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Features

Organization brings flair of Indian dance and music to students

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By Jerry Kim

Staff Writer

Students performed traditional Indian dance and music at Haymarket Theatre this past Friday night in the "SUR — An Evening of Dance and Music," hosted for the fifth year by the Association for India's Development.

The night started out with music by Avataar, a local Indian student band. The word Avataar means "the incarnation of Hindu gods," said Chaitanya Chopra, current president of AID and junior industrial systems engineering major. The students have been a band for about six months and have already performed several times at different events. They write their own music, which consist of folk songs with themes such as fishermen and the country of India itself. Along with the usual guitar, drums and keyboard, Avataar also plays the harmonium, a traditional Indian instrument. The students not only sang in Hindi but also in the Bengali language.

"I haven't heard this kind of music before," said Matthew Thornton, first year graduate student in computer science. "I was interested in the way the music was hypnotic. It transcended you."

Following a 15-minute intermission, the dance segment of the night began with Amrita Pati, second year graduate student in computer science, and Prakiti Parijat, graduate research assistant in bio-medical engineering. They presented the Odissi, one of the seven Indian Classical dance forms that dates back to the first century B.C., said Pati.

"Odissi is the most graceful classical dance of India, characterized by soft movements and delicate expressions," she said. "Odissi dance can be distinguished from others by the display of emotions and sentiments. For persons not familiar with the intricacies of Indian classical dances, Odissi presents a rich display of grace and charm."

The dancers donned the traditional Indian costume: a colorful silk sari, a richly

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embroidered blouse, a cover with frills around the hips and a cord with tassels tied at the waist, along with the customary silver jewelry consisting of necklaces, armbands, bangles, rings, head ornaments and a waistband. On their heads, the Odissi dancers wore crowns of white glittery flowers called the "Tahia."

A favorite part of the dance for Pati includes the "Abhinaya," which means "to act." Abhinayas are characterized by clear expressions of emotion as described in the song to which you are dancing and a very deep involvement with what you try to portray in the course of the dance, she said. It not only requires a very clear understanding of the Sanskrit verse you dance to, but also warrants that you identify yourself with the roles you try to enact.

Chopra felt the event was "indeed a wonderful opportunity for us in Blacksburg to experience the pleasure of such culturally rich art forms and appreciate the mode of storytelling in the ancient days. The very fact that artists who perform have undergone more than 10 years of training to excel in these art forms and exhibit their talents is simply commendable."

Along with SUR, this volunteer student-run organization has held other cultural events such as Indian luncheons, film festivals and participated in the International Street Fair. AID has received the highest four-star rating by Charity Navigator, America's best-known independent evaluator of charities, and is ranked second among top 10 charities in the United States.

Chopra said his "participation in AID has been an enriching experience, preparing us for the environment when we graduate. The few hours of our volunteer work in AID, together brings a good change for people in India and is our ultimate satisfaction."

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