

alap
Presents

BEHIND THE SCENES

MINI-STORIES ON PRODUCTIONS

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FILM: **MISS STRADDLER!**

SCRIPTWRITER: VIDHYA SUBRAMANIAN

SYNOPSIS: THE STORY OF A DANCER AND
ACTOR WHO STRADDLES THE
TWO WORLDS WITH EASE, WITH
A SPECIFIC CASE STUDY ON
NOOR





*A still from a theatre workshop,
Pre-Noor
Photo Courtesy:
Frozen In Time Photography*

As a teenager, I was often offered roles in films, a not uncommon state for many other dancers. However, it wasn't till several years later, when I was asked to act in a play about a Carnatic musician, that I considered the offer. At the time, I thought, "Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music are closely related, 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 or that acting would develop into another passion. I have since been in a few more plays and even a couple of short films. And this past May, I played the lead role in a production called Noor – Empress of the Mughals. The performance was produced by Enacte and

written and directed by Feisal Alkazi, a theatre director and son of Ebrahim Alkazi.

I'd earlier worked on a project produced by Enacte with Jean Claude Carriere. Nevertheless, when asked to attend auditions for Noor, I was rather anxious; not only was it a subject I was unfamiliar with but I would be sharing space with veteran actors from the Bay Area. I thought to myself, "What am I, a Bharatanatyam dancer, doing trying to perform the role of a Mughal queen ahead of her times?" I took a chance though and went to the readings/auditions. Miraculously, I got called back and was finally offered the role!

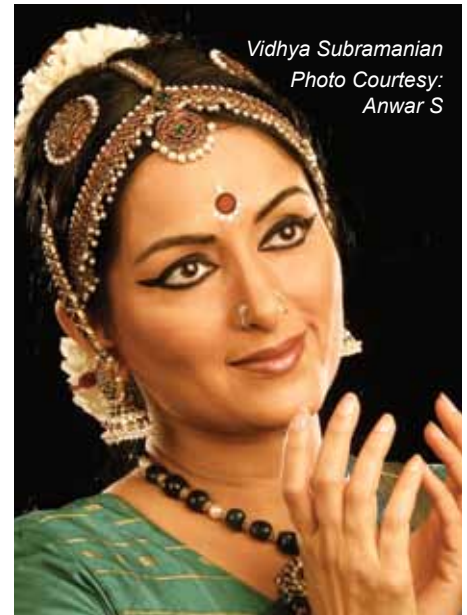
The process up until the selection was in itself a hugely interesting one. For a dancer, every single day is an audition with the self and the successful conclusion of each of those auditions continues until the time of the performance.

We started work for the production with a theatre workshop that, to my untrained eye, appeared to have little to do with the play. Veteran actors will, no doubt, be familiar with these workshops, which are designed to decompress – they contain physical exercises, role-playing exercises, eye-contact exercises, etc. Among them, there were some that required me to take giant steps out of my comfort zone but were nonetheless extremely effective in shedding the strong notion of "I" in my conception of a performance.

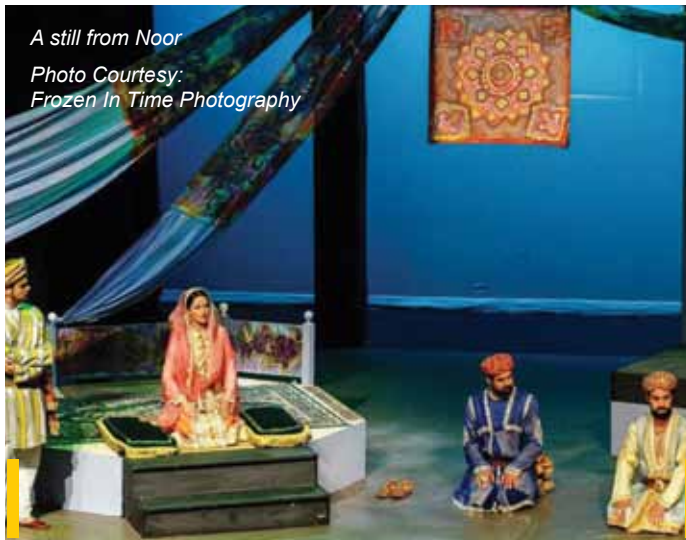
Indian classical dance is essentially a solo art in which the dancer revels in his/her

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 possibly only happen over a period of time if one was fortunate enough to work with the same set of musicians consistently. Which leads me to the question: could the dance field perhaps benefit from workshops and exercises to enable a higher level of cohesiveness in performance?

Those thoughts aside, we were now in rehearsals for Noor and quite immediately there was an emphasis on creative and nuanced interpretation of the script and our characters. Feisal did not want us to merely memorise



*Vidhya Subramanian
Photo Courtesy:
Anwar S*



A still from Noor

Photo Courtesy:
Frozen In Time Photography

“Conviction of portrayal arises from this connection and if I am not convinced, how then can I expect the audience to make the connection?”

lines and appear with pre-set notions of how to understand and perform each character. Each of us met with our co-actors and those with whom we'd be sharing scenes to examine Mughal history (fact and fiction), analyse characters (both our own as well as the others') and interpret relationships between characters.

We read scenes multiple times, each time with different renditions and dug deep into our psyche. What were Noor's motives in her choice of certain words in any given line? To whom was Asaf Khan referring when he spoke a particular line? How many different ways could Jahangir vocalise the same line? And so on. Feisal repeatedly asked the actor to unearth as many ways as possible to present the character and then decide on one that “worked”.

Additionally, we actors had to identify people in our own lives that resembled our own character as well as that of others. This helped me identify better with Noor, a woman far removed from my world yet not very different from me.

In dance too we have the process of understanding the lyrics, music and the thought process behind an idea. I read and re-read the lyrics until I have internalised 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 connection and if I am not convinced, how then can I expect the audience to make the connection?

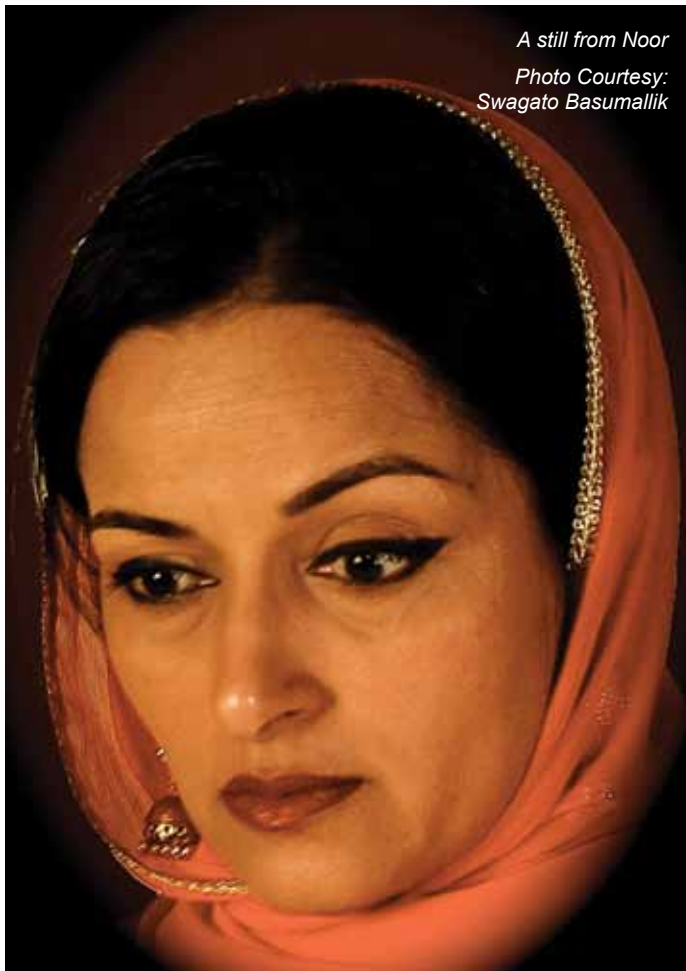
It maybe took time but I think I finally managed that connection when, during rehearsal, I cried as the character, with the character and for the character, while on stage for the climactic scene. I have experienced this in dance as well, when I simultaneously feel as the character and gaze upon her, with empathy, from the outsider's perspective.

Acting involves abhinaya, and the natyadharmi style is already a subtle version of abhinaya. However, within the space of theatre, I was told to moderate facial expressions and gestures; something a dancer has a hard time doing. One of the biggest challenges for me, therefore, was to wipe the slate clean of those gestures and expressions I am used to as a dancer and add minimally to the role of Noor.

And, of course, dialogue delivery was a whole new skill to be learnt - modulation, image association with each line, diction and memorization of pages and pages of the script! Voice projection was also a challenge since I have an inherently soft voice and could not rely on microphones to ensure the entire audience heard Noor speak.

By contrast, while dancing I have only emotion-triggered expressions and gestures to project to people in the last row. And somehow I find this easier than throwing my voice. However, I am now learning to internalize this modulation and, consequently, also develop a depth of expression in my abhinaya.

In theatre, I feed off the energy of the group, making for a palpable and electric spirit. In dance, I tap into an internal energy that is more meditative and involved. Either way, I am possessed by the character



A still from Noor
Photo Courtesy:
Swagato Basumallik

from the moment I am in costume. My body and mind enters a trance-like state; there is blankness and a readiness to experience a new life and new sensation, combined with a heightened sense of alertness.

And 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.

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