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"Malavika Sarukkai's elegant dance tribute to the Ganges"

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Malavika Sarukkai's elegant dance tribute to the Ganges Nancy G. Heller, For The Inquirer

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Long ago, I stopped making 'entertainment' . . . I stripped away the decorative. That doesn't interest me anymore.

So said Malavika Sarukkai, the extraordinary Indian classical dancer, during Saturday's post-performance Q&A session at the Annenberg Center. This concert of Bharatanatyam, a centuries-old dance form from South India, was the culmination of a weeklong residency that also included master classes, a lecture-demonstration, and the screening of a documentary film.

Mind you, Sarukkai didn't stint on sheer physical beauty - in her powerful, sensuous movement or her gloriously rich, blue silk costume accented with gold. But it takes a mature artist to resist the temptation to be simply beautiful, and - more important - to create and present eloquent moments of silence and stillness onstage.

After 42 years as a professional dancer of international renown, Sarukkai has earned the right to experiment with Bharatanatyam. And she did, in the evening-long Ganga: Nitya Vaahini (Ganges: The Eternal River). At various points in this four-part homage Sarukkai, embodied swimming fish, a saucy courtesan, a priest, and the ever-flowing waters of the holy river itself.

Sarukkai uses both the traditional Bharatanatyam movement vocabulary - complex poses based on ancient Indian sculpture, symbolic hand gestures, and precise footwork performed barefoot with ankle bells - and her own variations on that vocabulary. In Ganga, she breaks with tradition in another way, devoting an entire segment of her composition to a heartfelt lament for the now-polluted river.

One of the great pleasures of this program was listening to the five-person musical ensemble and observing the inventive, respectful, yet also playful interactions among them, and between them and the dancer. But, too often, their sound was ruined by over-amplification, an all too common problem at this venue.

No additional performances.

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