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A different step

By Phorum Dalal | Posted 25-Mar-2017

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Dancer Avantika Bahl's next production is a conversation with a deaf dancer, minus words and music





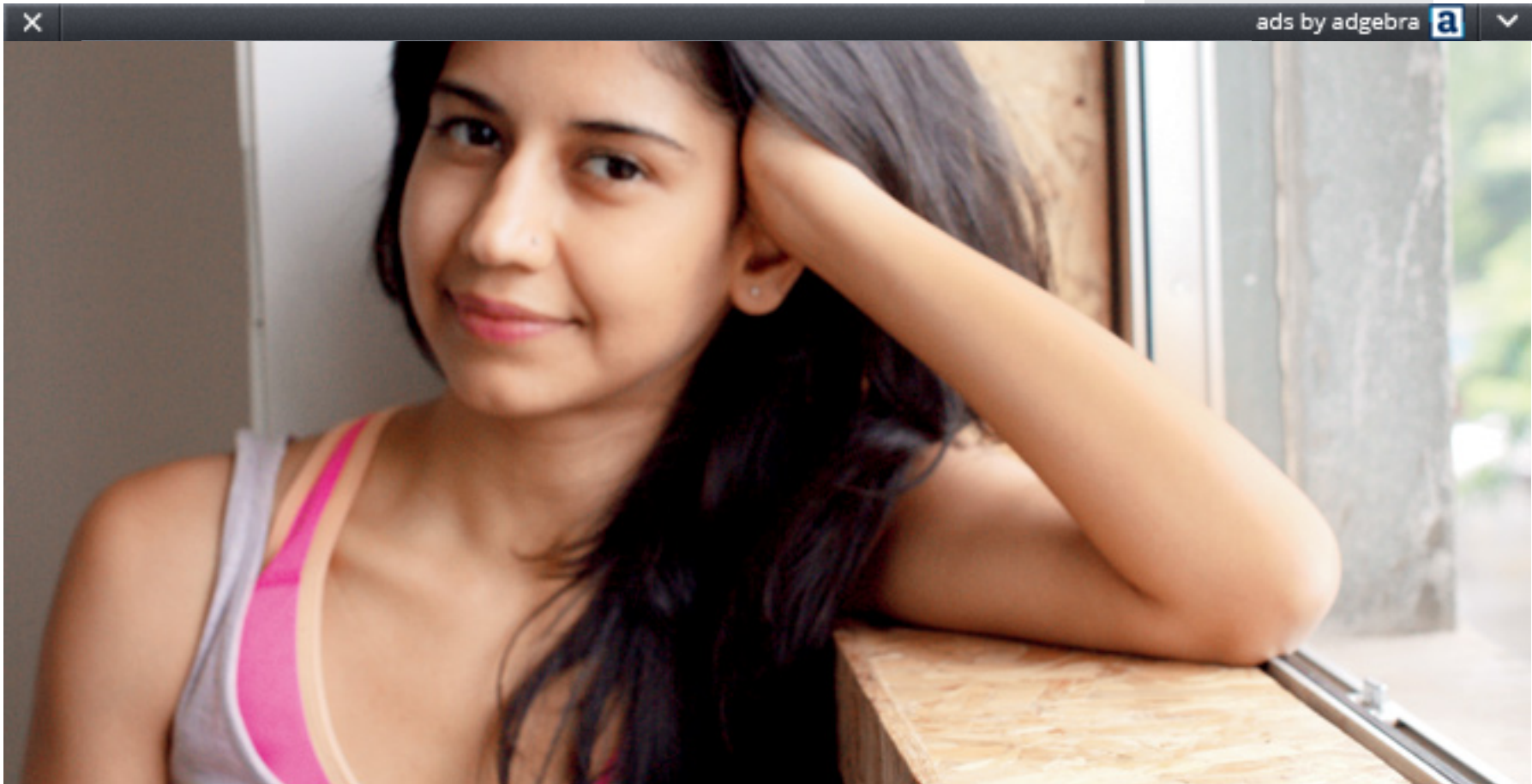
The first time we met Avantika Bahl, she was rehearsing for her debut production, *Wonkot*. A book by Rumi lay beside her as she directed four dancers to perform fluid contemporary movements. The performance was an adaptation of a work by the mystic poet.

This was in 2013, after which she created two more solo pieces. Her latest production, *Say, What?* focusses on the interaction between two people who slide between using and abandoning codified language.

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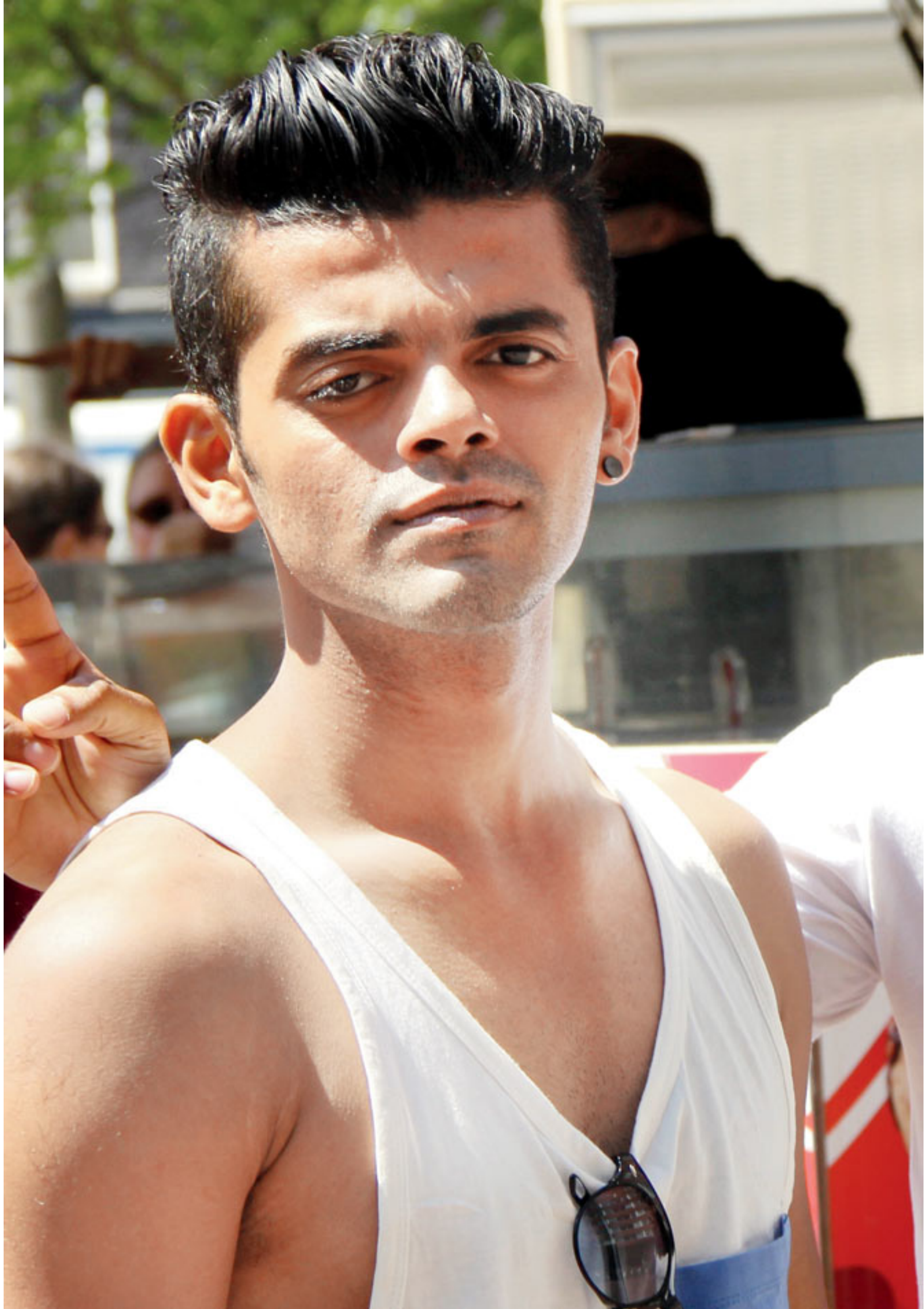


Avantika Bahl

Movement and sign

"As a dance practitioner and choreographer, I have always been interested in finding alternate modes of expression using movement. Growing up, I was fascinated by sign language, the deftness and the precision of hands, and the soundless communication," says Bahl, who signed up for an open course on sign language at Ali Yavar Jung's Institute in Bandra in 2015. The first class blew her mind away. "The way we use adjectives to ascertain the intensity of a feeling; in sign language, one emphasises with expressions. For example, the level of happiness is determined by how you vary the intensity of the same sign, involving your facial expressions, eyes, and body," says Bahl.

Eight months into the course, Bahl decided to find a way to marry movement and signs for a performance. "I wanted to create this piece with someone whose relationship with sound was opposite to mine," says Bahl. This translated into a duet with a deaf dancer from Shiamak Davar's dance company, 26-year-old Vishal Sarvaiya. Her sign language teacher introduced the two. "This 55-minute performance examines these very negotiations to reach meeting points that are common for both," she adds.



Working method

Sign language, says Bahl, is a poetic, secret code not many understand, thus allowing for private conversation in public spaces. Working on a process-oriented piece with Sarvaiya, sharpened her sign language skills as the duo relied only on that medium for communication.

"Initially, Vishal did not understand the contemporary dance language. There would be times we were working with ideas of different emotions, like anger, and it would take him a while to see how he can embody that. We went through a plethora of emotions, from anger, frustration to finding a common ground," smiles Bahl.

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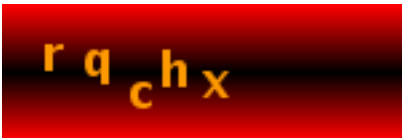
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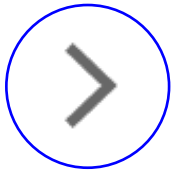
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