

ENTERTAINMENT - GLOBAL

Colorful, Earthy Rural Theater 'Nautanki' Charms

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BERKELEY, Calif. — There's this to be said about 'Nautanki', the semi-rural theater in India — these folks don't believe in beating around the bush. The message comes to you like a double shot of espresso — sharp and strong, packing a kick strong enough to wake up the dead.

For the audience at the University of California here, the rambunctious, colorful and vastly entertaining scenes enacted from the popular north Indian play "Sultana Daku" (Inexplicably — it's a guy), the performance brought a whiff of the earthy flavors of rural India 10,000 miles away.



Devendra Sharma, who teaches at Cal State Fresno and made an informative, passionate presentation, is the genuine article — someone who actually grew up with Nautanki.

Sharma, who literally grew up sitting on stage while his father performed, gave a poignant account of how modernity with all its accoutrements, particularly Bollywood, have made this lovable performing arts genre an endangered art form.

"Did Nautanki spoil Bollywood or Bollywood spoil Nautanki?" Sharma asked, tongue in cheek. The reach of Bollywood into the north Indian rural hinterland could well have sounded the death knell for Nautanki. "It's been such a struggle for existence," Sharma lamented. "They have adapted to changing conditions."

This has meant interrupting the main storyline for racy dances, for instance. No prizes for guessing where THAT came from.

However, he said, Nautanki has also been used to raise awareness on social issues. It has spread the word on HIV/ AIDs in Bihar, and elsewhere it has helped raised awareness on dowry and environment.

But as an entertainment art form, it is facing tough times, Sharma said. "It is kind of struggling with how to survive."

As the performance made amply evident — Nautanki's appeal lies in its simplicity and directness. These folks don't do nuance. The demarcation between good and evil is clear, emotions are expressed with gusto, leaving little room for doubt and ambiguity, and the entire performance is liberally laced with some rollicking music.

Although Sharma alone had any real experience of actual Nautanki performance — the rest of the

performers were Silicon Valley professionals — Sharma had trained them well, and with a gaudy, evocative backdrop made of a brash splash of colors and folksy art reminiscent of the roadside art of India, performers hammed away with abandon. Particularly noteworthy was Rajiv Nema's achingly funny portrayal of an imperious British officer, with an exaggerated Anglicized Hindi; the coy and coquettish Phulkanwar played by Seema Gupta; and the deliciously campy turn of the lascivious dancer Bedhini by Palak Joshi, which oozed enough oomph to send many a male pulse racing.

The story is simple enough — Sultana Daku is a rob-the-rich-give-to-the-poor kind of robber with a heart of gold. The British are increasingly concerned by his rising power to attack the rich at will, and so Mr. Young, a British police officer, decides to nab him. Since they can't take him on in a frontal assault, the British fall back on their tried and tested method of choice — perfidy. Sadly, it worked. The play ends poignantly, as Sultana Daku is betrayed by a compatriot.

It's a simply told tale, but the earthy colors, music and dialogues give it a piquant vibrancy which makes for compelling, absorbing entertainment.

To be sure, this was just a glimpse of what real Nautanki is, or rather used to be. Sharma reminisced about the performances of his father, Ram Dayal Sharma, a titan in the field.

Sometimes the attendees reached as much as 50,000 with men and women sitting in different, demarcated areas, with a raised platform at the center where the performances took place, he recounted. It was not uncommon for performances to go on all night.

There was an air of informality and interactive bonhomie between the audience and performers, Sharma said, with impromptu changes made in performance plans if the audience so demanded.

Poet folklorist Ved Prakash Vatuk, while commending the performance and presentation, disagreed with Sharma and UC Berkeley South Asia Studies Prof. Vasudha Dalmia's earlier remarks referring to Nautanki as rural theater.

It's not right to call Nautanki rural theater, said Vatuk, going back to his own childhood memories in the rural area around Meerut, Uttar Pradesh: Its Hindustani dialogue full of Arabic Persian words and its theatrical treatment was too sophisticated for rural audiences.

It was more appropriate to call Nautanki semi-rural, performed at smaller townships, Vatuk said. The real rural theater was called "Swaang," he added.

That said, the fact became evident that with the onslaught of Bollywood and television, all these forms of live performing arts are facing a crisis of existence. It's not just that people have alternatives, but Bollywood is also changing the aesthetic preferences of non-urban audiences, and while indigenous theater has tried to adapt, it has perhaps begun to lose a bit of its soul along the way, and it is by no means clear that it will be able to overcome the daunting challenge that modernity poses.