

Energising into sacred space

Inspired by the spirituality in SH Raza's paintings, an iconic dancer creates new work

Malavika Sarukkai

LOOKING INTO Syed Haider Raza's paintings, I could feel the energy in the radiating lines and the quality of harmony. I could sense silence and sacredness. All these elements are, for me, inherent in the dance form of Bharata Natyam. I could see the points of meeting between his 'contempo-

rary' paintings and my style of 'classical' dance. And I was impelled to create a new work called *Tejas*.

This creative journey started many months ago in dialogue with Ashok Vajpeyi, Raza's biographer, and Saroja Kamakshi, my mother and fiery collaborator. Into this space came the creative response of theatre director Prasanna Ramaswamy. As it gained momen-

tum, other inputs flowed into *Tejas*: conversations on form, image and the dancing body with my sister, poet-novelist Priya Sarukkai Chabria who responded with intense poems called *Colours for Malavika*.

I see the making of classical dance in many ways. Sometimes, like grand temple architecture in its structures. At times like a Chola bronze, a new creation in

each moulding. Sometimes like movement on the canvas of space, as in painting. Holding these resonances of art, my body and being respond to the particular intent of the moment and I look at dance as a flow across the canvas of space. *Tejas* draws from a tradition of philosophy evolved by the ge-

nius of the Indian mind — a philosophy of profound concepts that resonate with multiple meanings. Two personal artistic journeys of painter and dancer dynamise in the stage space with movement, colour, line and form as dance and paintings, exploring designs of energy. But such dialogues are best experienced firsthand by the viewer! And I premiere this new work in Delhi next Wednesday.

[WORLD VIEW]

SACRED IRONY:

Power *yonis* soar in celebration on Raza's canvas, while the line he lifts from Manu, the ancient Hindu lawgiver, goes: "Where women are worshipped, there do the gods find delight."



FEMININE MYSTIQUE: dynamic geometry and deep emotion infuse the movements of Indian classical dance, says Sarukkai



RAZA DUTTA

**ANJOLI ELA MENON, PAINTER**

Raza was one of the first contemporary artists whose work was exhibited at the Festivals of India abroad. Till then India had only showcased its ancient art. Usually, it is difficult to give a nationality to abstract art. But in Raza's abstract work, his Indianness shines through.

**SATISH GUJRAL, PAINTER**

The merit of Raza's work lies in the magnificent clarity with which his subconscious self manages to reflect itself. The tantra-inspired forms that Raza has adopted are a manifestation of the influence the environment has had on his work.

**JOGEN CHOWDHURY, PAINTER**

Raza has always been articulate about the philosophy behind his work. I think his sense of colour combinations is brilliant. One is immediately attracted to his paintings and there is a certain peacefulness about them. As with most artists, I think Raza too is attempting to simplify his work with every passing year.

**ARUN VADEHRA, GALLERY OWNER**

There is nothing contrived in Raza's work. What strikes me most is the spiritual and sublime element about it. I've watched him paint landscapes, the sun, and now he concentrates on the *bindu*. Despite living in France for the last 50 years, Raza's roots are here in India.

**SUBROTO KUNDU, PAINTER**

Raza has always encouraged younger artists. Every year he has been giving awards to them, which is a rarity in this field. When I look at his work, I am struck by the expertise with which he achieves tonal variations in the concentric circles that he paints. It requires a lot of hard work and skill.

SHADES OF THE MASTER

Sayed Haider Raza turned 85 last week. He might be physically weak now, but there is no sign of fatigue in him when he talks about his artistic journey

(Clockwise from above) A book cover designed by Raza in 1955; the master holds forth; Phases in Raza's creativity: *Temples in Benaras*, a watercolour on paper painted way back in 1947; *Tree & Bindu*, acrylic on canvas, 2006

**Priya Kanungo**

He had just woken up from his afternoon nap, was a little drowsy, but nevertheless, immaculately dressed and affable. Just that his hair needed to be combed. It was combed, by his assistant. Sayed Haider Raza does sometimes run out of steam now.

He turned 85 last week and Raza's birthday celebrations are still on. There are art shows, music and dance performances planned this week, all commemorating the occasion.

It is the forest that made him a painter. That's what Raza says about his choice of profession. His father was a forest ranger in Balbaria, Madhya Pradesh, and the verdant beauty of the region left an indelible impression on young Raza's mind. He wanted to reproduce all that he saw, and in the process, became a painter. Formal initiation was there too—at the Art School in Nagpur and the J J School in Mumbai

His stint in Mumbai coincided with the independence of the country, when Raza chose to stay on in India even though the rest of his family moved to Pakistan. It was a time when there was a general feeling of euphoria among artists in particular. Reminiscing, he says with a grin: "I think the most important thing was that the mind was independent." The by then strapping Raza, along with other artists like M F Husain, F N Souza, V S Gaitonde formed the Progressive Artists Group (PAG) around this time. "We didn't want to look to European, Greek or Roman art for inspiration. We wanted to create paintings which were contemporary, yet Indian." That's why for him Jamini Roy's work stood out among the crowd because of the "bold, dynamic and vibrant quality about his art. It was very Indian, but had a contemporariness to it," he says, jabbing a long finger in the air. He contrasts this with the "tender, softer variations of ancient Indian art that Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar created" at that time.

Coincidentally, "bold and vibrant" is how Raza's work is often described today. But the PAG dissolved pretty soon, with each of its members going in different directions—not just in terms of their work, but also geographically.

Raza moved to Paris on a scholarship given to him by the French government. He felt very much at home there—the museum, the international art scene, being with other artists and getting recognised. The recognition, of course, was slow in coming. So he would earn a living by designing book covers and teaching Hindi. It was also in Paris that he met his wife, Jaume Mongillat, who was an artist. His wife (who is no more) and the congenial artistic milieu were, together, strong enough forces perhaps for Raza to stay on in France for the next 50 years.

During his early days of struggle, Raza had received a lucrative offer to teach in the University of California in Berkeley. But after living there for a few months he turned it down. He explains honestly: "I didn't have the ability to sacrifice that a teacher needs to have for his student. Also, systematic teaching would require a break in artistic tension that is so essential for creative development."

But while in France he mastered the techniques of his art, Raza realised he wanted to go beyond painting a woman, landscape or forest. It was important to know about form and colour in a canvas. Something was missing in my work—to it was the Indian character.

So, he would make his annual trip to India to reconnect with his roots. He studied Indian history and philosophy, visited monuments and his erudition today shines through with every comment of his being interspersed with a quote from one of the many mystics of India. He is ecstatic when he talks of the *Ardhnarishtwar* concept for instance. "I think the belief that Shiva cannot exist without Parvati is fantastic. If you talk about this half man and half woman concept in the West, they will think you are talking about homosexuality," he says. His recent *Panchajanya* paintings, based on the five elements, is yet another, homage to his Muslim parents to his homeland.

Explaining patiently the Indian concept of art, Raza says: "It is not based on realism; it's not based on the retina. It is an inward journey." Known for glorifying the *bindu* (the circle) in his work today, Raza is nonchalant when it is pointed out that he has borrowed this concept from the tantrics. "For me, the *bindu* is the symbol not only of Hindu spirituality, but also of Indian art and awareness of life. When I paint the *bindu*, I am aware that I am literally in the womb of time, with no disturbance of sound or sight and that I am creating a spark of divinity... it is an act of supreme consecration."

It is this conviction perhaps that has carried Raza through. Today he is in a position to say his paintings are booked for the next three years.