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### Efflorescence

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Varied strokes from Padmini Chettur's "Beautiful Thing 2"; (far left) "Dont Ask Dont Tell" choreographed by Navtej Johar and Ben Riepe. PHOTOS: National Arts Council; Maximilian Linsenmeier

**Review** The phenomenally diverse Contemporary Dance scene was highlighted at the Ignite Festival as well as the Indo-German Urban Arts Mela. **LEELA VENKATARAMAN**

Gati Forum's second "Ignite Festival", showcasing phenomenally diverse Contemporary Dance expressions and encouraging dialogue and encounters among artists pertaining to different vocabularies of body movement from India and abroad, has created new space for this genre of creativity. Interestingly, informative exchanges between choreographers on the Gati premises showed how Contemporary Dance in myriad manifestations defies being categorised under labels. Rather than approach this genre of work as being in opposition to or a battle against existing trends, some dancers defined their attitude as "challenging oneself" or, as theatre person Maya Rao put it, "setting up one's own blocks and tensions" to arrive at "the best means of telling a story, as an artiste" as Sheetal Gandhi said. For some dancers like Navtej Singh Johar working with the other, and persons like Ben J. Riepe had given his own dance an openness and allowed him to let go of the inhibiting 'preciousness.' For Padmini Chettur whose 'beautiful thing 2' was in a class by itself, her distilled and concentrated body centric approach deliberately cut out too many outside sensibilities impinging on her journey and search. In a crowded schedule, most of which one saw, some highlights stood out.

One of the finds of the festival was Sheetal Gandhi who presented "bahu-beti-bewi." Poised between humour and active resistance, the female characters in this powerful dance theatre revolve round the complex family tensions of woman as wife, daughter and mother. Sheetal's innate feel for rhythm and how she adapts her Kathak sensibilities and body memory to her choreographic needs stands out. There is the Indian seed in her that despite living abroad, her mother and relatives have sown, and with this is a compassionate objectivity in viewing relationships in India, placed as she is in a different and distant context. The way the whole performance space is used, the ability to shift from bahu who would like to throw the ground chilly paste into her father-in-law's eyes, to the mother's witticism "Arranged marriages have no trial and error — only error" to the hiccupping old lady "Ave hichki" to the daughter who breaks her

engagement on realising that the young man loves his cat more than any other being, to the poignant young bride who asks, “Kai tero karu mein Kasur” the performer like a chameleon without breaks smoothly changed over from one to the other. A considerable actor, weaving Gujarati, English into a kavit like tukra dialogues, she showed herself to be an adroit mover, combining powerful singing of haunting old Rajasthani folk songs, so pertinent in making a statement on life situations. Sheetal is a special talent.

The other find of the festival was the U.K.’s exceptionally gifted Akash Odedra, whose skills are being honed under famous names like Akram Khan, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Russel Maliphant, with imaginative lighting designs by persons like Michael Hulls and Willy Cessa, adding a vital dimension to the dancer’s work. The riveting Kathak solo with just the supremely majestic sarangi providing the lehra melody with tabla in a lean musical accompaniment showed explosive energy, hands slicing through air and twinkling feet sans ankle bells freezing in immaculate sam precision with high vaulting jumps in Udan. Akram Khan’s choreography in “The Shadow of Man”, in connecting with the animal in each one of us, has movement starting with a bare, sweat glistening, back, with light reflected on the moving muscles, speaking its own language. Movements which test the physical limits to the utmost make the viewer’s mind ache! How lighting becomes a main collaborator in a work was seen in Russel Maliphant’s “Cut” where Michael Hull’s light designing cuts into movement giving the dancer’s moves, based on the dynamics of Kathak and Bharatanatyam he is trained in, a different, contained flow of its own. A play of light and sound in “Constellation” created a world of enchantment, the suspended lit bulbs at different levels like stars in the dark sky with the dancer’s body silhouetted in darkness, astral bodies and dancing body generating their own rhythms and luminosity – in tune with the impending Diwali spirit.

Seemingly simple and repetitive, Padmini Chettur’s “beautiful thing 2” with the body with its inner spaces moving in space dominated by a large light installation by Zuleika Chaudhari, must have been very exhausting. The search for a form in this particular presentation, in ati vilambit laya as is her wont, was rendered with a meditative concentration which is Padmini’s personal signature. The architectural geometry of lines and the manner of treating the audience – which becomes a part of this very intense journey which offers no embellishment of any type – are also very different from what one experiences in work by other artists.

Maya Rao’s “Ravana”, inspired among other things by the eloquent treatment given to this character in Kathakali, her language, was a rich experience of total theatre, with the performer switching with natural seamless ease between the playwright, searching for a way to start the story writing while partaking of the morning cup of steaming tea or coffee, and the character. Was Sita his love the long lost daughter given birth to by Mandodari? How could Sita paint the figure of Ravana when all she had witnessed were his feet? Did the demon King on ceasing to be, change into a bird in the forest waiting patiently (for 14 long years on the shores of the winding lake to meet his lost daughter/love), treading delicately on bird feet, not wanting to disturb Sita resting underground in her mother’s home? So many images passed fleetingly and through it all came strong vibes of the character. The post modernistic comic touch of Michael Jackson’s song with the performer aping Kathakali Ravana movements was hilarious – something only Maya is capable of. Again the final poetic touch was as the actor slowly exits through the open door filled with mist, leaving the feel of a mirage – which is what it was.

A visual and acoustic experience, “Live”, a collaborative work by Navtej Singh Johar and Ben J. Riepe was clearly a challenge to “aspects of eroticism and its repression in the present context of dance.” One could feel shades of Pina Bausch in the shrill acoustic experience, and Navtej’s Yoga sensibilities in the breath of the performance, with constant use of the very nondescript word ‘nice’, and bouts of hysterical laughter and singing by a woman – very original, but all not seeming to this critic to cohere into an integrated statement. The claim was no statement was intended or made. Confused, the only strong impression was that this was not my cup of tea.

Attakalari’s “MeiDhwani” at Mellenium Indraprastha Park in the Indo-German Urban Arts Mela, by a highly trained professional group of dancers performing in wonderful synchronicity was very typical of Jayachandran Palazhy’s work. The meticulously rehearsed abstract dance with dancers having a dialogue as it were with metallic pots (kodams), became over indulgent and needlessly stretched. Mannered walking like the village belle with pot on head was a bit artificial. Revelling in the ‘melody of the body’ through abstract movement got confused and mixed in ideology. Bringing in too much of symbolism in the latter half with Namaskar, and homage to fire and long tubular lights (representing the phallic symbol), ending with the traditional Kalaripayattu homage seemed needlessly digressive. Music mixing, light design and costume in white and red were well conceived.