

Dance@60: How to defy time with motion

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MUMBAI: These days choreographer and dance practitioner Avantika Bahl is buoyed up with the idea of exploring the many possibilities of dance. Bahl has been preoccupied with making performances inclusive, challenging mainstream ideas, through her project titled Prime, which challenges the idea of ageing in dance. "It does not lean on the rhetoric of spectacle or virtuosity, but asks a deceptively simple question – what happens when dancers age," says Avantika.



Incubated a year ago, the production Prime will be presented in the city next week, with a motley group of 60-plus dancers.

Bodies peak young and fade. Careers are short-lived and dancers bow out with age. "It is almost as if dance has an expiry date," says Avantika. "But what about the decades of wisdom carried in ageing bodies? What about their journey?"

It is a deeply personal inquiry. Six years ago, pregnancy and postpartum transformed her own relationship with her body. "I renegotiated what movement meant to me. It made me think of older dancers navigating change," she says. It led her to meet dancers over 60 since last year – both professionals and hobbyists, some were Odissi gurus, others had danced intermittently and some had pulled the plug decades ago overwhelmed by family responsibilities. "My generation doesn't always realise that we stand on their shoulders," says the 35-year-old.



Conversations led to the creating Prime, a performance featuring eight seniors drawn from varied life trajectories, but embodying a defiant statement: dance is not only for the young.

When 70-year-old Odissi exponent Jhelum Paranjape first received Avantika's invitation, she told herself that after following tradition "all my life, it is perhaps now time to experiment". "Avantika came to me at the right moment. I was restless and wanted to do something else," she said.

From a position of authority, Jhelum relished being directed again. "She is the director and I am happy to 'do this' and 'don't do that,'" she said. Theatre veteran and dancer Farooq Bhuwala looked upon the opportunity as an adventure. "I'm addicted to novelty," he says. "After 45 or 50, your body doesn't obey you as it did in the past; but this is exciting."



Marzame artiste Manuela and football coach Francis Cardoso, partners in love and jive, learnt the moves from their families, weddings and each other. Their bond however was solid on a parish stage show decades ago, which carried them from Mumbai ballrooms to jive contests in Doha. After joining Avantika's rehearsals, they discovered the "joy of working with disparate genres".

For Bharatanatyam-trained Sunila Ashok, the project was a chance to reclaim a lost passion. Once a school star, marriage and constant relocations between cities pushed away dance, until she started taking baby steps, again during the lockdown months – she began teaching friends online and started her own YouTube channel. She now travels from Thane to Bandra for rehearsals, "riding on faith".



Saravelli Devdas, rediscovered dance at 50. Learning Mohiniattam online rekindled her devotion, and she joined the troupe "with an open mind". Venkatesh Iyer, 64, once a prize-winning student dancer, thought his journey was over until Avantika reached out. "She's systematic, demanding but professional. She never settles till we get it right," he says.

Dance entered pathologist Dr Venkateswaran Akhileswaran's life by accident. Twenty three years ago, while waiting for his daughter's class with Shamak Davar to end, he decided to join too. At 36, he became the oldest student in the room. Twenty eight years later, he does Garba for two hours every night on a dance floor in his own studio. "Instead of expanding my pathology practice, I decided to dance to my heart's content," says the 64-year-old.



From Odissi to Garba, Mohiniattam to jive, from medical halls to parish stages – how does one build a performance out of such a motley group? "I wanted everyone to tap into what their bodies already carry, each responding to their own language," says Avantika, adding that this approach created "conversations in dance". Farooq calls it a "dialogue through movement".

The work also unsettles notions of hierarchy: guru becoming student, hobbyists standing alongside professionals, and doctors alongside theatre actors.

As India's population ages, conversations about elderhood often focus on decline and dependence. But here are bodies defying invisibility, moving with vigour and wit. And that is what keeps them going despite the demanding rehearsals. "It's fun," says Manuela. "I'm grateful," says Saravelli Devdas. "It gave me back my confidence," says Sunila Ashok. For Avantika, this is only the beginning. "This is not about nostalgia," she insists. "It's about what their bodies can do now. The enterprise is full of possibilities."

