Super Ramayana Dance Festival Staged in Thailand
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Seven Nations Celebrate the Rama Saga in Three-Week Birthday Party for Thai Princess

In the just getting started 90's more people have seen the Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana than the combined population of India since the Indus Valley era. Millions of Americans just watched Peter Brook's Mahabharata film on TV and in late April millions of Thais tuned their TVs to the final dance performance of The International Ramayana Festival at the Thailand Cultural Center held in honor of the Thai princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's 36th birthday. Seven dance troupes from Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia and India, and many Ramayana scholars participated in the three-week celebration. Sri Ganesan. 29-year-old leader of the Malaysian troupe, and who played the pan of Rama, wrote the following personal chronicle of the event.

Casually one afternoon in early March, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism called and asked if I would like to represent Malaysia in the festival. They wanted a group performance for the festival that would reflect Malaysian tradition and costumes, to try and portray it from the Malaysian cultural angle rather than duplicate India's efforts. The ministry, of course, agreed to provide airfare, costumes and the musicians for the dance. It was traditional Malay music called gamelan usually used in court dances and classical music. This was blended with traditional Indian music.

I accepted, of course, after a lot of hesitation, because I was afraid that critics may take me to task for introducing new trends in the dance. Also I wanted to provide exposure to my students. We set off into long and numerous practice sessions, trials, tribulations, doubts, wanting to excel, bring out the soul of the dance and music. This was the high point of my career so far, and I wanted perfection.

We were allotted April 13th and 14th for our solo recital which is a one and a half hour show of Ramayana starting from the time Vishvamitra goes to King Dhasaratha and requests the king to allow Rama and Lakshamana to kill the troublesome demons Subayu and Marisha.

Fifteen dance sequences were involved in the dance. On the final day we performed the same first episode. Along with other dignitaries, the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn was present. Seven countries actually look part. Cambodia gave a separate unofficial performance, probably because it is still not recognized as a nation by Thailand.

The festival also included a workshop, lectures, demonstrations and seminars, presented by each country after their performance. The Princess attended all the seminars presented by the seven countries and even took down notes.

I met the performers from the other countries. We were inspired by the different versions, costumes, captivating music. We found that in many of these countries the people are more cultural minded. I talked to a little boy in the audience and he said that the Ramayana was part of a topic they learn in school. Even the Thai kings are named after Rama. Most of the participating nations are Buddhist or Islamic, but vestiges of their Hindu heritage remain alive and are valued.

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