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Prime Time: Dancing In Their Sixties And Seventies

Defying stereotypes and redefining ageing, "Prime" brought together dancers in their 60s and 70s for a joyous celebration of movement, memory, and lived experience – proving that passion, like dance, only deepens with time.



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Dancing In Their Sixties And Seventies Photo: Special Arrangement

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Summary of this article

- Prime featured dancers aged 60 plus celebrating ageing through expressive, personal movement.
- Directed by Avantika Bahl, the performance embraced lived experience, joy, and resilience.
- Staged at Mumbai's IF.BE, the show inspired audiences across ages to rethink growing older.

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Last weekend, on September 20-21, an unusual event happened at an unusual venue in Mumbai. Ice Factory Ballard Estate, situated in the heart of Mumbai's heritage precinct, Ballard Estate, that is dotted with colonial era buildings, came alive with performances of a group of dancers, all above 60, proving, in more ways than one, that age is only a number. Under the direction of 39-year-old dance practitioner and educator, Avantika Bahl, the stage at IF.BE saw performers, expressing their relationship with time in a unique fashion.

As the full form of its name implies, IF.BE was once an ice factory whose origin harks back to 1885, when it was built to manufacture ice. Along the way, it was named Ambico Ice Factory. Over the years, when refrigeration came in, Ambico's worth as the single-largest producer of ice dipped. And gradually the factory fell into disuse. Then, a few years ago, Malik Architecture firm re-invented the decaying structure as a space for cultural activities. Beautiful but ageing spaces surrounding a large **banyan tree** were given a fresh lease of life by the architecture firm; and Ambico metamorphosed into IF.BE.

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Could any venue be more apt than this for ageing bodies to let down their hair and rejuvenate themselves through dance? Like the banyan tree, Bahl became the centre of their renewed energy when she conceived Prime, a show that turns the idea of ageing on its head. "Prime is about fullness, joy and lived experience, not regret or slowing down," explained Bahl in an interview I did with her a few days before the opening show.

Last year, Bahl had interviewed many senior dancers to understand what happens to their physicality with the passage of years. "I wanted to explore the relationship between movement and ageing bodies. And I found that years of wisdom, memory and practice live on in the body though the latter may not be youthfully agile. So I thought it would be exciting to have senior dancers perform on stage, drawing from their rich lives and experiences," explained the choreographer who likes to challenge the mainstream with off-beat shows. Look Left, Turn Right was performed at a busy traffic signal! Before that, after acquiring level three certification in Indian **sign language**, she did a full-length performance, Say, What?, using sign language and movement in collaboration with Vishal Sarvaiya, a deaf dancer. Clearly, stretching the boundaries of dance to project life lessons and diverse voices is what motivates Bahl.

The dancers in Prime came from varied fields: **Odissi**, Ballet, Jive, Mohiniyattam, Bharat Natyam, Contemporary and others. While some of them had not taken a break from dancing, many had returned to the field after a long gap. So each dancer had their distinctive body clock; and Bahl focused on making everyone connect to their individual bodies through deep listening. "Though each rehearsal had a warm-up to build strength and agility, it was need-based and never a regimented physical program," she explained.

Following a democratic process to structure the show, Bahl encouraged her band of enthusiasts to do what they could do, in whichever way they wanted to do it. "There is nothing that I taught. I would ask questions and they would reply through movement. Whatever emerged on the floor, I used that to build the show," she revealed. Of course, she made suggestions to fine-tune their acts, like increasing the tempo sometimes, slowing it down at other times; but the starting point was always each dancer's distinctive way of communicating **emotions** like persistence, resilience and sheer love for dance.

Sound designers Rahul Nadkarni and Nikhil Narendra, too, had to tailor the music to suit the dancers' steps. "Normally, dancers are led by the music. Here it was the other way around," pointed out Bahl. That

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this approach worked was evident when one member of the audience came up to her after the show and said she wished the music would go on forever! "One of the pieces was hauntingly beautiful!" she sighed.

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Even the costumes were designed in accordance with the dancers' suggestions. When Designer Karishma Acharya asked them what they would like to wear, one said she would like to wear a dress that would show off her shapely legs. Another wanted her arms to be flatteringly exposed. A third wanted to do his ballet number in a dhoti! Karishma took these and other requests seriously and came up with costumes that reflected their personalities as closely as possible, even rummaging in their personal wardrobes to do so.

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Not surprising, the seniors had a ball being part of Prime. Sixty two-year-old Sunila Ashok described the experience when she said, "I feel like I am going back in time. I feel exactly as excited as when I was a child." Performing on stage after more than four decades, she would wake up on rehearsal days with a sense of purpose. "And when, after 3 to 4 hours of rehearsal Avantika called it a day, I felt I could go on for a few hours more," she exulted, when I reached out to her.

All of them, as Bahl observed, love life! Prime is a celebration of lives lived fully. A multi-media presentation, it opened with a solo dance by Bahl that highlighted her personal journey as a dancer and worked as a preface to the dances by the seniors. There were also eight pieces of installation art by Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty, inspired by the quirks and energetic personalities of the dancers. In addition, a film by Sruti Viswesaran showcased the nine-month process of the dancers' evolution. "Last week-end saw the birthing of the baby," laughed Bahl after the shows that had an audience of more salt-and-pepper heads than she had ever seen.

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Many an elder came up to Bahl saying they were ready to put on their dancing shoes, too; while younger members said their fear of old age had evaporated. The biggest compliment came from her father when he said, "I'd better take my yoga seriously now!"

Ageing bodies suddenly felt youthful and peppy.

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