

Dance Drama Blends Martial Art With Mohiniyattam

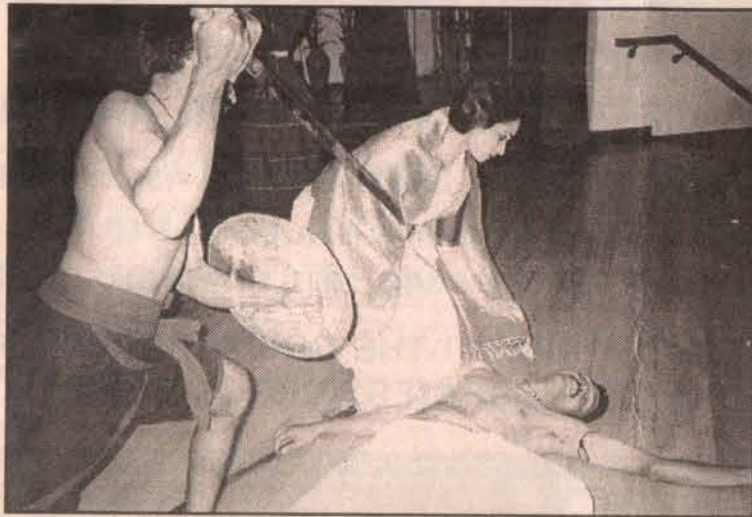
By ARCHANA DONGRE
Special to India-West

BELLFLOWER, Calif. — Titled "Ballads of Northern Malabar," the two-hour dance drama presented by the Kerala Dance Theater at the William Bristol Performing Center here Nov. 24 was a novel attempt to incorporate two diverse styles, Kalarippayatt, the martial art of Kerala, and Mohiniyattam, a classical dance idiom of Kerala, for the first time on stage.

"As a new concept, I chose to blend these two styles to create a visual and artistic impact in an operatic style, and introduced the common vocabulary of the Malayalam dialogues as an element to bind it together," Radha Carman, a Mohiniyattam dancer and founder-director of the Kerala Dance Theater, told *India-West* in a post-performance interview.

The "Ballads of Northern Malabar" concert wove together ancient tales of valor, of duels enacted between warring rivals, in this case master players of Kalarippayatt, giving a wide canvas for its portrayal by two of the medium's well-known artists, brothers Krishnadas, 38, and Dinesh, 32. The two are visiting from Kerala, and began their 42-day U.S. performance tour with this show in the Southland, offering the audience its first glimpse of the art form's strength, agility, precision, and grace.

Krishnadas and Dinesh have toured the world in recent years in an attempt to reclaim the glory of this art form as the ori-



A scene from the dance drama based on Kalarippayatt and Mohiniyattam. (Archana Dongre photo)

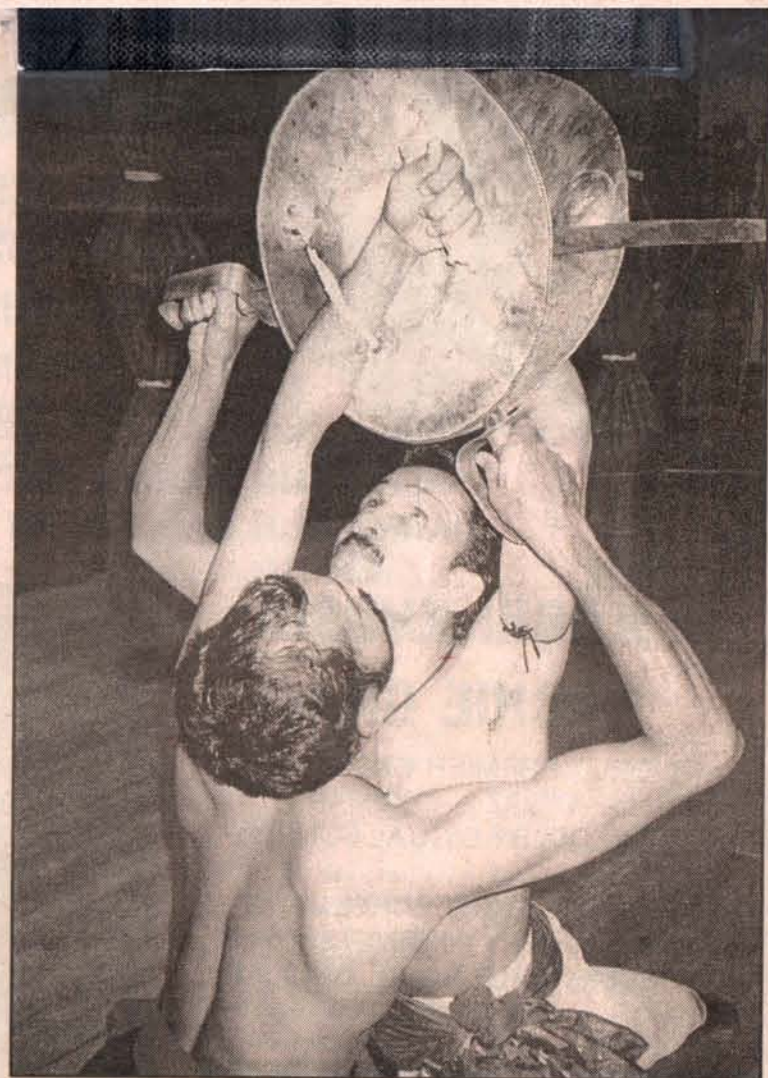
gin of all Asian martial art. Films such as 'Karate Kid' and the recent 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' gained immense popularity for their breathtaking display of Karate, Kung Fu and Tai Chi, but few are aware that although these arts were nurtured in China and Japan, they owe their origin to the Kalarippayatt of Kerala.

Although Kalarippayatt blossomed in its stylized form in the 13th and 14th centuries, it was prevalent and popular in the Sangam period that ran from 400 BC to 600 AD. Mythology connects it to the teachings of Parashurama, the patron god of Kerala. There was a Kshatriya named Bodhidharma, well versed in Kalarippayatt, who lived a few generations after Buddha's advent in 500 BC, and not only did he later become a Buddhist monk but he traveled

to Tibet, China and Japan spreading the Buddhist teaching. The Buddhist monks traveling the open and remote roads needed a method of self-protection, and historical evidence shows that Bodhidharma taught this art at the Shaolin temple of Tibet.

The monks, in their travels, carried it far and wide throughout Asia, and the art form took on local color by imbibing the regional practices, thus developing and branching into the varied styles of Karate, Kung Fu, and Tai Chi as we see them today.

Despite the fact that these are martial arts, they have a strong emphasis on meditation, tremendous mental discipline, clarity and focus, yoga-like postures as well as breathing techniques like Pranayama. The Asian martial arts also emphasize defense,



Krishnadas and Dinesh clash with swords and shields in this display of Kalarippayatt. (Archana Dongre photo)

and employ offense only when absolutely essential.

Literally, Kalarippayatt signifies exercise or practice (Ppayatt) in Kalari, i.e., roofed pits of earth that served as the traditional gymnasiums for the practice, as well as the temples of worship and clinics for treatment. The clinical therapy of Marma Chikitsa, i.e., knowledge

of how to use the 107 vital points in the body to cure its ills, such as injury from practice, arthritis or other diseases, went hand-in-hand with the practice of Kalarippayatt, and each athlete of the art is an expert in Marma Chikitsa as well as a special massage embodying it. This aspect gave rise to today's [Cont. on page C12]

C12 — December 7, 2001 — INDIA-WEST

Arts & Entertainment

Dance Drama Blends Martial Art With Mohiniyattam

[Cont. from page C10]

accupressure technique, which, although developed in China and Japan, originated in India.

The reigning kings of Kerala

in medieval times supported many warriors who were experts in Kalarippayatt, who fought the battles for their feuding kings. The "Ballads" concert showcased

the story of a woman named Unniyarcha (enacted in Mohiniyattam by Carman), who was strong as steel and capable of subduing 100 warriors who attempted to subdue her. Her brother Aromal was a fearless warrior, and as was his orphan cousin, Chantu, who grew up with Aromal, and was betrothed to the beautiful Unniyarcha.

As the story twisted and turned, intensifying the hatred between Aromal and Chantu, the stage became a battlefield for many a spectacular duel between the two. In lightning-fast movements and leaps they tried to overpower each other with hands and feet, then fought with long, flexible bamboo sticks.

As Krishnadas and Dinesh portrayed these scenes, their supple bodies exhibited not only the strength of steel but the fluid

grace of a fast, slithering cobra. Their sword fights were spell-binding, as each one, with shield in one hand and silver sword in the other, confronted each other in mercurial leaps in a masterfully-orchestrated battle with split-second precision and accuracy. A lapse or mistake of even a fraction of a second could have been fatal to either warrior, as the audience watched the combat in breathtaking silence.

Carman's pleasant portrayal of Mohiniyattam with its predominant quality of Lasya (sheer grace) stood in stark contrast to Kalarippayatt, and yet complemented it by delineating love, peace and beauty. Elizabeth Kurien, a Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam dancer, portrayed Kuttimani, the temptress of Chantu. R. Jayakrishnan performed as narrator in English,

as well as played the role of the grandfather. As a suggestion, it would have been nice to have had translations of the dialogues in Malayalam.

Krishnadas and Dinesh are the sons of Guru Sankaranarayana Menon, director of Vallabhata Kalari Chavakkad in Kerala, and claim their lineage to the warriors many centuries ago. Carman, originally a Bharatanatyam dancer, took to Mohiniyattam in 1991 as a disciple of Kalyani Kutti Amma of Kerala. Kurien, a dancer for the last 16 years, is a disciple of Shyamala Surendran of Kerala.

The vocals were sung by Babu Parameshwaran, a leading musician. Srihari Ranga swamy accompanied on various traditional percussion instruments.



Radha Carman (left) in a stylized scene with one of the Kerala martial art dancers. (Archana Dongre photo)