

The Dance of Theatre

By Vidhya Subramanian

As a teenager I was offered roles in films as I am sure were many dancers, but didn't accept any of them. Years later when asked to act in a play about a Carnatic musician, I thought well, Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music are close sisters, it can't be that much of a deviation. My curiosity piqued, I decided to give it a shot but with apprehension. Little did I know how much work I would have to put in, and that acting would develop into another passion. I went on to be in a few more plays and even a couple of short films. This past May, I played the lead role in a production called 'Noor – Empress of the Mughals', produced by Enacte, and written and directed by Feisal Alkazi, theatre director and son of Ebrahim Alkazi.

I had worked on a project produced by Enacte with Jean Claude Carriere. When asked to attend auditions for their next production Noor, I was anxious since it was a subject I was unfamiliar with, and I would be sharing space with some veteran actors in the bay area. What am I, a Bharatanatyam dancer doing trying to perform the role of a Mughal queen ahead of her times? Deciding to take a chance, I went to the reading/auditions, got called back, and got the part. This process itself was interesting to me. For a dancer every day is an audition with self isn't it? If I conquer one day's audition, I get called back to the next one, and the process continues until it is performance time which itself is like an audition.

We started with a theatre workshop that had nothing to do with the play, or so I thought. Theatre actors are familiar with these workshops designed to decompress - physical exercises, role-play exercises, eye contact exercises etc. There were some that required me to take giant steps out of my comfort zone but were extremely effective in shedding the 'I' in me. Indian classical dance on the contrary is essentially a solo art in which the dancer revels in one's own world of ideas, thoughts, choreography, practice, and performance. We come together with musicians for rehearsal and performance, but rarely do we workshop or perform exercises for the sole purpose of breaking down barriers and developing a spirit of fellowship. Harmonizing into an integrated group could happen over a period of time if one is fortunate enough to work with the same set of musicians. Could the dance field perhaps benefit from workshop and exercise to enable a higher level of cohesiveness in performance?

Next came the rehearsals. Feisal did not want us to memorize lines and come with preset notions of how to perform the character. We met with other actors who would be sharing scenes with us to examine Mughal history (fact and fiction), analyze our own character as well as others', and interpret relationships between characters. We read the scenes each time with different renditions, digging deep into our psyche. What were Noor's motives in her choice of certain words in any given line? Who was Asaf Khan referring to when he spoke a particular line? How many different ways could Jahangir vocalize the same line? And so on. Feisal repeatedly asked the actor to unearth as many

ways as possible to present the character and then to decide on one that “worked”. Additionally, we actors had to identify people in our own lives that resembled our own character as well as others’. This helped me identify better with Noor, a woman far removed from my world, yet not very different from me. In dance we have the process of understanding the lyrics, music, the thought process behind an idea. I read and re-read the lyrics until I’ve internalized them, although every time I practice or perform a piece, it undergoes nuanced changes. I also find ways to identify with the character I’m portraying in abhinaya, to make her more accessible to me in the context of my life. Conviction of portrayal arises from this, and if I’m not convinced, the audience definitely won’t be. During one of the rehearsals, while playing my climactic scene, I cried as the character, with the character and for the character. I have experienced this in dance as well when I feel as the character and simultaneously look at the character with the empathetic outsider’s view.

Acting involves abhinaya. The natyadharmi style is already a subtle version of abhinaya. While acting however, I was told to moderate facial expressions and gestures considerably, something a dancer has a difficult time of. To wipe the slate clean of gestures and expressions I am used to in dance, and add minimally to the role of Noor was challenging. Dialog delivery is a whole new skill to be learnt - modulation, image association with each line, diction, and memorization of pages and pages of dialog! Voice projection became my biggest challenge since I have an inherently soft voice and this was the first time I was acting without mikes. When dancing I have only my emotion-triggered expressions and gestures to project to the last person in the last row. Somehow I find this easier than throwing my voice to the last row. However, I am learning to internalize this modulation and developing a depth of expression in abhinaya.

In theatre, I feed off the energy of the group, making for a palpable, electric spirit. In dance, I tap into an internal energy that is more meditative and involved. Whether before dancing or acting, I am possessed by the character from the moment I get my costume and make up on. My body and mind go into a sort of trance, drawing a blank, and ready to experience with a sense of alertness. All of these combine to result in a sensation I never want to stop experiencing.

The contrast between my dance and acting is deliciously inspiring, and the nuances I borrow from each to feed the other can be endless. I feel the lines blur. Am I dancing Noor or acting a nayika? This is a cross-pollination that allows me to straddle the two creatively challenging arts.