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'Sethu' spectacle lights up Sculpture Garden's nights

Rohan Preston, Star Tribune

If the Big Apple has its Shakespeare in the Park and Lincoln Center festivals, the Mini Apple has Walker Art Center's occasional series of outdoor performances in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden.

In previous years, the local slate of theatrical dance performances has included memorable outings by Liz Lerman's Dance Exchange, which performed its "Hallelujah" project in a gentle drizzle, and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, which had a gorgeous, live collaboration with jazz contralto Cassandra Wilson in June 2003.

This year, the ringleader of thrills was Twin Cities choreographer and teacher Raneesha Ramaswamy, the foremost exponent of the classical Indian dance style known as bharatanatyam. Ramaswamy gathered a company of dancers, gamelan musicians, a chorus of monkey chanters and Carnatic singer Nirmala Rajaseka for "Sethu (Bridge)." A terrific spectacle, the show offered a torch-lit retelling of the Ramayana, a 2nd-century epic poem.

In this sacred Indian text, god-king Rama rescues his wife, Sita, from a 10-headed force of evil. Rama is helped by the Monkey-King named Hanuman.

It is easy to lose focus and intimacy in outdoor concerts, where distractions -- airplanes, bugs, bats, bees -- abound.

On Saturday, at least, everything seemed to come together at twilight in the Sculpture Garden. Even the birds seemed to perform on cue. In the middle of the performance by gorgeously costumed dancers, a flock of geese flew over the proceedings, their white undersides undulating in the light above the stage.

The dancers performed in front of a large, controlled fire, their faces and bodies lit with intensity. The monkey chorus, all men who performed in a Balinese chanting style known as kecak, were an impressive presence if a bit one-note. Still, they played a nice role ushering the dancers on and off the stage with their "cak-cak" chants.

Surprisingly, I was still able, at about 100 feet from the stage, to see many of the subtle facial expressions of the dancers, some of whom were cast opposite their gender. Aparna Ramaswamy, one of the most gifted dancers in any form in the Twin Cities, was electric and highly expressive as Rama, while Tamara Nadel was stalwart as Rama's brother, Laksmana. Kats Fukasawa, who has a face more elastic than a rubber chicken, was compelling as the wicked enchanter, Ravana.

One of the highlights of the evening was I Dewa Berata Putu, the Indonesian composer and performer who was fleet-footed and visually fetching as the grinning monkey king.

The success of "Sethu" evoked a few thoughts. For one, surely not all those thousands of people could see the dancing eyebrows of Aparna Ramaswamy. A Jumbotron could be used to highlight the performers. Also, we could use more of these events. Perhaps the expanded Walker Art Center, which commissioned the show, could program a few more.

And finally, it was such joy to see a company of international collaborators meet in Minneapolis, plan a massive project and then, so beautifully, rise to the occasion.