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Theatre & Dance

Erasing Borders, Battery Dance Festival, New York — review

Apollinaire Scherr

The showcase for Indian styles was danced expertly but the outdoor setting was ill-considered



Mohiniyattam dancer Pallavi Krishnan performs at Erasing Borders. Photo: Darial Sneed

The harbour over which the Statue of Liberty presides is backdrop to the weeklong Battery Dance Festival. It's a very picturesque setting — if you can see. For the first hour of the Erasing Borders showcase for Indian dance, the audience had to stare into the sun, squinting and sweating and grumbling between numbers. Still, no one left, a testament to the excellence of the artists and programming. The soloists flown in from India for the occasion were especially impressive. In the best pieces, each dancer's idiom seemed tuned precisely for the dance at hand.

Kathak invites showboating, given the intricate rhythms beaten out by bell-laden feet and the junket of turns adorned with flamelike arms. But the statuesque Sanjukta Wagh made the form worthy of a pious invocation to Shiva, god of creation, destruction and dance. Wagh's carriage was regal, her arms strongly angled, her steps and gestures crisply etched. When she paused, a meditative stillness pooled around her. And her drumming feet served not as the usual show-stopper but as a summoning of energy.

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Rakesh Sai Babu, descendent of royal Chhau performers, took advantage of the bowlegged stance and vigorous crooked-leg swings characteristic of this male dance to depict a holy man's wanderings. This was a walking dance. With collection box in one hand and canteen of holy water in the other, Sai Babu paced the stage purposefully to heavy drums. Swinging his leg in a figure-eight to initiate each step and lunging low as he transferred his weight, he emphasised the seeker's effortful quest yet buoyant spirit.

In its swaying softness, mohiniyattam is said to reflect its native land, balmy Kerala. Too often, though, it resembles a lacklustre version of the voluptuous dance-drama odissi. Not with Pallavi Krishnan, who blew in sideways like a welcome breeze. Head charmingly atilt and eyes averted from wherever she was headed, Krishnan swayed from side to side and sank low in plié. Her torso slanted backward so the humble belly, not the commanding head, appeared to lead. She seemed the blessed beneficiary of a benign Nature. And, indeed, as Krishnan danced, the sun did us the kindness of setting.



A second edition of 'Erasing Borders' appears at Pace University August 28;

batterydance.org; iaac.us