

My dance-lecture tour in the month of May 2005 in Canada

- Sunil Kothari reports from Ottawa

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I have almost completed my month long tour of Canada. I would like to share the highlights of it with the readers who follow my travels in Narthaki.

To begin with, I arrived on 15th May last month from New York to Ottawa to rehearse with young dancer Anjali Patil, a disciple of the celebrated Kathak dancer/choreographer Kumudini Lakhia who has blazed a trail of innovative choreography in Kathak. She is going strong from year to year. Her dear friends and admirers at Ahmedabad celebrated her 75th birthday on 19th May 2005. We arranged to send her 75 roses by telephoning our common friend in Ahmedabad. She had in the past, a few years ago, at my request when I had called her from New York, gone personally and given a bouquet of choicest 75 roses to my elder brother, Squadron Leader Bhagwandas Kothari on his 75th birthday in Ahmedabad. We wished her many happy returns of the day through a long distance call.

Our collaborative, high tech, cutting-edge programme with projection of slides, video screening indeed required rehearsals for perfect co-ordination. Anjali emerges out of video screening and performs with the ease of a seasoned dancer. We traverse three phases of Kathak: Temple background: Vaishnav period, the splendour of the Mughal court period and the recent years prior to and after independence when Kathak took a quantum leap, with Kumudini Lakhia's choreographic work 'Atah Kim'- what next?

Kumudini's another brilliant male disciple Prashant Shah and Anjali perform that ever fresh number and each time I see, it invests itself with newness - the most enjoyable choreography of duet Yugal. Both Anjali and Prashant danced in a superb light arrangement to the specially composed music by that ace musician, a disciple of Omkarnath Thakur, Atul Desai, and stole the hearts of a packed audience at the auditorium of Museum of Civilization on 24th May 2005.

To top it, our charming H E Indian High Commissioner Smt. Shaymala Cowsik blessed the event, bringing with her distinguished Canadian bureaucrats and Dr Chidambaram, special advisor to the Prime Minister of India in matters of defense and other visiting dignitaries to the performance. Before we took to the stage, dressed in impeccable South Indian Conjeevaram blazing yellow silk saree, she delivered the inaugural remarks without a single piece of paper in her hand, speaking spontaneously on Kathak, tracing its evolution, gently leading the audience into the beauty of Kathak dance. The audience gave a standing ovation.

Anjali and I had planned to curate this event last year when I was in Montreal at the renowned choreographer Mamata Niyogi Nakra's place giving a talk on how I had designed and edited my book 'New Directions in Indian Dance' (Marg Publications), illustrating it with screenings of innovations in Indian dance within India and those innovations by Indian Diaspora abroad, excerpts of Aditi Mangaldas, Chandralekha, Rajika Puri and Anjani Ambegaonkar and her thoroughly well trained in Kathak, daughter Amrapali's experimental work and participation in 'Cirque du Soleil.' Anjali Patil had specially come to Montreal driving from Ottawa to attend my lecture and next morning we met at the residence of Dr Devesh Soneji, Assistant Professor in the Religious Studies of McGill University to

shape up the concept.

There is that exquisite stamp of Kadamb School of Kathak in Anjali's demeanor, performance and approach to Kathak. She has flowered into a brilliant Kathak exponent under Kumudini Lakhia's affectionate but strict and disciplinary gaze, studying from her, spending long periods at Ahmedabad and practicing with Prashant Shah. I had seen them presenting Yugal at Kalanidhi Fine Arts' 'A Sense of Century of Indian Dance' festival at Toronto in March 2004, and was impressed at the sophistication and élan, doing justice to Kumudini's choreography. And when we rehearsed for four days in Ottawa, I felt more confident to present her in this collaborative effort. We had selected the slides of various temples, miniature paintings, paintings of drawings from the collection of British India Library, London, and had a well filmed video of Anjali as Meera in a palace of Rajasthan, from which she emerges dancing with perfect synchrony.

Then the final whole day rehearsal at the auditorium with state of art gadgets, lighting, to the live musical accompaniment on tabla by Ramesh Bapodara who joined us from Paris and a local musician from Afghanistan, settled in Ottawa, the light designing by Brad who had spent six months in Ahmedabad at Kadamb and was familiar with the images from my book on Kathak (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi), the screening of the slides, the entrance of a dancer Shirli trained in western vocal music and currently studying Hindustani music, singing thumri in Mughal court. We enjoyed the presentation as much as the audience or even more with all the attendant problems of entries and exits.

It is always a pleasure to perform abroad as things are handled professionally and the equipment, the lighting, the sound system and related matters are in perfect condition. The auditorium at the Museum of Civilization is well equipped with the latest state of art facilities. That lighting plays such an important role in new directions in Indian dance was brought to the notice of one and all when Prashant Shah and Anjali made an exit in a diagonal light like two swans!

Ah, those images linger still in my inner eye!

Dr. Sunil Kothari was Professor of Dance at the Rabindra Bharati University at Calcutta and the first to occupy the Uday Shankar Chair. A dance writer, roving critic, research scholar and author of many books, he is the recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award conferred by Kalanidhi Fine Arts of Canada, in March 2004.

Author