

ART CONNECT

An IFA Publication

Volume 5

Number 1

January-June 2011

Special Issue on the Performing Arts

Rs. 100



Contents

EDITORIAL

3

PHYSICAL TEXT: CREATING THE AUTONOMOUS ACTOR

Sankar Venkateswaran

6

DASTANGOI: CONJURING UP THE ANCIENT WIZARDS OF STORYTELLING

Mahmood Farooqui

20

THE GATI RESIDENCY: NURTURING NEW VOICES IN CHOREOGRAPHY

Anusha Lall

32

THE *RISALO*: POETRY IN PERFORMANCE

Shalini Panjabi

48

Reviews

BEAUTIFUL THING 1: EXPLORING GENDER AND GEOMETRIES

Parvathi Nayar

60

ALLADEEN AND DANCING ON GLASS: TWO WAYS
OF LOOKING AT GLOBALITY

Jisha Menon

74

ArtConnect

An IFA Publication

Volume 5, Number 1

January-June 2011

Editor

C.K. Meena

Design

Mishta Roy

Printed by B Narahari, published by Anmol Vellani on behalf of India Foundation for the Arts and printed at Manipal Press Ltd., Press Corner, Tile Factory Road, Manipal, Udipi, Karnataka - 576 104 and published at India Foundation for the Arts, 'Apurva', Ground Floor, No 259, 4th Cross, Raj Mahal Vilas IInd Stage, IInd Block, Bangalore - 560 094. Editor - C.K. Meena

Photo and Text Credits

Sankar Venkateswaran, Thyagarajan, Satoko Tsurudome, Vinayan, Mahmood Farooqui, Anusha Lall, Rajyashree Ramamurthi, Shilpika Bordoloi, Amitesh Grover, Desmond Roberts, Shalini Panjabi, Parvathi Nayar, Jirka Jansch, Sara, Jisha Menon, Virginia Rodrigues

Cover Image

Micari in Sahyande Makan — *The Elephant Project*, a Theatre Roots & Wings production. Photograph by Thyagarajan.

All efforts have been made to contact and receive permission from all copyright holders. Any source not acknowledged will be credited in subsequent issues.

Editorial

This issue is coming out one month earlier than scheduled, to coincide with IFA's second New Performance Festival from 18 to 21 November 2010 in Kolkata. It is the second such festival (the first was in Bangalore in 2008) featuring performances that have been developed with support from IFA. Fittingly, therefore, performance is the theme of this issue.

IFA part-funded a residency for emerging choreographers, the Gati Summer Dance Residency 2010, run by the Gati Forum in New Delhi. The Forum's Director, Anusha Lall, gives us an overview of this residency, which offers dancers a unique opportunity to create and stage their own choreographic works with guidance from mentors, who help them develop a critical eye towards their own work. We also have reflections on the residency, as two residents and a mentor narrate the highlights of their ten-week experience.

A New Performance grant from IFA launched theatre professional Sankar Venkateswaran on a journey to map contemporary acting, actor training and theatre-making in India. In this issue he describes how, by using physical text as a tool to create autonomous actors, he has tried to outline an alternative approach to contemporary theatre making in India. Another grant partially supported dancer/choreographer Padmini Chettur to develop a collaborative performance piece, *Beautiful Thing 1*, reviewed here by Parvathi Nayar. Also in the Review section is Jisha Menon's critique of Ram Ganesh Kamatham's play *Dancing on Glass*, which recently toured Mumbai and New Delhi.

3

Travelling from the new to the old, Mahmood Farooqui has been exploring Dastangoi, the sixteenth century performed art of storytelling, which migrated here from Persia. He has been researching, in particular, the countless fantastic tales woven around the Arab warrior Amir Hamza, which acquired distinctly Indic colours in the eighteenth century. An IFA grant helped Farooqui breathe new life into the art form, and his training workshops for dastangos (tellers of epics) are an attempt to recapture some of that lost glory. Here, he narrates the history of Dastangoi and talks of plans to extend its ambit by creating contemporary texts.

Meanwhile, another storytelling tradition, an intertwining of the oral and the written, is alive and well in the Sindhi belt, the swathe of land that stretches from Baluchistan all the way down to Kachchh. Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*, a vast collection of verses that tell stories about the region and the people of Sindh, continues to be recited, read and sung 300 years after they were composed. IFA grantee Shalini Punjabi, who travelled across western Rajasthan and Kachchh to trace the journey of the *Risalo*, found that the episodic and fragmentary nature of the stories allowed for a multitude of performance forms.

Journeys appear to mark this issue: journeys virtual and physical; inward journeys as well as journeys that retrace other journeys made hundreds of years ago.

C.K. Meena

ckmeena@gmail.com

Contributors

Sankar Venkateswaran graduated from Calicut University's School of Drama & Fine Arts with a first rank (2002) and completed intensive training at the Theatre Training and Research Programme, Singapore (2006). Sankar has undergone practical 'immersions' in four major Asian traditional theatre forms—Noh, Kudiyattom, Beijing opera and Wayang Wong—as well as Stanislavskian and post-Stanislavskian acting methodologies, and training in voice, speech, movement, theatre-making, Taiji and para-theatre. In 2007 he founded Theatre Roots & Wings of which he is currently the artistic director. Sankar works as a dramaturge as well as a producer, director, actor and music composer. He teaches acting and has been holding theatre-making workshops, one of which he was invited to conduct in Japan by Ku Na'uka Theatre Company in 2002.

4

Mahmood Farooqui studied history at St Stephen's College, New Delhi and at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He has been a journalist and a newspaper columnist and over the last few years, under the guidance of the renowned Urdu scholar S.R. Faruqi, has worked to effect a major revival of Dastangoi, the lost art of Urdu storytelling that dates back to the sixteenth century. He is the author of *Besieged: Voices from Delhi 1957* (Penguin) and *Habib Tanvir's Autobiography* (Viking), and has worked as a researcher with William Dalrymple on *The Last Mughal*. He is the co-director of the recently released Hindi feature film *Peepli Live*, and lives in Delhi with his wife Anusha Rizvi.

Anusha Lall is director and founder member of the Gati Dance Forum, a Delhi-based organisation that works to promote artists in the field of contemporary Indian dance. Her interest in dance spans choreography, performance, teaching and research. Some of her recent choreographic works are *Sambodhan*, *Vyuti* and *Tilt*. Anusha collaborates with artists from other disciplines such as theatre, video, sculpture and digital art, and has worked with leading choreographers and theatre directors from around the world. She has also created dance and digital

art installations that challenge traditional notions of viewing dance and aim to subvert the relationship between the dancer and the spectator. Her installations *Inside In* and *Homes for the Absent* have been exhibited at Spring Dance, Netherlands, and Apeejay Gallery and Khoj, New Delhi.

Shalini Panjabi is an independent researcher based in Bangalore. She did her PhD in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics on aspects of private education in India, and has received a Postdoctoral Research Award from the Charles Wallace Trust. Her research interests are also in the larger areas of orality, literacy and cultural heritage. One of her field sites has been Kashmir, where the focus has been on the complex issues that arise from conservation in a conflict situation. Her current work, funded by a grant from the IFA, is on Sindhi oral narratives in western Rajasthan and Kachchh.

Parvathi Nayar is a visual artist with a drawing and painting practice. Her thought-provoking work explores narratives of our world in unusual ways, and invites viewers to re-examine preconceptions. As a writer, she is a cultural commentator covering areas that include film, theatre and contemporary dance. Parvathi received her Masters in Fine Art from Central St Martins College of Art and Design, London on a Chevening scholarship. In 2007 she was the only artist invited to present an installation by ArtSingapore, Singapore's national art fair. She has exhibited widely in India and abroad, and her works have been collected by institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum, The Sotheby's Art Institute and Deutsche Bank.

Jisha Menon is currently Assistant Professor of Drama at Stanford University. She completed her Masters in English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and her PhD in Drama at Stanford University. She served as Assistant Professor of English at University of British Columbia, Vancouver for four years. She is currently working on a book, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan and the Memory of Partition*. She is also co-editor, with Patrick Anderson, of a volume of essays, *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Palgrave-Macmillan Press) that explores the coimbrication of violence, performance, and modernity in a variety of geopolitical spaces.

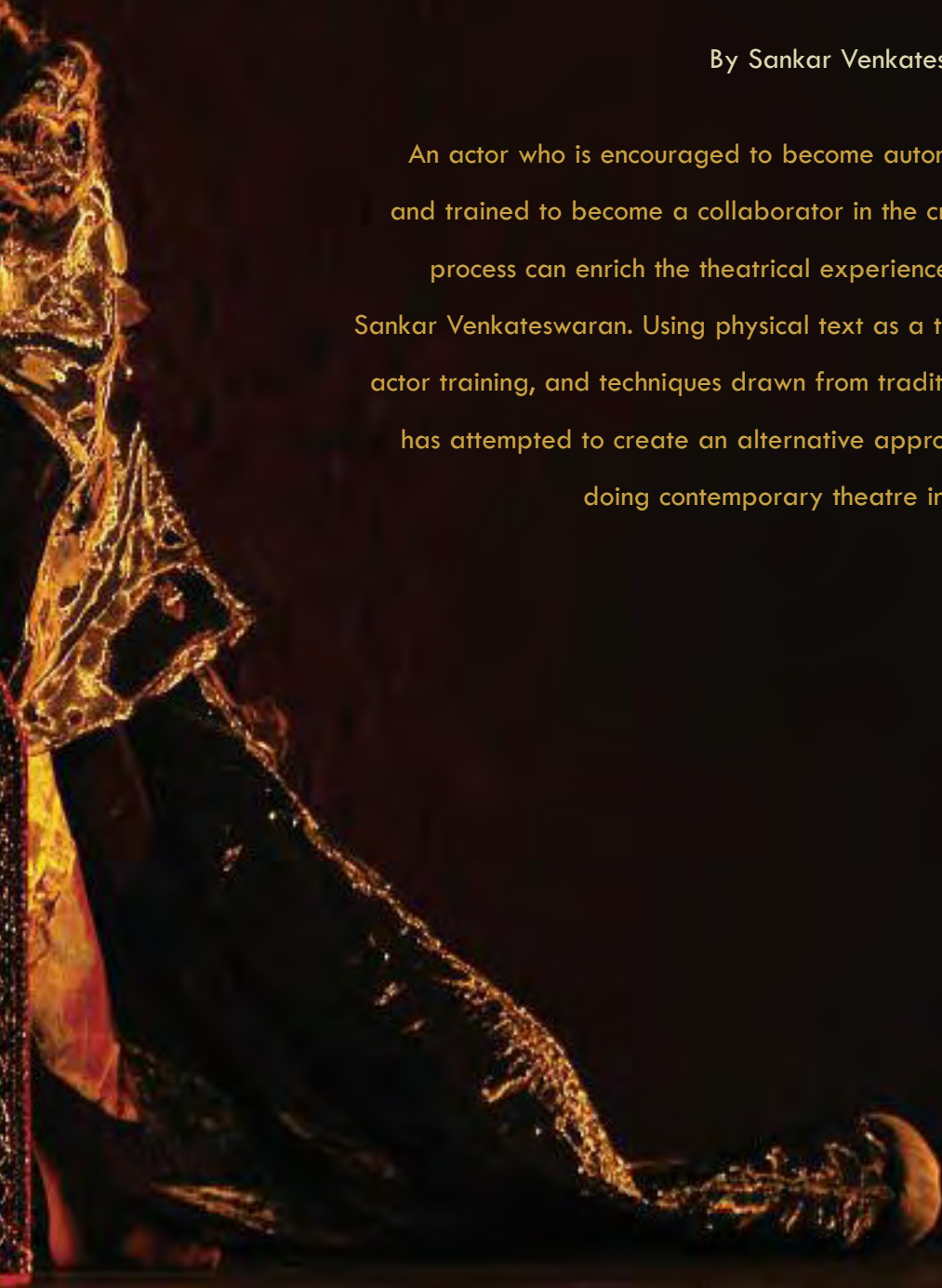


Micari in Sahyande Makan — The Elephant Project.
Photograph by Thyagarajan.

Physical Text: Creating the Autonomous Actor

By Sankar Venkateswaran

An actor who is encouraged to become autonomous and trained to become a collaborator in the creative process can enrich the theatrical experience, feels Sankar Venkateswaran. Using physical text as a tool for actor training, and techniques drawn from tradition, he has attempted to create an alternative approach to doing contemporary theatre in India.



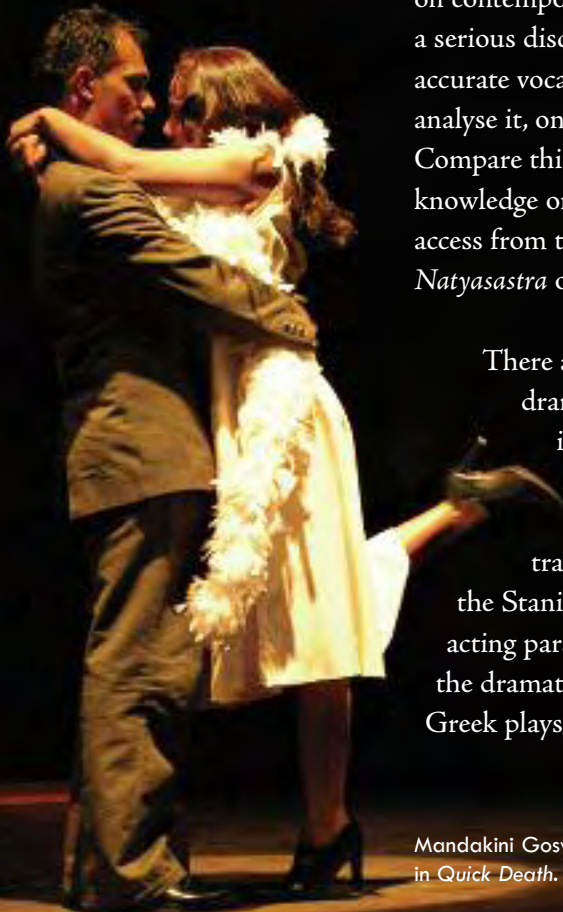
In early 2007, I started work on creating a methodology for actor training and theatre making, aimed at revitalising the experimental spirit of contemporary Indian theatre. Towards this, I wanted to start on a sequential and logical training process that would enable contemporary actors to participate in the creative process with a fair degree of artistic autonomy. The aim was to tap into the entire expressive potential of the actor and get her to commit fully to the substance of the act. I wanted my actors to claim their

authorship/authority over their creations. Such a rehearsal set-up, I thought, would empower the individual, theatre, and eventually, society itself. The origin of, and my inspiration for, this idea on autonomy came from traditional theatres.

The influence of the *Natyasastra* in practices ranging from Odissi to Kathakali shows us that there has been a unified language to talk about acting and its aesthetics in the subcontinent for hundreds of years. But not enough literature is available on contemporary acting, as there isn't a serious discourse on it, or an accurate vocabulary to discuss and analyse it, on a pan-Indian level. Compare this with the bulk of knowledge on acting that we can access from texts such as the *Natyasastra* or the *Abhinayadarpanam*.

There are a few institutions and drama schools where acting is taught. There are two streams that inform the fundamental training. One is based on the Stanislavskian or life-like-acting paradigm, which extends to the dramaturgies of Shakespeare, Greek plays, Brecht, Beckett and so

8



Mandakini Goswami and Prabhath Bhaskaran in *Quick Death*. Photograph by Thyagarajan.

on. The other stream draws on non-realistic, larger-than-life-like and abstract paradigms, sometimes independently, sometimes informed by the *Natyasastra* and/or certain regional or folk practices. There are also a few director-led theatre groups and labs scattered across India that undertake actor training seriously and pursue their own individual styles. Here the actor is trained to work under a director, and therefore limited to working in the director's style.

In institutions as well as in director-led groups, actors are not in charge of the process of creation. The directors may or may not understand the inspirational needs of the actors and may fail to articulate what they want from them. Often, the actor's judgments, perceptions, and understanding of the interiority of the actions are ruled by the director's interpretation.

Contrasting processes

A major difference between the processes of a contemporary actor and those of a traditional actor is in the progression that leads to a performance. A traditional actor's work can be broadly classified into three phases. The first phase is to

respect the form and to learn it in accurate and minute detail from a master, who gives the actor the 'blocking' in the initial stage of her training. The second phase starts from the moment when the actor becomes free of technique. This happens through prolonged practice. The actor now embodies a new 'spontaneity' and starts to move with a 'second nature'. The final phase refers to the moment when the actor intentionally, and with profound artistic goals in mind, moves away from the form. And to this end, she has to re-model the forms that modelled her. This departure from form is the exact moment when the actor begins to express her own artistry, gain autonomy over the substance of the act. She no longer follows the blocking, moves, gestures and vocalisations taught to her but keeps them as references and departs from them to create new actions over which she enjoys total authorship.

In contrast, the contemporary actor starts in a creative environment, generally acquainting herself with the work through readings and improvisations and by applying an analytical process to the substance of the act. This is the first phase. In the second phase, the director harnesses her improvisations to form part of the

larger dramaturgy. Through repetition and familiarity, the actor slowly starts to acquire a 'second nature' over her actions. The final phase is the 'blocking' or 'blueprinting' or 'plotting'. As the day of the performance approaches, the actor is given structures based on what she has created; scenes are modelled by the author, director or dramaturge, and executed by the actor in resonance with the director's 'creative will'.

It was based on this observation that I started to create an alternative

approach to play directing, acting, actor training and theatre making. I wanted to re-emphasise the centrality of acting in the creative process of the contemporary actor, working with my actors as collaborators and autonomous creators. Actor autonomy is not a form of irreverence towards the director but a disciplined process through which the actor can become truly empowered and, going beyond being a mere duplicator of established cultures, become an innovator of new and relevant creations.



Sunil Kumar in *Sahyande Makan* — *The Elephant Project*. Photograph by Satoko Tsurudome.



Sankar Venkateswaran in
Sahyande Makan — *The
Elephant Project*. Photograph
by Satoko Tsurudome.

Now, what makes it possible for the traditional actor to achieve such autonomy? The Kudiyattom actor's work is based on Sanskrit plays. Besides using the prescribed text, the actors closely follow the acting manual (*Aattaprakaram*) written for the performance. Much of the training and rehearsal process is devoted to embodying these acting manuals in meticulous detail. The Noh actors also have their acting manuals (*Katatsuke*) in addition to the dramatic texts.

12 An acting manual may consist of drawings, detailed written descriptions of the physical actions and their qualifications, a unique layout indicating stage directions, notes on music and choreography, and so on. These are passed on from teacher to student within the framework of traditional training. They are not considered as independent texts, but as supplements to dramatic literature; they operate as a set of guidelines with which the actors can kick-start the process.

The contemporary actor seldom gets to follow an acting manual, as there usually isn't one. Therefore, texts such as Richard Murphet's *Quick Death*, Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words* and Ota Shogo's *The Water*

Station become extremely relevant to the training process. They are 'physical texts', which are standalone bodies of work, while acting manuals are supplementary to the dramatic texts. Since physical texts are written along the lines of the acting manual, they serve a purpose in contemporary theatre similar to that of acting manuals in traditional theatre.

A pre-written physical text contains written transcriptions of actions. These transcriptions work as pre-determined forms and help the contemporary actor to bypass the difficulty of starting with a form, thus allowing her to shape her process as a traditional actor would, but within the framework of contemporary work. Such a text instructs an actor to be specific, structured, and yet spontaneous, and facilitates her in taking charge of the creative process. A physical text is an ideal tool for actor training. It leads the actor to express with her whole body and, in the case of my exploration with *Quick Death*, promotes actor autonomy and encourages representational acting and mimesis. Moreover, it is an invaluable teaching aid in the early stages of actor training as it provides the actor with a strong foundation, even as it rescues her from the challenges of voice work

and the vulnerabilities of early, unprepared emotional exposure.

Journey begins

I was not as clear about these concepts in 2007, when I applied for support from IFA. After spending sleepless nights drafting and redrafting my proposal, I was finally awarded a production grant. In the heat of a Delhi summer, ensconced in a building virtually sealed in glass, with no air-conditioners or ventilators, I started rehearsing *Quick Death* with Mandakini Goswami, Manoj Mathai, Prabhath Bhaskaran, Vinu Joseph, Sandeep Jayaraj, Shymon Chelad, Ranjith Raman and Satoko Tsurudome.

It was so hot that often, unable to rehearse on the floor, we sat with a scale model of the set and chess pawns to evolve the choreography. I put together the music, and the actors started looking at their actions in relation to the music and the space. Early mornings, before the sun came out, we regularly practised a regimen of exercises that I created to nurture the following aspects of the actor: Posture, Alignment, Ease and Relaxation, Readiness, Weight, Balance, Grounding, Awareness,

Energy, Movement as a whole, Feeling of the Form, Slowness, Stillness, Swiftness, Opposition, Radiation, Transformation, and Feeling of the Beauty. These exercises did not have any emotional content but consisted entirely of physical attributes that the actors had to develop in training sessions and rehearsals. Later, they were constantly reminded to apply these fundamentals to the actions they created and embodied in the performance text.

During rehearsals, I insisted that the actors wear costumes (three-piece suit, trench coat, hat, shoes, etc) when we did scene work, despite the heat and lack of ventilation. A few basic ground rules for acting were set and I insisted on their being followed in rehearsals. Always, five aspects must be connected: a new breath, a new thought, a new focus for the eye, a new body posture, and a new pitch (where the actors utter text). All actions are phrased in relation to the breath. An action must have a beginning, middle and an end. An action must always begin between an in-breath and an out-breath or vice-versa. Actors must work off each other, that is, more importance should be given to reacting than to acting, or in other words, not 'doing' but 'allowing

to be done to.' After a few rehearsals, with such rigid physical structures in place, I found out that as soon as we started rehearsing, a synchronicity in breathing happened between the actors.

This was a good sign—a very good sign, actually, because I was keen on the expressive potentials of the mind, and the bringing together of the minds, imaginations and impulses of the actors, author and audiences. Breath is the door to mind.

By 30 June 2007 we had something close to a work-in-progress. I worked on the piece further, and on

5 December 2007 we opened the (initially 60-minute) show in New Delhi.

Theatre of the Mind

Theatre Roots & Wings has produced two plays in the last four years. We have earned a reputation for creating unique and powerful pieces of theatre, which rely on the sheer power of the presence of the actor, live action, music and innovative staging. This theatre is full of ephemerals, unique to the nature of the mind. The mind, though physiologically invisible and psychologically unconscious, manifests in the form of profound

14



Prabhath Bhaskaran in *Quick Death*.
Photograph by Thyagarajan.



Yuka Tsuchida as Ashwathama, Nozomi Takeuchi as Balarama, Sakie Kishi as Dhritarashtra and Ayano Watai as Gandhari in *Urubhangam*. Photograph by Satoko Tsurudome.

experiences for the audiences to feel, relish, ponder, solve and sometimes wonder at. Here, the mind makes itself present in space and through time, charging space, dilating time, and engaging anyone who steps into the periphery of its presence.

This is theatre of the mind. There are a number of minds or imaginations operating in a theatrical experience. Moments of delightful theatricality erupt only when the minds of the author, the actor, the character and the audience harmonise. Here, what is in the poet's mind is reflected in the audience's mind. The vibrations in the audience's mind affect the character's states of beings and resonate in the actor's mind. The boundaries between the minds of the author, actor, character and audience dissolve and form one mind, one consciousness. Theatre works at its best in such synchronicities.

Now, how do I personify the mind in space? And what is the process? There are two things worth mentioning here: my directorial approach in getting the audience and the actors to actively invest their minds/imaginations in the performance, and the training that allows the actors to express their

minds/imaginations in and through their bodies.

As for my directorial approach, I am only concerned with the 'externals' of the actions that the actors create; that is, I have never attempted to dictate anything related to the interiority of the actions, or discuss anything related to the psychology or emotionality of the character. This is an invitation for the actor to invest her creative capital in the process. She is invited to invest her own imagination in the performance, which is entirely free of a director's prejudice. The actors find their own inner justifications and reasons for their actions and parts. Each has a different set of justifications for her part, which can be different from that of her fellow actors, of the playwright, of mine, and of the audience.

When directing a play I usually leave it to the actors to interpret the text. I might work with them to evolve their interpretations, but I never impose my interpretations on them. As a director, I work on the physicality, on discovering the tempo, rhythm, orientation and the various psychophysical qualifications that are essential to the 'watchability' of the actor. My major task in rehearsals is

calling the shots and building up the rhythm of the score together with the performers and the technical artists, thus allowing the actor to have total authority over the 'interiority'. This results in powerful actions that resonate with a multiplicity of interpretations/meanings. And since the actions are free of didactic information and built-in meanings imposed by me, the audiences are also summoned to invest their imaginations for the justifications that they seek while watching the performance.

The exploration of an actor is directed towards identifying and executing what is 'necessary' in a performative moment (with respect to the text). Ideally speaking, until the actor 'matures' enough to claim total authority over the substance of the act, a wink of an eye or a shift in the focus would be seen as 'unnecessary' if it is not written in the text; this is an invitation for an actor to *identify* and *refrain* from executing what is 'unnecessary' till she 'matures' and feels the creative urge and spirit that will then transform the 'unnecessary' into the 'necessary'. The actor might find the whole process restrictive in the early stages, only to discover freedom, at a later stage, which is achieved

through discipline. This process demands of an actor a balance between technique and inspiration, control and release, containment and freedom, consciousness and unconsciousness.

As for the training part, I direct actors to train their bodies and voices in order to express their imagination. After all, the mind of a character is seen on stage only through the body of the actor. My training for actors consists of structures that are placed sequentially, beginning at the level of least intricacy and going up the scale over a period of time. When it comes to training a contemporary actor in such a sequential manner, some questions regarding the beginning and middle arise. The end is more or less clear: we need actors skilled in their craft, autonomous in their art. But where do we begin and how do we proceed? Acting is largely a corporal task and the strength of empirical knowledge in acting is undeniable. Hence an ideal starting point would be the body itself.

Training should start with the body because it is the most tangible aspect of the human organism. Once the student actor completes a fair degree of training she starts on her

voice work, followed by training in speech and singing. With a well-trained body, voice, speech and singing faculties, the actor must explore the fascinating, subtle, complex, and profound landscape of the mind. Initially, the training should be done on the individual expressive faculties, and during a theatre making and performance creation practice, the integrated expressive faculties should be explored. These days, I am careful not to bring existing cultural forms to my rehearsal space during training sessions. I urge my actors to look beneath the layers of culture to represent the essential human truth so that the most primal image of the human being manifests itself in space.

18

What I have outlined is the tip of an iceberg. With this process I work on training the creativity and imagination of the actors and provide them with challenging dramaturgies to deal with. This results in a closely woven, progressively constructed training structure that links theory, training, theatre making and acting and the dramaturgy of a society through a profound connection. It has its starting point at a basic level of intricacy and progresses steadily and logically, aiming to develop creativity, technique and autonomy for the actor. With this training, the actor will be well equipped to face challenges when she journeys through genres and performance styles.



Scene from *Quick Death*. Photograph by Satoko Tsurudome.

The potential of this working methodology is ratified in my productions. Now, in 2010, when I review my journey, I see that the training process has unleashed the creativity and imagination of numerous actors in India and a few in Japan, inspiring them to create original work that is relevant to theatre, to society, and to themselves as individuals. So far, I have taught thirteen workshops all over India since the premiere of *Quick Death*, and shared various segments of my concept of the autonomous actor with more than 140 acting students in India and twenty-five students in Japan.

Over the last three years, my own study and practice in this direction as a theatre maker has given birth to four distinctly different productions: *Quick Death*, *Sahyande Makan – The Elephant Project* (based on V. Sreedhara Menon's text), (Bhasa's) *Urubhangam* and *The Water Station*. Since 2007, *Quick Death* has grown considerably shorter and quicker. Now in 2010, the play is little more than 35 minutes long, with no edits. As critic Sadanand Menon wrote: "*Quick Death* has lesser ingredients than a Molotov Cocktail. Yet, the result is spontaneous combustion. And the audience was left punch-drunk."

19



Scene from *Quick Death*. Photograph by Vinayan.

Dastangoi:

Conjuring up the Ancient Wizards of Storytelling

All photographs show Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Husain performing Dastangoi.



Writer, scholar and performer Mahmood Farooqui has been engaged with Dastangoi, the sixteenth century performed art of storytelling in Urdu, since 2004. His work has essentially involved writing on and performing from the longest fictional narrative of modern India, the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. In an email interview, Farooqui describes the history of Dastangoi and his ambitious attempts to rekindle interest in the genre.



The word Dastangoi is a compound of two Persian words *dastan* and *goi*, which together mean 'to tell a dastan'. Dastans were epics, which were recited or read aloud, telling tales of adventure, magic and warfare. The hero's adventures through new worlds and horizons could sometimes parallel the mystic quest, and at other times narrate a purely profane tale. Dastangos were specialised tellers of dastans.

As anecdotes from Mir Baqar Ali, the last famous dastango of India,

make clear, the practice of Dastangoi required an exceptional command over rhetoric, delivery, mimicry, ventriloquism and spontaneous composition. Moreover, Dastangoi was one feature of an oral/performative culture where the public arena was the first and perhaps the most natural site of performance. Contortionists, magicians, soothsayers, fakirs, madaris, animal fights, mushairas and sundry other activities provided a prismatic context in which dastans were composed and performed. The cleverness of the dastango lay in commanding the audience's attention at all times and demanded a range of acting and performing skills.

The most prominent dastan was the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*, which narrated the life and adventures of Amir Hamza whose travels take him through different realms where he encounters fairies, djinns and other supernatural beings. By the sixteenth century, versions of Hamza's story had begun to circulate in India, prompting Emperor Akbar to commission the *Hamzanama*. For the next two centuries, different Persian versions of the Hamza story circulated in India. Dastangoi was sufficiently entrenched in most parts of northern India with the dastangos getting prominent



mention in ethnographic accounts of the time. By the mid-nineteenth century, not only did the Hamza story begin to acquire greater currency in print but the conventions of dastans were also beginning to influence productions of modern Urdu prose.

Over time the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* has receded from public consciousness—both from the literary canon and from the sphere of the performing arts. Mahmood Farooqui began his tryst with the Dastangoi tradition in August 2004 while he was on a Sarai fellowship collecting material for a documentary film he intended to make. He soon, however, began to explore the possibility of performing the text. Though he knew that traditional Dastangoi performance was restricted to a single performer, he nonetheless began to work with other actors.

Farooqui's overarching plan is to train more dastangos, create new dastans and perform to newer audiences. He has conducted workshops with aspiring performers and given them basic training and Hindi transliteration of the texts to begin their practice. From these workshops he has selected performers who will further collaborate with him

to create and adapt performances from the traditional texts. Working with two male performers and a female narrator, he has done over 130 shows in different spaces and cities in India and abroad.

Here, Farooqui speaks of his journey into the wonderland of Dastangoi, which he calls “a near perfect marriage between literature and performance”.

ArtConnect: Could you tell us about the history of Dastangoi? What is its current status in India?

Mahmood Farooqui: *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* is the name of a tradition—a tradition of telling stories around the life and adventures of an Arab warrior called Amir Hamza. It becomes a kind of uber text into which all sorts of other stories begin to flow. The tradition goes back roughly to the eighth century, or perhaps even earlier depending on whom you believe, but it began to flower only when it was transferred from Arabic to Persian. For about five centuries Persian was a cosmopolitan language spoken all over the Asiatic world, like Arabic or Latin before it, so it had reach, it had universality and it had a great tradition of poetry, epics and stories.

Sirf
Kala Ghoda

February



THE TIMES
OF INDIA
Kala Ghoda
Arts Festival
Feb-11th Feb



From about the twelfth century onwards the tales of this Arab warrior began to spread in other parts of the world such as Georgia, Indonesia, Bosnia and Bengal, although it is difficult for us today to trace its exact genealogy and textual history.

There is a record of it being present in India, in a Deccan court, brought here by an Irani storyteller called Haji Qissakhvan Hamadani. Qissakhvan means storyteller, so already, in the sixteenth century, storytellers were separate artists/writers/performers and were given patronage and a high position in the court.

Then there was the *Hamzanama* by Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century. We know he was very fond of listening to these stories and sometimes narrated them too. The *Hamzanama* is the name of the illustrations, really big ones, about 1,200 of them, which Akbar commissioned. About 100 images survive but we have not been able to trace the actual text or oral version of the Hamza dastans they were based on.

It is only in the eighteenth century that we began to get versions, aspects or elements of it in Urdu. By

then there were native dastangos who were writing/performing newer dastans that differed from the Hamza tradition, which was still the most popular and predominant. The relatively simpler Hamza story, a tale of adventures, supernatural beings and battles, was mainly restricted to warfare and romance. *Razm* (war) and *bazm* (poetry/romance/drinking) are the staples of most epics, poetic or otherwise, such as the *Odyssey*, *Shahnamah*, and medieval Hindavi/Sufi romances such as Jayasi's *Padmavat*. Mir Taqi Khyal in Delhi wrote an eighteen-volume dastan called *Bostan-e Khyal*. This and the Hamza story were by then already acquiring very distinctly Indic colours.

25

It was when Khyal and other Indian storytellers brought sorcerers and the magnificent worlds they created through their magical effect and affect, the Tilisms and the tricksters who are shrewd and crafty jokers, that these two Indian peculiarities began to dominate most other aspects in Indian narrations of the Hamza epic.

It is a cyclical, formulaic story with changing principal characters and very similar episodes, encounters and incidents, each of which receive a new

twist, a new colour every time it is retold. It is up to the ingenuity of the teller, the dastango, to create the new out of the old, and therefore he improvises freely. Hamza fights Laqa, Laqa is helped by Afrasiab, Amar goes to his kingdom the Tilism-e Hoshrubah to curb him, and now you have the basic storyline. Sorcerers will come and go, they will be seduced or killed or imprisoned, new things will happen and the story will go on and on, potentially forever. There are countless Ayyaars and sorcerers; there are grocers, merchants, sepoy, soldiers, menial workers, wives, daughters... The bad must suffer, the good must prosper, and in between the two you can slip in anything you wish.

Thus the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* finally took shape in the early nineteenth century. But it was still a mainly oral tradition; people told or embellished stories that they had heard from others. Some, notably at Rampur court, began to write, and carve newer and more elaborate versions too. So there were people writing and people telling. Whether the audience was growing or diminishing is something we do not know. We also don't know how the performance was changing as a result.

It was the Indian print revolution, beginning with Fort William College Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, which provided a new commercial platform to the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. The Naval Kishore Press, one of the largest, most successful printing ventures in human history (recently chronicled by German scholar Ulrike Stark in her monograph *The Empire of Books*) was simultaneously printing stories in Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Bengali, Sanskrit and other languages. Religious texts, poetry, textbooks, stories, epics, Parsi theatre songbooks, everything was accepted as long as it sold.

And so it was that between 1880 and 1910 roughly, a group of six or seven dastangos, mainly Jah, Qamar and Tasadduq Husain, created this magnificent epic, the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*, in forty-six volumes, drawing on older traditions and their own experience as professional tellers. (Before that, the one-volume Hamza story, with affinities to the Persian version known outside India, had already sold in multiple editions since the 1850s.) And those forty-six volumes are an amazing print success story, reprinted several times till as late as the 1930s. It is a unique instance of an oral form of performance finding

such huge success in printed form.

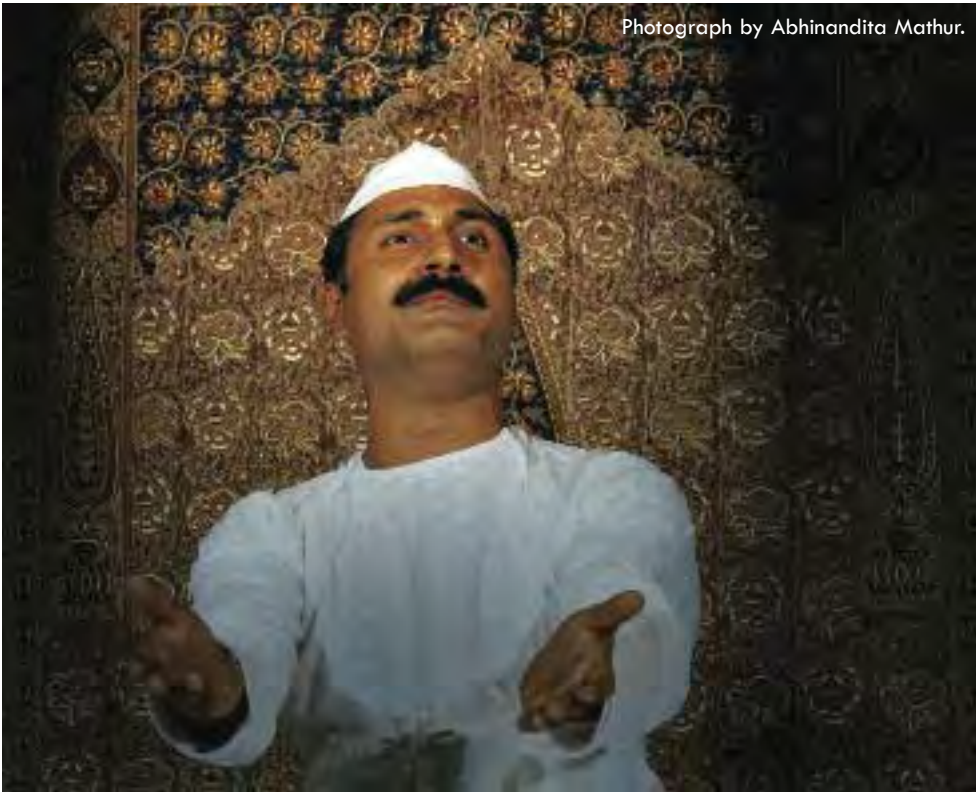
But there are no known dastangos left in India. Our work is the only thing that there is, and really, it is too poor, compared to the wizardry of the ancients.

AC: Your journey with Dastangoi —when and how did it begin, and who showed you the way?

MF: I got interested in the Dastan-e Amir Hamza only because of the sterling work done by the great Urdu critic S.R. Faruqi. He has painstakingly collected all forty-six volumes, perhaps the only such collection in the world now. After

twenty years of study he has produced a three-volume review of the epic (the fourth is in progress). He drew my attention to someone called Osama Khalidi who wanted to make a documentary about it. That's when I read his three-volume study and learnt about the tradition.

But it took five years of talking, thinking and freelancing before I got a fellowship at Sarai to research and document the tradition. It was the encouragement I received there that enthused me greatly. Then, by chance, I met the then director of India International Centre (IIC) P.C. Sen through his wife Binoo Sen. I had known them long and they have been





Photograph by Abhinandita Mathur.

distinguished bureaucrats, very encouraging of my artistic *awaragardi* (wanderings) over the years, and they suggested a lecture demonstration. So I had a space, I had a text and when I actually read the dastan called the *Tilism-e Hoshruha* (which is one long chapter, in eight volumes, of the longer *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*) I felt that the best way to put it across was to read it out or recite it.

Over a couple of months then I roped in another actor and an old friend, Himanshu Tyagi, to present two stories from the tradition, under the guidance of Faruqi-Saheb. We did it for a lark, but the first show, at IIC on 5 May 2005, was so successful and the stories seemed so alive, so current and so laden with the ability to entertain people in the contemporary moment that it would have been stupid not to seek more wah-wahs! After all, what else does a performer want?

I have been involved with theatre at school, college and later as well. I was keenly interested in modern Indian history and Urdu literature, and dastans brought the two together. At the same time it took away all dependence on producers, money, space and audience, which is

the bane of theatre practice in India.

AC: An intriguing observation you have made is that there was a dialogue between Dastangoi and Parsi theatre, and also, that Dastangoi influenced mainstream Hindi cinema.

M.F: This is a hunch; it needs research and elaboration. Both Dastangoi and Parsi theatre are part of the print revolution. In the 1870s and 1880s, Parsi theatre songbooks were selling for an anna or two annas and were hugely popular. In the same period, in Lucknow, Delhi, Rampur and other places, dastangos were reciting their stories in public spaces such as the steps of the Jama Masjid or the main square of Lucknow. So they shared spaces and presumably audiences. In dastans you can hear dialogue resembling that found in Parsi theatre—rhyming and bombastic. Dastans have a lot of poetry and so does Parsi theatre, which has a lot of singing. The influence of Parsi theatre on Hindi cinema, especially since the advent of the talkies, has been well documented.

So there are connections in content, performance and personnel; we need to research and trace them. The problem is that so far we mostly

have a textual history of the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*, not a history of the performance. There was obviously a lot going on in Indian cities in the nineteenth century—spectacles, tableaux, bhandis, stories from the life of Lord Krishna, Ramayana recitations, Urdu poetry at mushairas, Shia performative dirges called marsiyas... We must learn about them before we can speak authoritatively about the performative aspects of Dastangoi. It is a mammoth research project. But for the moment I am happy to concentrate on performance and building an audience.

AC: *Your ambitious project of expanding and extending the ambit of Dastangoi—the dastango workshops, the creation of new texts and audiences—could you tell us about it?*

M.F.: This is ongoing work. I innovated on the little we know about the performance part of Dastangoi and brought in two performers; it breaks the monotony and creates more engagement and fun, for the tellers and the listeners.

The workshops have been good. I have already had about ten more people performing new shows. Our



work right now is not about improvised storytelling; we are working in a tradition, and with texts, treating it like any other theatre exercise—take the text, memorise it, understand it and start narrating/performing/reciting/enacting it, and the rest will be worked out in rehearsal.

We have content that can entertain the highbrow and the lowbrow; we have a form that can be moulded to any space, so long as people can hear us and see us. Obviously, we must take it out of the hallowed spaces of theatre (with their discipline, decorum, bourgeois conventions and mandatory silences) and put it back in the bazaar and see how the present-day bazaars cope with this. That takes many more tellers and a much greater familiarity, on the audience's part, with our form and our tradition.

We must first inform the audience as to what this is, where it comes from, what they must expect from our performance and how they should react; we must then explain the content and the context of the story. Once awareness spreads, repeat audiences will come in and the whole game plan will change. Meanwhile I

am trying to keep a bunch of people ready.

To transform our work from being a show to being a genre takes time. But it will happen. We already know that it is not important for me to perform; Rana Senger, Sheikh Usman, Rajesh Kumar, Rasika Dugal, Manu Dhingra, Arti Jain and the new trainees can regale audiences just as well. That is a huge step and a great relief for me. Now the onus is also on them to take the form forward. Similarly we will get more performers who can tell more and newer stories.

About creating new content for Dastangoi, we have a performance form, and in that form we can tell anything we want, however we want: the partition of India, the history of slavery, the decline of Urdu, the Rajnikanth phenomenon... it depends on our knowledge, our command over the language, our ability to engage with and regale the audience. The universe is our language and every single word we use is a narrative, possibly also a story, probably only a story. We, our lives, our histories, our literatures, our music, these are all stories which, in one viewing, end in a split second, just like that.





The Gati Residency:

Nurturing New Voices in Choreography

By Anusha Lall

Contemporary dance practice in India has stagnated because we have failed to address choreography as a critical component of dance pedagogy, says Anusha Lall, Director, The Gati Dance Forum, New Delhi. Since there is virtually no organised support for dance creation in the country, The Gati Summer Dance Residency fills this gap by providing a reflective space for the dancer to forge a personal voice.

Rajyashree Ramamurthi in her performance piece *In the Light of Irom Sharmila*. Photograph by Desmond Roberts.

The burgeoning demand in the last decade for dance performances with new themes and in new contexts has seen dancers in India experiment with the movement forms they have learnt in different ways. Traditional vocabularies have been employed to express contemporary and socially relevant themes, solo forms have been injected with the dynamics of group movement to fill larger and more spectacular performance venues, and classical forms have been set to exotic music from unfamiliar genres. While some of these initiatives are successful, most of them fail to reach their potential. Often superficial in their engagement with the new elements that they attempt to incorporate, they expose a lack of clarity, rigour and imagination.

The absence of qualitative and exciting work in contemporary dance in India is all the more conspicuous, given the long history of modern dance in the country. The pioneering works of choreographers in the last century such as Uday Shankar, Kumudini Lakhia and Chandralekha, to name a few, had all the potential of triggering a revolution in contemporary dance practice. Yet, today, in defiance of its vital and

dynamic past, creative, inquiry-driven dance practice tends to be scattered, isolated and often astonishingly rudimentary. And this in spite of the inheritance of a physical culture of unimaginable richness, diversity and depth.

The reason for this sorry state of affairs is hardly a mystery. Our failure to consolidate, transmit and build on the body of work done by our predecessors is exacerbated by the virtual absence of systems that enable and support dancers to experiment and develop their own creative voice. Moreover, and this to my mind is our gravest shortcoming, *we have failed to seriously address Choreography, or the art of dance making, as an independent discipline in existing dance curriculums.*

Choreography is the set of tools and skills through which a dancer—classical or contemporary—creates a new work. It is her medium of creative expression, definition and self-discovery. Traditionally, however, systems of dance pedagogy in India neither recognise nor address choreography as an independent component of dance education. Rather, traditional forms rely on the internalisation of a predetermined grammar and structure through

repetition, and the gestation of ‘items’. A dancer learns and repeats, for several years, pre-existing dance choreographies on which, over time, she could model her attempts to create her own dance compositions.

This is not to say that principles of choreography in movement systems such as Bharatanatyam, Chhau and Odissi do not exist. In fact, embedded in classical forms are highly evolved choreographic devices and strategies which are capable of producing complex and highly differentiated experiences of movement in time and space. However, they are rarely, if ever, articulated. And they are never cogently transmitted. If one were to ask a dancer/choreographer why or to what effect she introduced this movement over any other, she would likely say that she simply felt like it.

Our failure to address choreography as a critical component of dance pedagogy has had, in the context of contemporary Indian dance practice, a severely debilitating effect. In the absence of choreographic tools and skills, each dancer is left to her own devices. To forge a personal voice in the face of years of training in a traditional vocabulary is a daunting task. It requires not only that new

skills are learnt and exercised but also that personal styles, vocabularies and interests are nurtured. It necessitates an expanded vision that includes an understanding of other media and technologies. This needs time, space and substantial resources. Most of all it demands practice—many times over.

It is ironic, therefore, that today, while we have an expanding choice of venues and festivals to ‘showcase’ contemporary dance, there is virtually no organised support—public or private—for dance creation in this country. We have developed neither the infrastructure nor the creative resources to facilitate a serious and qualitative engagement with dance creation. Few educational institutions include choreography in the curriculum; the guru-shishya system bypasses it altogether. For independent dancers, even basic facilities such as rehearsal space, funds to hire dancers and technical support, which are necessary for even preliminary research and development, are hard to come by. More often than not, dancers create alone, without interaction or feedback, and often in the face of surprisingly vehement opposition.

Supportive space

36 It is in response to this scenario that the annual Gati Summer Dance Residency (GSDR) was launched in 2009. GSDR, organised by The Gati Dance Forum, New Delhi, has been conceived as a space that supports and enables artists to propose, conceptualise and realise their own choreographic works. Designed for dancers and emerging choreographers, the residency provides a supportive, reflective space for the creation of new choreography. Each year, three or four emerging artists, selected on the basis of their proposals and their dance training, are invited to make their own solo or ensemble pieces over a period of ten weeks.

GSDR is in line with Gati's current interests and activities. A key area of Gati's concerns is the development of strategies and approaches to teaching choreographic skills, especially in the context of Indian traditional dance forms. This, we believe, is fundamental to the development of a vibrant and vital re-engagement with inherited movement systems. Moreover, it is imperative for the evolution and consolidation of a new and distinct contemporary Indian voice.

GSDR's objectives can be summarised thus:

To create systems and infrastructures which assist and promote process-driven choreographic practice. Or, in other words, to provide the means and facilities that enable young choreographers to freely explore and develop their own choreographic voice.

To extract choreographic principles embedded in our very distinctive traditional forms so that dancers trained in these languages may harness this knowledge as a creative resource in their own individual explorations

To develop a critical discourse on, and context for, contemporary dance praxis in India, including scholarship that reflects contemporary concerns and paradigms in dance creation, and mentorship that can guide and support new talent

Of the twenty-plus applicants from across the country, four choreographers were selected for the residency in 2010. Pune-based Rajyashree Ramamurthi, who already had considerable experience making solo performance work and is trained in Odissi, proposed to create a solo







Lokesh Bhardwaj during a tech rehearsal.
Photograph by Desmond Roberts.

inspired by the Manipuri satyagrahi, Irom Sharmila. Lokesh Bhardwaj, a Bharatanatyam dancer and yoga practitioner from Delhi, wished to explore the phenomenon of memory based on the analysis of mental activities found in Patanjali's Yogasutras. Shilpika Bordoloi, a Manipuri and Bharatanatyam dancer, also from Delhi, presented a concept that sought analogies to her experience of impermanence in nature. The fourth resident, Divya Vibha Sharma from Bangalore, who had been trained in Kathak, Kalaripayattu and contemporary dance, wanted to reference episodes and relationships in her life to make sense of the path that she seemed to be creating for herself.

40

GSDR is a deliberately small and intensive residency. It is designed as such because, in the absence of any formal education in contemporary choreography, it has to serve as both a training ground as well as a space for individual research and development. Each choreographer is provided with an honorarium and a rehearsal space for ten weeks, as well as with technical assistance and a production budget to cover costs related to the choreography (such as dancers' payments, music scores, technical equipment and sets or props). The choreographers also attend

a daily technique class through the period of the residency.

Reflective approach

The residency's most distinctive feature, however, is that it encourages a critical and reflective approach to dance making. The residents are selected as much for their concepts and past training and experience as for their willingness to embark on a journey of self-inquiry and exploration. In this, a team of mentors or 'outside eyes' support them at every stage of their creative work. These mentors are senior artists and teachers in the field of performance, whose role it is to question, clarify, urge explorations in directions that may have been neglected, and critically respond to the residents' process. This mentor-resident interaction has become one of the cornerstones of the residency. Their exchange gives residents access to several pools of experience and expertise, which adds immensely to the quality of their creative investigations.

The mentors this year were Maya Krishna Rao (theatre performer, lecturer and Kathakali artist), Amitesh Grover (theatre director and digital media artist), and Anusha Lall

(choreographer and dancer). Additionally, the residency invited three guest mentors who conducted workshops with the residents in their respective fields of expertise: David Zambrano (master improvisation artist and teacher from the Netherlands), Jonathan O’Hear (lights designer from Switzerland) and Ish Sherawat (musician).

The residency’s ten weeks are structured to balance process and production. During the initial weeks, the four residents devised their own working methodology and ways of generating movement material. This was different for each choreographer. Rajyashree, for example, spent a significant amount of time researching Irom Sharmila and interviewing people who had met her or made films on her. Then she started drawing on images, which for Rajyashree represented Irom’s being, for improvisation. Lokesh, on the other hand, started with his body as the site of memory. His research was concerned with how remembering—consciously and unconsciously—could be given a physical vocabulary, and whether he could adapt his training in abhinaya and yoga to do so.

Next, they devised a structure for the work. In what order should the

sections be placed? How should they be connected? The answers to these questions varied from choreographer to choreographer, depending on the concept and the material that each had developed. The final weeks were dedicated to working with lighting, sound scores, sets and props. At each stage of the process—finalising the concept, generating movement material, devising a structure, integrating music, lights, sets—residents presented their work to and received feedback from the mentors as well as from one another.

The use of resources is not limited to pure exploration; that would be a waste of the already scarce opportunities in this field. One of the objectives of the residency is to contribute to the body of contemporary dance work in the country. The final performance is therefore in a formal setting, with the appropriate lighting, costumes and sets. And we see a new choreographic creation in a contemporary Indian voice finally come to life.

(The Gati Summer Dance Residency 2010 was supported by Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, India Foundation for the Arts, Pro Helvetia – Swiss Arts Council, Embassy of The Netherlands and Bharat Forge.)

‘Mentoring was a crucial aspect’

Rajyashree Ramamurthi looks back on her eight-week residency and describes what it meant to her.

I knew about the Gati Summer Dance Residency in 2009 but since my children were very young I waited a year to apply. I already had a concept in mind. I had seen a documentary film on Irom Sharmila (the Manipuri satyagrahi who has been on a continuous fast for ten years now). I was deeply moved by her and by her movement. Although there were political underpinnings I was more interested in her spiritual struggle. I wanted to capture what she evoked in me and use it as a basis for a performance work.

I got a taste of the rigorous questioning during the interviews. I was quite excited and jittery when I got selected. I started reading up a lot about Irom.

I went there with not too many expectations. Although I had been a practising artist in the UK before that, working as a commissioned artist, sending proposals and getting projects to work on, this was a different experience. In the previous projects I

had worked on, once you secured the funding, you were left to your own devices. Here, the mentoring system is very prominent. It is crucial. The rigorous critical thinking over every decision about the work was something I hadn't done for years. You could say that I was a little bit out of touch! And at the same time it felt enlivening to be a part of such an active creative environment. We were encouraged to take risks and this was very exciting!

Mentoring was one aspect that I found useful. The other was what they called joint presentations: regular group critiquing. I could see what others were going through. I saw from the outside another person's struggle. It was nice to work in a community. We had regular meetings, were expected to attend classes every morning. The first week was great! We were lucky to work with maestros such as David Zambrano from the Netherlands. He helped us open ourselves up. He reminded us: "You are the space and the space is you."

As far as I know there is no other residency like this in India. I took it as an opportunity and a challenge. Working alone as a dancer, you can start stagnating after a while, and here we were encouraged to work together and share experiences with our fellow artists. I ended up working on Divya's (a fellow resident) performance, "Don't Be Dotty". It was diametrically opposite to the nature of my own work, so the residency proved

to be a varied and rich experience as I got to work as a choreographer as well as a performer in someone else's work.

One of the best things was that I didn't have to organise anything. I wouldn't have been able to afford the time, space, money—all those resources that they took care of. It felt like a big treat! It gave me a space where I could be myself, go deep within myself.



Rajyashree Ramamurthi was inspired by a documentary film on Irom Sharmila. Photograph by Desmond Roberts.



Divya and Rajyashree in *Don't be Dotty* by Divya Vibha Sharma. Photograph by Desmond Roberts.

‘Getting feedback while working was new to me’

The residency helped Shilpika Bordoloi clarify her concept, work with a diverse group, and deal with criticism during the evolution of her piece.



Shilpika Bordoloi. Photograph by Amitesh Grover.

My work at Gati was about changing landscapes. Initially, my concept, which I presented to them, was about parallel streams of my life. I knew I wanted a piece about my life, the stories within. But the only bit of

clarity I had about it was that it would have a connection with nature and the spiritual, which have always influenced me deeply. It was much later that abstraction and specifics came together to create the notion of ‘impermanence.’

I had already done a solo piece called *Longing* where my analogy was the journey of a river on the way to meet the sea. Here, in *Impermanence*, it was the winding journey of a river in the open, and within was the forest. So the forest became a major analogy to be developed further. When they interviewed me during the selection process, they queried me on how I would actually develop this. My thoughts were about changing landscapes and a process which originates from physical energy and later cognises into emotional motifs, and not the other way around.

The first week of the residency was intensive. It was fantastic! Mentors like David Zambrano—he is a phenomenon, a rockstar! The

process was really inspiring. We worked on looking at space, on looking at where we were in terms of projection. David made us work with intensive movement/physical impulses, and it gelled very well with what I wanted to do.

We had three mentors who met us once during the process of creation, in spaces they had given us to rehearse, and thrice for presentations.

Getting feedback during the evolution of the piece was new for me. It was an interesting opportunity for me to get feedback while actually working on a piece. To constantly get feedback, to understand feedback—that was a challenge, since you usually develop a work on your own, all alone. In many ways this residency was about working with critics and finding the clarity in the choices one makes. Working with a community of artists for one evening was a new experience. In future I know I will be able to work in any diverse group—the residency helped me see that.

A huge challenge for me was the limitation of time. If you work with physicality you can go on and on, but there was a date set for the final performance. The title also came up

because the piece kept on changing. One week before the performance we had to do a presentation, complete with sets and costumes. I listened to the feedback and for the final performance I presented a completely different work from my presentation! There was no compulsion, no rigid demand that you have to stick to something and do only that. Even on the day of the performance my emotive journey was different. It kept changing. It was a celebration of the moment and in that I found inherent beauty!

It didn't end for me there. Mainly because the process I chose was so different, the concept kept on developing. I would say it is a continuing process.

The residency is a wonderful thing. You don't have anything like this in the country. We don't have to worry about booking the hall, inviting the audience, who should do the lights... It's all taken care of. The residency offers us that luxury. You need to just do what you should do, what you are meant to do, as an artist.

‘They all experienced a huge growth curve’

Theatre director, multimedia artist and pedagogue Amitesh Grover describes how he mentored dancers for the first time.

I have been a visiting faculty member at the National School of Drama, so mentoring was not new to me. But I have been working with actors, designers and programmers; this is the first time I have mentored dancers/choreographers.

46 I was surprised at first when Anusha (Lall) asked me to be a mentor, but then it became clear that the dance residency had an open-ended format and many other disciplines could be brought in. Interestingly, I collaborate with a Chhau dancer, so there was a certain overlap with my role at Gati. I have worked on many shows with NSD graduate Amit Saxena, who has learnt Chhau for years; I have worked with him on looking at the intersections between Chhau and acting.

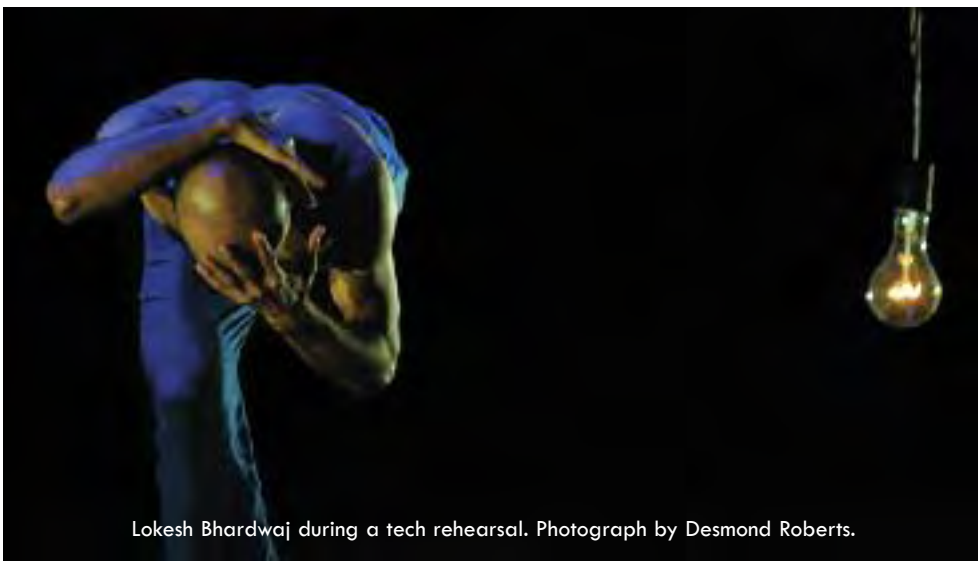
When Anusha, Maya (Rao) and I sat down to look at the nature of the residency it became very apparent that we were looking at a new grammar. Our success would depend on the openness of the applicants, their growth during

the residency and the degree to which we could start pushing them.

My first session with them was a very short one; we looked at body, spoken text, camera projection and the nature of this interaction. When I met the dancers individually I saw that there were some instances where they did bring multimedia into their work. A lot of practice, time, was needed to get the ideas to work. My job was to say no! To guide them on what they can and cannot be exploring.

When I went in to watch the dancers I was looking at the body in performance, the self, the grammar. I have worked with Maya for four years so I wouldn't say I am uninitiated in dance. And like Maya (who has phenomenal experience in both theatre and dance), I focussed on questioning the artistic process and identifying ideas that had the potential to be explored further.

My job was to go in and raise questions they weren't asking themselves.



Lokesh Bhardwaj during a tech rehearsal. Photograph by Desmond Roberts.

Some of the dancers developed greatly during the residency. I looked at episodes, sequences, and at the material they used—basically, anything that was not the body. They came up with material such as swimming costumes, a ball of wool, jute dipped in white paint... How the body in dance interacts with ordinary material and how it becomes extraordinary—that's what we were looking at.

I observed a difference between actors and dancers when it came to the face and body. With actors, there was a face-down participation of the body, and with dancers it was the opposite! With actors, the face was very much present and I had to get them to bring in the physical presence. The dancers, being classically trained, placed a lot of emphasis on the hand, leg, torso, and the face was completely absent. So I pointed that out and got them to achieve a unity of face and body.

I helped them push the limit of the body. For example, I would notice that after a 15-minute piece, nobody would be sweating at the end. I pushed them to the threshold. I would ask, are we really experiencing, or are we just demonstrating grammar?

I think the residency is a fantastic idea. There are very, very few such opportunities in our country. I have seen all the dancers go through such a huge growth curve. In just ten weeks, so much can be achieved. If it were to extend, and continue, it would be absolutely wonderful. In fact, I have asked some of my actors to apply for the residency.

For the dancer/choreographer it is an opportunity to not only be within the piece but also step out and look at what is produced. They gain absolute ownership over their own work.



Bhagrumal and accompanists at the Halani Darbar, Ajmer.

The *Risalo*: Poetry in Performance

By Shalini Panjabi

Photographs by Shalini Panjabi

Shah Abdul Latif (or Bhitai as he is popularly known) is the pre-eminent Sindhi poet, widely regarded and revered as a Sufi. His *Risalo*, a compilation of his verses composed nearly three centuries ago, is a living, breathing presence all the way through from Kachchh to Baluchistan. Shalini Panjabi explores the proliferation of forms in which the *Risalo* continues to be read, quoted, recited and sung.



Following the diverse tracks around Shah Abdul Latif and his poetry in western Rajasthan and Kachchh has led me to varied performance forms. Shah Latif's poetry is usually classified as mystical poetry, yet the rendering of his verses and couplets in a variety of situations seems to endow them with a life of their own, and different interpretations and forms abound. Nearly three centuries after they were composed, his verses have been kept alive by different groups of people in the border regions of India adjoining Sindh.

50

The *Risalo* of Shah Latif is a compilation of his verses, and comprises a series of surs—lyrical compositions arranged according to their musical settings. There are about thirty surs, (the exact number varies in different editions of the *Risalo*), and most of these portray episodes of well-known folk stories of the region. The stories include *Sassui Punhun*, *Umar Marui*, *Rano Mumal*, *Lila Chanesar*, *Suhni Mehar*, *Sorath Rai Diyach* and *Nuri Jam Tamachi*, and there is also a sur on the battle at Karbala (the historic battle that is commemorated during Moharrum). The tales are usually placed under the rubric of allegorical romances, symbolising the quest for the divine. However, this is

but a partial reading, and the variegated ways in which the tales are received and performed reveals a multifaceted text.

It is a text that speaks centrally of the lives and the landscape of the area, celebrating its distinctive terrain and way of life. Shah Latif is strikingly a poet of the region; he is not merely the most popular Sindhi poet, but the poet of Sindh. His poetry is inseparable from the land and its people—“*zameen ji aaye*”, I was told. The stories and the many sub-stories in the *Risalo* have a variety of settings, with the characters following myriad professions and undertaking long journeys. Covering a geographical area from Baluchistan and Sindh to Rajasthan and Kachchh, the narratives constantly evoke the rich and complex interactions in the region. There are detailed portrayals of various communities: camel herders, fishermen, pastoral nomads, potters, ironsmiths, traders, hunters, farmers, holy men, shipping merchants and many others. People delight in the poetic depiction of their lives, with minute observations on crafts, houses, dress and so on. There are also many evocative descriptions of landforms, of various grasses and trees, of animals big and small. The imagery in the *Risalo* is also often symbolic, and the

poetry is understood and enjoyed at multiple levels.

Kachchh and the area west of Barmer and Jaisalmer in Rajasthan are historically considered as belonging to the ‘Sindhi belt’. Sindh has been seen as the cultural heartland of the region, the fountainhead of various musical, craft and literary traditions. There were also ties of patronage, pilgrimage, seasonal migration, marital alliance and trade with Sindh. These links continued after Partition, as the border between India and Pakistan was porous in the initial decades. Border controls began to be gradually tightened after the War of 1965, but regular, furtive movement of people continued from both sides. With increased tension, however, the border began to be sealed from the 1980s and is now fully fenced and guarded. The cessation of movement across the border has had a major impact on the lives of people in the area. Yet the bonds with Sindh persist, as exemplified in the vitality of Sindhi poetic and musical traditions today. Several villages in Kachchh and in the districts of Barmer and Jaisalmer are inhabited primarily by Sindhi-speaking communities. Other people speak Dhathi or Kachchhi—and now increasingly Gujarati, Hindi and Marwari—yet many continue to read,

sing, recite and listen to Sindhi poetry.

In the *Risalo*, each tale is presented as a series of selected episodes. No tale is told in its entirety; often, even a proper sequence of events is not delineated. This episodic, fragmentary nature of Shah Latif’s oeuvre is echoed in the varied renderings today, and the narratives emerge often as songs, couplets and aphorisms. This refraction allows for a multitude of performance forms, as even snippets resonate with meaning. Shah Latif’s poetry is quoted, recited and sung in various ways. These can be with or without musical accompaniment. The surs are also played on different musical instruments with no vocal accompaniment. There is a symbiotic relation between music and words in the *Risalo*, with the surs composed to be recited or sung. The lyricism of the poetry and its wide appeal across a spectrum of communities has led to a proliferation of forms.

When travelling in the area, one hears Latif at various times and occasions. His poetry emerges in everyday conversations, as proverbs or illustrations of a point or even as greetings. Older men often recite couplets or *beyts* when they meet, to

express their joy at the meeting, or to allude to the journey made, or even to gently admonish the visitor for having come after so long. Such is the power and beauty of Latif's poetry, I was told, that even a reprimand gives joy. A young singer from Kachchh expressively stated, "A *beyt* is like a gift from a friend." The gift cycle is completed when the response is also received in the form of a *beyt*. Latif's poetry appears as a flexible medium for expression, with "people using it variously, to the extent they understand". Another singer also described Shah Latif as a true 'shayar', as one whose poetry transcends his times. Shah Latif's poetry speaks directly to its readers and listeners, even though life here, as elsewhere, has changed.

52

Circulating Poetry

The Risalo is a written text and many read it silently, but it thrives in circulation. It is largely learnt and recited amongst people, especially amongst knowledgeable people (*jaankar*). This often happens at formal or informal gatherings called *rihaans* (*kacheris*).

A *rihaan*, I was told in jest, is whenever five men meet and start talking. It is an event in which poetry

is recited, which is special to the region. Earlier it was a primary mode of entertainment in the villages, as men would gather after work and begin discussing and reciting. Nowadays it seems to take place usually at the sidelines of *melas* (*fairs*) or weddings.

I witnessed spontaneous *rihaans* a few times, as I went around seeking men and women who knew *Bhitai* well. Soon a few of them would start exchanging *beyts* and animatedly discussing their possible meanings. One man would recite a *beyt*, then another would recite the next *beyt* in the series (*kadi*) or a *beyt* that expressed a similar sentiment, and so it would continue through related *beyts*. The recitation or delivery of a *beyt* is referred to as '*beyt dena*' (giving a *beyt*), and it is also given to elicit a response. The response is in the form of another *beyt* and also, periodically, is an exposition of its meaning. In the *rihaans*, this exchange was accompanied by frequent exclamations of praise—for the beauty of the lyrics and for the mode of their delivery. Amid the mutual appreciation, however, there was also a sense of competition among the men. On display were one's recall (how much one remembers of the narratives), comprehension (how well one can

expound on the many meanings of a couplet), and the breadth of one's repertoire (with people trying to recite relatively unknown couplets). Rihaans are often spaces for the performance of one's knowledge of the *Risalo*, with people being known in the region for the mastery of different aspects of it. A rihaan is incomplete without its audience of men, old and young, who sit around and listen. There are always eager listeners asking questions and even reciting a line or two.

As much as Latif's poetry evokes the landscape, this form of its transmission has been itself shaped by the landscape. In this arid region people have been primarily dependent on livestock rearing and dryland farming. In the past, agricultural work was largely confined to four rainy months in a year, the *chaumasa*. There was a lot of spare time and men spent many evenings and nights at rihaans. These could be in an *otak* (room for receiving male visitors) or even around a fire in the open. Apart from the *beys* of Shah Latif and other poets, there



Kaamil Meher, Rano Fakir and Allu Khan singing the surs.



Sumer Fakir and Mitho Fakir with their dhamburas and Fakir Jan Mohammed singing the surs.



thrived a whole world of oral games and complex riddles at the rihaans. This tradition has declined but is still alive, and new riddles (some based on Shah's poetry) continue to be composed.

56 The continued vitality of Shah Latif's music and poetry is most evident in communities that feel specially connected with him. Notable amongst these are the Jats. Many of Shah Latif's *murids* (disciples) are said to have been Jats, and they figure prominently in the narratives too. The community of Fakirani Jats in Kachchh claims descent from one of Shah's main *murids*, Sanvla Fakir. The Fakirani Jats were earlier a very distinct group, living a frugal life with few possessions. The shrine of Sanvla Fakir stands on a small island in Sir Creek, on the very border between India and Pakistan. It is now out of bounds to all except the security forces, but that has not diminished the community's attachment (*lagav*) to Shah Latif. There are still a substantial number of Fakirani Jats who are regarded highly for their knowledge of the *Risalo*.

The Fakirs who sing the Shah Jo Raag are said to be relations of Shah Latif's early *murids*. According to tradition, Shah Latif referred to the

black robed fakirs who sang his verses as his children. These fakirs sang his poetry the way he himself sang it, to the accompaniment of the dhambura, a five-stringed instrument that he invented. The descendants and disciples of those fakirs still sing Shah Latif's poetry every night at his dargah in Bhit, Sindh. In India, there is just one group of three men in Kachchh who sing Shah's *vais* (a *vai* is a form of verse) in this style. It is also referred to as the Dhamburai Raag and is a unique, high-pitched style, haunting in its effect. It is a rigorous form, requiring years of training. The fakirs sing only Shah's poetry, but their delivery in a falsetto is not easily comprehensible even to the local listeners. A senior musician likened their mode of enunciation to the deliberate babble we adopt with a small child, adding that Shah Latif adopted this mode before God.

The three fakirs here live in the same village in the Rann of Kachchh. Their houses are partially built on stilts, to protect against the annual inundation. They are livestock herders, and a bad monsoon can still force them to move out of their homes for a few months. Yet, wherever they are, they get together every Thursday night (*jume ki raat*) and sing Shah's *vais*. Their performances outside are at

a few melas, and they are the only singers at the dargah of Lakha Fakir—another of Shah Latif's *murids*. Recently they have performed a few times at stage concerts too.

Shah Latif has probably been heard outside the Sindhi speaking communities only over the last few decades, at the Sufi concerts organised regularly at urban centres across the country. At these concerts the appreciation of the audience is based largely on the identification of the music with Sufism, as most have little knowledge of the language. Shah Latif's poetry and the performances are seen as representative of a 'secular' genre, symbols of a syncretic culture. For the singers there is some irony here, as Shah Latif's lyrics get marginalised even as they are widely circulated.

The Manganiars from western Rajasthan have been amongst the communities most visible at these concerts. As a community of caste musicians, they are highly adept at their craft. At the concerts they perform as a group, singing in a rhythmic style and are usually cheered on by their audiences. When they perform locally and before their patrons, they exhibit a slightly different style. It is more low-key and

there is greater emphasis on the words, for the audience knows the poetry. Occasionally they also perform the tales from the *Risalo* as dastans—renditions with intermittent singing and speech—which can last anything from half an hour to a whole night, although nowadays they are usually of a short duration.

The dastans have been the primary mode for the formal delivery of the *Risalo*, and also a major source of entertainment. A few decades ago, live performances began to be recorded and circulated as audio cassettes. Later, many studio recordings of dastans were also done. These cassettes and CDs—especially of Pakistani artists—are still widely bought and listened to in Rajasthan and Kachchh. I was fortunate to hear a live rendition of a dastan by a senior musician at a small dargah. He sang through the night, with a small group, on a *Savsumar*, the first Monday of a month of the Islamic calendar. Devotees had been coming through the day, but the music programme only began well after dinner. The singers sat facing the audience in an open courtyard adjoining the dargah. They sang a dastan from Sur Hussaini and a few kalams. On a cold night, fuelled by a continual supply of sweet tea, the audience of forty to fifty men

remained largely constant. They were from villages around and they listened closely, often nodding and exclaiming in appreciation. When the programme ended at daybreak, the men stood around chatting with the singers before leaving for their homes. Most of them would be back on the first Monday of the following month.

In the Islamic Calendar

A performance tradition that significantly marks days in the Islamic calendar is the raag of the Sindhi Muslims of western Rajasthan. The term 'Sindhi Muslim' covers a spectrum of communities that have

migrated from Sindh over the last few centuries. Some of these communities are Sindhi speaking, while others speak Dhati. They are all mainly herders and small farmers. The Sindhi speaking communities of the Mehers, Daras and Balochis sing the kalam of Shah Latif and other Sindhi poets especially during the months of Muhurram and Rabi al-awwal (the month of the Prophet's birthday). They sing in *tolis* (groups) of about five men, usually without accompaniment. Sitting almost in a circle, they recite or sing the kalam in an atonal style, individually and in chorus. Interestingly, these are also



often competitive performances (muqablas) between *tolis* from different villages. One group starts and the other has to pick up reciting or singing from the point they stop. It is a difficult style, requiring knowledge of the kalams and of the ragas and surs. All the singers I met had learnt from their ustads, who had been mainly Sindhi Muslims proficient in the tradition. This training, though, had been intermittent, restricted to the short periods when the singers were able to stay with their ustads.

There are many other styles of singing Shah Latif's poetry. The Meghwals, some of who are recent migrants from Sindh, sing Bhitai as they do bhajans, to the accompaniment of a tanpura and cymbals. Women of the Saansi tribe sing in unison in a low pitch, and even occasionally perform at weddings. A few individuals, from different communities, are renowned for their knowledge of the surs of Shah Latif, of the music he composed. Vais or kafis or dastans are meant to be sung in the appropriate surs. Most singers today know just five or six of the thirty surs, but there are still a few people who know about fifteen surs.

Women sing Bhitai too, but usually in the home as lullabies or as

wedding songs. In Pakistan, though, there have been some renowned professional women singers—the most well known here is Abida Parveen. Locally, Mai Bhagi and Begum Fakirani are highly regarded. On a few occasions I was shown short videos of Mai Bhagi on mobile phones, a medium of recording and sharing that has been adopted very swiftly in the villages. On inexpensive handsets, men download videos from the Internet and record live renderings in villages around, allowing for a truly mobile medium for the circulation of performances.

There is yet another aspect of the *Risalo* in performance: an exposition. The *Risalo* is regarded as a holy text by many Muslims, and one reading of it is as an exegesis of the Koran. In this form, the poetry can be heard in the *takreer* (religious lecture) of maulvis and is also recited occasionally during the *khutba* (sermon) after the Friday prayers. Concurrently the Sindhi Hindus too have always had a very high regard for the *Risalo*. Some of them refer to it as the 'fifth Veda' and regularly read its 'shlokas'—a term they sometimes employ for the couplets. The Bhagat, a theatrical form with a mélange of song, music and dance, was primarily associated with the Hindus in Sindh.

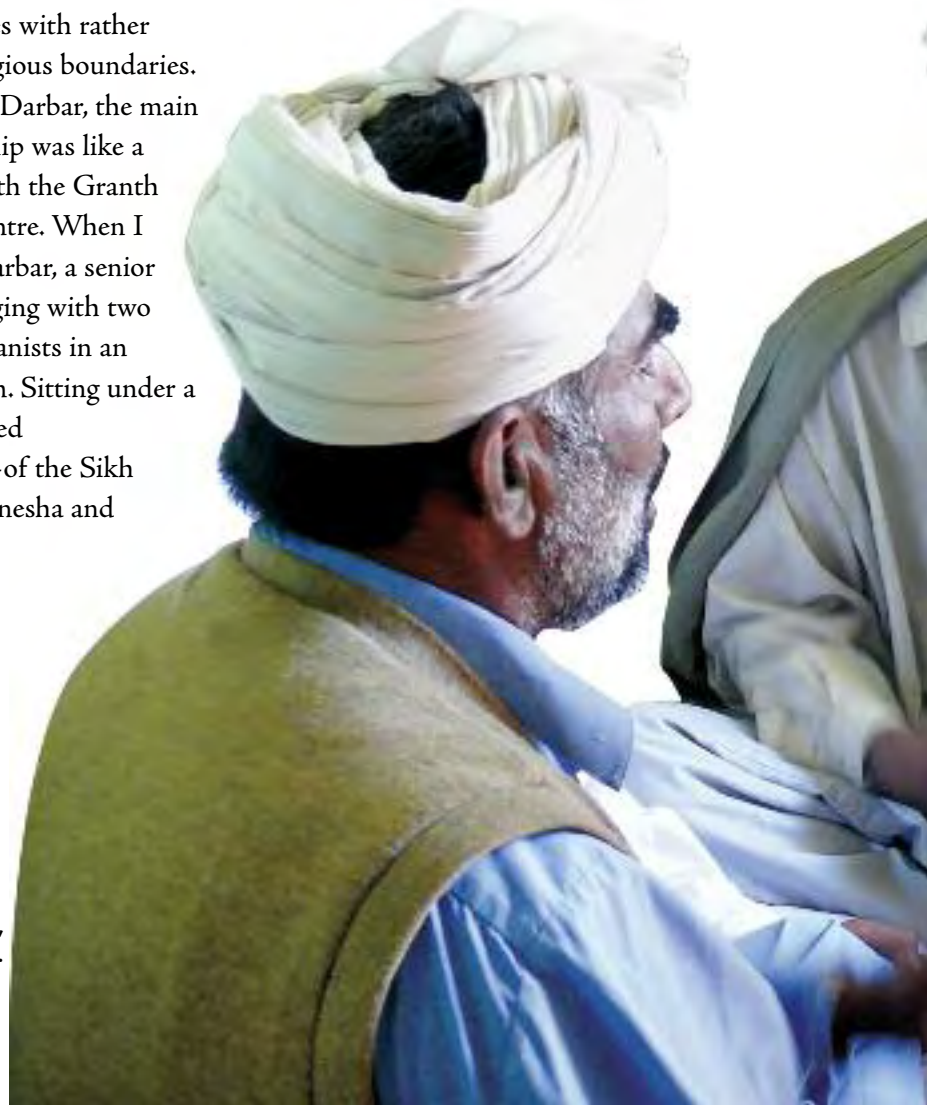
Yet, most often the Bhagat singers (known as bhagats) would sing the songs of Shah Latif and others at their all-night performances. I met one of the few surviving bhagats in Ajmer, but unfortunately have not been able to witness a performance.

Ajmer has a large community of Sindhi Hindus who settled there after Partition. The many Darbars there are the seats of the different Gurus, and most of them are spaces with rather undefined religious boundaries. At the Halani Darbar, the main room of worship was like a gurudwara, with the Granth Sahib at its centre. When I went to the Darbar, a senior singer was singing with two young accompanists in an adjoining room. Sitting under a tableau of mixed iconography—of the Sikh Gurus and Ganesha and Durga—they were singing the kalams of Shah Latif

and Bulle Shah, with intermittent commentary. Devotees kept walking in, some sat for a while, others moved on after bowing to the statue of the Guru and placing some money before the musicians. This was a 'satsang' for them.

For me, it was yet another form of performance of Shah Latif's poetry

60



that I had witnessed. Rooted in the region and interwoven with the life of the people, the renderings of the *Risalo* emerge in continual variation. These expressions embody the domain of performance—performance as verbal art, of which a whole range is represented here: as modes of

language use and ways of speaking, and in more tangible forms with the main focus being on the text. The ‘textual community’ of the *Risalo*, an intertwining of the oral and the written, has given rise to multitudinous possibilities.





Beautiful Thing 1: Exploring Gender and Geometries

Parvathi Nayar

The premiere of Padmini Chettur's new contemporary dance work, *Beautiful Thing 1*, which emerged from a two-year workshopping process, took place at Adishakti's Theatre in Pondicherry in June 2009. Parvathi Nayar found it an effective and uncompromising piece of contemporary dance, which had an integrated approach to the body and questioned the notion of dancer as seductress.



Aarabi, Sujata, Akila, Anoushka and Preethi, dancers from *Beautiful Thing 1*, pose in a studio. Photograph by Sara.

64

The premiere of *Beautiful Thing 1* offered a certain satisfactory resolution to the two-year project that engendered the piece. It is vintage Padmini Chettur: stark, with a minimalist poetry and the signature absence of any superfluous movement or emotion.

Beautiful Thing 1 emerged from a workshoping process with Chettur's troupe of dancers. Although she stated that her intent was to explore time, and geometries and grids, the piece is also, as we shall see, an exploration of other concepts, such as the process behind artistic creation, the nature of the body (especially the female body and the dancer's body), and the coming together of text and performance.

Beautiful Thing 1 is a collaborative piece as well, at some

level, for Chettur worked with poet Vivek Narayanan for the text and Maarten Visser for the music. A clue to Chettur's creative preoccupations can be found in the title of the work, which was chosen in a spirit of irony. It reflects her own questioning of the necessity of beauty in a dancer when the dancer is viewed as a seductress enticing the viewer into the dance. There is also a certain irony in the appendage '1' referring to the fad of works being created in series. Incidentally, though not intended as such by Chettur, one can find a resonance in her title with the title of the famous, performance art piece by cutting-edge performance artist Marina Abramovic, 'Art must be beautiful, an artist must be beautiful'; in this work the subversive nature of the statement was made obvious by the juxtaposition of words and action;



The five dancers were asked to relax for a moment. Photograph by Sara.

the artist brushes her hair while repeating the phrases in the title over and over.

There was a reason for Chettur's choice of venue. From her point of view, the space at the Sir Ratan Tata Koothu Kovil, Adishakti's theatre, gave her an opportunity to try out the piece with a select audience that included professionals from whom she was able to get feedback, rather than do it more publicly. She observed that the limitations of technical support in Pondicherry—such as lighting—made her feel that the piece wasn't entirely resolved in its presentation there; however, it gave her and her dancers an excellent sense of the work, and of what further refinements could be brought to the piece. She said it helped her prepare the work for the next stage—not in terms of production

values so much as the sense that the performance/dance had reached a certain level of proficiency. The communal atmosphere at Adishakti's theatre also allowed for lengthy discussions about the intent of the piece and its realisation, among Chettur, her dancers, collaborators, and the well-wishers and professionals who attended the premiere. As a physical space, Adishakti's theatre, with its parquet floors, charcoal walls and intimate ambience, allowed for a very direct interaction with the dance, where the spoken words and the deliberate exhalations of breath were all palpable. However, the size of the venue did limit the audience severely.

The arc of the dance in *Beautiful Thing 1* was built as a series of interconnected movements—performed in solos, pairs and groups. A sense

of the dance being about the body under exploration was made evident by such devices as isolated articulations of parts of the body, or the highlighting of weight transfers, or the manipulation of the head as a separate appendage attached to the body. The various elements of the dance came together very well, and the framework of a mathematical underpinning was also evident in such aspects of the choreography as the strongly conceived diagonals, and the numbers called out by the dancers.

Creating a Language

66

An immediate response to the work was a recognition of the quality of consistency within the dance, which probably arose from the duration and process dedicated to its creation. Under Chettur's guidance, the dancers created the performance language for the piece through a workshopping methodology: they were asked to pick up random pieces of paper with the name of a body part written on it. Then they had to find a physical articulation to express the specific part of the body mentioned in the paper they had picked up. Chettur converted this vocabulary of bodily expressions into a distinct kind of phraseology; in other words, the individual expressions of specific body parts

created by the dancers were like a basic a-b-c that Chettur used to build the 'sentences' that constituted the eventual dance called *Beautiful Thing 1*. Importantly, it is she who created the pacing, and the interlocking of the components into a whole, to fashion the intent of the piece around grids and movement, form and time. Chettur does not see the dance as having to necessarily 'be' about something; for her, it is about the body and its articulation. The body has its own language, and the dancer is trained to give a form to this language. On a different note, the body of the trained dancer is unarguably and necessarily a beautiful thing.

To remark that Chettur deals with the female body in her dance is not stating the obvious. The body has been the site of investigation of many contemporary dancer/choreographers. It is true that all dance is about the body, but a few choreographers such as Chettur go beyond that, looking at the body as both subject and object, rather than as the object with which to discuss specific subjects. Even within particular works of choreography where the intent of the choreography is to specifically explore the body in its entirety or some specific aspect of the body, no two works are alike: the approach of the

specific choreographer, whether Pina Bausch, Jerome Bell or Meg Stuart, sets each work apart. In Chettur's case there is a certain integrated approach to the body. Though in the structuring of *Beautiful Thing 1*, Chettur presents various parts of the body in isolated movements, it does not give a sense of the dismembered or conflicted body. Rather, her work is a schematic approach to how various parts interlink and are articulated.

Though there is no attempt to proselytise on the part of the choreographer, i.e. Chettur's work carries no overt 'message' relating to social issues, it would be impossible not to read into the work certain ideas of gender. This arises from Chettur's own philosophies and life experiences/choices as a dancer. Though trained in the classical Bharatanatyam tradition, Chettur as a dancer made her big break from the classical form under the tutelage of Chandralekha (between 1991 and 2001).

An iconoclastic and original dancer/choreographer, Chandralekha pushed Indian classical dance into a contemporary arena. She is quoted as describing her work as "celebrations of the human body", as opposed to a form of worship of a godhead.

Chettur's work exists in this belief-system. As a dancer she presents work in a contemporary arena, dealing with the female body as a site of strength.

Approach to Emotion

The female dancer—male dancers are noticeable by their absence—in *Beautiful Thing 1* is a confident if unemotional presence. Or to be more specific, the point is not that the dancers are 'emotionless'; rather, they choose not to engage with emotional expressions on their faces; the narrative is carried entirely within their bodies.

Chettur eschews the projection of facial emotions by the dancers as a device that is 'learnt' and expressed, for several reasons. Chief among them is her rebellion against classical Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam in which the dancer plays the role of seductress. A second reason is that Chettur is a dancer/choreographer who prefers the dance to exist in the moment, not as a piece of theatre in which the emotion is pre-learnt. She likes the dancers' concentration to be in themselves and their bodies, and for them to be totally present mentally and physically in the moment of the dance.

Such an approach is of course, very visibly, a double-edged sword.



Plain tops arranged in front of the stage were donned by the dancers in the final stage of *Beautiful Thing 1*. Photograph by Jirka Jansch.



The strength of the piece lies in how the dancers are almost ferociously concentrated in the space-time continuum in which they have placed their bodies to progress through a prescribed movement. They do not invite emotional interaction but they do invite engagement through their one-pointed focus. It is this intensity of physical expression—rather than inviting smiles/looks from the dancers—that the audience engages with (or not).

70 Personally, this kind of concentration is completely absorbing; one doesn't feel the need for a dancer to seduce with practiced invitations. What kept my attention, for example, was the dancers' focus, which drew me in mentally and intellectually. Patently, however, this need not be the reaction of all members of the audience; some viewers could experience feelings of exclusion, of being cut off from the world that the dancer inhabits.

Thus Chettur's intention of communication without seduction created an intriguingly tricky interaction between audience and dancer—an almost paradoxical situation. In *Beautiful Thing 1* the particular language that she has developed over the years, which was particularly effective in *Paper Doll*,

continued to have further impact. Still, there continued to exist the latent danger—that was evident in *Pushed* as well—that the dancers might exist so powerfully in their own space that others are not invited in.

A significant step taken in *Beautiful Thing 1*, in resolving this paradox, was the introduction of text into the dance. The text, conceived in collaboration with poet Vivek Narayanan, was successful in parts. The naming of the body and the citation of mathematical numbers was a good entry into the dance's underpinning of mathematical grids and bodily articulations. Through the incorporation of gestures of blocking the mouth (thus blocking speech), the contrast between bodily communication and verbal languages was suggested; silencing the dancer verbally could yet allow another kind of communication that is all physical. Other textual elements such as background snippets of the dancers did not feel as integral; however, you could argue that these textual elements added texture to the piece.

The use of text allowed for one of the most successful passages in the dance: the linking of word and *mudra*. Until this point in the dance, the movement vocabulary created for the

piece was seen as specific to particular articulations of the lower body. We saw how hip and leg were linked even as there was a deliberate disassociation of the core from the arms and hands. This choreographic choice was both highlighted and altered by the powerful passage that linked *mudras* and words—thereby also bringing together the performative and text elements.

External Elements

As a piece of performance, obviously there were external elements in play in *Beautiful Thing 1*, some of them site-specific. At Adishakti's theatre, the stage was bare, and the black box space didn't permit, for example, the use of wings; it is uncertain whether it was useful to see the dancers off-stage seated on the side, or whether it would have been beneficial to stick to the finite experience of revealing the dancers only on stage.

Background music was provided by Maarten Visser, who used an industrial-sounding idiom in the compositions. It was a true collaboration between Chettur and Visser, revealing the ease that came from having worked on many pieces together. Chettur's need, it would

appear, was that the soundscape should remain in the realm of sound, rather than harmonies. Though the sound was industrial, Visser created it all from acoustic sounds including those emitted from non-traditional sources such as wind-up toys or instruments such as the santoor. He believes that the discerning audience will always hear the "hand behind the music".

As for the lighting, by M. Natesh, it offered some interesting moments. At a particular instant in the dance, for example, when the dancers were retreating in a diagonal line, they were 'backlit'; this lighting choice threw into prominence sharply-lit silhouettes of muscle and form on the body. However, lighting was not completely integrated into the dance, and some of the accents needed more specificity; perhaps the technical limitations of the space did mean that it was not a fully realised component of the piece. Chettur said that she was concurrently also working with Belgian collaborator and lighting designer Yann Martens for her first performance abroad of *Beautiful Thing 1* at Salzburg.

In terms of the costumes, appropriately, the look was contemporary, and the clothes were



Total concentration on the body invited the audience to engage rather than emotionally interact with the dance.
Photograph by Jirka Jansch.



designed as blocks of colours—lime, magenta, purple, mustard and grey. The costumes did their job, but not as spectacularly as they did, say, in *Paper Doll*. Perhaps the range of colours was too large or perhaps the use of colours and shapes was not manipulated enough to make a distinct costuming statement. However, it must be noted that the costuming in no way detracted from the work.

One particular costuming choice was extremely successful. At the performance, plain tops in the same block colours as the rest of the costumes were arranged in a line in front of the stage, and were donned by the dancers in the final passage of the dance. The tops proved to be made of stretchy material and the performers literally extended themselves by pulling, stretching and suspending their weight with the aid of these stretchy tops. Apart from being an effective piece of movement, it was also satisfying as a perfect melding of costume and dance.

Beautiful Thing 1 was an effective and uncompromising piece of contemporary dance, which was experienced as a logical extension and continuation of Chettur's *oeuvre*. Contemporary or modern dance in India is still a reasonably new and

emerging art form. Like Chettur, most acclaimed contemporary Indian dancers do have a background in one of the classical forms, which, arguably, offers the rigorous training that dancers need (though this is an assertion that comes up for debate when the dancers also seek training in a Western idiom of contemporary dance). Still, even Astad Deboo—often referred to as the pioneer of modern dance in India—did train in the traditional form of Kathakali before going on to learn the style of the seminal Martha Graham. In Chettur's case, her classical training and contemporary sensibilities stand her in good stead.

Even though the contemporary is a nascent form, what offers hope is that there are many ways in which it is evolving. For example, some strains of contemporary dance experimentation in India seek to fuse the classical framework with other performative traditions such as martial arts or yoga. Certainly, groups such as Attakkalari or the Daksha Sheth Dance Company have gained recognition for mixing a number of Indian performance elements such as kalaripayattu, yoga, classical and folk dances. Meanwhile, other dancers such as Aditi Mangaldas have chosen to vigorously

reinterpret classical forms (which in Mangaldas' case is Kathak) and bring them to a contemporary arena. Yet others such as Odissi-trained Ananya Chatterjee have used the classical in a contemporary sense to offer specific messages; Chatterjee allows street theatre to influence her work to create a form of activism through dance and look at issues that concern women.

Chettur's niche is specifically her own, where the traditional informs the modern only in subtle and conceptual ways. The intent, always, is uncompromisingly contemporary. Chettur's choreography offers no nod, apologetic or otherwise, towards any form of 'fusion' nor expresses a need to show the lineage of the dancers. *Beautiful Thing 1* sees Chettur continue, successfully, to push the contested boundaries of what is seen as contemporary dance in India. She is one of the most important contemporary dancers/choreographers working in India today.

Afterword

After the Pondicherry premiere, *Beautiful Thing 1* was shown in Salzburg, and Chettur

indicated that the response was very positive there. The work continued to evolve, and Chettur was able to incorporate certain technical changes into the piece at Salzburg, such as in the lighting. With the use of some 200 lights, large washes of lighting created a narrative about how we see the body and/or the movement at specific times. The light, apparently, was always shifting; for example from the dancers being backlit to frontlit over the course of five minutes. As for the look of the piece onstage, a broad white stripe was introduced on which the stretchy t-shirts that would later be donned by the dancers were placed. Chettur also hopes to modify the costumes further, in time for future tours of *Beautiful Thing 1* that include Berlin and Hamburg.

It becomes very important then to appreciate that the Pondicherry premiere also worked as a crucial jumping board from which *Beautiful Thing 1* could be taken outside India. And that in this way, Chettur continues to be an ambassador for Indian contemporary dance, linking India and countries abroad with a shared appreciation for the evolving idiom of contemporary dance.





Alladeen and Dancing on Glass: Two Ways of Looking at Globality

By Jisha Menon

All photographs, by Virginia Rodrigues, show Meghana Mundkur and Abhishek Majumdar in scenes from *Dancing on Glass*.

Having watched an Indian and an international play featuring call centre employees, Jisha Menon found their approaches to the subject vastly different. While one used the phantasmic mode of depiction, the other captured the disjuncture between the discourse on globalisation and the embodiment of its realities.

I watched Ram Ganesh Kamatham's *Dancing on Glass* in Bangalore in July 2004, just months after watching *Alladeen* in Los Angeles. A collaborative production by the London-based Motiroti and the New York City-based The Builders Association, *Alladeen* is a multi-media show that depicts the circuits of global capital between New York, Bangalore

and London. It portrays the training and work sessions of the call centre employees in Bangalore, and the pedagogical indoctrination into American tongues, lifestyles and popular cultural references that constitute an important part of the training of call centre employees. *Alladeen* explores various strategies of impersonation: the ways in which the employees take on American names and identities derived from American television's famous sit-com, *Friends*.

I had been looking forward to watching the work of two companies well known for their avant-garde and cutting-edge style. But it was odd watching this play in an audience of predominantly white American viewers. I still recall how I instinctively withdrew from the programmed, spectatorial pleasures of the show when the audience laughter at the hapless imitations of American accents resounded in the theatre.

But my uneasiness did not end there: I was troubled by the play's insistence on a phantasmic mode of depiction that made invisible the material disorientations of the employees. The phantasmic character of these transformations—from Satya to Monica, Savitri to Rachel and



Aman to Joey—is reiterated through the scenic design: images from Hollywood and Bollywood movies alternate; blue globes turn in the workspace; green lamps float through black space, heightening the sense of fantasy. These transformations exemplify the ways in which the employees are seduced by deterritorialised discourses on globality. Through a process that simultaneously disavows the material implications of their virtual identities, and also actively encourages them to imagine, if not identify with, the lifestyles of the racialised white American middle-class, impersonation enables call centre employees to engage in a process of self-fashioning. The impersonation through which citizen-consumers produced at the intersection of fantasy, the market, and the state shape their identities is predicated on disavowing their everyday material realities while simultaneously buying into the phantasmic promise of globality.

Dancing on Glass offered very different fare. It stages the embodied disorientations experienced by over-worked third-world employees, working through the night to service first-world American consumers. The title reinforces this point by calling

attention to the material, mortal body, simultaneously in rapture and in pain.

The play tracks the life of Megha, aka Megan, a young, confident, 'liberal' call centre employee who gradually descends into a vortex of depression and gloom. In addition to the repetitive tedium of her job, and the racist and sexist abuse she encounters over the telephone, she





must also contend with the challenges of working through the night. The nocturnal working hours produce resultant ailments: she develops a skin disorder from lack of exposure to the sun, and her hormones act up because of her irregular sleep patterns. But it is the death of her lover, Pradeep, a fellow call centre employee, that finally precipitates her descent into despair. On his way home, Pradeep, sleep-deprived and disoriented, crashes to his death after he falls asleep behind the wheel. She attempts to cope with her grief by turning to Pradeep's roommate, Shankar, a small-town

migrant hopelessly infatuated with her. The play explores class- and gender-related tensions within the city between lower-middle class male migrants and their more 'liberal' and urbane middle-class female counterparts. It charts the gradual prohibitions of freedoms as the protagonist loses her sense of sexual, social and personal freedom. *Dancing on Glass* pivots around this disjuncture between liberty and liberalisation.

The play opens with a conversation between Megan and a hostile American customer on the



other end. The customer demands to know her real identity, and then hurls a stream of invectives at her for taking his job. The opening immediately sets the context of social and economic anxieties about the flight of American jobs to India and China among other places. The rage and panic in the voice of the American on the other end of the phone signals that it is not merely his job that the faceless Indian woman has usurped but more importantly, his entitlements as an American citizen, his American dream, his very sense of self.

In an interview the playwright Ram Ganesh Kamatham told me his motivation for writing the play was to offer a micro-political look at the disruptions that global capital has produced in individual lives. In his words, "With a macro-global perspective and its accompanying liberal humanist rhetoric, real issues are often glossed over, and these real issues are seen directly around us—infrastructure unable to cope with an exploding population, a spate of new physical/mental disorders that our healthcare is not yet equipped to deal



with, a massive attack on our sense of identity and culture... This play takes the micro-local or 'on ground' position, experiencing the trauma of this change in an immediate way via a human relationship that struggles to cope with this drastic lifestyle change, emotional alienation and fragmented identity."

It is this disarticulation between the discourse on globalisation and the

ways in which these realities are embodied and inhabited on the ground that is at the heart of Kamatham's play. *Dancing on Glass* is a grim reminder of the dangers of uncritically embracing the buoyant rhetorics of neoliberal globalisation. Kamatham demonstrates, at the level of the all too mortal body, the material perils of buying into a disembodied discourse of globality.



About IFA

India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) is one of the country's leading independent arts funders, championing the cause of arts philanthropy and advocating the importance of the arts in public life. In the last decade and a half we have substantially enriched India's cultural landscape and infused passion and professionalism into the business of arts philanthropy.



IFA was set up in 1993 to focus on urgent but unattended needs in specific areas of the arts. Since we began we have committed more than 13 crore rupees (approximately three million US dollars) to projects located in almost every corner of the country.

Our support has gone out to independent research and teaching institutions, cultural and development organisations, scholars and artists. Musicians and choreographers, writers and visual artists, filmmakers and film scholars, architects and conservationists, sociologists and art historians, craftspersons and folk performers have been among the beneficiaries of our support.

Today we fund cutting edge artistic practice, support initiatives to bring the arts into the classroom, assist in institution development and infrastructure creation, fund research in the arts, help in the preservation and transmission of valuable cultural knowledge, and create public platforms for the dissemination and advocacy of the arts. We also act as a source of information and expertise to those in the arts community and beyond.

To receive regular information about our activities, send an email to contactus@indiaifa.org asking to join our mailing list.

To support our activities and in turn receive *ArtConnect* and other IFA material for free, become a **Friend of IFA**. Visit **www.indiaifa.org** for more information.

ArtConnect

An IFA Publication

Volume 5, Number 1

January-June 2011

Contents

EDITORIAL

3

PHYSICAL TEXT: CREATING THE AUTONOMOUS ACTOR

Sankar Venkateswaran

6

DASTANGOI: CONJURING UP THE ANCIENT WIZARDS OF STORYTELLING

Mahmood Farooqui

20

THE GATI RESIDENCY: NURTURING NEW VOICES IN CHOREOGRAPHY

Anusha Lall

32

THE RISALO: POETRY IN PERFORMANCE

Shalini Panjabi

48

Reviews

BEAUTIFUL THING 1: EXPLORING GENDER AND GEOMETRIES

Parvathi Nayar

60

ALLADEEN AND DANCING ON GLASS: TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT GLOBALITY

Jisha Menon

74



I F A

India Foundation for the Arts

'Apurva' Ground Floor, No 259, 4th Cross
Raj Mahal Vilas IIInd Stage, IIInd Block,
Bangalore-560 094

Phone/Fax: 91- 80 - 2341 4681/82

Email: contactus@indiaifa.org

www.indiaifa.org

