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## PIFA REVIEW: Chandrouite

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by *Kat Richter for The Dance Journal*

Fingers dyed red and splayed wide like a fan, three dancers carve across the stage in a series of slow, sustained, flex-footed lunges. We may not know their story— who knew there was such a thing as the Indo Caribbean Diaspora?—and we may not recognize their movements—indeed, few can *pronounce* Bharatanatyam correctly—but somehow we understand. This is “Chandrouite,” the latest from Usiloquy Dance Designs.

Subtitled “A Voyage Beyond Kala Pani,” the concert, which premiered Sunday night at the Annenberg Center, pays tribute to the thousands of Indians who were sent to labor on Caribbean sugar plantations between 1838 and 1917. Known as “Coolies,” they kept the musical traditions of Northeast India alive and it was in this theme of survival that Artistic Director Shaily Dadijala found her inspiration.

In “Vani,” four dancers interpret the life of an Indo Caribbean farmer. Through a series of precise hand gestures called “Mudras” and percussive footwork, they mime the work of a field hand, of childbirth and of motherhood. There’s nothing revolutionary here—traditional costumes, pastoral theme—but then we get to the music. Throw in a few steel drums and an overlay of African rhythms courtesy of the Caribbean Music Group and suddenly the Western ear “gets it.”

“Rain” continues in this vein, with four dancers dressed in cotton skirts as “Creole Indians.” This is not Dadijala’s term but rather one of many displayed during a slide show of archival images. With a nod to Guyana, the piece combines spoken word with heavy but simultaneously feminine movements, syncretism embodied.

Despite the concert’s ambitious themes and eclectic assemblage of music, few dancers aside from Dadijala and principal dancer Paramita Datta really stood out. With her exacting eye movements and complete mastery of seemingly impossible isolations, Datta is a dancer one could watch all day.

It is not until the final piece, “Tassa,” that we get the splendor usually associated with classical Indian dance. In sumptuous, jewel-toned costumes designed by principal dancer Michelle Yeager, the company takes the stage like an exhalation: solid, relieved, steady. Their silken pleats rustle as they bend into deep plies and spring into angular poses like a quintet of grasshoppers. They dart across the stage, their feet striking the floor like fingers striking a keyboard. Their energy is in their restraint, their strength coiled and the nine-minute meditation leaves the audience in a trance.

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