

Drinking Dance

Sanskrit, which has a word for everything, has a word for the pleasure we experience upon seeing a work of art. It is “rasa”, which can be translated as “juice”. This suggests that the audience has an active role - that we extract the juice from the performance - chew it, savour it, swallow it, or spit it out. Because this metaphor comes from India, land of clove, cinnamon, pepper, ginger, turmeric, we may presume that the sensation the writer meant is not a creme brulee kind of aesthetic pleasure, but more of a vindaloo: so sharp, pungent, fiery, hot, that it brings tears to the eyes.

Balasaraswati suggested another metaphor: she compared the Bharata Natyam recital to the Great Temple, entering through the gopuram of alarippu and continuing by measured steps to the ‘dark inner sanctum’ of the padam, with the thillana like the final burning of camphor, and the concluding sloka representing the devotee taking the god into her heart. The metaphorical darkness that Bala refers to is the darkness of private life, secrets and intimacy. The sringara padams that bring us into the inner sanctum deal with love between a man and a woman; usually that love is illicit, often it brings pain.

Milan Kundera’s metaphor of ‘lightness’ is not an opposition to darkness, but to weight. “Marriage, friendship, commitment, responsibility, ties to family, culture and nation” are heavy; we approach that ‘unbearable lightness of being’ every time we “commit adultery, betray a friend, break ranks, defy authority, sever a family bond, leave a homeland, or create a work of art.”

I have had two experiences of watching dance that were ‘light’ and not heavy. The first was when I was very young, perhaps 19. At the time, and because of certain circumstances, immaterial to the story, I had come to Delhi and been introduced to Uma Sharma, the renowned Kathak dancer. In fact, my guardian admonished Uma to ‘take care of me’ while I was in Delhi. Uma immediately invited me to her house.

There was a party going on when I arrived, but other than Uma, I was the only woman there; not such an unusual circumstance in the Delhi of that time. The men were all much older than me. The conversation went on all around me in Hindi, which I did not understand, and Uma was the centre of it.

I wasn’t bored, though, because in trying to appear sophisticated, I drank much more alcohol than I was accustomed to, and now it required every bit of my concentration to sit up straight and appear normal. Later, many guests left, and the atmosphere of the party changed; conversation became more relaxed, body positions shifted, cushions on the floor made it convenient to lounge. I stretched out too, on the edge of this circle around Uma.

A heated discussion began, about some aspect of Kathak. I could see that there were opposing sides, and that the arguments were meaningful and important to all the men assembled, and to Uma, though I had no clue as to what that point might have been. But in a moment it became irrelevant, because Uma, just sitting there on the floor, began to sing and dance.

I had never seen Kathak at that point in my life. Perhaps I knew that it involved fast turns and footwork. Anyway, the very limited understanding of Indian dance that I had at that time came only from Kalakshetra, and it had to do with tradition, stricture, rules - heaviness. I had no frame of reference to judge what Uma was doing; just sitting on the floor, singing in a low, smoky voice something unbearably sad and haunting, moving her hands and arms very little, while the most tender, naked emotions appeared and transformed her lovely face.

Uma continued to dance, transported, until the mood passed. I was exhilarated, light-headed. I knew that I had witnessed something very special.

The second experience also involved alcohol. This time, I was in Seville, travelling in Spain with my brother's girlfriend, a wild, outspoken red-haired woman, up for anything. We were wandering the cobble-stoned streets deserted under the hot afternoon sun, when we heard the sounds of flamenco guitars wafting from one of the upstairs windows. Egged on by each other, we opened the door and mounted the stairs, following the music. We stopped at the threshold of a room in which there was obviously some kind of class going on, but like no class that I had ever attended. There were perhaps 10 men of varying ages, playing guitars, and one young dancer, wearing jeans, flamenco shoes, and with her blouse tied up high at the waist against the heat. No one seemed the least surprised or perturbed by our presence. Instead, the man nearest the door passed us shot glasses containing a clear liquor, and in all seriousness made it clear, in Spanish and by signs, that we could not remain unless we drank these down. We did, even though it was a strong harsh brandy that burned our throats and made us cough. We stayed and drank again each time the glasses were passed to us.

The men played, the dancer danced. There was an easy camaraderie between them, jokes and appreciation of each well-performed sequence; but soon the talking stopped and the playing became serious and sustained. The pattern suggested questions and answers: one musician seemed to be leading the others by once in a while posing a musical question, which the others seems to consider and response to. But this was no intellectual questioning; the harsh staccato of heels on wood, the plaintive, wailing, strings, they were surely dealing with matters of life and death.

Flamenco even under normal circumstances is fiery and passionate; this time the fire entered me; it burned and smoldered in my blood. I would have followed the first young gypsy guitarist who beckoned. Days later, in Toledo, we saw a poster and realized that one of the guitarists we'd seen was a renowned artist and the dancer was one of the best up and coming flamenco dancers. We attended the concert, and even though it was

wonderful, it wasn't the same as the experience in that hot, crowded, smoky room in Seville.

--- Gitanjali Kolanad ---

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