



# THE HINDU

## Dancing beyond 60: Avantika Bahl's *Prime* proves that age is just a number

'Prime', with eight dancers aged between 60 and 71, looks at the ageing body and the lived experience it carries. The show will be staged at the Experimental Theatre, Mumbai, on November 16.

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Venkateswaran Akileswaran, Faredoon Dodo Bhujwala, Venkatesh Iyer, Sunila Ashok, Jhelum Paranjape, Saraswati Devdas, Francis DSa Cardoso and Manuella F Cardoso | Photo Credit: Photo courtesy: Mayank Sharma.

The eight artistes on stage had two things in common — they were all over 60 and shared a love for dance. Though they began training in different dance styles at a young age, some continued to pursue their passion, while others paused for personal reasons, only to rediscover their love for dance years later.

The dancers — four men and four women — were a part of choreographer and contemporary dance-practitioner Avantika Bahl's 75-minute show 'Prime' (staged last month at Mumbai's IFBE Hall). They had been rehearsing for nine months.

Avantika says the aim of 'Prime' is to look at movement and the ageing body. "As we grow older, our movements change. Yet, the ageing body carries wisdom, memory and lived experience. The show is a testament to resilience." Avantika, who has choreographed Aadyam Theatre's 'Mumbai Star' conceptualised this show almost "seven years ago".

The eight performers, aged between 60 and 71, each have unique stories. Jhelum Paranjape, born in 1954, is an accomplished Odissi artiste. Venkatesh Iyer, now 70, began as a dancer and later choreographed wedding sangeets and community events. Venkateswaran Akileswaran, born in 1958, is a pathologist who started dancing when in medical college and returned to the art at age 50. Faredoon Dodo Bhujwala, born in 1960, has been a well-known dancer and choreographer for 45 years. Saraswati Devdas (born 1962) and Sunila Ashok (born 1963) took a break from dancing but later returned to practicing regularly. Francis D'Sa Cardoso, born in 1964, and 60-year-old Manuella F. Cardoso have been actively involved in Mumbai's cultural scene."

Taking into account the fact that ageing is a slow, acquired transformation, Avantika began to wonder what happens to dancers when they started ageing. She says, "A time is reached when one is at the crossroads of knowledge and ability. You know exactly how you may be able to do something, but your body may not be able to support you fully."



Having got her concept in place, Avantika looked for the right performers and says: “It was only last year that I deep-dived into this subject. I was lucky to meet eight people who suited my requirements. I also needed commitment as this is a long-term project but they were happy and supportive. They imposed their trust in me as a choreographer, and that was important.”

Avantika says each dancer is an archive of memories that her generation will never be aware of. “They had different personal histories that needed to be told. I also told them I would not be teaching them anything, but would only be extracting what they had to offer and put everyone on equal ground. I was interested in their joys, their griefs and wanted those stories to come out,” she adds.

‘Prime’ has music by Rahul Nadkarni and Nikhil Narendra, with the uptempo final song composed by Het Sanghvi. The main dance show is accompanied by two companion works. Artists Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty have created an installation including eight unique sculptures drawing from each dancer’s personality and mannerisms. The installation’s title ‘I am a dancer made of song’ is a line from a poem by a 92-year-old former ballerina suffering from dementia. Besides this, there is Sruti Visweswaran’s film which tries to understand the process of putting together this work. Says Avantika, “I wanted to access their worlds through different mediums and these two fit in perfectly.”

According to Avantika, “Mumbai Star set her about what to expect from ‘Prime’. There were a lot of learnings in ‘Mumbai Star’ in terms of production which came in handy while preparing for ‘Prime’. And at the heart of both productions is the translation of sheer joy.” That, she says, is what she looks for in her work.

‘Prime’ will be staged at the Experimental Theatre, Mumbai, on November 16, and travel to other cities. Says Avantika, “It raises questions about the effect of ageing even among those who do not dance. I think there’s something for everyone to take away no matter what point they are in their lives.”

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