

An Incredible Monsoon Stage for Incredible India's Birthday

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Samskriti Executive Director Rathna Kumar with Indian Consul General Anupam Ray. Photos: Amitava Sarkar

By Jawahar Malhotra

HOUSTON: Neither the fury of the wind nor the fierce downpour of monsoon rains could deter the show and Executive Director cheerfully told nervous inquiring callers in performing parlance that the show must go on. About a thousand people heeded her call and braved the elements to see the program “Incredible India” (using Indian Tourism’s motto, with exclamation marks for

the first I's) at the Miller Outdoor Theatre, even as lightning bolts crackled and zig-zagged to earth behind the seats, beyond the hill that surrounds the performance bowl.

It was India's Independence Day, for goodness sakes, and the first ever collaboration between the 22 year-old Indian Performing Arts Samskriti (meaning cultural tradition) and the 21 year-old Consulate General of India in Houston. The new Consul General, Anupam Ray, who has been in his assignment only since May, has shown his flair for the unconventional and his fondness for Indian arts and literature when reaching out to the Indian community in the Bayou City. Since his arrival, he has enlisted the community in the International Day of Yoga, made a much heralded speech to the Indian Chamber of Commerce and at this event, shown his understanding of Indian song and dance in the immense pool of talent here which he intends to showcase wherever he can. He attended with his wife Dr. Amit Goldberg, his daughter and their son who fell asleep on his mother's shoulder as the evening wore on.



Jonathan Hollander's Durga Project by The Battery Dance Company of New York

Ray opened up the 2-hour program with a welcoming address in which he expressed his happiness at India's 70th Independence Day being celebrated with "such enthusiasm so far from its shores" adding "it is a day in which we remember the sacrifices of those who fought to bring liberty and democracy to our people." Early next morning, on August 15 itself, the Consulate celebrated with a flag-hoisting at the office on Scotland Street – another departure from the program that has traditionally been held at the Consul General's house – followed up with another flag hoisting at India House (see related stories).

Samskriti Executive Director, the renowned dancer Rathna Kumar, gave brief appropriate introductions backstage for each performance. “India is a land that is at once bewitching, diverse, mysterious, charming, colorful, enticing, inviting!”, she remarked, “... with a rich tapestry of dances and songs that make the fabric of Indian culture so extraordinary and unique.”



The evening’s eight performances started with bhajans and patriotic songs by students of the Center for Indian Classical Music of Houston under the guidance of Executive Director Pandit Suman Ghosh. This was followed up by the dance “Elements”, a contemporary interpretation of the five elements Water, Fire, Earth, Wind and Space seen as manifestations of the Creator and Destroyer, Shiva and performed by students of the Anjali Center for Performing Arts.

On the heels of this was the dance Tarangam, from Andhra Pradesh, with dancers balancing on rims of brass plates while singing a paean to the blue god, Krishna and choreographed by Vempati Chinna Satyam. This was followed by the graceful and statuesque style of Odissi dance by students of the Kalangan School of Odissi under Director Suradipta Datta and choreographed by Kelucharan Mahapatra. The classical dances were closed off with a Tillana in Bharatnatyam form again from the Anjali Center for Performing Arts, choreographed by Rathna Kumar.

Then came on two folk dances, a Bengali vibrant dance by Piyal Sengupta and Ensemble and a lively and colorful Gujarati raas by Roarin’ Raas under captain Atish Patel.

The piece de resistance of the evening was the Durga Project by the Battery Dance Company of New York under Artistic Director and Choreographer Jonathan Hollander, a Fulbright Scholar to India and a great lover of Indian dance and music, who was on hand for the evening. The performance showed how malleable Indian music is – the heavy tempo, tabla and drum score

was from Rajan and Sajan Mishra's Tarana Raga Durga and Garuda's Dream, produced by Sangita Sounds with table solos by Samir Chatterjee – and how it can lend itself seamlessly to Modern Dance in a harmonious coming together of the East and the West. The Battery Dancers Robin, Mira, Sean were joined by visiting guest artist Unnath Jain from India as they performed the highly sensual dance of a lovers triangle, redemption and forgiveness. They had performed a day earlier in Dallas and were to perform in New York the following weekend and both Hollander and Jain mingled with the crowd after the show.

Incredible India was made possible by grants from the Texas Commission on the Arts, the City of Houston through the Miller Theatre Advisory Board, and the Consulate General of India in Houston.