

DANCEVIEW

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF DANCE

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licking an ice cream cone and practicing his dance steps. Then, as if pulled on a string he slowly he glided across the stage, a puppet, an unacknowledged presence, until it was his time to step into the action. Throughout *House*, dancers entered in and out of the plot when they became *leyaks* (spirits). The women, as seductive water nymphs brought the flood that turned out to be an absurdly ridiculous “dance” in a bathtub. The delicious back and forth between the parents (Catra and Laksmi) and McPhee about the boy’s future looked like it came straight out of Balinese folk drama. Aryani was the housekeeper but also a mischievous spirit troublemaker. Laksmi, as the chanting and dancing Penyani Kekawin who announces the coming doom, looked like a Cassandra. The boys pour into the house and perform a rambunctious Kecak-like dance--on McPhee’s bed.

House’s staging (Jay Scheib), however, undermined the theatrical effectiveness of much of the movement action. With both the orchestra and a skeleton house on stage, there simply was not enough space for the physical movements to breathe, particularly those inside the house. A live video, with the screen above projecting into the audience, tried to mitigate those limitations. It was not enough, but did throw an intriguing spot one another of *House’s* thematic thrusts—the outsider looking in who becomes a voyeur.

With *Sita Haran*, the **Chitresh Das Dance Company** (Cowell Theater, Sept. 27) has a winner. Choreographer and dancer Das has created a charming, utterly accessible yet refined story ballet about the most famous section of the *Ramayana*. It served as a reminder that “kathak” means, “story telling.” Using a gestural language made up of specifically Indian and more generally understood movement vocabulary proved to be a smart decision. Elaborate program notes, supplemented by taped narration also helped in following the complicated plot, but it was Das’ choreography and the clarity of the interpretation that made *Sita* such a delight. This is a show that should travel beyond the confines of its Indian audiences.

Purists might object that, contrary to tradition, “Sita’s” choreography is set and the dancing is not as rhythmically intricate and nuanced as it would be if the dancers were working within given parameters and to live music. Pure dancing—though there were lots of pirouettes—played a secondary role to the story telling. Das also wrote the serviceable score, heard on tape.

But on its own terms *Sita* works. The story picks up when the Demon King Ravan, upon his sister’s instigation, kidnaps Prince Ram’s wife Sita who had followed her husband and his brother into exile. It ends when Ram rather ignobly kills the Monkey King, Bali. All the

parts were danced by Das’ nine-woman company, with five o’clock shadows and pencil-thin mustaches where necessary.

The dancers understood that dance drama will descend into melodrama unless clarity and restraint work in tandem with each other. Not that there weren’t a few Bollywood touches. The skirt swirling Joanna Meini’s flirtatious and spurned Surupanaka was a little too exaggerated just as Anjali Nath’s much suffering Sita a few times looked too much like Lillian Gish. But those are small quibbles. Seibi Lee in the double roles of Marich, the retired roué, and as Hanuman, minister to Sugreeva, the wronged prince of the Monkeys, was magnificent. Her gestures were large and readable with a huge range of facial expressions. With beautiful clean lines and strong stances the brothers Lakshman (Farah Yasmeen Shaikh) and Ram (Rina Mehta) looked alike but Shaikh, in an interesting shadowy way, showed his greater perception of the world around them. Completely loyal, his was not a blind loyalty.

Even small parts were beautifully worked out. Labonee Mohanta’s fleet-footed Golden Deer had a wonderfully nervous anxiety about it. Jatayu, The Grand King of Eagle’s, gradual expiration just about broke my heart.

Sita was very much a company piece though it did have its star, Charlotte Moraga, in the role of the two villains, Ravan, the demon king, and Bali, the monkey king. Evil is always attractive on stage, but Moraga pushed it into the world of the titans. Broad of chest and arms like trunks, villains had grandeur, fierceness and yet a touch of the comic to them. Moraga’s was a major accomplishment.

Smuin Ballet (Palace of Fine Arts, Oct. 2) faces the dilemma of all companies that want to keep going after their founder’s death. The issue of which of Michael’s Smuin works are worth preserving is particularly acute because so much of his easy viewing choreography might not stand the test of time. One of the excellent decisions that Smuin made towards the end of his life was opening his company to younger choreographers, the best of whom, Amy Seiwert, is now its Resident Choreographer.

In its most recent concert, Smuin Ballet, which has a faithful following of now mostly older folks, seems to continue that direction. Seiwert’s new *Soon These Two Worlds* is a charming and witty interpretation of selections from one the Kronos Quartet’s biggest hits “Pieces of Africa.” *Fly Me to the Moon*, set to a string of Frank Sinatra tunes, is Smuin in his serviceable show business vein but if I never have to see his *Medea* again, I shall be most grateful.

Seiwert tuned into the gentle bonhomie of these folk-