THE DOWNWARD SLOPING STAGE

Nothing could have prepared me for the performance I gave on Wednesday. It was physically the most challenging performance i have ever done. It was also the shortest performance I have ever done: six minutes. A senior member of the Kalakshetra community (who no longer works at the institute) saw my earlier performance at the Vinayaka temple in Besant Nagar and asked me to dance in her program. Respectful, and a bit flattered, I agreed.

It was ominous from the start. She asked me to do a tarangam- the kuchipudi piece in which the dancer dances on a brass plate. it's not an unusual element- it can be seen in folk dances around the country- dancers with pots on their heads, dancing on a plate, with diyas in their hands. it's exciting for the audience, acrobatics for the dancer. In Kuchipudi, the tarangam has complicated rhythm patterns on the plate. This evening, six other girls would perform folk dances, a senior Bharatanatyam dancer would dance 3 classical pieces, and I would perform the tarangam. The program was at the Taj hotel for an exclusive Russian delegation.

Every visitor to Chennai should see the exquisite five star Taj Fisherman's Cove near Mahabalipuram. No classical dancer should ever have to dance there. The stage was constructed on the beach so that the ocean formed the background of our dance. It sounds romantic, but the stage was merely several wooden planks built three feet over the sand, sloping backwards towards the ocean! Naturally, beaches have a downwards slope. To make matters worse, the stage had a red carpet over it to protect our feet from the splinters and nails of the wooden planks.

Nothing could have prepared me for this physical challenge. Strong legs can help you to move a plate over carpeting, but nothing (except practising on a downward sloping floor) can help you to find a completely unfamiliar centre of balance on a downward sloping stage! Fortunately, I did not fall, and even remained pleasant throughout those six minutes. It was memorable for all the wrong reasons.