PROJECTS / PROCESSES
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About Projects/Processes

Projects / Processes is a new initiative to publish commissioned research essays, longform writing, and in-depth criticism that explore the ideas and processes behind select curatorial projects at Serendipity Arts Festival. Over two years, the Festival has accumulated a rich database of creative energies and partnerships. As an eight-day long event, the Festival is a platform for multidisciplinary collaboration and cultural innovation, and has commissioned over 70 new works across the visual arts and performance since its inception in 2016. The Projects / Processes series offers an opportunity to give some of these works and the stories that they tell an afterlife, through a deeply engaged look at how they came together and their significance to the discourse of contemporary art in India moving forward. Each volume comprises essays covering distinct projects that stand in some dialogue with each other, through the questions they raise and the thematic landscape they cover.

About Serendipity Arts Festival

Serendipity Arts Festival is a multi-disciplinary arts event set over a period of eight days in December in the vibrant settings of Panaji, Goa. Curated by a panel of eminent artists and institutional figures, this festival is a long-term cultural project that hopes to affect positive change in the arts in India on a large scale.

Serendipity Arts Festival 2017 experimented with site, form, scale, and display, featuring over 70 projects including more than 40 projects commissioned specifically for the Festival, alongside a line-up of scintillating programmes spanning music, dance, theatre, visual arts and culinary arts. In addition to the curated events, we believe in collaborations that can give the Festival varied perspectives. As a result, SAF 2017 saw an exciting array of Special Projects which highlight our institutional collaborations.

The Festival also attempts to address pressing issues such as arts education, patronage culture, interdisciplinary discourse and accessibility to the arts. This intensive programme of exhibitions and performances is accompanied by spaces for social and educational engagement.

About Serendipity Arts Foundation

Serendipity Arts Foundation is an arts and cultural development Foundation created to encourage and support the arts as a significant contributor to civil society. It aims to promote new creative strategies, artistic interventions, and cultural partnerships that are responsive and seek to address the social, cultural and environmental milieu of South Asia. Committed to innovation, SAF intends to promote and create platforms for creativity, providing the wider public with a unique source of contemporary art and culture. SAF programmes are designed and initiated through collaborations with partners across a multitude of fields, each intervention created using the arts to impact education, create social initiatives, foster community development, and explore both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity in the arts, with a special focus on South Asia.

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Quality Street
Performed and Directed by Maya Krishna Rao

Quality Street, based on the story by Nigerian writer
Chimamanda Adichie, is about a mother and her daughter,
set in Lagos, Nigeria, but with a few details changed can be
transposed to several cities across the world. The entire story
is a non-stop, verbal 'boxing match' between mother and
daughter - funny, yet deeply moving. At a deeper level, the story
looks at issues that lie at the core of people's lives – of culture,
values and relationships within a family.
This is a solo performance, where the events are seen through
the eyes of the mother, Mrs. Njoku. The show is a salute to all
mothers (and fathers) who strive to put up with their children
against, sometimes, very heavy odds.

Shikhandi
Directed by Faezeh Jalali
Produced by NCPA in association with FATS TheArts

A comic, tongue-in-cheek retelling of the story of Shikhandi
from the Mahabharata, directed by Faezeh Jalali, mixes the
traditional with the contemporary, questioning maleness,
femaleness and everything in between. Shikhandi is perhaps
one of the earliest trans-characters from Indian mythology.
Shikhandi was meant to be born male to avenge an insult in

her past life as Amba. But a bigger karmic game unfolds when she is reborn female, raised male, has a sex change (thanks to a *yaksha*) on her wedding night when she finally fulfils her destiny – to be the cause of Bhishma's death.

Dumb Wait-err
Conceptualised and Directed by Tushar Pandey
Collaborators Samagra Creations + Push and Pull Theatre

This production is an interpretation of Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, adapted to Hindustani and performed in a site responsive style. This show challenges the traditional notions of spectatorship in theatre and brings ideas such as voyeurism to the fore. Using multiple TV screens, CCTV cameras and the live performance, the space binds the situation, characters and the audience together in a unique experience.

Theatrical Explorations of Contemporaneity

Gargi Bharadwaj

This essay is a reflection on three theatre productions staged at Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa, 2017: *Quality Street*, performed and directed by Maya Krishna Rao, Faezeh Jalali's *Shikhandi: The story of the In-Betweens*, and Harold Pinter's *Dumb Wait-err*, directed by Tushar Pandey. The essay segues from one performance to the next, paying attention to what each work makes intelligible and sensible and how that affects the spectator, calling upon her to think and act in particular ways. These performances offer a provocation to the senses. What is seen, heard, and felt forms the basis of the theatrical experience affected through the theatrical material—body/movement, space/stage, sound/voice. There is little in common between them in terms of aesthetics, organisation of space, processes of production, and specificities of reception. But from a curatorial perspective, reflecting on these performances collectively might alter the experience of these works and enable a conceptualisation of citizenship through performance that can be broached in the festival context.

I. Between Text and Context: Exploring the Radical Potential of Comedy

Maya Rao's *Quality Street* is a single actor comic performance based on the short story by the Nigerian feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It takes stock of the relationship between a bourgeois Nigerian mother, Mrs. Njoku and her daughter, Sochienne, who has returned home after six years in America, radically transformed. The planning of her wedding in the village family home to a Kenyan becomes the rallying point for the differences of lifestyle and faith as Mrs. Njoku negotiates her young and stubborn daughter's desires to lead a life much different from her own. We see her go through a gamut of emotions, from being shocked, to mocking her daughter's choices, to feeling disappointed and even insulted by her—Sochienne calls her "a fat bourgeois, a dilettante dancing while Nigeria was failing, as though she could somehow solve the country's problems by depriving herself of a manicure!" Acutely aware of how notions of postcolonial modernity might translate across cultural contexts, Rao's witty and thoughtful performance uses gestures, movement and tonal inflections to contemporize Adichie's story for an urban Indian audience. The reference to faith as a box of multicoloured wrappers in a purple Quality Street chocolate box—the quintessential totem of the well-travelled Victorian taste—translates as diversity and difference in the Indian context, an idea deeply challenged by discourses of Indian-ness in the present. The politically dominant view that

conflates modernisation with westernization and asserts atavistic sectarianism and majoritarian impulses at the cost of principles of inclusivity embedded in our liberal democratic constitution are immediately called into question. Sochienne's choice of the family country house over an "overpriced gilded hall" in the city for her wedding or ancestral gods over catholic rosary rings in nostalgia for older beliefs, negotiating the divide between African traditions and an alienated modernity.

Quality Street stands apart from the performance oeuvre of Maya Krishna Rao that spans over four decades of theatre making, performing, teaching, and activism. Maya's practice combines years of Kathakali training with the topicality of street theatre and the comic edginess of political cabaret and burlesque, inflected with innovative techniques of sound and camera. Her shows have developed from everyday images on the street and in newspapers (*Deep Fried Jam*, 2002), reinterpreting deeply complex epic and canonical literary characters (*Ravanama*, 2011 and *Lady Macbeth Revisited*, 2010), social tragedies and instances of violence against women (*Om Swaha*, 1979, *Heads are Meant for Walking Into*, 2005, and *Walk*, 2012). In all of these performances, Maya created performance texts rather than building on already-scripted material. Performed as single actor shows, often staged in collaboration with media artists, sound designers, and musicians, her work has a deep, affective impact brought about by inducing the spectator at levels material, physical, and emotional. The characters in these pieces, their personal and social world, physical and psychological space, are reconstructed to speak to our political, social, and moral sensibilities, albeit never

directly but obliquely. Maya weaves together a conundrum of sound, image, media, word, song, action, noise, silence, movement, and stillness. We are never allowed to settle into the humour or pathos she creates, but are required to constantly struggle to join the dots she splutters around. *Quality Street* departs from this repertoire that has in the recent years focused more on staging encounters with the audience on the street, in university campuses and protest marches, and marks a return to her earlier body of work, where written texts (mostly short stories) were the basis of performance, and interpersonal relationships took center stage (Brecht's *The Job* and Manto's *Khol do*).

A simple mise-en-scene anchors us into the world of *Quality Street*: a small wooden table and chair draped with a lace table cloth are placed squarely in a small room to elude to the comfortable security of the English tea-table. A shining tea urn, porcelain tea cups with saucer, a flower vase with lilies are atop the table, leaving the space ahead of it bare for movement. *Quality Street* has been performed previously on large proscenium stages where the set up remained roughly the same, but this prefabricated twin-room space in the erstwhile Public Works Department building in Panjim constricts the performance area even further, drawing the spectator physically closer to the actor, enabling a closer view of each facial, bodily, and vocal nuance. She enters the stage moving fervently to the tune of Prince Nico Mbarga's iconic highlife classic, "Sweet Mother," walking behind the traditional Kathakali curtain handheld by two stage attendants. Used in Kathakali to introduce the character's inner state or condition

(*bhava*) before the details of the emotional state are worked out in movement and gesture, this interpolation of rigorous rhythmic movement of the feet and hands continues. As the curtain is lowered we see a bedecked woman, holding her gaze towards us, strutting about the stage in high heels, eventually settling down to sit well poised, sipping tea.

As our conversation after the show over rounds of Goan pav, prawn fry, and local beer unfolds, Maya recounts the making of *Quality Street*. The proposal by the Sangeet Natak Akademi to make a performance on African writing as part of Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010 led her to read Adichie and choose this story to perform. Her acquaintance with Sabaina Jurschewsky, a Ghanian expat in Delhi who had lived in Lagos, transformed into a friendship through the making as she introduced Maya to the unknown pockets of the city where African culture lived and breathed. Visits to inner lanes, unfathomable floors, and corners of INA market in Delhi, selling lengths of unstitched fabric of bold African prints in cotton and brocade became the exciting beginning of researching Nigerian culture. The traditional wrap-around skirt, called iro, in pistachio green and the matching loose-fitting blouse (*buba*) worn with the head wrap (*gele*) were stitched by Sabaina herself. The persona of the Nigerian matriarch was replete with the thick west African accent learnt from Sabaina. She carefully alternates this with the distinct tonality of the American "r" to differentiate the wealthy widow from her foreign-returned daughter.

"A new accent," posits Maya, "is alien and constructed externally, much like Kathakali where meaning is made

outside." During the hour-long, non-stop battle between Mrs. Njoku's settled ways of being and her daughter's newfound understanding of an unequal world made even more unpalatable by her mother's bourgeois tastes and mannerisms, Maya switches smoothly between the disconcerted mother and her disapproving daughter, following Brecht, reading "not into the role, but *out* of the role." She never fully "becomes" the Nigerian matriarch but captures the "Nigerian-ness" of the character. She does not become but stands beside the character, empathising with her, demonstrating the complexity of her emotions, inviting the spectator to question what they see and hear. The costume accentuating her proportions to "appear" Nigerian, the acquired accent and body language, overdone gait and poise, are not perfected to impress real or authentic behaviour but layered onto the body of the actor. Maya circumvents falling into the precarious position of creating a stereotype in this material embodiment, a cardboard version of a Nigerian woman who acts in staple and predicable ways. She instead presents a three-dimensional character who behaves in unexpected, vulnerable, and nuanced ways. And since she keeps slipping in and out of the character, as audience, we never see her as the Nigerian mother but as the actor who plays the Nigerian mother and her daughter. The farcical and disjointed manner of the staging combines strategies of emotive explication borrowed from Kathakali where the physical propels the inner world of the character rather than the other way around. Maya's use of codified gestures and movement from Kathakali break down the entire performance. Hers is a trained and compelling physical apparatus forestalling any

collapse of the actor's identity into the character.

"I am terrorised by the text," Maya shares in a trepidatious tone as we meander from the show to discussing her process of developing a performance. She is not interested in playing the "message" embedded in the text but making the text reverberate with her own critical social stance as an artist in the present. Self-designed processes of improvisation in her studio permeated by sound, object, and text—with often the camera as her sole companion—set her on a journey of surprise and discovery of the characters she embodies. That the text is neither primary nor indispensable, but just one of the materials of performance is made amply clear as she declares the centrality of that other element one cannot miss noticing in her work; "there is no escape from music," she says. Equally compelling is her assertion about the need for comedy in the present unsettling and divisive political environment. "If I can't make comedy, then I am not doing anything," she declares. Distinguishing between laughter and comedy, we locate in the latter a recognisable quality of the everyday, which allows for a double-edgedness and ferocity with which a point can be made. Comedy propels a spontaneous combustion of audience laughter, theatre material, and performance to produce affinities between the actor and her audience and amongst audience members. The possibility of comedy to forge deep connections with others through the transformative potential of shared laughter make it a form of social activism carried out on stage. In *Quality Street*, Maya Rao uses this radical potential of comedy to propose acceptance and appreciation of diversity.

Between Myth and Reality: Problematics of Representation, Agency, and Consumption

A lean young woman runs urgently on a spot on the dimly lit stage. A voice over loudly cries out: "I see no reason to live in humiliation. Neither as man nor as woman. What a terrible misery my life has been." Running tirelessly looking around herself, yet not getting anywhere, she soon stumbles and falls down. This is the opening and our introduction to Shikhandi, the central character in the eponymous production *Shikhandi: The story of the In-Betweens*, inspired by the epic Mahabharata. Staged at the proscenium theatre in Kala Academy, Panjim, *Shikhandi* begins promisingly enough on a frenetic note, expressing the inner turmoil of its protagonist, and soon enough transforms into a witty, woolly playground of seven actors who regale the muddled parody of Shikhandi/ Amba's story. Performed in English by an ensemble of agile, transfixing, and hyper-fluent Bombay based performers, *Shikhandi* was first penned by its director Faezeh Jalali in 2010 and was developed over a year of making in 2014 with the actors. The play spans two lifetimes of Amba and Shikhandi, focusing on her second life of female to male transformation from Amba to Shikhandi in order to avenge Bhishma, the undefeatable warrior and teacher of the Kauravas who had abducted Amba and forced her to marry his brother, Vichitravirya. On her resistance to do so, not only was she rejected by the man she loved for having come in contact with another man (Bhishma), but also by Bhishma himself who

refused to marry her owing to his oath of remaining celibate.
Amba resolved to avenge her humiliation at the hands of
Bhishma and sought Shiva's intervention to become the cause
of his death in her next life as Shikhandi, herself a woman who
is brought up like a man to fulfil Amba's unfulfilled pledge.
By the account of its director and actors, the performance is
a tongue-in-cheek retelling of Shikhandi's dilemma of who
she is, by extension exploring the issue of identity broadly.
As Faezeh further expounds in an interview, "The play is not
only about gender and sexuality. It's about us, existing in the
in-between. So we are talking about mortals and Gods and the
Yakshas, who are also the in-betweens."
Several moments of first-person narration, codified
movements from the classical dramatic form of Koodiyattam
from Kerala—the oldest surviving Indian theatrical tradition—
and Kalaripayattu, a martial art form also from Kerala, are
interspersed with witty verbal retorts on contemporary
political issues. References to Section 377 of the Indian Penal
Code, which criminalises homosexuality and brings forth
questions of consent, sexual agency, and moral policing,
along with punchy-raunchy jokes, abound as the story of
Shikhandi unfolds. The eclectic live score played onstage by
accompanying musicians frequently bounces from classical to
the iconic title song of B. R. Chopra's popular 1988 teleseries
Mahabharat. While the narrative and textual material is drawn
from its voguish interpretation by the best-selling mythologist
and management guru Devdutt Pattanaik, the added frisson
comes from Faezeh's rhythmic English prose-writing, which
is witty and sharp, yet frequently slips into the stand-up

comic gab of hyperbole and humour. The proscenium stage is organised simply: two vertical wooden structures about six feet in height are placed upstage on either side of the stage decorated with an intricate Kolam-like bamboo mesh and coconut brooms. The actor-narrators occupy the space over these vertical levels and the floor space below, in front of them. Shiva, when evoked by the angry Amba seeking divine retribution for Bhishma descends from the skies using aerial silks and acrobatics. Actors keep slipping in and out of formal dance-like postures and movements into mundane walks and stances. The use of movement, music, and choreography from traditional performance genres grounds *Shikhandi* in an existing heritage of theatrical story telling traditions that regularly reinterpret epic texts.

The performance, however, fails to negotiate the tension between respectful appreciation and critical questioning that is the hallmark of this tradition. Ridicule, or a refusal to take canonical symbolic representations seriously can be an effective form of questioning, even resistance to existing oppressive structures, notwithstanding the challenge such a strategy poses. *Shikhandi: The story of the In-Betweens* re-presents the mythic characters in the same oppressive patriarchal and feudal conditions of the ancient and celebrated myth, while simultaneously consolidating the myth as an unquestionable source of wisdom. The tongue-in-cheek retelling is so loyal to the myth that it never departs from the resilient stereotypes it creates in the first place. The laughter that these complex mythic characters and their stereotypical behaviours evoke does not stem from any emotional or

cultural identification with them, but from a flattening of these characters into cardboard versions of an imagined past, reinforcing gender stereotypes for a modern neoliberal audience. Moving methodically in neatly choreographed movement across the stage, poised and confident, they are all dressed in nondescript, androgynous, and identical costumes—single shoulder-strapped, waist-length bustiers, and knee length dhotis in solid black and white with the traditional amulet and lingam (the phallic representation of Shiva) in bold red and brocade tied around the waist. They are all the same, images of the composite androgynous, *Ardhanarishvara*, man-woman with no originality or difference. The in-betweenness of one is the same as that of the other, the position of neither corresponding to anything in the real word. Shikhandi, the first born to Dhrupada and elder sibling of Draupadi, is a woman brought up like a man. Her gender is not her choice but a given. The performance introduces us to Shikhandi and then leads us back into her past life as Amba, a woman who, following Shiva's blessing, kills herself so that she can be the cause of Bhishma's death in her next life. No revisions are made to the popular retelling of the myth, re-inscribing Shikhandi in a web of unknown circumstances, pre-destined fate, confusion, and self-denial. She does not know why she feels one way and has to act another, or why she looks like a woman and is not accepted as one. The persistent questioning of herself and her sexual identity is reflective of a heterosexual anxiety about sexual desire, identity, and social acceptability with regard to queer people. Shikhandi repeatedly asks, "*What did I do to deserve this?*" or "*Who am*

I?" One cannot help but wonder whose questions these
are and whose anxiety they represent; are they reflective of
Shikhandi's own self-questioning or of the heteronormative
projection of doubt and fear onto the image of the "other"?
Not only do these declamations undermine her ability to
define herself outside of a heteronormative framework, but
they also reduce her to a repertoire of stereotypical bodily
behaviours. She is seen straining after masculine postures
and gestures, which are often a source of humour: She flexes
her muscles often, beats her chest and thighs, wears a wicked
smile and flamboyance only to become uncomfortable and
disown them moments later. She is mocked and harassed with
a slew of abuses: "Goy," "Birl," "Girb," and the more familiar
"hijra," "chakka," and "sixer." She evokes pity and laughter and
is neither woman nor man enough—she is simply "it." This
heterosexual representation of the queer body is inadequate,
inferior, and often humorous, appearing to normalise queer
stereotypes and legitimize heteronormativity.
Shikhandi is positioned as one of the earliest transgender
characters and is referenced in all publicity material of
the production as such. The attempt to mythologise non-
heteronormative identities in the present by tracing them all
the way back to the Mahabharata loses sight of the complexity
of the present. While the word "trans" implies movement
and fluidity, a sense of crossing over and beyond, its gender
aspects are embedded in the contemporary context—that of
the visibility and representation of a broad category of sexual
minorities. The problematic of the specific "crossing over"
that Shikhandi undertakes is completely elided. The rarity of

a woman magically transforming into a man, rather than the other way around by swapping her sexual organ with another marginalised character from the myth, Sthuna, who is neither god nor mortal but a *yaksha*, is made immaterial. Trans here stands not for a hybrid identity comprising the archetypal images of femininity and masculinity but more specifically a woman who is failed twice, first as Amba and then as Shikhandi, disparaged, inadequate as women to fulfil their desires within the patriarchal and feudal structures of the myth. Shikhandi is passive, unformed, and lacks character. Her undefined sexuality makes her an absence. She takes no decisions. Things happen to her and people struggle to make her what they want her to be. We never know if she desires to become a man or whether her venture into the forest where she finds the yearning *yaksha* is foreordained. The homoerotic moment between her and her newlywed wife in the previous scenes are never allowed to develop into an exploration of love and desire and are played to humour the audience into dis-believing that very possibility. In the struggle of control over the central female character, the lesbian must be defeated by her embodiment of male-ness. The problematic of re-telling or re-writing mythological narratives emerges when they are cast (again) into a patriarchal model and characters trapped within events not of their making, or even knowing, playing parts in struggles that are not theirs. Shikhandi has been re-inscribed into the mythic magical space where she will act in expected or preordained ways and will ultimately bequeath her personhood to fulfilling Amba's unfulfilled desire, who in turn is only crucial so that she can come back to haunt Bhishma and

change the course of the great war of the Mahabharata. Amba too is, after all, only a cog in the wheel that stops or spins on the command of Krishna. The myth becomes a vehicle through which violence and execution of power are materialised and replayed in the public memory through physical manifestations on stage. Subversive political and sexual content on stage generally receives the least disapproval when couched within the larger affirmation of a hegemonic myth like the Mahabharata. The politics of unmasking women of ancient mythologies in contemporary performance must push beyond creating stereotypical images of sexuality to reveal how these, far from expressing timeless truths, are in fact heavily mediated by the values of the patriarchal and feudal structures that they are embedded in.

As the 500-seat capacity Kala Academy auditorium in Goa swells into a packed house pulsating with an entertained audience during the 90-minute long performance, one is compelled to think about sexual agency of the marginalised in a neoliberal capitalist culture embodied by the festival site and the forms of representation that free-market driven entertainment takes. The production, reception, and success of the production carries itself on the female body offered for public consumption through comfortable and predictable viewing experiences. While it is heartwarming to witness the rare site of serpentine queues of impatient audiences awaiting the performance outside theatre houses, the persisting discomfort from the raucous laughter, rounds of applause, and the ensuing standing ovation inside beg the question: What exactly affects audiences to such a display of approval

and appreciation? Who or what are we laughing at and what purpose does it serve?

III. Between Live and the Mediated: Exploring Spatial Experiments with Pinter's Dumb Waiter

We sit in a small, freshly painted room. Three LCD screens hang on the wall in front. Two doors, one on the right to enter from. The same to exit. An adjoining room to the left, only partially visible through the wire mesh and a metal frame door, demarcating the performance space from us.
Screen 1: Frontal view of the adjoining room. Piles of cartons against the walls. Two men. One sits on a block reading a newspaper, the other lies carelessly on a sleek mattress on the floor.
Screen 2: Top-down view of the same room. A narrow corridor with two doors.
Screen 3: Top-down view of the audience as they occupy the room. It becomes suitably oppressive as 70-odd people are huddled inside.
Slow-paced, mundane actions unfold in front of us on the screens, each giving us a different view of the room captured by a slew of CCTV cameras. A compelling aesthetic of surveillance, complacence, and tedium surrounds us in this small windowless room that precludes the possibility of any other view. The room is neither fully operational nor entirely defunct—there is a lavatory that doesn't flush, a stove but no gas, it seems like the kitchen of a restaurant but without the wherewithal needed. It plays host to mundane

conversations that lay bare the differences of class, age, and experience between the two men. The spatiality of this room, transformed from the ordinary into the exceptional, where unexpected events play out is defined by the movement of a contraption—a dumb waiter that obliterates any conventional notions of privacy, anonymity, and agency. We watch the action on the screen even as it plays out live right next to us, not entirely visible to everyone equally or entirely. There is no unmediated access to "the real" here, it is only through mediation that we access and know the world. We have been programmed into safety and complacency in a carefully crafted environment. We look at the screen to look into the room, while we are also continuously being looked at, being watched. The distance created between the audience, physically oriented not towards live action but the events playing out on the screens is a crucial aspect of the production's scenography. There is no stage, no auditorium, no backstage—no leeway for any space other than this one.

In its fourth run in two years since its conception by Tushar Pandey, *Dumb Wait-err* is the Varhadi-Dakhini- Hindi adaptation of the well-known Harold Pinter play *The Dumb Waiter*. Performed by Nitin Bhajan and Purnanad Wandhekar, the performance has transformed from a site-specific work developed in the kitchen of a small bachelor pad in suburban Mumbai to being a "site-responsive" work that consciously dialogues with and complements the structural and historical aspects of the space where it is performed. A conversation with Tushar after the show reveals that the old PWD office building in Panjim, acquired recently by the festival, had to be massively

reconditioned to create the performance space, designed by scenographer Asheish Nijhawan. One main wall had to be broken, wall cabinets and door frames removed, and the room painted afresh. Installing ten CCTV cameras in this bare space created a mise-en-scene of entrapment and alienation that advances the theme of surveillance. The use of LCD screens, the constructed frontality of the view, the makeshift wall, the smell of fresh paint, along with wire mesh and carton boxes, creates a palpable reality that disallows the audience from settling into habitual routines of spectatorship or responses that tend to otherwise pass into abstraction in the moment of experience. Written in 1957 and performed for the first time at the Hampstead Theatre Club in London in 1960, *The Dumb Waiter* is one of the British Nobel laureate Harold Pinter's best-known plays, one that embodies his unique blend of farce, absurdity, and realism. It achieved the rare distinction of being adapted for popular TV by ABC in 1987. Centered on the monstrosity of two hired assassins, Ben and Gus, who are in a room awaiting instructions of a new assignment from their mysterious employer, the play limps on with a foreboding atmosphere clouded by small talk and argumentativeness. Between Gus's unceasing questions and Ben's exasperated repartee, their meaningless babble is both comical and terrifying, hiding beneath it a growing sense of anxiety and vulnerability. They debate odd topics, read the newspaper, struggle to make tea, bully each other, discuss cricket, struggle to light a cigarette, guess who their next target might be, move back and forth to the lavatory, check their pistols, and violently disagree with each other. All this until some matchsticks arrive mysteriously from

under the door, followed by random food orders carried down by the dumb waiter and eventually, instructions on the phone. Presented through an inventive use of sound and a hatch in the wall emanating light and reflecting it onto the actors faces, the dumb waiter suggests a movement of objects between this room and a place above it. The mechanism of the dumb waiter is itself analogous to the operations of surveillance, control, and self-regulation. It signals authority and power—faceless, all-pervasive and working, quite literally, from above Gus and Ben's heads—present in the room despite the absence of the boss. As the frequency of the dumb waiter's movements increases, the atmosphere of unpredictability of the next moment builds. The assassins recall and repeat the action score or a sequence of pre-rehearsed actions distilling the meaning of the text into action. Looking at the audience directly through the wire mesh, they mechanically replay the sequence of the killing succeeding the impending encounter, divesting the act of any moral or emotional baggage. They function in unison, co-dependent on each other, despite all differences that underlined their conversation so far. As Gus goes out to prepare for the encounter, the dumb waiter brings down instructions for Ben to carry out his task. He calls out to Gus and points his weapon at the entryway from which, without either of them knowing, Gus stumbles in. Pinter's play ends ambiguously with the two men facing each other in extended silence. The capture of life by an unknown power, the reality of victimization of the individual stripped of his humanity, dominated by and subservient to mechanized systems of control is made complete.

Harold Pinter's plays have long served as grueling reminders of the human condition of the times in which they are read and performed. In the political climate of post-war Britain, Pinter's plays participated in the multi-vocal debates about insufferable human reality and its representation. They echoed a breakdown of the idyllic world view of relationships, meaning, and truth, giving way to a world where words belied meaning and actions were incomplete, defying any closure or resolution. The dominant critical lens put on Pinter's plays, along with those of Samuel Beckett and others, have been those of the absurd and the "comedy of menace," which philosophically and structurally depart from traditional realist and naturalist traditions with emphasis on explanation, plot, and deterministic action. In Pinter's theatre, there is no logical syllogism between words and action on stage; rather, a deliberate sundering of cause and effect, deafening silences, and long "Pinteresque" pauses that direct us to the performative power of language. Following Pinter, language is not only the carrier of meaning but also a mode of its obfuscation. To be able to use language and be heard is a question of power. It is almost impossible to separate what is being said from how it is being said, bringing us to the relationship between form and content in theatre. Reflecting on the two-year-long process of rehearsing and previewing *Dumb Wait-err*, Tushar rationalises the choice of working with a canonical dramatic text rather than devising one that accommodates a pre-figured form. He says in a personal interview that "it provides a ready, well-crafted ground on which to build. Form is not the driving force here. It

is driven by the content of the play." The relationship between form and content forged here is instructive, particularly from the point of view of reinterpreting canonical western plays in contemporary times. Not only does content drive form, but the non-textual aspects of space also drive the content, in turn affecting the form. Form and content are therefore intrinsically connected here with the site of performance and impacted by it in concrete terms. The site-responsive nature of this performance enabled it new interpretative possibilities. *Dumb Wait-err* reimagines the horror of the final encounter by doing away with the ambiguity of Pinter's text. Ben packs his bag and pulls out his revolver before exiting through the audience area. Following his departure, we watch him on the LCD screen shooting Gus in the narrow corridor before leaving. Two stage hands enter the corridor and move Gus's dead body against the wall, covering it with plastic and stacking cartons over it so that no trace of their final encounter remains. The spectator is no longer a passive observer or a voyeur but made part of the act, as witness and a potential victim who can be both touched and seen. The refurbished PWD office space is organised and used for an intimate experience of this menacing situation in which we are both culpable and vulnerable. The show derives from the social context of our complicity to propose a chilling aesthetic expression making it hard for us to respond to what we see, hear, and feel.
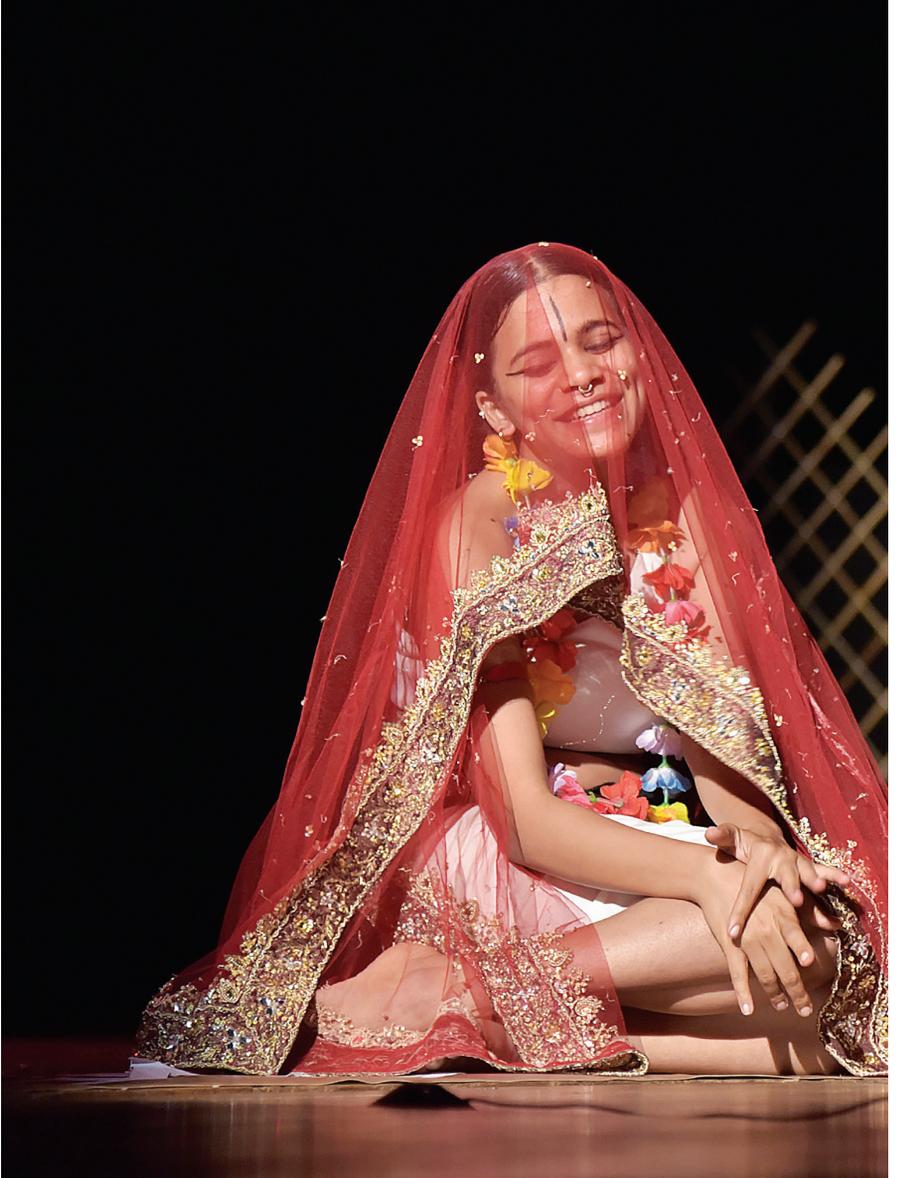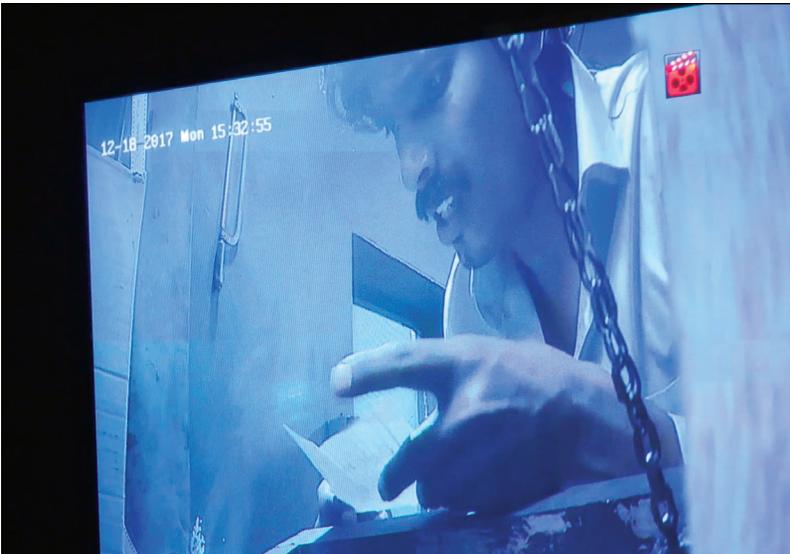
Captions

Pages 36 & 37 (***top***) -
Images from *Quality Street* performed at the PWD Complex in Panaji, Goa on December 21st and 22nd at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 37 (***bottom***) -
 Image from *Shikhandi* performed at the Dinanath Mangeshkar Auditorium in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Pages 38 & 39:
Image from *Shikhandi* performed at the Dinanath Mangeshkar Auditorium in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 40 (***top***)***:***
Image from *Shikhandi* performed at the Dinanath Mangeshkar Auditorium in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 40 (***bottom***) -
Image from *Dumb Wait-err* performed at the PWD Complex in Panaji, Goa on December 21st at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 41 -
Images from *Dumb Wait-err* performed at the PWD Complex in Panaji, Goa on December 17th & 18th at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Biographies

Gargi Bharadwaj is a theatre practitioner and a research scholar based in Delhi, India. She graduated from the National School of Drama, Delhi with a specialization in Theatre Techniques, Design and Direction (2007) and completed MAIPR (2008-2010) from University of Amsterdam and University of Warwick. As a theatre practitioner between her formal education she directs performances, conducts theatre workshops and curates theatre festivals. Her doctoral research focuses on state cultural policy and issues of cultural governance and citizenship in India. Other areas of interest are genealogies of contemporary theatre, performance curation, representation and self-articulations of women in public culture. She has presented research papers at conferences in University of Lisbon, University of Warwick, University of Cape Town and University of Hyderabad. She teaches courses on history/historiography of performance and practice based research methodology in Performance studies at SCCE, Ambedkar University, Delhi.

Maya Krishna Rao is a theatre artist who has worked on and off stage for the last thirty-five years. She is particularly known for her solo performances that have a distinctive form and style. She collaborates with other artists to create multimedia shows that she directs and performs in herself. She does stand-up comedy built on current political events and popular issues. Some of her celebrated performances are, *Khol Do, The Job, A Deeper Fried Jam, Heads Are Meant For Walking Into*, and *Ravanama*. The most recent was *Walk* - created in response to the horrific gang rape in a moving bus and eventual tragic death of Jyoti Singh in 2012.
For several years Maya taught acting at the National School

of Drama, Delhi. Maya has specially designed and taken theatre programmes to schools and conducted workshops for teachers on how to use drama as a teaching methodology in the classroom. Until recently, she was professor at Shiv Nadar University, where she designed a Diploma programme called TEST - Theatre for Education and Social Transformation, a first in any institution of higher education in India

Faezeh Jalali is the founder of the theatre collaborative FATS Thearts in Mumbai. She is an actor, director, producer, choreographer, teacher, runner, and an occasional writer and aerialist. She received her MFA in Performance, from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Clarence Brown Professional Actors' Training Programme and her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts (Acting and Directing) from Beloit College, Wisconsin. Faezeh has been part of several plays in India and abroad including, *I Don't Like It, As You Like It* (directed by Rajat Kapoor) for which she won Best Supporting Actor (female) at the META 2017, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Tim Supple), *Arms and the Man* (Naseerudin Shah), and *Pericles* (Joe Haj), among others. She has directed *Jaal* (by Annie Zaidi) for Writer's Bloc 3, *All in the Timing* (by David Ives), *Re-Lay* (adapted by Abhishek Thakur), *Dream Catcher* (by Vijay Nair, co-directed with Trishla Patel), *Objects in the Mirror are Closer Than They Appear* (co-directed with Choiti Ghosh), and directed a monologue *I'm Every Woman*, for Rage's One on One 2, as well as *TAKE 35* (a solo by Anuradha Menon) for the Park New Festival 2017.
Her play 07/07/07 won Best Ensemble Cast at the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards, 2016. Faezeh is the recipient of the Tanveer Natyadharme Puraskar 2017 for her contribution to the field, as well as the recipient of the Dubey-Tendulkar Theatre Fellowship, 2017.

Her most recent play *Shikhandi - The Story of The Inbetweens* won the META for Best Ensemble and Best Supporting Actor (female) 2018, runner-up at the Sultan Padamsee Playwriting Awards, and the LAADLI Media Award for Gender Diversity, Theatre 2016-2017.

Tushar Pandey is an actor, director, and teacher. He is an Inlaks Shivdasani International Scholar, with specialisation on Lecoq's pedagogy from London International School of Performing Arts (LISPA) and a graduate of the National School of Drama (NSD), India.
 Tushar has been associated with various collaborations and projects in India and the UK, performing, conducting workshops, creating works from classical styles to site-specific contemporary, acrobatic, and mask- based works. He has been actively involved in conducting workshops and talks for artists across India and has been involved as performance creator/tutor for various projects.
Apart from collaborating with Lyrebird Theatre, London with whom he devised, produced, and performed *SHIPS OF SAND*, which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2011, Tushar has also presented his work in England, Scotland, Greece, Dubai, and China.
Tushar's work concerns highly visual movement and text-based combinations of fiction and nonfiction sources. He is presently devising works to develop performance language and create new expressions that go beyond existing performance boundaries.

Purush

An original dance piece commissioned for Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Curated by Tanusree Shankar

Choreographer Robert Moses Kin

Choreographer's Note

Robert Moses Kin

I have struggled with finding just the right way to talk about art and creation for a long time. What I know is this: there is as much truth in movement as in speech, as much in life, and being a man in today's world, as there is in living well any society and living well and fully must be about authenticity of action and ethic. That is what being a man is about. This work is formed from the literal blood and sweat of the men, the artists involved. They have be more than generous in sharing their life experiences, good will creativity, energy and knowledge they have been without a doubt the fuel in the engine that drives this work. The gossamer inspiration for the work however came from women of depth, charm and a great deal of drive. The central idea is that the sheer volume of the male experience is yet to be addressed in a way that draws knowledge from the light and dark, the classical male and new male, the pressures, and joys of being a man. This work is a reach toward the unattainable, varied ever changing lived male reality of every man in the world and ideals of a great many of the men in the audience. This is for you and your sons, your wife and daughters, you fathers and ancestors. We are here only starting the conversation with a short statement but keep listening there is more to say and our live speak volumes.

Assistant Choreographers Crystaldawn Bell and Norma Fong Michihira
Dancers Vicky Bhartya, Uttam Saxena, Kiran Shenvi, Neeraj, Jimit Thaker, Indranil Ghosh, Gobindo Mandal, Kunal Kanti Mazumdar, Krishna Banik, Surojit Mishra, Rudra Prasad Roy, Purunendra Kumar Mehsram
Music Bickram Ghosh
Lights Gaurav Sharma
Production management Monidipa Mullick

Purush

Ranjana Dave

Introduction

Eleven men sit shoulder to shoulder in a tight row, their backs
turned to the audience. As the *purusasukta* from the Rigveda
describes the nature of the cosmic being, this vast expanse
of bare backs tells many stories. There are those who sit
ramrod straight, their gaze steady. There are shoulderblades
that catch the light with their chiselled sharpness. There are
soft, rounded shoulders that weigh down the spine, tempting
it to melt into the comfortable embrace of the pelvis. One
almost feels wistful when this moment dissolves, giving way
to a montage of references to evolution, duality and the male
principle. These flash past as a series of fluid images, tempered
by a certain aggression as the dancers walk over each other,
their feet marking firm terrain on bare skin. Working in
different spatial planes, the dancers emphasise on archetypal
images in moments, bringing in deeply individualised
movement aesthetics to disrupt these images at other times.
With 12 dancers on stage, in *Purush* – choreographed by
Robert Moses' Kin, and curated by Tanusree Shankar – this
individuality is central to performance, and it reflects an
entire universe of dance influences. Commissioned for the

Serendipity Arts Festival 2017, *Purush* examines strength, power, and masculinity in men, linking this focus to the mythological notion of Shiva as the quintessential man. Selected through an open audition process, the dancers in Purush come from across the country. With different movement sensibilities and training backgrounds, the process of finding common ground began by initiating a series of conversations around masculinity. "The dancers didn't know each other at all when we began work on *Purush*, and now they are the best of friends. Each one of them came with a certain amount of baggage. There was this sense of being defensive because they didn't know whom they were going to be working with. Once they were in the same space, everything came together in a very short time," said Shankar about the easy dynamic that the dancers developed over three months. The idea of an all-male performance had been on Shankar's mind for many years. She wanted to focus on men as human beings before calling attention to their gendered identity. Following in the legacy of her father-in-law, choreographer and filmmaker Uday Shankar, she was also interested in addressing stereotypes that bogged down male dancing. Having met Robert Moses several years ago, the making of *Purush* presented itself as an opportunity for Shankar to collaborate with him. In his work on the piece, Moses was assisted by dancers Crystaldawn Bell and Norma Fong Michihira from his company, Robert Moses' Kin. The company has worked in the San Francisco region since 1995; Moses is also on the dance faculty at Stanford University and director of its Committee on Black Performing Arts.

Gendering Dance

In the West, the gender gap in dance is now the subject of much fiery conversation, with artists advocating for greater choreographic and directorial opportunities for women – though a section of them oppose the privileging of equal opportunity for the sake of levelling the playing field. Conversely, dance in India is a female-dominated profession, with many successful female choreographers and artists at all levels of the profession. Yet, people in positions of power in concurrent bureaucratic mechanisms – policy makers, funders, and those with institutional authority – are often men. Flying in for a short and rigorous work period – fifteen days in all - Moses first had the dancers play around in the studio. "What does it mean to be a man here? That was one question I asked them," said Moses about the long conversations and exercises that informed his sense of the dancers' movement range, interests and preoccupations. Many of the dancers spoke about the pressure of being 'men' in their communities. They were expected to be responsible, make money, care for their parents, hold serious employment, preferably outside the arts, and conform to heteronormative roles in society. When they needed emotional support, many of the dancers sought out friends and female siblings. Gender is a crucial dynamic within and around dance in India. Dancers often have to make choices between maintaining their artistic integrity and accepting projects that shake this integrity while providing a steady income. Seen as a 'soft' choice of career, dance then becomes an unfavourable career option,

particularly in a patriarchal society that first looks to its men to be breadwinners.

The idea of *ekaharya abhinaya* in traditional dance practices allows performers to switch between several roles without a change of costume. It favours the assumption of gender-nonconforming identities in performance, where a performer, regardless of their chosen gender identity, takes on several gender roles to tell a story singlehandedly and effectively. In its most pedestrian applications, performative identity is often linked to physical characteristics – for instance, a taller female dancer is more likely to be cast in a male role. With small variations, basic dance training is then the same for male, female or genderqueer dancers – who all learn (gendered) nuances of movement, also gendering the manner in which qualities like valour or grace are then physicalised. A long history of crossdressing in performance traditions in India further complicates this notion of gender. While crossdressing in certain forms of performance stemmed from the lack of female performers or a resistance to allowing women to make public appearances on stage, it is also valued for the transgressive skill and craft it brings to forms – where performers seamlessly assume gender identities other than their own. For example, the early 20th century Marathi actor Bal Gandharva had a stage persona that women flocked to emulate, copying his stage persona's appearance, bearing, and mannerisms.[1] This appreciation of craft extends to classical dance forms – the Odissi dancer, Kelucharan Mohapatra, was lauded for the unassuming femininity he brought to his portrayal of Radha, dancing as a balding man in his late sixties.

As a young dancer, he observed women walking to the river, incorporating these real-life movement observations into the characterisation of female roles he choreographed in Odissi. This fluidity of gender in dance often leads to assumptions about the sexuality of male dancers, who are sometimes stereotyped as effeminate and thus not masculine enough – a flawed perception that Shankar also brings up. In response, male dancing often manifests itself as hypermasculine; at its height, dancers privilege machismo, aggression, and martial ability to reaffirm their masculinity in performance. Physical ability then becomes the locus of choreographic intention, with other creative devices, elements and tools taking a backseat. In group work, any intimacy or dynamic that does not reflect this heteronormative physicality then becomes out of bounds.

Curiously, this sense of impermissibility in dance is not reflected in the otherwise easy homosociality of Indian society, where non-sexual public intimacy between people of the same sex is frequent and unlikely to garner attention. For example, one sees men who identify as heterosexual holding hands and strolling in public, and women in parks huddling shoulder to shoulder or lying on each other's laps. *Purush* gestures to these grey areas in some ways, with a string of duets embedded in the piece pointing to several relational configurations between the dancers, even as they hint at the relationships and social situations that the dancers then form in society. These duets also draw on the duality in the varying mythological personifications of Shiva. In his tandava aspect, he is an extremely hypermasculine figure, projecting severity,

rage and ferocity. But in his androgynous manifestation as Ardhanariswara, a coming together of the gender identities of Shiva and Parvati, he accommodates both extremes on the spectrum – the hypermasculine and the hyperfeminine. By referencing Shiva through the use of Sanskrit verse and archetypal images, Purush places itself within the context of gendered imaginations of Shiva and Parvati, or Purusha and Prakriti (interpreted as the masculine and feminine principle, or consciousness and nature), from mythology.

Language(s) of Dance

Shankar's legacy is key to understanding her curatorial aesthetic. Uday Shankar, her father-in-law, stumbled upon a career in dance by accident in the 1920s, when he met and worked with the dancer Anna Pavlova, creating dances for her company and even performing in some of them. In the early 20th century, artists in the West had turned their gaze towards the Orient, finding in it a freedom and sense of wild adventure that was refreshingly at odds with the stilted formality of classical performance traditions, including ballet. Recognising this interest, Shankar, who was self-taught, assembled a ragtag troupe of dancers and musicians, many of them from within his family, and began touring Europe with productions that drew on Indian themes and myths. Shankar's lack of formal training widened his possibilities – he was inspired by several forms, including Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Manipuri – and he also developed his own training regimen based on a constant discovery of the potential of movement. He was a success in

the West, receiving rave reviews for his performances. Back home in India, the traditionalists were none too pleased. His lack of formal training was a sore point for many of them. His biographer Mohan Khokar recalled the biting ten-word description of Shankar that appeared in a directory of musicians and dancers published from Thanjavur.

Unorthodox. Performs Lasya types only. Unfit physically to perform Tandava.[2]

The film *Kalpana* (1948) is perhaps the most comprehensive example of Shankar's work – at least among the traces that remain of it. Largely autobiographical, Kalpana (Imagination) builds a narrative around the creative journey of Udayan (Uday Shankar), a talented artist who dreams of establishing a dance school, Kalakendra. In populating this narrative, Shankar segues into concerns about the state of art and that of the nation, referencing his own past work and imagery from expressionist films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). The film disappeared from the popular imagination very quickly, resurfacing only some years ago. Its high level of technical craft apart, it also offers a glimpse of the possibilities of a new, improvised dance language that draws from Indian traditions – work that artists in the Shankar family, including Tanusree Shankar, have continued to do.   In her essay, *Boundaries and Beyond: Problems of Nomenclature in Indian Dance History*, dance scholar and anthropologist Urmimala Sarkar Munsi describes her early training in Amala Shankar's dance classes. She recounts an incident where Shankar encouraged them to find multiple tonalities for the word *dao* (give), physicalising these tonalities as an exercise in improvisation. These exercises

trained students to be open to improvisation and new possibilities of movement, she notes.[3]

In his attempt to find a common denominator for the discursive training backgrounds that the dancers in Purush came from, Moses' methods mirrored these improvisational techniques used by Amala Shankar decades ago. Moses had never worked with any of the dancers who were part of the production. He decided to put some grounding rituals into place to create shared experiences. His assistant, Crystaldawn Bell, led a conditioning class for the dancers. Being through a rigorous class that left them exhausted then became the first common ground that the dancers found to bond with each other about. There wasn't enough time to incorporate training that built a shared technical vocabulary, but the rehearsal period still allowed for simple experiments with form. Moses had the dancers execute rolls, slides, skips and other basic movements. This was a useful springboard for improvisation, he noticed. "What does a skip look like to you? You may think of it in one way but there are 12 men in the room. By the time you get to the seventh dancer, he has to come up with something else. And the first time you come up with something else is the first time the permission to be different is actually given in the room. The permission to be different is the permission to be yourself in a way. You have to find a way to address the differences and to make people comfortable in moving beyond their native skillsets," Moses said about finding starting points for the rehearsal process.

At a certain juncture, Moses encountered the question – what is the story here? "The thing that ends up on stage is

an artefact of sorts, but it has a life of its own. You start with a conversation or a notion," he pointed out. In response to the question, he initiated a discussion about the modes of storytelling. *Purush* didn't necessarily follow any of the established modes; it attempted to find – in Moses' words – touchstones of emotion or memory which resonate with people. This made conversations about gender, masculinity and life a valuable component of the process. In the process of making, the stories and facts receded into the background, while the ephemeral realisations stayed, feeding into an intangible sense of 'narrative' that was inspired by how people felt about themselves or what they remembered they were like. *Purush* is a consolidation of these discursive narratives, of the diversity of the dancers' experiences of life and movement. Shankar had two words for Moses in moments of doubt. "MAN. MEN. That's it," she would say to him. The dancers begin *Purush* clad in cropped pants, and then go on to acquire additional layers of clothing. Towards the end of the piece, they begin to shed these layers, carefully aligning them on the floor – clothes now devoid of bodies, but still in conversation with each other – shirts laid out as if they are tucked into pants, capes floating dissolutely over pants. In divesting themselves of these clothes, the dancers seem to cast aside the identities that the process of socialisation imposes on them. They are, perhaps temporarily, separated from these fraught constructions of identity, that now lie on the floor, deflated and lifeless. When the dancers appear for the curtain call, they stand on these discarded clothes, sometimes disturbing their careful arrangement as they step forward to bow. Each dancer has a different bow. Some make

flamboyant bows that begin in the sky, looking up at the ceiling as they join their palms. Others are matter-of-fact, bobbing their heads in quick, functional motions. The only thing they seem to have in common is the enthusiasm with which they applaud each other. What then, must we privilege most about performance – the act itself or the shared experience of having lived through it?

Notes

1. Bal Gandharva was the face of several advertisements for women's products.
2. Khokar, Mohan. *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar*. New Delhi, Himalayan Books, 1983, p. 79.
3. Sarkar Munsi, Urmimala. *Boundaries and Beyond: Problems of Nomenclature in Indian Dance History*. In Sarkar Munsi, Urmimala, ed., *Dance: Transcending Borders*. New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2008, p. 97.

    All images from Purush, performed on December 17th & 18th at DB Ground in Panaji, Goa during Serendipity Arts Festival 2017.
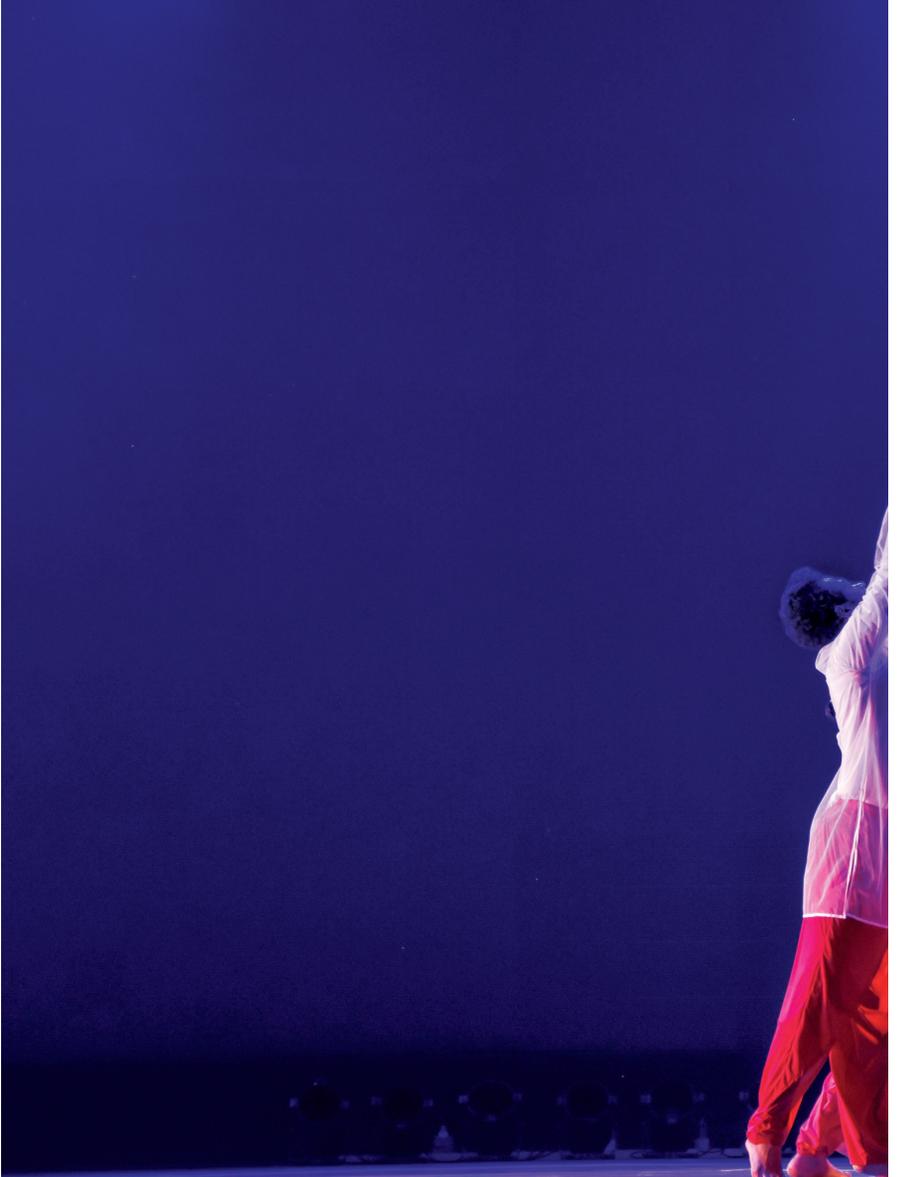
Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Biographies

Ranjana Dave is a dancer and arts writer. She co-founded Dance Dialogues, a Bombay-based initiative that helps dancers connect with provocative and diverse ideas, individuals and institutions. Within dance, she has explored the strands of writing, archiving, performance and pedagogy. She has written for Firstpost, Hindu, Scroll, and Tanz. She curated an online archive of dance video on Pad.ma. Her current interest in pedagogy and learning environments emerges from her experience of learning and practising classical dance. Ranjana is programmes director at the Gati Dance Forum in New Delhi and has worked on developing pedagogical frameworks that encourage critical thinking and a reflexive artistic practice as part of its curriculum development initiatives.

Tanusree Shankar is the choreographer and the chief inspiration of the eponymous academy and troupe. Tanusree, who trained for seven years under Amala Shankar, has developed a kind of choreography, which reaches out to audiences worldwide. Her choreography is not a combination of classical dances, but is original, giving concrete shape to the music that inspires it and is based on the Uday Shankar technique of "New Dance". She choreographed several events, including the Asian Games, the Festival of India in the USSR and the Wills World Cup Cricket Championships. In 2007, she was chosen to be the chief choreographer for the National Folk Dance Festival, assigned by the Indian department of culture. Tanusree choreographed an Indo-French Ballet called *Padmavati* directed by Indian film maker, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, in Paris in 2008.

A Sangeet Natak Akademi winner, Tanusree instructs master classes at Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center. She has also conducted various workshops in Reading for the WOMAD Festival, Birmingham and Leeds in UK. Her troupe members have participated in the prestigious Edinburgh International Fringe Festival in 2001.

Sari: The Unstitched
Choreographer Daksha
Sheth

Sandhi
Original dance and music
pieces commissioned for
Serendipity Arts Festival
2017
Curated by Sanjeev
Bhargava

Notes

Sari: The Unstitched

Sari: The Unstitched is a celebration of the creation of this unique drape in constant play with the body, both in stillness and in movement. This show was conceived to rekindle the lost playfulness and individuality of the sari. As the quintessential expression of the weavers' imagination, talent and skill, the sari continues to be the jewel of the Indian hand loom industry. This union of the sari and the wearer exudes the sensuality of dance. The performance highlights the stages in the journey from cotton pod to a magnificent fabric, draped in a range of wearing styles.

Choreographer and Artistic Director Daksha Sheth
Direction Devissarao
Stage Design and Composition Devissarao
Sari Wearing Styles Rta Kapur Chisti
Light Design Sreekanthan Nair
Collaborator Daksha Sheth Dance Company

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

Sandhi

An extension of last year's project, Sandhi will include renowned musicians accompanied by four dancers. From each of these creative collaborations between a classical dancer and a classical vocalist emerge new productions with a selected text.

Antar-Prekshana
A collaboration of Hindustani classical music and Odissi

Prekshana is the process of viewing or observing. Antar-Prekshana is a production where the musician and the dancer aim to engage in the process of inner as well as inter-art observation. A deeper introspection into one's own as well as the other's art-form results in newer interpretations of age-old traditions. Hindustani music and Odissi dance – both are traditions rich in their form and content; the idea is to discover unique ways of looking at them.
In Antar-Prekshana, we aim to create an unusual repertoire combining various Hindustani musical forms like khayal, chatarang and tarana with traditional Odissi pieces like mangalacharan and pallavi. The musical forms are to be specially composed in a way that they lend themselves to dance and its interpretations. The two art-forms, therefore, do not work in isolation but rather engage in active interaction and exchange, resulting in a synthesized as well as coherent work of art.

Concept, Choreography & Dance Arushi Mudgal
Music composition & Vocals Pt Madhup Mudgal
Supporting Vocals Sawani Mudgal
Pakhawaj & Tabla Kharak Singh
Flute Rajat Prasanna
Harmonium Pravesh Mallik
Lights Kritika Uppal

Adhyatma
A collaboration of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam

Adhyatma or the metaphysical, is a branch of Annamacharya's works which deals with addressing the philosophical nature of the human mind. The poet here questions his own beliefs and his nature of existence, as also all of ours. Aranyani came across these padams in her reading as far back as 2012, in a book titled 'God on the Hill' by David Shulman and Narayana Rao, and when the chance to collaborate with Sikkil Gurucharan was provided by Serendipity, it provided the perfect opportunity to explore these metaphysical padams. Aranyani selected 3 padams - one that addresses the question of endlessness of the mind, another which questions the materialistic and unrealistic desires of humankind, and a final one that depicts the poet questioning his own actions and decisions about life. SAF 2017 was the very first time these padams have ever been performed or danced in recent performing arts history!

Concept, Choreography Dance Aranyani Bhargav
Music Composition & Vocals Sikkil Gurucharan

Indian Cello Saskia De Haas
Indian Percussion Sumesh Narayanan
Academic support Professor David Shulman

Pratidhwani, Echoes From the Palace
A collaboration of Carnatic music and Kuchipudi

"Who are you?"
She questions the throne – the unshaken, historical symbol of
power.
With half her life passed, Chitrangada, reflects upon her
duties as the Queen of Manipur, wife of Arjuna and mother
of Babruvahana. Reliving the crucial moments of her life, she
raises questions that were left unheard.
You are the throne-inanimate
Yet, you hold kings and other noblemen as puppets on a string!
You have caused violence, bloodshed, and war
Millions of innocent lives lost in your quest
To keep you, my father raised me like a man
To keep you, I let go of the man I loved
You made me choose: to be a wife or a mother?
I could have been both, but you made me take sides
I know now, the price of power is not paid at once,
It manifests as sacrifices throughout life.
I sit on you as a Queen; living on the power you exude–
But ultimately, it is you who has ruled me all my life.
Enough now, this must stop.
I have played my roles well enough
It is time now to live for myself, as myself–

To live as Chitrangada!

Dance Prateeksha Kashi
Music Chandana Bali
Accompanists Vyjayanthi Kashi (Nattuvangam), S.
Lingaraj (Mridangam), Jayaram Kikkeri (Flute), Karthik S.
(percussion), Y.G. Srilatha (Venna)
Light Design Vinay Chandra P.

Dancing Emptiness
A collaboration of Hindustani classical music and Kathak

The term "emptiness" itself conjures up a state of nothingness, hopelessness or the simple absence of everything. But when the Buddha speaks of emptiness, or when Kabir speaks about Shunya, does it mean nothingness or hopelessness? They talk of emptiness as a space that is utterly different (nayara), something that is subtle (Jhini), almost beyond imagining. Emptiness includes the teaching of impermanence, and that everything is in a state of flux. The dharma of non-attachment relates to the concept of emptiness and impermanence – if all things are impermanent and are ever changing, what is there to be attached to?
Is there a love without attachment? Is there a permanent beloved in the sea of impermanence? Can 'Emptiness' be danced and rejoiced? *Dancing Emptiness* is an exploration of impermanence and unending interdependence of all. At *Dancing Emptiness*, the Buddha and Kabir meet to tell the story of love without attachment, rejoicement without indulgence.

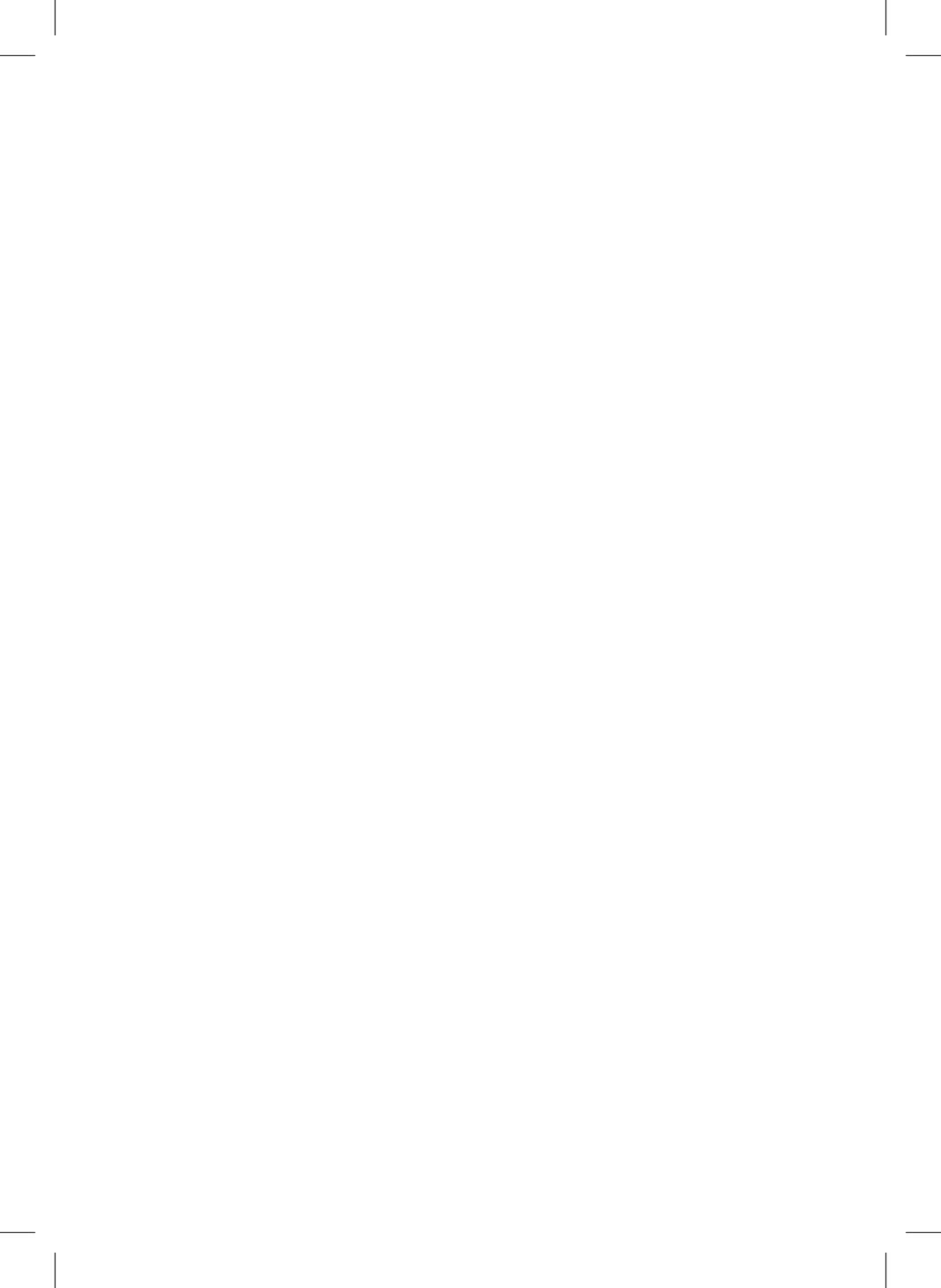**PROJECTS / PROCESSES**

Dance Gauri Diwakar
Music Bhuvanesh Komkali
Accompanists Yogesh Gangani (Tabla), Aashish Gangani
(Pakhawaj), Abhishek Shinkar (Harmonium), Mohd. Nasir
Khan (Accompanying Vocals),
Sound Design Roopak Chaudhar
Light Design Govind Singh Yadav

Towards New Beginnings

Ranjana Dave

"Your problem is," my dance teacher once told me, "you ask too many questions. You just have to decide to believe." At issue was a discussion about the logic of a particular narrative, and my teacher despaired of my penchant for the quotidian, for deconstructing these logics before I felt prepared to inhabit a story. One of the hazards of writing about dance is that the writer's eye strips the performative experience down to its crudest layers. The flying acrobat is securely connected to a cold steel winch, you always spot people peering in from the wings, and you know when the dancer on stage nearly slips on the pile of flowers flung into the air by the previous dancer. To exercise a willing suspension of disbelief requires conscious and constant effort. It is with vicarious pleasure, then, that I eavesdrop on audience conversations at performance venues. Often, they privilege extreme experiences of pleasure—the dancer meeting her musician on the beat, choreography that requires considerable physical prowess, and moments of endurance—positions held without a hair out of place, far too long, an exhilarating and endless array of spins, or jumps and leaps that send the dancer flying into empty space, actively defying their relationship with gravity. However, in the course of arriving at these "aha" moments, the audience is also willing

to engage with a sustained temporality of performance—a duration largely devoid of thrills or heightened action, where the performance calls on the audience's ability to engage consistently, over a period of time. These were some of the thoughts that made an impression as I watched the audience watch *Sari* by the Daksha Sheth Dance Company at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017. There is applause when the company's younger dancers execute sequences that call for great virtuosity and speed. But the audience goes berserk when the company's grand dame, Daksha Sheth, appears on stage, clad in a light silk, dancing to the dadra, *rangi sari gulabi chunariya re*. Her movements are small, measured, and have the appearance of being improvised. Sometimes, she segues into a *sanchari*, an elaboration or deviation from the broader narrative of the song—one story embedded within another. At other times, she claps energetically, her arms stretched out towards the audience, inviting them to participate in the exuberance of the moment. How does a single dancer fill and consume the seemingly endless space of the stage? What reserves of craft, practice, and spontaneity do performers tap into to bring to each moment the imprint of all that they have learned and experienced? What does finding new terrain mean for dancers? What gives? What ruptures? What encourages them to engage with new ideas, texts or embodiments? These are some of the questions that artists constantly ask of themselves. Performance, then, can add up to being more than the sum of its parts, when an interest in the mechanics of performance begins to inform and enhance our experience of it. This essay looks at two distinct sets of work; the stand-alone

production *Sari: The Unstitched* by the Daksha Sheth Dance Company, and *Sandhi*, a commissioned project that saw four young classical dancers collaborating with Hindustani and Carnatic vocalists on works that reimagined certain hierarchies of labour when music is examined within the context of classical performance. Both projects were part of impresario Sanjeev Bhargava's curation for the festival. Bhargava lives in Delhi, where he runs Seher, an organisation that mainly works to make Indian culture accessible to a larger section of society. In dance, Seher has most significantly done this by taking its events out of the proscenium space and into open-air settings such as parks and monuments, where they are available to both dedicated and floating members of the audience. From 2002 to 2014, Seher organised the Ananya Festival at Purana Quila, inviting classical dance troupes to perform against the spectacular backdrop of this 16th century monument. Bhargava recounts having to build an audience for Ananya—from a sparsely-filled Kamani auditorium, four years hence, he watched people troop in an hour early for classical dance performances, despite the bad weather. Over time, these audiences had grown to appreciate the subtleties of classical dance. If, perchance, the programme began late, audiences resented the wait; they had showed up early to find seats or even standing room—so they wanted what they had come for. Bhargava sums up his curatorial aesthetic in one word—purity. "There are very few traditional and purely classical platforms," he pointed out. Purity, for him, represents an integrity in grammar, form, and style. As an instance, he cites the singularity of the tanpura, which could then be lost amidst

a profusion of instruments or musical textures. Bhargava, speaking about the long process of building an audience for the classical arts, says,

> A pure grammar is more important than putting up fusion to attract people. When you go from rock and fusion to jazz to Western classical music, there will always be fewer spectators for the latter compared to the former, because it is easier to understand. What is easier to understand is easier to enjoy. I don't want to go into which form is better than the other; as a connoisseur and follower, I like purity. You don't have to descend to the level of the audience – you can give them a quality that they may perhaps learn to appreciate. Some performances may appeal to a wider audience, while others may not appeal to just about everybody.

At SAF, *Sari* was staged at the DB Ground, a massive stage with seating built to accommodate 2000 spectators, in addition to a floating population of bystanders and onlookers who are at the food court or linger on the peripheries of the performance area. The stage is flanked by two giant screens, with the cameras zooming in on finer details. *Sandhi* was staged at the smaller open-air theatre next door at the Kala Academy, with raised concrete seating, as sounds of the Mandovi River washed over the performance space.

Sari: Embodying The Spectacle

The Daksha Sheth Dance Company (DSDC) works from a secluded space on the outskirts of Trivandrum, by the Vellayani Lake. Sheth, with her family—her musician partner Devissaro, and their children Isha and Tao—moved here in the early nineties. Growing up in Ahmedabad, Sheth studied Kathak with Kumudini Lakhia, who was herself one of the first people to challenge the insularity of classical dance. Weary of repetitive mythological narratives, Lakhia started playing with notions of abstraction and new material in the form of short stories by contemporary Indian writers. Her work was initially greeted with horror by orthodox members of the dance fraternity. When one looks back at Lakhia's work today, it mirrors much of what we have come to see in Kathak performance, underscoring the widespread impact of her practice on the field of Kathak itself. It is this spirit of enquiry that she passed on to students like Sheth and Aditi Mangaldas. As a young dancer in search of new ideas, Sheth decided to push her stylistic limits by exploring other styles of movement. She studied Mayurbhanj Chhau, a martial arts practice from Odisha, one of three styles of Chhau that have originated from Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand. She spent a few years living in Vrindavan, working with a scholar to develop texts and music for her performance. During this time, she offered dance at the temple, asking herself what it meant to perform, present, or offer. Her work draws from these discursive experiences, channelling her background in Kathak and Mayurbhanj Chhau, besides elements from Kalarippayattu and Malkhamb – which

informs much of her aerial work.

The inclusion of aerial elements in choreographic work spurs a significant reimagination of what it means to dance. On a surface, the dancer draws meaning from their relationship to gravity, resisting it, succumbing to it, negotiating its forces, and testing its limits. When the dancer "hangs" from the ceiling, they invert this relationship, and their correspondence to the surface, to gravity, is problematised. The limbs begin to come into play in more equitable ways, with the arms as responsible as the legs for stability and balance on aerial elements such as silk or rope. Often, when multiple dancers perform aerial sequences, this necessitates a strong dynamic of trust and teamwork. There is less control over how the body places itself in space and hence greater effort required to incorporate skill and craft into the execution of movements.

Sari was made in collaboration with Rta Kapur Chishti's The Sari School, highlighting the different ways in which this continuous length of fabric emphasised individuality and playfulness. Chishti's school functions as a workshop, encouraging awareness about handloom practices and different ways of draping the sari. With her long-time colleague Martand Singh, Chishti authored *Saris: Tradition and Beyond*, 2010, a comprehensive document of design practices that have informed the making of the sari over time. Digital publications like *Border & Fall* have continued to popularise the sari as a multi-functional garment. Through *The Sari Series, Border & Fall* shot and made public a series of videos that teach users to drape the sari in various ways, annotating these videos with notes on the regions where these styles of draping evolved.

Performance projects have also highlighted different aspects of the sari in recent times. In Bharatanatyam, Malavika Sarukkai's *Thari – The Loom* physicalised various motifs and elements from the sari using movement structures and narratives from Indian mythology.

For Sheth and Chishti, the emphasis was not only on exploring the yardage of the sari, but also on highlighting the deeper concerns that plague the handloom industry in India. Chishti's work has taken her to several corners of the country, where she has witnessed communities of weavers give up their traditional handloom practices to opt for better-paying careers, burning their looms for firewood in times of dire need. *Sari* incorporates some of these observations, using footage shot with weavers and recorded sounds of the loom, the clickety-clack of labour punctuating the rhythms of the dancers. Interacting with the audience is an important element in Kathak. Given the intricacy of its rhythmic structures, the only way to allow the audience into these structures is to engage them in "conversation," call on them for an active exchange of energies, where the audience is implicated by being asked to stay alert and responsive to overtures made by the performer. *Sari* actively deploys this quality of interaction when the dancers use their bodies to specify rhythms, tapping various points on their limbs and torsos, in addition to tapping their feet, to generate rhythmic patterns. This is supplemented by Tao Issaro's live percussion,and accompanied by a recorded recitation of rhythmic syllables. This interaction lends the piece its playful tone, also creating spaces of exploration that allow the choreography to move into abstract notions of flow

and continuity that are derived from the sari, well beyond the constraints of tangible connections to the subject or theme.

Sandhi

Antar-Prekshana by Arushi Mudgal & Madhup Mudgal

Of the four pairs of collaborators working on a performance for *Sandhi*, the Odissi dancer Arushi Mudgal and her father, Madhup Mudgal, have had the longest working relationship. Based at the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in New Delhi, the Mudgal family runs a school that specialises in Odissi and Hindustani music. Arushi dances in the style of Kelucharan Mohapatra, having trained with her aunt, Madhavi Mudgal. As a first-generation practitioner of "classical Odissi," Mohapatra had a long teaching career. Over six decades, he taught several generations of dancers, constantly rethinking the fundamentals of the form as he developed his pedagogic approach. Arushi follows a version of technique taught to her aunt, distinguished by a fairly wide chowka or turned-out position and the emphasis on simple but fluid movements of the torso. Madhavi Mudgal brought to the form a specificity of music and rhythm, using her access to professional musicians to create new compositions for Odissi. She also turned her attention to costuming, bringing a minimalist aesthetic to the dancer's appearance, favouring sparse silver jewellery, thin sari borders, and the use of vivid contrasts in costume colours.

Arushi points out that classical dancers often work with music in

isolated ways. The musicians work on their own and compose a piece. Then the dancers set movement to the music they receive. The creative process often plays out in this manner, with work stilted or slowed down by the lack of resources. In Arushi's case, music and dance unfold under the same roof, allowing for sustained conversations between collaborators. "I have grown up watching Madhup ji and Madhavi ji work together. Once they have an idea, they flesh out their vision for it together. The concept is not limited to the dance; it seeps into the music as well," she said about the long-time collaboration between her father and aunt.

In her own work, Arushi revels in patterns that challenge complexity and speed. "We restrict ourselves by having these ideas about what 'works' for dance. It puts you in a comfort zone, where you continue to work with what suits you. You stop yourself from exploring possibilities that lie outside of what you think works. For instance, the composition I danced to in Jog (Sandhi), had a shorter first line, which was a challenge in its own right," she pointed out, referring to the final piece of her performance. Named *Sandhi*, after Bhargava's broader project, the piece combines the pallavi, or the pure dance choreography of Odissi with the tarana of Hindustani classical music—where rhythmic syllables are strung into a raga-based composition. The pallavi is danced to *sargam*—the vocalisation of musical notes, or to an *ukuta*, which is similar to the tarana—a string of rhythmic syllables. Each line of the pallavi is usually of a considerable length, allowing for the gradual acceleration of pace and the potential to repeat movements to create emphasis. For her performance, Arushi settled on the act of observation,

drawing from meanings of the word "prekshana." Her choreography then becomes an examination of her own preoccupations as a dancer, and an observation of how her father's practice as a musician intersects with her work in dance. Broad mythological tropes from the stories of Ganesha, Krishna, and Shiva meet various compositional formats of Hindustani music, including dhrupad, thumri, chaturang, and tarana. Having danced Odissi for as long as she can remember, Arushi now focuses on deriving satisfaction from her work as a dancer by trying to find in the form aspects and nuances that excite her. What has helped is a maturity that has grown with experience. "I have become more open with time. When you are growing up, you feel you must have very strong beliefs because you think you need to have them. Over time, you find the right balance— and that may change constantly. I don't want to restrict myself by defining what I believe in or follow," she said of her current perspective.

Adhyatma by Aranyani Bhargav & Sikkil Gurucharan

An engagement with metaphysical poetry forms the basis of this collaboration. The *srngara* (erotic) padams of the 15th century Telugu poet Annamacharya/Annamayya are a popular resource for dancers, but his *adhyatma* (metaphysical) padams aren't. "How do you say 'endless'? I found that I was at a bit of a loss with my mudra vocabulary," said Aranyani about the many challenges of interpreting Annamayya's work. For Adhyatma, she chose three such padams. Working with the Carnatic

concert vocalist Sikkil Gurucharan, Aranyani chose to rearrange the performance space to emphasise on the new dynamic between the musicians and the dancer. Abandoning their usual posts alongside the stage right vertical, the musicians moved into the dancer's space, forming an intimate semicircle around her. Then they were no longer just singing for her, but making themselves more visible, and thus, implicating themselves with greater intent in the act of collaboration.

The ambiguity, doubt, and sense of conflict embedded in the poems were a choreographic challenge. In general, the act of performance privileges clarity; confusion is personal. What ends up on stage must have survived uncertainty and doubt. The gestural and emotional vocabulary of Bharatanatyam aspires towards clarity and resolution. There is conflict, there are twists in the plot, but the narrative of an expressive composition often ends in some form of resolution. In the *adhyatma* padams Aranyani chose, this finality was largely absent. There are no answers. There are, on occasion, personal resolutions, but little room to universalise or generalise them. Annamayya was a prolific poet, composing a song a day in his time at Tirupati, even indicating the raga they were to be sung in. These poems were inscribed on copper plates and stored in a temple vault. While his *srngara* padams were couched in the female voice, the *adhyatma* padams were written in the poet's voice, contrasting his turbulent human self with the seeming immortality of the god he worshipped, translators Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman point out in *God on the Hill*, a translation of selected padams by Annamayya.[1]

Aranyani found herself drawn to the qualities of reflection,

self-questioning, doubt—and the humility that ensued from this process—in the *adhyatma* padams. Written as a series of exchanges with Venkateshwara, the resident deity of Tirupati, in *God on the Hill*,[2] Annamayya asks difficult questions that have no absolute answers: "Is there an end to the endless mind?" Or: "What shall I do? What am I doing? I am too foolish to change course." Aranyani found herself eliciting an emotional response to the poems. In the padam *eda valapeda*, Annamayya comments on the temporariness of everything. "What love? What friendship? These are just words. Nothing lasts," he writes fatalistically.

Aranyani compared this to attitudes towards interpersonal relationships in the 21st century , with the tendency to steer clear of emotional investment or dependence, and the privileging of detachment as a useful dynamic. In another padam, *kim karishyami*, Annamayya makes a bold statement, proclaiming that he will never worship the god on the hill. Expounding on the decisive third padam she ended her performance with, Aranyani says,

> That line attracted me to the padam. I felt like it was such a bold thing for a devotee to see, it's a form of *bhakti*. In one interpretation he could be saying I am not worthy of worshipping you. But that he said it so brazenly – he is never apologetic about it – he has a body and an ego that will die with him – so why should I bother worshipping you (Annamayya says to Venkateshwara).

For many of the dancers in the *Sandhi* project, including

Aranyani, collaborating with concert musicians called for a rethinking of the flow of performance. Both Hindustani and Carnatic music are deeply improvisational. For some part of a performance, musicians sing or play an *alap*, a free exploration of the notes of a particular raga or melody. They go on to explore the *raga* through a text or note-based composition set to a fixed time cycle, with the pace of the music escalating further into the composition. There is no set understanding of how many times a line should be sung; a line is sung until the musician has fully teased out all its musical possibilities. Dancers construct a narrative and usually set the unfolding of that narrative over a specific rendering of a composition. This calls for fixing the number of repetitions of each part of the composition. While the musician can still improvise, they are now inexorably bound by time and rhythm, and need to conclude each element in the composition at a predetermined point in the performance, moving on to the next to keep pace with the dancer. The *Sandhi* dancers spoke of staying acutely aware of the unfolding of these time cycles—in the event of accidental departures into free improvisation—they wanted to be prepared to stay in sync with the musicians. This sensitivity towards the music aided a redistribution of agency in the performance space, where musicians were more than mere "accompanists."

Dancing Emptiness by Gauri Diwakar & Bhuvanesh Komkali

How do musicians make space for the shift in balance between music and dance in a collaboration? "I still have doubts about

how I am doing all of this," said the Hindustani vocalist
Bhuvanesh Komkali in a post-performance conversation,
adding, "When I sing individually, I have my own set-up, but
now I have to enter the thought process of another discipline,
and then compose music based on its parameters." Komkali
boasts of a rich lineage in the Hindustani classical tradition;
he comes from a family of singers, being Mukul Shivputra and
the grandson of Kumar Gandharva. He recounted that his
father often described classical music as *bandhan purna*, where
improvisation or artistic exploration was always within external
constraints. Yet there was freedom, despite the constraints. In
collaborating with Diwakar, Komkali had to take into account
the constraints of her form too.

For Diwakar, the trope of "emptiness" required some serious
reflection. She describes her usual temperament as *chanchal*
(playful/ fickle). On watching televised documentaries
about Buddha and Kabir, she felt the urge to work with
their philosophy. Diwakar choreographs her own work but
approached Aditi Mangaldas when *Dancing Emptiness* turned
up. Diwakar danced with the Kathak dancer Aditi Mangaldas,
as part of the latter's company, and continues to be mentored
by her. "I have watched Aditi di dance *jhini jhini* and a few other
compositions. She is everything to me. The way she approaches
abstract ideas is unparalleled," said Diwakar about her faith in
her mentor's choreographic process.

Diwakar's background in Hindi literature always seems to
draw her to the layered narrative, where every scrap of text can
be unpacked in multiple, sometimes contrasting ways, Yet,
"emptiness" seems like a lofty challenge for Kathak dancers,

who spend their days packing *avartans*, or loops of time, with permutations and combinations of rhythm designed to stun the viewer. However, it is crucial to note that the fullness of Kathak only presents itself to us through an appreciation of its silences and pauses. One comprehends and appreciates its craft of rhythm at the end of an *avartan*, when the dancer marks time by freezing the body, bringing all movement to an end. The satisfaction of watching a dancer perform *chakkars*, or spins, peaks only after the last spin is complete, when all that remains is the memory of their costumes whipping the air.

The collaborators deploy these spaces between fullness and emptiness as a choreographic device and as a means of distinguishing what dance and music individually bring to the performance. Diwakar and Komkali's performance of the Kabir composition *chal hamsa wa desh* commences with a short *alap* by Komkali. As he concludes his *alap*, the lights dim and the music tapers into silence. Diwakar enters from stage right, using her toes, heels, and the entire foot to trace a *gatnikas* (gait) across the stage. One doesn't see her face – only her lower half is lit. For a few seconds, one only hears the sound of her ghunghroos and the consistent drone of Komkali's electronic tanpura. Gradually, Komkali chimes in, repeating the first two words of the composition, *chal hamsa*, against the steady patter of Diwakar's feet. Suddenly, as he moves into the next line of the composition, light floods the stage and we find Diwakar in the throes of a flutter of *chakkars*. The swan references in the piece, they both explain later, are metaphysical, not literal. While the lyrics may reference a woman talking about her lover, the collaborators attempt to address the metaphorical significance of the poem.

In dance, this plays out as a reluctance to elaborate on a linear narrative. Instead, Diwakar treats abstraction as an opportunity to explore the rhythmic element of kathak, suggesting joyousness and ephemerality as a means of metaphorising the text. Interspersed through the piece are gaits that suggest the movement of the swan—the dancer's arms emphasising on its undulating wings, or a ripple in the torso accentuated by subtle dips of the chin recalling the swan's long neck and pointed beak. As an artist, how does one bring fresh perspectives to old texts and ideas? There are no easy answers. But when in doubt, the fundamentals of the form always seem to hold fresh inspiration. As Komkali puts, his responsibility as a musician is *avartan ko khoobsurti se bharna* (to suffuse the time cycle with beauty and craft).

Pratidhwani: Echoes from the Palace, by Prateeksha Kashi & Chandana Bala

In the only narrative-based work in *Sandhi*, Kashi and Bala work with the story of Chitrangada, the Manipuri warrior princess who falls in love with Arjuna. The piece is choreographed by Kashi's Kuchipudi dancer-choreographer mother, Vyjayanthi Kashi. Raised to protect her father's kingdom from its enemies, Chitrangada comes across as one of the bolder female characters in Indian mythology. Afraid that Arjuna will be repulsed by her warrior self, she transforms into a feminine version of herself, and Arjuna duly falls in love with her. Eventually, in a moment of crisis, she is forced to reveal her warrior identity to Arjuna, and goes on to have a son, Babruvahana, with him. In keeping

with the traditions of her dynasty, she continues to raise her son in her father's home, alert to the possibility of any threat to his kingdom.

The collaborators attempt to imagine how Chitrangada views herself. In stories where she is the protagonist, she is viewed through the lens of duty—as a mother, wife, daughter, and princess—and lauded for her ability to do justice to these roles. What did Chitrangada make of the various expectations society had of her, as protector of her father's kingdom, dutiful wife and doting mother, the Kashis and Bala wondered. They made Chitrangada's perspective the focus of their piece, putting her in conversation with the throne, a symbol of her power, but one that she has constantly fed with sacrifice.

Kuchipudi comes from a strong dramatic tradition, making the spoken word an integral part of its performance. While text is usually sung in the course of a performance, the collaborators built on the spoken element to better illustrate Chitrangada's inner turmoil. These voices then appear to her as voices from the pillars of the sprawling, desolate palace she occupies, serving the function of a *sutradhar* or narrator who links multiple scenes. In the performance, Kashi first appears as the warrior princess, taking inspiration from Thang-Ta, a Manipuri martial art form, to demonstrate Chitrangada's agility and valour. Kashi brings an unselfconsciousness to the movement to highlight Chitrangada's obliviousness to the webs of power and duty that thicken around her. It is only on seeing Arjuna and falling in love with him that she first encounters the problematics of her existence. Here, Kashi effects a quick modification of her costume to suggest a Chitrangada who is now tapping into her

feminine side. Resorting to elements from Kuchipudi *nritta*, she constructs an image of a woman who is sure of her love, even as she grapples with her startling loss of agency.

In the narratives that the collaborators encountered, Chitrangada later travels to Hastinapura to live with Arjuna. Could a present-day interpretation suggest another resolution? "Lots of women multi-task. I didn't want Chitrangada to leave everything and go away. We have to live our lives," Kashi declared with some passion in our interview, as her mother and Bala tried to hide widening smiles. What if Chitrangada authored her own destiny? The collaborators decided that she could do it all. "I can have it all. I am going to do whatever I do on my own terms. I didn't have to pretend to be a boy to rule the throne. Even a woman can sit on the throne," pointed out Kashi. All the *Sandhi* dancers assert themselves as independent artists, mindful of, but not held back by the shadows of their gurus and predecessors. Classical dance is still a relatively new construct, less than a hundred years old. These dancers represent the third generation of their respective traditions. They are a curious generation, one that is willing to challenge the status quo. How does one read them, simultaneously, as 21st century individuals and artists from a classical practice? What new constructs and notions can they apply to their forms? As Arushi puts it, "I want to explore new things. What I thought yesterday and what I think today has already changed. I can't say what might happen tomorrow." Moored in form, but open to new influences and ideas, where will their curiosity take them?

Notes

1.   Annamayya, *God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati*. tr. Rao, Velcheru Narayana, and Shulman, David. New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.
2.   Ibid.

Captions

Page 72 (***top***)
Image from *Sari: The Unstitched* performed at DB Ground on December 15th at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity Arts Festival 2017
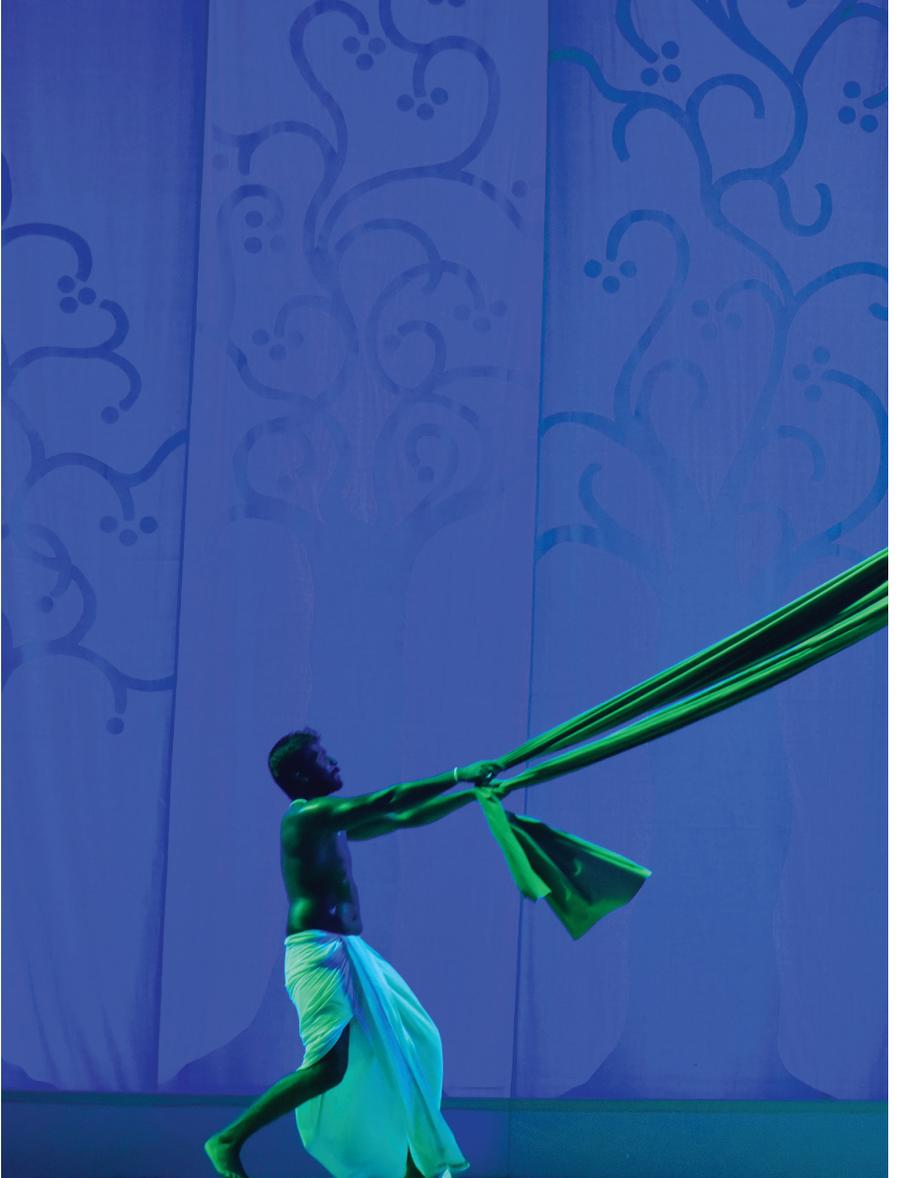
Page 72 (***bottom***)
Image from *Sandhi - Pratidhwani, Echoes from the Palace,* Prateeksha Kashi (Kuchipudi) and Chandana Bali (Carnatic) performed on December 18th at the Open Air Theatre at Kala Academy at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity Arts Festival 2017
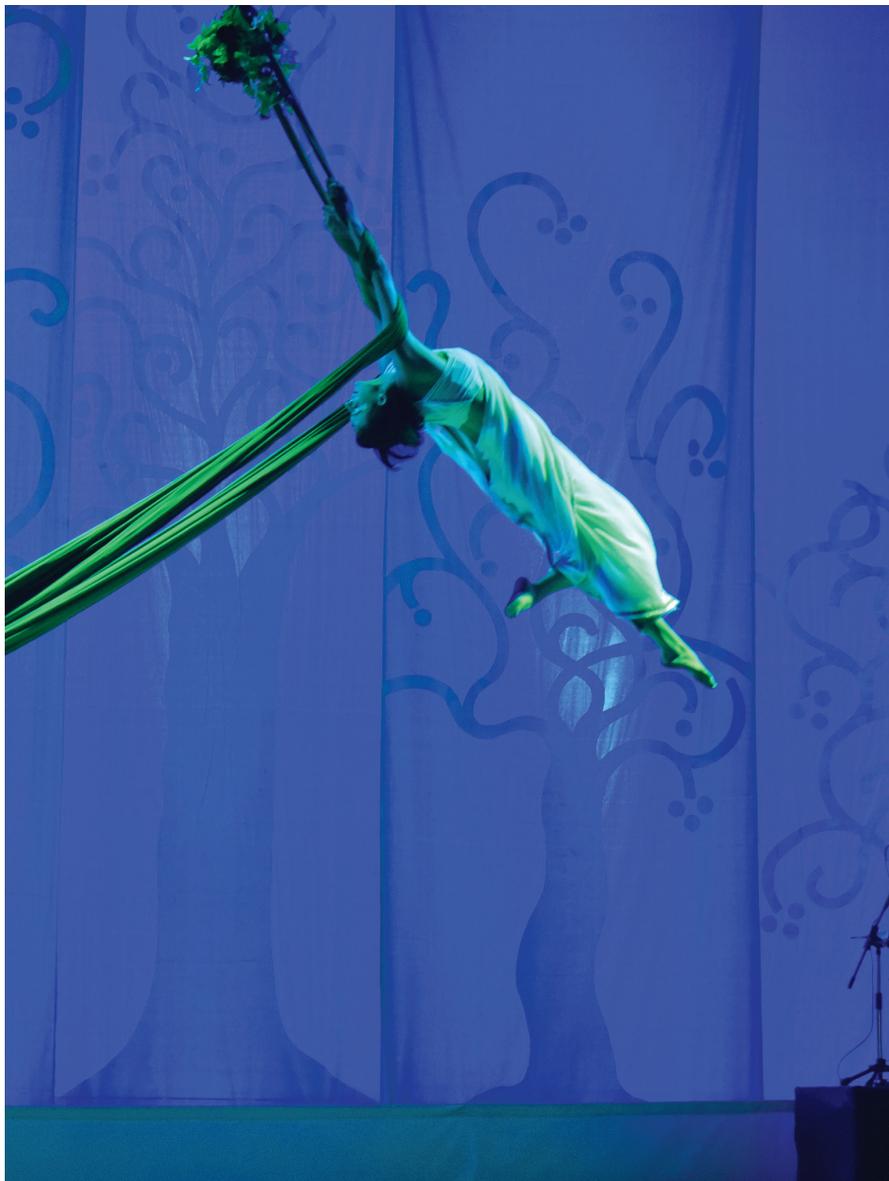
Pages 104-107
 Images from *Sari: The Unstitched* performed at DB Ground on December 15th at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 108-109
Images from *Sandhi - Antar-Prekshna,* Arushi Mudgal (Odissi) and Pt. Madhup Mudgal (Hindustani Classical) performed on December 15th at the Open Air Theatre at Kala Academy at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 110-111
Images from *Sandhi - Adhyatma,*
Aranyani Bhargav (Bharatanatyam) and Gurucharan Sikkil
(Carnatic) performed on December 17th at the Open Air
Theatre at Kala Academy at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity
Arts Festival 2017

Page 112-113
Images from *Sandhi - Pratidhwani, Echoes from the Palace,*
Prateeksha Kashi (Kuchipudi) and Chandana Bali (Carnatic)
performed on December 18th at the Open Air Theatre at Kala
Academy at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity Arts Festival 2017

Page 114-115
Images from *Sandhi - Dancing Emptiness,*
Gauri Diwaker (Kathak) and Bhuvanesh Komkali (Hidustani
Classical) performed on December 19th at the Open Air
Theatre at Kala Academy at Panaji, Goa during Serendipity
Arts Festival 2017

Biographies

Ranjana Dave is a dancer and arts writer. She co-founded
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connect with provocative and diverse ideas, individuals and
institutions. Within dance, she has explored the strands
of writing, archiving, performance and pedagogy. She has
written for Firstpost, Hindu, Scroll, and Tanz. She curated an
online archive of dance video on Pad.ma. Her current interest
in pedagogy and learning environments emerges from her
experience of learning and practising classical dance.Ranjana
is programmes director at the Gati Dance Forum in New Delhi
and has worked on developing pedagogical frameworks that
encourage critical thinking and a reflexive artistic practice as
part of its curriculum development initiatives.

Sanjeev Bhargava has designed some of the most significant
cultural events that the capital has witnessed in recent times —
in the areas of dance, music, theatre, art and cinema – such as
Bhakti Utsav, Delhi Jazz Festival, the South Asian Bands Festival
and *Ananya* at the backdrop of Purana Qila remains as one of
the biggest dance festivals of India. Through Seher, the cultural
organisation he founded in 1991, he has also discovered fresh
talent from remote corners of India. Many of today's well-
known artists were given their first break by him. Sanjeev has
been curating some of the most iconic cultural programmes
for the Office of the President of India. *The Trafalgar Square
Festival* in London was organised by Seher in collaboration
with the Mayor of London and the GLA to mark 60 years of

India's independence in the UK. In addition to organising the *BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra* Tour of India, Sanjeev has organised some of the most important events for the United Nations systems in India. Most recently, he was instrumental in conceptualising the *Udaipur World Music Festival* February 2016, a world music event featuring 100 artists from over 15 countries including Italy, France, Spain and others. This festival has since become an annual event and set a benchmark for presentation of International artists from across the globe.

Daksha Sheth carved a reputation for herself in the world of Kathak for 20 years before she began to explore a range of movement idioms. Having been in the field of dance for 45 years, she draws from her experience in Kathak, Mayurbhanj Chhau, Kalaripayattu and Mallakhamb to aesthetically combine tradition with contemporary Indian dance. The Sangeet Natak Akademi awarded her for her creative and experimental explorations in the field of dance in 2010.
Each of her dance productions has been a product of such experiments and together they represent a continuous evolution of a dance language. This evolving dance vocabulary is the signature of her work: she was the first to introduce aerial technique in Indian dance work and has continued to use it in her productions since 1998. Moreover, each production has radical changes in the context of: music costume, staging, themes, music, lighting design etc. As a dancer and choreographer, Daksha's strength lies in her command and love of rhythm, a natural flexibility and balance and an instinctive capacity to project a range of emotions from sheer joy to vibrant

power. She wants to capture the vitality and rawness of folk and ritual performing arts and combine this with the sophistication and precision of the classical forms and has developed an entirely original movement vocabulary over the years.

Prateeksha Kashi trained in Kuchipudi under the guidance of her mother and guru Vyjayanthi Kashi, a celebrated performer and choreographer. Having attained distinction at the Junior and Senior dance examinations conducted by the State Government, she also received a scholarship from the Central Government of India to advance her studies in Kuchipudi. She has performed in several prestigious dance festivals at regional, national and international levels. She is an empanelled artist of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and has also conducted workshops alongside her mother on her tours. She was selected to represent Kuchipudi in the 100 Member Youth Delegation to China by the Ministry of Youth. She is an A-grade artist of Doordarshan. Prateeksha received the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar (2013-2014) from Central Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Aditya Birla Kalakiran Puraskar. Prateeksha has the title of Nalanda Nritya Nipuna, instituted by Nalanda Dance Research Centre. Her other awards include 3E-Educating, Enchanting and Empowering Dancer Award, Kalabharathi Yuva Pratibha Award and Aryabhata International Award.
With a keen interest in spreading Kuchipudi, Prateeksha coaches dance aspirants and speaks regularly about the experience of being a young classical dancer. Prateeksha excelled in academics and has secured a gold medal in

Computer Science Engineering. She has starred in several alternative films, including *Priyamanasam, Dwar-Door* and *Prakruti*, which won a National Award for its screenplay.

Chandana Bali primarily works in Carnatic classical music, while experimenting with parallel genres like Sufi, folk and bhajans. She has performed in the fusion circuit with musicians such as Louis Banks, Sivamani, Taufiq Qureshi, and Sanjay Divecha. She has received the Aryabhatta Youth Award, Ananya Yuva Puraskara, and Ghantasala Youth Award. She has many singles to her credit, composed and produced by her. She has featured in albums such as *Badaboom* by Ranjit Barot, *Secret* by Sanjay Divecha, *Cosmic Chant* by Rajeev Raja, and *Forest* by Taufiq Qureshi. She has a few playback tracks in the movies to her credit. She is constantly working towards bringing together devotional and spiritual poetry from various genres and presenting them in concert recitals. She is a Coke Studio artist and has performed with Amit Trivedi in the series' third season. She has worked with experimental dance groups such as Nritarutya and accompanied independent dancers such as Vyjayanthi and Prateeksha Kashi, composing music for live performances and dance productions. She is a regular on the jingle circuit. Currently she lives and works in Mumbai, where she performs solo and with bands, records music, and teaches it.

Pandit Madhup Mudgal is one of the best known Indian classical vocalists of the present generation. He heads the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, Delhi's leading and oldest institution for training in classical music and dance, founded

by his late father and first guru, Professor Vinay Chandra Maudgalya. Madhup's initial training was under his father, and thereafter under Shri Vasant Thakar and Pandit Jasraj. During these years he was also able to absorb ideas from the many visiting musicians who formed part of the Vidyalaya's extended family. But the abiding influence on his art has been that of his mentor and guru Pt. Kumar Gandharva. This influence has shaped Madhup's style and approach and given him a deep awareness of, and sensitivity to the fine balance between tradition and innovation.

He is a regular performer at important platforms and festivals in India and abroad (including the Fez Festival in Morocco and at the Theatre de la Ville, Paris), and as a top-grade artist of All India Radio, he features regularly on AIR's National Programme. Simultaneously, Madhup's classicism has not prevented him from innovating and experimenting. As conductor of the acclaimed Gandharva Choir, Madhup has proved himself to be a brilliant composer of choral music. His work with solo dancers and his compositions for choreographed group dance works uses a variety of poetic texts and is well known and much appreciated by both connoisseurs and lay listeners. He has also performed in fusion concerts with eminent jazz musicians Paulo Moura, Harmeto Pascoal and Benjamim Taubkin in Brazil.

Madhup has received several awards, including the Sanskriti Award and the Padma Shri award from the government of India.

Arushi Mudgal is an Odissi dancer, known for her technical virtuosity and creative approach to tradition. She has trained

under her aunt and Guru Smt. Madhavi Mudgal at the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, Delhi. She has also been mentored by dancers like Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Smt. Leela Samson, who have further enriched her approach to the arts. Arushi tours extensively as a soloist performing at various prestigious festivals within India and abroad. In 2008, Pina Bausch invited her to perform at the Internationales Tanz Festival in Dusseldorf, Germany. In her choreography, Arushi explores plural areas of creativity, from traditional to contemporary. Her recent collaborative projects include *Haveli*, a production with musicians of Indian and Western genres, an opera, *Orfeo - Crossing the Ganges*, *Samagat* with Kathak dancer Monisa Nayak, *Swadesh* with Mythili Prakash and Monisa Nayak, presented in the UK, and *Sama*, a contemporary work with Roland Auzet, a French percussionist which was premiered in May 2014 at the Steps Festival of Switzerland.

Arushi has co-authored a book on the aesthetics of Odissi with senior scholar and aesthetician Professor S.K. Saxena. A graded artist of Doordarshan, she is empanelled with the ICCR. For her contribution to Odissi, Arushi has been presented with various awards including Sangeet Natak Akademi's Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar (2011), the Young Women Achievers' Award by YFLO - FICCI (2011), the Chitra Kala Sangam Samman (2010), the Sanatan Nritya Puraskar (2006), the Indian President's Bal Shree Award (2003), the Original Mind Award (2003) and the Rajiv Gandhi Excellence Award (2014).

Gauri Diwakar is a Kathak dancer and has been the recipient of many prestigious awards. In 2008, she was awarded the

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Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Gauri has also received Sangeet Praveen from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad. An A-grade artist of Doordarshan, Gauri is also empanelled with the ICCR.

A versatile, energetic performer, Gauri is a regular performer in several national and international dance festivals. Most recently, she performed at the Sydney Dance Festival in Australia and at the Korzo Festival in The Hague. She started training in Jamshedpur, studying Kathak with Sumita Chowdhary. She further honed her skills under the tutelage of the renowned gurus, Pt. Birju Maharaj and Jai Kishan Maharaj at the Kathak Kendra. After graduating with distinction from Kathak Kendra, Gauri further perfected her skills by studying with Aditi Mangaldas. She danced with the Drishtikon Dance Foundation: Aditi Mangaldas Dance Company for twenty years, and continues to be closely associated with them. Gauri is also passing on her skills by training young students under the aegis of her trust, Gauri Diwakar Sanskriti Foundation: Sarvatra Nrityam.

Born into a rich legacy of music, **Bhuvanesh Mukul Komkali** is the grandson of Pt. Kumar Gandharva and the son of Mukul Shivputra. Bhuvanesh's earliest memories are filled with the sounds of early morning practice, performances and recordings. An extensive repertoire made its way into the very cells of his being, even as he graduated from college with a commerce degree. Bhuvanesh's musical quest continued under the tutelage of late Smt. Vasundhara Komkali and Shri Madhup Mudgal. Learning the rudiments of vocal music

under such accomplished teachers has deepened Bhuvanesh's appreciation for his forefather's talents and renewed his commitment to preserve and extend his heritage. He is currently engaged in enriching the archives of Gandharva's music using the latest in digital technology. He has composed music for the Hindi feature film *Devi Ahilya*. Bhuvanesh has performed successfully in several reputed music festivals across the country. He has received scholarships from the Ministry of Culture. He has also received several awards for his work, including Sangeet Natak Akademi's prestigious Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar in 2012. He is a regular performer for All India Radio.

Aranyani Mudgal began her training under Padmashri Leela Samson at the age of 5. After training with her for 16 years, during which time she had a well-received arangetram in 2001 at the age of 16, Aranyani went on to pursue ballet and contemporary dance in the UK and in India. She continued to practice and perform Bharatanatyam, and delivered performances in various countries such as France, Germany, the UK, Belgium, Turkey, the Netherlands, Australia, China, the United States and Canada. Aranyani also academically engaged with dance and wrote her master's thesis on the multiple modernities within Bharatanatyam at Oxford University. Her most recent performances in India include performing for the then Vice President of India, Hamid Ansari; performing for Sonia Gandhi and other dignitaries at the 100th Birth anniversary celebrations of Indira Gandhi in Nehru Park and at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa.

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In 2014, Aranyani founded Vyuti Dance Company, a dance group that explores the modernity inherently present in the traditional form of Bharatanatyam. In 2016, Vyuti had its debut performance successfully and within a year of it, had travelled within India with the new work, and to Africa with ICCR on a tour. Vyuti has just premiered its latest work, Sakhi in various cities in India where it is being well received. Aranyani is the recipient of the Natya Kala Mani award, is empaneled with ICCR and was centrally featured in a PSBT documentary on the transformation of Sadir to Bharatanatyam. She currently runs Vyuti, and practices, performs and teaches based out of Bangalore, India.

Carnatic vocalist **Sikkil Gurucharan** is the grandson of Sikkil Kunjumani, elder of the internationally acclaimed flautists Padmashri Sikkil Sisters. Gurucharan has been under the tutelage of Vaigal Shri. Gnanaskandan and Shri B Krishnamurthy. He has performed extensively in India and abroad, spanning prestigious venues such as the Music Academy (Chennai), Sri Shanmukhananda Sabha (Mumbai), Esplanade Theaters by the Bay (Singapore), Riverside theatres (Sydney), Korean Arts Management Centre (Seoul), the Sangeet Natak Akademi (New Delhi), Chowdiah Hall (Bangalore) and at popular festivals like the Cleveland Festival (USA), Rabindra Utsav (Kolkata), to name a few. He is also an A-grade All India Radio artiste.
In bringing this art to students and aficionados alike, he has opened the gates to a larger and interested audience having a welcoming attitude towards innovation while retaining

the spirit of the original art form. This is evident in his active participation in youth festivals, lecture-demonstrations and his concerted effort at recording theme-based albums that have greater appeal with listeners.