

FRIDAY REVIEW

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Time to improvise!

A peek into the world of improvisational theatre **Pages 4 & 5**

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Arunima Sengupta Basu and the dancing duo Archana and Chetana conjured up myriad flavours of mythical tales through Kathak and Bharatanatyam

MADHUR GUPTA

Keeping the tradition of introducing young artists to connoisseurs of the Capital alive, India International Centre recently presented Arunima Sengupta Basu from Kolkata and the dancing duo Archana and Chetana from Bangalore in their IIC Double Bill concert.

Aptly titled, the event presented a double indulgence for the rasikas to view high classical arts of Kathak and Bharatanatyam with a tinge of regional flavours.

The evening began with Kathak by Arunima, a student of Gurus Luna Poddar and Pt. Rajendra Gangani. Presenting the much revered text excerpts from Ramayana, the dancer depicted various stages of Lord Rama's life including those of intense hardships and the ultimate establishment of Ram Rajya.

Musically composed and choreographed by Pt Rajendra Gangani, the piece coaxed the audience to meditate upon the unparalleled standards of Lord Rama, eluding any literal translation of the saga. On being asked about her association with the stalwart guru and her thoughts on Guru Shishya tradition, the dancer commented, "Our parampara entails a lifelong bonding between the teacher and the disciple, whereby the disciple becomes an integral part of the guru's family, rendering service to his guru in all possible way, in return of the knowledge imparted by the maestro that incorporates a complete education both about the subject and about life as a whole."

"Mora Saiyaan Bulawe Adhi Raat Ko" was another piece in *bhav paksha* of the dancer. This thumri, a rendition by late Jayeeta Pandey, explored the charted waters of the *virahini nayika* waiting to be one with her beloved and exuding immense joy on receiving an inkling of his call to meet her. With deft qualities of a dancer, Arunima managed to evoke the sense of separation by ending her piece in a tragedy, when the heroine, unable to cross the flooded river, shatters into deep grief. Interspersing with, paran, tukras, high velocity pirouettes, and vilambit and drut laya tatkar, the dancer chose to draw curtains on her recital.

Next in the lineup were Bharatanatyam dancers Archana and Chetana; students of Guru B.Bhanumati, Sheela Chandrasekhar, and Devaki Narasimhan. Also evoking the Vaishnavite deities Rama, Krishna, and Vishnu, the dancers titled their presentation: 'Sarvam Krishnamayam'.

Continued on page 8

The life and times of Josh

Marked by sophistication and poetic musings, Salima Raza's "Yaadon Ki Baraat" unravelled the romantic side of the poet of revolution

DIWAN SINGH BAJELI

The Wings Cultural Society headed by talented young theatre practitioner Tarique Hameed is undoubtedly a first-of-a-kind which mainly focuses on novelists and poets whose works inspire to create a morally better world. We have seen in the past fine productions by the group that appeared at prestigious festivals including Bharat Rang Mahotsav.

Critically acclaimed, its productions include "Chand Roz Aur Meri Jaan" by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, "Topi Ki Dastaan" by Rahi Masoom Raza and "Sara Ka Saara Asmaan" based on the life of poetess Sara Shagufta. Continuing its artistic credo, it has presented "Yaadon Ki Baraat" based on the autobiography of Josh Malihabadi at Stein Auditorium, India Habitat Centre recently under the direction of Salima Raza.

Poetic musings

Candidly frank, the production evokes multiple moods, vividly bringing alive vignettes of the life of poet Josh Malihabadi (1898-1982) and his turbulent times. It is marked by sophistication and poetic musings. Such evenings are rarely witnessed on the Delhi stage these days.

Director Salima Raza has evolved her own presentational form which unravels content in an unpretentious manner. There are two performers – Salima herself and Arshad Eqbal, producer, director and voice caster, – who sit on the chairs occupying centre stage.

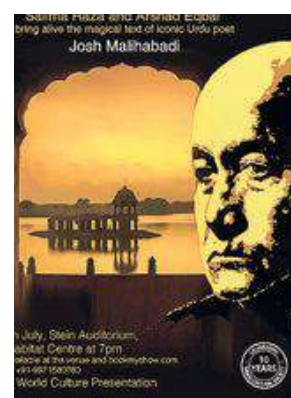
Both are holding copies of the poet, elaborating their point by reading relevant passages from the autobiog-



Beyond the obvious Arshad Eqbal and Salima Raza in "Yaadon Ki Baraat"; Josh Malihabadi in a poster of the play ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

raphy. After establishing themselves in conversational mode in an unaffected style, they establish a lively rapport with the audience. In this process, Salima and Arshad transcend the concept of the fourth wall and make the members of the audience involved in the revelation of the poems and times of the poet and to reflect on his works and social conflicts he confronted. The performers remain sitting on their chairs throughout the show, their tonal variations, clarity of accent using punch at the right place and facial expression eloquently convey the central idea of the autobiography.

Another innovative aspect of Salima's production is the use of recorded off stage music which is beautifully rendered in soulful voices highlighting the poet's world view. The melody appears to start from a distance, rising steadily, making transition from conversation into melodious renderings of poems



lyrical and an integral part of the narrative.

Enlightened visionary

Known for his defiance of dogmas and British colonial rulers, Josh Malihabadi is greatly venerated for his poetic richness and social vision and is famously called Shayar-e-Inqilab. He is one of the finest Urdu poets who stood for the oppressed. He remained in India till 1956 and later migrated to Pakistan.

The performers narrate his poems, biography full of romantic anecdotes that impart insight into the emotional world of a poet who wrote fearlessly.

The director interpreted his work and times not in a style that is ostentatiously philosophical replete with pompous Persianised Urdu. Her aim was to capture everyday occurrences which kept audience in good humour.

Here is a humorous anecdote: Malihabadi kept him away from drinking. Once he

was invited by his friends to have a good time in the evening, he encounters a voluptuously beautiful dancing girl who was instrumental in introducing him to the taste of wine and the company of beautiful women.

The performers narrate a chapter from Malihabadi autobiography with his wife. It is witty, comical and a wife's concern for her husband fearing that he has affairs. In this narration, the poet does not express his bitterness about his wife's behaviour who is critical about his lifestyle. Instead, in this narrative, love and understanding between wife and husband are revealed. Though known for his affairs, he married only once.

There is a poem which celebrates composite culture of India and display the sense of joie de vivre by Hindus and Muslim while celebrating Holi. There is an undercurrent of peaceful co-existence between different communities illustrated through his references to the Gita and the Quran.

Though the dominant mood of the production is one of light-hearted amusement, the denouement ending with the couplet: "Raje Almas Ke Tere Khas-O-Khashak Mein Hain, Haddiyan Apne Bujurgon Ki Tiri Khak Mein Hain... Ghar Jo Chhodange To Phir Chhawini Chhayenge Kahaan", rendered in a melodious voice steeped in deep poignancy, stirred the soul of the audience.



'I don't sing to please'

Inspired by Kumar Gandharva, vocalist Rahul Deshpande is forging his own path

SHAILAJA KHANNA

Despite his rich lineage, it was only after the success of songs he sung in "Katyar Kaljat Ghusali" that Rahul Deshpande became a household name. He has acted and sung in over 100 shows of the play of the same name over the last few years.

Articulate and chatty, Rahul, grandson of Pt Vasant Rao Deshpande, a popular figure in Maharashtra music and theatre circles, is not your typical music centric musician. Educated in a premier English school, Rahul confessed to listening to popular Western music in his youth rather than his grandfather's tapes. Only three years after Vasant Rao Deshpande passed away, Rahul found his musical inspiration initially through the music of the iconic Pt Kumar Gandharva. Incidentally, Rahul has even adopted Kumar ji's stance of leaning on his arms!

Rahul's concert recently at the month-long Swara Malhar festival in Pune was an eye opener. Despite it being a Malhar festival, Rahul chose boldly to sing raga Madhu Kauns, with even the lyrics of his opening khayal "de mohe darshan Rama" in Jhaptaal, making no concessions to the season of the rains. He held the audience attention with fast taans, gamaks, more used on instruments, and subtle laya play. There is no doubt Rahul has forged his own path musically. His concluding thumri "chhaa rah kal ghata" was sung with innovative embellishments.

One admired his candour and his willingness to take on all questions head on.

Edited excerpts:

You wear many hats - sin-



I am optimistic about the future of our music, but I must admit that it is the few crowd pullers who carry a festival.



Striking a chord Rahul Deshpande

ger, actor, organiser...

"Katyar Kaljat Ghusali" is not the first film I did; but yes, everyone is talking about it. In 2011, I had acted in a Maharashtrian film "Bal Gandharva" in which I sang and also played a small role, but "Katyar Kaljat Ghusali" is by far the biggest hit. I have always wanted to revive Marathi musicals.

The time of Pt Deenanath Mangeshkar and Bal Gandharva was the golden era of Marathi musicals, and I wanted to recreate this era. My grandfather had acted as Khan sahib, the central character in "Katyar..." in the original play, and I wanted to revive it as a play for a newer audience. So we did around 100 shows of it, spread over 10 years. At NSD, Delhi students had only heard of Natya sangeet, they didn't know musical theatre even existed.

I also did other plays such as "Man Apmaan", "Saubhadra". I think because the interest in and popularity of these plays, the films happened. I also did a show on Kumar Gandharva ji entitled "Raagvilas" based on his book "Anuprag Vilas" which contains his bandishes.

I am happy to say that after watching my plays and films, more youngsters are coming to learn classical music. That was my aim.

There is another biopic that I can't talk about yet, but in that too I sing and act. Another film is about my grandfather. It's the

first film I have composed music for, and that was quite a challenge.

However, I am very clear about my identity. I am a classical singer and that is what I want to be remembered as. I do love to perform, but it is primarily to push my agenda of popularising classical music.

How did you gravitate towards singing?

My musical inspiration is Kumar ji. For me music equalled him. I started singing because of him. I wanted to sound like him. I also learnt from his son Mukul Shivputra for 8-9 years. I studied in an English school where the music I heard was Western popular music.

The classical music interest happened later. I feel my music sounds current because it has all that I heard. Amongst the classical musicians I was inspired by include Pt Bhimsen Joshi, Kishori Amonkar, Mallikarjun Mansoor. At some point, when I was 23-24, I decided I wanted to do nothing but sing, and sing well. I did riyaz for 8-10 hours. I devoured the recordings of my grandfather; his singing sounds easy but it is so difficult to do. I consciously did not try to sound like him, I felt it was impossible. With Kumar ji, I felt closer. Kumar ji and my grandfather were very close friends, and I think in a way my involvement with Kumar ji's music brought me closer to my grandfather too.

I admired his approach to

music. The way he interprets each bandish is different each time. I still have so much to learn from the recordings.

Tell us about your signature style?

As a singer one should not try to copy a voice or even a style. Your personality has to come out in your music. Initially, I tried to copy, but it didn't work. When I sing, I can switch modes and bring out the style of Mukulji, or Bhimsen ji or Vasant Rao ji - but ultimately it's my music. I travel a lot, and I do think all these influences seep into my music. I like to watch meaningful films and read what my friends recommend.

I try to bring in newer audiences by singing the type of music they want to hear, but do not move away from the tradition I have been trained in. I believe artist can command audience attention; it's your own confidence as a performer that holds attention. I don't believe one has to compromise on style or time. I don't look at my watch while singing unless I have been told to contain myself. I don't care how I am being judged; I don't sing to please. It bothers me to think that I sang for the gallery.

Let's talk about your annual music festival Vasant Utsav.

It's been 11 years now, and I was quite clear the festival had to be a befitting tribute to my grandfather's legacy, which was not confined to only classical music. He loved ghazals, laavanis, natya sangeet - so I wanted the festival to include all that too. I wanted the festival to include Marathi musicals too.

In 2020, we will celebrate the 100th birth anniversary of my grandfather. So, I am planning a big event.

How do you see the classical music scene in India today?

I am optimistic about the future of our music, but I must admit that it is the few crowd pullers who carry a festival. Unknown artists at a standalone concert will fail, even if it is not ticketed. In Madhya Pradesh, the Tansen festival is well run by the State. I wish Maharashtra would also patronise classical music.

I did a new type of concert called 'baithak' where I talked to the audience, explained what a khayal was, then sang it. It was popular but it's been two years now. I have not been able to carry it on. Sadly, classical music needs to be sponsored as ticket sales do not cover costs.

I am excited about my concert for Banyan Tree at Kamani auditorium on July 20th. There are very few opportunities in Delhi I feel, so this for me is nice.



Sonal Mansingh

Well-deserved!

Forty four artists from the field of music, dance, theatre, traditional/folk/tribal music/dance/theatre, puppetry and overall contribution/scholarship in the performing arts have been selected for the Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards for 2018.

At its General Council meeting held at Guwahati recently, National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama announced that noted tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, seasoned classical dancer Sonal Mansingh, Satriya exponent Jatin Goswami and veteran Bharatanatyam dancer K. Kalyanasundaram Pillai, have been selected for Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellow (Akademi Ratna).

Veteran theatre critic of *The Hindu*, Diwan Singh Bajeli has been selected for Overall Contribution /Scholarship in the Performing Arts. Along with him, Puru Dadhich has also been selected for the same category.

In the field of music, 11 artistes including seasoned Hindustani vocalist Madhup Mudgal and sarod maestro Tejendra Narayan Majumdar have made it to the list.

Malini Awasthi, Gazi Khan Barna, Narendra Singh Negi and Mohd. Sadiq Bhagat have been selected in traditional/ folk/ music /theatre category.

In dance, Radha Sridhar for Bharatanatyam, Ishira and Maulik Shah for Kathak, Arupam Lakshmi Devi for Manipuri, Sukuma Sen for Odissi, Tanqueswar Hazarika Borbayan for Sattriya, Gopika Varma for Mohiniattam and Pasumurthy Ramalinga Sastry for Kuchipudi are among nine exponents selected for the prestigious award.

In theatre, nine eminent artists have been selected including Rajiv Naik and Lalitluangliana Khiangte for playwriting, Sanjay Upadhyay and S. Raghunandana for direction and Suhag Joshi and Teekam Joshi for acting.

The honour of Akademi Fellow carries a purse money of ₹3,00,000 and Akademi Award carries ₹1,00,000, besides a Tamrapatra and Angavastram.

The SNA Awards will be conferred by the President of India in a special investiture ceremony.

Unscripted and spontaneous, improvisational theatre is emerging as a powerful tool for developing life skills and building communities

SHRINKHLA SAHAI

Life as usual, flipped in a moment for Shruti Jain when she decided to try out a class of improv. A financial planner and analyst by profession, she wanted to explore her creative side with the workshop. Among several game-changing takeaways, she realised that as in the session, also in her life out there, she wasn't really listening actively to people. "During an act, I figured that I am nodding and maintaining eye contact but not listening, back in my work it's the same. This changed my relationship with my clients and I have evolved remarkably as a professional." Stepping into different roles during the workshops shifted her perspective on people, "I had never thought about how a waitress at a restaurant might be feeling, or my domestic help at home when I said something mindlessly to her. To be able to feel like others is so profound!"

Similarly, for Training and Development professional Avijit Shastri, a brush with Improv transformed his approach in corporate life. "I realised fears are so hard-wired within us that it is difficult to break out and let your guard down. While this may take several years with regular HR training sessions, 'letting go' can happen easily in just one improv session where you find a safe space to be silly, imaginative, make your team member look good and accept people without judging."

Nurturing empathy is central to improvisational theatre for Blessin Varkey who facili-

tated these workshops. "At its core, Impro is about acceptance. Accepting stories, characters and people for who they are." As the Artistic Director of The Impro Company, Delhi, he prefers to use the term 'impro', tipping the hat to the pedagogy of the 'Improv System' pioneered by Keith Johnstone in the 1970s. This is just one of the several schools of spontaneous theatre that have their own distinct formats and approaches.

Not just for laughs

Unlike a regular play that is scripted, rehearsed, prepared and staged, improvisational theatre is primarily unscripted, unplanned and created collaboratively by the players in the moment. Incidentally, the term 'improv' has become hemmed to refer mainly to comedy, though there is an array of other experimental, dramatic and narrative-based



Impro allows us to experience awareness, acceptance and vulnerability. It also helps us understand what it means to have a 'learner's mind' Blessin Varkey

improvisational theatre. The focus in improv shifts deeply from performance production to process-oriented work.

Balasree Viswanathan of Improv Comedy Bangalore points out, "Comedic improv has taken off in India in a big way, but it also puts improv in a box of being just comedy." A closer look at the trends in the past five years reveals the possible reason, "Stand-up and improv were taking off together so they got bundled together because people were familiar with the comedy vehicle and mostly shows of both genres were happening at the same event and venue."

Ankur Sardana forayed into improv during his time in the US. Back in India, he had a brief stint as a playwright before returning back to the world of unscripted theatre, which proved "much easier to begin with less resources, and has powerful potential for developing life-skills."

Based in Gurugram presently, he founded Nautankibaz Improv Comedy nine years back, with core team members Anshu Daga, Ankur Nigam, Mayank Moudgil and Sumit Mehta. Inspired by the work of legendary improv aesthetician, Viola Spolin, he reflects, "The shift from scripted plays to improv is also about a way of life. In improv, there are no meaty roles, we work as a team and it is a lot about community-building." In the recent past, their workshops with children and families have drawn a large number of participants. "It is often difficult to tell people what exactly improv is. We realised that the venue makes a lot of

difference. It doesn't work so well in an auditorium-setting where people come to sit and watch. It needs to be interactive, collaborative, game-like." For Sardana, an important aspect of improv is that it should be now and here, relevant to what people are experiencing and for them to bring their lives into it. "Since it is spontaneous, people can share or reflect on the topics relevant to them right now. It is basically a means for people to talk and build communities."

Gender Bender

While improv may have a topical and timely edge to it, the acts can often be gender-skewed and it was important for Madhu Shukla and Balasree Viswanathan to explore this influence. "Prevailing gender stereotypes often overwhelm a regular improv act. For instance, if it is an interaction between a doctor and nurse, it would be as-

sumed that the doctor is male and the nurse is female, similarly for a boss and secretary. And often the women roles would just be relegated to being the romantic interests for the men. This can get quite limiting." With this in mind they started Adamant Eves in

2017 within Improv Comedy Bangalore, an experiment as an all-women's group.

They realised that it is easier to explore a diverse array of issues, roles and topics within this format. "The dynamic between team members changes," says Viswa-

nathan, "One can be more open to taking risks with performative choices on stage. The audience can't typecast us so easily into the regular characters and concepts, there is a different kind of comfort between the players and we can explore the depth

of social equations and emotions without the pressure of punch-lines."

The group plays around with topics, including insights into gender issues, "Sometimes the topics revolve around gender just by bringing our real lives onto stage. When women are coming to an improv session after being groped, catcalled, pushed over, these emerge as critical issues to explore, with comedy or through non-comedic improv." Reflecting on whether they are tagged as a feminist performance group, she says, "We are not a feminist improv group by design, but by virtue of us all being women, it is feminist, for sure."

Inclusive approach

Blessin Varkey believes that within the directorial role in Impro, one must also double as an educator. "Improv allows us to experience awareness, acceptance and vulnerability. It also helps us understand

Caught in the act!

Directors share some memorable Improv moments

"Two male actors are on stage. They begin the conversation and we realise gradually that they are actually playing sisters. They brilliantly use the space and the objects around them to give us (audience) the illusion that they are at a camp site. After talking about their marriage plans and their day like any other ordinary women, we realise that they are also the two most wanted criminals of the Interpol! The brilliance of the improviser lies in establishing the ordinary, basic setting first and then collectively working towards building an interesting story."

Blessin Varkey, The Impro Company

In our Improv theatre production 'Unravel', as the audience enter the venue, they are handed a sheet of paper with questions. The questions are seemingly simple, and could also be interpreted deeply. For instance, 'what would make you happy?' For some, it's an ice cream of their favourite flavour, someone wants to be at the beach, while another starts pondering over their true calling in life. The sheets are collected and set aside, they re-emerge later in the performance, as cues for the actors. A stray sigh, random giggles, nervous claps, from the audience indicate that their answer-sheet made its way into the play in a way they couldn't have imagined. And that's the impact of improv.

Varoon P Anand, Kaivalya Plays



Exploring diverse issues (Clockwise from above) A performance of Adamant Eves in progress; members of Nautankibaz Improv Comedy; members of Playground Comedy Studio ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

While improv may have a topical and timely edge to it, the acts can often be gender-skewed and it was important for Madhu Shukla and Balasree Viswanathan to explore this influence

what it means to have a 'learner's mind'. He co-founded the Improv collective at the Playground Comedy Studio and also served as its artistic director earlier. Presently spearheading The Impro Company, he believes it is crucial to explore improvisation as an approach and pedagogy in mainstream and inclusive education.

"Improv has also been part of my day job as the head of the Innovation and Research unit at a Delhi based non-pro-

fit, where we research and design innovative solutions to assist children and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in their education, employment and rehabilitation through technology. I've been using improvisation with my team, which usually involves special educators, speech and occupational therapists, psychologists and developers during the ideation phase."

Recalling an instance where improv and education blended seamlessly he says, "My favourite experience of using improvisation, till date was to see a 17-year old, young adult with severe learning disabilities and limited verbal capacity contribute to an improvisational exercise called the one-word story. The story was simple, it was about a lion in the jungle having water. One word story can be really challenging. It's important to listen, be present and be syntac-

Improving on Improv
Nautankibaz Improv Comedy: Introducing Bollyprov- 10 minute on-the-spot movie-style Improv. Six-week Performance-oriented Improv series starting in August.

The Impro Company: 'Keep Calm and Improv' series for different groups, alongside special sessions of Impro for the elderly. 'Not so Blue' series for young individuals with autism.

ICB: A unique Improv Musical (duet) titled 'Hum'. Later this month, the musically inclined duo - Balasree Viswanathan and Nasir Engineer would be presenting a feature-length Improv performance filled with games and stories on music and singing, all improvised in the moment.

Kaivalya Plays: Starting Head Space, a series of monthly Improv jams and workshops at Oddbird Theatre, Delhi.

tically coherent. So, to see the boy contribute in the story was a big surprise to the special educators and the vice principal because it opened up for them a whole new range of tools to explore working with students."

Mental health matters

In their latest Improv show- Unravel, Kaivalya Plays, a Delhi-based collective, unpacks issues of mental health. Improvisation games and exercises alongside audience suggestions provide an entry point into unsettling discussions that probe the stigma around mental health through the production. The ensemble uses spontaneous Improv, theatre exercises and audience suggestions to devise the final performance on the spot. The show aims to create safe spaces for the performers and audience alike to acknowledge and possibly, articulate their own experiences with mental health. Initially commissioned for the Refunction programme by Goethe-Institut /Max Mueller

Bhavan the show has evolved steadily from the earlier format and also involves a drama therapist now.

Director Varoon P. Anand was first introduced to "spontaneous improvisation" in 2008 at the Theatre Guild of Ancon in Panama. "Over the years my curiosity about the relationship of spontaneous improvisation with depression only grew," he shares. "This piece seeks to explore a theoretical connection between the techniques of improvisation and its therapeutic effects on anxiety, depression, manic depression, bipolar disorder and other possible mental health disorders. One of the main concerns with 'Unravel' is to maintain an atmosphere of discovery and conversation, constantly engaging the audience and encouraging their participation, but without trying to offer conclusions or 'cures' to the symptoms of depression or anxiety."

Next Up

A relatively nascent genre in the country, improvisational theatre is now teeming with possibilities, players and perspectives. Kaivalya Plays would be opening the Old World Culture Theatre festival at the India Habitat Centre, Delhi, in August, attempting to situate improv productions into mainstream theatre festivals, rather than offsets of comedy shows.

One of the most awaited theatre festivals in the capital, an Improv theatre production would be featured as the opening production for the first time. "We are often asked whether the show was really improvised!" says Anand. "Do we have a script? No. Of course we have an overall structure, but the actual show is created with and amid the audience. Come to the show to discover this and explore Improv!"



Resonance

This peacock is the pride of Punjab

Taus is a string instrument similar to the violin and is played during shabad kirtans



DR M LALITHA AND M NANDINI



We were recently invited to perform for the UNESCO's City of Music programme in Germany, where we represented India and Carnatic Music. As part of our concert, we collaborated with a German ensemble and had a chance to listen to a rare Indian string instrument, Taus being played by a German lady.

Intrigued by its sound and peacock-shaped structure we decided to explore this instrument. Taus, which falls under the category of Chordophones, belongs mainly to North and Central India, with specific connection to Punjab. It is associated with the Sikh saints and mainly used in devotional music.

'Taus', a Persian word, denotes a peacock. The neck of this peacock-shaped instrument holds a long wooden rack with 20 heavy metal frets. On top of the instrument, there are four main strings that run along the fingerboard. There are four pegs for these main strings that are made of either wood or steel. The main strings are usually tuned to shadjam, madhyamam and panchamam.

Apart from the main strings, there are around 30 sympathetic or resonant strings that are attached to the pegs located on the side of the instrument. The main strings, made usually of metal, pass through a bridge that is traditionally made of ivory or bone but more often of rosewood. The notes from the first fret of the last string

start from the mandra sthayi madhyama and go up to tara sthayi gandhara.

Taus is usually made from one piece high-quality wood, usually the Tun wood, which is similar to the red cedar. At the tail portion of the instrument is the sound hole. The instrument has a large resonating chamber. The sound chamber of the Taus is bigger in size and is covered with wood or goat skin. The peacock feet, carved in wood, holds the instrument. Sometimes peacock feathers are attached to the instrument as an embellishment.

Bowing technique

The Taus is played with a bow, a bit concave in structure. The bow has the frog and the upper portion similar to that of the violin. The index, middle finger and the thumb of the right hand hold the stick portion of the bow, while the ring finger is placed near the frog and the little finger is kept below the bow hair. Long bowing is special to this instrument. The bow hair, made of nylon, is coated in Rosin like the way it is applied to the bow of the violin.

The playing techniques are more similar to that of the violin. The left hand fin-

gers produce the melody while the right hand fingers hold the bow to strike the strings. The index and middle fingers of the left hand are used to play the notes, sometimes the ring finger is used to play certain phrases.

Taus artistes mostly play seated on the floor, with either one leg or both tucked in, the top portion of the instrument resting on the performer's shoulder.

Taus's construction and playing technique are also akin to Dilruba, another string instrument mostly used in the North. Scholars say that Dilruba originated from Taus.

While some say that Taus was invented by Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru of the Sikhs, there are others who think that it was created by Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th guru of the Sikhs and was a poet. As a master of the Persian language, it is said that he gave the instrument a Persian name in the language and he could play it.

Taus is part of Gurbani kirtan/Shabad kirtan, where the performer recites the hymns while playing the instrument.

The writers are well-known Carnatic musicians



Theatre Talk

‘The effect of stage is magical’

Amruta Sant on reinventing herself with each character she plays

DEEPA GAHLOT



In Mumbai show business, where supply of beauty and talent, far outweighs the demand, how does a girl, who, admits with charming self-deprecation that she does not have the “figure, height or complexion” make a successful acting career for herself?

In the case of Amruta Sant, who has done theatre, television, films (including an important part in the foreign film *The Extraordinary Journey Of The Fakir*), it must be her mix of Marathi (father) talent and Punjabi (mother) confidence, that pushed her to approach the stage directors she wanted to work with, and land roles.

“It all started it Ruia College,” she says, naming her central Mumbai alma mater, which has a very active theatre department, and a tendency to consistently win inter-collegiate drama contests.

“I started doing a lot of plays there, which led to my getting some TV shows and also a marketing job. The job I gave up because I thought marketing involves fooling people; and TV I eventually quit, because I could not go there day after day and do the same thing. Fortunately, I joined Thespo (a youth theatre festival) and did some plays. I also tried to get into Marathi theatre, but could not give it too much time at that point.”

Meeting Dubey

When Amruta met the legendary Satyadev Dubey, she told him about her desire to work with him. “He cast me in his play ‘Khuda Ke Liye Mat Dekhna’. Imagine, he has a play that says don’t come to see it, and audiences still came! Working with Dubeyji was an eye opener. I understood what theatre is all about. With the same confidence, I approached Mak Sir (Makrand Deshpande) and he cast me in his play. Through his play, I met Divya Jagdale and worked with her. Then I did plays with Sunil Shanbag, Jaimini Pathak, simultaneously I started doing Marathi plays like ‘Dhol Tashe’ with Vijay Kenkre, ‘Gidhade’ with Athisha Naik, I did a Gujarati play and an Urdu play also. I enjoy doing plays in different languages.”

By the time she thought of formal training in theatre, she was 26 and had done enough theatre to know that she had talent and loved being on stage.

Amruta went on to win awards for her Marathi play ‘Talyat Malyat’ with Abhijit Guru and *Panhala*, a film with Nagesh Bhosale. “Abhijit is the most popular writer of Marathi soaps, but



he always returns to theatre. Imagine, it was his dream to perform at Prithvi. I told him, there is no language barrier, and I made him write a play that we performed during the festival, so his dream came true. No matter how many films I do, I will come back and do plays. It’s a different experience altogether, I did a workshop with Vijaya Mehta and she said, theatre completes an actor.

There is the audience, the actor, stage, light and there is space in between; when you feel the silence, you breathe together, the space vanishes and they (audience) are there with you. That’s when the whole experience gets completed. When I did ‘Talyat Malyat’, in which I played a bipolar character, I think I got into that zone.”

She likes the fact that every time you do something on stage, you can do it differently. “After a point, you start doing it more for yourself than the audience. Divya Jagdale is one of the best directors. She says forget the earlier show, and makes you create something afresh each time. Mak Sir takes that to another level. He will let you go to any extent and then he will get what he wants. In one of the plays, he played an eight-year-old boy, with his moustache and white hair, and he was convincing. Divya makes you feel the complete character. In one of her plays ‘Coffee In The Canteen’, I played a teenager, and in the next, ‘Toxic’, I was a mother of two kids. I think I am a director’s actor, every time I reinvent myself as a new character, I enjoy it. On stage, I can feel it... it may be the same line, but the effect is magical,” says Amruta.

The writer is a critic and columnist

The heritage of swing

Be it Rajo Parba or Teej festival, swing is linked with the themes of expectancy, love, and fertility

NAVINA JAJA

The poignant picture of a mother rocking her baby lying in a hammock made from her torn sari in the sweltering heat at a road crossing evokes the all-pervasive idea of the universe of the 'swing'. One that conveys a map of hidden roots where joy and expectancy enjoin mundane with spirituality. The swing has a tangible presence in visual arts of textiles, crafts, paintings, and architecture; but there is a greater web of the intangible world of the swing comprising poetic songs, dance, rituals, and beliefs. Like a reel, one frame moves into another exposing swinging world of the wonder that is India.

The essence of the heritage of swing comprises largely of the season of the monsoon, the omniscient presence of Lord Krishna as the archetypal lover of Radha as much as the Supreme Being. Swing is a metaphor linked with the themes of expectancy, love, and fertility. For example, a three-day festival of the swing called Rajo Parba in Odisha is celebrated to mark the mensuration of Mother Earth. It corresponds to the astro-climatology of the spirit marking the start of the wet season. There is a certain pregnancy - there is no breeze under the dark hanging clouds, it is hot and moist, sweat and body odour permeates; the women wearing new dresses ride the swing breaking the stillness and relieving themselves in the breeze.

In several other parts of India, the third day of the monsoon month of shravana is celebrated as Haryali (green) Teej in several parts of North India. Dressed in green attire, women hang swings on trees, the mango tree is the most preferred one to celebrate the fertility festival. While the married women fast and aspire for conjugal bliss, the unmarried girls wish for good husbands. Their desires swaying in nature, alternately touching the sky and saluting the earth.

The canvas shifts, somewhere in



The swing of hope (Clockwise from above) Girls enjoying the Teej festival in Chandigarh; Dola bedi textile of Odisha; a miniature painting depicting Radha and Krishna on a swing ■ AKHILESH KUMAR, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the South in Tamil Nadu as part of a ritual in the marriage ceremony, a young newly married couple sat on a swing (Oonjal). Ladies of the house gently rocked the swing singing special songs, "...On the golden swing, she flowered under the warmth of the love of her Lord." The swing went up and down and the song whispered to the couple of the ups and downs they needed to share as part of their journey together. The women circulated rice balls around the couple and threw them in different directions to ward off evils spirits.

Oscillating back to the North, the gathering monsoon clouds in the bygone days in Banaras saw the elites organising stag parties all through the rainy season. The success of these monsoon stag parties was the performance of the courtesan. She sat on a swing and sang songs. Amidst the rising dark clouds, the melody echoed - (jhoola pada kadam ki daari, jhoole brij ke nar naari) "The swing hangs from the branch of the Kadam tree on which sway the men and women of Braj."



Hindol Mahal (Swinging palace) comprising a large hall with arched openings and solid inclined buttresses that lend the building its name.

Along the stretch of forest land covering several states, there is among a large number of indigenous communities a variety of swing rituals linked with statues of several goddesses. These images crafted in wood and the lost wax process of the Dhokra metal art have become a popular item for urban homes.

Festival of hearts

Of the many Indian Gods, Krishna (from the pastoral community) and his overarching lineage from within Vaishnavism postulates the most vibrant form of celebrations through which a devotee finds himself. Seva or service to Krishna is an important element for the believers to connect with the divine. "We experience Krishna with our eyes, we feel Him through all of our senses. Hari is the desire, the festival of our hearts. To im-bibe Krishna's form is the ultimate reward. "(Venu Gita, Subodhini). The festivals of the Swing - Hindol Utsav remains an important event in the festival calendar of Krishna worship.

In spring, in the season of Holi, the Eastern coastal state Odisha celebrates the Dola (swing) Festival. The statues of the three central Gods (Krishna, his sister Subhadra, and brother Balram) are shifted to pavilions (mandaps) and placed on swings. The motif of the pavilion of swings is replicated as design called Dola vedi in Odisha textiles.

In other parts of India, the monsoons provide relief from the intense summer heat giving way to an exuberant spirit. It is time for lovers to unite, the environment is colored with lush greenery, sweet-smelling flowers, and fruiting trees.

Krishna is believed to be in service of his female principal Radha whom he woos on the swing. For a month, swings are hung in all Krishna temples and every day for an hour in the afternoon, the idols of Krishna-Radha are taken out and placed on a swing. The swings made of silver, gold, mirrors, fruits, vegetables, jasmine, Indian roses, and greenery represent fertility and love in union.

A string pulls the swing to and fro and the devotees in the cour-

tyard bind themselves through the string to the divine couple who are venerated with songs and flowers are showered. The worshippers, in turn, are sprinkled with red dry powder gulal representing love by priests. Soon after, a pool of perfumed water with lotus blooms is prepared. A small boat is floated in the pool of water. The idols of Radha-Krishna is removed from the swings and the divine couple is given a joyous boat ride. The boat ride ends, the divine couple is placed back on the swing, after which bhog (sacred food) is offered to the divine couple.

The elevated swing

Madhusudan Baul roams around the terracotta temples of Bishnupur in West Bengal singing the 400-year-old mystical wisdom, "live your life swinging gently between the two chakras - The Ajna Chakra (psychic centre located between the two eyebrows) and the Vishuddhi Chakra (located in the throat); If you swing higher you be-

come an ascetic, and if you swing lower your animal instincts predominate."

Kabir, the mystic, uses the loom-weaving imagery in a word jhini jhini that mirrors the movement of swaying. In both lyrics,

the swinging, says Madhusudan Baul, "is about the *spandan* or the motion of vibration. Life is nothing but negotiation of swaying vibratory movements."

Far away, sits Pandit Birju Maharaj recreating the motion of the swinging of the divine couple (Krishna and Radha) in his famed performance of a jhoola "Jhoolat Radhe Naval Kishore". The realm of his dance communicates the primary sensation of seeing. He mediates through his performance the forces of tension in the ropes and the flowing swaying movement of the swing. He recreates the bending of the monsoon cloud, his hand embraces Radha and then a rain-drop falls.

Half evaporates in the motion of the swing, the other half of the rain-drop is soaked in the fold of the scarf that binds the two energies of Radha and Krishna. Such is the power of his performance that the submerged divine forms seem to dissolve leaving an empty swing rocking amidst the monsoon clouds and the undifferentiated space!



Double treat

Continued from page 2

Commencing with a composition of Arunachalakavi, Yen Pallikondirayya in ragas Mohana and Kapi set to Adi tala, the allegorical piece asked the Anant Shayan Lord Vishnu the reason for his tiredness. Is it because of the innumerable duels with demons in his avatar as Krishna, is it because of the long walks during vanavasa with Sita as Lord Rama, is it because he lifted Govardhana Giri to protect the people from the wrath of Indra as Bala Gopala?

Archana and Chetana commented that both guru and the student have better understanding of each other's capabilities with one-on-one mentorship, which in turn helps the guru tap full potential in students, "Unlike the academic education system, in the art scenario student learns from the same guru for long durations lasting 15 to 20 years or more. We don't just learn the art from them but also the way of life and in the years to come develop a beautiful parental bond with them."

Succeeding with a Padavarna as seen through the eyes of Rukmini, the piece extolled the magnificence of Krishna. Beautifully expressed by Archana and Chetana, the piece explored Krishna's various exploits like Gajendra Moksha, Draupadi Cheerharan, Raas in Vrindavan; laced all throughout with jathi patterns executed in a neat style in raga Khamach Adi tala.

The duo chose to conclude the evening with a Devaranama, Kadagolataarenn set to Yamankalyani raga in Adi tala. A pleasant change from reciting the heroic and love-lorn epics of Krishna, the dancers presented this soothing *vatsalya rasa* piece where little Krishna takes away the churning stick of Yashoda, making her plead and coax him with much wit. With Yashoda's enticement of Bala Gopala with balls of butter and bowls of sugar, the evening came to an end leaving a sweet flavour of these mythical tales with the audience.



Capturing Delhi's past!

Camera has been a constant companion for Vidur Sodhani, a Delhi-based photographer and avid traveller. Now, his love for monuments of Delhi can be seen in a month-long exhibition at India Habitat Centre. In "Delhi Evolution Through Flora & Time", nature and architecture have been highlighted through pictures that appear like work of art.

Blast From The Past

Cinema for a cause

A socially conscious filmmaker, Jahnu Barua's narratives are a fine blend of the ethical and the allegorical

PARTHAJIT BARUAH
.....

"Just because you gave my land back, don't think, I'll vote for you. Don't think the world around will never wake up," cries out Rakheswar. His anguish and long suppressed anger are distinctly visible when he strikes at the face of the landlord's poster pasted on a tree with his spade. The plight of Rakheswar, how he got back his land, is poignantly displayed in Jahnu Barua's iconic film "Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai" (Catastrophe) that won the National Award for Best Film in 1988. The 12-time National Award winning filmmaker continues to be a voice of the subjugated, poor farmers and the marginalised.

Barua emerged as a staunch practitioner of alternative cinema and became the first Assamese to receive an International award - the Silver Leopard award - for "Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai" at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1988. Before that, Assamese film "Puberun" (1959) by Prabhat Mukherjee was screened at the Berlin International Film Festival.

In his journey of 40 years in the world of cinema, Barua has made 14 thought-provoking films which have transcended the linguistic, cultural and geographic barriers. Barua emerged as a filmmaker of note with his seminal work "Aparoop". The film projected an Assamese woman as breaking the expected norms and values of family and society.

As a socially conscious filmmaker, human values are always at the forefront in his films, and Barua believes that the idea of humanity was born in him when he was in the village called Japihojya of Sivsagar district where he studied for two years. His protagonists such as Rakheswar in "Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai" (Catastrophe), Powal in "Hkhagoroloi Bohu Door" (It's a Long Way to the Sea), and Dandeswar in "Baandhon" (Waves of Silence)



Showing the way Jahnu Barua in the thick of action: (below) a still from "Aparoop"

are ordinary human beings with ordinary human emotions and passions but are given ethical and allegorical dimensions.

Maternal bond

The image of his mother as a strong woman is often reflected in Barua's films. He says, "In my childhood, I saw my mother managing the entire household chores and their families. Her leadership and wisdom have left an indelible mark in my mind."

His female characters such as Aparoop in "Aparoop", Ritu in "Firingati", Mrs Barua in "Bonani", Mrs. Khatun in "Kanikar Ramdhenu", Trisha in "Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara" and Juree in his short film "That Gusty Morning" are strong women and in a way, shadows of his mother.

Aparoop, the wife of a well-off owner of a tea estate, feels suffocated in the four walls of her bungalow. In spite of living in a conventional Assamese society, she

elopes with her ex-lover Rana and thus breaks the social shackles. In "Firingati" (Spark), Ritu Baruah, a widowed teacher goes to an interior village Koronga and starts a school fighting against the evil forces in the village. While Mrs Khatun in "Kanikar Ramdhenu" (Ride on the Rainbow) is portrayed as a caring and loving superintendent of a juvenile home. She reprimands the police officer when he comes with a court order and enters inside the juvenile home in a police uniform. Similarly, Trisha and Juree are shown as emotionally strong girls who sacrifice their personal likings for their ailing parents.

Nature lover

Barua's films are replete with evocative images, and the most recurring images are of sea, river and birds. Sea has become a strong symbol in films such as "Hkhagoroloi Bohu Door" (It's a Long Way to the Sea), "Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara" and "Baandhon". Both the sea and life are suggestive of unpredictability.

Barua uses the sea as a central symbol for life itself, and his point of suggestion is not to surrender, but to keep moving. In "Baandhon", when the old couple loses their only grandson in the Mumbai terror attack, they sit in a bench facing the sea and Dandeswar goes on saying: "We are common people. The world is too big for us. We have no choice but to have trust in it. But like you also, I

don't know why it has betrayed us again!"

Again, in the film "Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara", Uttam Chaudhary and his daughter Trisha face the sea and recite the poem, "Lehron se Darkar nauka par nahin hoti / koshish karne walon ki haar nahin hoti..." by Harivansh Rai Bachchan.

The image of bird is repeatedly used as a symbol of liberty in his films like "Aparoop" and "Pokhi". Bird symbolises both freedom and captivity. Birds can fly away but they can be chained too in a cage. While the river, an image of lifeline and a means of survival, is strongly used in his films like "Halodhiya Choriya Bau Dhan Khai", "Firingati" and "Pokhi". The river Diroi in "Firingati", the river Dihing in "Hkhagoroloi Bohu Door" and "Pokhi" are used as the recurring images which suggest the life force of the village people. On the other hand, the image of child in his films like "Halodhiya Choriya Bau Dhan Khai", "Hkhagoroloi Bohu Door", "Pokhi", "Tora", and "Konkar Ramdhenu" is used to suggest a possibility of positive change in society.

Awarded with Padma Shri in 2003 and Padma Bhushan in 2015, Barua says, "Since the day I have been making films, awards are not my prime focus. It does give me immense joy, but I don't carry forward the images of awards. I just move ahead after each award."

