

Katha kahe so kathak

By Anasuya Menon

It was a perfect blend of sur, taal, and laya that made the audience transcend to the world of kathak. Subtle movements of the arms gave shape to emotions and tales of Gods unturled through delicate footwork. Shila Mehta and her troupe took the audience at the Fine Arts Hall to the wonderland of mythology. The programme, on Saturday, was organised by Dharani.

"Katha kahe so kathak; the one who tells a story is kathak," Shila said, feeling perfectly at home on stage, urging the audience to keep up the rhythm for her. Everybody is born with rhythm, so enjoy with me, she said as her feet gracefully caught up with the rhythm, reached a crescendo and then fell to a slower pace.

Shila Mehta was all praises for the Kochi audience who participated in her performance. "The audience was very responsive. kathak is all about reaching out to the audience. If the artiste is unable to do that, the point is lost," she said as she relaxed in her hotel room the day after her performance.

Shila was trained in Bharathanatyam for seven years but felt that the kind of flexibility and independence that she experienced while performing kathak was rarely felt while performing anything else.

"Kathak is an elevated form of dance. You feel like the dancer is reaching out to some supreme power," she says, as she explains why kathak appealed to her more than Bharathanatyam or Manipuri.

She unravelled the complexities of this graceful dance, her arms cutting through the air, as she spoke of the inevitability of a sense of taal in kathak. *Taal* is nothing but a recreation of the cycle of life...



Express/Rajeev Prasad

For Shila Mehta, kathak is an elevated form of dance. It makes the dancer reach out to some supreme power

"The idea of *uthpathi*, *ssthithi* and *vinash* is so beautifully enacted through feet movements," she said.

There is a general opinion that kathak is a stiff form of dance, Shila pointed out. "That may be because its movements are restricted to the arms and the feet. But, look at it this way,

The dancer does not get the support of his or her body while dancing. The entire expression has to be conveyed through the eyes, arms and feet," says Shila, who felt that kathak provided scope for improvisation and spontaneity. Aesthetics too plays an important role as it is not bound by strict rules. She

believes that kathak also reflects the personality of the dancer.

Having originated in the temples of North India, kathak has come a long way from being just a temple art. It was greatly influenced by Persian dancers who performed in palace courts during the Mughal era. It has thus imbibed the beauty of both Mughal and Hindu traditions. This explains why kathak dancers wear either Mughal or Hindu costumes. Popular tales, either from epics or folklore are woven into poetry which the dancers perform.

Shila Mehta learnt the nuances of kathak from Prahlad Das and his son Chitresh Das. Later, she also received training from Pt. Vijay Shankar, Pt. Kumudini Lakhia, Kalanidhi Narayan, Pt. Birju Maharaj and Talyogi Pt. Suresh Talwakar. She also has the Nritya Praveen to her credit.

For her, dance is a physical, mental and spiritual experience. "Kathak takes me away from the material world, calms my mind and I feel pure bliss," she said.

Shila runs an academy of performing arts called Nupur Zankar in Mumbai and is currently doing research on the folk literature of Gujarat. By blending it in kathak, she intends to explore the possibilities of Gujarati folklore. "Charani Sahitya, the folk literature of Gujarat, gels so well with kathak that it would be beautiful if I could utilise the richness of the language. I intend to compose an item which would be kathak, but where the sensibilities would essentially be folk," she said. She used the *dandiya* to enhance the *tarana* (rhythm) in an item which she performed in Kochi.

Shila conducts programmes in the US every year and has also been invited by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to perform in Germany.