and Keerthik Nair --representing the forms of Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi and Kathakali and comprising three generations.

Each dancer performed items designed to illuminate the most compelling characteristics of his classical dance form and to bring the richness of the masculine tradition of Indian dance to the fore. One highlight was a specially commissioned work choreographed by Chandrasekhar, a man in his 60s, for himself and Keerthik Nair, a teenager. The duet, called

Parampara, expressed the passing of tradition and craft from one generation to another--a poignant and resonant theme in this era of the generation gap. Another outstanding item was the finale, Tillana, also staged by Chandrasekhar, which brought all of the Indian artists together in an exultant display of rhythmic interplay and rapturous virtuosity.

As mentioned, Purushalso featured an entry from the exciting territory of cross-cultural creation, Testimony to Nataraja, a collaboration between American choreographer Jonathan Hollander and Indo-American composer Badal Roy (tabla) and his partner, Ken Wessel (guitar). The dance was performed by Battery Dance Company members Kevin Predmore, and John Freeman and is accompanied live by Roy and Wessel.

The National Tour of Purushwas sponsored in part by Air India, with further support from State Bank of India, Citibank India Investments, Oberoi Group of Hotels, Sreedhar Menon, LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & McCrae. Manjula and Rajan Bansal and Divya Shah.

The Inside Story, from Jonathan Hollander

"I respectfully submit to you and your readers a personal report of Purush: Expressions of Man. Made up of a stellar cast of men who represent the pinnacle of artistry in the forms of Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali and Kuchipudi, as well as American modern dance, Purushwas my brainchild. I have devoted the past year of my life to organizing its two-month American tour. Any degree of journalistic neutrality can therefore be disclaimed up front. I am fully engaged in the subject and confess my bedazzlement with the musicians and

dancers of Purush.

"I shall begin my report with the residency in Boston in September during which time Purushartists were literally dancing all over town! Whether holding the rapt attention of thousands of school children in eight Cambridge public schools, teaching music students at the New England Conservatory about Indian vocal techniques and the drumming and footwork of Kathak, or enlightening 150 MIT students and faculty members on the shades of difference between Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi, their energies never flagged. The culminating performance before a large crowd at Boston University's Tsai Performance Center ended with the audience choreography I have grown accustomed to at Purush performances--not just a 'standing ovation,' rather a 'jumping ovation!'

"In Houston, we were thrust into the wonderful world of Rathna and Anil Kumar, husband and wife, dancer and videographer, grand human beings in every respect, With very little time and few resources other than their own generous hearts and their feeling of loyalty to their fellow artists, they brought 400 people together including the newly appointed Indian Consul General and Mrs. Sweshpawan Singh to experience Purush. Beyond that and recognizing our dilemma in filling a gap left by last-minute cancellations, the Kumars have brought eight of the Purushasback to Houston to teach and give workshops prior to our next engagement in Dallas.

In all honesty, a footnote must be written to reveal the "underside" of Purush. Everyone who has been involved with

the Arts, either as performer or presenter, knows that purity doesn't pay, at least in cash. Too many Indian dancers have been pursuaded over the years to perform for the "exposure" which usually mean a token honorarium at best. Although I find that musicians have been able to stand up for themselves and demand reasonable fees, there is no established fee structure for top-level dancers. A program like Purushhad to be heavily subsidized in order to break even. We were hamstrung by three last-minute cancellations and the inability to secure performance fees commensurate with expenses.

What makes Purushso special, and why does a melange of dance styles result in a transcendent experience rather than a circus act? My answer is simple: the brilliance of each and every performer, their ability to captivate through honesty and craft rather than superficial showmanship; their respect for their art form and their deference to each other. But please do not take my answer for granted. Go see them for yourself!"

Battery Dance Company, 380 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, New York 10013, USA. Tel: 212-219-3910; fax: 212-219-3911.

Arangham Trust, 33, Warren Road, Mylapore, Madras 600 004, India. Tel: 44-499-6469; fax: 44-452-123