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Technology meets tradition to tell a love story

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Indian mythology is filled with memorable tales that deserve retelling. "Abhignana Shakuntalam" is one such timeless tale of true love, tragic separation and eventual re-union authored by poet Kalidas sometime in the period between the 1st Century BC and 4th Century AD. It is one of his best-known works in the Sanskrit language.

On Nov. 3, at the Regis College Fine Arts Center, the Rasarang School of Performing Arts, founded by Bharatanatyam dancer Poornima Risbud, brought "Abhignana Shakuntalam" to life through mime, music and dance in a lively multi-media presentation that lasted two hours. 40 participants ranging from age 5 to 55 recreated the story through a briskly paced sequence of scenes that told the story of Shakuntala. The effort was a creative amalgamation of traditional art and special effects through the use of technology.

And for a change, technology worked effectively save a minor exception – at one point, a message flashed on the big screen on stage warning that the computer was running on battery and needed to be connected to a power outlet. Members of the audience wondered what would happen to rest of the dance-drama if the computer ran out of battery power. Thankfully, a stage crew member responded to the need in real-time and the show went on without a hitch.

What was Kalidas's "Abhignana Shankutalam" about? It is the story of Shakuntala, the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and Apsara Menaka who upon being abandoned at birth, grows up in the secluded hermitage of sage Kanva. One day, Dushyanta, the king of Hastinapura goes hunting to the forest, falls in love with Shakuntala and marries her. He needs to return to his capital to take care of his responsibilities and just before parting with Shakuntala, he gives her a ring. Shakuntala is sad and forlorn and lost in fantasy when sage Durvasa arrives to the hermitage. When she fails to attend on him, he curses her by bewitching King Dushyanta into forgetting her existence. Now, the only way out for Shakuntala to remind King Dushyanta of their marriage is to show him the signet ring that he gave her before leaving the forest.

On her way to Hastinapura, to meet and unite with her husband, Shakuntala and her companions cross a river. The wedding ring slips off her finger while she plays with the water. On arrival to the palace, due to the effect of Sage Durvasa's curse, King Dushyanta refuses to acknowledge her. Her companions, who return to the hermitage, also abandon Shakuntala.

Fortunately, in a twist of fate, the ring is discovered by a fisherman in the belly of a fish he has caught on a fishing trip. He surrenders the royal ring to King Dushyanta who realizes his mistake. Alas, it is too late for Shakuntala has left the palace.

Dushyanta does manage to find Shakuntala and their son later, by sheer chance, and the family is happily re-united.

Several aspects of choreography and direction came together to tell the story through mime and dance. The introduction of technology supported the story development and enhanced the presentation in a powerful manner. Computer projections of still images and video clips that filled the large screen backdrop on the stage created an environment suitable to different scenes in the play. A striking and realistic picture of fishermen boats created the atmosphere of a dynamic river. A video clip of a deer chase in a thicket of green trees recreated a forest.

Custom made music by Praveen D. Rao made use of sounds from nature, melodious compositions, beautiful voices and a variety of instruments such as flute, tabla and violin to create a rich musical score.

Traditional dance costumes in an array of vibrant and pleasing colors, innovatively designed costumes such as that of a big yellow fish, imaginative stage props that included a full-sized, large painted boat, careful makeup such as painted white whiskers of lion cubs and subtle, evocative stage lights lent themselves well to the overall presentation.

Varied emotions came alive through expression in the form of mime and dance across several different episodes. King Dushyanta's valor was expressed through a straight-backed regal walk, a mood of tender, romantic love between King Dushyanta and Shakuntala came alive through graceful movement and sculpturesque dance poses, Shakuntala's bitter disappointment on her husband's refusal to recognize her at the reunion in the palace came across through facial expressions while the joyous celebration of fishermen after catching fish was shown through a lively folk dance. Mother and daughter pair, Poornima Risbud and Shachi Risbud, were brilliant in portraying the different moods of the story effectively.

Shekhar Shastry as narrator or "sutradhaar" tied the story together towards the end with insights into Kalidasa's epic work and drew the audience's attention to several different journeys in the dance-drama, two prominent symbolic ones being King Dushyant descending reaching the forest in a chariot, finding his love and marrying her and the second, the king's arrival to the forest in a heavenly chariot provided by Lord Indra and his re-union with his wife and son. Shastry commented that in life, a balance was required between heavenly and earthly realms.

At the end of the show, several local celebrities commended on the effort put into telling the story of "Abhignana Shakuntalam." Ranjani Saigal of Lokvani called the effort of Rasarang School awe-inspiring and congratulated Poornima for choosing to enact a gem from Indian mythology.

Pradeep Shukla of Learnquest Academy said that he felt special affinity to Kalidas's work because he spent his childhood in Ujjain, India, where a four-day Kalidas festival was an annual feature. "I am very proud that Poornima has pulled off a Kalidas play in Boston, USA!" he said.

Pandit Ananthakrishnan, head of the Sanskrit Bharati organization, conveyed in Sanskrit that he was happy that the play had easy Sanskrit dialogs that the audience could understand easily.

Poornima Risbud, founder of Rasarang School of Performing Arts, said in her closing remarks that her students selected the "Abhignana Shakuntalam" play because it was in Sanskrit and they wanted to find innovative ways to encourage tradition. She acknowledged the hard work of all her students over a period of three long months, especially that of her daughter Shachi, her parents, senior students Aditi, Pallavi and Ira, among others. It was touching to note that Poornima's mother designed and stitched the fish costume and her father designed a large boat prop. She thanked the sponsors of the show who included in addition to a handful of individuals, eClinicalWorks, Kishore Gowda, Learnquest Academy and Wayland Goddard School.

The enactment of an epic play in Sanskrit in the form of a dance-drama by an enthusiastic and visionary Bharatnatyam teacher along with her family and 40 of her students turned out to be a fine example of what collective efforts can accomplish in creating a work of art. The integration of technology in enhancing the dance-drama was note-worthy and left an indelible impression in the minds of the viewers.