



Most ballerinas wear out multiple pairs of pointe shoes in a week; for some performers, a single pair is not enough to get through a performance

Artistes who don't fit labels

■ Whether artistes fit boxes or not, whatever is worthwhile will be appreciated



Sharon Lowen
dance without frontiers

Performing Artists who don't fit labels The majority of performing artistes, like most people, fit in clearly labeled categories: Bharatanatyam dancer, Kathputli puppeteer, ballet dancer, jazz musician. Within each category there is a wide range of ability and the creative aims to which the artist aspires, but generally there is a simple designation that satisfies both the presenters and the man on the street with "what they do". This week I recalled the challenge of being an artiste who doesn't fit a known category when a remarkable performing arts couple arrived in India. Annie Hickman and Allyn Gooen. Annie is a dancer and sculptor who doesn't call herself a dancer and doesn't exhibit her sculpture in galleries. At the age of five, a ballet teacher said her ankles were too weak to be a ballet dancer and this crushed and discouraged her from dancing until she reached college. Performing modern dance in college, she felt she could design better costumes and this was the beginning of her journey. After a foundation studying sculpture and classical western mime in NYC, she added 5-8 years of jazz, ballet, tap and gymnastics with New York's top teachers before she found her true artistic calling when she entered a pet store, Fang and Claw. The tree frogs, lizards and bugs she discovered were more beautiful than any art she had seen in a gallery. She decided to bring this beauty to life with costumes and movement. Her costumes are created with intricate basketry macramé and takes a year each to complete. She then exhibits her creations in performances that bring them to life through dance. Allyn Gooen gave up

teaching at a university when the head of department said "no more balloons in class". He took the plunge to full time puppet shows and presenting balloon animals to children for a few years until the fateful day when he arrived at a venue with 500 children waiting, only to discover that he had left his puppets behind. This was the beginning of a new kind of performance as he told the organiser that the children were the puppets and the balloons were the costumes, sets and props and proceeded to make it so. He's not "just" a balloon man or storyteller and not sponsor of children's performance series in the US would book him into any of the categories they want to fill until they saw a showcase performance, but he said, "If you like what you see you gotta get me, because there aren't any others!" This actually has worked, as he has managed to present thousands of performances worldwide over a few decades. Annie, Allyn and I had connected originally through puppetry, though none of us are currently practicing puppeteers. I had left puppetry when I



Annie Hickman (above) poses with her creations; (below) Hickman's costumes of the Jackson Chameleon and the Blue Bird.

came to India to study classical Indian dance, turning down an offer from Jim Henson of the Muppets. When I returned to the USA after five years in India, George Latshaw, whose puppet productions I had been in with several symphonies, was the director of the Puppeteers of America 40th Annual Festival at Kent State University, Ohio and invited me to perform in the only non-puppetry perfor-



mance. Allyn was at the puppet fest, though committed to creative storytelling performances with balloons and an ex-puppeteer like me, we stayed in touch through our shared passion for great puppetry and common friends. He has helped me to stay connected with this community even though I'm not there. Annie also had a puppetry background but evolved her passion for dance and sculpture into a performance art. Most of her performances are for children, as are Allyn's, since performing arts specifically for children is a significant genre of presentation in the west. Even with creating only one new costume per year, she has performed variations of the All-American Bug Show at least 4000 times for schools, children's art festivals and art museums. With her husband, Allyn, they have combined their two unlabeled art forms into productions like the Lizard of Oz and the Love Bug's Hug. Eight cases of costumes and one bag of balloons!

I've always been amazed by the multitude of challenges all artists overcome to share their art. These two world-class performers for children reminded me of the challenge is being recognized when you don't fit into what is expected. I think of Narendra Sharma and Bhoomika struggling for a rightful place in the world of Indian dance because they were virtually unique in continuing the tradition of Indian modern dance established by Uday Shankar. Bhoomika is not traditional yet also not western modern dance and not fitting into an established category for recognition and sponsorship continues to be a lifelong uphill struggle. It is easy to forget that there were significant challenges faced by Odissi, Sattriya, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam, Vilasini, Andhra Natyam, Bharata Nrityam in their individual struggles to gain recognition as classical genres of India alongside those recognised at the time of Independence; Bharata Natyam, Manipuri, Kathak and Kathakali. Till the 1970s and 80s, with a few exceptions like Jon Higgins, a vocalist, and my dance, non-Indian performing artists were simply considered students. It took six Videshi Kalakar Utsavs spread over 1989-1994 and the receptivity of audiences to change labels based on their own experience. Ultimately, whether artistes and their arts fit the boxes or not, we find easiest to put them in, whatever is worthwhile will be appreciated. Being unique is not the worst challenge an artist can face. Sharon Lowen is a respected exponent of Odissi, Manipuri and Mayurbhanj and Seraikella Chau whose four-decade career in India was preceded by 17 years of Modern Dance and Ballet in the US and an MA in Dance from the University of Michigan. She can be contacted at sharonlowen.workshop@gmail.com



A scene from the play Sakharum Binder.

To celebrate life, struggle

Vatsala Shrivastava
review

It is true that death doesn't really end the mortal life. There are always some elements which stay in this world even after the person moves on to "life after death." In theatre activist Shashi Bhushan's context, his creative vibes continue to be part of the theatre world after he lost his life to dengue and the ignorance of the then management of the National School of Drama (NSD) in 2009. Patna celebrates the life and struggle of its former rising star through a theatre festival "Majma." An initiative of Bhushan's NSD, senior Randheer Kumar and his cultural group Raaga, Majma begins with felicitating a contemporary theatre personality and showcases plays from all across the nation. Majma, a festival in its fifth year, recognised the contribution of Hindi playwright and poet Rajesh Joshi on November 4. Noted theatre personality from Assam, Dulal Roy, graced the occasion. The award ceremony was followed by Mr Joshi's play Tukke pe Tukka, an adaptation of a Chinese folktale Three Promotions in Succession. The social satire, directed by veteran Bansi Kaul, charmed the Patna audience with colourful characters and humorous puns. The protagonist represented a large section of incompetent and mediocre sarkari workers. Day one also had an inspiring musical performance by a maha dalit women-only group, Awahan Sargam Band. The

members of the group, field workers and labourer, left the audience startled with their command on drums, dhols and tambura. "We wanted to bring different genres of contemporary theatre to the city. The festival had a variety in the form of subject, presentation and approach. On one side, we had an experimental play *The White Hands* from a small town of Bihar, on the other we had a classic *Tukke pe Tukka* by a renowned director. We did not want monotony in the theme," said Mr Randheer. "The variety in the selection of plays matched the versatile nature of Bhushan. The festival is getting bigger and better each year," added Hrishikesh Sulabh, noted theatre person and writer. Day two showcased one of Vijay Tendulkar's most controversial plays, *Sakharum Binder*. Directed by Vijay Kumar and presented by Manch, the play narrated the story of a man who gives shelter to a series of women abandoned by their husbands. In return for providing shelter, Sakharum exploits the women by getting them to perform household tasks and occasionally, for sexual favours. Vijay Kumar again had a rendezvous with the viewers on Day four with his solo *Hum Bihar Me Chunav Lad Rahe Hain*. In this interactive play, Vijay presented a subject line and references which were fairly contemporary and included the audience in his creative journey on stage. "The audience in Patna has a remarkable awareness on social and cultural issues and literary knowledge. The people here might appear raw and rustic on the outer lines but they surprise with deep

understanding of subtexts. It has always been satisfactory as a performer to be in this city," says Mr Vijay. *Jee Hume to Natak Karna Hai* and *Zindagi Madhur Hai Kumansenu Me* were performed by two Delhi-based group Sehar and Bhasha respectively. Raaga presented *Natmethia*, a play based on the life of Bhikhari Thakur, known as the Shakespeare of Bhojpuri. Thakur, who created Bidesiya style, faced various challenges as an artist in the pre-Independence era (1887-1971). *Natmethia* highlights the pain and pleasure of an artist in making. The critics said that this play had given Patna one of its best theatre actors. The work of Ajit Kumar, Bullo Kumar, Ashutosh Abhigya, Manish Mahival, Sunil Bihari, Akash Kumar and Ravi Kaushal were exceptionally impressive. "I give the credit to the entire team. I was just leading the process. There is no conventional hierarchy in my team and that allows my actors a wide creative space," said Randheer, the director of the play. The last day had a great expectation from the Dastangoi team which failed to create the magic they are famous for. *Dastan-e-Chauboli*, a Rajasthani folktale, was presented by Manu Sikandr Dhingra and Nadeem Shah. The Dastangoi fans who have been enchanted by the magic of Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Hussain in past, found Dhingra not well rehearsed for the show. Shah was the saving grace and kept the energy flowing. The festival ended with one-minute silence for Bhushan and the hope to come back next year with unique set of performances.

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

Rebel Nagas' demand unacceptable

New Delhi: The minister for external affairs, Mr Swaran Singh, declared in the Rajya Sabha today that the rebel Naga leaders' demand for a sovereign, independent state was "absolutely intolerable and we cannot accept it." He was replying to a volley of supplementary questions from several Opposition and Congress members on the rebel Nagas' demand. Mr Arjun Arora (Cong.), asked whether the news of rebel Nagas' demand for independence had been received by the Government through the Press only, and remarked that the means of communication of the External Affairs Ministry was in a "deplorable state." Mr Swaran Singh said that there was always a "difference between what is available to the Press and what is available authoritatively. "While speaking in the House, it will not be fair that I base the Government's stand on just what appears in the newspapers. It was incorrect to say that the means of communication were in any way faulty." Asked by Mr I.K. Gujral (Cong), whether the area around Kohima had been declared disturbed after the sand taken by the rebel Nagas, Mr Swaran Singh said that this related to a certain strip alone, and had been necessitated for reasons spelled out in the Nagaland Governor's orders. —UNI

World music moves to a higher octave



Parag Kamani
ticket to write

Before I was informed of its definition, my first reminiscences of seeing "world music" performed live occurred way back in March 1984 when Shakti — the band fronted by guitarist John McLaughlin — played at Cooperage Football Grounds in south Mumbai, featuring the likes of Zakir Husain on tabla and L Shankar on violin. (Incidentally, he played a fusion night, courtesy organiser InSync at M u m b a i ' s Shanmukhananda Hall on November 9 with Mike Albert, a guitarist whose claim to fame was a brief stint with American hard rock band Megadeth.) My next live journey into this new genre happened four years later when, as a staple of the UK-based Real

World Records (RWR), Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour performed as part of the 1988 Amnesty International Human Rights Now! Tour at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, playing before an audience of 72,000 with Tracy Chapman as the opening act. No doubt, N'Dour's presence had a lot to do with the artiste that followed him next on stage, none other than one-time vocalist of Genesis, Peter Gabriel, who founded RWR. In fact, the record label celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, having connected the Western musical world with stunning voices from the rest of the globe. Examples are rampant, including the explosive qawwali of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan — who I saw per-



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form live in Mumbai in 1996 — or the sounds of Afro Celt Sound System, or the harmonies of Blind Boys Of Alabama. There were the Jazz India promoted Jazz Yatra festivals that often featured a unique blend of jazz combined with Indian instrumentation, a festival that I first attended in Mumbai — if I remember the year correctly — in 1992. But, as the product head of record label Saregama's international music division in 1995, not only did I have access to the RWR roster for release purposes, but also a label known as Narada and its sub-label, Higher Octave. With it was another revelling music journey, this time into ambient, or new age, sounds from around the world through artistes such as German guitarist Ottmar Liebert, American

Indian themed Sacred Spirit, and the Welsh initiated Adiemus, to name a few. The world music connection did not occur overnight, but was a growing movement that gained popularity in the '60s. Much credit also to the continuing international successes of leading Indian classical music exponents such as sitar player Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan on sarod. European and American musicians, as I have stated in a previous column, became enchanted by the inter-relationship between mysticism, spirituality and music, through the emergence of Indian music and its exponents, either through visits by international musicians into India or with Indian musicians travelling abroad. Initially the Indian musicians

catered to an Indian diaspora before diversifying their fan following to include the West. The initial boost of the world music genre was provided by the genesis of the WOMAD (World Of Music, Arts, and Dance) international festival, which was co-founded in 1980 by musician Peter Gabriel. Since 1982, WOMAD festivals have travelled all over the world, including Adelaide (Australia), Taranaki (New Zealand), Extremadura (Spain), Sicily (Italy), the Canary Islands and, in 2010, Abu Dhabi in UAE. While Gabriel has been to India before, one is not aware whether he would consider making India as a base for his rotating musical festival in future. However, until that happens, if at all, take a look at the Masters Of World Music event that com-

mences on November 19 in New Delhi, following which it moves to Hyderabad, Pune, and Bengaluru, ending in Mumbai on December 10. Initiated by menswear apparel brand Blackberrys, the intent of involving themselves in music is "to contribute in the conservation and promotion of exceptional musical talent across the globe while also nurturing Indian talent". And, so it is with the presence of Indian artistes — such as Barmer Boys, Catharis, Highway 61, Shoonya Rajeev Raja — covering, among others, the genres of Carnatic, jazz, Rajasthani folk and traditional Bengali sounds as part of this festival. Two of the leading international musicians participating in the Master Of World Music are Malian musicians Fatoumata

Diawara, who was born on the Ivory Coast and is presently based in France, and Vieux Farka Toure, son of Grammy-winning legend, the late Ali Farka Touré, whose music transcends blues, folk, soul, reggae and rock.

Surely, a musician whose music will be, conservatively stated, a revelation in bringing world music back into India.

The writer has been part of the media and entertainment business for over 23 years. He still continues to pursue his hobby, and earns an income out of it! — The writer has been part of the media and entertainment business for over 23 years. He still continues to pursue his hobby, and earns an income out of it!