LIVING

Person or performer? Dancers want audiences to engage with their process, not just product

Does 'performance' exist in a detached capsule of time that is a respite from daily life, or do we see it in the context of how dance relates to society?

Ranjana Dave | July 03, 2018 13:52:07 IST

In *Lion Goes for a Haircut*, a children's story by Swati Shome, a bored lion leaves his usual surroundings and begins to wander the city. A haircut is just what he needs to dispel this monotony, he decides. Peering into the hairdresser's salon, he gets excited as he visualises various possibilities for the new 'look' he is about to get. But when the lion walks into the salon, the people in there are terrified and flee as fast as possible. Aghast, the lion tries to stop them; he just needs a haircut and has no desire to eat anybody. Now alone, he looks around and spots a wall of mirrors – a strange sight, for he has never encountered his own reflection. He finds himself staring right into the faces of a huge number of lions who look every bit as fierce as him. Desperate to retain his dignity, he begins to roar to scare them into submission. They roar back, equally fiercely. Finally, frightened out of his mind by this relentless posse of lions in the mirrors, the lion abandons all dreams of a styled mane and rushes back to familiar surroundings as fast as his feet can carry him.

In my last few pieces, I've considered how the term 'dance' can encompass a spectrum of movement-based practices, how dance intersects with the history of civilisation in fundamental ways, and finally, who the 'performer' can be. As an Odissi dancer, during my training, I was often told that the dancing needed to look 'effortless', an instruction that appears in different forms across most classical dance practices. If you are tired, you smile brightly. If you are in pain, you smile even harder. You think you're dying? Death can meet you backstage after you are done dancing. The audience doesn't need to know how much you struggle to maintain the illusion of being 'effortless', 'light', or 'beautiful'. Then, I ask, are audiences interested in being put into conversation with the style-conscious lion, or do they place him firmly outside their orbit? Does 'performance' exist in a detached capsule of time that is a respite from daily life, or do we see it in the context of how dance relates to society? What are the questions that dancers are asking? What is the ratio of 'performer' to 'person' that we want to see on stage?

There has been, and continues to be, an interest in 'process-based' performance in the current dance landscape. Dancers don't want their audiences to engage merely with the final 'product', but also want them to see how it came to be made. In *Conditions of Carriage: The Jumping Project*, Chennai-based choreographer Preethi Athreya worked with a diverse cast of 'performers' – some dancers, a few parkour artists, a lawyer, an art therapist, a

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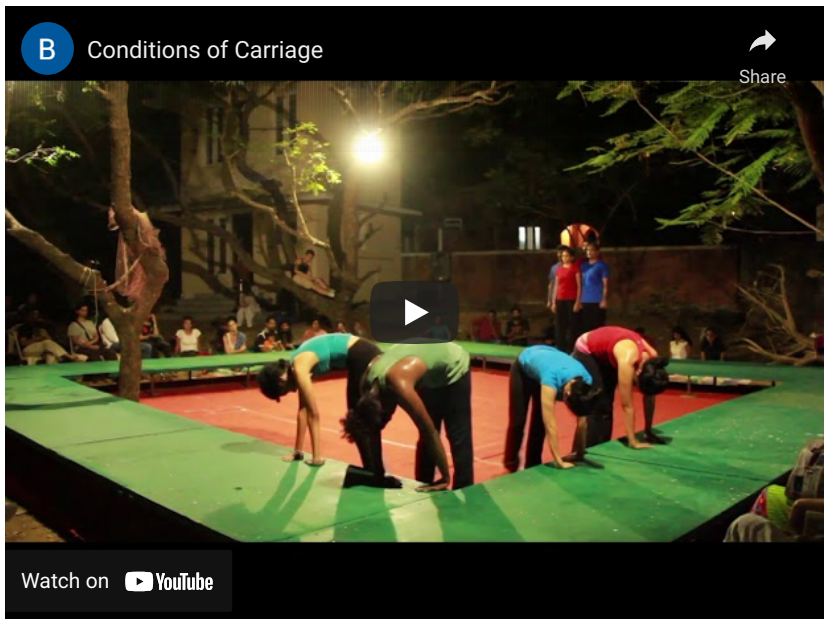
theatre-person, and others. Jumping was a familiar, functional form of movement, Athreya reasoned, one that wasn't exclusive to dance.



To jump for the better part of an hour required a certain kind of physical endurance, but it wasn't something one couldn't develop. Over the years, Athreya has worked with a mixed cast, often based on the availability of her performers. She has performed the piece indoors, under a bridge, in colleges, and on the beaches of Chennai. When you have jumped under the afternoon sun, your heartbeat is likely to reflect that. In how it is performed, in a square pit that the audience surrounds on all four sides, *Conditions of Carriage* makes every moment of this engagement visible. It is 'performance', but you see nostrils flaring as the performers exhale. You see their clenched fists tightening as they leave the ground and pumping downwards as gravity does its job. You watch their hair go awry as they jump. In addressing what it means to 'perform', and complicating the question of who can perform, Athreya's choreography opens up a conversation about ability. Does dance need to correspond to an idealised physical perfection? Are we, as audiences, willing to engage with performers as people, regardless of their size, shape, colour, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and identity?

What is the 'able' body? Is it the only lens to view the world with? When hearing dancer Avantika Bahl started learning sign language, her interactions with the deaf community in Mumbai opened up to her a whole world of ethical questions around deafness and the ways in which deaf people approached 'ability'. Working with deaf dancer Vishal Sarvaiya, Bahl made *Say, What?*, a dance piece that challenged the codes of communication and language that are normally taken for granted. The dancers' focus on the non-verbal was informed by their shared understanding of the body and their ability to sign to each other. For the deaf and hearing audiences who watched the piece, the absence of music levelled the playing field. In doing so, *Say, What?* returns to the body to ask questions of it. Does the ability to hear need to be universal or central to how we perceive the world?

A brand new Pawan Hans' Sikorsky chopper with 9 people on board crashed into the Arabian Sea on Tuesday, killing four people — including three ONGC employees.

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Morgan, who led England to their only ICC ODI World Cup triumph in 2019 on home soil, made the announcement just 10 days before the start of England's limited-overs fixtures against India.

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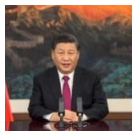

China should think of Tibet, Xinjiang before raising India's domestic issues

If President Xi Jinping's vision and policies succeed, one day there will be one China, one language, one culture, one ideology and one political system in China

Horoscope for 15 June: Here's what the stars have in store for you under Wednesday's skies

Few might invest money on an important project, some will spend money on material comfort and luxury. Workload will decrease for government employees. For a few zodiac signs, love and affection will increase in their marital relationship

In the past few days, I have been revelling in my old fascination with medieval poetry that evokes *bhakti* and *srngara*. These poems thrive on ambiguity – lovers who never showed up, hints not taken, messages that went astray – to create charged narratives where a final union offers the satisfaction that it does only when viewed in the wake of the trying challenges that this love has weathered. There are entire compositions where a *nayika* stands at the door, wondering if she should welcome her two-timing lover back into her life. As an example, watch the Odissi doyen Kelucharan Mohapatra perform *yahi madhava*, an *ashtapadi* from the 12th century Sanskrit love poem, *Gita Govinda*, where he plays a spurned Radha, who has awaited Krishna anxiously all night, and is furious when he turns up the morning after, bearing tell-tale signs of the night he has spent with someone else.

Human complexity is central to practices of storytelling and *abhinaya* in classical dance. If there was no betrayal, if lovers made precise romantic gestures and choices, if they didn't have moments of deep-seated confusion – poetry probably wouldn't be half as exciting as it is!

There is also the rejection of the physical body and external trappings in the *bhakti* genre, where physical appearance is irrelevant to the pursuit of the divine. In an oft-quoted verse, the 10th century poet Devara Dasimayya declares (in a translation from AK Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva*):

If they see
breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,
if beard and whiskers
they call it man:

but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman

O Ramanatha

As audiences and performers, what if we viewed the possibilities of the body in more radical ways? What if we were receptive not only to the man playing Radha, but to even unlikelier configurations of ability and physicality on stage? If we relish the complexity and variability that these poetic narratives in dance suggest, what would it mean to let go of the primacy of articulation through the 'ideal' dancing body?

Ranjana Dave is a dancer and writer based in New Delhi. She tweets at @chaltipatang

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Horoscope for 28 June: Check how the stars are aligned for you this Tuesday

Government-related work may get hinder today while others will start a new business or job. Children may have stomach infections while others will complain of joint pain. A few of the zodiac signs will be worried about some unnecessary expenses that will disrupt their savings.

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On 28 June, few of the zodiac signs will be worried about some unnecessary expenses that will disrupt their savings. Government-related work may get hinder today while others will start a new business or job.

Children may have stomach infections while others will complain of joint pain. Check how your Tuesday will turn out:

Aries: (21 March - 19 April): The hindrances coming in your foreign trip or travel will fade away soon. Today you will be calm and composed right from the start of the day. You might change your daily routine due to work pressure and stress. The income of software and IT professionals will increase in the coming days. There will be peace and prosperity in your family under Tuesday's skies. You will be interested in watching movies and web series with family.

Taurus: (20 April - 20 May): You will come across some new exciting business opportunities that will help you grow. Few of you may complain of knee pain. Stay away from immoral activities as it will never let you improve in life. Avoid borrowing money today. You might have a quarrel with your partner over some issue. Always pay attention to the needs of your family.

Gemini: (21 May - 20 June): You might attend some social event today. Your income sources will increase in a few days. Old issues among family and friends may resolve today. You may fail to achieve success in your work due to lack of focus and diligence. You will find it difficult to focus on household chores.

Cancer: (21 June - 22 July): Work-related issues may keep you stressed today. Do not make

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any unnecessary acquaintances with strangers. Pay attention to the studies of your children. The day might begin on a negative note today. You will be happy with the behaviour of your family members especially children. The day is good to complete all hindered work.

Leo: (23 July - 23 August): Your boss will highly motivate you today to perform better. You will have immense respect for your father for always supporting you. Few of you might spend money on an unnecessary show off. You should make good use of the current favourable time. Reach out to those who need your help.

Virgo: (24 August - 22 September): Your work efficiency will increase this Tuesday. You might get into trouble due to some complicated task. Physically you will be tired and lethargic at work and home. It would be advisable to complete all important work before evening. Always respect each other's feelings in love relationship. Government-related work may get hinder.

Libra: (23 September - 22 October): The time is favourable for starting a new job or business. Today, you will perform brilliantly in competitive exams. Your social network will increase, improving your connections. You will achieve desired success in the business and bring profits in the coming days. Your position in the office will get stronger.

Scorpio: (23 October - 22 November): You will be worried about some unnecessary expenses. Do not give much importance to negative things or thoughts. Don't trust your subordinate employees much. You may go for an outing today with family and close friends. Don't lose your temper on petty issues, rather stay calm and matured while handling matters.

Sagittarius: (23 November - 21 December): Your positive virtues will be admired in your family. You might buy few presents for elders. Your self-confidence will increase, making you happy and delighted in all aspects. Your hastiness and temper may spoil your work so be careful of that. Your mind will be occupied with various new thoughts under Tuesday's skies. Be it at work or personal life, expand your mind and thought process.

Capricorn: (22 December - 19 January): Your family atmosphere will remain disciplined today. You might have to work overtime at the office. You might get some delightful news by the end of the day. You will meet the expectations of your family. Your political connections will benefit you in the future.

Aquarius: (20 January - 18 February): You should keep a check of your diet and take care of your health today. There will be a lot of responsibilities on you at the work place. Mentally, you will be agitated with the stress in life. You may plan to conduct an auspicious ceremony with family. Those in love should spend more time together.

Pisces: (19 February - 20 March): You should follow your passion and work hard to reach your goal. Working professionals will work with full dedication and overpower their enemies. The health of women will remain good under Tuesday's skies. Some negative incidents of the past might re-emerge and escalate further. Children may have stomach infections so take care of their diet.

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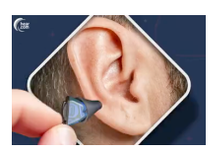

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Horoscope for 27 June: Check how the stars are aligned for you this Monday

A helpful connection between Mercury and Chiron will support working professionals to move forward with their goals. A few of the zodiac signs will witness some good vibes around them and this will encourage them to perform better at work.

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On 27 June, few of the zodiac signs will witness some good vibes around them, encouraging people to perform better at work.

A helpful connection between Mercury and Chiron will support working professionals to move forward with their goals. Check how your Monday will turn out:

Aries: (21 March - 19 April): Today is a great time to iron out any wrinkles in your social life, helping you improve in your communication and confidence. Good vibes will continue to flow this evening urging you to open up without abandoning sensible boundaries.

Taurus: (20 April - 20 May): Do not overthink on your abilities or responsibilities today, especially regarding your professional path. Good vibes will continue to flow, helping you feel secure within yourself and about your manifestation skills. Keep moving forward towards your dreams as they will become a reality sooner than you might expect.

Gemini: (21 May - 20 June): Take some time to analyse your social circle both online and in the real world too. Today, you will ask yourself to look into the most positive relationships around you, and cut ties with those who bring toxicity into your life. Listen to your heart this evening when Luna connects with Mars and Saturn, it will offer spiritual guidance while providing you the strength needed to set new boundaries with yourself and the people in your life.

Cancer: (21 June - 22 July): You might feel the need to put a few emotional walls up today, giving you permission to quiet down and take stock of your feelings. A supportive aspect between Mars and Saturn will encourage you to prioritise your goals. These positive vibes are perfect for moving past drama or trauma that has been distracting you recently.

Leo: (23 July - 23 August): You'll be in the mood for meaningful connections today. Your cosmic climate will bring major healing to your heart. Good vibes will help you develop healthy boundaries within your most passionate relationships. Watch out for sketchy or manipulative behaviours within your social circle.

Virgo: (24 August - 22 September): The universe will support your professional ambitions today, so do not break your focus. A helpful connection between Mercury and Chiron will inspire you to tap into your personal power, that will help you to negotiate for more pay, extra time off, or better working conditions. Good vibes will flow when Luna connects with Mars and Saturn, helping you strike a healthy balance between handling your responsibilities and taking care of your health.

Libra: (23 September - 22 October): The universe will send you messages around self-love today which is much needed in the start of the week. The cosmic climate this Monday will encourage you to open your heart only to positive people to elevate your aura and mood. Divine inspiration may come by evening, so that you can spend the second half of the day in a creative space.

Scorpio: (23 October - 22 November): The Gemini moon will remind you of the importance behind personal transformation and emotional evolution. It will further inspire you to check in with your thoughts and feelings. A supportive connection between Mercury and Chiron will help you move past any emotional weight that has been following you.

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Sagittarius: (23 November - 21 December): Do not feel guilty about boosting your ego through the art of flirtation today. These flirtatious vibes are all about feeling good and having fun, especially when there's an opportunity for love and romance. With time, you will gain maturity, and the willingness to grow will make your day.

Capricorn: (22 December - 19 January): You'll operate from a productive headspace today, where you feel particularly satisfied every time you cross something off your to-do list. A helpful connection between Mars and Saturn will inspire you to reclaim your space at home, and also invest in the comfort of your abode, so don't feel guilty when you spend on some extravagant items or decorative pieces.

Aquarius: (20 January - 18 February): You'll feel inspired to roll up your sleeves and put action behind your ideas today, especially when it comes to approaching your personal goals. Staying socially and intellectually stimulated will elevate your mood and energy levels, so do not forget to have fun either at work or at home.

Pisces: (19 February - 20 March): Staying busy can help you escape from any drama or trauma that has been weighing you down recently. The cosmic climate today is also great for breaking through any feelings of self-doubt that has been creating obstacles in your path. Give yourself permission to indulge in a bit of luxury to give your mind some rest from stress, worry, or fear.

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Atop Mount Everest, a German alpinist scripts his story without supplemental oxygen and high altitude guide

David Göttler is a conqueror of Mount Everest but the ace climber had to turn around on multiple occasions while climbing 8,000ers such as Everest, Nanga Parbat and Shishapangma

Shail Desai | June 26, 2022 09:13:01 IST

Firstpost.

David Göttler on top of the world on the Mount Everest. Image courtesy David Göttler

On 23 May, 2019, David Göttler set off for the summit of Everest (8,848m) from Camp 4 at 2.30 am. Just above the South Summit (8,750m), the German alpinist saw a line of climbers making gradual upward progress. While most of them had the luxury of breathing supplemental oxygen, Göttler was making an oxygen-less attempt and without any high-altitude guide by his side.

Trecherous terrain and one careful step at a time. Image courtesy David Göttler

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Göttler took a moment to analyse the situation. He realised it was too much of a risk to wait it out in the queue while in the death zone. In that moment, Göttler simply turned around and gave up on his summit aspirations.

Then last year, he was back on Everest, this time with Spanish trail runner, Kilian Jornet. The duo climbed together and without oxygen. Once they arrived at South Col (8,000m), their collective experience at altitude told them something was amiss. Instead of risking trouble higher up, they decided to turn around.

Then this year in May, Göttler made his third attempt on Everest. In the wee hours of 21 May, he found himself all alone beyond the South Summit. He pushed on and finally reached the top at 9.45 am before making a rapid descent off the mountain.

Higher the heights, fiercer the spirit. Image courtesy David Göttler

"It was really magical to be climbing alone after what I had experienced in the past. There was no wind, the sun was shining and I had the summit all to myself," Göttler, 44, says.

In these times of commercial climbing that draws hundreds of aspirants to Everest each spring - around 650 climbers made the summit from the Nepal side this season - Göttler's success stands out from the rest for his style of climbing. Since the time he started out at the age of seven under the watchful eye of father, Ernesto, he's been a proponent of the light and fast approach, without the use of supplemental oxygen or a high altitude guide. It's often meant returning home empty-handed, but he's stayed true to what he had learnt since his early climbing days.

"I chose to move in the mountains in a self-sufficient way and progressed slowly over the years to get to where I am today. I've always been a part of small teams, which means there is no scope of carrying big, heavy equipment. This is what eventually defined my ethics and my style of climbing," Göttler says.

In 2006, Göttler got to the summit of Gasherbrum II - his first 8,000 metre mountain. Since then, he's gone on to climb five more of these giants that culminated in Everest this year. But what most are unaware of is that over the years, he's had to turn around on multiple occasions while climbing 8,000ers such as Everest, Nanga Parbat and Shishapangma.

"It's never easy and you feel a lot of frustration and disappointment. But in that moment, it's not a difficult decision to turn around because I always try to anticipate what can happen. Success is not just about reaching the summit - it's also when you can manage to call off the climb at the right point and don't need to be rescued. I think real success is only when you come back without frostbites and traumas. It's tricky but this is what it's about for me," he says.

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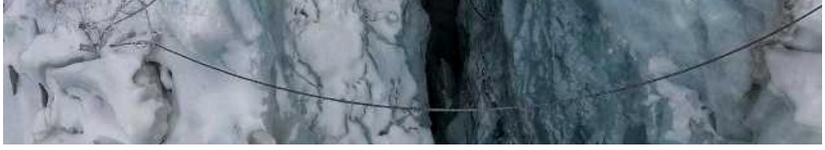

Travails before triumph. Image courtesy David Göttler

"For instance, there were those who summited various mountains this spring, but got into trouble on their way down. Clearly, something went really wrong for them to have frostbites. I'm heartbroken for these guys and what they've had to suffer. But I just cannot call this success," he adds.

After arriving in the Solu-Khumbu region in Nepal, Göttler's first acclimatisation rotation took him to Mera Peak (6,476m), where he slept a night on the summit, "away from the Everest circus". Then he pulled off three rotations on Everest before the summit push, where his high point took him to the top of the Geneva Spur (7,900m). In all, he spent a night at Camp 3 and five at Camp 2 as part of his acclimatisation on the mountain.

He says the ropes to the top of Everest were set up as early as 7 May, which in turn benefitted his own attempt. Good weather there on meant that a lot of the other climbers made their final summit push while he was still on his acclimatisation rounds. It eventually left the mountain uncrowded when he decided to go for the top. However, the decision to be patient and wait it out was anything but easy.

"When you pass so many people going for the summit, it plays on your mind and it's difficult not to get drawn into it. All kinds of thoughts run through your head - will the weather still be as nice when I'm ready for my summit attempt? After the two cyclones last year, I was quite aware of how things can change on Everest. You don't want to be the king of acclimatisation and never get to the summit!" he says, chuckling.

At 9.30 pm on 20 May he set off from Camp 4 on the South Col. His load was light - a litre of water, three energy bars, two gels and a spare pair of gloves. It took him 12 hours 20 minutes to get to the summit of Everest and another five hours to get back to camp.

"The mental challenge on these mountains is way harder than the physical aspect of climbing. And over the years, I've learnt that I don't really have to look at what other people are doing. Because 98 per cent of them are going with oxygen and Sherpas, so it's very different from what I do," he says.

Faith in skills, firm in determination. Image courtesy David Göttler

That said, there's always the risk of getting into trouble on the mountain. Göttler usually chooses to go with a partner to bring more safety to his climbs and exchange ideas before arriving at major decisions. But on Everest, he took the call to go solo, the only backup in the form of a device through which he could text his girlfriend back home in Spain.

"I usually like to share these experiences with someone. But for the first time, I had this feeling of being in a flow state on the mountain. I enjoyed the freedom of making decisions. I was constantly having a conversation with myself after analysing the terrain and how I felt

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Recommended by outbrain in the moment. The most important thing is to accept that up on the mountain, you cannot count on someone coming to rescue you because everyone is at their limit and resources are few. So, you just have to ensure that you don't get into any trouble," he says.

Göttler also cannot wrap his head around the trend of climbers knocking down multiple big mountains in a single season. And how those with limited experience decide to take on daunting peaks such as Kangchenjunga and Makalu as their first climb up an 8,000er.

"A lot of the summiteers wouldn't make it to the top if you took away their oxygen. And the moment you use oxygen, you take away the difficulty that nature throws at you. You are actually climbing a 6,000-metre peak or even lower, depending on the flow of oxygen. So there's a need to distinguish between the different sports that are unfolding on the same 8,000 metre peak," he says.

"I don't want to take away from their feat - everybody can choose the climbing style they wish to adopt. But these are mountains that need a lifetime of preparation before you can tackle them. So we need to be clear that it's no historical sporting feat or any kind of first if one is on bottled oxygen," he adds.

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Even after his success on Everest, Göttler put out a post, clarifying the fact that he did benefit from the fixed rope laid out on the mountain.

"It's important to be clear about how you made it to the top. There are those who use oxygen and then try to hide their masks in the summit photo. As a community, we need to be honest and transparent about what we do and how we do it," he says.

These days, Göttler is back at his summer base of Santander in northern Spain. With Everest in his bag, he doesn't rule out another attempt on the mountain, this time perhaps via a different route.

"Reaching the top made me realise that Everest is a different beast. That said, I'm not the kind of person who just ticks off summits - the route and style is very important to me. Now I know the mountain even better, so this gives me the knowledge and advantage of perhaps taking on a different challenge on Everest in the time ahead," Göttler says.

The author is a freelance writer from Mumbai who thrives on narrating a good story. Views expressed are personal.

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