REPORT ON

SHAKUNTALA DANCE DRAMA BY YOGNAT

“The rain cloud laden with rain blesses the parched earth with its showers; similarly our beloved AMMAJI is the dynamic rain cloud of dance dramas showering upon us such blessed, veritable feasts of Indian culture” said Pulavar I Pattabhiraman as he presented AMMAJI with the title award of “Natya Nataka Karmugil”. Truer words have not been spoken as the dedicated service of Ammaji for the cause of our beloved Indian cultural arts is unparalleled in the history of Pondicherry.

Under Ammaji’s aesthetic, artistic and dynamic direction and co-ordination, Mahakavi Kalidasa’s SHAKUNTALA came truly and fully alive in front of more than a thousand strong and appreciative members of the audience who had assembled on 16th October in the New Auditorium of JIPMER. This was Yognat’s unique way of paying tribute to our visionary founder, Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj on the occasion of his 104th Jayanthi (birthday) celebrations.

Lyrics for the dance drama as in the past 17 years were written by Mutthamizmamani Kalaimamani Pulavar I PATTABHIRAMAN on the basis of research done by Ammaji and Dr Ananda while the music was composed by Kalaimamani Nada Yoga Shironmani SV JAGATHEEESAN in association with Dr Ananda who composed musical interludes and rhythmic patterns to enhance the effects. Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani and Smt Devasena Bhavanani conducted the performance with stirring Nattuvangam and emotive singing and were responsible for choreographing the initial dance compositions that were then tweaked into perfection in Ammaji’s magical hands. Ammaji has that amazing magical touch that can make even the lifeless statues come to life and dance with grace and beauty. No wonder all the children and young adults performed their roles to perfection by merging themselves into their stage characters.

The main roles of Shakuntala and Dushyanta were portrayed by Selvi D LAKSHMI and Selvi I KRISHNAVENI who were indeed the most charming and handsome couple with amazing chemistry on stage. It was a pleasure to have Lakshmi dance with us again after a short gap as she is undoubtedly one of the brightest stars to have come out of Yognat. In a true display of yogic character and skill in action, she managed to come for all the practice sessions despite her busy work schedule in Chennai making great effort for the success of the entire dance drama. Having played numerous major male roles in our dance dramas in the past, this year was refreshingly different with her playing to perfection the sweet and demur role of Shakuntala. It was very special to have a message from her later saying, “Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this year's dance drama as I feel that every moment that I dance, I live my life to the whole”.

Krishnaveni who has in the past few years matured into a lovely dancer deserves a special mention for her excellent help in organizing a lot of the initial choreography as well as in coordinating all the student participants into a dynamic team. She was often the only one who really knew what was happening during the initial practice sessions! Her noble grace under pressure and true Yogic character in testing times deserve great appreciation and we were
tremendously pleased when Pulavar I Pattabhiraman chose to honor with the title of “Nalina Natiya Kalaip Poonthendral”. He also honoured Sri C Shamugam and Smt Lalitha Shamugam with the titles of “Yoga Semmamani” and “Yoga Nanmamani” in recognition of their Yoga Seva though Yognat under the dynamic guidance of Ammaji. Dr Ananda and Devasena who have formed a dynamic yoga and cultural team traveling all over the world in the past few years were honoured as “Inaiyil Iniya Inai”.

Right from the first scene where Dushyanta and Shakuntala are introduced right to the grand ending praising Bharata Nadu the audience was totally transfixed to the edge of their seats. Dr Padma Prashanthini, another lovely star of Yognat, was to say later, “Each character brought life which weaved the story beautifully. The characters filled the auditorium, and did not give way for any other thought. It is well known that “Yogaha Chitta Vriti Nirodaha” but this performance made me realise the possibility of “Natyaha Chitta Vriti Nirodaha”! “This was a most amazing performance. No loose ends at all - we were totally glued to the drama and its unique dynamism. No one but Ammaji can do this” said Srini, Director of Yatra Arts Foundation in Auroville who was also in charge of the excellent lighting for the drama.

Smt Reena Dayanidy, one of the stars of Yognat understood the difference I this dance drama in terms of excellent preparation. Being part of the back stage management committee she commented, “Usually Stage rehearsals and final performance will have totally different effects but to me this time, the stage rehearsal itself was so perfect that it made me feel that it was the best program i have ever seen. I was lost for sometime and then inspired I called up some of friends that night and asked them not to miss it. This drama is very unique because it is very difficult for anyone to say this scene or that scene was the best for the entire dance drama as a whole looked the very best. Congrats to my dear Yognat team! A wonderful team effort”!

The musical support team was truly par excellence and many commented on their struggle in trying to decide whether to focus on the music or the dance! Selvi R Shalini touched a new level of proficiency and it was undoubtedly her best performance to date. Devasena’s excellent Nattuvangam and vocal support enabled me to concentrate on the emotive aspects of the singing and the Keyboard playing by Sri SV Jagatheesan and violin support from Sri V Thanikachalam was excellent. Sri M Prasanna lent excellent rhythmic support on the Mridungam along with Puduvari Kalaimamani Sri Al Ramasamy who created amazing special effects. The costumes were ably organized by Smt Lalitha Shanmugam and Yogacharini Vibha with their tidy make up her team of Smt Kanimozhi, Selvi G Sarulatha, Smt Amudha, Smt Gunaseeli, Smt Kokila, Smt Bijal, Selvi I Balasundari and so many other volunteers. The back stage management was taken care of efficiently by the team of Sri C Shanmugam, Sri C Kulandaivelu, Sri G Dayanidy, Dr Balaji and Sri Saravanan without any major hiccups. Sri P Mutthamizvaanan and Smt Meena Ramanathan gave an excellent overview of each scene in Tamil and English respectively helping the audience to enjoy better every nuance of the drama. Reception arrangements were handled by Sri E Gajendiran, Selvi Sriprabha, Selvi Jayalakshmi and Smt Tamilselvi.

The main roles were played by I Krishnaveni (Dushyanta), D Lakshmi (Shakuntala), Dhivya Priya Bhavanani (Bharata and fisherman), S Vidya Shankari (Priyamvadha and fisher man), S Samyuktha (Anusuya and fisher man), S Devasena (Rishi Kanva, Guard and Asura Chief), R Varalakshmi (Durvasa Rishi and Indiran), S Samyuktha (Rishi Vishwamitra), SS Lothikha (Menaka), S Sabarishree (Rishi Kashyapa), S Preethika (Arunthathi), N Poonguzhali (Mathali, Fishermen and Bee), S Sarveghnalakshmi (Charioteer), S Valli (Deer), Anandraj Bhavanani (Lion Cub). Others who played numerous roles included S Anurupa, A Thamizhmalar, R

Our Chief Guest Sri P. Mathew Samuel the Special Secretary, Art and Culture, Government of Pondicherry was such an inspiring Guest of Honor. He charmed us all by bringing his 90 year old mother to the event along with other close family members and was a receptive and attentive member of the audience, a sincere and appreciative speaker and was so warm and generous in his blessings for all the youngsters. “Respected Ammaji, my dear friend Ananda and their institution are assets to Pondicherry” said he as he expressed his admiration for the work done over the past 40 years by Swamiji and Ammaji in taking Yoga and the cultural arts to all sections of the Pondicherry society irrespective of any man-made barriers. He recounted his hilarious experiences in helping Swamiji push his old Volkswagen van in the streets of Pondicherry many decades ago and quipped that the van seemed to always stall close to places where he was!

The special guest of the evening Sri B Santhanakrishnan, Director of Art and Culture, Government of Pondicherry was effusive in his appreciation of the wonderful performance by all team members. “I haven’t seen such a perfect performance anywhere. This is such a special evening for me to see the results of the yeoman cultural service work being done by Yoganjali Natyalayam under the guidance of Ammaji and Dr Ananda”. and singled out Lakshmi for special praise. He was also very taken by the musical team who created a magical environment and said “Many a time I didn’t know whether to watch the dancers or watch Dr Ananda sing as he was so amazing”. Other appreciative and honorable special guests included Sri C.M. Sukumar (Chief Manager, Indian Overseas Bank), Puduvai Kalaimamani Pulavar I Pattabhiraman (Director Valluvar Villisas Kuzhu) and Sri B Girish Kumar (Correspondent, New Modern Vidya Mandir).

Eminent Pondicherrians who graced the evening included Thavathiru Velu Swamigal (Managing Trustee of Sri Rengaih Madam in Karaikal), Dr Madanmohan (HOD Physiology and Programme Director ACYTER, JIPMER), Dr N Ardhanari (Eminent social activist and educationist), Puduvai Kalaimamani Sri V Manikannan (Senior vocalist and music master of Ananda Ashram for many decades), Puduvai Kalaimamani Sri SV Jagatheesan (General Secretary Pondicherry Music and Dance Artistes Association) and Sri Muthou (Former Joint Director Education). International representatives of the Gitananda Yoga Family worldwide honoured on the occasion included Yogacharini Shobana of the Czech Republic, Yogacharya Michael Deslippe of Canada, Yogacharini Shwetha of the Czech Republic and Yogacharini Aishwariya of Canada.

Yoga Sadhaki Vibha (Sana Aejaz) of Chennai was honoured with the Yogacharini title and received her Advanced Yoga Teacher Training Diploma on the occasion. Her parents were also honoured on the occasion and Ammaji expressed the desire that Vibha take Yoga into the Islamic community creating health and harmony in society through such a union of thought. Dr Ananda expressed his admiration and gratitude towards Vibha for her Yoga Seva towards Ammaji during Ammaji’s hospitalization and said that Vibha had proved herself to be Ammaji’s Yoga daughter through her dedicated service and Yogic attitude.

What can I say of my dear and most loving students? Such amazing human being they are! Showing us that they are capable of doing the most difficult things, with unbelievable equipoise and grace at any and every time. What can I say of the stars of the show; my dear Lakshmi,
Krishnaveni, Samyuktha, Lothikha and Sowmiya? All I can say is that you all stole my heart with your skill and dedication to this wonderful art. I had to struggle a lot to control my tears when my dear Shalini was singing with me. I have to say that Varalakshmi is such a natural performer who gets fully into any character she plays. Her dedication towards doing a role in every dance dram to honor Swamiji is highly commendable. Too bad she never went into acting- would have been a top of the top in the film world with such intensity of character. Of course each and every one of the small ones was such a cute star too that night. All of you have been blessed with such great talents and loving supportive parents. May Swamiji and Ammaji bless you with the very best always.

All in all I can safely say that the greatest success at all levels was achieved by the Yognat team who surpassed all expectation! Not a wrong move anywhere in the 3-hour long Shakuntala dance drama! Swamiji was there with us every moment and Ammaji’s Shakti manifested in such a loving and dynamic manner! Hats off to the entire Yognat team for such an amazing, entertaining and enlightening time! 3 cheers!!!