

Kathak performance by Shila Mehta inspires Belgium.....

By Ilse Ruysen
September 12, 2011

The combination of years of hard work and mere artistic talent were on display on Sunday night at De Ingang in Ghent, where Shila Mehta presented a delightful evening of Kathak dance to conclude her most recent stay in Belgium.



For the 4th year in row, Belgium had the honor to welcome Shila Mehta, an internationally celebrated Kathak dancer and director of the Nupur Zankar Academy of Performing Arts & Research Centre in Mumbai. As a solo dancer and illustrious choreographer, she performed in numerous distinguished festivals of India and abroad resulting in many notable honors and awards.

The way in which she is able to combine both passion and technical precision is guarantee for an outstanding performance. Not only does Shila Mehta show spectacular endeavor towards the classical Indian dance form she came to present in Belgium, at the same time she holds an utterly appealing charisma, which enables her to pass through this energy to her students, inspiring them to follow in her footsteps.

Kathak is one of the eight Indian classical dances, which can be traced back to the nomadic bards of ancient Northern India, known as Kathaks, or storytellers. From its early form as a devotional expression dedicated to the Hindu gods, Kathak gradually moved out of the temples and into the courts of the Hindu and Muslim rulers. Yet, it was only during the mid-1800's that Kathak received renewed attention and gained prominence among the kings not only as a form of entertainment, but as a classical form of art.

Using instrumental and vocal music along with stylized gestures, the Kathak dancer brings to life the great scriptures and epics of ancient times, particularly the great Indian epics "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana". The dance emphasizes rhythmic footwork, amplified by anklets of tiny bells. But it also displays a multitude of facial expressions and refined gestures that allow the performer to embody multiple personalities or creatures in these timeless tales. This mixture of dance, music and mime makes Kathak one of the most vibrant theater art forms in the world.

After her first training with Shila Mehta, Maya Saper, a professional dancer and choreographer from Ghent, decided to invite her Kathak Guruji to Belgium to share her experience with others.



They started a project 4 years ago which aims at bringing top-class Kathak dance to Belgium. Given that high-quality training in Kathak has not been available anywhere else in Belgium so far, this project has each year offered an opportunity for students and professional dancers to indulge in Kathak during a number of short-term, intensive workshops. Yet, given the success and interest in a more elaborate programme, the duo recently decided to let Maya Sapera offer a year-round Kathak course during the upcoming years. By developing a more elaborate teaching environment for Kathak, they hope to give this magnificent dance the attention it deserves. The introduction of a voluntary exam at the end of each course will be one of the strategies to upgrade Indian classical dance also in Belgium from an amateur dance to a renowned form of art. The ultimate goal is to lay the foundations for high-quality Kathak dance in Belgium which might one day bring along international recognition, especially from India.

This year, Shila Mehta has been in Belgium for a one-week teaching programme, involving a two-day beginner's workshop as well as an intensive training for a selection of more advanced dancers. Whereas the beginners were introduced to the basic steps and a series of short but endearing choreographies, the latter had the opportunity to touch up their technique built up during previous years. For many of the students it has been a wonderful and exciting experience. When asked about their impressions, one of them answered: "When I saw Shila Mehta perform in the Bozar in Brussels last year, I was moved to tears. It was unbelievable to see how a story can be told without words, using only the body in combination with a great amount of passion and empathy. Enchanted by the elegant movements and eloquent displays of footwork, I felt the desperate need to learn this beautiful dance myself."



The workshop was concluded by a magnificent presentation by Shila Mehta herself, and three students from her intensive training. Performing a series of expressive evocations of ancient stories from the great epics as well as an enchanting display of rhythmic skills, Shila Mehta once again left the audience spellbound. Especially the episode about Lord Krishna chasing a girl (WIE WAS DIT WEER?) who was carrying home water and constantly encouraging him to go away while at the same time she was just very much in love with him, was enormously enjoyed by the audience. And also the demonstration of her three students was absolutely magnificent. The result of their intensive training was a successful mix of powerful footwork, delicate gestures and vocal chants, corresponding to specific cycles of beats in the music. A true pleasure for the eye!

In sum, many have been left behind astonished by Shila Mehta's visit to Belgium and everyone is looking forward to a chance to indulge again in the wonderful art form of Kathak dance...