

Thillana Mohanambal – One pager

Timeline and locale: this movie is set in the culturally rich Tanjavur, Thiruvarur and Madurai regions of Tamil Nadu, presumably in the mid-20th century period as one could infer. This is primarily a dance-musical, with nadaswaram and bharathnatyam being the core of temple music and dance in these regions, as it has always been. There are no historical kings/queens patronizing the arts in this movie. The artists are freelancers performing at temples and at concerts mainly sponsored by the rich landlords, shettys and other such rich patrons of the respective towns.

Shanmugasundaram (played by Shivaji Ganesan), one of the two key protagonists of the movie, is supposed to be the undisputed king of nadaswaram in the region. The movie opens with a wonderful rendition of some traditional songs/keerthanas by him at a concert, sponsored by the local merchant (vyshya). Unknown to him, Mohana (played by Padmini), the other key protagonist of the movie and apparently the undisputed dancing queen of the region, gets to know of his performance at the temple where she is supposed to dance after his performance. Fascinated by his reputation, she eagerly arrives there with her dominating, greedy, money-minded mother and her accompanists. Just as she is spell-bound by his music, he abruptly stops, as he is disturbed by some crackers being burst by other villages in the vicinity. It shows the dedication and respect he has to his art and he refuses to continue despite requests from the patron himself (through the middleman, of course). This is interpreted as head-strong/arrogant behavior by some people, and he certainly is short-tempered and rather inflexible.

Just as he is leaving, Mohana meets him and expresses her regret that she couldn't listen to his 'kutcheri' fully. He gets annoyed and wonders whether he was performing for her. She claims that she would match his nadaswaram rendition with her impeccable dance. Thus starts a series of challenges between the two and quite a bit of the movie is dedicated to each of two reinforcing the challenge.

Mohana's very first performance in the movie, the one immediately after Shanmugasundaram's, is wonderful and amply demonstrates Mohana's/Padmini's dancing prowess. All the accompanists of Shanmugasundaram were in awe of her reputation and wanted to go and watch her performance. But he vehemently declines their requests and orders them to go to sleep (at the guest house). But after a few minutes each one of them slip out and Shanmugasundaram, who had been pretending to be asleep, despite himself goes there and watches her performance from behind one of the pillars. Mohana, having seen him, takes a dig at him through the opening line of her song itself ('Maraindirudu parkum marmamenna?') and even tags him by his name in the another line, which gives him a jolt. Very beautiful composition and performance.

Thus both fall in love with each other, or do they fall in love with each other's art? That would be a good question to explore.

Mohana very sportively takes up Shanmugasundaram's challenge and states that she will dance to his nadaswaram only in front of Thyaragaraja Swamy in Tanjavur temple. But her mother flatly refuses permission, stating that a very rich patron had invited her to perform on the same day with a huge pay packet. But somehow she convinces her mother who lays down lot of conditions, including not meeting him before/after the performance.

Finally they do challenge each other and a local swamiji who plays judge, declares that both are equal and undisputed in their respective art and just as Shanmugasundaram is praising Mohana and states that she could be titled 'Thillana Mohana', a patron spurned by Mohana (and who wanted to stop this jugalbandi challenge) throws a knife at him, aiming to kill him, but it hits left bicep and injures him seriously. He is taken to a big hospital in Chennai and Mohana stays back at her home praying for his well-being.

Once he recovers, he is requested to perform for a king and he agrees to perform only if Mohana dances. And she does. This is another wonderful dance/musical of the movie ('Nalam daanaa?').

Mohana's mother's greed and the gullibility of these two lead to a series of misguided ventures master-minded by a crooked middleman (played by Nagesh) which eventually leads to both blindly signing very binding contracts with that same local king (fictional). The consequences are dramatic, with Shanmugasundaram doubting her fidelity. But then the maharaja himself comes out and clarifies things and admits his folly. Thus the misgivings are cleared and they end up tying the knot, typical end for usual formula movies.

As such, if at all one intends to produce a dance-musical based on this movie, one could just pick a few elements that just involve mainly the two lead characters and focus on their dedication to their respective art forms, the instant love that they feel for each other (or their art?), Shanmugasundaram's ego and such, and leave out everything else.

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