

Astad Deboo Breaks Boundaries with Divine Rhythms

10th - 11th December 2009

Astad Deboo, a name to reckon with in Indian contemporary dance, is a man with a highly dynamic and individualistic dance style. An innovator par excellence, he blends Indian classical dance forms of Kathak and Kathakali with modern dance techniques to create his own unique style. His illustrious career has spanned four decades and has won him several honours, including the Padma Shri. As part of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of IIT Kanpur, Astad Deboo gave two dynamic performances - Breaking Boundaries and Rhythm Divine - with his troupe.

The first performance titled Breaking Boundaries, was his latest production featuring the talented street children from the Salaam Balak trust (an NGO that rescues street children and rehabilitates them). The 70-minute performance had five interwoven pieces exploring the evolution of life. The entire dance sequence was a unique attempt to fathom some unexplored dimensions in space and time. It began with children performing suave body movements resulting in different coherent formations. The next three dance pieces, were highly synchronized group dances but with each dancer making his/her own definite statement and breaking many accepted boundaries of society, culture, and art. The next item had Deboo himself on stage with the children, performing to soulful music composed by Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia.

In the last piece, which opened with a one minute solo act by Deboo, dressed in black, later joined by his troupe, both the music and dance changed to a fast paced rhythm. The performance thus ended on a highly charged and vibrant note.

The next day's performance, titled Rhythm Divine, was in collaboration with the Pung cholom drummers of Manipur. The performance began slowly with classical music in the background. Then the dancers picked up the pace - with perfect synchronization, producing rhythms by tapping the hands on body and floor with full force. What followed was visual poetry - the music and dance of the drummers, and Astad Deboo who complemented them with emoting fingers, body, and eyebrows. In this 70-minute dance performance, the drums entered the scene only at the 60th minute, causing the entire auditorium to reverberate with sound.

At a time when the Indian dance scene was not open to innovations, Astad Deboo embarked on a journey to introduce contemporary dance to Indian audiences and the

journey hasn't ended yet. He shows no sign of retiring. In fact, he is constantly exploring new possibilities and collaborating with new artists.

CONVERSATIONS

"Boundaries were broken when these kids ran away from their homes", says Astaad Deboo in a candid interview with Reema Mittal

Is it the first time that you are performing in an IIT and what has the experience of performing among the technocrats been like?

Well, this is the second time. The experience has been good except that there were many students in the audience when I performed earlier. And they grew restless as the show didn't start on time and they had to be calmed down.

Why did you choose to name your dance piece 'Breaking Boundaries'?

Many boundaries have been broken. Boundaries were broken when these kids ran away from their homes, then they were picked up by the Salaam Balak Trust. They also broke the boundaries of their talent and existence through this dance. That's why I chose this title.

What were the challenges that you faced while working with these kids?

Well, these kids only knew Bollywood dance. Therefore, it was a challenge to introduce them to this new dance form. Often they would ask 'Is this also some kind of dance form' (one piece has been choreographed on narrow benches). But they all were eager to learn so were highly receptive.

How do you think the lives of these kids have been impacted?

Of course their lives have been impacted. Anyone who works with me is impacted. These kids have learnt a lot and have gained confidence. Many of them are working professionally in different streams (Deboo's face lights up with a spark while talking about 'these kids').

From working with international celebrities to working with these unknown young amateurs; how has the transition been for you as a person in terms of experiences?

For me an artist is an artist. Their baggage doesn't come with me and I don't bring my baggage also. For me it's my work and we work together to create some interesting piece. These kids often say 'Arey, aap to itne bade hain aur hamare saath he khana

khate hain'. Then I tell them 'Yeh bade ke baat nahin hai. Mein kalakar hoon aur aap bhi kalakar hain'. In order to get respect you need to give respect. There are famous people who treat other people very shabbily and it just reflects so poorly on them.

Your forthcoming projects...

At the moment, I have to show these works (Breaking Boundaries and Rhythm Divine) in other metro cities. I am also working on a duet with a Swiss choreographer in Switzerland which will open in October next year. I am also looking at the Buddhist monks' chanting from Arunachal and Mysore. These are the two centers where Tibetan monks reside. I am also interested in taking street children to Brazil as there is lot of street culture there.