

'Chanakya': Compelling Message Of Unity & Freedom

BY MAHADEV DESAI & VIREN MAYANI

Atlanta: Atlanta's prodigal writer/producer/director Syam Yellamraju presented a mega, 326 BC historical drama "Chanakya", in English, at the Clayton County Performing Arts Center on Sunday, September 13th, in benefit of the Chinmaya Mission Alpharetta, (CMA).

CMA Chairman, Pujya Swami Tejomayananda conveyed Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda's and his blessings and good

motivate them to learn about Chanakya: his contribution as a scholar, a Prime Minister, a shrewd diplomat, and chief architect of the first Maurya Emperor, Chandragupt's rise to power. As the names of the winners from Elementary School, Middle School and High School were announced, the audience responded with a resounding applause. In addition, all the names of the winners and profiles of the judges were published in the program brochure.

Presented to a 1200 seat, sold-out patronage, the two and half hour audio-visual treat

the core. Though there were as only two Indian folk-dance presented with young village women in colorful costumes joined by the invited but invading Greek soldiers, the choreography lingered till the end. There were 92 actors with the age range (5 – 60), playing 110 characters. More than 75% of the 30 plus production and direction team were women. Music was locally composed and authentically produced in India by the group comprising of composer Srini Kishore and team, Sujatha Rayburn, Smitha Yellamraju and Srivalli Vempatti. Technology was in full play and concerted team-effort was in constant motion; for example only 8 microphones were circled back and forth between all the performers, to deliver without error, the theatrical dialogue-audio to the audience, for the two and half hours of live play which resonated well with everyone in the audience. A fete in itself, besides the constant make-up changes etc. The scenes presented in rapid succession, had minimum stage dark time in-between 12 scene and setting changes. That downtime was effectively used by "Kaal" the narrator of the Chanakya history. The audience enthusiastically applauded at the end of each scene-change and gave a long thunderous standing ovation to the entire cast, when the play concluded.

When the play begins, we find Acharya Chanak (father of Chanakya) and Shaktar talking about the unjust and oppressive rule of King Dhananand of Magadh. Young Chanakya goes to the University of Takshasila to empower himself with education. After completing his studies he becomes a professor. Masses suffered because there was disunity and wars between kingdoms of Gandhara, Kaikeyi and Magadh. Like his father, Chanakya, a Brahmin, is also insulted and ill-treated by King Dhananand. Enraged, Chanakya meets an extra ordinary child named Chandragupt, and takes him to Takshashila for training. Chanakya and Chandragupt team up to seek retribution against King Dhananand. The Greek Emperor Alexander invades India. The weak kings of little kingdoms are helpless against Alexander's powerful army. Chanakya and his peers try to persuade shortsighted kings such as Ambhi of Gandhara and Dhananand of Magadh to unite but in vain. So Chanakya decides to initiate a grassroots movement to unite and awaken the masses (Uttishta Bharata). A change of heart is brought about among the Indian mercenaries in the Greek army to turn into freedom fighters. Many kings, ministers, army generals and strategists unite to wage a war against Alexander, under Chandragupt's command. Death of a Greek Governor and mysterious death of Alexander helps to drive away the Greeks from India. Next Chanakya and Chandragupt use various stratagems to bring about an end to dictatorial regime of King Dhananand and to enthrone Chandragupt.

When Syam was asked, what motivated him to produce 'Chanakya'? he promptly retorted: "I do not have the resources to produce a commercial Broadway hit, but we got dangerously close. The team focuses on community oriented shows, with a purpose. Chanakya was designed to take the community theatre to the realm of professional "Broadway like" show. We will not pursue Broadway shows, albeit our team has the capability and the know-how, but not the resources. It does not interest us either. We do shows for the benefit

of our communities and future generations, certainly not for money. More than 50% of the artists would not have performed if this was a money making venture. I wanted our kids to get a visual treat of what "glorified India" meant and that we were "cool" even in 326BC. Hence the reason, the play was even delivered in English. Not one of the over 30 youth that participated in the play will ever forget the history of Chanakya. That is what I wanted to see achieved and our team did! "A good show for a great cause"

Viren Mayani feels, that talent mining from within our local communities, nurturing some of them, gathering and uniting them to cohesively participate and contribute to a humungous play like Chanakya, proves many things:

(a) we do have immense inert talent in each one of us and it needs to be tapped (b) collectively we can make magic especially when it is for a just cause – like Chanakya did for India's history (c) it does take a village to create something of this nature especially when more than 50% of the actors are on stage the first time ever (d) patience and perseverance is extremely rewarding, especially when all participants are not punctual (e) you build a community within a community.

When asked another valid and pertinent question, "Why CMA? when there are so many non-profits to raise funds for in Atlanta?" Syam stated that this was the first ever fundraiser for CMA. CMA's methodology stylized as a Gurukul, teaches Vedic learning to students and they too have the hierarchical Acharya embodiment. It was a perfect parallel, teaching students right from wrong – the way Chanakya taught the

Continued on Pg25.....



wishes on the occasion. CMA President Sudha Malhotra welcomed everyone and introduced Board Member Smt. Sharada Kumarji, who is resident Acharya of Chinmaya Mission, Ann Arbor, Michigan and who has been an inspirational and guiding force behind CMA from its inception. Af-

'Chanakya', evoked deep patriotic intensity and created a scope for special and authentic early-age Indian music and culture, which was delivered to the hilt. It is notable, that no current century Indian instruments like sitar, tabla, etc., were used for the background score. Instead; veena, flute, dhundhubi, manjira and trumpets were recorded.

The music included chanting and recitations of uplifting shlokas from the Vedas. All of the 92 artists, of varied ethnic background, playing the 110 roles; thoroughly immersed themselves in their stage characters and acted very convincingly. The elaborate period costumes, including those of the Greek soldiers, Indian Royalty, Acharyas and students undergoing training at the Gurukul in Vedas and martial arts; the lighting,

the props and varied backdrops of a hut, a rural scene, and the palace hall; the furniture, battle scenes and accessories that consisted of an elephant, the throne, coins, pots, urns, sword-fighting et al., added to the artistic finesse of the entire production and presentation. It was authentic to



Photos by Passion Photo & Video

ter a brief introduction to CMA and its proposed project of an Ashram project, she proceeded to light the diyas as a reverential homage to Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda. CMA had initiated a praiseworthy Chanakya Essay Competition for children, overseen by Lakshmi Vedala, to

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