

Love, art and tea

The InKo Centre hosts an evening of classical Korean performances



Moments in time (Clockwise) Young Ja Lee, Na Yesim and Sung Ok Kim in their element. ■ M KARUNAKARAN

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An unassuming little woman, dressed in white, regards her 20-odd-strong audience with a kindly smile. Clasp her fan gently with both hands, Korean singer Young Ja Lee closes her eyes for a brief while, and begins to sing.

The sound that erupts from her mild frame – a cross between the echoes of a bell and the chants of a monastery – belies her appearance completely.

Barely more than a deep, extended syllable at first, it stuns her audience into silence and slowly weaves itself into words, and then into rhythms, eventually turning into a poignant tale of star-crossed lovers.

For those unfamiliar with the language, the story unfolds through the expressions on her face: at one moment a picture of warmth, the next, a look of absolute anguish, mirrored in tone by her song. In the more joyous moments, she unfolds her fan with a snap, bobbing delicately on her toes with the rhythm. She wraps up what would originally have been a five-hour performance within twenty minutes, and her face, hitherto a mix of powerful emotions, relapses back into a kindly smile.

"Actually, I am a photographer," she says, after the performance, "I learnt singing in Pansori, which is like the opera in Korea."

Having said that, she professes a deep love for Arunachal Pradesh. She came across a *rishi* during her travels there, and "he is like my Buddha," she

says. So attached did she become with the entire experience, that she gave herself an Indian name: Aruna.

As the echoes of Lee's performance fade away, drums begin to beat somewhere in the distance. Reminiscent of the catchy beats of a *dhak* during community festivals, the beats flank dancer Sung Ok

Kim, as she makes her eager entrance, all ablaze in a black-and-red traditional garment. Like Lee, she begins mild and controlled: stepping in circles and beating the flat drum in her hand with a stick. Her movements are deliberate, almost as if in slow-motion, and as she keeps the time, the deep beats of her instrument strike a contrast with the merry, *dhak*-like background music.

Slowly, she picks up speed and cheer, swirling around faster and faster. Though her tempo ebbs and flows, her set smile doesn't waver, till she finally goes into a spinning frenzy, like a dervish, albeit one who is very much present in the moment and enjoying it to the full.

The performances of the evening are

meant as a blessing to artist Na Yesim, whose works of embroidery are on the display at the venue.

Using cloth of different shapes and texture as her canvas, Yesim stitches delicate floral, star-like patterns to hint at scenery on what would otherwise have been a patch of cloth.

In accompaniment to the music and the art was a tea ceremony, performed by Yesim aka Kyeongwon Kwon herself. Yesim solemnly transported the

tea from a cracked clay pot to a teapot, and then into tiny, pale peach-white cups made of Korean mud, arranged in neat little rows. She fills them to the halfway point from left to right, and then retraces the flow till the clear, warm liquid reaches right below the brim, then invites the guests to take a sip as they stroll amid her art.

The exhibition, titled, *Sarang-Ga*, is open to the public at InKo Centre, Adyar Club Gate

Road, till January 15 (except Sundays) from 10 am to 6 pm.

