

Blueprint for an Actor K. C. Manavendranath



Ankanam members practising the 'The Rooster Stance' from Kalaripayat. This exercise helps the actor to breathe evenly and deeply from his centre.

The actor who must use his body, voice, thoughts and feelings to achieve a unified stage presence must strive to realize that the mind/body are inseparable, that the concept and the physical realization of a role are one and the same. The ideal way in which an actor must work is to come so profoundly in contact with his own existence that distinctions between concept and realization, mental and physical, impulse and action, cease to, exist for him. During our work we realized that it is useful to avoid distinctions like 'mind' and 'body'. Ultimately I hope to reach a point where 'senses', 'emotion' and 'body' are one. We found that voice has especially suffered from this artificial separation and is produced as if we were not speaking with the whole body. I am on the path of realizing that once the body, senses, emotions, and thoughts are integrated it can lead to an ultimate performance.

Your centre is your source of energy, as the energy flows outward into a new form, and through your actions you begin to experience yourself anew. With your centre as a source of energy, the external forms these energies may take and the process of action by which the energy flows from your centre into observable outer forms, are in fact all aspects of one indivisible process of becoming that expresses your fullest personal potential with your art.

Our relation to the cultural identity of the region helped equip us through learning the traditional training processes of the source materials detailed below, objectively looking at tradition as outsiders.

Here it is essential to speak about my urban upbringing: my earlier concepts of theatre were shaped by Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Grotowski. In theory and practice I no longer accept some of their methods but they served as excellent theoretical and practical schools for self teaching. This made it possible for me to exchange material with performers in Kerala and I felt it necessary to pool my historical condition as an artiste with the historical conditions of performing artistes in Kerala. It also required me to question myself through practice, to reveal/confront/come face-to face with the Malayali identity. These discoveries serve as a springboard in negotiating my attitudes towards a nexus of traditional theatre in Kerala and the contemporary theatre.

I realize it is a question of my craft changing my self. The question is not: what does theatre mean to people? Instead I must question what theatre means to me. The answer, converted into action without compromises, would provide the nexus between tradition and contemporary theatre.

The aim is to link the traditional concept of performance with contemporary theatre, for there must be a way to make traditional consciousness compatible with modern habits. This means that we are not only studying the training processes but also studying the living patterns of traditional performers and their community context, reconstructing an analogue for my actors, to create a parallel approach for ourselves reflective of their mores, standing both within and outside their particular tradition. I strongly feel that in a healthy theatre neither tradition nor modernity is introduced; we must encourage the actor to discover tradition and modernity in himself. Herein lies the nexus. What I am striving to do is to restore the wholeness of the human

body in the theatrical context. It is essential to bring together the dismembered physical functions to regain the expressive, perceptive and organic abilities of the human body.

Source Material

For the purpose of training the actor's body I decided to study the techniques of performer training in our martial and traditional theatre forms—Kalaripayyat, Kathakali, Kudiyattam, Sopanam, Vedic recitation, Arabic intonations, serpent rituals, rituals of oracles, Theyyam, Mudi yettu.

The performing art forms I have chosen are established. In a way the forms are static, distinguished by their complex techniques, as opposed to the modern view of the theatre as a continuous search, with new reactions, situations and experiences. The essential difference between western and oriental theatre is not merely one of technique, but of the culture of the body; a culture of the body which imposes a way of placing yourself in space, of engaging other muscles, a special way of contacting others.

In Kalaripayyat, Kathakali, Kudiyattam, serpent rituals, Theyyam, oracular rituals and Mudi yettu there is an agreement on the unity of mind and body and the concentration of energy in the lower back/abdomen. This is particularly interesting for the modern actor, as the initial impulse for breath/voice and movement is generally located in this area. The mind/body is trainable and the premise of this training is that the whole human being can be trained.

Kalaripayyat-Discipline I

I chose Kalaripayyat as the backbone of the research work for the acting methodology. Performers in Kathakali serpent rituals, Theyyam and Mudi yettu also have a long course of training in a *kalari* (a workshop/ gymnasium), which gives them the suppleness and agility of movement which is the very essence of these performing art forms. Kalaripayyat is neutral. The development of a training technique in a performing art form like Kathakali, which has its roots in a neutral martial form like Kalaripayyat, would provide a parallel (a model) for the development of an acting methodology. The *kalari* is normally 42'x 21', facing in an east-west direction. The movements always begin from east to west. There is a 3' wide opening on the

eastern side. The *nilavillaku* (oil lamp) is lit at the south-west corner or *puttara*. Besides the *puttara*, towards the south, is the *Guruthara*, the Guru's seat.

The training session usually begins with an oil massage. The oil, which has special ingredients, is used to heat the various parts of the body evenly and to make the joints supple. The prescribed dress is a *kachacha* (a combined broad belt and *langotti*). This is first tied around the lower back through a series of five manoeuvres (one end is tied to the western end of the *kalari* and the other end is held taut by the trainee and through movements, steps and circular turns the entire strip is tied around the loins and the lower back). The *lutchacha* also helps to keep the trunk erect and localizes the small of the back for the trainee to concentrate his energy around that portion, so that he can achieve a neutral but energized condition. This region happens to be the source of breath/voice and movement impulses. The trainee can therefore centre himself, contact himself viscerally in the deepest way; and when he touches his centre he can be liberated to flow outward into new forms that are organic expressions of his life experience. This centring or unity of energy source/energy flow, is a total experience of the total self. After tying the *kachacha* the trainee goes through the *puttara thoyall* (obeisance at the *puttara*). Thus prepared, the trainee has to go through a regular course of *adavus* or formal exercises which takes one through a graded series calculated to make the body supple and the limbs agile.

The underlying fact beneath this form of body culture is that it is necessary to achieve both tranquility and physical health in order to become a stable, harmoniously realized man.

Whatever expressive form 'movement' had taken—whether oracular rituals or communal dances to express happiness after a fine harvest they contributed to the idea that body movement rhythmically arranged and structured according to physiological and emotional principles can correct body illnesses and perpetuate the life force in man. The bodily mechanism in Kalaripayyat is assisted by placing the body in many different attitudes and postures, in assorted positions in the belief that such combinations produce physiological changes. The study of what movements to combine or separate, what particular articulation is necessary, resulted in an enormous number of arrangements, permutations and combinations. To these were added systems of breathing and various positions of lying, standing, sitting, and moving, combining elements of passivity and activity, to show that the strength comes from the spine and that preparation is as important as the act. Throughout the *adavus* we go

through techniques of moving through a varied sequence of contrasting forms that create stable volatility with calmness, balanced strength with flexibility and controlled energy with awareness.

Kalaripayyat is not an art directed towards an audience. It is an art-in-action for the doer. The correspondence between the parts of the body is essential to the structure-idea and feeling. The body is the form and the mind, the spirit is the moving force. Mental motion is present with every physical action. The patterns of movements are orally recited by the guru-vaythari. These recitations are rhythmic and at a particular tempo. This is a method of holding the trainee to the point of concentration whenever his mind wanders away. This method of side-coaching can give the trainee (actor) self-identity within the activity and keeps him functioning at a fresh moment of experience. After many sessions it arises spontaneously out of what is happening and is given at a time when the trainee is in action. Dynamic interest is beneficial to one's nervous system and with a good nervous system one's whole being becomes more perceptive, alert and receptive.

The techniques of Kalaripayyat are based on a way of movement that involves forms with a stylized method of patterns which evolve from movement and movement from the forms. The structures are so varied as to put into play every position of the body. Evenness, clarity, balance, are the basic qualities of its composite technique. The perfect weaving of the dynamics of movement and form promotes fine circulation, quietens the mind and regulates the emotions. The variety of patterns keeps one mentally stimulated as techniques develop from *adavu* to *adavii*. The mind has to be on the action as the variations and repetitions demand total attention. Since the structures do not evolve correctly without mental participation, control of consciousness inevitably develops. Concentration, therefore, is a natural result of such technique and forms.

The entire system is warmed up gradually as the action accumulates. Patterns and movements in subtle succession activate different parts of the body. Breathing is natural, light or deep, depending on the structure and positions of the forms themselves. With the flowing alternation of light and strong dynamics, from passive to active, circulation is made to move freely to all parts of the body. The movement requires that motion be outwardly unvarying and in continuous flow. Ability to maintain a consistently slow tempo and even quality over a long period of time is an indication that the body has acquired strength and

control but also that the mind is in harmony with the action. In terms of pure movement, the patterns are so constructed that the strong alternates with the light, the active with the quiescent, the weighted with the empty, expansion with contraction, the relationships being flexible and continuous. Many of these patterns involve circular movements, curves, parabolas, arcs (jumps) and spirals which go in many directions horizontal, vertical and slanted.

This technique is not arbitrary or abstractly decorative. Circular motion helps conserve energy. It prevents one from over-extending oneself since the dynamics of physical tension can be controlled while moving in a line or a curve. A circular movement produces a sense of detachment, containment and emotional security.

Throughout the twelve *adavus* one is made aware of the laws that govern this particular use of the body of the actor or trainee including biological factors-weight, balance and imbalance-(*kalam chavital*: exercises separate from the *adavus*) which offer the possibility of reaching a pre-expressive organic tension that determines a change in the quality of energy giving life to the actor's presence, enabling the body to capture the attention of the audience before the process of personal acting experience begins. When we speak about



Kudiyattam and Kathakali: The body is balanced on the left leg, right leg raised, big toe bent, torso bent back at an angle to give a larger-than-life impression. This is a posture for the beginning of dactyl.

relaxation on stage we mean that all unnecessary tension has been removed and that the remaining energy has been purposefully focused. The first step in achieving relaxation is to identify, localize and get rid of unnecessary tensions. This restful awareness is the essence of Kalaripayyat.

Kalaripayyat has a regular massaging of the limbs during the monsoon season. The guru massages the trainees. Tense muscles operate ineffectively and impede circulation. Massage acts as a mechanical cleanser. It increases muscle tone (the muscle's normal state of tension).

We have been using Kalaripayyat exercises and their departures with sticks for exercises dealing with gesture extension.

Throughout this period of study, exercises for the actor have been put into practice involving engagement with oneself, relaxing, concentrating on one's being, sensing, wholeness, centering, aligning and moving.

Kathakali-Discipline II

I decided to study the training process in Kathakali as it draws its movement techniques from Kalaripayyat and animal movements which emphasize speed, grace, balance and recognition of various energy centres in the body. These movements are closely controlled, every gesture dictated by aesthetic principles of economy, suggestiveness, grace and intensity.

My training sessions were devoted to *meiorrappu-adahus* (drawn from Kalaripayyat), *bhavas* gesture projection and foot work. Throughout the training sessions what struck me was the way these exercise which had their roots in Kalaripayyat had been adapted for a performing art form like Kathakali. The basic posture *chavitti anzaruka* (torso held upright, knees turned out, bent into a trapezoidal or box position and feet flat) in Kalaripayyat becomes more extreme in the case of Kathakali where the performer does not rest with his feet flat but on the edges of his feet. This tension or imbalance is compensated by applying tension in the small of the back and this is why these performers seem to be always in precarious balance. This reduction of balance base gives us a different way of engaging the body. What appears to be a meaningless complication is actually a very intelligent device to keep the body in organic tension, as when a person is at the point of jumping.

At the core of this particular bodily engagement is the notion of 'presence': the quality of being right *here and now* with an awareness of actual space and actual movement and of the vital meeting of lives in that space and moment. This quality of presence which can't be stored on tape or film is one thing which makes theatre different from T.V. or film. And this meeting or showing of moments involves becoming aware of the visceral confrontation with the reality that one is now (and at some other time no longer) living.

There are 24 basic mudras. These mudras are composed by hands and fingers and are ideograms which replace the spoken word. They are gestures inspired from religious rituals; mimetic gestures; stylized descriptive gestures from everyday life, and invented gestures. They can be composed by one or both hands. These 24 basic mudras are combined with one another to produce meanings.

The mudras are also held at specific places and have different meanings. The three centres are the head, the chest and the navel. This generation of gesture from in to out or out to in, with its cadences, has been of particular interest to me, to help me to construct a formalized approach to the physical expression of emotion by locating 'emotion centres' in the body. In Kalaripayyat the energy centre is localized at the small of the back. In Kathakali the energy centres are at the small of the back, the back of the neck, the palms of the hands and the feet. Here one must distinguish between one's centre as the actor and the apparent centre adopted for the character. Gesture generation has given me certain character centres that can by bodily logic and cultural tradition be associated with different types of persons. The Elizabethan idea of reading character in the body ('this is the forehead of a murderer') seems to be quite accurate in principle. In the exercises I have tried to develop for the modern actor there is also an attempt to match basic personality types with bodily alignments.

There are specific stamping exercises for the leg to develop tempo-rhythm. There are six talas in use for this purpose. Also, the various parts of the body are completely de-synchronized. The mudras are sculpted precisely while the legs move at a great speed. Among the techniques discussed in building the character was that of getting to the truth within by superimposing a rhythm from without-there are exercise performed by pupils of Stanislavski in which clapping hands is a more incisive way into action than free association. The tempos vary from *rasa* to *rasa*: for *shringara* it is medium tempo, for *karuna* slow, and fast for *raudra*. Observations and practice have laid a foundation for tempo-rhythm exercises for the actor.

The performers learn various eye exercises which I think can be directly used for working with modern actors.

During a performance the performer usually keeps his mouth shut and breathes through his nose. However the Kathi and Red Beard types of characters vocalize their emotions. The performer who plays a Kathi type (Keechaka, Ravana etc.) vocalizes his emotions at a particular key note for particular emotions. For example, for *veera*, *raudra* and *adbhuta* rasas the keynote is *shadja* or *rishabha*; for *shringara* and *hasya*, *madyama* or *panchama*.

This is an interesting technique to help the actor perform organically. Since sound is voiced breath it helps him to reach emotional states. I am trying to work out with these voiced sounds in comparison with work on 'Eurhythmic as visible speech,' to evolve exercises.

There are also exercises in Kathakali for this *go-gua* or voiced gesture.

Kudiyattam-Discipline III

My area of work encompasses a practical study of the liberation of energy and creative impulses connected with the flow of unity of body and voice in Kudiyattam and the study of moderately exaggerated rhythms of normal speech. In Kudiyattam the actors have a unique way of reciting both Sanskrit and Prakrit passages, syllable by syllable, with correct and proper utterance. These ragas (about 24) are used for recitation, depending on the context and sentiment. Also, these ragas are different from the ragas of music. And often the significance of pure sounds of words uttered is represented.

In Kudiyattam suppression is a fundamental aspect, as it is of many traditional performing arts. What do I mean? Expression in Kudiyattam is not natural. So there is an unbearable tension in the actor because he is using unnatural movements and voice to express natural emotions. That is what gives Kudiyattam its uniquely weird effect. The Kudiyattam actor suddenly engulfs the spectator with an overwhelming stage image. The secret of this kind of acting is the instantaneous release of suppressed action, their suppression again (i.e. non action), release again. I suppose it would be psycho-physical tension. A pertinent point in acting with the body/voice totally.

Oracular Rituals-Discipline IV

Our conscious mind arranges and puts a certain amount of order into the phenomena of the external world that surrounds us. Our consciousness indicates the direction in which we work. An actor must always open himself to receive the phenomenal world. Because of the nature of the acting problems, it is imperative to sharpen one's whole sensory equipment, shake loose and free oneself of all preconception, interpretation and assumptions so as to be able to make direct and fresh contact with the created environment and the objects and people within it. The fundamental of this psycho-technique is to put us in a creative state in which our subconscious will function naturally. Yet one cannot do without external grammar, in this case the repetitive external movements to different rhythms which are graded in sequence.

The oracle is willing to submit himself to a traumatic psychological and emotional experience so that others who are not endowed with his ability may benefit. He carries on a dialogue with the spirits revealing the other world through signs and symbols created by his mortal body. He sees the hidden and the invisible but he has to articulate his vision. This serves as a model for the actor in the contemporary theatre. Both are engaged in acts of self revelation, one in intimate contact with his spirits and the other with the recesses of his imagination. Oracular rituals illuminate one essential problem-the resolution of a spontaneous, improvised approach, with the reproduction of a meaningful pattern of imagery and interaction, and past experience with present naiveté. These are analogous to a performer's task.

Discipline V

A. Sopanam is particular to Kerala and is sung at Vishnu temples. There is a great deal of elaboration with two or more singers, purely devotional in nature. The purpose was to find out ways of proper placing of the vowels and developing the voice resonators

Exercises have also been worked out for vocal gestures. Sopanam seems to be good as an antidote after actors perform exercises for voice projection and exercises involving the maxillary and the throat resonators.

B. Arabic intonations: work on vocal source material for enunciation of stop consonants and guttural consonants; developing voice resonators and diction exercises.

C. Vedic recitation: work on vocal source material for enunciation of sonorous consonants and stop consonants, developing voice resonators and diction exercises.

Theyyam and Mudi yettu-Discipline VI

These forms make it possible for us to enter physically into mental structures which otherwise would exist on the level of thought and fantasy. My intention is to present these concepts to actors in ways that stress continuities with their previous experiences and wherever possible to restate the new challenges in terms of their affinities with acting problems while moving through theatrical space; as a way of getting abstract thought processes back in touch with the life of the body. Metaphysical space could be identified as actual space and the resulting physical areas could be treated as playing areas through which an actor can enter, move and function in theatrical production. In its essence it is a process of making mental constructs (scripts, improvisation, stories) happen as events in space and each of the resources it employs, gesture, blocking, setting, light etc., functions by translating imaginative relationships into spatial relations. The objective is to introduce actors to new material to build on skills and experience to explore 'space' in a series of acting tasks.

- 1) to imagine the physical characteristics of space
- 2) to discover constraints and opportunities of space
- 3) to find ways of transforming space
- 4) to find out what sorts of encounters are possible and what they are like to space
- 5) to think out the implication of a posture in space

The objective also is to work out transitions from actual space towards more abstract space, from shared, interpersonal space to interior mental spaces, to the impersonal semantic spaces of language and literature, to the spaces of abstract thought.

To provide a way of realizing this aspiration by 'carrying' the sensing body of the actor into the midst of a conceptual area, or performance space, thereby restoring to abstract image some of theatre's own quality of immediate, physically experienced activity in space.

The performers are exposed to the integrated techniques or training disciplines and intercomparative disciplines of our traditional theatre, and to modern theatre practice and points of departure with emphasis on

- a) natural expression or stylization
- b) the personal creative expression and the codification
- c) principles of scene structures /frames or the building of a character
- d) the biological processes of a theatrical act
- e) the psycho-physical and psychological aspect of acting

During the work I deliberately try to leave all elements of the traditional theatre that are linked to an external cultural background to avoid 'virtuosity' and concentrate instead on certain dramaturgical aspects and conclusions that I have taken as inspiration, for example:

i) That the word and the gesture do not duplicate. Their relationship is not literal, it is interpretative. Exploring the domain of the word, interpreting its nuances and shades, transcending lexical boundaries, the actor expands the meaning and heightens the emotional content of the word.

ii) Polarization techniques-the liberation of the actor from the word to express himself in the purest, in the conception and design of the art.

iii) Emotional training independent of character types.

iv) Gesture projection, where the gesture is the culmination of the art of the actor accentuated by eye movements and facial expressions, reinforced by his entire psyche. Movements involving the spine which transforms the energy to an articulate physical language, like the throat and mouth transform vocal energy to verbal articulation.

Elements of an internal theatrical state and elements of physical characterization leading to form a common theatrical state.

Outer stimulations

- 1) Relaxation
- 2) Movement

- 3) External tempo rhythm
- 4) Vocal technique
- 5) Text
- 6) Voice
- 7) Speech

Inner stimulations

- 1) Senses
- 2) Internal tempo rhythm
- 3) Emotional memory
- 4) Imagination
- 5) Control and finish

The performers are given training disciplines for 'contacting yourself: centring, alignment, moving, sounding' and physio-vocal development. Through the text:

- a) Approaches of stepping (acting) into characters
 - i) through an outer stimulation, for example, through movements and postures
 - ii) from the senses to slowly evolving a structure or outer movement
- b) Creation of scenes in an epic manner as in Kathakali, then in *a narrative manner and finally in a chronologically exact realistic reconstruction of an event.
- c) Exercises to develop images and stimulations necessary to give an action reason. These are worked through both group dynamics conditioned by the environment and from outside the environment, e.g. emotional and physical memory.
- d) Building character types using facial masks, body postures and also autonome symbols for inspiration and then trying to create new symbols based on personal experience.
- e) The use of personal experience leading to natural expression: The actor is asked to draw inspiration from the elements (e.g. animals) as in Kathakali, by finding and expressing through a frame; and also using the same stimulation for the creation of new frames.
- f) Textual work. Two aspects are central in this work:

- i) psychological and literary analysis
- ii) using the theatre's own mode of expression, the psycho-physical approach, e.g. improvisation on a given text, movements, images and polarizations.
- g) Simultaneous work on rhythm and vocal gesture:
 - i) Voice projection, resonance and its changes through a different quality of movement or tension in the body.
 - ii) using voice as emotive stimulation for building up characters.
 - iii) Developing the vocal instrument through images, rhythms, colours, stories and props.
 - iv) Choral voice work to discharge the actors from words in certain situations.
- h) Using tempo-rhythms as outer stimulations, for e.g. text, movements. To provide a basis for the composition of a scene in a particular way so that there is a framework for the motions of the actors.

The training disciplines imparted are to serve as a vocabulary to understand creative problems and experience using the language of theatre itself. Exercises, which, while being flexible and capable of variation have to be precise in their structure. What is being attempted is to get the actor to imbibe the physicality found in Kathakali, Kalaripayat, Theyyam and Mudi yettu, to open up new territories for the actor by working with shapes and rhythms of action and feelings. The actor has to arrive through somatic impulses and become resensitized to evoke the body to create and express feelings.

The group of actors must be open to change, for each error brings them to a condition closer to the body's functioning, which become phases of a creative work. The actor must learn to *synthesize* what he learns from analysis in a unified and congruent performance. The well-trained actor must read the text for specific clues about rhythms, inflections, emphases, to begin creating his role.

It is envisaged that through the source material used the actor will achieve physical and vocal mastery, analytical insight into texts and the ability to synthesize their concepts and techniques in role playing. This could serve as his blueprint.

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K.C. Manavendranath interviewed for STQ by Biren Das Sharma and Jhuma Basak

STQ: Don't you think that constantly drawing from different sources like Kathakali and various other martial arts may confuse the actors?

Meyerhold were actors, they knew the craft, they did not sit and dictate. Unless I do it along with my actors I will not be able to offer anything.

STQ: What kind of creative input are you expecting from your trained actors?

KC: No, once you are very clear about what you are doing you will not be confused. They have to understand the spirit of the culture of a region.

STQ: Why is it necessary to start with the body?

KC: In Kalari the body mechanism, physical structure etc. has been well studied. It's not just physical training. A lot of importance is given to the spine, to stretching, and if you do it wrong it is going to affect you some time. Therefore you need the guidance of a master. It is important for the kind of theatre we do. But I am also talking about both body and mind: the dynamism that is in our philosophy. For example, the *tandava-Shiva's* dance is deeply rooted in us and it has natural human emotion, feelings; and physical expression. I am not interested in a theatre where you just sit and start talking and pretend. I think that to act is not to pretend. But I will never completely go into one form-I will never learn to perform Kathakali-I never want to do that. Once I enter that stage I can't come out.

STQ: Then how do you want to negotiate with these forms?

KC: Only by going through the training processes. I am not studying them at the performance level. But towards the performance-yes.

STQ: If you only concentrate on the training don't you think that this may exclude the thinking part of it, which is very important to theatrical creativity?

KC: No, they are all holistic. They have something call atarnapralutrana which are production texts. Unlike the contemporary actors these people know this very well. It's part of their education. For example, while I was teaching theatre I found that I had to start from

denotation and connotation to make the students pronounce properly. This problem will never occur in a traditional performer. Because for him the text and the body go together. So the thinking starts developing fast. He is taken in for training at an early age, which is also very crucial. He starts doing theatre when we start thinking. We don't have a point of reference. So, in our case, the director or the playwright becomes most prominent, becomes the armchair theoretician. Whereas, in what we may call the 'modern tradition', people like Stanislavski,

KC: To function at the optimum level-that is the idea-to function as creative actors. It's not just a question of talent. I feel that one can learn, one can act by being very good receptors initially. And then, through a kind of osmosis with your own basic expressions, you develop. I would not mould the actors into a particular style. No. It should come from within. But that takes time.

STQ: What happens to the actor when he gets, say, a Beckett text? Will he be able to interpret a modern text? The actor is trained in different physical forms and styles. What about an actor's emotional maturity, intellectual maturity? How do you train an actor to do that?

KC: One should work on texts. The classics, for example. Take a contemporary text and analysis of the text from the actor's point of view. How many meanings a word has, how many images you can bring out? I can talk about my personal experience. Veenapani Chawla, the director of Savitri, has condensed the original Aurobindo text into a 115 minute play. The text has no stage direction. Just the words. 'Death' is a character which I played for some time. For me 'death' is a very vast subject, so I had to go back to my own encyclopaedia, my physical 'equipment' to get as many different images of death as possible. I call my theatre a 'theatre of nexus'. A theatre which has contemporary sensibilities. And it is not that we always do traditional exercises. We do lots of contemporary exercises also-for example, exercises which might have been used by Stanislavski. People often thought that I had learnt from Grotowski. But I never met him in my life.

STQ: Do you find your work close to his?

KC: Yes. Some of the work of others, like [Eugenio] Barba's, for example, are close to mine.

STQ: Traditional forms are usually suitable for communicating traditional thinking, traditional ideas. Often these forms are capable of handling certain traditional texts only.

Do you think that an actor trained in a particular traditional form is capable of interpreting a modern text?

KC: We are only studying the training system of the classical forms; we are not interested in performing them. If I am a Kathakali actor I will find it very difficult to do modern work. But what I learn from Kathakali training is about the centres, the power, the body. It's like creating a storehouse I can draw on later. For me performance is extra normal. And the actor is always put into extra normal conditions in training. To put it in very simple words, 'to make him an all-rounder' 11 1 It way is what one wants to achieve through training. No mimicking-cut that out. For the last ten years Indian theatre has been doing that.

STQ: Do you see a possibility of using this experience of theatre in a systematic way?

KC: In a more abstract way, I would say. The actor's body is imprinted with these things. But if the body starts mimicking I might as well take ten trained Kathakali performers, ten trained Kalari artists or martial artists and do a play. This is happening in India. You are just choosing certain source material with a specific aim. It is different when one is developing a certain system or a certain mode of training and taking from different source materials. For example, in Tamil Nadu, a friend of mine is using Therukoothu. But the principles are the same. If you take Noh or Kabuki you will find that the principles are the same. You know that we want to go to the essence of the human being, of the actor, the core, how can he express himself. That is very important. How can he express himself using his equipment. That means that even contemporary thinking, not only traditional values, has a place in it. Because most of these forms are well codified, well structured. But within these structures there is an opportunity for you to improvise. That becomes very interesting. How do the actors do that? The actors have a fantastic repertoire to fall back on.

STQ: When you take a very modern text how would your actors—who have gone through this training—interpret the text? Would your theatre be able to handle any text?

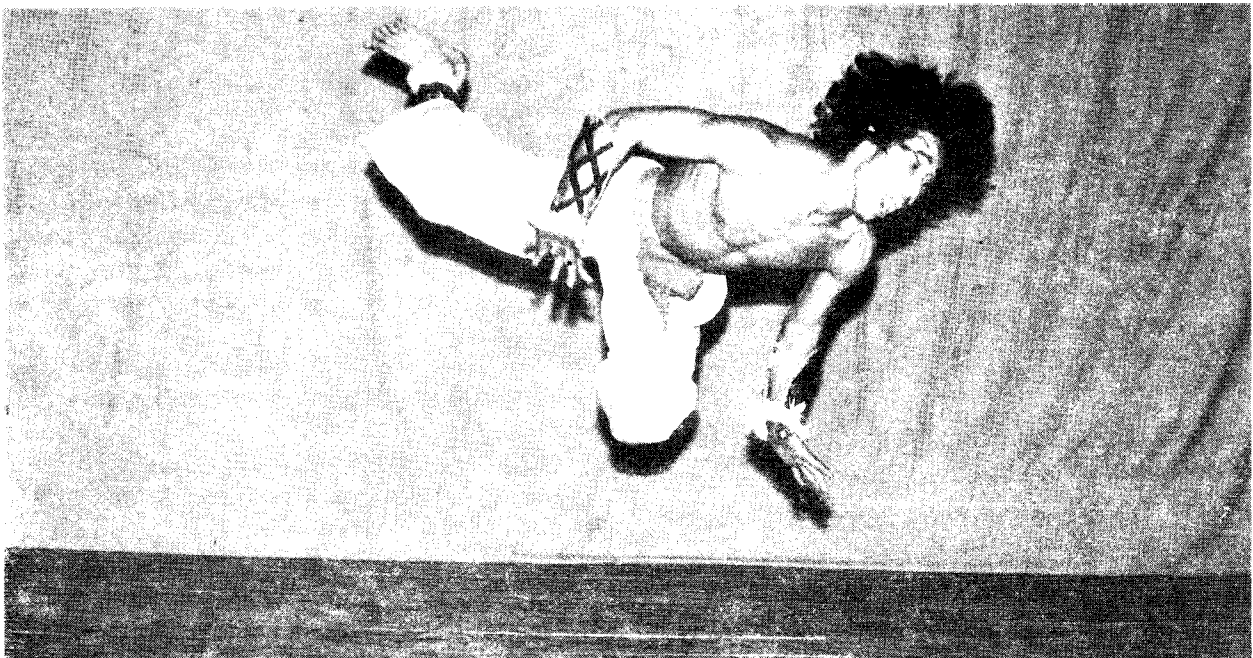
KC: If you are looking for some sort of creativity without completely destroying the essence of the play you have to be true to the playwright's concept. So your choice of plays will also differ. You see, that is where the classics work. The interpretations are so many. When a play can be interpreted in so many ways then it becomes a classic. If it is just a very linear text, just pointing a finger at a particular thing, then it becomes very tough for the actor. The actor has only one route to follow. It's not a canvas on which he can really work. In order to explore various possibilities we have developed some acting cycles which are technically very precise exercises.

STQ: During the process of working on a production how do you think the actors get involved in the intellectual process of conceptualizing the play?

KC: I prefer the actors to seek out their ways. I give them a broad framework or an immediate truth which I need, perhaps for the day. We are together but he keeps on trying out on his own. Sometime I don't accept what he gives me initially. But mine is more an actors' theatre. It works like a collective in a way, though I route things for them, make propositions. An actor has to be intelligent. I believe in the intelligent actor, the thinking actor, an actor who is able to function holistically. Without this vision one may try to pull one's tradition out of one's bag of tricks and put these into a

production. I have seen some directors doing this. Our theatre is full of either so-called folk or imitations of the folk, classical gestures, steps, language-there is no creative activity in this. An actor learns four steps from a Kathakali guru and that is reproduced on stage W a performance. That is only a director's theatre and the actor is like a cog in the wheel. Focus is on the visual, on the spectacle only. The director is not concerned about how the actor thinks, about his ways of expression, his various confrontations with contemporary society, with his own tradition. He remains just a part of a plan or a blueprint of the production.

Crossovers: Explorations across Disciplines



Khilton Nongmaithem demonstrates a complex movement from Thang-ta, a martial art form from Manipur

Several theatre groups and individuals work with gurus and experts from traditional performance and martial arts as part of their theatre training. STQ talks to some of these experts about their experience of working with theatre persons, and the implications of this for their own traditional disciplines.

Martial Arts in Theatre

Khilton Nongmaithem: Thang-ta

Martial arts are not meant to be performed as such, they have nevertheless found a place in theatre, especially to train the actor. Thong-ta (Manipur) and Kalari (Kerala) in particular are being used by many theatre directors , to bring a totally new body language and expression into their work. Manipur-based Thaig-ta guru KHILTON NONGMAITHEM-- who has worked with theater groups and conducted

workshops for them -talks to BIREN DAS SHARMA and LOKENDRA ARAMBAM about how actors can benefit from martial arts training.

STQ: As a martial artist who regularly works with theatre groups and conducts workshops, do you teach them martial arts proper?

KN: When I work with a theatre group, I actually work on improvisations using some martial arts movements and work out different ways of expression, because I feel that theatre people need to work with emotions.

STQ: Are you saying that for theater people you are gradually adapting a new way of teaching martial arts?

KN: Yes. It is totally different. When I teach martial arts proper at my institute in Manipur the exercises are different. It is another technique of teaching. But when I work with theatre groups it is totally different. For them I organize some scientific exercises which are derived from the martial arts system. It is important for the actors because this way they can easily get their own energy flow.

For example, on my recent tour of South India, I worked with four theatre groups: Spandana in Bangalore; Koothu-p-pattarai in Madras; Ankanam Theatre Group in Kerala and Maya Rao's Natya Institute of Choreography at Bangalore.

The people at Spandana are not full-time artists. Most of them are office goers. They'd come around 6:30 in the evening and work upto 9:00 p.m. doing their exercises and other routines.

I'd get only an hour's time with them. Then they started working on Chandrasekhar Kambar's play *Siri Samipige*. They wanted me to work on part of the choreography for this play.

STQ: What exercises did you do for them?

KN: For Spandana, I developed a set of systems. Not the usual method of teaching as we find in our own martial arts training. But the materials are derived from the original exercises. The emphasis is on making the exercises less difficult and more adaptable, and on making the actors' bodies flexible. More importance is given to breath control and finding of energy centres.

Bharat Sharma dealt with the choreography for the dance sequences in the play. For a short piece, he combined Mayurbhanj Chhau and Thang-ta techniques to choreograph a fight scene between the two kings. We worked together on this.

STQ: That meant utilizing the martial art forms as a choreographic input?

KN: Yes, I worked with the Thang-ta and he with the Mayurbhanj Chhau techniques. We worked out a rhythm from the combination of the two forms.

STQ: You were also working with Koothu-ppattarai. What was the form or system you worked out there?

KN: Using music, I did some improvisation work in utilizing space, using movements. At Koothu-ppattarai I evolved systems based on some basic exercises, like rooting the feet firmly to the ground, twirling the body, twisting the body round, etc., that I did not do elsewhere. After that, I applied music and asked them to go about using the space and the music, and to recall certain exercises that they had done with me earlier. I asked them to coordinate their movements with the music, and then to 'freeze' their bodies when the music stopped. This was quite helpful in their play.

STQ: Do you feel that for a theatre group the important thing is not to learn just the techniques of martial arts as such but the use of martial arts as an expressive form?

KN: Yes, it's very important for theatre. I feel that pure martial arts techniques are not necessary for theatre. For the last ten years I have been working with theatre groups in Manipur. I used to use actual martial art movements in my choreography for theatre. Now I feel that it is not necessary to use martial arts in theatre in the way we usually do because the people who perform are not supposed

to be martial artists, they are actors and actresses. All they need are elements of martial arts, only the basic principles. For example, when I take a stance, when I do some movements, how does my energy flow? This is the only principle that they have to know and then they have to improvise on their own. This is what I have come to realize.

STQ: For the exercises with Koothu-p-pattarai, what differences did you observe from Thang-ta exercises that you do in Manipur? What warmingup exercises did you do?

KN: As warming up, I used the *Ta Khousaba* (spear movement): one starts exercises from the feet upwards to the ankle; then to the calves, then to the knees, to the thighs, and so on.

STQ: That means a slow, gentle exercise.

KN: Yes, in fact, one of the gentlest exercises possible. One form is to put the feet together and move the ankle up and down continuously. Then spread the feet at an angle of 45 degrees, and practise moving the ankle and the toes together alternately. Along with that, stress is laid on the nerves in the calves. The knees are locked together while doing this exercise. I do this warming up exercise five times at a stretch. Then I do another exercise involving the movement of the

knee and a simultaneous movement of the hands. Moving the knee at an angle of 45 degrees, I try to find out on which part of the limb more stress is laid, the nerves in the calves or those in the thighs, etc. I keep the spinal cord straight, keeping the body's centre of gravity or body axis in the middle and when the legs are spread out, find out what particular muscle in what part of the body is at work and where the strains are felt.

STQ: At the same time maintaining the balance of the body? How does it help in acting?

KN: For example, in martial arts we use some breathing exercises even when we are in a bending stance. There is another exercise for the standing stance and also for sideways and backward stances. These exercises are very important for theatre because many groups have adapted different physical acting styles. So when one wants to deliver a dialogue from a bending stance one needs to know how to control one's breathing. When I sit down in this half-standing, half-sitting posture, can I do deep breathing? If I stand I can do it, when I am in this half-standing, half-sitting posture, with the knees spread out in 45 degrees, I would like to find out whether I can do deep breathing. At this particular juncture I try to tell them that breathing should be done from below the navel.

STQ: That means breathing in and out uniformly? KN: Yes, without a break in the regular breathing. STQ: Exhaling when sitting down and inhaling when standing up?

KN: I tell them to control the body axis with breathing. When I exhale, I come up straight. I try to keep a balance of the (body) weight. For the actors I have devised some exercises using different stances from martial arts along with some voice exercises which can go with the flow of breathing and follow the energy line. Most of the actors told me that after my workshop they found it very easy to deliver the dialogue. Now they have found a new flow in their own body.

I derive my whole system from the spear movements. I utilize the later parts of the *Chingkheiol* exercises, but skip the initial ones.

STQ: In other words, you have transformed the exercise system to give positive usefulness to the martial arts-translated these into a new form. How many days were you working with Koothupattarai? What kinds of exercises did you do there?

KN: I did about fourteen exercises. I also did a few ground exercises-how to extract energy from the ground. In any movement, my energy centre should lead me and not my hand or my eye. When I am sitting on a chair, and I stretch a leg forward, I think I am moving, my leg is moving

forward. But, that is not so; unless the energy centre is shifted, my body will not move. Even if I raise my hands, my body won't move forward. Whereas when I start shifting my energy centre that lies concentrated in my body axis, my body will start moving forward or backward accordingly. The back and the buttocks are the heaviest and the slowest parts of the body in consideration of body movements. These particular parts are involved in any movement of the body. So, how to extract and utilize this energy centre? How do I make my energy centre lead me? If I intend to step forward with the left leg, I must shift my body weight, meaning the energy centre, to my left leg which shall compel me to move my whole body forward, straight or to the left as desired.

What I did at first was only simple up and down exercises, not involving a shift in the energy centre. Whereas, when I start twirling my body around, and extending my leg, I start shifting my energy centre from my body axis to particular parts of the body. When the energy centre shifts accordingly, the body movements follow freely. I derive this exercise from the spear movements.

STQ: How did you think these up? Did you conceptualize these before you started conducting the workshops at Spandana or at Koothu-ppattarai or had you thought it all up much earlier?

KN: I had thought it up before I left Imphal. What I am trying to do now is to bring in the form of the *Chingkheiol* exercises, that are treated as the basis in our own traditional exercises, as a later form of exercise to be preceded by the new forms. I am trying to develop these as the basis for my training system.

STQ: That means before performing the *Chingkheiol* exercises, you are developing some preliminary exercises to create body consciousness in an actor, to discover one's own energy centre and to become aware of the sensation of getting grounded to the earth. You start your exercises from the ground itself to the toes, and to the ankles, to the calves, and so on, going up gradually. There is no feeling of being 'pressed down' from above?

KN: We derive energy from the feet. So I strongly felt that one ought to start the exercises from the feet onwards.

STQ: That means from the earth?

KN: Yes, we derive energy from the earth. That means the energy will first seep into the feet.

STQ: You have been working with several groups as a martial arts instructor. How did they differ in their expectations?

KN: In all the theatre groups, I observed their eagerness to learn the martial art forms. They all expressed their eagerness to learn more, but the binding factor was lack of time plus other commitments like working on the plays, etc. What they all expressed was that their body flexibility increased; their stamina increased. This helped them immensely in the plays, and they desired further lessons. The difference is that the theatre artistes utilize the martial arts energy as an expression.

STQ: How do you put expressions and emotions into martial arts?

KN: For instance, when I take a stance, where do I store my breath, the expression obtained when I am in the particular position with sword in hand, etc. That is exactly what they try to capture; to put in dialogue appropriate to that particular stance.

STQ: Trying to express the emotion therein?

KN: Yes, to express the emotion. They also asked me from where do the basics originate, how I control that, etc.

STQ: Here, as they are enquiring, how do you extract and/or develop the emotion arising thereof from the martial arts?

KN: We have a simple motto 'emotional restraint, not anger.' For example, in martial arts we control our emotions during a fight. But even when we control our emotions, people say we look aggressive. The point is that I may look angry but I won't get angry. That is very important. There are techniques in martial arts to control one's emotions while fighting. One day I demonstrated this to the members of a theatre group. They were very excited and they wanted to work on it, to learn it for their new play. Then, for them, I worked with emotions and expressions mainly. We worked not on the techniques but on the principles of the emotions and their control. This helped them a lot.

STQ: That means there is no anger.

KN: There is no anger. Actually, it's deep concentration on my part to focus on a particular point. I am not concentrating on the opponent as such. It's knowing my own self. We have a saying in martial arts that if one does not know oneself, then one does not know one's opponent.

STQ: What about your eyes?

KN: I keep them in front. I am actually 'listening to nature', listening, seeing, watching intently with the senses. The intense concentration conjures up a vivid picture of what I intend to do. My mind is on a single focus.

STQ: Among the theatre groups, other than the techniques of the martial arts system, they are interested in it as an expressive form, to extract energy from 'the inside' in order to express vibrant emotions. Don't the dance artistes say anything on this note?

KN: They do. When we perform an original form like the spear movement, *Ta Khousaba*, there is rhythm in the movement, no doubt, but such that they are unable to follow its steps. Now, if I break the movement up and instil rhythm in sequences, they can then utilize the movement in dance. If I try putting in rhythm to the movement step by step, if I make additions and subtractions here and there, they can make full use of the movement in dance. This was what they expected of me. To enable this, I made efforts to deconstruct the spear movement and to stylize it. For instance, in the stances i. e. stepping in and out as we do in the martial arts, the dance artistes could not find these useful to them. It may be useful to the theatre people who usually pose in such stances. That is not so with dance artistes. Now, if I put in certain hand patterns in the movement, I start putting in rhythm to the otherwise static stances. This is where the dance artistes get interested.

STQ: With the hand movements there is then a rhythm to their movements?

KN: Yes, their whole body starts functioning.

STQ: It becomes a dance?

KN: If I start moving my hands in these patterns (like the pattern of eight), a rhythm starts entering into the movement even though the feet may not be in tune. The upper part of the body starts flowing. What I find more interesting is that since I am doing the exercises for the dance artistes, I can now do the movement with certain beats and in a rhythmic manner, keeping time with the hands. There is no hurried movement. In its place, a well tuned step in flowing rhythm now develops, the exercises become more planned, I ask them to shift two steps, do the third, shift to another, and then do the fifth and the sixth and so on. Hence a pleasing exercise system develops.

STQ: So in the interaction with dance forms, the martial art form itself interacts with the rhythm of the dance and blends with the dance?

KN: However, the rigour of the martial arts is not lost, although a flow in the rhythm is developed that was not there previously. Its usefulness is now not only to dance. There is scope for its applicability in theatre. Previously they used to get exhausted doing the *Ta Khousesaba*, whereas, now they do not get so exhausted, being carried by the rhythm which they find pleasing. So, wherever an actor desires to utilize any part of the body, the exercise system helps in creating awareness of the body parts, and their proper appreciation.

STQ: So, it is not just teaching physical movements or pure techniques of martial arts, but actually helping the actors and actresses to perform better? Being a martial artist, how do you keep a balance between non-performance and performance? After all, martial arts are not meant to be performed.

KN: For the last ten years I have been working with theatre people. I have studied and observed their work. Now I feel that I can not only teach martial arts but also help them in their work. To give you an example, take a movement from martial arts which is not for demonstration or performance. But there is a rhythm in it. And I

KN: For the last ten years I have been working with theatre people. I have studied and observed their work. Now I feel that I can not only teach martial arts but also help them in their work. To give you an example, take a movement from martial arts which is not for demonstration or performance. But there is a rhythm in it. And I know that this rhythm is not applicable to theatre or in dance as such. What I thought was, if I want to use that kind of movement in theatre, can I try to slow down the movement and try to find a rhythm? I realized that in this way the movements become stylized. When this is put into a play it comes out well, though it doesn't look like martial art movements at all. But before I try it out I practise it myself. I slow it down and divide it four times, then six times. This way I discover a wonderful new flow. And this is very useful for the actors, because it is also very easy to do. Otherwise the actual movement is very difficult for the theatre people who are basically not martial artists, and are not practising it vigorously.

K. P. Krishnadas: Kalaripayyat

K. P. KRISHNADAS belongs to the fifth generation of a traditional martial arts family of Kerala. He started learning Kalaripayyat at the age of eight and became a guru at twenty-six. He is the first in the family to work with theatre people and in 1986 he travelled to UK to teach and demonstrate Kalari. In India he has collaborated first with G. Sankarapillai and later with

K. C. Manavendranath, Prabir Guha, N. Muthuswami, Lokendra Arambam and others. BIREN DAS SHARMA and JHUMA BASAK talk to him about his experience in working with theatre people.

STQ: Do you like working with theatre people?

KPK: I like to work with theatre people. Now I know what they want from Kalari and other traditional arts. They want to conserve their energy so that they can perform for two or three hours. They want to learn about breathing control. K. C.'s group joined my institution and they come every morning for a three-hour class. I am teaching them the basic exercises first. They want to choreograph fight sequences with the help of Kalari movements. They do not want to use Kalari directly in their theatre work. They want use it in their own way.

STQ: In theatre it gets changed, doesn't it?

KPK: It does. For some fight sequences they used Kalari, but it is different. For example, we use real weapons, but the actors may simply imagine the weapons. I have choreographed a sequence from the Mahabharata for a production, a fight sequence done without weapons. I did it using some movements from the Pranam, some from the Dagger, the Sword and the Gada exercises. My father doesn't like it. He says, 'You are the fifth generation and you must keep the tradition and teach the next generation also.' I told my father not to worry about it. I explained it to him and said that there is no harm in working with theatre people. More than anything else they want to practise and become more energetic. So my father said, 'Okay, you can teach them.'

STQ: What are the theatre people looking for?

KPK: Ankanam members are learning the basics as new students. They are not coming to my class as theatre people-I am teaching them just like the newcomers so that they can pick up slowly. But in a short workshop situation I don't teach like this. For example, usually we teach Pranam only after two months' practice.



Krishnadas conducting a Kalaripayyat workshop with members of the Theatre living Laboratory, West Bengal.

In a workshop I won't teach the way I usually do. Because they won't understand. They will forget after five days.

STQ: So these short workshops are affecting your normal teaching styles?

KPK: Yes. But in my institution I don't teach like this. Here they must practise four hours daily like a beginner. It's hard work. We first teach the Horse Stand exercises, and then the Defence exercises moving forward, backward and sideways. Then we enter into the first kicking exercise. There are ten leg movements in all. After the first ten leg movements we teach the bending exercises. Then we start practising the Pranam. Because a practitioner must know his body. The first ten leg movements make the body flexible. These are very slow movements and they make the Pranam exercise very easy. Usually it takes six months to learn the basic movements. We have a total of eighteen maypayyats. After three maypayyats we teach the longer exercises-but only after four months. Also one must continue practising the basic

exercises daily. Then you can go into weapon fighting. For that you need a minimum of six months.

STQ: Do you think that theatre people are interested in Kalari because it's a form of martial arts or a form of physical exercise?

KPK: Both. It is not simply physical exercise. They can use some of the movements in theatre also. I have seen Chandralekha using movements from Kalari in her theatre work.

STQ: Kalari as a form is meant only to be practised and not performed. But it is gradually moving towards performance. How do you feel about that?

KPK: Kalari is not a performing art. Even a formal stage demonstration of Kalari is different from the actual Kalari. During a stage demonstration we 'make' a show for the audience, but in Kalari the exercises are guided by commands. On the stage we do not give commands. That is one main difference. When it is performed, some adjustments are also necessary. When we practise, the exercises may be very slow. On stage we show mainly the basic exercises and one or two main payyats and end with some exercises with weapons like swords and daggers, spears and daggers, trishuls, flexible swords, axes, knives etc. Senior students with a minimum experience of three years may take part in such demonstrations. When we teach we make it very clear to the students that on the stage it will be totally different.

STQ: Do you think that the entire philosophy changes when you move to performance?

KPK: Not the philosophy but the method.

STQ: As your involvement with theatre grows are you accused of neglecting your own art?

KPK: Gurukula people criticize me. In 1989 I attended a theatre seminar at NCPA, Bombay, and had to take leave from a camp being held at Delhi. I was told, 'You must also keep your tradition. Kalari is an art and it's your own tradition.'

STQ: Do you want to continue working with theatre people?

KPK: I want to keep in touch with the theatre world. At the same time I must keep my tradition alive. One thing for sure, from Kalari I get more respect. Not that the theatre does not respect me, but theatre is different. Kalari follows the Gurukula system. The students come and help my family. They come early in the morning and stay till the evening. But they also keep a distance. When I teach, no one is allowed to talk. You can only observe.

Theatre is different. When I work with theatre people I tell myself-now I am a theatre person. I have to adjust.

Traditional Performance Forms in Theatre

P. N. Rajiv: Kathakali

P. N. Rajiv, Kathakali dancer and guru, worked for a Kerala theatre group called Ankanam for two years and then went back to dance. This interview with BIREN DAS SHARMA and JHUMA BASAK was recorded at a time when he was working with theatre people.

STQ: Why did you start to work with theatre people?

PNR: After finishing my degree in economics and my training in Kathakali I had no job. I couldn't get my livelihood from Kathakali. I was a little upset. I took a job at an herbal medicine factory. There I used to make ayurvedic medicines. One day while working overtime late at night I asked myself, 'Why am I doing this? I am a Kathakali artist first of all.' The next day I left that job. I came back home and my parents asked me, 'What do you want to do next?' I said, I don't know, but one thing for sure, I can't leave Kathakali. It is in my blood. I don't know what to do.' On that day one of my friends came to see me and asked me whether I was interested in working with a theatre group. I agreed because I wanted to earn some money. Now I am almost thirty years old. People look at me and think, this man is just a Kathakali dancer. Why? They wonder. Why didn't I go to the Middle East and earn some money and come back and lead a family life?' I can't do that. I didn't know what would happen next. So I started working with theatre people. But that has also created a problem. When somebody wants to contact me for a Kathakali performance people say that he has left Kathakali and joined theatre. My fellow Kathakali actors do not accept the way I am working nowadays. Frankly, I don't know where I stand. Once I knew that my mind, my body, everything, was fixed in Kathakali.

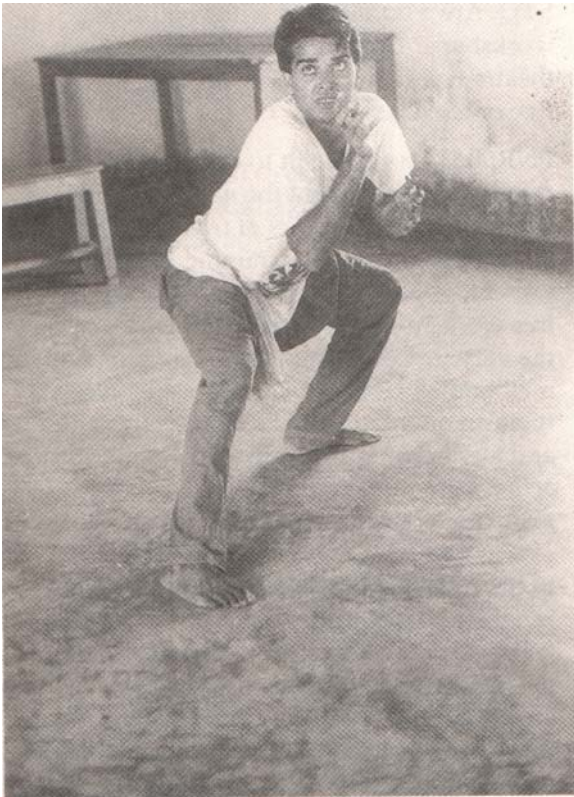
At that time I was not even allowed to play with other boys of my age. A guru must not play with others. When I started learning Kathakali I thought that it would give me a livelihood, prestige and money. But I discovered that it is very difficult to earn a livelihood from Kathakali. I am still in a dilemma. I don't know whether I can live as a Kathakali actor and survive. Some of the students who have finished the Kalamandalam course are driving auto-rickshaws in Kerala or working as policemen. I'll never be able to do that. I can't. At the

Kalamandalam the chance of getting a job as a teacher is very rare. A post gets vacant after many years. There are no other institutions except these four run by the government. And students are not interested in private studies. There is no future in Kathakali.

STQ: Isn't the state doing anything for Kathakali actors?

PNR: They are actually destroying Kathakali now. They are mixing politics with Kathakali. At the Kalamandalam students' politics is very strong. Last year they had a strike because the students didn't want to do the eye exercises in the early morning. They wanted to shift it to the evening. Politicians are also playing a role there. I don't expect anything from the government. During my training period we were not allowed cycling, we were not even allowed to use a pillow. I was so committed that I did all that. We had to wake up at 3.30 am in the morning and the eye exercises would start at 4 am. After that we had body control exercises and had to take a massage which would finish at 8 am.





Kathakali guru P. N. Rajiv demonstrating and conducting a workshop with members of Theatre Living Laboratory.

Then I had to go to school. I came back from school at 4.30 pm and would start practicing till 7 or 7.30 in the evening. Again after dinner we had regular discussion sessions. I did all that and managed to get my degree in economics.

STQ: Do you mean that Kathakali as a profession has no future?

PNR: It's true. Every year twelve actors are getting training from Kalamandalam. There are three other institutions run by the government. There are a lot of Kathakali actors in Kerala now. Most of them don't perform. The maximum amount one can earn from one performance is two hundred rupees. The maximum number of performances one can get in a year will not be more than forty to forty five. The golden days of Kathakali were during the feudal system. Each feudal lord had a Kathakali group. They lived there and got everything they needed. At that time people were very dedicated to the art. Now even the Kathakali artists themselves are not so dedicated to the art.

STQ: Why do you say so?

PNR: Imagine that I have a chance to go abroad for a month, which may be a good season in Kerala. In a western country I will give a presentation lasting thirty minutes, whereas in Kerala I must take five hours to do the same performance. I'll get more money for a thirty-minute show there than a five-hour show in Kerala. So the best performers will go west.

STQ: Is this one of the reasons you are shifting more towards theatre?

PNR: No. In my childhood I have seen people respecting Kathakali artists. They were treated very well. Now there is no respect for a Kathakali actor in his daily life, not even if you are the best. Everybody has become business-minded. If he is invited to perform he will be looked after only for that time, till the performance is over. This is what makes most of the Kathakali actors unhappy. When you are on the stage they may garland you, but in real life there is no value for your art, no money and no respect. My involvement in theatre is more due to these practical reasons. I can't live only by performing Kathakali. But at the same time I can't keep myself away from Kathakali. My working with theatre people gives me a chance to do both. I can continue performing Kathakali and also work for theatre. Theatre is a very popular form and through it I can make people interested in Kathakali also. If an actor says that he has learnt something from Kathakali, that his energy comes from Kathakali training, then an interaction with theatre people may also help Kathakali. At that time I thought that this could be a way out for me.

STQ: How do theatre people you are working with intend to use Kathakali in their work? Will it be distorted, changed, integrated?

PNR: My hope is that if they are interested in a theatrical method of using Kathakali, some of them might get interested in Kathakali as such. The response to my weekly Kathakali demonstration is very good. After four demonstrations I give a proper Kathakali performance. First I demonstrate some *padams* from a story, for example the story of 'Nala Yuddha', and I demonstrate the usages of the mudras and *bhavas* in the *padams*. Next Sunday I perform the same story for the same audience.

STQ: Are you satisfied with conducting workshops? Do you think that one can give theatre workers something of Kathakali in five or ten days?

PNR: It is very difficult to do anything in five days. I was taught the *nava rasas* only after finishing two years of training. I had to go through continuous training in facial exercises, eye exercises, facial massages etc. In a workshop I may start with *nava rasas* on the very first day. This is not the right methodology, I know. But this is to give them an orientation. Later they can decide and learn properly. It is true that you can't achieve anything in five or ten days. Even to learn any of the forms only as physical exercise you simply can't learn how to do it in the right way in a few days' time. I often ask the participants on the very first day, 'Why do you want to learn Kathakali?' They tell me that they want to learn facial expressions and gestures. They want to learn how to express with slight movements of the facial muscles, how to change the *bhava* or *rasa*.

STQ: After working with a theatre group do you feel that theatre experience can also influence you, give a new dimension to your art?

PNR: I hope that to some extent it will. For example, the use of space. Kathakali is very frontal. In theatre you have more freedom so far as space is concerned. The Kathakali structure is very rigid and one is not allowed to break it or change it. If you ever do that, if you ever break the codes, people will blame you, they will neglect you as a Kathakali performer. After working with theatre people I am trying to introduce things which are not in Kathakali. But I am not really breaking the tradition-I am introducing simple things which help better communication. For example, last year I performed at my guru's house. I was performing Bhima. After killing Duhshasana Bhima ties Panchali's hair with hands dipped in Duhshasana's blood. But during the performance, while I was doing Panchali's hair I embraced her and screamed. After the performance was over my guru slapped me and asked, 'Why did you do that?' Frankly speaking, while performing I lost control. I was thinking of Bhima and the things he had to go through-the

vaastraharana where he had to sit idle and watch Draupadi being unrobed-and then something just happened to me. I embraced Panchali and screamed.

STQ: Do you still want to continue experimenting with Kathakali even after your guru disapproved?

PNR: Yes. My guru has also become a little more sympathetic. I have told him that this is not breaking away from the tradition or the structure of Kathakali form. It's like an actor becoming the character.

STQ: What does K. C. Manavendranath expect from you, exactly?

PNR: He is developing an actor's training methodology from various traditional theatre forms and martial arts of Kerala. He wants me to make the actors know themselves better, know their bodies better, where the energy point is, how much energy one can put on some parts of one's body and how to shift the energy. K. C. expects that the actors will be able to achieve these through Kathakali exercises. They are learning the basic Kathakali exercises for the body, the face and the eyes.

When I joined K. C's group I noticed that some of the members know the basic things about Kathakali. Three of them are from the School of Drama and two others have also worked with a village theatre group. So it wasn't difficult for me to introduce Kathakali as a different style. They were familiar with the ways gurus teach. The first problem I faced was a lack of sense of rhythm. I think it is an inborn thing. One can improve through practice. This was the main problem when I started working with them. The other problem was that someone may have a certain physical block which makes the exercises difficult for him. I had to look for a new method to use certain exercises which may suit his body. So I requested Krishnadas, a Kalari guru, to help me because the basic exercises of Kathakali are taken from Kalari. The difference is that we do not exercise for demonstration or performance, because the costume we use does not allow us to move our legs high like they do in Kalari. So, for Kathakali we had to make some changes in the exercises which were taken from Kalari. Krishnadas helped me a lot by giving massages to the participants who had blocks. In Kathakali the massages are different and more painful, with emphasis on the hips. The strongest part of a Kathakali dancer is his hips. The dress we wear weighs up to ten kilos. Theatre workers want to know how it is possible for a Kathakali artist to dance continuously for 4-5 hours. This was the first question K. C. asked me, 'Where do you get this energy?' He requested me to make his actors so energetic that they would be able to

work continuously without losing energy. He is looking for a new method of actors' training - training in body control, gaining more energy and things like that.

STQ: But as a performing artist do you find it frustrating to use Kathakali only as a training system and not an artistic form?

PNR: This is a problem I had. For me there was no choice. I think that some theatre people have an image of Kathakali as an exercise pattern. Even for the facial expressions the workshop participants often ask for the exercises. They want to know the exercises and massages needed for facial expressions. They often take Kathakali only as an exercise for body fitness, or body flexibility. For them it is just like Kalari.

STQ: In contemporary theatre you see a trend of copying interesting movements or gestures from classical dances. What do you think of this?

PNR: In my view Kathakali is not an art aimed at making people socially aware, or inspiring them to fight against oppression or things like that. It is only for joy, happiness. An audience of a Kathakali performance needs imagination. The Kathakali performer doesn't use *any* sets, backdrops, cut-outs or props. The audience must have the same imagination as the Kathakali performer has. This imagination and this relationship between the art and the people can only make the culture grow. Can you say that Kathakali demoralizes people? If an artist is truthful to himself, if he loves the art and if he has imagination, he can enjoy the art. Kathakali actors are not fighting for social justice. One of the Kalamandalam secretaries tried a new story called 'Manaba Vijay'-the story of the third world countries fighting against the first world. It was a flop. Kathakali is not for that. I never put such things in my performances.

STQ: But you did some sort of experimentation when you were performing as Bhima.

PNR: That is for Kathakali and not for something else like social reform. As a Kathakali performer I try to grow and I want to make Kathakali grow. Kathakali can't come down to reach people; people must come up and enjoy Kathakali. I am trying for that actually-there is something I am happy about. For my village performances the audience is increasing. When I started there were only four or five people, now I have fifty. In less than one year this has happened and the youngsters are ready to come and watch and ask questions.

K. Rajkumar: Bharatanatyam

K. RAJKUMAR belongs to a middle-class family from interior Kerala, south of Madurai. He was put under a guru and started to learn dance at the age of 12. He later joined Kalakshetra and earned a diploma in Bharatanatyam. He has worked with noted dancer and choreographer Chandralekha for two years and later collaborated with several theatre groups. BIREN DAS SHARMA talks to him about working with theatre.

STQ: At any stage of your dance training was there a feeling of not being satisfied with Bharatanatyam as such?

KR: Yes, there was. Because Bharatanatyam is traditionally *nritya pradhan*. It can be seen as a form of Indian mime with the mudra and other things. You mainly communicate through mudras in dance, and I realized that people do not know them. They don't know the language of the mudra. They are not able to understand what I am conveying to them. One has to be more expressive, through movement dialogue. I thought that I should opt for something which would give me both dance and dialogue together.

STQ: That means you want to move from classical dance proper to theatre?

KR: Yes. Slowly. I think that dance can communicate social themes. I know that traditional dance forms are meant to perform religious or devotional themes only. But I want to go in for social themes and at the same time I want to make dance more communicative. Classical dance forms are as codified and rigid as Pythagoras's theorem and to develop the theorem further is difficult, if not impossible. Similarly, if you want to introduce social themes through dance you have to create a new language to express your views, new ideas. That's why I have started learning Kalari, Kathak and various forms of martial arts and other dance techniques. Also, the audience should be able to enjoy what you are expressing. It's not enough if they just appreciate your body. The tradition says that a *darsak* (viewer) should enjoy the experience, he should get into the mood of what you are conveying to him, the meaning of it. Once my body gets used to various techniques I may try to codify something new which will be my own, but I think it will really take a long time to reach that point. Dance theatre as such has been in practice for many years in India, but it communicates only specific themes. It is codified and fixed. To take that same classical alphabet and use it to communicate new social themes is not possible. You have to find a new set of codes for your own language. But it can't be just borrowed from classical

forms. Practicing the classical forms will help you to know your body language, to realize your capability in movements, your sturdiness, and things like that. I had a chance to see Veenapani Chawla's *Savitri*. She had taken Tai-chi movements and choreographed them to express certain feelings. The actors perform the Tai-chi movements and then speak the dialogues, which are codified to the movements. I think that it has actually helped her to choreograph and express her ideas.

STQ: Isn't there a danger in merely lifting interesting items, images or movements from one or more forms and applying them blindly to theatre?

KR: Yes, because if you make a language out of Malayalam, Hindi and Bengali it won't work. You have to find your own language. You might be able to do that once you master certain forms and create your own movements. Western countries have codified physical exercises for theatre people whereas in India modern theatre has to borrow things from abroad. I don't think that these exercises are suited to our body construction. Like our traditional languages, our classical and traditional forms have various codified training systems suitable for our conditions and the construction of our bodies. So it is important to learn the basics of these traditional martial arts and dance forms first and then explore your own movements according to your own bio-system.

STQ: What happens in a country like India when you take a particular form from one particular region and teach it to students from another region whose bodies are conditioned differently? On the one hand you're rejecting foreign training methods, and on the other, you're teaching a form to the students who may find this particular form 'foreign' in a similar fashion?

KR: This is a good question which I am exploring now. A form like Manipuri has no expression at all, basically it is all on movement. Kathak is more based on *tala* and less on *abhinaya*. Odissi has both. Both Bharatanatyam and Kathakali have more expressions and gesticulations and are more expressive. And all these forms are conditioned geographically. In Bengal I have found that people don't use their eyes at all. As an actor, when you leave your geographic location and explore other forms and discover the differences you might be able to express more.

STQ: When you work with theatre people and give them training in classical dance do you teach them all the basic techniques or just a selection? Do you adapt to suit their needs?

KR: I teach them a selection of the basic techniques. For example, if I teach them the expanding exercises first and slowly get internalized to the movements, I come away from the movements and start expressing them. *Adavus* are done mostly with no expressions. I have taken the *adavus* and put some expressions to them. I have to find a new way of getting the participants into the rhythm. For example, if I want to teach them the basic steps in three speeds: *bilambit*, *madhyam* and *druta*, I may make them clap, which is not traditionally done. But when they start clapping they also get the rhythm. This way they learn very fast.

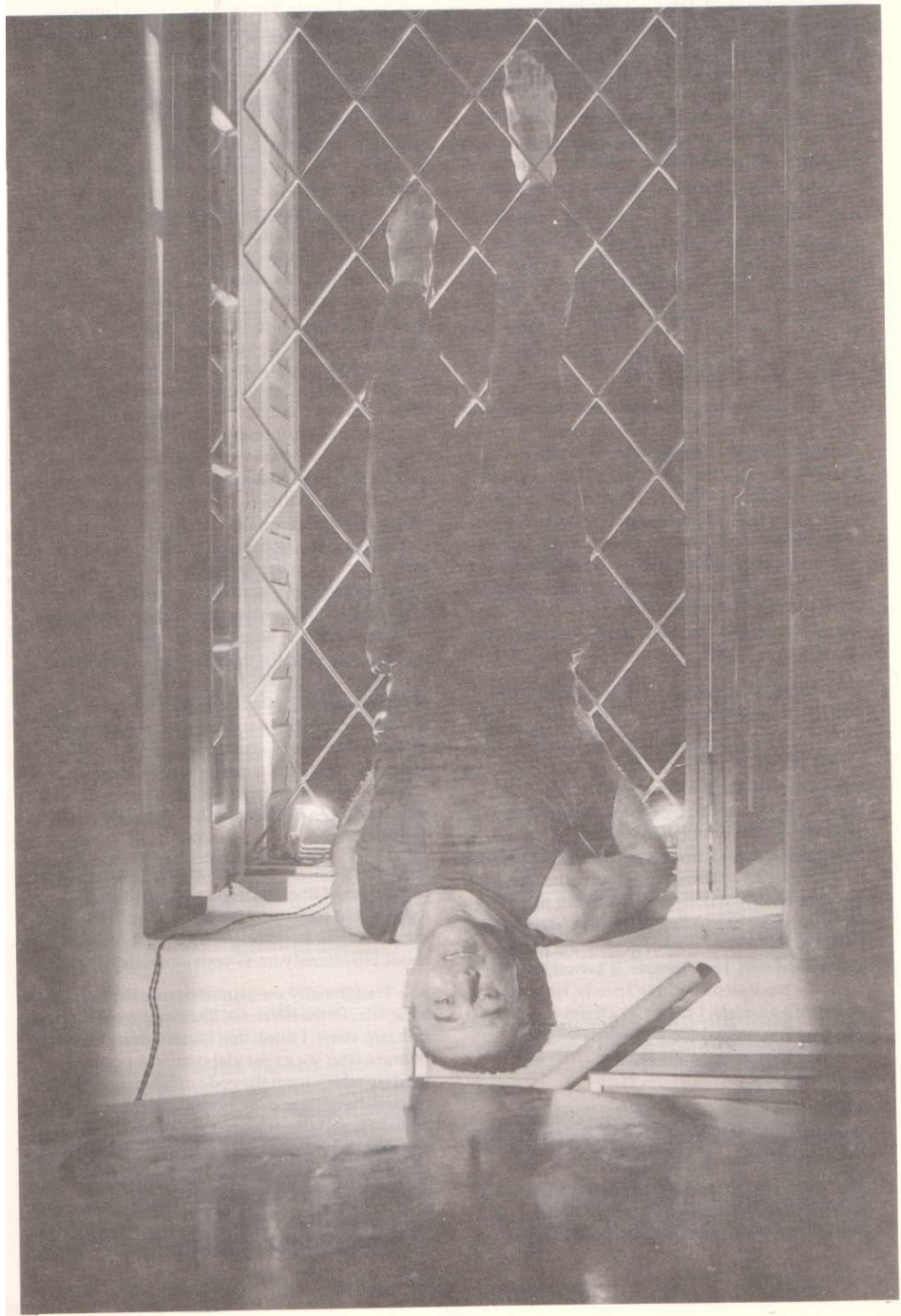
STQ: Anyone faithful to classical dance may complain that you are distorting the traditional teaching system.

KR: That's why I am not performing anymore. I have already come away from tradition and am not performing traditional Bharatanatyam anymore. I know that from a codified language you can't just go for improvisation work. It might take a long time to understand the meaning of these new explorations through or against tradition. The *NatyasJzashtra* is called the fifth Veda-Bharata's *Natyashastra* says that the essence of all the Vedas are in *Natyashastra*. But times have changed. In ancient times life was different and now the problems are very different. For example, now that everything is computerized and we are in the modern machine age, if I want to talk about a theme like 'pollution' I can't find mudras from *Natyashastra* to talk about this problem. How could I express this with the help of a classical form? The question is, what is your goal? So it's very difficult. Tradition is really losing its value as people go into modern tunes. And some people want tradition to be maintained. I live in this time, so I work for this time. I am not waiting for the future. I do not want to be an artist performing a traditional form of dance. I am a modern person who wants to talk about modern problems. An actor can have his basic training in different traditional forms. I start with a classical form. We can guide trainees to try out things taken from tradition. For example, the eye contact. Your expression is codified according to your movements and your gestures are fixed according to your expressions. These are some of the things that can help a theatre person. A modern form like the third theatre is performed in the open, with crowds around. Here, in the midst of people, the actors work more with expressions and can establish eye contact with the audience. Thus they are able to communicate very easily. Similarly, Kathakali is performed in the open. The screen is held

up before the characters enter and then the screen is taken off. It is the same in Therukoothu.

STQ: But don't you think that in order to master techniques of Bharatanatyam one should go through the entire process of learning? Don't you think that you are giving only a partial knowledge about Bharatanatyam to your students?

KR: Traditionally we learn the basic rhythms, the basic *talas* or the *adavus* of Bharatanatyam, in the first two years. I think that is enough for an actor. Because later we go for elaborations, learning mudras which form the code of language. The mudras have their own meanings. They are the alphabets and the grammar is the *talas*, the *adavics*. The *adavus* are the movements with which we express feelings. I think for theatre people it is enough to learn the basic movements.



I am still exploring . . .' Astad Deboo

One of India's first contemporary dancers, ASTAD DESOO has performed extensively both in the - country and abroad. He has innovated compositions working with puppeteer Dadi Padumjee and life size puppets, as well as classical musicians, and the element of theatre in his presentations is particularly marked. Here he talks to STQ of his move towards a modern Indian dance idiom. Interpolations by ANJUM KATYAL, BIREN DAS SHARMA and SREEJATA GUHA appear bracketed, in italics.

My very first experience of dance was in the city of Calcutta. My mother used to study dance and music home for her own enjoyment and knowledge. She didn't have any desire to perform. But she was interested in the Indian tradition of dance and music and I distinctly remember her in our living room re she used to study.

I started my initial dance training when we moved to Jamshedpur. There was no pressure either me or from my parents that I should be sent to dancing school. They saw that I was interested. So they said, 'Okay, .let's put him in the local school.' In the local school I had Bharatanatyam in the beginning I studied it for a very short period of time and the school decided to change the gurus who teaching. Guru Prahlad Das from Calcutta would visit Jamshedpur twice a week to teach Kathak that's when I really started.

Even when I was studying at that young age there was no guidance. I was not even aware of other dance forms. I don't recall any Kathakali dance performance or Manipuri or Odissi. This was between 1956 and the 60s. What I distinctly remember was that I did see Uday Shankar's film *Kalpana* and what struck me was the technical wizardry of the whole thing being in shadow. What also got my mind ticking was that there was no religious story to it as such. What I saw left an impression on me and a certain curiosity was subconsciously left in my mind.

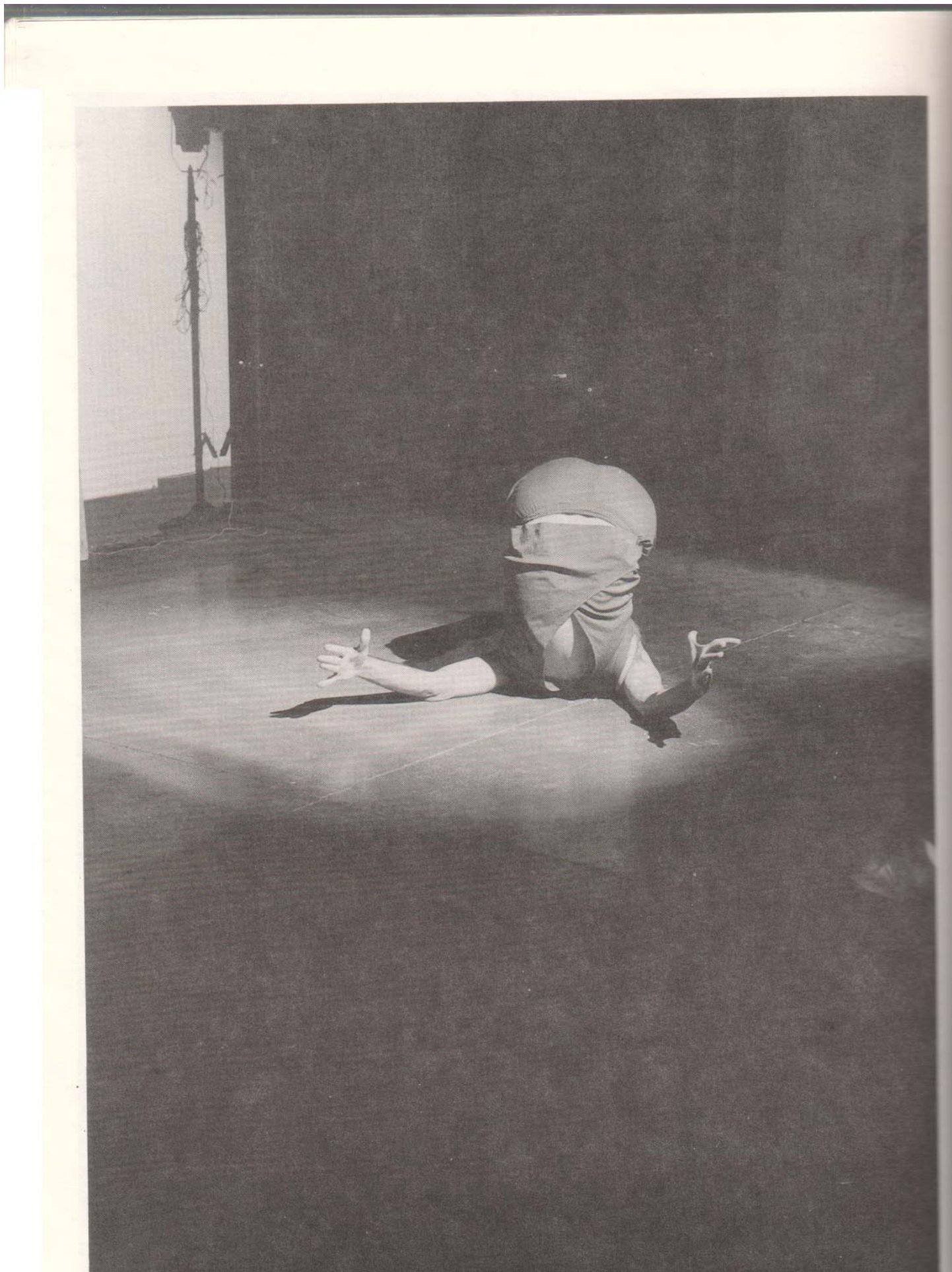
There was, I recall, a certain amount of being nagged by my school friends, but not really to a great extent. On the other hand, the annual school function was never complete without my dancing. I was Parsis in general are more inclined towards Western classical music and dance. It was not so in my I also remember that I wanted to learn piano and my parents told me, 'If

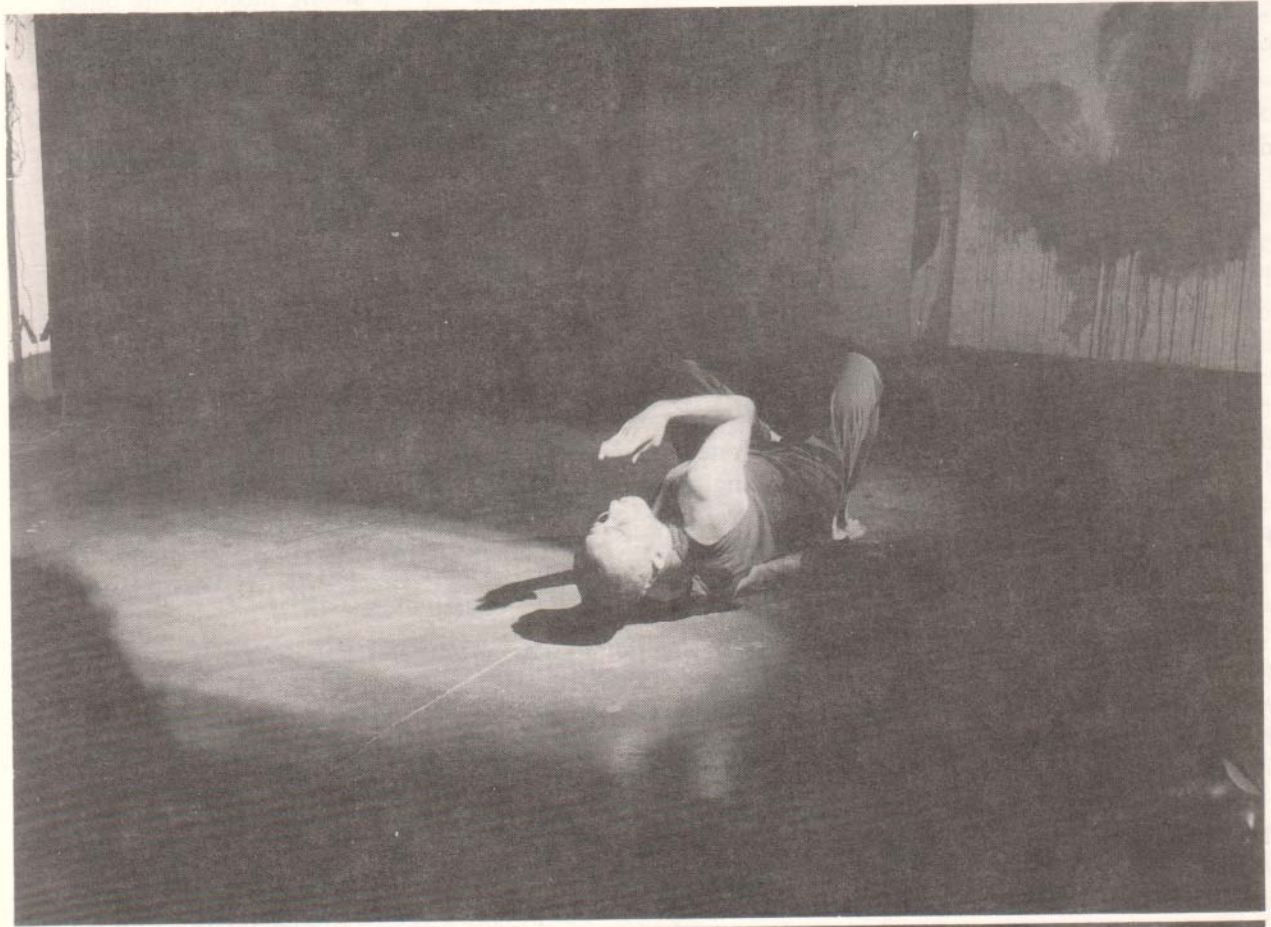
you want to learn an instrument then it's better that you learn an Indian instrument, harmonium or..."As years went on, I was paying more and more attention to my dance and less to my studies. Then my parents felt it was time to get serious.

When I finished school I really wanted to go to the film institute at Pune to become an actor. But my parents said, 'No, you should have a proper, normal college life.' History was one of my favourite subjects in school-history and geography. But I thought, 'What am I going to do with history?' So I began to study commerce in Bombay at Podar College.

I was in college between 65 and 69, and the first two years were just full of going to movies, discos. Though I practiced whatever I learnt. It was in 1967 that Uttara Asha Coorlawala came down from New York (she was studying at the Martha Graham School) and the Murray Louis Dance Company, an American dance company, happened to be on tour IN India. Asha decided to do a dance workshop in which I was involved. But it was through Murray Louis that I saw an entire company perform. Through Asha I became aware, saw a new form ... I was involved in a dance which she choreographed for a women's organization. It was fun. But when I saw Murray Louis, saw the company perform, I saw other bodies, and I really became aware.

Then, after Asha left, I started slowly in my room, started trying to explore my body, trying to imitate to see if I could do what I had seen. Those were the early stages of my exploring, trying to be aware of my body, away from the Kathak technique. I was also going through my studies. I had to though there was really no interest. I often wished that I wouldn't get through, so I could try to convince my father to let me pursue dance. On the other hand, I didn't want to be a failure. So I extended myself to the extent that I could get through. But beyond that I really didn't push myself hard. And then dance again started prevailing. I remember distinctly that in the third year of the college, (which in those days was not a university exam. year and that's when I had more time), I started going through the USIS





Library and trying to see any books on dance, and see films. I also started seeing more of the other classical dance forms. I remember seeing Manipuri dance. Kathakali left a very strong impression on me-the whole richness of theatre in Kathakali which I didn't find in other dance forms. Also, probably I saw an ensemble work, in comparison to Bharatanatyam or Kathak as solo performance. It left a very strong impression. Again, not having any guidance was very strange. I was curious but not to the extent of making it a passion. I was, in a way, confused. Even in college I used to perform whatever I recalled of the Kathak style and I started adding a few things of my own. Also, seeing the Hindi films of that time was partly influential. I became very involved in dramatics in my college days; I participated in the intercollege competition and joined the dramatic society. Still today I feel at times that I like to act. But people feel that, no, I should dance. Though I have acted on the London stage ... I have done two productions. One was written by Farookh Dhondy, *Film Film Film*, which was based on King Lear but reset in the Indian film industry. There I not only choreographed certain dance segments but I played little cameo roles of a servant, beggar, hijra and the other work which I did was by Meera Sayal, a well-known Asian British actress, who was also a script writer. Her most recent film, which got a lot of attention, was *Bhaji on the Beach*. She has also been in India with her one woman show. In Bombay we did this play which she had written. It had two cousins-she living in England and I in India. She, though growing up in Britain, was conservative and my growing up in India was more modern. These are the two acting experiences I had. I also did *Panchatantra* with Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna [Pathak Shah] and a couple of others. We did that for a project for street children. But that was my little flirtation with acting with the Bombay crowd.

So coming back to my college days ... Yes, at that point I was curious and a bit restless. I wanted to go overseas. I was always in for doing something out of the ordinary. Not to be different, but just that the idea appealed to me. I had a school friend who was senior to me but we had struck up a rapport and a friendship. He had hitchhiked through Europe and that whole adventure fascinated, excited me, and I also decided that after I graduate from college I would hitchhike around Europe. I also asked Asha-we were in touch-if she could help me get admission to the Martha Graham School because she was studying there. She was kind enough to get me admission and I approached my parents and said that now that I was about to graduate I would like to hitchhike through Europe. I told them that I would like to go to USA

to study dance and I also mentioned that I would pursue a course in management. I must say that my parents were very supportive and at no point did they say no. But there was a lot of concern from the others: 'You are allowing your only son to go hitchhiking.' But my parents said, 'Okay, you have taken the initiative, go ahead.' Also I had finished my college. Not that I waited for my results to come out! There was this urgency to leave because I was going on a cargo ship and in those days when there was a lot of restriction on leaving the country there was always the loophole that if you left as a cargo deck-class passenger there was really no need to get permission. I still remember the three pounds that one got as foreign exchange!

In my backpack was my dance costume of a dhoti, a Kathak outfit, some recorded music, bits from Hindi films which had a classical flavour and some regular tabla music with bols which I recited. Looking forward to the entire adventure and excitement which lay ahead of me, I took off. I landed in the port of Khoromshair in Iran where I got off. My first destination was Teheran. There we had family friends from Jamshedpur. That's where I had my first television appearance. Again, through a crowd of people I befriended there, I came across a very famous Iranian singer, Meher Puiya. He had taught himself the sitar and in those days Indian culture was like ... you know... because of the Beatles and the Hollywood celebrities who came to the Maharishi, in those flower-power days Indian music and anything Indian was in-it was like peace and love, and I fit the bill. Meher Puiya had his own television show. This was 1969. He said, 'Why don't you come and we'll devote an entire half-hour show to you.' You can just imagine my excitement and to be paid! I remember I got the equivalent of fifty dollars!

There was an interview and there were reports in the press. That really got me very excited. I had taken off with a very meager sum of money and also I was trying to make it on my own-and I did make it, though initial help and backing came from my father and my father's younger brother. So I decided that in each port of call I would see if there was an opportunity to present my own little dance. I had a time limit. Within two and half months I had to get to the US. I left the ship at Iran and then it was the magic of the thumb which took me from Teheran to Turkey through Greece into Italy

I was trying to follow the travel plan which my friend Pratap Chirayath had given me. But I remember waiting at the Turkish-Greek border and this car pulled up and a black American from the army said, 'I am going to Athens.' 'Great.' It was a 5-600 mile straight ride

to Athens. So one was deviated. One was going to Yugoslavia. But the route changed. From Iran I went to Istanbul. Once again I appeared on the local television programme. What probably got me into the slot was the novelty of an Indian dancer hitchhiking. In Athens they said, 'We have no money.' I said, 'Okay, I will do it for the exposure.' I got a certificate. I started collecting certificates that said I had been on these television shows. This sort of pattern followed. In some countries it worked, and in some it didn't for the simple reason that I didn't have the time to stay on. So in that way, I performed on Austrian television. In Geneva I also featured in a programme, thanks to an Indian called Prabjot Singh who used to be in Air India. He was in those days very high profile because he got Salvador Dali to design ashtrays for Air India. He got me on a programme. I did a bit of pure Kathak and then whatever I improvised. But it was still very much Kathak based. Because at that time there was no real studying of any modern dance techniques. It was more like whatever I could catch. Again, money was really tight. One was just basically surviving. And at that point I was just fascinated by the country. I saw a little bit of dance but not really a lot. When I came to London I had to extend my stay because I had not taken my US visa in India. I was waiting for certain papers, not realizing how difficult it would be. I had to temporarily abandon the idea of going to the US and I was extremely disappointed and frustrated. But at the same time I said to myself, 'Well, let's make the best of it.' So I went to the London School of Contemporary Dance. I could not afford to take classes, to enter myself in a full course. So what I did was a barter, exchange. I would sort of teach my dance which was based on Kathak technique and I would take classes at the school. Then again I was just fascinated by the life and I wanted to be with the in-crowd, just hang out. That's what I did. That's when I started seeing the local dance companies perform. There I had my first taste of the modern dance technique of Martha Graham because the London School of Contemporary Dance used to teach it. I also took ballet classes because it was a very important foundation for a modern dancer. So I started exploring and the whole experience also brought me to the reality of realizing what my body could assimilate and what my body could do. Right from that point I decided that I was not going to copy, that I was not going to be a clone. I would take what my body could accept and try not to make a fool of myself. When I started really learning modern dance seriously I was twenty-two years old and by then the body had certain limitations because all these years one had been learning Kathak technique and then all of a

sudden to learn something completely new-which was also exciting and challenging-was not easy. There were certain movements which I had never thought my body was capable of doing, really extending or pushing my body, trying to achieve the level of technical proficiency being imparted. But at the same time I realized that there were going to be limitations.

(Your basic foundation was Kathak. When you started doing ballet what were the main problems that you felt in terms of the body?-AK. Was it difficult to unlearn Kathak?-BDS)

No, it was not difficult to unlearn Kathak for the simple reason that during the four years in college I didn't go to any school to continue with Kathak. Though it was there, because all the formative training years had been in Kathak. So the body automatically did the *chakkar* or whatever one had studied. In ballet one had to stand really straight, tall. The extension or lifting of your leg is not there in Kathak or any other Indian dance. Our Indian dances are all earth connected whereas ballet is sort of 'above'. Also I found that there are lots of things which the body was being made to do which were not natural. For us, for me, dance has always been a flow, even when there are emotions it comes as a flow. I found that in the ballet and in modern dance emotions are not there. There was a certain amount of emotion, but not the sort of *bhakti* or spirituality which are still very much embedded in our dance till today. One has innovated, but the *rasas* are very much present in my work. It is not necessary that one portrays this through facial expressions but through the body one can express and emote. Just the reverence, touching the guru's feet at the beginning of the class and then doing a prayer to lord Ganesha or lord Shiva, which was part of the dance. So it was there ... subconsciously it was there.

(What you started saying about the unnatural element ... that's very interesting-AK)

As I said, with Indian dance, even when we are learning, the movements flow. Whereas in ballet even when I was doing the Martha Graham technique-it was painful. A lot of that was contraction, and physical pain which I never endured while studying Kathak. Okay, one felt tired it was difficult to control the feet and just let one *ghungru* ring and then take it to a crescendo or try to come back to the *sama* Those were the technical problems one had which

one overcame by practising. But while learning [ballet] I found the body being tortured. It came naturally for the others who had studied it. But for me it was like really uprooting myself from one culture.

Again, when I was studying, the whole question of survival was also there. I was not at ease. I didn't know where I was staying-with friends, or, you know, friends of friends. Studying dance, but still excited with the adventure of just growing up. Dance was there. But at that time I just wanted to live life. Just sort of experience what was happening at that time. I also remember, I was reading articles on actors and they all said that they washed dishes. So I also said, 'Okay, I have to go and wash dishes.' So I went to a Bangladeshi restaurant and became a dishwasher for a week. I said, 'Okay, that's it.' It was like when one gave interviews I remember, one said, 'I wash dishes.' I worked in a restaurant serving food over the counter. That was another job I did for a while to keep myself going.

What was very interesting in London was I did a show with Pink Floyd, the rock group. There again it came about because... when I was hitchhiking I befriended two Australian girls and we met up in London. One of these girls was working in an organization in which Arabella Churchill-Winston Churchill's granddaughter-was working . . . it was involved in raising money for the lepers in India and Africa. It was called LEPR. They were doing a fund-raiser. My friend knew that I was dancing and felt that it would be nice to give an exotic Indian touch to the show. Pink Floyd had come out with their album *Medal*. There was a fashion show ... it was a sort of masala evening which was -being held at the Chelsea Town Hall. It generated a lot of excitement for me because doing a show with a band ... In those days they were not really big, or mega, but the whole idea of having live music and then participating in a fashion show also-I had to model one or two outfits. Pink Floyd's earlier work *Medal* still rings in my mind. I used it later when I came to India. I did a play in Bombay, *Che Guevera*, with a group of Xavier's college boys. Anyway, we had one rehearsal session and the whole thing was improvised. 'Okay, this will be our music.' I responded to the music with my little knowledge of innovative dance and my Kathak. So we did a little fusion, mix and match. In London one lived life on a day-to-day basis.

I went to Canada [when my UK visa expired]. Again it was the same pattern. Took a few classes ... Learning. Then I had a brief flirtation with jazz. There again I just took classes as

and when I could. Because the problem of money was always there. I spent two and a half months in Vancouver. That's where I became involved in a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts, working along with doctors and psychiatrists. They said, 'Would you like to come and do some dance workshops?'. . . By then I had been studying various forms of modern dance for a year, and still continuing Kathak. So I said I would do a sort of workshop for the people who had come to the centre for de-toxication. It was a rehabilitation programme which offered music, painting, dance. I made them participate and try to emote. It was one of the focal points in the programme I was trying to evolve for them. Because a lot of these people had really closed up, were not able to express their emotions. It was a very interesting experience for me to get them to participate or create situations to relax them, make them feel comfortable. I was given a case history and told to act it out. I knew whose history I had, so that- I could also observe and try indirectly to see whether they could handle whatever situation had led them to take drugs. It was exhausting for me because I had to emote. I was always emoting and every day, or alternate day, there was a different kind of emotion one had to deal with, act out. That was a different experience of using my dance.

The visa was running out. There was an opportunity of settling down. Friends said that they could help me get immigration ... but I was not interested. Japan looked very promising. So, off one went.

I went to Japan in July 1970. and left in April of 1971. I landed in Tokyo with limited funds. Youth hostels were always the cheapest-from there one could explore. One started learning the language. I really was very fascinated with the Japanese way of life. At that time the Expo was being held in Osaka and the Indian 'youth' delegation came but it was hardly youth! One smart woman who was also connected with the Youth Hostel Association in India got hold of housewives and business people and formed a contingent to come and visit Japan under the umbrella of Indian Youth. An international two week youth festival was being held. So the group leader-we befriended each other-came to know that I was a dancer. They had no cultural component in the group, so she said, 'Would you like to join?' 'Sure.' I spent two glorious weeks experiencing and seeing parts of Japan and coming to know the Japanese delegation and all the international youth. All the countries had to present their dance in front of Crown Prince Michiko. So, one performed there. We were introduced to the royal family. It was all very exciting. That's where I made Japanese friends. I started learning a few words of

Japanese. I came to realize that one should always learn the slang. It was probably a survival instinct, it put the people at ease. I learned street lingo. The Japanese friends asked if I wanted to come and visit them-they came from different parts of Japan. So I visited them. I lived in their homes and they really took me in. Now they have become part of my extended global family.

In those two weeks, one of the visits I made was to the Kabuki theatre. That really left a very strong impression on my mind. When I came back to Tokyo I went to the Kabuki school, the Kabukiza.

(What was it about the Kabuki that struck you?-AK)

The theatrics. Just the opulence. But at the same time one was so taken with their precision, their meticulousness. Even there I felt that total devotion. When I was studying modern dance I took class, but once class was over there was no relationship with the teacher. The guru-shishya relationship was not there. The whole reverence, the respect, which I saw in the Kabuki, the strict discipline ... Also the fact that for me, a foreigner, to be allowed ... because there the teachers are extremely strict. It was not like in India, where if a foreigner wants to come and study our culture, we allow them, knowing fully that it is just a little flirtation. There the Japanese teacher knew that I wanted to study. But he said, 'No.' I befriended a student who was at the Kabukiza and through his good offices I was allowed to just come and sit. I had a language problem. My Japanese was not all that great. The actor who I befriended had a certain knowledge of English. He knew that I was very interested and that there was a certain amount of seriousness.

I was teaching English and I also got a job for a while as a host at a bar meant only for women (like the counterpart of women hostesses for a male club). We were there to sit with them, dance with them. By then I had a certain amount of proficiency in Japanese. I even did fashion modelling for a Japanese designer, Kansai Yamamoto: Everything fascinated me about Japan. So I took every opportunity to explore, hitchhiked through all the islands. I took classes in Japanese Obong Odori, the folk dance called Obong. There I could study. In Kabuki whatever little I could study was what my friend would teach me. But nothing from my teacher.

Japan was like love at first sight. I was very much taken by their reverence, their discipline. Whatever they did, even an alien art form, they were really into it 150 per cent,

really wanted to perfect it and try to be better than the original doers/users. That was something which really struck me. I absorbed everything like a little greedy child, right from their food to ... everything. I remember that I met one Japanese who thought he was French. I don't recall how we met. But his business was supplying food to the nightclubs. I used to hook up with him two to three times a week and that way I got into the night life of Tokyo, going to all these bars and clubs which one would never have access to. When I had an accommodation problem I stayed with this Kabuki actor. But we both kept such different hours, because I was the night bird and he had to go to study.

I appeared on Seekainge Ongaku, a television show, where I danced, was interviewed. There I met an American painter and we decided on body-painting and dance. It was her show for television and I was sort of the medium. It was like a painter and a dancer working together. There was this huge acrylic canister of paints and this white canvas on the floor. I had a belt with a hook and I was lifted up and she put me into one huge canister of paint and brought me out. So the body came out in different colours and as I was brought down there was music to which I danced. It became a sort of work in progress. It was televised. Eventually a hose was brought in and I was hosed down completely then and there. It was like the end of the show. I still remember that very fondly and distinctly.

In between I went to Korea because my visa expired. That was very brief. I just went, got my visa to come back to Japan, saw a bit of Korean dance, appeared on Korean television. Through the World Expo I had acquaintanceships which really helped me in Asia. I remember Cambodia was very interesting because the entire youth group had come from the dance school. That got me into the royal palace in Phnom Penh. I'll come to that later.

I went on to Taiwan. I became restless after I found I knew my way around. Then I decided to uproot myself and throw myself into a new country and start the whole exercise again of looking at the place, learning, performing. So this process went on from Taiwan to Hong Kong to Manila-I was on my way to New Guinea, to Sing Sing, the festival where every year in Papua New Guinea tribal peoples gather and participate. But I got robbed. So Australia had to be abandoned. Came back to Hong Kong, spent a couple months there teaching dance and came to Vietnam. There I really experienced the war. I had befriended the journalist from AP who was based there and through him I went to the war-torn areas.

And there again, I performed my work. From Vietnam I came to Thailand. From there I went to Cambodia, saw my friends who were dancers, came back, went to Laos. So this went on for three and a half years.

(During all that time, from the dance and theatre end, what stayed in your mind?-AK)

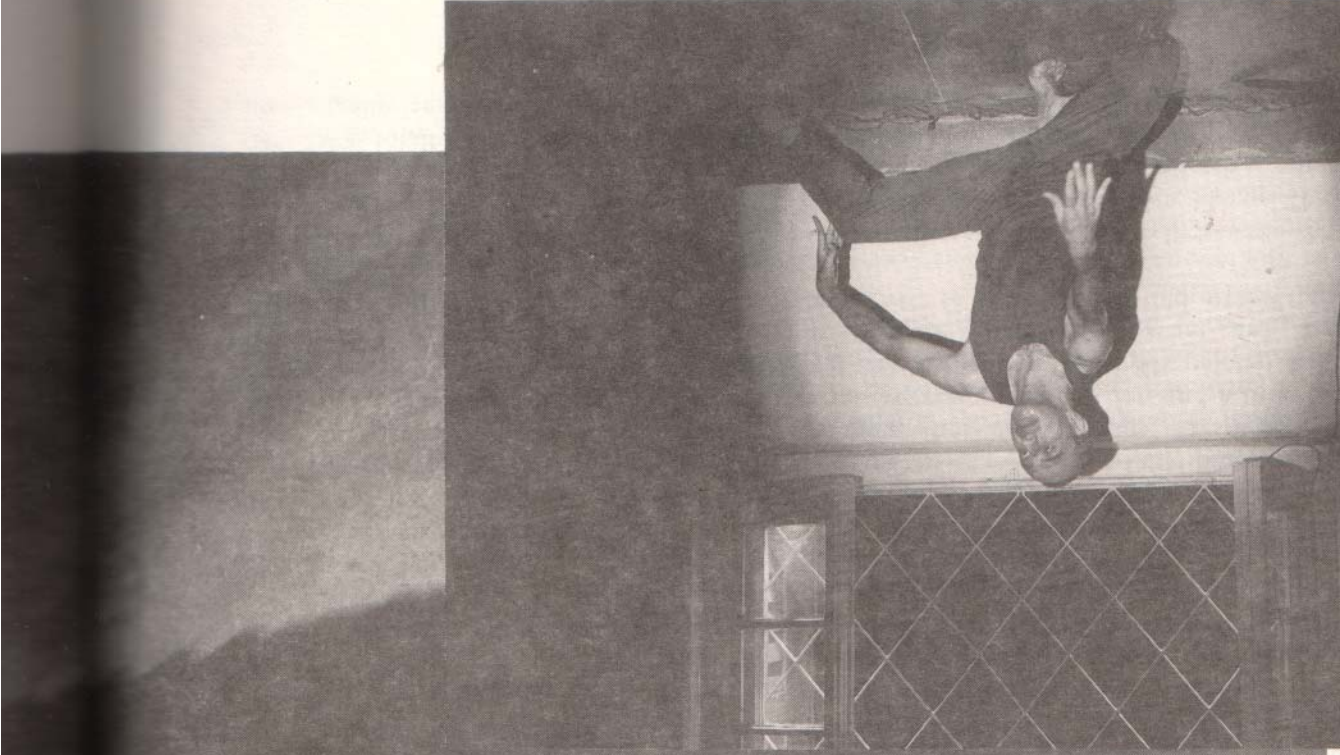
In Taiwan I saw the Peking Opera which was very fascinating and very different from the Kabuki. In the Peking Opera the actors themselves would be singing. In Kabuki there was an ensemble who would sing. Different costuming, different technique, the monkey which is so prevalent in the Peking Opera, in comparison to the lion in Kabuki. In Cambodia there was an entire dance ensemble ... they danced just for me, I found it very touching, that I was the only one. And I in turn performed for the entire school. Dance was there in front of me. That was my big motivation. You have to move on, you have to learn, experience. My focus was- I'm just going to travel and experience.

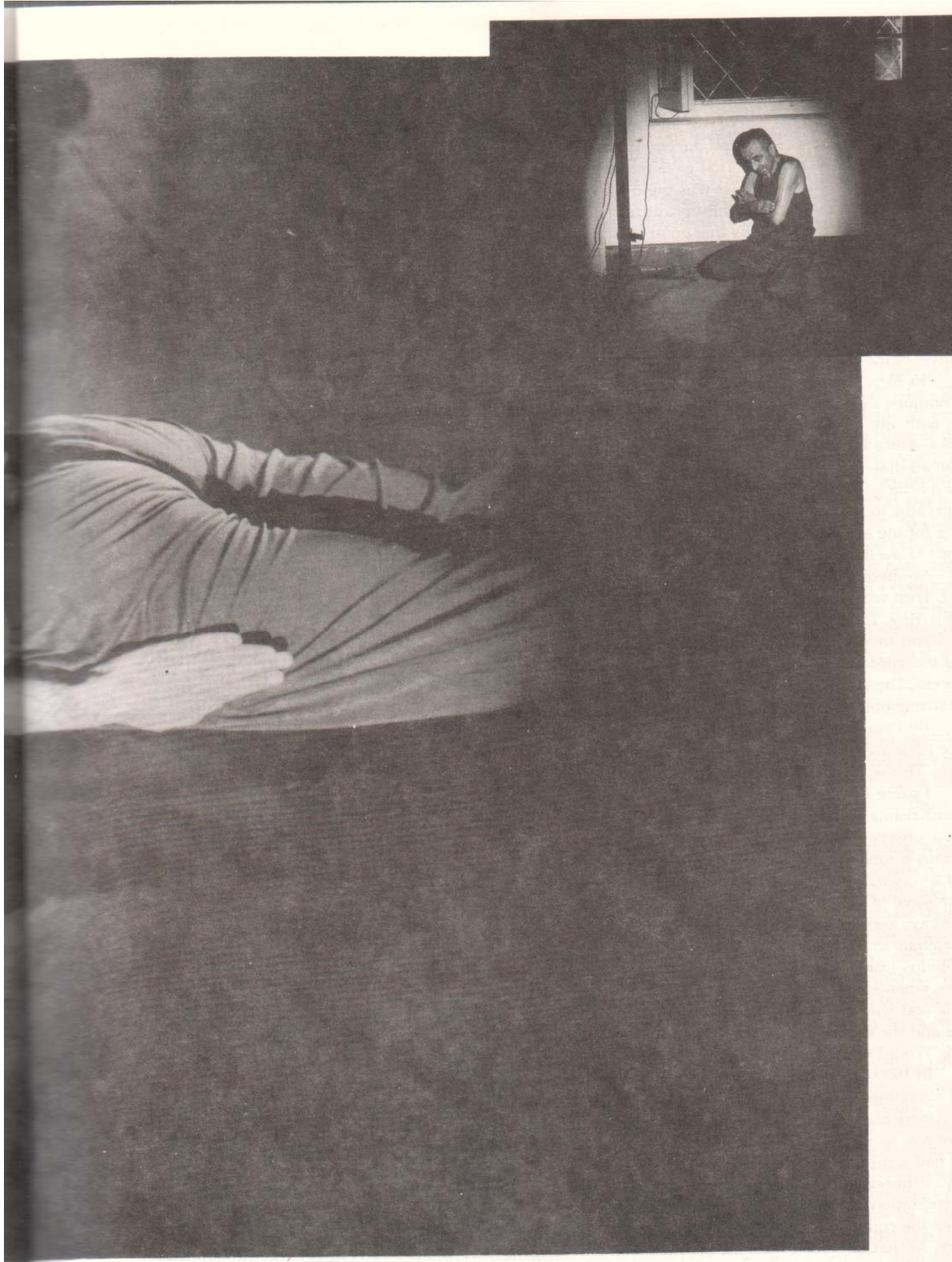
After three and half years I came home beaming with all my adventures and experiences. My sister was getting married. I met Sunil Kothari in Bombay. He was the one who had introduced me to Kathakali. He saw me dance and said, 'Why don't you go to guru Krishna Pannicker and start studying Kathakali?' So I started studying seriously, going to him every day for four months ... With Kathakali the whole thing being on the edge of the feet ... which has become a signature of my work. I evolved a dance called *Asylum* in which I make the toe my child, my lover, my tormentor. The stance of Kathakali really became a focal point. In 1972 I started slowly thinking and developing and moving in a direction. And in that period I did my first dance performance with the college students of Xavier's College. I choreographed a work, a very crazy theme called the 'manne-kings and manne-queens' with lifeless models coming to life. I got my body painted and as a part of the ritual they gave me a bath on stage and I remember that the stage manager was so mad because of all the water-I told him that it would be just two mugs of water. But I told the students 'Give me a whole bath on stage.' This was organized by the Time and Talents club, a Parsi organization. It was very amusing and fun and a little bit shocking in those days. I was not trying to be revolutionary, it was just getting your body painted, loving your own kind, your own gender, not the opposite sex. In general it was just being avant-garde. I did that show and I said,

'Well, I'm still not ready.' Then I got my visa to America, so I told myself that I have to go where dance is. ,

So I went back to Thailand and spent a little time there and then on to Indonesia- basically it was Java and Bali where I spent time. I saw a lot of their dance. They are very open, like us. They allowed me to try what I could. I was fascinated with the shadow puppets in Java. The leather puppets. Javanese dance was totally different from Cambodian or Thai or Manipuri ... they sort of pick up their bodies and break it, similar to our Indian ways ... the

hands. Javanese Topeng ... though it was using traditional





technique it was talking about political problems. It's a traditional form, but at the same time they bring in present day political or social problems.

From Indonesia I hitchhiked all the way down to Sydney. There I auditioned for the Sydney Opera House's opening in 1973. There was an audition for an opera called *The Rose Garden* where they required dancers. I got the role of the lead dancer. It was very exciting to be part of this huge global event as well as dance with other dancers. That gave me confidence. I got a chance to see aboriginal work-managed to go to Papua New Guinea. It was mind blowing. Coming from different villages-you see the mud people; you see them with really beautiful feathers, covering themselves with loincloths. The whole atmosphere was so electric. By that point I just had started my own body of work.

Then one came to America. I went to study Afro-jazz at the San Francisco State College. I was there for three months and spent about six weeks at the course. I had to leave periodically because of my visa , expiring. I made a quick trip to Mexico to meet my Mexican friends from the Youth Congress. The history, the ruins, fascinated me. I got very good response in Mexico right from my very first performance. Since 1974 I have been there ten times to perform. And the last visit was to perform at the festival of the City of Mexico.

In New York I studied the Jose Limon technique for a while. By now I knew that the American techniques were not really for me-Kathakali, I was getting more into that. So I was just taking class but not with any great seriousness. Then one summer I decided to go to Kenya and Tanzania, to look at the Masai dance forms. And one whole year in South America. Brazil is a very fascinating country. Copoeira is an all-male performance form. In way it is like Kalari-the footwork and the way of using the body. I did a little work with Brazilian singers-I met Milton Nascimento, one of the leading Brazilian singers, who came to see me perform. I did a show with Luis Gonzaginya Jr who died a couple of years ago. He sang for me and I performed. I am very fascinated with Brazilian music and I use Brazilian music from time to time in my work. Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia-performing everywhere, seeing their work.

So there were certain elements which I felt went into my body language ... one felt comfortable, first. Then when one performed one saw the reaction, so one knew that okay, I was projecting and it was not jarring, looking unnatural. That was the process of learning. Certain things I eliminated because I tried and they did not really work. Like jazz. I realized that it is not me. I discarded it. So these things you incorporated first and then you saw that it

was not looking perfect. So I dropped it. So that's the process. Then, as years have gone by, the wear and tear in the body has taken place. The awareness and the strong points I have concentrated on and developed.

By then it was close to four years that I had not returned home and my parents started putting a little pressure on me. But I was having such a good time. Finally I did come home, after four and half years. This was the end of 1977.

I came back and got into Kathakali seriously and started doing a yearly pilgrimage to Kerala to guru Krishna Pannickerji for six weeks. After that I went on to Kalamandalam myself, spent some time there, observing class and just getting into the whole ... living in the Kathakali environment with various actors and musicians, travelling to different villages, seeing the all-night dance performances. I had a very nice guru-shishya relationship with guruji and he also took a great interest in me. He was not dismissive of my creativity, because even when I was studying with him I did have my own shows in Bombay, and I was keeping up with my work and trying to take it to other parts. Then I had my *arangetram* in Kathakali. During that period of time, two companies featured in my career. One was the Pilobolus Dance Company, which was American, and the other Pina Bausch. Pina saw my Kathakali work when she came to perform in 1978-79. During that time Asha [Coorlawalla] also came down to India and was studying Bharatanatyam. We did a show together where I did a choreographed work of hers and she did a choreographed work of mine and we did our individual work. Pina saw my work and said, 'Would you like to be with the Company?' I said, 'Yes, certainly.'

In 1980 October I left. Just before leaving, I had my *arangetram*. I took my entire Kathakali costume and everything along. But I was in for a shock. There everybody fended for themselves. I was a little lost. An American dancer, Arthur Rosenfeld, took me under his wing and helped me. Though I was invited there was no stipend or anything. Probably Pina wanted to see how our relationship was going to work. She had a different concept in mind for me-I should do only traditional interpretations in the Indian way. Whereas I didn't want to be typecast-Here is an Indian so let's have a Kathakali-based interpretation all the time. She allowed me to come in and be with the company for a good eight months. When the company was touring I went off and performed wherever I had been able to set up my own work. At that time I was performing Kathakali in full costume. Whenever the company performed

close by I went along and saw them work. I saw how she choreographed. That was a learning process for me.

Also, being with other dancers, experiencing the whole company. They were all professionals, they came and worked, then went their own way. Because I had just come out of the guru-shishya relationship, which was emotionally very stable, it was difficult for me. But it was interesting to see Pina's thought processes, how she linked, up choreography. She would throw out ideas, whatever she had in mind, trying to get them to express various emotions, like, say, what was your first experience of sexual harassment? Each one would recall, if they had had such an experience, and they would make notes and she would make notes. Or, like, if you saw a beach after many days, give me three kinds of different interpretations -excitement, disappointment, or no emotions. Then when she was clear about what she wanted for that particular segment she would say, 'I want you to recall' . . . whatever had impressed her. And she would say, 'Stick to that interpretation.' This is one of her processes. Sometimes she would give situations where you had no clue and sometimes there were things she never used. She wanted people to speak in their own languages, in their mother tongues, there were Polish people, French-- she wanted them to speak in their own languages if they had a spoken text to express. Also, what was very enviable ... there was no cost criteria. You want this and it's there, made available.

From time to time one did see a warmth to her. I recall when she came back last year, I met her a couple of times. After I left the company I did meet up with her a couple of times in New York when the company was performing. We didn't have much to say to each other. At that time she had her own pressures and I also just kept my distance. I just got to see the performance, connected with some of the dancers I knew who were still with the company. But in Bombay we had a couple of private moments. We had dinner together, she enquired very fondly about my work, what I was doing. I took her around, she wanted to see the streets of Bombay. There was a formal reception but she just wanted to get away as quickly as possible. So we took off. We parked and we walked-at that time Muharram was on. So I took her to that whole area. She was always fascinated by the bazaars, the people. She loved the food stalls.

Her earlier work, *The Rites of Spring*, was really dance oriented. After that her pieces have been more theatre than dance. I haven't really been able to work on those lines. I would

like to, if I ever have an opportunity of working with actors and dancers. Surely Piria's influence would be there in getting them to express whatever script I have to do. When I did work with a group of actors from the Arpana Theatre in Bombay I had a script chalked out, though I got them to express what I wanted to. But it was very little in actual theatre, it was more in movement that I got them involved.

(What was so exciting about Pina Bausch's work?-AK)

The entire production. You marvel at the way she weaves the entire production, punctuated throughout with movements which she choreographs ... it keeps you on the edge of your seat. Also, I find that each of the performers, even the actors and the acrobats involved, fit into that puzzle and eventually a total picture is formed. I find her work always exciting to look at. I have been fortunate enough to see most of her works and I look forward to a production of hers.

In the 80s I was doing my own thing and looking for a platform, an alternative platform, which brought in people who were interested in dance and who were open. Ensemble work really struck me, but I continue being more a solo performer, largely because I never had the opportunity here in India to do ensemble work. I have done group work in Brazil. In 1991 I choreographed an all-male dance company. But the problem at home is not having the infrastructure. Today dancers say, 'We want to work with you.' But funding is a problem. In the ensemble work I have done sometimes, with Dadi Padumjee or Arpana Theatre, there has already been an existing group which I have gone in and worked with. How many people really know my work? Very few people in India have really seen a -body of my work. Only in Bombay, which is home, there are people who have seen the innovation in my work from 1978, when I came back to India, till today.

I stayed in India for three years. But after 1980 I took off again and till today I really haven't spent a full year in India. I spend six or seven months depending on how my work schedule has been overseas. My work has never been, even till today, for the Indian expert. The first generation doesn't really come. The second and the third generation show an interest because they also have a cross-cultural upbringing. Slowly I find that there are young Indians coming. Also,, there is a change in the atmosphere, even in the modern dance from a country other than America or Europe. They are looking at how dancers have taken their tradition and gone on to developing a body or a language, making it contemporary. But I still find a lot of

resentment because I am contemporary, because I do not use heavy vocabulary of Indian classical work, or mystique, which Europe is really fascinated with. One is happy that Chandralekha has made an impact-what has been in her favour is that her vocabulary is still very much Bharatanatyam based. Her themes are abstract, but at the same time related to astronomy or...

(Tantra-BDS)

Yes. Compared to my work which may deal with a drug problem or with a social problem, or say insomnia, or even an abstract body of work. Indian dancers today have started innovating with dance forms, whether Kathak or Chhau. They turn around and tell me, 'What you are doing is not innovative Indian, what we are doing is innovative Indian. What you are doing is western.' Which I am not. My work-now it is with *dhrupad* music, which is quite prevalent in my works, or I have a work called *Mangalore Street* which is very much part of everyday Indian life. Or political satires, which I have in my work. That is so Indian. And as I said, right from the word go, when I was innovating or trying to form ... it was an individualistic style, Indian in foundation ... just expressing myself as an individual creative person, taking from different elements and forming a body of work. So you can't say because I don't use a very heavy Kathakali-based technique that my work is western. It's not.

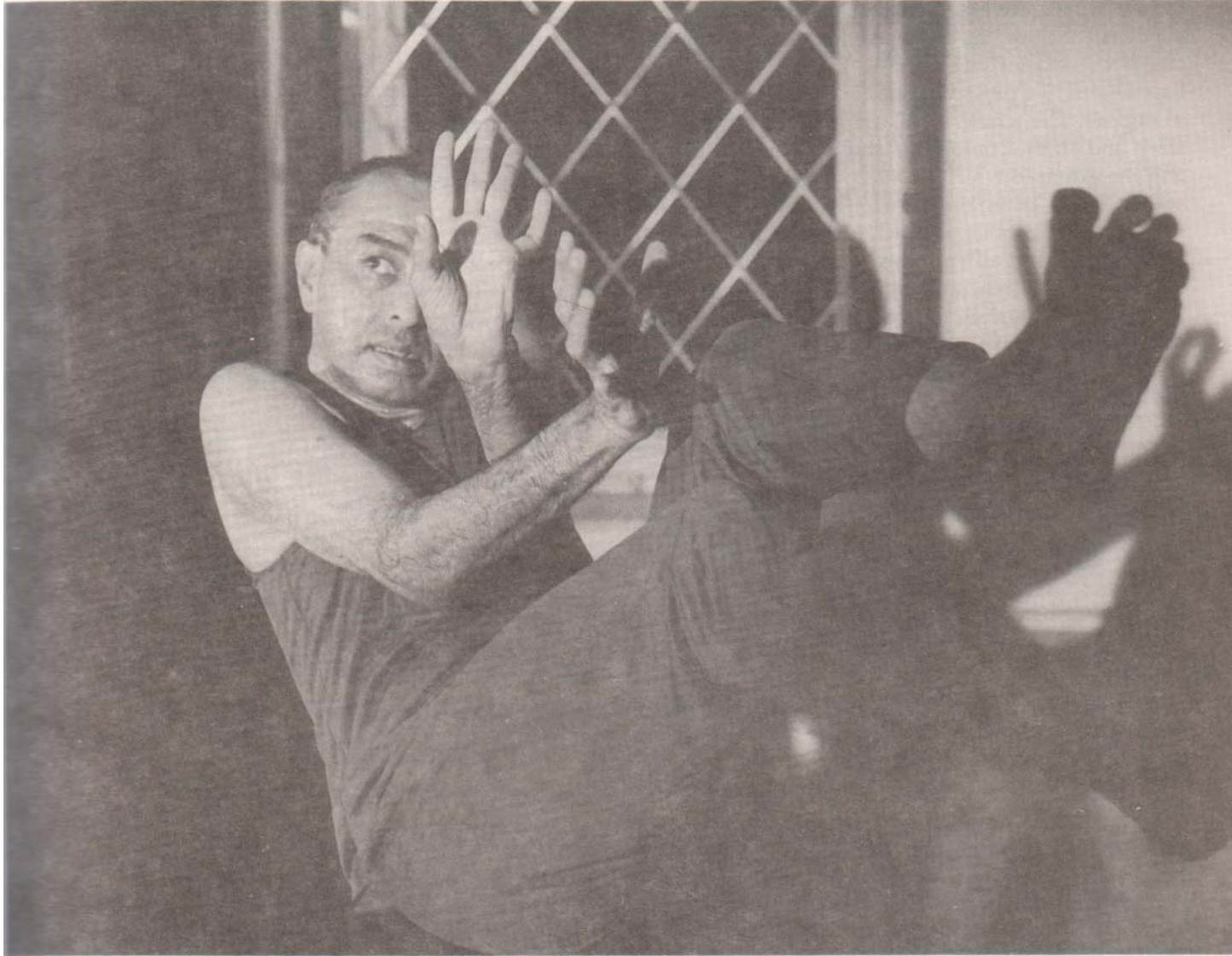
When I came back in 1978 I was doing a lot of narrative work because I was trying to get a platform, an audience. My very first work after coming back was a piece called *Space Odyssey*, which I based on the soundtrack of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a sort of science fiction fantasy. Then I encountered some young students of architecture, Suresh Bhavnani, Ratan and Banoo Batliboi and Fali Unwalla and they said, 'Why don't you work with objects?' So they would come up with ideas, whether it was tension cords which I used in my work called *Confluence* or a work called *Basics* which uses three rectangles and a cube. They gave me these inputs for abstract works. So then gradually I started to express and choreograph things where I didn't have a storyline, where I just wanted to extend my movements with those objects. When one was choreographing and trying to build an audience I did a mixed bag of abstract and narrative pieces. Sometimes

I had ideas from a particular piece of music ... I told Ratan, 'I want something like a little embryo moving, like a foetus.' They said, 'Okay. Why don't we make you a huge plastic balloon and let's see how that works.' So this big balloon was



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made and we had an acrylic platform. They lit it up from below. With the smoky texture of the balloon, the light coming through and by just pressing my fingers on the wall of the balloon ... you see the body moving. That's how we collaborated. Ratan Batliboi became my support and guiding force. For every production he is there as my technical director and he is full of ideas with regard to lights. I must mention Sam Kerawalla who in the earlier days was also very instrumental in designing my lights. There was this piece called *Chrysalis* which was done for the Bach centenary for which I had taken Pablo Casal's Concerto Number One on the cello. This was an abstract work and here I wanted to show each part of the body moving individually. To make it really effective Ratan constructed a huge box which was 12'x10'x3'. In the box there were various windows of different sizes. As we started off, all you saw was the fist. The movement of the fist. Then came ... just the toes, the ankles. It was very surrealistic for the viewers and eventually different parts of the body got exposed-just the waist to the knees, just the two arms, just the eyebrows, just the neck, part of the upper torso and eventually the entire torso but no



neck. Then eventually, the entire body coming out. Had it not been for that effective set which really conveyed the work, I wouldn't have been able to do that. When I came back in 1984 Max Mueller Bhavan held the first East-West Dance Encounter and that's when I really used dance and theatre, with spoken words. I had just been with the Wuppertal Dance Company-so I did that piece called *Mangalore Street*. Here I collaborated with a friend who is really my think tank-Sunil Shaubag. I mentioned to him that I was taking a day in the life of a clerk. I really wanted to take a scooter on stage, but we have all these limitations on our Indian stages, so I made it into a cycle. There is a street in Bombay called Mangalore Street and you find mechanics and there is this udipi restaurant and offices and down the lane there is a warehouse. I play this character Joglekar and come in cycling ... I had these masks designed

for each character. I go to the cycle-wala and say, 'Cycle-wala sahab, aap ke cycle wapas laye hain.' Then I become the cycle-wala-I had a half-cap with a spanner with springs on it-and I go. . . 'What men sir? Turn aisa kaiko bolta hain?' The Goans speak Hindi like that. 'Aap ka cycle hamara cycle kaiko bolta hain? E sala Indian maal achcha nain hain.' 'Tum kaam thik se nahi karte ho. Muje saam ko cycle chahiye.' 'Agar line me kuch banna ho to film star banno.' I have done it many times. Every time the film star changed-I did an Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, Naseer. Then I transform into this fantasy of being a filmstar and the film music comes on and then the music breaks and Joglekar is back at work. He sits down and he wants his chai. So he calls for Raju the chai-wala. The chai-wala comes in. Then the boss. Here I used spoken words and dance and it is all done by me.

Most of my works are one-liners and quite self-explanatory, they give you an outline and I want the audience to make their own interpretations . . . I don't go in for too many explanations. I also did an earlier work on the atomic bomb. This was during my 1978-80 period. I called it *The Botrtb and After*. There I used the Prithvi ceiling and played the mad scientist getting upon the grid and coming down a ladder. Space always inspires me. Often a work, though choreographed, changes because I find a particular theatre has an interesting entry point. So there is always that room for improvisation. Other abstract works include *Insomnia* in which I told Ratan that I needed a bed. All he did was, on a sort of base he put two pipes where I could just rest my neck and my ankles and the remainder of the body was in mid-air. The whole work, the first five minutes of the dance where I am sleeping and I am unable to sleep and all the contortions and my being restless-it was really fascinating. I came to know my body and the extent to which I could push myself in just being absolutely straight like a plank, or contort but still hold and maintain that straight position and not sink into that mid-space below. Then there were always social problems which bothered me, like drugs. I did a work called *Broken Pane* about a drug addict. These are all very theatrical. The curtain opens and you see a corpse. Then there is a flashback and I begin as a jolly student, then take to smoking marijuana, go on to sniffing cocaine, then mainlining ... it is very physical, where I'm having these contractions, I really bang my head on the floor. I am so involved in it that I really don't feel physical pain, though I do at times get bruised. I even break the window. Recently in Ahmedabad when I was doing *Broken Pane* I smashed my fist and cut myself. But the show went on.

I did a large collaborative work with Dadi Padumjee called *ThanatomorpJzia*, the many faces of death, where I show death as a dancer, death as a lover, death as a liberator and death as a celebration. Though we called it *Thanatomorphia* we should call it something with Yama because most of the vignettes have been based on Yama. The various characters are all puppets and we utilized two dancers. In death as a dancer there is a huge puppet on the stage and through its stomach the spirit of death comes out and charms these women who are all puppets. Death as a lover is myself and a puppet as my lover. It's based on Dhrupad music. It's recorded by the Gundecha brothers but this time I have taken various ragas and again it's an abstract work where I am just saying that my work and Dhrupad singing is not really at cross purposes, but eventually blends and hopefully I do plan to use more Dhrupad singing in my work.

Then I have done three works on Tagore's Rabindra sangeet which again I have adapted. The songs have been translated and I have read the text in English and have my own interpretations. These are my most recent works.

In 1985 I was in Paris and I was very keen on performing at the performing theatre of Pierre Cardin. I did an audition for him, organized through Anjali Mendes who works for him. I went off to London and got a phone call saying that Mr. Cardin would like me to go to Rome to meet Maya Plisetskaia, the prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet; and he was keen that we meet and decide to choreograph a dance on her. Also it was arranged that when he presented my choreography I would share the evening with Maya. I was surprised, nervous. I did go to Rome, met Maya, spoke a bit and returned. We did not really discuss the content. It was given to understand that I would have a free hand. So I decided to do a contemporary work, my own interpretation. But when I landed up in Moscow to start work at the Bolshoi with Maya she had her own views of what the choreography from an Indian choreographer should be about. First of all she did not like the music at all. I selected Philip Glass' music and even the movements which I had conceived ... she just said, 'No, no.' She wanted all those neck movements and eye movements-she really wanted to do an Indian dance for me to adapt and choreograph. There were certain Indian motifs I had used to punctuate it with, but I didn't have in mind a dance totally adapted on an Indian myth. I had called it *Queen of the Underworld* and the Philip Glass music I had used was from his album *Konanasistkaska*. There were a lot of artistic differences between

Maya and me. I had a soundtrack of Louis Bank's with me which was a fusion of jazz and Karnatic music. I played it for her. Now I had already done my homework and there were just two weeks in which I had to choreograph the work for her. I had to redo the sound and make the changes in the choreography. When I was choreographing her I was utilizing her bare arms which is the most beautiful part of her. Also I was trying to get her to perform barefoot but she didn't want to. She danced on points. Even her whole concept of having an Arabian Nights costume- Mr. Cardin helped me to change her mind ... So we worked. When I came to Paris she really behaved like a diva-fair enough, she is very respected and a great ballerina-but she started all these tantrums which we did not have to deal with in Moscow. To cut a long story short, eventually the piece worked, and the work was accepted. She did a solo piece for 15 minutes. Generally when she is dancing she has a corps de ballet to back her up, or she has a male partner. But here there were some movements-as the queen of the underworld she rises up, comes up from the earth. A lot of work was on the floor, while in ballet she is either lifted up or leaps. As the choreography moved, emotions came in. Like when the queen was getting very frustrated or when she is put into a corner and explodes ... the whole theatrics. She is a very theatrical performer in any case. So, using all these points (I had seen her works in the past), I wove the piece. Just the fact that she performed for 15 minutes at her age-when she performed she was 60 plus-was a great feat for her.

After the first night the acceptance by the audience and the critics caused a total transformation. Walking into the theatre on day two was another experience. But in a way it left me a little sad ... because I noticed that even in her interviews she did not mention my work at all. But for me it was great. Maurice Bejart, Patrick Dupont, Zizi Jean Maire-lots of big names in the dance world came and saw the choreography.

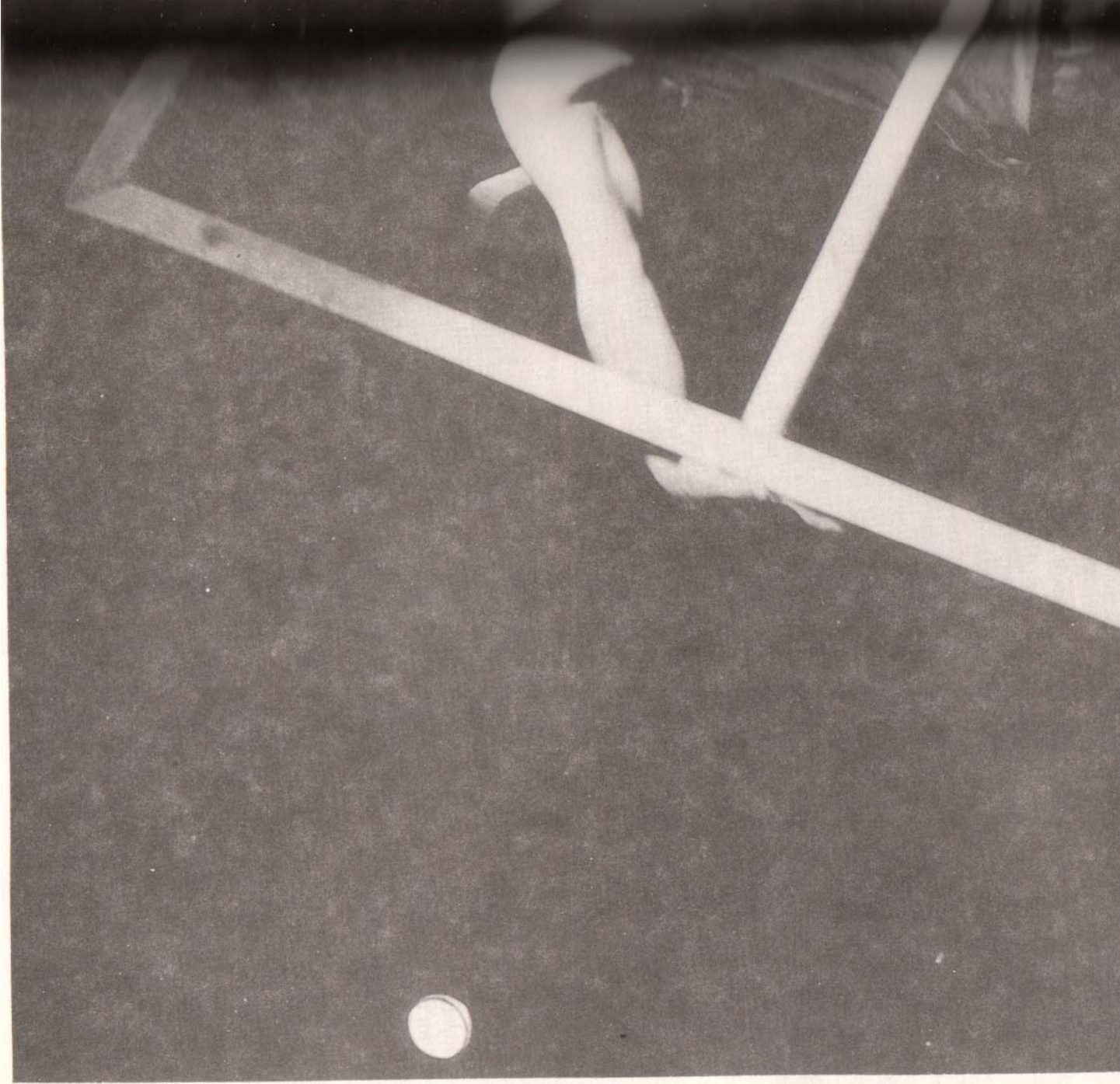
(How did her own work contrast with yours?-AK)

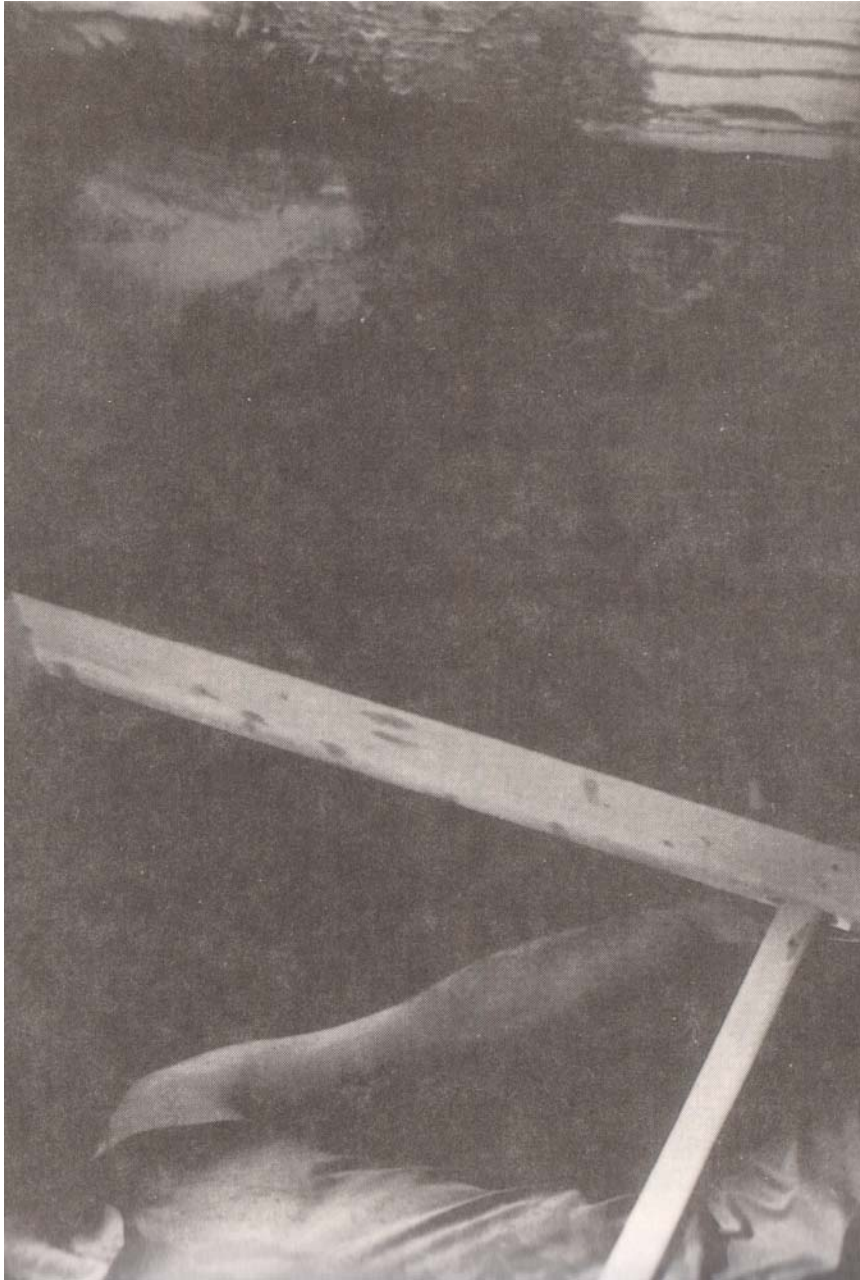
She had 15-20 dancers behind her. Her sets and costumes were very elaborate. Mr. Cardin had designed her costume; the set was also specially designed. It was her choreography-Chekov's *Lady and Her Dog*. It was all very ornamental and pretty. She came on stage with a parasol, or she came out with dogs and her consort was there, who picked her up and put her down, other dancers came along. Whereas in my piece there was just one wall and

she was in a smoky, earth-brown chiffon one-piece suit which Mr. Cardin had designed. She was from the underworld and her costume was also earthy and dark. It was performed in Paris at the Espace Cardin. It was good that I was able to be at the Bolshoi theatre and see the Company rehearse and perform. So it was an interesting experience.

What was also very interesting was my China tour in 1988. It was a private tour which I was able to arrange through a dance critic in China. I performed there for the Chinese artists-in Beijing, Shanghai, Xian, Canton-for the dancers, the musicians, the actors and a few other people invited by various organizers. I always had a Chinese musician performing with me and it was totally improvised. I never knew what instrument the performer was going to play. A couple of hours before I would get to know that he would be playing the piano, the pipes, or singing. So it was also interesting for the audience. They were quite keen to see how a traditional Indian classical dancer had stepped out-because they are also doing contemporary dance in China-to see how I use the classical base to create a style of my own. In that way I had a very interesting interaction with the Chinese performers, singers, actors, dancers and choreographers I met.

For the past six years I have been working with The Action Players, a Calcutta-based deaf theatre company. It started off with short workshops in movement and one year the artistic director Zarin Chaudhuri asked if I could come for a longer period of time to do an intensive workshop. I also found the idea very challenging. So I came down for two weeks and worked with them for six hours every day and got them into a pattern and discipline of coordinating their movements. I found a way of giving them a beat. As they are hearing-impaired, music was to be utilized in the background for the viewers' benefit. It worked well. Whatever music I chose and the way I broke the counts and did the choreography it somehow worked and I decided to do a production. We called it *Dancing Dolphins*. The first half is poems from Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales* which has a contemporary setting, and solo mime works by the actors. The second half was a 35-minute dance, basically five vignettes which I call a tapestry of movements. While I was choreographing, the actors came at various points at their convenience. If there were six actors to work with three hours every day, I created a work with them. Basically the approach to the work was to show, 'Here is a group of hearing-impaired. But they all coordinate simultaneously.' They work with different objects, relating to them, whereby you recreate





different spaces for them. For example, the performers get on the cubes and within that very limited, tight performing area they perform together. That has been done on four cubes. So you see four different sets of people. Or you see all of them with chairs-how they balance on the chairs and how they work. There is another aspect-total improvisation. They do it through me.

I come on the stage and improvise and they mirror me Your reflexes have to be really fast
That's what I have also shown in this particular work *Dancing Dolphins*
(*What was interaction like with other performing arts communities? Did you feel that they were accepting you more or were you able to explore new things by looking at their works?-AK*)

In the initial stage there was a lot of resentment. For a long time I never had dancers coming to see my work. Even today very few of our leading dance performers have really seen my work. Certain gurus have, Kelucharan Mahapatra and Birju Maharaj-ji, and I don't think that either of them really approves ... but we have a cordial relationship. Last year I was in Bhopal ... they had the Purush Festival. There the Kuchipudi performer Venapati saw my work and really liked it. He really marveled at the control and even the imagination. In Bhopal I had done very recent work and also a work from my earlier days called *Rituals* which is done with forty candles on stage and the whole ritual of going and getting purified for the sacrifice and then being yanked up by ropes and hung in mid air. But he appreciated the use of my body and space and also how I interacted with *dhrupad* music. Chandralekha, Daksha Seth, Bharat Sharma, Sonal Mansingh, Mallika Sarabhai, I know have seen my work. I had a very good response when I was at the Krishna Ganutsava in Madras-it was a lecture demonstration and the connoisseurs and stalwarts of Indian classical dance were there. They responded very well and one of them in the question-answer session asked, 'How would you do Bhutanam *Moksham* (a Kathakali story)? They were not aware of *Asylum* in which I used my toe as my child. That's how I interpreted the whole Putana story, with my toe becoming Krishna and my life being taken away as he sucks the milk.

But as years went on I started getting invited-like the Khajuraho dance festival was a real breakthrough for me, then the Elephanta Dance Festival. These festivals are mainly for Indian classical dance performers and just getting invited was breaking the ice, and there was recognition. Prior to that when I came back I encountered Dadi Padumjee, the puppeteer. Over the years we saw each other's work. In 1988 I asked him if we could collaborate, and he also liked the idea. I did a work called *Friends*. Again the title is self explanatory. There are two friends and at one point in the relationship one tries to dominate the other. Eventually the puppet becomes the dominant force and they try to patch up, but we leave it at a very

ambiguous level. Does the friendship really take off again or does it take off on a different level? It worked well and we took it to Delhi, Bombay. I also took it to the Khajuraho festival.

At the same time I was in Bharat Bhavan [Bhopal] doing a workshop for the Rang Mandal actors there. That's when I heard the Gundecha brothers sing at a small private concert. I was really taken by their singing in the *dhrupad* style. We met up and we said, 'Could we have an interaction?' Which we did. There was a sense that it would work if we had the opportunity and time to work together. So when the Khajuraho dance festival¹ invitation came up I said, 'What better opportunity?' So I asked them. They were keen but at the same time a bit apprehensive. Also, they had to take permission from their guru. But from the beginning it was very clear that I did not want them to experiment, I wanted them to sing in *dhrupad* style. Eventually they said yes, they would sing for me at the festival. One of the other criteria of the festival was that either I weave a story around the temple or work on a poet from Madhya Pradesh. So I decided, along with Satyadev Dubey, to use Muktibodh-Lakdi ka Ravana Sunil Shanbag helped me condense the poetry. I made Ravana a politician and I had an actor from the Rang Mandal repertoire reciting each verse. The singers sang in different ragas, depicting different emotions as the poetry continued. Through my designer Ratan and his wife Banoo we used the Kathakali curtain. She made black banners and faceless faces were drawn on them depicting the crowds coming closer and closer. I had two panels and I worked in between the two panels. The Kathakali influence was there using the curtain and introducing the characters. It went down very well. Both the solo work which was called *Ahavan* which is a dance dedicated to the space, in which I take the blessing of the space and do an abstract work on raga Bhimpalās which the Gundecha brothers sang. The funny part of it was that when it worked so well I decided 'Okay, I should get it across to Bombay and Delhi.' But they came under a lot of pressure from Government cultural bodies and even from their guru-that they should not sing for me. They hadn't seen the work but probably felt that as the Gundechas were coming up as *dhrupad* singers it was a bit early for them to experiment ... They were not experimenting, they were to Hong Kong for the Asian Arts Festival. They sang for me there, and that broke the ice. They got a lot of feedback. Amjad Ali Khan and Pandit Jasraj-ji had seen me perform to their taped music and at some point they met the Gundechas and complimented them. So when the Purush festival in Bhopal was organized they sang for me live on the closing day of the festival. Again all these other great gurus Kelucharan Mahapatra,

Dhananjaya, Birju Maharaj-ji-and all the male performers were there. So I think they will perform live now.

(It strikes me that a lot of your interest seems to lie in ensemble work and choreography, apart from being an individual dancer-right from the films you saw, everything that struck you was the 'theatricality' of it. Can you talk about this?-AK)

Yes, because of the fact that while growing up there was never group work, ensemble work. So that always fascinated me, to see how dancers, bodies, combine together to form patterns, to form stories. Again, in South-east Asia, solo dance was never really emphasized as within our traditional forms. It was always ensemble work. Naturally it fascinated me. I even participated when I was there. One of my major frustrations here is not being able to interact or work with other dancers initially because the dancers did not really want to be associated with me . . . I was sort of the *enfant terrible*. 'What is this Indian boy trying to do? Imitating. . .' I was not imitating the west. By then I had so much of the Southeast Asian influence. Here I was trying to be an individual, but I was always shunned.

(How do you understand dance theatre? How would you describe it?-AK)

Well, in my own work, dance is the medium, but the presentation is theatrical. The characters I develop, change into, maybe taking on different characters, the theatrics comes in because you are transforming yourself from one character to another. Even when I am dancing with other actors, or with puppets, there are certain elements in choreography where it's not so much movement as just the stance, projecting the character, taking an attitude. So that way my work is really interwoven and there is no demarcation between theatre and dance.

(Do you feel that what you do is dance theatre?-AK)

Oh, yes, definitely. But there are certain pieces of mine which are just pure dance with no theatrics involved. It depends on the themes I choose. In a political satire like *Lakdi ka Ravana*, or even Rabindranath's song *Ekla Chalo Re*, the theatrics come in. Because I am interpreting it as my struggle in my dance, I as a modern dancer fighting the classical milieu, the resentment. There theatre comes in. But in a piece like *Reaching Out* or *Endless* the whole work is just in movement.

(How would you define your aesthetics? -SG)

When I perform ... it is with feeling. I am still exploring. When I dance I immerse myself completely, not that I go into a trance or anything, I am very much aware. Even when I do abstract work there is a lot of devotion to my work. It is probably because of my Indian classical background, from that culture. I am proud of it. That makes my work so much more meaningful to me. The other day I was dancing and somebody came up to me and said, 'When you dance you are really enjoying it.' Even if it is pain which is being projected there is that *bhakti* in it. That comes across. At times people say, 'We don't see a particular technique. You say that you have studied Kathakali and modern dance techniques. But we don't see that.' I say, 'Look, you have to see the work as a totality because I am forming a new language of my own. There are sometimes elements of techniques I have studied which can be seen.' I have now started using my body like plasticine-it is moulded and at times it is just being elongated and elongated. I don't have to stop, there don't have to be jagged ends or bumps, just one flow. I articulate through my body, my movements, my *rasa* and *bhava*. I just let the viewers interpret it for themselves. Sometimes they say, '-We have no yardstick because no one else is doing it.' But now people in India have been exposed to a lot of dance companies from overseas. Last week I was in Bombay and Pandit Jasraj-ji rang me up. He had seen my work a year and a half ago in Vancouver. He was keen that some of his other colleagues and people should see my work. I did not explain the work to him. I just said that this is an abstract work. He is a musician and he probably saw it in a different light. I do receive a lot of feedback from the musicians today. Even Amjad Ali Khan and his wife saw me perform and they said, 'It is very refreshing, what you are doing, there is a beauty in it. We do see that there is a lot of devotion in your work. There is *tapasya* also.' People want me to articulate all the time. Okay, I may give a brief about the thought processes. But ... When you go to see a painting you don't corner the painter and question him. You just look at that and enjoy it for the moment. It is not necessary that I have to have a myth behind it. But I do give a certain framework to it. Like, basically my titles do give you something to hold on to, to make your own interpretation. Sometimes, after a couple of performances the thought process changes and I start improvising within the framework. But it is only my technical director and other people who might see that transformation taking place. So there is a framework and within that framework there is a lot of free flow. Again, it changes because of the space. One gets very inspired by spaces-not just

proscenium spaces but interesting, different spaces, and then the work takes on a different dimension. It is not that I just go and perform, do something. No. I have an idea in my mind.

(How do you really choreograph a dance, form an idea? You said that there is a system, a methodology. It is never unstructured. How do you work out a dance?-BDS)

You have a certain idea in mind and you start with whatever movement you think of, feel. It is very difficult to explain how ideas come. There are sometimes stories behind what I am doing. It is not necessary that my work is all abstract. There is a theme. Then one structures around it. Take, for example, *Insomnia*. One is not able to sleep. There are many factors-Memories which haunt you, whether in your childhood, puberty or adulthood-these are the little vignettes one can make into a piece. Each time it is different. *Thanatomorphia* started because a friend passed away of AIDS. The process keeps on growing. Right now I have the idea of working on the two animal gods in Hindu mythology Hanuman and Ganesh. This is been in my mind for three years. I talk and I listen. Maybe some day it will just hit the right chord. I want to collaborate with my friend Dadi Padumjee on this. I might even bring in an actor or two. There are ideas which lie dormant or semi-dormant. I worked with drug addicts in 1970 in a therapy programme, but it was only in 1987 that I got round to doing a dance about a drug addict. I did it when I felt that it was right within me. When I choreographed it I did not do it because it was fashionable at that time. Like people ask me, 'Why don't you do anything on AIDS?' But one does not want to do something like, 'Oh, I want to talk about the trees being cut, the rivers being polluted.' One has to weave ... I'm thinking of using birds, a whole congregation of birds, and through the ideas of the birds the story is told.

(Most of the art forms can deal with very complex ideas, even political themes. Dance probably remains one of the forms which has rarely been used to convey political ideas or contemporary problems. Is dance essentially a form which cannot deal with such themes?-BDS)

No, it can. As I said, there are two problems-the choreographer who presents it and the audience. Will the audience accept it? Today in the west it has changed. But here you are put into boxes and they expect that you are going to do this or that. If you step out they are shocked or surprised. I have done a little bit of political satire in my work. In *Lakdi ka Ravana*

I presented Ravana as a politician. I came in an Ambassador-car with four black cat [commandos]. I showed how he dupes and terrorizes his subjects till they start getting restless and revolt.

Our dance tradition has never really touched on politics or social issues. Maybe social issues but never politics. Okay, politics were present in the Mahabharata. But nothing more concrete than that. No, there is scope-though it becomes dance theatre, not pure dance. Eventually it depends on the person who is choreographing and directing it.

(What is modern in modern Indian dance?-BDS)

Quite a difficult and tricky question. What is modern in modern India today? Right up to 1984 there was not very much happening in the Indian classical dance genre that was modern. After that changes began. But the choreographers still feel happy with their classical vocabulary and taking from that they continue to do work in a contemporary format, or so they say. But I don't find that happening. It's basically sticking to themes or ideas which they feel safe with. They all happen to revolve around the mystic, the tantrik. Okay, they have taken poems by certain Indian poets but ... for them probably it is modern, but in my eyes nothing revolutionary is happening yet. Not that I am doing something revolutionary either. But I do take on abstract works or even contemporary works. Or again I use other performing artists, mixing media, collaborating with them.

Then again it is not necessary that dancers or theatre companies should venture modern works, when they do not really have the vocabulary or the ideas. The fashion right now is to add something modern; something contemporary, to our classical work, or step out. But if they are not convinced they should just let it be and continue with the classical work they are familiar with.

(But what is modern?-BDS)

Something not pertaining to the classical mould. But that does not mean using a classical mode and interpreting. I would say it is modern when you are interpreting contemporary problems. The way it is presented, whether with the help of visuals, clever stage craft, costuming, in speech, in projecting-these elements are put together. Because these aspects are not really used in our Indian classical presentations, especially in dance forms. You can use your classical

foundation and from there, if there are other marriages with other art forms, or just bringing in another style or work. But again, it does not have to be brought in just to make it 'modern'. No, that does not work. You have to see that the marriage really takes place. -

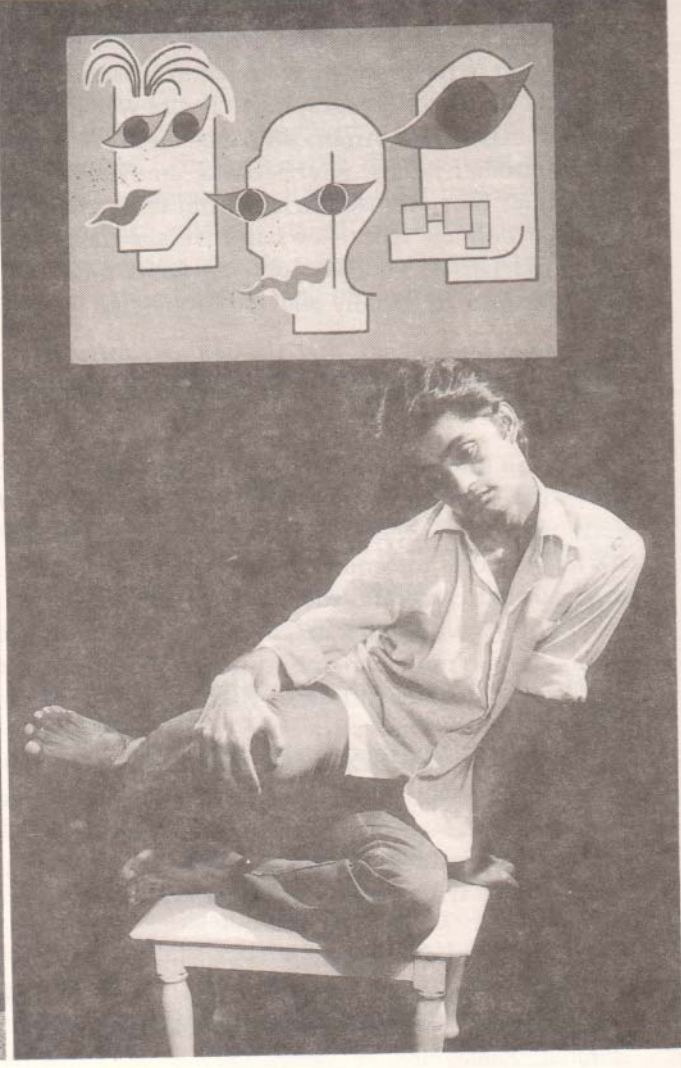
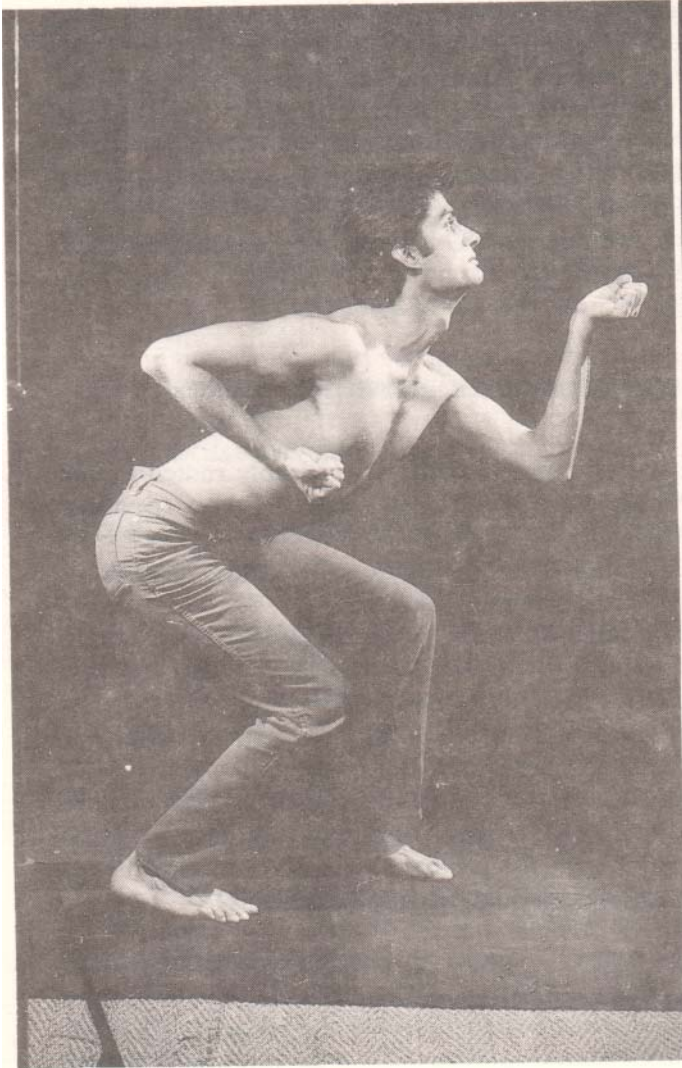
Daksha Seth uses Chhau, Kalari and Kathak in her work. Chandralekha has martial arts and dance in her work. But there is nobody who is doing works in mixed media. Theatre people are using more movements in dance form but not the reverse, with dancers using theatre ... maybe there are dancers would like to experiment. But there is no platform, there is no infrastructure, no support. Today the public might be open to seeing an experimentation from a dancer. And slowly the movement of contemporary dance ... a new language is emerging. It is again like all individual choreographers, Chandralekha, Daksha, Mallika Sarabhai, Aditi Mangaldas, Manjusree Chaki Sircar-all have their own companies, creating a style and body of their own work. Most of them have a classical technique as their foundation, which is fine. There is no reason to discard that and take on an alien form or technique. It depends on the choreographers. The newer lot like Ranjabati Sircar or Bharat Sharma or Daksha Seth have all been to the American dance festivals. They have exposure to American dance techniques. Maya Rao is another dancer who is doing innovative work in the Kathakali technique. They are all using the techniques they are used to and from there going on to choreographing. But I still see a lack of abstract, social or political work-no controversial themes have been tackled. yet by them. Okay, Aditi in one of her works tackles a social problem-harassment of the woman. But by and large, I still don't see much of political satire or socially relevant problems.

(Do you intend to say that the contemporary Indian dance forms are in the process of changing from traditional/classical to modern, but thematically they are still very conventional? How do you explain this refusal of modern dance?-BDS)

First of all, our classical works all stem from tradition and religion, which is so deeply rooted in our growing up; and it has been the environment, the atmosphere, in which the arts have been patronized and presented. So people can always relate because through the years they have been exposed to it. All of a sudden to come up with a modern version or interpretation ... in my experience if a company from abroad come and did modern dance, even if it was bad the audience would go to see them and initially they would just accept, 'It is going to be good since it is coming from abroad.' But if somebody from our own milieu and atmosphere tries to present his or her own interpretation, they always look at it with a very negative attitude. They

don't give the artist the platform to express in a form other than the classical form. Initially it was the audience, but now I find it is the promoter who is the main stumbling block. Because he or she takes the decision and feels that the audience is not going to like or accept it. They do not want to take the risk. Whereas overseas, even in Indonesia and Taiwan today there are platforms and support. The other thing which is lacking in this country is commissioning of work. Here one has to produce oneself and handle everything right from the production aspect, trying to find a sponsor who will present you-it really adds more work to the individual creative person.

All photographs accompanying this piece show Astad Deboo at an informal performance in the temporary studio space of artist Chittrovanu Mazumdar, in Calcutta in August 1995, which is referred to in some detail in the editorial. Photographs by Naveen Kishore.



Modern Trends in Choreography in India Bharat Sharma

To begin with, I may speak of how I have to introduce myself and my profession in social gatherings and other situations. Here are some case studies which I would like to share with you.

A

'What do you do?'

Since being a male and a dancer is not a respectable and economically profitable profession, I have to take a slightly diplomatic line of discourse.

I say 'Well, ummm ... I am an artist.' 'Artist!'

Ah, so you paint.'

'Well, umm ... I am not that kind of an artist. I try to dance.' 'Oh, you are a dancer. (*Pause*) What kind?'

At that point it dawns upon *me* that there are 'kinds' of dances! Thus, I have to go about explaining the kind of dance I do and I have to change my stance, demeanour, colour and creed to adjust to the situation I am confronted with.

B

For example, once I said, 'I am a Modern Indian Dancer and a Choreographer.' 'Oh, Martha Graham!' came the reply.

I soon realized the discourse would have to be steered into styles and big names and I would have to soon identify with one of the modern deities. An added complication was that this person was an ardent reader of newspapers in the mornings and his sense of history had stopped in the 1950s.

'It's amazing how they dance on their toes. They seem to fly!' he continued.

I replied 'Well, I dance on the ground, stamp my feet a lot, move my hands in all directions and make faces. It's more experimental work using a lot of Indian material.'

'Experimental! What is that?'

I realized that I had named the wrong animal and I would soon have to enact it to explain my point of view within the glares of eminent people in an open market place. I cut short this

exchange of ideas by asking the gentleman the latest rate of an upmarket share in the national sensex.

C

In another dialogue I was asked, 'What style do you perform?'

This was a person who was expecting to be told which of the classical styles I do.

And I replied, 'I do not do those. I do my own thing,'

A question flew back to me - 'You perform folk dances?'

This confirmed my belief that this was a case of the 'Natyashastra' syndrome where everything outside the 'Natya Dharmi' (Higher Tradition) was 'Lok Dharmi' (Lower Tradition). And at that time I sat down and befriended the young lady with a smile and gave a very long speech on politics, the social dimension of dance, the state's cultural policy, the lack of a stimulating atmosphere for creative work in India, so on and so forth. Somewhere in the midst of the speech I realized my smile had lost its charm.

'What you say is very interesting but unfortunately I have to leave.' She left because she had an appointment with a Minister.

D

Another went like this:

'So, you mix styles like such-n-such and such-n-such, something like a *khichri*.'

And I replied with a tremendous sense of happiness, '*Khichri* is a staple Indian diet and is most effective when a person is sick. I do not mind being a *khichri* as long as it cures the ailing world of Indian dance.

E

On one occasion I was traveling to the US to perform at a prestigious modern dance festival. At Delhi airport I was stopped at the immigration check because I had not specified the word 'artist' which was entered against my profession. I repeated my story. The passport officer looked at me and announced it loudly to his colleagues and soon

there was a bunch of airport officials around me. After a hearty laugh, one asked, 'The filmy style! Can you show it?'

I took the situation in my stride and replied, 'Which heroine do you want me to enact?'

The boss came around and saved me the embarrassment of doing a Helenisque-jig.

But this encounter made me think. It had a silver lining. Films have definitely provided the input of free expression of the body in the national psyche and efforts have to be made to provide dignity to this phenomena.

I went back to the officer and said, 'Sir, I made the mistake of dancing in my present life, I will not do this in my next life. But would you care to see my next performance in Delhi in this life?'

He agreed.

F

Yet another went like this: 'So you innovate in dance?' Now, this query came from a highly sophisticated person and I had to be on my guard. I did some quick thinking and concluded that this was a product of excessive reading, and was a logical and a linear mind. This was a Modern Brahmin who would co-opt every dimension of change and draw a straight line.

I retorted, 'I do not innovate, I create.'

G

And the last one I will relate bordered on hysterics:

After a romantic candle-lit dinner in a plush restaurant with a young Indian lady, dressed in the choicest of Indian sarees, with the choicest jewellery, with the choicest chic look and the choicest British accent in English, I escorted her to her chauffeur-driven car. While getting into the car she realized that she had not asked me about my profession the entire evening. She lit a cigarette and listened to my credentials while I stood there in the cold winter of Delhi.

After a deep analysis of my discourse, she replied, 'Bharat, India is a continuum, an unbroken civilization of thousands of years. It has such rich traditions. Why at all do we need modernity!'

This time I had no answer. I went back home in my two-wheeler, reciting the choicest abuses in my mind, not to the person, but to the acute social crisis which the elite in India faces and the impact it is having on the new trends in Indian dance.

The above remarks may sound negative. But I have also demarcated a loose boundary within which the modern trends of choreography in India operate. This leads to the problem of nomenclature, i.e. what name should we provide to this animal which has been around, within the Indian sub-continent, for almost a century. The beginnings can be traced to the experimental work done by Rabindranath Tagore in 1890s and later to Uday Shankar. After the 40s much has happened and it is not easy to wish away this animal, which has many names: like Indian Ballet, Dance-Dramas, Modern Indian Dance, Contemporary Indian Dance, Innovations and so on. And I am happy that it has so many names because it is being interpreted in as diverse ways as the diversity of its practitioners requires. What needs to be done is to identify the principles which underline the practice of this art form.

In my own humble way I have tried to probe the basics which determine this art form. These ideas have grown and been shaped through years of observing and participating in events.

In one sense, I have been 'witness' to some of the 'crimes' within the Indian dance scene. Before I mention them, there is another dimension I would like to add while discussing modern trends in choreography.

My earlier training was in an Indian Ballet troupe, Bhoomika, in Delhi, and in the course of time my interest in other disciplines, especially theatre and other performing arts, grew. I have come to believe that the principles I am trying to describe are part of a phenomenon which can be found in all forms of modern performing arts practice, be it dance, theatre, design and/or music. It is part of a larger context-the search for a 'modernist' sensibility in performing arts in India.

The first principle which underlines these phenomena is that it is transitory in nature. It reflects its time, space and environment. The two essential components which go into a

creative work, form and content, are directly related to each other. The attitudes towards technique, style, aesthetics, design etc. grow out of this relationship. In a creative process, the tendency is towards the subjective leading to the objective; a narrative, a theme or an impulse initiating a process to achieve the required form for expression. Conversely, motional or movement impulses, or stillness, may generate a feeling or a narrative and a choreographer may set about organizing these impulses in creating dances. Similarly, there can be innumerable beginnings to a creative work; a music score, a painting, a prop, an incident, a concept or a social issue can act as a basis for an artistic journey.

Till the 70s, a narrative was the main determinant of a creative process. The form was evolved around the narrative; the structure, style, patterns of movement, design and music grew through trial and error, through improvisation and research. In the 80s there was a shift towards the form, whereupon abstract, physical impulses motivated narratives. Abstract dance became an accepted form of expression, while free improvisations were used to create cohesive structures of performance: Today, a choreographer has comprehensively broadened the scope of his/her resources in beginning a creative process.

Technique is a word which bothers almost every dancer and choreographer. In the case of a modern choreographer, attitude towards technique grows out of attitude towards the relationship of form and content. Technique, as we have come to recognize it in its reductionist way, is nothing but bland mathematics. A set of basic physical material is identified, like stances, hand gestures, movement patterns and accompanying musical structures, and an exercise in evolving permutations and combinations of this physical material starts giving shape to a pattern and movement structures. A practice of these patterns over a period of time becomes a style. A more thorough practice of the movement structures goes into the realm of discipline, perfection and excellence. In the case of the modern choreographer, s/he reserves the freedom to evolve a new style in each new creation.

I would like to give two examples in which I have participated. The first is a prolonged creative exercise which was undertaken in 1980 by Narendra Sharma at Bhoomika as a process to choreograph 'Aalingan' (Embrace)-a twelve-minute dance. The idea emerged while watching an extremely technical and 'jagged' performance. As a counterpoint, an abstract idea of flow, continuity, curvature and leisure crept into the choreographer's mind which needed to be probed. Soon the dancers in the company realized that they were in

trouble! For hours and days together, abstract designs in curves and circles were explored with parts of the body-on the floor, while standing, and in the air. After an arduous phase, combinations of curvature-designs of limbs were put into cohesive movement sequences within a languorous rhythmic cycle of 6 (3+3)-3s being taken as an extension of the curves. A random arrangement of the sequences gave an unusual feeling to the movements and the choreographer saw elements of eroticism in it. Soon combinations of duets, trios and quartets were tried. It was decided that a quartet would be an appropriate format and soon the music director was invited to respond to the movement sequences. After threading the segments together, the music was composed, during rehearsals, and recorded in a studio while the dancers performed. Once the music was edited, the dance itself went through many versions. The element of touch was totally removed from the dance because it denoted the 'obvious' within the erotic rather than the 'ethereal'. The title soon flowed into the piece and the lighting-designer and the costume-designer were called in to discuss concepts. The entire exercise took about nine months to get to a performable state and the dance is still in the repertoire of Bhoomika. What was interesting was, more than the dance, the process through which the entire exercise was undertaken. More intriguing is the fact that the choreographer was never satisfied with one version, and even today he keeps changing it with new dancers and spaces and reworks the costumes and the lighting design.

In this case, it was a simple inspiration which released a chain of responses towards a search for an architecture and a form to portray a feeling-that is, ecstasy.

In contrast, I would speak of a play which was directed by Bansi Kaul for Rang Vidushak in 1992-93. The inspiration emerged through his own personality-his unique sense of humour. He felt a sense of identification with Khwaja Nasiruddin's anecdotes and wisdom tales. The tales were introduced to the actors and after the very first reading a few were identified for improvisation. Groups were formed and within a few minutes each had to enact one tale. From that point onwards the rehearsal process to visualize the tales went into a wild chase. Tales within tales were invented, dialogues were improvised and thrown away, sub-texts became long movement sequences, acrobatics, movement collages, humorous enactments, design elements and live music flowed in and out of the improvisation sessions. For months together new materials were explored and there was a conscious attempt not to formalize any enactment in the initial stages. Some informal improvised street performances

were done to get a feedback. The entire effort evolved like a ballet production. Just a few days before the formal presentation took place, a playwright was invited to write down the spoken words of the actors. Once it was done, some cleaning was done on the written text to articulate certain ideas. The entire production was then ruthlessly edited to give a shape to its presentational quality, and intermediary episodes and enactments were introduced to tie different tales together. Words were reduced to the minimum, to the extent that the written script was reduced to a kind of queue sheet for the movement sequences. Today, new tales are improvised at regular intervals and brought into the performance structure, while others move out. The play survives by the name of *Soch ka Doosra Naam...?*

In this case, a series of tales set off a chain of responses towards a search for a form which could depict the spirit behind the narratives -that is, wisdom and humour.

Another principle which underlines modern dance is that its vision of the universe is body-centric, that is, the human body is both the primary source of expression and its basic material. The mind resides in the body and this duality is the artist's inspiration. The perception of the subtleties of life grows from this belief in the body-centricity of existence. In essence, the celebration of the body becomes an art form.

The hands, limbs, torso, eyes, head and so on are entities by themselves. Each can express independently or in relationship with other body parts. If more than one body is involved, then the possibilities are amplified by the added scope of space, time and the choreographer's imagination.

Expression through the body has been a primal human instinct since time immemorial. Human beings danced in pre-historic times to celebrate a successful hunt. Once human beings settled into community living within an agricultural economy, social norms were evolved which affected the behavioral patterns of the body. With the growth of civilization and cultures, different communities assigned different attitudes to modes of expression through the body; aesthetic principles conditioned each culture's perception of the body. The growth of material sciences and the industrial revolution had its own impact on the manifestations of the body and its aesthetic principles.

In a comparative analysis of contrasting sets of aesthetic principles, the *Natyashastra* holds good within the context of vedic thought and the age in which it developed. In the late 19th century, Rudolf Van Laban went about observing the working habits of industrial

workers in the factories of Manchester, England, and evolved a unique set of aesthetic principles based upon the behavioural patterns of human beings in an industrial society. A modern choreographer does not rely solely on one set of aesthetic principles as resource material but opens up to the human experience.

One principle which s/he carries within is a profound sense of the collective. The science of ensemble work is the backbone of his/her understanding of the art form. The individual grows within the ensemble, working simultaneously within the self and also sharing the energies of colleagues. It is implicit that a dancer has to work within the ethos of the ensemble before graduating to a soloist. It has been noticed that a dancer trained as a soloist finds it difficult to adjust to ensemble work.

To elucidate this principle, I may talk about a rehearsal I was once watching. One young lady, not very tall, who had had strict training in a soloist tradition, was trying her hand in a group situation. Her partners, two tall men trained in ensemble work, were trying hard to find synergies to break the symmetry which was setting in during each attempt to choreograph a sequence. There was somewhere a belief that ladies (that too, short ladies), needed to stand in front of tall men, and that organizing bodies in a given space meant everyone doing the same thing at the same time, all the time. These ideas may emerge from a state of mind which believes that all the trees in a forest stand at right angles and sway symmetrically, in unison, to the exact rhythm of the breeze.

But the two men were shrewd enough to swing the situation to their advantage. On the performance day, they let the lady loose on stage to do her own thing and they themselves went about alternating between matching her movement and energy and countering it, in different rhythms and areas of the stage. In the end they jumped into the auditorium to dance amongst the people. To the utter consternation of the lady, attention got diverted to the happenings in the auditorium, and she was finding it difficult from the soul within to get off the stage while the performance was on!

From a different perspective, a modern choreographer extends and builds on his/her sense of the collective to become a socially conscious person. S/he derives inspiration from immediate experiences and is critical, reflective and essentially progressive. In many ways, a modern dancer and choreographer is an agent of change. '

Another principle is the relationship between the teacher, dancer and the choreographer. A teacher considers it a rule that when a student walks into a class, s/he carries within the essential qualities of a dancer, choreographer and a creator. The teaching process becomes an exercise in mutual self-discovery whereupon the teacher initiates methods enabling the student to reveal inner qualities while helping him/her in organizing and perfecting the material. Improvisations are integral to the creative process and the student learns the craft through trial and error. Uday Shankar told his students, 'The dance is within you. I am here to help you discover it.'

The choreographer in a student matures once a creative work starts taking shape. A stage comes when it needs to be shared with a group of dancers, and that initiates an altogether different process of interaction where a democratic mode helps assimilate diverse energies and sharing of individual qualities. A student once asked Doris Humphrey how to learn the art of choreography. She replied, 'Do it!'

There would be no modern dance without a dancer. The art dies with the dancer because many dances are created around the unique qualities of a particular dancer. Thus, in its living state, a dancer carries within the essence of the art form. The dances of Uday Shankar, Menaka, Ram Gopal, Sadhna Bose and so many others vanished once the pioneers stopped performing them.

The qualities of a dancer, choreographer and a teacher may reside in one personality or in different people in different combinations. In each case, the logistics are determined by individuals. Ultimately, it is the collaborative nature of the three which goes into the creative work.

Another principle which underlies modern dance in India is that, by the nature of its very practice, it aims for the universal and operates at a local and individual level. In its attempt to be universal, it is multi-cultural and cuts across the social and political fabric. In other words, it is assimilative, integrative and intrinsically diverse. The practice of the 'universal' principle is in recognition of the diversity which pervades life.

In a case-study of any modern dance group in India, one would witness the presence of varied people from different cultural and social backgrounds, speaking different languages and practicing different styles. Thus, creative work coming out of such convergences, by its very nature, has the potential to appeal across a cross-section of social, political and cultural factors.

To elucidate this point I will return to my childhood. I was brought up in the environment of a ballet troupe. In fact, I was born when my father Narendra Sharma was conceiving *Ramlila* for his group, National Ballet Centre. I was six months old when the rehearsals started and my mother used to leave me in the music pit. I acquired the habit of sleeping while the drums played at their loudest. Later, when my father joined Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi, to re-choreograph *Ramlila* between 1961 and 1965, I remember the kind of cultural diversity which used to coexist in the ballet troupe. There were dancers from Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, Bengal, U.P. and Punjab, speaking different languages, representing different styles and cultures. Even in the making of *Ramlila*, the aesthetics had a pan-Asian vision. Musical instruments were collected from all over India and the costumes were designed emphasizing the folk and tribal traditions. There were four Muslims in a live orchestra of twelve musicians; songs of Rama were sung by a Muslim. The director and the management had a harrowing time keeping this diversity together. The task was all the more difficult because all of them lived together on a single campus. But it worked. Today, multi-culturalism is a profound word but it was practised by all the major ballet troupes in the last fifty years and even now it is one of the stronger bases of their existence.

Another principle which one witnesses is the element of self-destruction/self-renewal. Each creative process is complete in itself and each time a creative bug bites an artist, a new process is initiated. A whole logistical and organizational structure may be built around an idea and dismantled upon the fulfilment of the idea. Similarly, if one makes a survey of works by a choreographer over a long span of time, one would witness variations of styles, concerns, logistics, and adaptability to circumstances and so on. This principle works within an artist too, to constantly re-define the art form to one's self and to relate it to each given time and space and the life around it.

This principle is a strong presence in the work of Bansi Kaul. He loves to destroy what he makes. His performers are always on tenterhooks; he is notorious for changing a whole sequence or even the script right in the course of a performance. While I was working for Rang Vidushak he always encouraged me to do a non-verbal movement-play for the group. One fine day he forwarded a play and asked me to block it in a balletic form. Soon he disappeared from Bhopal on some work. I was in a quandary and started working, in collaboration with the actors and the music director, on giving a physical shape to a complex psychological play within an

environment of a circus. The form started taking shape by introducing certain design elements and choreographing exits and entries. The first version of the blocking was rehearsed for some time to let the actors get a stronger sense of the inner meaning of the play. I also tried an experiment where the entire play was done in silence, the floor patterns and gestures providing a queue to the dialogues.

The dates of the public performances were announced and the actors moved out on the open-air stage to open up their lungs. Bansi Kaul was supposed to take over the final rehearsals one week before the show. He arrived in the morning and straightaway headed towards a different area in the open-air space. Soon he gave a rehearsal call to the actors and brought out all the scenic material the group had. Work started in right earnest and an unusual space for performance and audience-seating was constructed. The actors were given a rest and late in the evening he started re-blocking the entire play all over again within the dynamics of the new space. He did not even bother to see the version I had done. I went through a state of confusion and in a huff laid off work on that production. He directed the play in his own inimitable style and in the credits list I found my name against visualization and choreography. I confronted him with my questions a few months later and he explained it thus: It is essential that a creative work should be steered through several contrasting versions, processes, disciplines and analytical stages. All these activities could be independent of each other. Some element of each exercise is retained by the mind, body and the collective consciousness of the performers. Thus a creative work needs to go through several layers of 'destructions' and 'renewals' and the result should reflect the multiplicity of working processes.

In the end, a modern dancer and choreographer is a creature who carries a streak of madness within. S/he is a natural maverick, an out-caste, pointing to the future.

The Music of Umrao

Vidya Rao

Although the music for Umrao was conceived for the play, the questions and concerns have been with me for many years. They arise out of my own experienced concerns as a woman, a singer, and moreover a singer of the *thumri-ghazal* repertoire. So *Umrao's* questions began for me in my own life and concerns. What does it mean to be a singer? To be a singer today, to have been a singer a hundred years ago? What does it mean to sing *thumri*, to choose to sing it, to be born to that singing? How does my life and its concerns overlap-if at all it does-with the concerns of women singers of another time?

It has always seemed then insufficient to pursue the path of music alone. I needed to hear the women speak. I needed to try and excavate their voices from contemporary accounts.

There are two kinds of questions that interest me. The first concerns music. What was the musical style, the *gayaki*? How has it changed and why? Is it possible to reconstruct this *gayaki* and present it again on the contemporary concert stage? If not, why? Was/is there a difference between male and female *gnyakis*? Have differences widened or has the gap closed, and why? and so on.

The other set of questions is about the women (the tawaifs) and their lives. The image of the tawaif that most of us have today is the one we get from mass-media, films-the *tawaif* is either vamp or victim, a woman to be hated or pitied, either sexually aggressive, or, if this is a victim-plot, 'pure' despite her life. Her redemption comes through death or through marriage to the noble hero. One way or another, her redemption is the end of her tawaif-hood. We tend to think of the tawaif as unable to escape her exploitation, passive, in need of rescuing. Alternatively we think of her as a kind of proto-feminist figure, whose very lifestyle interrogates

patriarchy. Somehow, none of these images seemed to me to give a clear picture of the tawaif I met and spoke with. They seemed constructions, ideas, not a way of knowing a woman who lived and worked in a certain fashion.

So, apart from making sense of the music in my life, I wanted to understand who these women really were, how they lived their lives, what they thought about their lives, their art, and also what they thought about the way in which other people, including mass-media, perceived and represented them. I felt, too, that unless I grappled with these questions I would remain, somewhere, stuck in my singing. It seemed to me important to undertake this exercise because, as I see it, art, what one does, and then, what one is, these intermesh; indeed in the singing of a truly great artist, the line between art and life melts.

All of these questions were directly linked to my own personal questions. How was I to sing? What sense was I to make of thumri's erotic lyrics? How was I to be? My being and my art - how were they related? Were they related at all? And finally, the puzzling, painful question of happiness. Why does contemporary society feel the need to warn, even punish the woman singer? In film after film, story after story, I get this message that for women the pursuit of art invariably means unhappiness, specifically unhappiness in domestic and marital life. Is this true? Do women really have to choose between art and happiness? Did women have to choose in an earlier time? Is happiness the same as domestic stability? Are there other kinds of happiness? Can one be happy and unhappy at the same time - can one experience pain in one area of life and simultaneously pleasure in another? Is one happy then or unhappy?

I was interested then in the lives women led, the events of their lives, the ways in which they told these events, narrated themselves. I was interested too in the different ways in which they expressed themselves and their lives. And especially as they did this through thumri singing-a narration that is at once both masked and explicit, both oblique and direct.

Perhaps for me the most important understanding has been that art style and life style do overlap. That is, what we do, what we profess, and who we are, our being, are intertwined. How we tell our stories, how we sing, influences the way we are, and the other way around. And if we did not see our being and our actions to be meaningfully related, we might as well give up both doing and being. We might as well not sing, we might as well die, cease to be. We might as well end our story.

In many ways I suppose the best way to address these problems is through film or theatre. So when Anuradha Kapur decided on *Umrao* for Vivadi's new production I was both overjoyed and terrified. Overjoyed, because here was an opportunity to say all the things I wanted to say and have this music 'saying' supported and understood by texts of words and images. Terrified, because I was afraid I might not be able to say what I wanted to well and clearly enough. The play was an opportunity for me to translate historical researched data, stories, anecdotes, personal feelings, into a musical text that would run parallel to the narrative text (the script of the play) and also hint at other texts hidden within this story and script.

Umrao Jan Ada, the novel, is an exciting text to work with because the novel itself speaks in many voices. Is Ruswa aware of what he is doing, I have often thought, reading it. At one level, it is a typical *tawaif* story, a master narrative, with all its familiar motifs: an innocent girl is kidnapped because of an old feud between men; she is sold to the *kotha* she grows into a talented, charming woman whose ability as a poet and singer earns her much fame; she is restless with this life, attempts to find alternatives; grows old, retires, seeks a new world in religion and prayer. In this way, as her life draws to a close, she is 'redeemed'. In telling this story, Ruswa used the technique of framing a narrative within a narrative so that the story we read/ hear is in Umrao's voice, is told by her as she speaks to Ruswa. And so we are never very sure whose voice it is that we hear - Umrao's, Ruswa's, Ruswa remembering, or some other's. Nor can we be certain if this is being read or heard by us - or indeed, as we see later in the novel, by Umrao herself. The novel therefore addresses questions of who the narrator is, who the one addressed, and equally asks us to consider whether this is the event as happening, as it happened, or as recalled and remembered.

In telling this story Ruswa is utterly unsentimental. (Was that the way it was told to him? Was that the way he heard it?) Yet, he is also affectionate, sympathetic, admiring. And so we have a certain matter-of-factness in the narration, and, at the same time, a warmth, a friendliness; this is the voice of a *hamsafar* [a co-traveller]. At another level, Ruswa (or is it Umrao?) espouses another kind of rhetoric where he has Umrao denigrating herself, speaking of her shameful life and deeds, and of herself as a woman who is not *nek* [pure, 'decent']. And again one asks - whose voice is this? Does Umrao truly think this about herself? Does Ruswa? Is this the voice of a faceless thing called social values?

In a sense, through the novel run the many voices that must surely have been heard in turn-of-the-century Lucknow; in a sense, too, Ruswa's many selves as they lived, listened, acted and spoke, and also Umrao's many selves-laughing, struggling, brooding, loving, envying-living fully. Perhaps we all live such lives. Perhaps we all speak this way. Perhaps all our work, all our telling, is unresolved, full of contradictions.

But it seems to me that what is important is not that there are contradictory selves, but the kind of contradictions, and the way they are stitched together to form a most fascinating-but certainly *not* seamless-narrative.

It seems to me then, that the way in which this narrative, this telling (that echoes many naratives and tellings that I have heard from old women singers) happens, the *rastas* [paths] it chooses, the techniques it adopts, all seem to parallel the very technique of *thumri gayaki*. It would appear then that the form used by *tawaiifs* (and their friends) to tell their lives and the more consciously practised style of the art form adopted and practised by them, were in some way running parallel and speaking to each other. The style adopted in singing is learnt and practised for hours every day for years on end. Though Indian music is improvised and created at the moment of performance, it is not unrehearsed or unconsciously spontaneous. There is a knowingness to the spontaneity. Even the intimacy of address that is so essential to *thumri* singing is studied, knowing. So the fluid moving from one register to another, one space, one self to another, that is, I think at the heart of *thumri*, is learnt, practised, though of course, the final leap from performance technique and *gayaki* tricks to the transcendental magic of true art is just that - magic - and can neither be taught nor practised, only sought. It seems to me then that somehow the learnt, consciously practised art style flows into life and the narration of life. It informs the way a woman will think about her life and the way she will tell it.

As we know it today, *thumri* is the product of the regional medieval courts, successor states to the Mughal empire. Musicians and musicologists are often concerned with identifying the 'authentic' voice of a form. In the case of *thumri*, while authenticity is often claimed by accessing a distant past (via reference to texts like *Natyashastra*), this 'authentic' is named and-located in the early years of this century. Inevitably so, because this is when the earliest recordings of music become available. But in fact *thumri* as sung and performed today (and claimed as authentic) is much removed stylistically and performatively from this turn-of-

the-century style and performance. The names that are cited as the authentic voices of thumri gayaki-Moujuddin Khan, Bhaiya Ganpat Rao, Gauhar Jan etc.-these voices, significantly, sing and shape the gayaki at precisely that historical moment when a western colonial world view, with all its notions of class, morality, women's status, aesthetics and realism had burst upon the Indian scene. It seems to me that thumri, as we imagine it today, was being reformulated, and performing traditions were both assimilating and contesting western ways of seeing and hearing, western ways of understanding the relationship between performer and audience. The turn-of-the-century style was therefore as much a style 'in the making' as is the style practised today, as indeed earlier gayakis too must surely have been.

A form like thumri is the coming together of several elements that comprise its text - sound, the word, movement, and the context of performance. Stylistically, thumri draws from the desi music of the purab region, refining it and 'classicizing' it to cater to courtly tastes. It is characterized by typical methods of voice production and delivery, and the use of specific musical ornamentations. These are considered to highlight thumri's emotional, dramatic quality. Because it emphasizes *bhav*, emotion, thumri allows for the mixing of ragas in order to fully explore these emotions. Musically, meaning is created and communicated through the nuanced use of both *swar* and *bol*, in what is called the *bol banao* style. This style of performance focuses as much on the word as it does on *swar*. *Bol* and *swar*, along with movement (as I describe below), simultaneously developed narratives.

From oral and written accounts it appears that till as recently as the early years of this century, the mode of rendering a thumri included both musical and danced elaborations and improvisations. The artist-more often than not a tawaif-elaborated the *bandish* in terms of its musical and poetic possibilities (*bol banana*), and also moved about the performance space as she elaborated the poetry of the *bandish* (*bhav batana*) through the techniques of *ada* (movement of hands, torso) and *bhav* (facial expressions). In between verses, she might also have danced, the dazzling footwork of *kathak*, to the accompaniment of *laggi* (doubled tempo) on the *tabla*. This thumri had therefore a strong visual aspect-the tawaif's body ineradicably present in the performance. The visuality of thumri is both in the inescapably material body of the performer, and also present in the iconic body that the text (simultaneously musical sound, word and movement) creates.

Today, except in some film sequences, it is extremely unlikely that you will see a thumri performance that combines voice and movement. Already, by the 1940s, senior or highly respected women singers were singing *seated* rather than standing, and if they used the technique of *bhav* batana at all, this was done in a seated position; there was no footwork, nor did the artist move physically across the performance space. The position of the accompanists had also changed. Whereas earlier they had stood behind the artist, their instruments tied to their waists, and had followed her about as she danced and sang, they were now seated on either side of her (tabla to the right, sarangi to the left). After 1947 even this minimal *bhav* batana has vanished. Singers sing and dancers dance, and the twain do not meet in the same person. Quite naturally this splitting off of an important avenue of the articulation of *bhav*-i.e. facial expressions, gestures etc., necessitates changes in the *gayaki* which make it increasingly difficult to create *bhav*.

The musicologist Raghava Menon tells me that *bhav* is born out of perfect swar and out of the nuances within the voice itself-the voice, regardless of the words it sings. And he is right. Yet, as he also says, words are not unimportant. Where does one pause, which word does one repeat; how does one say the word, which part of the word is stretched out through meend or taan? So the word has several meanings-at the level of language, at the level of its cultural associations, but also pure sound-as word-sound married to the sound of the abstract swar.

In whatever fashion one sings thumri I imagine there are some qualities that must be understood, internalized and expressed, in order that the form may, despite fairly drastic changes in technique, context and mode of performance, continue to be called 'thumri'.

So what are these qualities?

As I understand it, thumri is a form that is characterized by an intimacy of address and a nuanced detailed vision. In this it seems to me to be akin to miniature painting. It seems to me too that it is characterized by, it lives and breathes by, its ability-desire, surely-to extend itself constantly by making its boundaries fluid, and also by its need to question constantly all given notions, whether about ragas, moods, or of the line between self and other. Just how this happens can only be heard, and heard by a knowing listener who knows how to hear. Perhaps one example will suffice here:

Take this *dadra*:

*Aiso jatan bataye daio Ram, kaise din kati hain. Achra plvaar, kagda banaiba,
Ab daras dikhaye jaiio Ram, kaise din kati hain.*

This *dadra* is set in the sweet wistful raga Piloo. The *nayika* beseeches (her friend? her self? her absent lover?) to help her-'Tell me, how shall I pass these days, (of separation)? (In despair) I shred my *aanclial* to tiny paper-like strips. Grant me a vision now (or) how shall I pass these days?'

The mood clearly is one of *birha-of* separation from a loved one, of pain and longing. The -*rasa* is inevitably *srinagar*, the exotic. The singer, however, adds this *doha* to it:

*KaaRa, sab tan khaio, aur chun chun khaio maas, In do nainnn mat khaio kaaga, mohe
piya milan ki aas.*

(Eat up, peck at this flesh, crow, But spare these two eyes,
that long to see the beloved.)

I would say the *rasa* here in this *doha-crows* pecking at one's waiting, wasting flesh, two staring eyes, endlessly watching-is not so much *shringar* as *vibhatsa* that of disgust. But the juxtaposing of this *doha* (and its *vibhatsa* flavour) and the *dadra* (and its mood of *birha*) startles us out of our sentimentality and heightens our understanding of the complexity of *viyog shringar* (of love-inseparation) and therefore of love itself. And we realize that if *vibhatsa* can be part of *shringar*, then so can fear, jealousy, murderous rage, laughter ... To my mind, this realization can only make us more human, richer in our humanity. It seems to me also that this shift in register is similar to the Lacanian concepts of drive and desire. The *dadra* and the *doha* together move the *nayika*, the singer, and the listener from the space of desire to that of drive, and back again.

At the same time that the singer moves from one *rasa* space to another, she could also move and transgress the boundaries of raga. There are ways in which I could, by shifting the tonic and communicating that shift, by treating raga Piloo's *pancham* as the tonic, create a sense of the raga Jogiya. I move then from one raga to another without in fact having changed anything but the rural ground. Sound meaning is also therefore fluid here. Nor I think is there a primary word meaning, a real meaning as against other meanings, metaphoric meanings, no hierarchy of text and sub-text. The face the *dadra* presents is its face, but we know that a face is mobile and can say many things, and if it did not, it would be a face in the finality of death. Like the waves and the sea, meaning endlessly unfurls out of the *bandish*.

To me what is also important is the fact that in *thumri gayaki*, decoration, embellishment and *nakhra* are not just add-ons, they *are* the form. In some senses, we have perhaps internalized ways of seeing and hearing that treat form, structure and detail as separate things. We think, for instance, that some thing - a piece of music - has to be created. We understand it formally. We understand that this form has to be articulated through a structure; it is constructed. And finally there are its details. To my mind this makes false divisions. It also does not allow us to understand the rationale of detailing in music.

For one thing, no student of music, though knowing full well what 'form' it is one is learning, equally how to 'structure' the singing, ever learns this way. We learn by endlessly repeating details, a *swar*, a phrase. The detail, the *swar* or the phrase, is not just a part, the sum of many of such parts going to make the whole. The detail is the *bandish* it is the raga. It is the whole in essence. It contains the whole, it is complete in itself; every moment, every detail is complete in itself. And the whole, clearly, is more than just a sum total of all these details. *Thumri* is recognized to be *thumri* because of its details. In this sense *nakhra*, *ada*, the particular methods of voice production and delivery, as much as the combinations of *swar* patterns are the form; it is in them that 'thumri-ness' resides and is perceived.

To my mind, the essence of thumri seems to be reflected also in the ways in which women singers speak about themselves and their lives moving in and out of spaces, shifting register, suggesting, hinting at submerged meanings. It seems also to be the way in which we might read the novel *Umrao Jan Ada*.

In the novel *Umrao Jan Ada*, the protagonist often speaks of the process of learning and of the thrill of performance. It is, one realizes their acquiring of skills, and their claim to the magic space of performance that enabled women like *Umrao Jan* to perceive themselves as actors in the stories of their lives, authors of their destinies. So, in attempting to understand *Umrao*, her life, her story, and the way in which she is represented, it is important to understand her art-form. The novel portrays *Umrao* as a writer of Urdu poetry; throughout the book there are also references to music-raga-sangeet-and to the songs of the thumri repertoire. *Bega Jan*, for instance, she whose face is pitted with pock marks, enralls *Umrao* with her singing of 'Jhoola kine dara'. Women like *Umrao* were trained in raga-sangeet; their performances, however, were primarily of thumri and ghazal In memory and imagination, therefore, thumri and the tawaif are inextricably linked.

I chose then for the play *Umrao* to focus primarily on *thumri* I decided thus for several reasons. To my mind *thumri* was the music of the *tawaifs* and therefore in a sense *thumri* and *tawaifs* signify each other. Also, in essence, *thumri gayaki* (as I understand it and as I have described it) seemed to me to be the key to understanding the *tawaifs* voice(s) and the many narratives around it and that it tells. I chose *thumri* rather than *ghazal* as the main focus because though both forms were sung by *tawaifs* *thumri* is the mother *gayaki*. As I understand it, *ghazal* exists in many spaces and forms. It has a life as a purely literary form, a written text that can be read; it exists as a form recited in *tarannum* style by male poets in the *mushaira*; it has another life as an offering to the *pir* at *sufi* shrines, where it is sung, generally in *qawwali* style; and then there is the *thumri-ang-ghazal*- the *ghazal* sung in the manner of *thumri*, using the details and nuances typical of *thumri gayaki*. So the *thumri-ang-ghazal*, which is the way the *tawaifs* sang *ghazal*, is only one of the ways that *ghazal* can be performed, and as its name suggests, its *gayaki* style derived from *thumri*. In a sense then, the *gayaki* of *ghazal*-the *thumri-ang-ghazal*-is included in the wider repertoire of *thumri*. The *gayaki* of *thumri* informs the way this *ghazal* will be sung.

I wanted also to question the expectation that *Umrao Jan*, a courtesan of Lucknow, would, inevitably, sing *ghazal*. I wanted to remember that *Umrao*, who was once *Ameeran*, had spent her childhood in *Faizabad* where she must surely have spoken *Avadhi*. Just as surely, she would have heard and sung *sohar banna-banni*, *jhoola* and *barahmasa*, and so many other songs of the seasons of the earth and of human life. I wanted to remember too that *Urdu* was the language of the court, but *Avadhi* was *Ameeran's* mother-tongue and so *Umrao's* too. By using *thumri* I felt I could suggest the journey of women like *Umrao* from their villages to the *kothas* of Lucknow, as also the journey of forms like the *purabi dadra* from their rustic origins to their transformation into courtly stiles And finally, I hoped the use of *thumri* would recall the poetry of *Wajid Ali Shah* (the *bandish* 'Mohan rasiya aaye' is his) and perhaps also question the half-articulated idea that equates Lucknavi culture and the culture of the *tawaifs* with 'muslim' culture, and all of these with *ghazal*.

My concerns were several. First the question: What relationship was the music to have to the play and to the other elements in the play.

Following from this, I had to consider problems of authenticity, history, sound-word-visual detail etc. I also had to understand the conventions of theatre music and choose or create a style that I thought suitable for umrao.

As I understand it, music is used in theatre in several ways. One way is for music to illustrate action, highlight meaning in a spoken line or a movement. What is being spoken or enacted is reported and echoed by the music, spun out. Alternatively, the music may serve as the word/action at that point. In these instances, music illustrates and carries forward the narrative. In this sense it is 'straight', literal.

Another way is for music to act as a kind of observing voice. Music is here used to highlight meaning, uncover a hidden or unexpressed idea or meaning. It is used to extend the actor's lines; it is an extension of the ongoing narrative.

Perhaps more than in theatre, in film, song and music can be fantastic elements, juxtaposing dreams and illusion with reality, thereby hinting at tensions, conflicts, and possible resolutions. In all these instances, music functions as narrative, as an element that defines, propels, or deflects the narrative.

Yet another way in which music appears in theatre is in its evocative function. Music, generally as background music, is introduced to create atmosphere, to heighten mood, even to anticipate events. It functions here as a kind of aural backdrop against which the play's action and its spoken text can be unfolded and heard and seen.

It also appears as spectacle, as performance. In some cases this might involve a break in the narrative, as for instance in many contemporary film songs. In other cases, the narrative might justify such spectacle - i.e. if the narrative deals, as the film *Umrao Jan* does, with a singer and her life.

Generally, also, the tendency has been to adopt a given notion of historical and formal authenticity - or to project that to the viewers. An interesting example of this is the song 'Mohe panghat pe' in *Mughal-e-Azam*. It seems to me to be a good example of music as performative, spectacular. Its use can be justified by the narrative, but it does not particularly further this narrative in any fashion. It is received as 'classical' music of the kind that would be sung by a courtesan. It is received as authentic. This, despite the fact that we also know that *thumri-dadra* was not performed, certainly not in this style, in Akbar's court, and that this *bandish* itself belongs to the repertoire of Lucknow *katltaks*-Achhan Maharaj's rendering of it is famous. It

does not belong to the Mughal courts: Yet in the film it is perfect-as song, as mood creator, *and* as a means to authenticate the historical setting. This particular song functions to locate the historical place and time, but equally it makes a claim of historical and formal authenticity for itself.

It seems to me also that generally music functions in theatre via the logic of a 'heard' realism that echoes the psychological realism of the actor's performances.

In *Umrao* I tried to understand these many ways of using music in theatre, and then tried to find a way of using music so that it would signify *thumri* itself. I know that music appears in theatre as one element among many and that therefore it has to surrender its autonomy here. Yet I wanted that in *Umrao* music should appear as music, as its own self - not as narrative, spectacle, mood or fantasy. My sense was that if it appeared as itself it would spontaneously also fulfill all these other functions.

The most important characteristic of Indian art music is, I think, its delight in itself. It does not need to refer to anything outside of itself. I suppose one might call this its abstract, formal quality. It is not concerned with motives, desires, cause and effect, with a need to be realistic. It is concerned only with itself. All else, all drama, comes from this concern. Mood, emotion are all created through *gayaki*, through the form. This is true, even in the case of that most evocative, lyrical and emotional of forms, *thumri*. The form does not create *bhav* by emoting, rather *bhav* is born through the form itself which, paradoxically is known and made manifest through details like the nuanced sounding of *swar* and *bol*, the changes in the texture of the voice, in moments of silence, movements etc.

I worked, then, as if I were singing. The whole, an understanding of the whole text (not just the script, but also the novel, my many discussions with musicians etc.) was with me, but I worked slowly along the details. I did not attempt to prove a historical, credible authenticity, but stayed instead with an inner authenticity. I did not try to create *bhav* evoke emotion or atmosphere through music-I tried instead to let *thumri* appear as itself, as its own form and let it speak from there. It seemed to me that what I wanted to do was to create a musical text (not just a series of songs) that would run parallel to the written/spoken text(s) - i.e. the novel, its many voices, the play as written, and as performed. I hoped the musical text would echo and interrogate our ways of reading the lives of women, women performers, the forms they practiced and their performances, the play script, the performances of these actors. It seemed to me that the

way I could do this was by making the musical text interact with the speech and movement, with the stage space and sets, word, sound and visual detail. The musical text also had to interact with its own history. I wanted also that the music should highlight the quality of thumri gayaki-both its conversational tone, and its dramatic quality, and also emphasize its decorative, *nakhrila* quality. I chose to work with details that would weave in and out of the spoken text like another voice, the voice of music which was both Umrao's other voice and simultaneously much more than just an alternative voice. Thus, for instance, Umrao traces thumri story and the stories that are told about it-a parallel narrative to Ruswa's about Umrao, and Umrao's own. I do this through the references to film music, whereby thumri's story is traced from *darbar* and mehfil through popular forms like *nautanki* to the world of commercial recordings and Bombay films, and the creation of a 'modern', 'Indian' cultural representation. Through film music, I also suggest the stories of women who might be Umrao's daughters - those wonderful actresses of our childhood days, whose beauty and presence still haunt us, and who defined, for me and my generation, our ideas of love and romance. This was the idea that led to my singing a traditional thumri and recording it over the background music from Shree 420's classic umbrella sequence song. I wanted this music to suggest the journey of thumri from purabi folk song to mehfil music to inspiration for so much early film music. I wanted it also to suggest the lives of Jaddan Bai, one of the greatest singers of her time, and her daughter Fatima whom we know as Nargis-Nargis the star of the RK Films era, Nargis the social worker, the lady in white. I wanted the music also to link Umrao's aloneness at the end of the previous scene, the falling rain, the two moods of *birha* and *sanjog*, with the light-hearted, playful mood of the next scene. Ruswa's umbrella was the visual equivalent of the background texture of the jingling interlude in the *Shree 420* music; it was against this that I could spread the *bandish* 'Piya bina sooni sejaria'.

At other times, the music attempts to create, to become spaces and times. I felt here that I was working with colleagues whose own style included an understanding of this. I see in Geetanjali [Shri's] script and Anuradha [Kapur's] dramaturgy a similar effort. The word is made flesh; it becomes that which it signifies, while simultaneously going beyond it. The *barahmasa* 'Nayi jhoolan' is used in this way - to signify Faiz Ali; to signify also his nostalgia for the pastoral charm of Farrukhabad, and a listening Umrao's for the remembered innocence of her Faizabad childhood. The use of *barahmasa* in this fashion also suggests that this nostalgia is at the heart of *thumri* performance - perhaps of all our engagements with 'traditional' art forms. In

an earlier time, just so might a newly-urbanized *taluqdar* have listened nostalgically to a *barahmasa* Today's listeners nostalgically imagine a world of beauty and romance now lost forever.

Inevitably, because I refused the notion of authenticity, I had to address it head-on. I tried to deal with the issue by juxtaposing, without hierarchizing, music from different sources and times-film music, film versions and representations of *thumri* and *ghazal*, songs sung by Begum Akhtar, Kamla Jharia, and also by myself and by Uttara Baokar [who played Umrao Jan]. Kamla Jharia's voice, singing 'Na turn mere' was used to evoke the atmosphere of the *kotha* and the *chawk*, and also juxtaposed with Uttara's voice and mine to suggest changes in style, voice texture, life style. The sequence that follows features Uttara and myself singing two different *bandishes* (in two different *talas*) in the very similar ragas, SindhuraKafi and Kahi. It suggested the atmosphere of the *kotha*, the way, for instance, people describe Dal Mandi in (Banaras) and even the Burhwa Mangal festivals of Banaras-'waves of music coming at you from all directions'. But I also wanted it to suggest the fact that while *tawaiifs* listened to and learnt from each other, legitimacy as a performer came from *shagirdi* with an *ustad* (at one time, sarangi players; increasingly, later, vocalists of the *khayal gharana* traditions). I wanted it to suggest the bitterness and gentle resignation with which *tawaiifs* have told me how they taught young men of *gharana* families all that they knew, but how they were never acknowledged as teachers. I wanted it to suggest that as women our relationship with knowledge and the legitimacy of knowledge is tentative and apologetic.

I believed that the ideas I had about *thumri*, and about how music should be used in *Umrao* would meet with understanding, and more-a parallel thought process-from my colleagues. The sequence using Sindhura-Kafi and Kafi could not have worked as it did without Amit Bararia's brainwave of using two different *bandishes* (earlier I had planned to use only one). Nor would it have worked without Anuradha's blocking of the scene in the way that she did. Nor would the scene itself have been possible if the actors had refused to rework and re-block the scene consequent to Amit's suggestion which came late in the rehearsals. Anuradha used an umbrella to suggest Nargis, romance, nostalgia, to continue the rain of the earlier scene-and the 'Piya bina' song sequence leapt to my mind. Words and silences from Geetanjali's layered, nuanced script provided the points of entry and exit for music. And Nilima [Sheikh's] paintings created the detail, nuance and intimacy, the shifting perception, the moving frame, that

to my mind characterizes both *thumri* and miniature painting. Part of the enjoyment of *Umrao* then was that from the very beginning we worked together, the different elements developed and were worked out together and simultaneously, so that music or stage sets were not so much made to fit a given script, performances were not elicited to suit a finished text, but rather that all these various elements came together, in relation to each other. So that I felt supported in this work by—certainly Anuradha, Geetanjali and Nilima—but also by the actors whose performance brought the script, the music, the painted sets to life, by the stage hands, by Rajan and Giridhariji who handled the sound and the lights, and by Amit who took over the arduous task of recording and making a master track of the sound, and whose comments and criticisms were invaluable in finalizing not just my choices about the music, but also my convictions about my choices and decisions.

As with all performing art, a play is finally a performance that is seen, and (hopefully) understood and enjoyed by its audience. For those involved in its creation, for me, working on *Umrao* was a joy in itself, an end in itself.

The Player King and the Clown

Look at the clown. he
unremembered his costume,
unremembered his practised pranks,
unremembered who he is
made his face an unreadable and,
Like a king, unafraid of the mess he had made,
unflinching, walked across the stage,
stood firm, hands folded at his back,
And looked at the audience with a regal look

dressed the clown's words in the costume of the king
and murmured 'ye' in all arrogance.

chewed and crushed each syllable

as he articulated them.

words were authority-intoxicated,

voice was in the base without a scale.

the king's wish was accepted.

The people were happy and elated.

they danced and saluted; saluted and danced.

The king peeped out of the side-wing, just then.

'look at the buffoon and laugh,' the clown said.

dumb people of all the twelve zodiac signs

laughed aloud.

'i, your monarch, am leaving. send me off' said the clown.

up stood the spectators and

silently the clown made his exit.

when with utmost royal pride

the king took his entry

the people roared with laughter,

clap-clapped their hands, and hissed.

when i told the people he was their king

'you are a clown' they shouted.

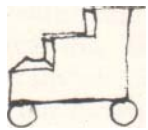
please be serious, this is not the play intended

i tried to explain.

the audience called me a fool

and made me sit down quietly.

Poetry by Chandrasekhar Kantbar Visuals by Chittrovanu Mazumdar





The Character I Created

the character in my play
climbed off the stage
came directly to me,
and took the chair next to me.

i was looking at the play
he was looking at me.
his looks, like arrows,
pierced my heart.

if i shifted my legs,
so that they should not touch his,
his legs wantonly brushed mine
his hand fell heavily on my shoulder.

when the audience was silent
his laughter burst out.
when he clapped, it was unnecessary.
every eye was on him, and
his eyes were on me.

it was just not right.

standing up

i walked out

he followed me.

as i opened the door

he went in, before me.

smiling familiar smiles

he stood-a mirror in front of me!

why do these so many characters,

educated in civility by me,

behave like this?.



Poetry by Chandrashekhar Kambar Visuals by Chittrovanu Mazumdar

Theatre Log

A Retrospective of Badal Sircar's Plays

The Ethnic Arts Centre of Hyderabad, in association with Samskar, organized a retrospective of Badal Sircar's plays and a seminar on his work on 27, 28 and 29 July 1995 at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's conference hall in Hyderabad. At the formal inauguration of the retrospective, Mr.

Nandadulal Dasgupta introduced Badal Sircar and the noted dancer Sri Nataraja Ramakrishna felicitated him. All the plays performed by Sircar's own group Satabdi were presented in Bengali after a brief introduction by Sircar himself before each show.

Adapted from an African play, *Sada-Kalo* (White and Black) is a Utopian tale about political and racial oppression in South Africa where God descended to witness the people's suffering and help them. The play satirized the ruling class and its military and mocked them in their desperate fight against God. It was greatly appreciated by the audience even though they did not know Bengali.

The second play *Chadui Bhati* (Picnic) was a . humorous anti-war play which showed how a government indoctrinates soldiers to fight against another nation. Two soldiers belonging to enemy nations meet at the battlefield and learn from each other about the meaninglessness of war. They enjoy themselves by joining the picnic arranged at the battlefield itself by the parents of one of the soldiers. The juxtaposition of a picnic and a war intensified anti-war feelings by highlighting the absurdity and horrors of war.

The third play presented by Satabdi was *Michhil* (Procession) in which Badal Sircar himself played the Ad man. The image of Khoka suggested how innocents are victimized and oppressed by those in power. The officer symbolized the physical oppression while the Master stood for oppressive power as such. The play exemplified how not only religious rituals but also political rituals like the procession itself would make people confused. The Master first used religion, then liquor and finally culture to deaden the awareness of the people. Sircar thus lashed out at the media of entertainment that diverts our minds from perceiving the real problems our society faces. The play ended in forming a human chain with all the people, actors and audience, and thus emphasized the need for collective effort in finding the right road. The play was very unique in its theme and technique and it evoked great response from the Telugu audience.

The third day opened with a discussion on Sircar's plays and the role of alternative theatre. In my paper on the Cultural Labyrinth in Sircar's *Procession I* attempted to show how the crisscross roads in the play symbolize the cultural labyrinth where people get lost, being disoriented and dehumanized. This was followed by a discussion where Badal Sircar answered questions from the participants.

Sircar explained that he uses theatre to create awareness among people. He believes in collective endeavour to understand and solve social and political problems. He does not believe

in the omniscience of political leaders but prefers to learn from the so-called illiterate people. He also repudiates the authorship of certain plays, which he attributes to the collective effort of Satabdi.

M. Sarat Babu

Golay Memorial Seminar on the Modern Dramatic Statement

The department of English, University of Pune, had organized a seminar on the Modern Dramatic Statement on 7 and 8 December, 1995. Dr Prashant K. Sinha, professor and head of the department, welcomed the participants to the seminar and fondly remembered late W. H. Golay who, through a substantial donation, had made it possible to hold this seminar. Dr Sinha stated that the funds were sufficient for the Drama department to make the seminar a yearly event.

In his welcome address Dr. Sinha attributed the multiplicity of forms in Indian theatre, both classical and folk, to the country's cultural pluralism and traced the Western influence on Indian theatre. Dr Shreeram Lagoo delivered the inaugural speech and emphasized the importance of technique in theatre production, with illustrations of how bad productions spoil the spirit of a good play. In his presidential speech Prof. Barlinge drew a revealing comparison between drama and human life. Unlike animals the human being is capable of going beyond one's real 'self' and entering another 'character'. Prof. Barlinge analysed various components of acting such as speech, emotions, gestures and costumes with make-up and talked on the need for their proper synthesis to bring about the intended effect.

Dr Sujit Mukherjee chaired the first session and Dr Vinod Sena presented a paper on the 'dancer plays' of W. B. Yeats. The 'dancer plays' enabled the playwright to express what he could not express in his previous plays. He borrowed the technique from the Noh theatre of Japan, that had impressed him with its great intensity and expressiveness.

In the second session, chaired by Dr Vinod Sena, Ms Swati Pal presented a paper on Ritual and Agitprop Theatre and Ms K. Sumana on Absurd Theatre.

The third session was chaired by Prof. Venkata Reddy. In her brilliant paper on Tagore's *Natir Paaja*, Dr Rimli Bhattacharya illustrated how Tagore had improvised during preparing the production and drawn on various dance forms of India. She discussed in detail Tagore's experiments with colour, light, language, scenery and gestures. The performance of the play raised several questions about what an Indian woman should be. In her paper on Third Theatre

Dr Sarbani Sen presented a comparative study of Tagore's *Raktakarabi* with Badal Sircar's *Procession*.

On the second day Dr Raja Rao chaired the first session. Analysing Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*, Ms Anjelic drew the attention of the participants to the sexism reflected in the play which presupposes that dance, specially Bharatanatyam, is essentially feminine. Women participants lashed out at this concept during the discussion that followed.

Dr Anikhet Javare from the Department of English, Pune University, chaired the second session. Rajeev Naik discussed the dramatic technique of fellow playwright Chandrasekhar Phansalkar in his paper. Dr Sharma analysed various productions of Shaw's plays. The third session was chaired by Prof. Vinod Sena. Dr Suman Bala dealt with the technical aspects of Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. Prof. K. Venkat Reddy studied the plays of Badal Sircar which, according to him, transcended the limitations of urban commercial theatre as well as rural indigenous theatre. He discussed a progressive development in Sircar's work from *Procession*, which dealt with a search for a real road to a real home, through *Bhoma*, to *Stale News*. Prof. Prashant K. Sinha chaired the last session. The undersigned presented a paper on Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*, discussing the status of woman in society. The playwright was present and took part in the discussion. In answer to questions from the participants he said that he was very optimistic about the future of Marathi theatre because a new generation of playwrights had emerged on the scene. He said that contemporary social and political life is very complex and so is the human character. Therefore it is very difficult to find solutions to complex human problems. His own experience cautioned him not to be too enthusiastic about them.

Dr R. K. Dhavan summarized the proceedings in his brief report, and the seminar ended with a vote of thanks proposed by Prof. Sinha.

M. Sarat Babu

Notebook

Seminars

An international seminar on 'Continuities and Convergences in the Performing Arts Traditions in East, South and Southeast Asia' was held in Calcutta on 11 and 12 December, under the auspices of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, in collaboration with the ICCR. The objective was to break away

from the obvious and look 'beyond the shortsightedness of Indological exercises' in a search for 'a possible Asian view that would allow for differences within the Asian sensibility and offer a model that allows recognition of difference.' The general approach was stated as an attempt to find out 'if there is anything specially *oriental* or even *third world* in the form of performing arts' and to reach an understanding of how 'societies have traditionally looked upon the problems of creativity and artistic experience' and most importantly, to study 'the place and role of modernism and modernity as post-Enlightenment Europe understood them.' The project is understandably very ambitious and the present seminar was planned after a general round table of Indian scholars held earlier in April had set the above ground rules.

In her keynote address Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, director of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, discussed the possibilities and problems of such an enquiry and suggested areas/topics which need study and re-examination. For example, a fresh translation of classical texts like the *Natyashastra* would definitely throw new light on the subject. Prof. Li Shi Min of Central Academy of Drama, Beijing, China, briefly talked about a possible theorization of the actor-text-audience relationship, while another Chinese scholar, Dr. Tan Chung, talked on 'Asian Cultural Interfaces' with a selection of slides on Indian-Asian motifs in sculptures and paintings. In his brilliant paper on 'The Singing Voice: Some Asian Perspectives' Dr. Ashok Ranade carefully compared singing traditions in different societies and their cultural specificities with a very good selection of examples of voices and styles. Another paper presented by Mr. Chun In-Pyong of Chung-ang University, Seoul, on 'The Triple Musical Form of India and Korea', illustrated the similarities, dissimilarities, points of convergence and departure in Indian and Korean music. Alessandra Iyer's paper on 'Dance Sculpture of Prambanan: Natyashastra in Ancient Java' analysed the sculptures of the Prambanan Temple and identified them as illustrations of the *Natyashastra*, which clearly indicates the artistic and cultural absorption of the Natyashastra system in Java. Other presentations were from H. Kanhailal of Manipur, A.J. Gunawardana of Sri Lanka and Ms. Takako Inoue from Japan. Mr Samik Banerjee coordinated the seminar on behalf of the Asiatic Society.

Natrang Pratishthan, New Delhi, organized an informal discussion session with the noted Bangladeshi playwright, Sayiid Ahmed, on 16 November 1995 at Triveni Sabhaghar, New Delhi. The topic of the discussion was 'Some Aspects of the Bangladeshi Stage' (*Bangladesh*

Rangmanch ke kuchh Pehlu). On his visit to India Ahmed was working on the Chhattisgarh drama forms.

Awards

The noted Hindi playwright of Rajasthan, Hamidulla, was awarded the prestigious annual Behari Puraskar, 1995, instituted by the K.K. Birla Foundation. The award of Rs. 50,000, citation, shawl and silver decorations were presented to the playwright at a prestigious ceremony held at Rajputana Palace Sheraton in Jaipur on 7 November, 1995. A postgraduate in Hindi literature, Hamidulla has been given various awards by the state governments of Rajasthan (including the state's highest literary award, Mira Puraskar), Karnataka, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.

Productions

Asmita, New Delhi, staged Girish Karnad's *Rakt Kalyan (Tale-danda)* translated by Ramgopal Bajaj and directed by Arvind Gaur at Sriram Centre, between August 23-27 and September 17-21. Samanantar Intimate Theatre, Allahabad, presented the Hindi play *Manthan* at the NCZCC Auditorium on 26 October. The play was written by Vibhanshu Vaibhav and directed by A. R. Bhowmick.

Between 14-20 December, the students of Rangashram Theatre School (Natyavidyalay) staged four productions-Urubhangatn (direction: Partha Bandyopadhyay), *Madhyanha* Surya (direction: Sandeep Bhattacharya), Garbhavati *Janani* (direction: Sidhartha Chakraborty), Arturo Ui (direction: Pradeep Bhattacharya)-on their premises at Behrampore in Murshidabad district, West Bengal. Rangashram was established in October 1994 and their objectives are the preservation of Murshidabad district's folk culture, creation of theatre archives and library, conducting theatre workshops for children, building an auditorium and open-air spaces for theatre performance and developing training and production of professional performances.

Gita-an Imagery, an intercultural collaborative performance directed by H. Kanhailal, and performed by actors from Manipur and Tamil Nadu, was presented by Arangham Trust, Brahaddhvani and Koothu-p-pattarai, in collaboration with Kalakshetra Manipur, supported by South Zone Cultural Centre. The performance venue was the Museum Theatre, Egmore, Madras, and the dates were December 6 and 7.

Bangalore Little Theatre produced *Head Start*, a new play by Vijay Padaki premiered specially for Child Relief and You (CRY). The show opened in Bangalore in January, followed by shows in Madras. It is dedicated to David Horsburgh, whose methodology for taking quality education to the poorest children is now gaining recognition, more than ten years after his death.

Festivals

The 12th Nandikar National Theatre Festival was held in Calcutta from 15 December. This respected annual forum draws theatre groups and performers from all over the country. The programme began with felicitations to Salil Bandopadhyay, Debashish Mazumdar and a concert led by Amjad Ali Khan. This year the festival included children's plays by Nandikar's children's projects, Calcutta Rescue and Natarang, Jammu. Other visiting groups included Act One from Delhi, Spandana from Bangalore (who presented B. Jayshree in a one-woman play, *Uriya Uyyale*, directed by Surendranath), Trimiti, Pune (who presented Karnad's *Agnijal* directed by Bhaskar Chandavarkar), Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre from Delhi who presented *Jantadarin and Sarak* and Cltarandas Chor. Padatik in collaboration with Anamika Kala Sangam, Calcutta also presented their recent 'spectacle on stage', *Ram Katha Ram Kahani* directed by Shyamanand Jalan.

From 22-24 December Rangkarmee, Calcutta, held a three-day festival of its award winning productions, *Lokkatha*, *Court Martial*, and *Rudali*, directed by Usha Ganguli, at Madhusudan Mancha. The group is also scheduled to celebrate its 20th Foundation Day in January, 1996.

Celebrations

On the occasion of 200 years of Bengali theatre, the Department of Information and Culture announced the construction of Banga Natya Bhavan at 85, A.J. C. Bose Road, Calcutta. The foundation stone was laid by Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister, on 27 November. The cultural programme following it was presided over by Budhhadev Bhattacharya, Minister for Information and Culture.

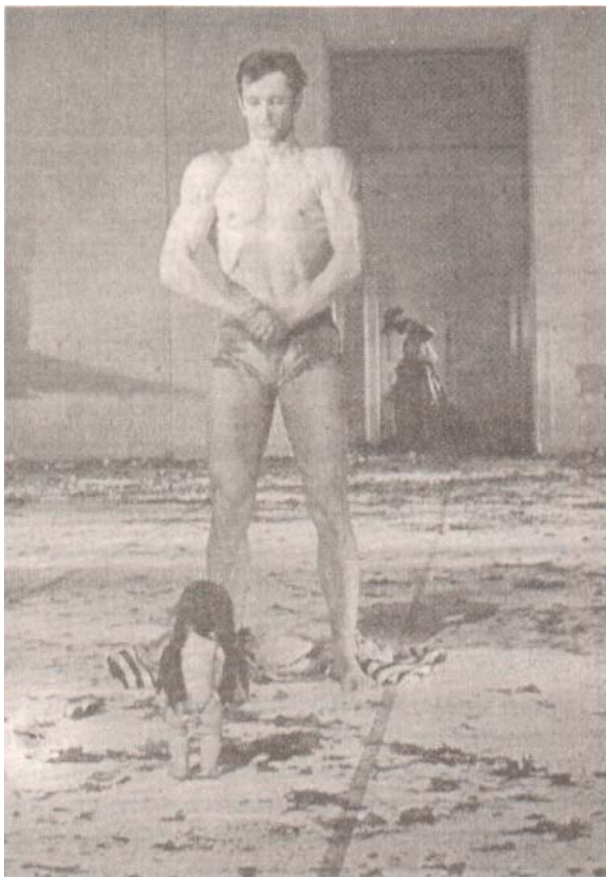
This Notebook consists entirely of information sent in to us by theatre workers. STQ invites theatre individuals and groups to send in reports and announcements of productions, workshops, seminars and any other significant news items they wish to share with the theatre community through this forum.

Books on Theatre from Routledge

Ramsay Burt

The Male Dancer

Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities



Men, brought the first time by their wives, returned of their own accord, and found that the dance, as an exhibition of art, muscular poise and coordination, was as exciting as a track meet and a wrestling match. They agreed with (Ted) Shawn, that 'dancing is not a sissy art'.

Under the sheer weight of attention to women's bodies we seem to have become blind to something. Nobody seems to have noticed that men's bodies have quietly absented themselves.

Somewhere along the line, men have managed to keep out of the glare, escaping from the relentless activity of sexual definitions.

(Rosalind Cozvard, 1984)

The climax of his art was his jump. He leaped high into the air, and there stayed for what seemed several seconds. Face and body suggested that he was to mount still further, do the Indian rope trick with himself as rope, hurl himself up into space through an invisible ceiling and disappear. But then he came down - and here was the second miracle - more slowly than he had gone up, landing as softly as a deer clearing a hedge of snow.

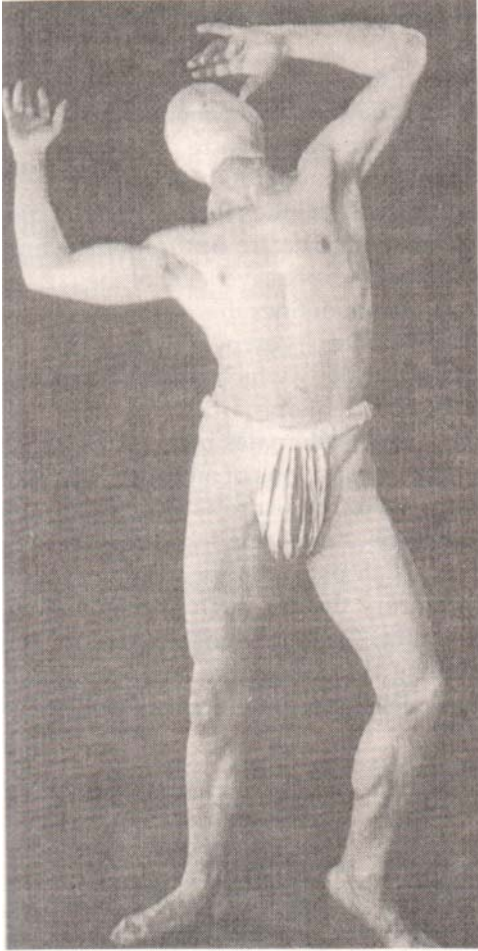
(Rebecca West on Nijinsky, quoted in Buckle, 1975)

Theatre dance is dance performed on stage rather than dance activity occurring in social situations. In looking at gender representations, Ramsay Burt's approach is inspired by the achievements of the women's movement in redefining images of women. Issues relating to images of men, however, are often different from those which affect images of women. There is a key difference between reevaluating images of women and doing the same for images of men. Part of the feminist project has been to reclaim and redefine femininity, and to celebrate the achievements of women artists and thus contradict the legacy of centuries of definition and domination by men. To what extent can men's achievements in dance be celebrated without at the same time reasserting male dominance and thus reinforcing the imbalance of power between men and women in our society? In an ideal world, men should be able to find ways of expressing their individual experiences through dance and contribute to non-discriminatory perceptions of the differences between men and women. The reality is, of course, the reverse: images of men generally reinforce male dominance over women. But, as is argued in the first part of this book, patriarchy is maintained through limiting the ways in which masculinity is represented in cultural forms including theatre dance. To become aware of the conscious and unconscious ways through which dominant ideas are inscribed in theatre dance, is a step towards understanding how to create alternative, non-oppressive representations.

In this lively book Ramsay Burt examines a selection of significant developments in the representation of masculinity in western theatre dance during the twentieth century. A major assumption that underlies this selection is that it is only within work that is progressive, experimental or avant-garde that staid old-fashioned images and ideas about gender can be challenged and alternatives examined. Taking issue with formalist and modernist accounts of

dance, which dismiss gender and sexuality as irrelevant, he argues that prejudices against male dancers are rooted in our ideas about the male body and male behaviour.

Building upon ideas about the gendered gaze developed by film and feminist theorists, Ramsay Burt provides a provocative theory of spectatorship in dance. He uses this to examine the work of choreographers like Nijinsky, Graham and Bausch, while relating their dances to the social, political and artistic contexts in which they were produced. Within these re-readings he identifies a distinction between institutionalized modernist dance which evokes an essentialist, heroic 'hypermasculinity' and radical, avantgarde choreography which challenges and disrupts dominant representations of masculinity. What is argued is that masculinity as a socially constructed identity is not a stable entity. Rather, it is made up of conflictual and contradictory aspects. Representations of masculinity in theatre dance over the last hundred and fifty years have threatened to disrupt and destabilize masculine identity. What makes extreme, almost stereotypical representations of violent, macho masculinity appear to support dominant conservative norms of masculinity in one ballet or modern dance piece but criticize and threaten these norms in another? Why is it that some choreographers have been able to reject and subvert the conventions and traditions through which masculinity is represented, while others' attempts have been recuperated within dominant conservative gender ideologies? How is it that some choreographers



have succeeded in making visible aspects of masculine experience that are otherwise denied or rendered invisible within mainstream work?

— *The Male Dancer is* essential reading for anyone interested in dance and the cultural construction of gender.

Pb: ISBN 0 415 08900 X £ 12.99

Edited by Phillip B. Zarrilli

Acting (Re)Considered

Theories and practices

Scientists of the body speak in figures, teachers of acting speak in images, artists speak in words, theorists speak in propositions. To speak in any of these forking tongues is to be split

from the others. It is necessary, though perhaps not possible, that we describe a line that will join these several points. The gap between performance and thought is not simple, but is composed of subgaps on either side, between the pedagogical imagery of performance and the flesh which performance possesses, between thought about the theatre and the metathought which plays through theatre ... The performer and the thinker could momentarily meet in the sign's provisional and already receding closure. The two might be-is it too much to ask?-the same person

(Holis Huston, 1984)

There are many languages and discourses of acting, each written/spoken from a particular point of view. Theorists often speak only to theorists; practitioners only to practitioners. Too seldom do they speak to each other. This book invites us to try to speak and listen across these gaps and boundaries to each other and to those parts of our 'selves' which might practise theory or theorize practice.

Acting (Re)Considered is an exceptionally wide-ranging collection of theories on acting, ideas about the body and training, and statements about the actor in performance. Included are discussions on acting by or about major figures who have shaped late nineteenth and twentieth century performance, including: Meyerhold, Copeau, Decroux, Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, Barba, Suzuki, Fo, Rosenthal, Dafoe.

The essays-by directors, theorists, historians, actor trainers and actors - bridge the divide between the theory and the practice of acting. This is vital reading for all interested in performance.

Pb: ISBN 0 415 09859 9 £ 12.99

Eugenio Barba

The Paper Canoe

A Guide to Theatre Anthropology

An actress flips through the pages of this book and asks me: 'Of what use to me are all these analyses, all these examples, the same names over and over again?' And she adds: 'Your

book is arid. I work alone, in an empty room, in what you call the Third World or the Third Theatre. I am already fighting everyday against my own aridity. This is not what I expect from a book about the actor.

I answer: 'Here there are pipes, channels, a few reservoirs, all of them dry and empty. Noone can give you *your* water.'

She asks me: 'Do you mean that without all this, my water, if there is any, becomes a swamp?'

It is easy to banalize the words 'profession' or 'technique' by repeating: 'These are not the most important things.'

Yet, apart from one small element, finding *one's own meaning* in the theatre implies a personal invention of one's craft.

But what I call 'the small element' is the essential thing. It has to do with a part of ourselves which is subject to continuous disorientation, to periods of silence, tiredness, aridity, discouragement. It is a teeming and sombre sea which at times seems flooded with light and at times daunts us and is as bitterly infertile as the salt it contains.

One cannot remain with one's eyes fixed on stars or one's heart abandoned to the sea for long. One needs the well constructed deck of a ship, the grease of the engines, the artificial fire of welders.

To invent one's own meaning means knowing how to search for the way to find it.

Sometimes the shortest route between two points is an arabesque, the journey of a canoe gripped by the currents. This book is a paper canoe. The currents are the flowing multiplicity of theatres and their performers, experiences and memories. The canoe's route twists and turns, but according to a method.

If you can't bite, don't show your teeth.

I must concentrate on technical precision. I can only collaborate with those who know the art of self-discipline.

I believe only in the stubborn. I write this 'treatise' for them.

Do not believe that it will be of use to you. Do not believe that you will be able to do without it. Eugenio Barba, director, theorist and founder of Odin Teatret, is today one of the main points of reference for contemporary theatre. *The Paper Canoe* is the first major study of theatre anthropology; it distils all the research of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, and focuses upon the pre-expressive level of the performer's art. Barba defines this as the basic technique which creates 'presence' on stage; a dilated and effective body which can hold and guide a spectator's attention.

The Paper Canoe alternates between detached analysis and the observations of an ardent traveler who reveals the value of theatre as a discipline and a revolt. It comprises a fascinating dialogue with the masters of Asian performance and the makers of twentieth-century theatre, such as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Craig, Copeau, Brecht, Artaud and Decroux, making their thoughts and techniques accessible and relevant to contemporary practice.

Pb: ISBN 0 415 11674 0 £ 10.99

Readers of STQ are welcome to acquire these titles at a 10% discount and post free from: Seagull Books Private Limited, 26 Circus Avenue, Calcutta 700017. Tel: 407942, 403636. Fax: 2477906

STQ invites publishers and distributors to send us books on theatre and the other arts, as well as from the broad field of culture studies, for inclusion in this section.