

Gayatri Sriram at Mandapa

Created practically at the same time as the Concours de Bagnolet of Jaque Chaurand (cf. its current avatar the “Danses Elargies” at the Théâtre de la Ville), Mandapa, which was founded in 1975 by Milena Salvini and the late Roger Filipuzzi, remains a one of a kind place, dedicated to the traditional and open to the contemporary. With three euros and six cents, Milena Salvini, Isabelle Anna and their team reduced to a strict minimum, enliven this temple dedicated to Terpsichore which is situated at the far end of the 13th arrondissement and faces an Antonian church established in the year of Stravinsky’s *Sacre*. Mandapa is not simply a meditation centre but rather a centre of living arts and performances (more thanone hundred and fifty, music, dance, theatre, puppet shows and martial arts programs are presented there each year!), dedicated to contemplation. Numerous French contemporary and “free dance” performances continue to be produced here but it is well and truly Indian dance in all its forms that gives this welcoming place its reputation.

In the course of its summer festival this year, Indian of course, Mandapa introduces us to a splendid dancer of Bharat Natyam, Gayatri Sriram, native of Kerala, trained by Minal Prabhu and living for the past fifteen years in.... Singapore. Her style is influenced by the Kalakshetra School, an academy created in 1936 by the luminous danseuse Rukmini Devi Arundale. Indeed Gayatri Sriram’s movements are clearly discernible, the gestures seem to be broken down, and the geometry is perceptible. Her jetés are reminiscent of our classical ballet. Symmetry is emphasised: each movement is repeated at least once, delineated following the four cardinal points, this from the start.

Introduced by Gauri Gupta, accompanied by her guru, Minal Prabhu, rhythm virtuoso, expert at the cymbals (nattuvangam) and onomatopoeia (bols) as well as the singer Balasubramanian Sharma whose melodious voice modulated each verse taken from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata without recourse to artificial amplification, the flautist Jayaram Kikkeri with rounded sounds limited to the middle register, the two-face drum (mridangam) highlighted by Krishnan Murugan, Gayatri offered us five instances of dance considerably interspersed with pantomime- an art in which the young woman excels. Her face, which one could observe at a very near range, in close up so to speak, underscoring the intimacy offered by this sanctuary at the rue Wertz, is itself a veritable theatre. On it is etched fleetingly expectation, joy, hope, irony, mockery, disdain, resentment and even ire. She does not try to take easy advantage of her natural gifts- an athletic body of harmonious proportions but acts and lives each emotion or state of mind intensely and communicates it to us by a simple blink of the eye, a lively rolling of the pupils or an abrupt wrinkling of the eyebrows. It must be said that her eyes, rimmed with kohl, appear immense.

The narrative ends up being as familiar to us as the opposing couples that Indian wisdom seeks to unify (man-woman, war-peace, order-chaos, ugliness-beauty, creation-destruction, immobility-movement, joy-sadness, etc.). The dance, itself is extremely precise and leaves little room for improvisation. Nevertheless, Gayatri Sriram leaves the stamp of her manner of evolving, of occupying the stage, of communicating with her partners sitting cross-legged on the garden side and especially of communicating with the closed wall of an informed audience. An audience that was captivated by the performance and repeatedly talked about the danseuse.

