Canara HSBC LIFE INSURANCE
LIFE'S TWISTS LEAD TO NEW PROMISES. FULFIL THEM WITH US.
KNOW MORE
T&C APPLY IRDAI REG.NO. 116 (BANCHECHURU/N22) ENG

SPOTLIGHT ART

# The drums they hear

Malini Nair

MAY 22, 2017 17:45 IST
UPDATED: MAY 22, 2017 18:15 IST

SHARE ARTICLE PRINT A A A A

'Say, What!' is touring the country now.

**A choreographer and a dancer explore a performance outside the boundaries of sound**

What is it like for a choreographer to work with a creative partner and dancer who is deaf? How would rhythm fit in? What sort of music would work? Would you watch it as a holistic work of art or of social awareness? And if you tune out both music and words, would dance still work?

'Say, What!' handles these questions as much with courage as artistry. And the answer to the last question is yes, a choreography can work without sound, just sign and body language. Contemporary choreographer Avantika Bahl took a year to collaborate with deaf dancer Vishal Sarvaiya to craft a piece where all established codes of communication in dance were abandoned.

Business ke liye taiyaar? Online business ko do pehchaan domain name ke saath.
.com Ready for Business
LEARN MORE
AD

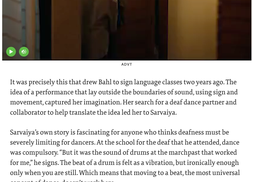
'Say, What!', three months past its Mumbai debut and after many versions, is touring the country as a silent performance. And it is playing to mixed audiences, both deaf and otherwise, making for multiple connections between and among viewers and dancers. At Delhi's Gati studio, after the performances, there are as many questions shot at Sarvaiya in sign language as those addressed to Bahl in words.

## No words

Afterwards, in the lobby, excited fans surround both dancers and the feedback flies fast, mostly through the animated language of hands and fingers. "This response is even better. You don't get away with just saying a few words of congratulations, you have to use your whole body and face to convey your feelings," says Bahl.

Sign language is not unknown to Indian dance forms—the codified mudra system comes close. And even when used for routine communication, there is something choreographic about the precision, rhythm and elegance with which the hand, the fingers and palms come together in sign language.

ADVT



ADVT

It was precisely this that drew Bahl to sign language classes two years ago. The idea of a performance that lay outside the boundaries of sound, using sign and movement, captured her imagination. Her search for a deaf dance partner and collaborator to help translate the idea led her to Sarvaiya.

Sarvaiya's own story is fascinating for anyone who thinks deafness must be severely limiting for dancers. At the school for the deaf that he attended, dance was compulsory. "But it was the sound of drums at the marchpast that worked for me," he signs. The beat of a drum is felt as a vibration, but ironically enough only when you are still. Which means that moving to a beat, the most universal concept of dance, doesn't work here.

Although most of Sarvaiya's classmates dropped out of dance, he went on to enrol in Shiamak Davar's hugely popular classes in Mumbai. There were four other deaf students in class.

"When I started learning, it was more visual than anything else—faster, slower, imitating others in class. The teacher then began to break the rhythm down for us. They also developed a system to cue with hands," he signs, as Bahl interprets.

Sarvaiya went on to become an assistant teacher at Davar's. How did he pull that off? "Because I am a good dancer," he signs and laughs.

## Thumping dhols

Beat and bass-heavy music, especially hip hop, he says, works best for deaf dancers. The thumping dhols at Ganesh processions in Mumbai were always a great track to pick up your feet and dance no matter what your hearing skills. 'Right Here, Right Now' from *Bluff Master*, and 'Shut Up and Bounce' from *Dostana*, Sarvaiya tells you, are great songs to dance to if you are deaf.

Working with Bahl was a process of constant negotiation. There were ideas exchanged, and some fraught moments especially because 'What Say' is an abstract piece and Sarvaiya was not familiar with the concept. "I couldn't quite understand the contemporary dance language. What does it mean? What was I to imagine? It took a lot of sharing to develop the work," he signs.

For Bahl, the process was no less complex. Since there was no scope for working with external rhythm, it had to be internal rhythm at work. It took a lot of playing around with ideas and bodywork to finalise the piece. Interestingly, it did not start off wordless. It began word-heavy but every new draft had less and less sound.

As Bahl says, "We increasingly felt that we didn't need any voices and that we could communicate with just sign and body language. We just had to be still and dance."

*Malini Nair writes on, and lives for music, dance, theatre, and literature.*

Return to frontpage

Our code of editorial values

Related Topics
magazine dance arts, culture and entertainment New Delhi

FIRST DAY FIRST SHOW NEWSLETTER
Want the box office news in your inbox?
The First Day, First Show newsletter brings you fresh updates, every Friday!
Enter Your Email Here Sign up for free
By providing your email, you agree to THG's Privacy Policy

TabOola Feed
'Savarkar did very little for India's independence' thelinda.com | Sponsored Learn More
Best Public Speaking Course for Children Planetspark | Sponsored Learn More
Supporting a child means transforming their life Akshara Petra | Sponsored
Three phases of Indian renaissance thelinda.com | Sponsored
Mahindra Vicino presents large-sized 2&3 BHK starting ₹2.5Cr* all-... Mahindra Lifespaces | Sponsored Learn More
Used cars in high demand! Get Top Price for your Car SellRight by Spinny | Sponsored
Born Between 1965-1990? Get ₹1 Cr Term Life Plan ... Term Life Insurance Plans | Sponsored
Masters Degree in Abroad - IU Germany Intelligaat | Sponsored Learn More
Get Certified from IIT Madras CCE & Intelligaat Intelligaat | Sponsored Learn More
Online Entry Job in USA from India. Salaries Might surprise you Finance | Search Ads | Sponsored Click Here
This Is What A New Hearing Aid Should... Best Hearing Aids | Sponsored
[Mumbai]: Why is Everyone Excited Over Th... Automatic Electric Heater | Sponsored
Maharashtra - prices for unsold SUVs might... Unsold 2020 Suvs For Sale | Sponsored
SPONSORED
Ads by Vuukle
Vuukle
Suburban
A suburban area is a mix of the urban and rural. Most of the amenities you'd find in a city are also available in a suburban area. Because it is not so around, there is also plenty of room for you to spread out.
Advertisement

This article is closed for comments.
Please Email the Editor

TRENDING TODAY INDIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2022 RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS CORONAVIRUS HOUSING.com
106 | Eknath Shinde moves Supreme Court; Uddhav Thackeray can [redacted]
13K | Maharashtra political turmoil updates | June [redacted]
106 | 'No place to store water'; TN asks A.P. to suspend supply of Krishna wa[redacted]
8K | 46 dead, 16 hospitalised after trailer of migrants found in Texas [redacted]
7K | Silchar flood man-made; embankment breached: Assam Chief [redacted]
Search here
TRENDING TODAY
Eknath Shinde moves Supreme Court; Uddhav Thackeray Ca...
Maharashtra Political Turmoil Updates | June 27, 2022
'No Place To Store Water'; TN Asks A.P. To Suspend Supply O...
46 Dead, 16 Hospitalised After Trailer Of Migrants Found In ...
Silchar Flood Man-Made; Embankment Breached: Assam Chi...
TRENDING TOPIC
Maharashtra
Maharashtra
Chennai
Assam
TRENDING ON OUR GROUP SITES
BUSINESSLINE
Fayon


CONTACT US Copyright© 2022, THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD.