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DANCE

Communicating through movement



Devina Dutt

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Soundless: Avantika Bahl's 55-minute collaborative work has been created with her hearing impaired partner Vishal Sarvaiya, who is a teacher and performer at Shiamak Davar's dance company.

Contemporary dancer Avantika Bahl's new production Say, What? imagines a world without language as we know it, says Devina Dutt

When Avantika Bahl (31), an independent dance maker trained in contemporary dance set out to make new work, all she knew was that it would have something to do with her fascination for sign language, the means by which the hearing impaired, communicate with each other.

Sign language with its use of the codified gesture, and complete dependence on the body for meaning making on the go, mirrors the processes of dance. It is also playful, improvisatory and constantly evolving, which only reinforces the link to dance. This is especially true of contemporary dance with its emphasis on

movement and the body in space. Originally from Delhi, Bahl trained at the London Contemporary Dance School and is now based in Mumbai.

Two years in the making, Bahl is now ready for her first public show of *Say, What?* today. The 55-minute collaborative work has been created with her hearing impaired partner Vishal Sarvaiya, a dancer who is a teacher and performer at Shiamak Davar's popular dance company.

Sounds of silence

Say, What? is performed entirely soundlessly. The two dancers are locked in an intense interaction where gestures and body movements are examined and abandoned, taking the viewer deeper into the realm of pure abstraction. Gleaning the artistic intention and sensing the production's direction is a labyrinthine personal journey with moments of surprising directness and clarity. As the two dancers traverse the floor space, signing is often extended out of its conventional meanings. Signs are used as a tool, akin to playing with random words whose purpose is less with making intelligible meaning and more to do with examining them as abstract units held up in space. One senses that the purpose might be a more fundamental, almost epistemological enquiry into the idea of communication. "What if there was no sign language or even language then how would we communicate," asks Bahl.

Like dance, sign language is only a code for getting meaning across but that basic functional use is overlaid with a need to take pleasure in creative expression. This is clear in the unrelenting use of movement, the weight and history of each gesture and action that the dancers present. Interestingly, while Bahl and Sarvaiya are aware that their piece could arouse curious interest, they have managed to grant each other an unselfconscious space, allowing for their individual differences to come to the fore. "I have not controlled Vishal's soundscapes. I can hear my sounds but with Vishal the fact that his dance may be creating sounds is not in his immediate awareness. He says I may have made it but I don't know. I find this fascinating."

Learning to sign

It all began two years ago when Bahl, along with an actress and filmmaker friend persuaded the Ali Javar Jung Institute for the Deaf, Bandra, to allow them to enrol for a diploma course in sign language. It was after attending classes twice a week for almost seven months and after having completed about 70% of the syllabus, Bahl met Vishal and decided it was time to begin work on *Say, What?*

The piece has seen extensive changes in a year-long process of development. Theatre director, light designer and actor Arghya Lahiri is credited as the light designer and dramaturge for the production. But the latter is an appellation he scoffs at. "I don't have a background in contemporary dance and I don't sign so all I really did was watch very carefully and try to work towards clarity," says

Lahiri. There were about a dozen such viewing sessions spread over the year with intense discussions. Lahiri says since sign language is alien to a large section of people and so is contemporary dance, achieving clarity was always the goal. He makes a fine distinction between clarity and accessibility though. "I am fine with being puzzled as long as I'm engaged," he says.

One of the things Lahiri did was to ask Bahl to write extensive notes throughout the process. "It helped me rework the piece. He told me to write the work and as a contemporary dancer this was new to me," says Bahl. Structuring the piece on paper before studio and rehearsal sessions, meant that the intellectual articulation of the piece was already underway, reducing the complete reliance on the visceral. It is hard to believe that the piece has at different times been a visualisation of a song, fragments with a storyline, text and spoken parts. In one version Sarvaiya even performed a primer on deaf culture. But in its current form *Say, What?* has been ultimately distilled down to silence and abstraction.

It's Bahl's slow and detailed creative process that's very unusual. Most contemporary dancers in Mumbai strike an uneasy alliance with either the corporate sector or the Bollywood machinery. While they offer dancers respite from financial uncertainty they also eat away at artistic independence and integrity leaving them trapped inside the commercial dance ecosystem. This is why creative expressions like *Say, What?* are so vital for the city's culture. Initiatives like this demonstrate that an independent arts practitioner can hope to bypass the market and serve to remind us that there is always an alternative.

At the moment though, the city does not even have a properly curated contemporary dance festival in which a spectrum of pieces including new works from other cities or abroad, can help create better awareness of this form. "Most people think contemporary dance is popular culture and Bollywood. For an independent dance maker the struggle is hard. I miss not having [a] community and other dancers doing similar work to talk to," admits Bahl.

But Bahl remains cautiously optimistic about Mumbai. She was fortunate to receive unconditional support in the form of rehearsal space at the state-of-the-art Future School for Performing Arts (FSPA) in Kalina where she teaches contemporary dance. FSPA is a dance and performing arts education platform for aspiring artists. With 5,000 sq ft of space, four studios and sprung floors especially equipped for dance, the school offered Bahl the use of their studios at a nominal cost. Antara Ashra, who runs the FSPA, has a clear vision of nurturing the school and supports Bahl's work owing to a sense of common artistic goals, says, "Work like this will indirectly strengthen the ecosystem that FSPA is invested in nurturing in the long term."

Say What? will be performed this evening at 7.30 p.m. at The Mumbai Assembly, Bandra West; for more details see bookmyshow.com

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