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DANCE

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 2018

'The Jungle Book' adaptation 'Jangala' fuses Indian classical dance with contemporary ballet



STEPHEN TEXEIRA/COURTESY

BY [ANOUSHKA AGRAWAL](#) | STAFF

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There is something remarkably charming about the blend of the traditional with the contemporary — as if two completely different cultures and eras are merged into one. Oakland Ballet Company's "Jangala" exemplifies this.

The production is the brainchild of Graham Lustig, artistic director of the Oakland Ballet Company, who wished to transfer the story of Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book" onto the stage. "Jangala" fuses contemporary ballet with bharatanatyam, a traditional South Indian classical dance form. For this production, the company partnered with guest artist Nadhi Thekkek from

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Nava Dance Theatre — a San Francisco-based bharatanatyam dance company. The piece premiered at the Middlesex County College in New Jersey in 2013, and, most recently, at Oakland’s Skyline High School on Saturday.

The performance opens with a bharatanatyam piece by dancers from Nava Dance Theatre, including Thekkek, and was a refreshing, playful routine based on a story from the popular Indian comic series “Amar Chitra Katha.” It tells the story of an elephant trying to save its home, the forest, from being destroyed at the hands of a forester. The piece is accompanied by live music, adding to the general mood of joy that the routine embodies. The dancers are adorned with bharatnatyam saris of various, bright colors, enhancing the forest setting. This opening piece perfectly introduces the larger story of “Jangala.”

“Jangala” not only fuses bharatnatyam with contemporary ballet, but also includes bhangra and Bollywood movements. In an effort to combine very different styles of dance, however, the routine is sometimes too chaotic for the audience to completely follow it — there is an obvious distinction between Thekkek’s bharatanatyam and the kind performed by the dancers of the ballet company.

Additionally, the various acts of the performance switch suddenly from soft, classical music to mainstream Bollywood, echoing changes in the dance forms, from traditional ballet to a Bollywood-bhangra fusion. The interplay between these clashing sounds and movements can be confusing to an audience.

Nevertheless, Sanchit Babbar, an alumnus of the prestigious Ailey School, is fitting in the lead role as Mowgli. It is thrilling to watch him switch from ballet to bharatanatyam to bhangra, instinctively and without the slightest flinch. The expressiveness of his entire body perfectly illustrates the transition from a baby to a young boy, moving from the jungle to the urban, human world. As Shere Khan, Tori Jahn is also stunning to watch; her movements are fierce and strong, yet majestic, perfectly capturing the essence of a tiger.

The fact that the ensemble is a collection of experienced, exceptional dancers is made apparent in the tremendous way they deliver the various themes of the story — the theme of unity, in particular.

The relationship between Mowgli and his two friends, Baloo the bear and Bagheera the panther, played by dancers Calvin Thomas and Frankie Lee Peterson III, respectively, is particularly beautiful. The two animals teach Mowgli the laws of the jungle and the production dedicates an entire scene to the three of them — a version of “The Bare Necessities” scene from the Disney adaptation that everyone knows and adores. Their movements are centered around supporting one another, which is made evident as they constantly, gracefully lift Mowgli up and carry him from one end of the stage to the other. The audience experiences a new friendship being formed — an experience that is truly heartwarming.

As a production that encapsulates dance forms from various corners of the world, some performative aspects of “Jangala” remain confused and ambiguous. Yet the immensely emotive dancers, in their genuine attempt to embrace Indian dance styles, are riveting to watch. The continuous switching between styles of music fastens the audience’s gaze onto the stage, as do the impressive dancers of both the Oakland Ballet Company and the Nava Dance Theatre. “Jangala” is a wonderful amalgamation of the old and the new, the classical and the contemporary.

“Jangala” will be performed Friday at San Leandro High School.

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