

## KURUNTOKAI - "The Interior Landscape".....A Journey into Love

"What could my mother be to yours?

What kin is my father to yours anyway?

And how did you and I meet ever?

But in Love -

Our hearts are as red earth and pouring rain mingled beyond parting"

Kuruntokai - ancient Tamil

poetry - Translated by A. K. Ramanujan

These beautiful lines from ancient Tamil poetry found meaning on stage in the deft hands of Anandavalli of Lingalayam Dance Academy when she staged KURUNTOKAI, at the Parramatta Riverside Theatre in Sydney on the 28th and 29th of July and at Murrniji Theatre, Canberra on the 26th of August 2006.

With six beautiful girls and a very versatile male dancer, Anandavalli's choreography of five Kuruntokai poems depicting the love life of the ancient Tamils was a visual delight. The music support, and aesthetically beautiful costumes enriched the performance.

Kuruntokai is an anthology of four hundred love poems of 4 - 9 lines each, sung by different bards nearly 2000 years ago during the Sangam age, known as "AHAM" or love poetry in Tamil. Some of these beautiful poems were translated into English as "Interior Landscape" by the celebrated poet the Late A.K. Ramanujan.

"AHAM" poetry centres on the world of inner experience taking the love of man and woman as its ideal expression. Its themes encompass love in all its variety - Love before and after marriage, in union and in separation, in anxiety and in patience, in chastity and in betrayal.

The ancient Tamil poets sang about the five phases of love peculiar to the five landscapes of the Tamil homeland - the mountains, the forests and pastoral lands, the coastal regions, the parched wastelands and the fertile valleys.

It was love at first sight in the mountainous regions where the hunter men courted the women who kept watch in the corn fields.

There was temporary separation in the pastoral lands, the coastal regions and the dry wastelands when men left their women folk and went away for longer periods to earn their livelihood. It was patient and anxious waiting by the women.

Life was comparatively comfortable in the fertile regions. But there was resentment and "sulking" exhibited by the women when the men went in search of pleasure, and the wives had to guard them from the lure of other women.

Each phase of love got its name from the flowers found in each landscape - KURUNJI, MULLAI, NEYTAL, PAALAI and MARUTHAM.

These poets sang the real world - the life as they saw it. They sang the secular world and not the sacred. The audience who are used to seeing Puranic Gods and Epic heroes were treated to a completely different style of dance in Kuruntokai.

In these "AHAM" poems, the poets do not address the readers directly, instead, one overhears what the characters say to each other or to themselves - the hero, the heroine, the hero's friend, and the heroine's friend who act as messengers or confidantes, the foster mother, the concubine and the passers by are the only characters. As such each poem is a drama in monologue - rich in symbolism and layered meanings.

Anandavalli had chosen five of these beautiful poems set to music by Bhagavathalu Seetharama Sarma while the beautiful English translations by A. K. Ramanujan were narrated at the beginning of each poem and in-between by one of the characters.

It was a spectacular performance. The dancing was graceful with perfect coordination and variety. Special mention should be made of the damsels playing at the seaside dipping their feet in the waters. When one accidentally falls down, the hero going to her rescue and the blossoming of love between them was beautifully presented.

The concubine who reproaches herself for being accessible to the hero, who had left her for his wife, was well portrayed by the simile of the shark, the pool and the mango.

The wedding scene was aesthetically presented, bearing Anandavalli's stamp of refinement and imagination. Care and research should have been taken in portraying the Sangam age - for example, the Aryan Practices like the worship of fire and other rituals that followed had not entered the Tamil rite of marriage during the age of Kurunthokai.

The continued projection of the five landscapes on the background was a distraction to the audience who could not fully enjoy the expressions of the dancers. The landscapes projected did not show the appropriate flora and fauna of the Tamil homeland which was very much a part of the landscape and the subject of the poems themselves.

A storyline with a sequence would have been more meaningful - introducing love first , followed by separation, anxious waiting, marriage, infidelity, reconciliation and forgiveness. The portrayal of the concubine in the beginning was confusing to the story.

Seran Sribalan, the only male dancer was a delight to watch. He displayed his emotions well, excelling as a lover. Abirami as a lovelorn damsel portrayed her emotions beautifully. Kavitha's acting as a matured elder needs special mention. It was excellent dancing by Swetha, Saipriya, Swathi and Jennifer. Music by Aruna, Govindarajulu, Varalakshmi, Raguram and Bala Shankar added colour to the performance.

It was a fitting finale when the show ended with the recital of the poem -

"How did you and I meet ever?

But in Love,

Our hearts are as the red earth and pouring rain mingled beyond parting".

The Thillana that followed though beautiful did not blend in with the theme.

Kuruntokai was a happy synthesis of good poetry, music and dance depicting the rich heritage of the TAMILS.

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