



P RAJENDRAN

When Rama Vaidyanathan performed the *Ras Lila* on a sun-dappled stage under the trees in Battery Park, New York City, she was acutely aware this was a privilege she cannot look forward to back in India.

Her dance was part of the Erasing Borders Festival of Indian Dance, organized by the Indo-American Arts Council, August 15-17. About 200 people came for the free event and curious onlookers came around all the time, and settled on the grass awhile to watch.

Besides the outdoor Indian Independence Day session in Battery Park, there were two other sets of performances, both indoors, at the La MaMa experimental theater in the East Village.

"It was really nice. There is a connection between dance and nature," Vaidyanathan said, arguing that, in its early history, the kind of Bharata Natyam she practices was likely also performed under the trees in some temple compound.

The thought makes "the adrenalin flow the body," she said.

It showed. Lost in the mood, Vaidyanathan showed uncommon power as she performed the introductory *Mayur Alaarippu*, and, later, the more delicate and flirtatious *Ras Lila*, the dance of the besotted *rasikas* for Krishna or, in Vaidyanathan's terms, the yearning of the living soul for the ultimate one.

Her performance followed two dances by an enthusiastic and athletic trio from the Gurukul Academy; a Mohini Attam performance about a peacock pining for rain, the *Mayil Koothu* by Vijayalakshmi; and an Odissi performance about a sapling growing into a tree, the *Charkavaha Pallavi*, by Rahul Acharya.

Rani Khanam, a Kathak performer, impressively described in word and deed, the kinesthetic memes the Lucknow *gharana* relies on, using her anklets and the sinuous movements of arms to depict, among other things, one girl experiencing the rain and another waiting for her swain.

In the first effort, she used well-timed claps of her hands and her anklets to uncannily recreate the transformation of

## A celebration of Indian dance carries on despite hurdles

a light drizzle into a heavy shower.

Aroon Shivadasani, executive director, IAAC, has some trouble putting together the annual event, in its sixth year now.

"All of these dancers are very accomplished. All of them are at the top of their respective genres," she said, speaking of the stringent selection process. Yet the IAAC could not have the One New York Plaza location like last year.

A team of panelists, and curators Rajika Puri and Uttara Asha Coorlawala, assessed the appeals of applicants, the people who would be in this part of the world at the right time, and those who should be requested to come before drawing up the final list.

Puri and Coorlawala said they also scouted for talent, and viewed 80 to 90 videos before deciding who to call in.

"We also try to bring people from India that we want," Puri said, adding that this was a costly enterprise for their nonprofit.

Rama was going to be in New York, Rani was over in California — making bringing her over an easier option — but Rahul and Vijayalakshmi came from India.

Besides these logistical problems, Coorlawala also described the difficulty of explaining the finer details to mainly mainstream visitors just learning about classical Indian dance.

"People don't know how to explain it to a Western audience," she said, pointing out, by comparison, the difficulty of explaining a Kabir *doha* (couplet) to those unfamiliar with the contextual nuances embedded in the language.

Shivadasani said the dancers were being paid a small honorarium but wished the organization had more money to give the performers.

After the performances, the three dancers from the Gurukul Academy — Samarpita Bajpai, Kirstie McDermott and Krystal Bryan — gave an impromptu onstage lesson for the audience.

There was less interest for classical dance forms in India now, Khanam said later, pointing out that all Indian television channels other than the government-run Doordarshan were opting for the immediately popular, and so commercially promising, art forms.

Considering how these art forms fared in their home country, she said it was very encouraging to have such an event in New York.

PHOTOGRAPHS: KABIR CHOPRA



Snapshots from the Erasing Borders Festival of Indian Dance, organized by the Indo-American Arts Council, in New York, August 15-17