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EVENT *Charishnu* celebrated India's rich cultural heritage, in all its colours and hues. DIVYA SRIDHARAN watched the performance and spoke to Leela Samson, who conceived of the production

The long drive to the Isha Yoga Centre was well worth it. Nestled in the foothills of Vellingiri, the open air theatre was a perfect venue for *Charishnu*, a musical extravaganza. The production was part of Yaksha, a dance and music festival presented by Isha Foundation.

Leela Samson, director of Kalakshetra, conceived of this production in 2008. It was put together for the Indian Ministry of Tourism, when it opened its office in Beijing, China. Since then, *Charishnu* has travelled to other countries, besides being applauded within the country.

Seamless

"The idea was to showcase India in all its beauty and splendour," Ms. Samson explained. It was a mammoth undertaking, but within a few months, various Indian dance forms were united on one platform. "*Charishnu* was possible due to its individual choreographers," Ms. Samson said. These stalwarts include Aditi Mangaldas for Kathak, Priti Patel for Manipuri, Aruna Mohanty for Odissi, Imocha Singh for Thang Ta, Umamahesh Vinayakaram who led the percussionists, and Sadanam Balakrishnan who handled Kathakali and Mohaniattam. Leela Samson choreographed the Bharathanatyam piece.

"The production is interconnected," Samson explained. "This is unusual, because usu-



COMING TOGETHER *Charishnu* showcased the country's diverse dance forms PHOTOS: S.SIVA SARAVANAN

ally these styles don't sit very sweetly together. They're like very individualistic people, and they normally don't get along! For instance, if an Odissi dancer had to stand next to a Kathakali

dancer, the Kathakali dancer would need about four-feet spread. So, if you wanted to put your arms around him, for a Krishna position, he'll play Krishna, but you wouldn't be

able to get anywhere near him," she smiled. *Charishnu* was about understanding the other's space. "I mean this not just literally," Samson continued. "It is also space in terms of the move-

ments - that's the most problematic thing about the styles. Unless I know enough about Odissi, I shouldn't be dancing with an Odissi dancer. There has to be empathy. Like any good

marriage, there has to be a certain respect and love for the other." It was evident that *Charishnu* had been knit together seamlessly. Each group worked on their respective pieces separately, each roughly over seven minutes long. And then, they came together, to weave it all in.

A good marriage

It was also wonderful to watch the marriage of the martial arts with the classical dance forms. Normally, as Ms. Samson said, the classical and the martial don't co-exist. But in *Charishnu*, the Thang Ta martial arts performer, who usually plays on a drum, actually made his entry while dancing to Manipuri music, as the Manipuri group were already on stage. And then, the Thang Ta drums slowly took over.

"We all need to know a little of the other's form; we all meet and part," Samson pointed out. "I wanted to show that India, in all its diversity, can still knit together as a whole. It can be viewed as one nation, without any barriers of caste, or creed, colour and status, education, or anything like that."

Charishnu has faced logistical issues. "It's a big production, and requires a large stage, but somehow people who have heard about it, have come forward and asked us to present it," Samson revealed. "We do it as often as we can, but there are

logistical hassles, like finances, and how to get so many people across the country together." The groups have travelled from their original places - be it the Odissi group based in Bhubaneswar, or the Kathak group based in Delhi. "It's not just getting them, but we'd also like to pay them reasonably well. It's not a double-billing - it's a six-time billing. That is tough. I feel bad that it is so, but it's the minimum," she said.

It felt worth it, watching all the 60 dancers come on stage towards the end of *Charishnu*. They were dressed in white, as a sign of peace. Every minute was beautiful. And, this included the percussionists from Chennai, who presented a fantastic music illustration.

Importance of dialogue

Charishnu was a slice of unity in diversity. "The bottom line is that you can still dialogue, irrespective of how high class or educated you might be, or how otherwise somebody else may be," Leela Samson explained.

"There are no presumptions that you are more cultured than a man who lives in a little hut, and who is perhaps one of the greatest potters in India. Everyone has their greatness. And this production is something like that, because everyone comes together and gel. They are friends, despite coming from very different states," she concluded with a smile.