

## 'Ballads of Northern Malabar' is Spellbinding

BY K.B. & DEVIKA NAIR

BELLFLOWER, CA-The audience sat riveted to their seats as the tale of a maiden Unniyarcha from Northern Malabar unfolded before their eyes in a spectacular fashion intricately woven together in a unique colorful blend of Mohiniattam, Kalaripayyat and theater.

"The Ballads of Northern Malabar" was presented by The Kerala Dance Theater at the Bellflower Civic Auditorium on Nov 24 and produced and directed by the Founder, Radha Carman. For the many who turned up braving the inclement weather it was a rich and rewarding experience. The presentation was a novel display of Mohiniattam, Kalaripayatt and drama on the same platform created by. This production sacrificed none of the beauty of any of its components.

The theme was based on a ballad about a formidable woman Unniyarcha who singlehandedly subdued 100 villains who had tried to abduct her. It is a tale full of human emotion, betrayal, lust and tragedy.

Recited in verse and song in Malayalam to maintain the authenticity of the original it was subtitled skillfully by the use of a narrator introduced into the story. He speaks to the dancer in English and repeats relevant portions of the answer as part of the conversation by which a non Malayalee could also follow the story without difficulty. Playing the lead female role of Unniyarcha, Carmen also introduced speech and music by a Mohiniattam dancer, speaking and singing in Malayalam with clarity and diction for a non Malayalee.

Radha Carmen was outstanding



*Radha Carmen*

in her portrayal of the character of Unniyarcha, sometimes lover, sometimes conspirator, occasionally a flirt, a sister or a romantic with powerful expressions to match every possible human emotion.

Krishnadas Menon (playing Chantu and Aringotar) and Dinesh

Kozhisseri (as Aromal and Aromal-Unni), the kalaris from India were astounding and spectacular in the display of their martial skills. Starting with a show of smooth and sinewy exercises in the earlier scenes the action is built up with dramatic suspense with the progression of the story and climaxes with an explosive demonstration in the use of staves, swords and shields which had the audience gasping in disbelief.

Elizabeth Kurien was enchanting in her role of Kuttimani. She provided an appealing exhibition of the gentle grace and beauty of Mohiniattam and displayed exceptional ability of expression to convey the emotions of the hapless Kuttimani.

Vocals without stringed or wind instrumental support is a daunting proposition. With the limited use of a keyboard, Babu Parmeshwaran provided haunting music.

These stunning percussion effects were provided by the versatile Srihari Rangaswamy with the judicious use of the mridangam, madhalam, tabla and chenda.