

Friday Review Chennai and Tamil Nadu

Bhakti was intact

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

The drastically edited presentation scored through earnestness and commitment.

Photos: V. Ganesan



Showcase of competence: Melattur Bhagavatamela.

Just to hear its ringing “tongutaka tadinginatom” is to be invested with the fervour of a traditional theatre which even today, continues to be a form of ritual worship. Bhagavatamela undoubtedly belongs to the open air, street pandal venue, and to a leisurely, all-night unfolding. A drastically edited timebound version in a modern auditorium cannot but be a reduced experience.

And yet, Melattur Natarajan's Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanti Bhagavatamela Natya Nataka Sangam managed to bring out the essential aspects of the chosen play “Kamsa Vadham,” introduce the main characters with more than mere competence, and evoke the “navarasas” as promised in the musical introduction to this opera by doyen Venkatrama Sastri (1743-1809).

Veritable fare



On that day at the Music Academy, the team of S. Narasimhan, S. Venkatesan, Prabhakaran (vocals), Nagai Sriram (mridangam) Ramprasad (violin) and B. Gokul (flute) did their best to create the 'saannidhyam' the work demands. Nor were actors/dancers behindhand in their earnestness. Kamsan's patrapravesam lived up to every expectation. Storming in after routine Kattiyakaran and Ganapati, S. Kumar as Kamsan, made viewers sit up with the veritable turbulence he created – first in the seated posture, next as he stamped across the stage in various ways and paces, more menacing with weapons in hand. Timid Vasudeva and pregnant Devaki were no match for his fury. As always N. Srikanth as Devaki sketched a brilliant scene with his poignant performance, with just the right level of emotional charge. He maintained drama without sliding into melodrama. The song with the refrain “Anna! Anna!” where Devaki reminds Kamsa of their sibling bonds, moved everyone in the hall except of course, Kamsa. Veteran Natarajan was able to paint a convincing Yasoda in a short span, all adoration and protectiveness towards her cherished child. His hasya stroke was a bonus.

The story progressed credibly enough to make viewers overlook the strangeness of a Balarama looking far younger than Krishna. Vijay Madhavan's calendar blue Krishna began as Mahavishnu who “shrank” into the baby on the banyan leaf amidst applause, to become the infant of the prison-bound Devaki. As the avenger he destroyed Kamsa easily, as if in play. With the past 80-year old Venkatraman as Ugrasena, dharma is restored in Mathura and the victorious Krishna is reunited with birth parents amidst rejoicings.

The lengthy narrations and sancharis of all night performance had to be replaced with slideshow effects. Nor were all participants equally accomplished which made for unevenness in performance. The absence of over all aesthetics in presentation and costume could be overlooked as bhakti and commitment were not missed out from start to finish.