

Review

Delighting Nala and a deficient Hamsam

Text & pic: Hareesh N Nampoothiri

e-mail: newn.haree@gmail.com

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Kathakali lovers in Thiruvananthapuram got yet another chance to enjoy Kalamandalam Gopi's Nala in 'Nalacharitham Onnam Divasam' when Drisyavedi presented the play last week, here in the capital city. Gopi Asan's presentation of Nala in the former parts of the play was even more detailed than usual. In Nala's *padam* welcoming Sage Narada starting "*Bhagaval Narada Vandeham....*" Gopi elaborated on how the sage travels everywhere playing his veena and also how great he is as an ascetic. Later, Narada removes the doubts in Nala's mind regarding his chances of marrying Damayanthi, the daughter of King Bhima of Kundina.

Set in Kalyani raga, the *padam* "*Kundinanayaka Nandinikkothoru...*" portrays Nala's thoughts on Damayanthi. Kalamandalam Gopi is known for his stylized presentation of Nala in this scene and here also he performed it with grace. The way he acted "*Mudiratharakabari Parichayapadaviyo...*" deserves special mention here. Apart from the usual *manodharmams* which include portrayal of Nala trying to console his mind by playing veena, how he desperately requests Kamadeva to send at least one arrow to Damayanthi instead of sending all towards him, Gopi also presented another act in which Nala plans to send a message to King Bhima asking for his daughter's hand and withdraws from this because it did not benefit him as a king. After giving proper orders to his minister, Nala goes to the royal gardens to find some relief. There he finds the golden swan (*Hamsam*), decides to catch it and hides behind the plants which marks the end of the first scene.



In the next scene, Nala succeeds in catching the golden swan. The interaction between Nala and the Hamsam is the highlight of this scene, but sadly it didn't go too well. Kalamandalam Ratheesan, the actor who presented Hamsam was more responsible here. When Hamsam says "*Janakan marichu poyi, thanayan njan oruthanayi...*" (My father passed away and I am his only son, left alone...), Gopi's Nala responded that he is also in the same position. To that, Ratheesan's Hamsam reacted, "Why should I bother?" which did not go well with either the character or the scene. Gopi's Nala went on having such interactions in between without much help from his co-artist. It would have been better if Gopi had presented these *attams* as Nala's own thoughts instead of trying to have conversations with the Hamsam.

Often, Kalamandalam Ratheesan performed facing the co-actor instead of facing the audience. This made his acting a bit difficult to comprehend. Ratheesan was trying to somehow get along with his character, making one feel that he may not be in good health. As the audience here is familiar with the actor's caliber, it was not surprising that they expected a much better performance from him. Later, the Hamsam travels to Kundina to meet Damayanthi and to convey Nala's love for her. In those scenes as well, Ratheesan failed to make an impression. Kalamandalam Shanmukhadass came in the role of Damayanthi along with Kalamandalam Aadithyan and Kalamandalam Arunkumar who played the role of maids. The presentation of Damayanthi by Shanmukhadass was very impressive as he presented the character perfectly, with the help of fine movements and a blend of controlled *sancharis*. Aadithyan and Arunkumar also did their part well.

Kalamandalam Gopi's elaborate presentation helped the singers as well allowing them to excel. Be it "*Kundinanayaka...*" in Kalyani or "*Priyamanasa! Nee...*" in Thodi or Damayanthi's *padams* in the latter scenes, Pathiyoor Sankarankutty and Kalanilayam Rajeevan were at their best. The change in raga of some *padams* ("*Naalil Naalil...*" rendered in Yamunakalyani and "*Hantha Hamsame!*" in Nagagandhari) were interesting. The percussionists Kurur Vasudevan Nampoothiri and Kalamandalam Achutha Warier also did well by providing ample support to the actors. RLV Somadas and Pallippuram Unnikrishnan did the Chutti and Uduthukettu respectively. Kaliyogam was Sandarsan Kathakali Vidyalayam, Ambalappuzha.

Hareesh N Nampoothiri is a visual design consultant by profession and a lover of classical art forms. Being an ardent follower of Kathakali, he conceptualized and directed a documentary on Kathakali titled 'Thouryathrikam', which introduces the nuances of Kathakali to the common man. Writing and photography are his other passions.