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Editorial

This issue is coming out one month earlier than scheduled, to coincide with IFA's second New Performance Festival from 18 to 21 November 2010 in Kolkata. It is the second such festival (the first was in Bangalore in 2008) featuring performances that have been developed with support from IFA. Fittingly, therefore, performance is the theme of this issue.

IFA part-funded a residency for emerging choreographers, the Gati Summer Dance Residency 2010, run by the Gati Forum in New Delhi. The Forum's Director, Anusha Lall, gives us an overview of this residency, which offers dancers a unique opportunity to create and stage their own choreographic works with guidance from mentors, who help them develop a critical eye towards their own work. We also have reflections on the residency, as two residents and a mentor narrate the highlights of their ten-week experience.

A New Performance grant from IFA launched theatre professional Sankar Venkateswaran on a journey to map contemporary acting, actor training and theatre-making in India. In this issue he describes how, by using physical text as a tool to create autonomous actors, he has tried to outline an alternative approach to contemporary theatre making in India. Another grant partially supported dancer/choreographer Padmini Chettur to develop a collaborative performance piece, *Beautiful Thing 1*, reviewed here by Parvathi Nayar. Also in the Review section is Jisha Menon's critique of Ram Ganesh Kamatham's play *Dancing on Glass*, which recently toured Mumbai and New Delhi.

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Travelling from the new to the old, Mahmood Farooqui has been exploring Dastangoi, the sixteenth century performed art of storytelling, which migrated here from Persia. He has been researching, in particular, the countless fantastic tales woven around the Arab warrior Amir Hamza, which acquired distinctly Indic colours in the eighteenth century. An IFA grant helped Farooqui breathe new life into the art form, and his training workshops for dastangos (tellers of epics) are an attempt to recapture some of that lost glory. Here, he narrates the history of Dastangoi and talks of plans to extend its ambit by creating contemporary texts.

Meanwhile, another storytelling tradition, an intertwining of the oral and the written, is alive and well in the Sindhi belt, the swathe of land that stretches from Baluchistan all the way down to Kachchh. Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*, a vast collection of verses that tell stories about the region and the people of Sindh, continues to be recited, read and sung 300 years after they were composed. IFA grantee Shalini Punjabi, who travelled across western Rajasthan and Kachchh to trace the journey of the *Risalo*, found that the episodic and fragmentary nature of the stories allowed for a multitude of performance forms.

Journeys appear to mark this issue: journeys virtual and physical; inward journeys as well as journeys that retrace other journeys made hundreds of years ago.

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Contributors

Sankar Venkateswaran graduated from Calicut University's School of Drama & Fine Arts with a first rank (2002) and completed intensive training at the Theatre Training and Research Programme, Singapore (2006). Sankar has undergone practical 'immersions' in four major Asian traditional theatre forms—Noh, Kudiyattom, Beijing opera and Wayang Wong—as well as Stanislavskian and post-Stanislavskian acting methodologies, and training in voice, speech, movement, theatre-making, Taiji and para-theatre. In 2007 he founded Theatre Roots & Wings of which he is currently the artistic director. Sankar works as a dramaturge as well as a producer, director, actor and music composer. He teaches acting and has been holding theatre-making workshops, one of which he was invited to conduct in Japan by Ku Na'uka Theatre Company in 2002.

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Mahmood Farooqui studied history at St Stephen's College, New Delhi and at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He has been a journalist and a newspaper columnist and over the last few years, under the guidance of the renowned Urdu scholar S.R. Faruqi, has worked to effect a major revival of Dastangoi, the lost art of Urdu storytelling that dates back to the sixteenth century. He is the author of *Besieged: Voices from Delhi 1957* (Penguin) and *Habib Tanvir's Autobiography* (Viking), and has worked as a researcher with William Dalrymple on *The Last Mughal*. He is the co-director of the recently released Hindi feature film *Peepli Live*, and lives in Delhi with his wife Anusha Rizvi.

Anusha Lall is director and founder member of the Gati Dance Forum, a Delhi-based organisation that works to promote artists in the field of contemporary Indian dance. Her interest in dance spans choreography, performance, teaching and research. Some of her recent choreographic works are *Sambodhan*, *Vyuti* and *Tilt*. Anusha collaborates with artists from other disciplines such as theatre, video, sculpture and digital art, and has worked with leading choreographers and theatre directors from around the world. She has also created dance and digital

art installations that challenge traditional notions of viewing dance and aim to subvert the relationship between the dancer and the spectator. Her installations *Inside In* and *Homes for the Absent* have been exhibited at Spring Dance, Netherlands, and Apeejay Gallery and Khoj, New Delhi.

Shalini Panjabi is an independent researcher based in Bangalore. She did her PhD in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics on aspects of private education in India, and has received a Postdoctoral Research Award from the Charles Wallace Trust. Her research interests are also in the larger areas of orality, literacy and cultural heritage. One of her field sites has been Kashmir, where the focus has been on the complex issues that arise from conservation in a conflict situation. Her current work, funded by a grant from the IFA, is on Sindhi oral narratives in western Rajasthan and Kachchh.

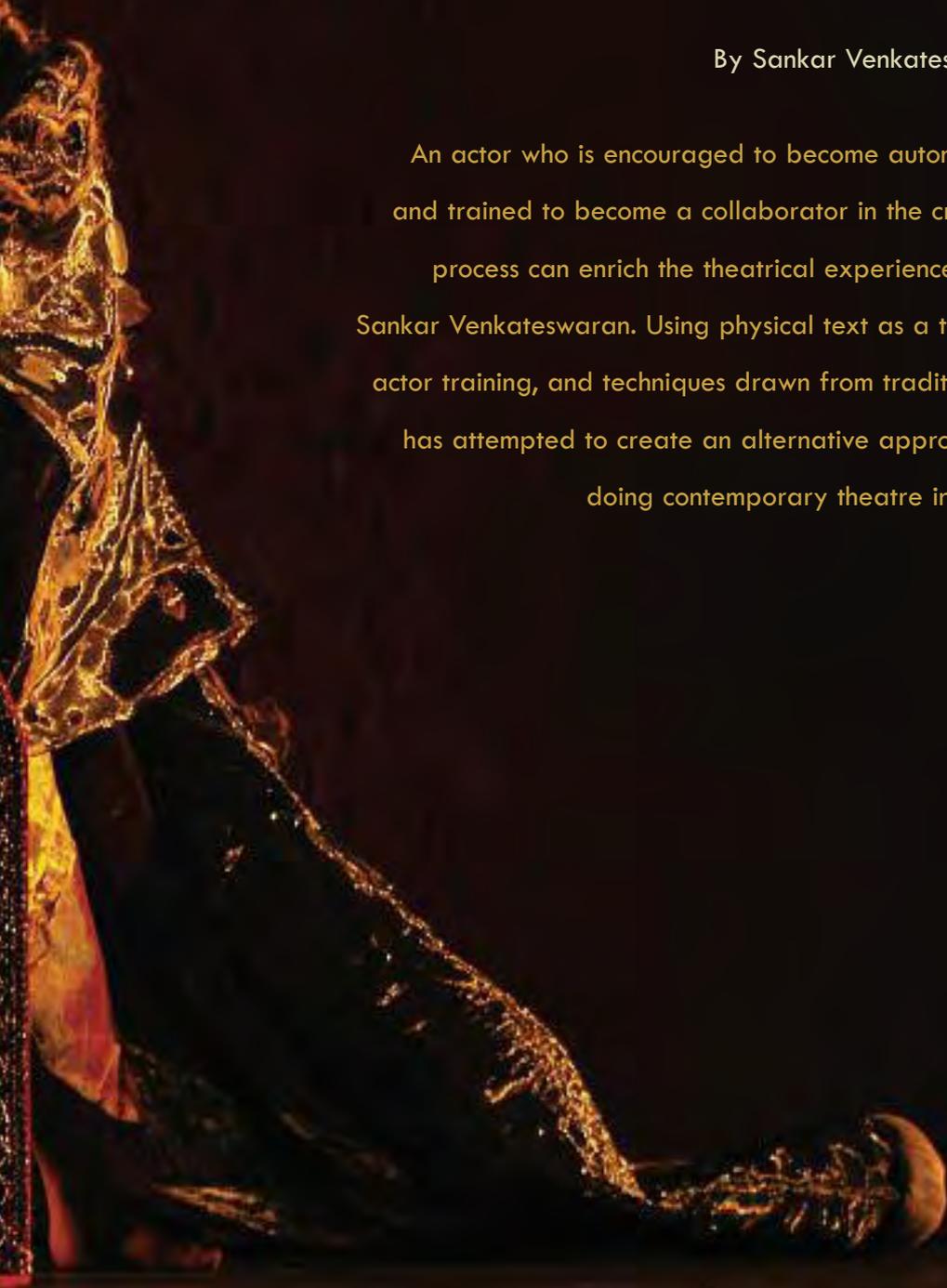
Parvathi Nayar is a visual artist with a drawing and painting practice. Her thought-provoking work explores narratives of our world in unusual ways, and invites viewers to re-examine preconceptions. As a writer, she is a cultural commentator covering areas that include film, theatre and contemporary dance. Parvathi received her Masters in Fine Art from Central St Martins College of Art and Design, London on a Chevening scholarship. In 2007 she was the only artist invited to present an installation by ArtSingapore, Singapore's national art fair. She has exhibited widely in India and abroad, and her works have been collected by institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum, The Sotheby's Art Institute and Deutsche Bank.

Jisha Menon is currently Assistant Professor of Drama at Stanford University. She completed her Masters in English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and her PhD in Drama at Stanford University. She served as Assistant Professor of English at University of British Columbia, Vancouver for four years. She is currently working on a book, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan and the Memory of Partition*. She is also co-editor, with Patrick Anderson, of a volume of essays, *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Palgrave-Macmillan Press) that explores the coimbrication of violence, performance, and modernity in a variety of geopolitical spaces.

Physical Text: Creating the Autonomous Actor

By Sankar Venkateswaran

An actor who is encouraged to become autonomous and trained to become a collaborator in the creative process can enrich the theatrical experience, feels Sankar Venkateswaran. Using physical text as a tool for actor training, and techniques drawn from tradition, he has attempted to create an alternative approach to doing contemporary theatre in India.



Dastangoi:

Conjuring up the Ancient Wizards of Storytelling

All photographs show Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Husain performing Dastangoi.

Writer, scholar and performer Mahmood Farooqui has been engaged with Dastangoi, the sixteenth century performed art of storytelling in Urdu, since 2004. His work has essentially involved writing on and performing from the longest fictional narrative of modern India, the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*. In an email interview, Farooqui describes the history of Dastangoi and his ambitious attempts to rekindle interest in the genre.





The Gati Residency:

Nurturing New Voices in Choreography

By Anusha Lall

Contemporary dance practice in India has stagnated because we have failed to address choreography as a critical component of dance pedagogy, says Anusha Lall, Director, The Gati Dance Forum, New Delhi. Since there is virtually no organised support for dance creation in the country, The Gati Summer Dance Residency fills this gap by providing a reflective space for the dancer to forge a personal voice.

Rajyashree Ramamurthi in her performance piece *In the Light of Irom Sharmila*. Photograph by Desmond Roberts.

The *Risalo*: Poetry in Performance

By Shalini Panjabi

Photographs by Shalini Panjabi

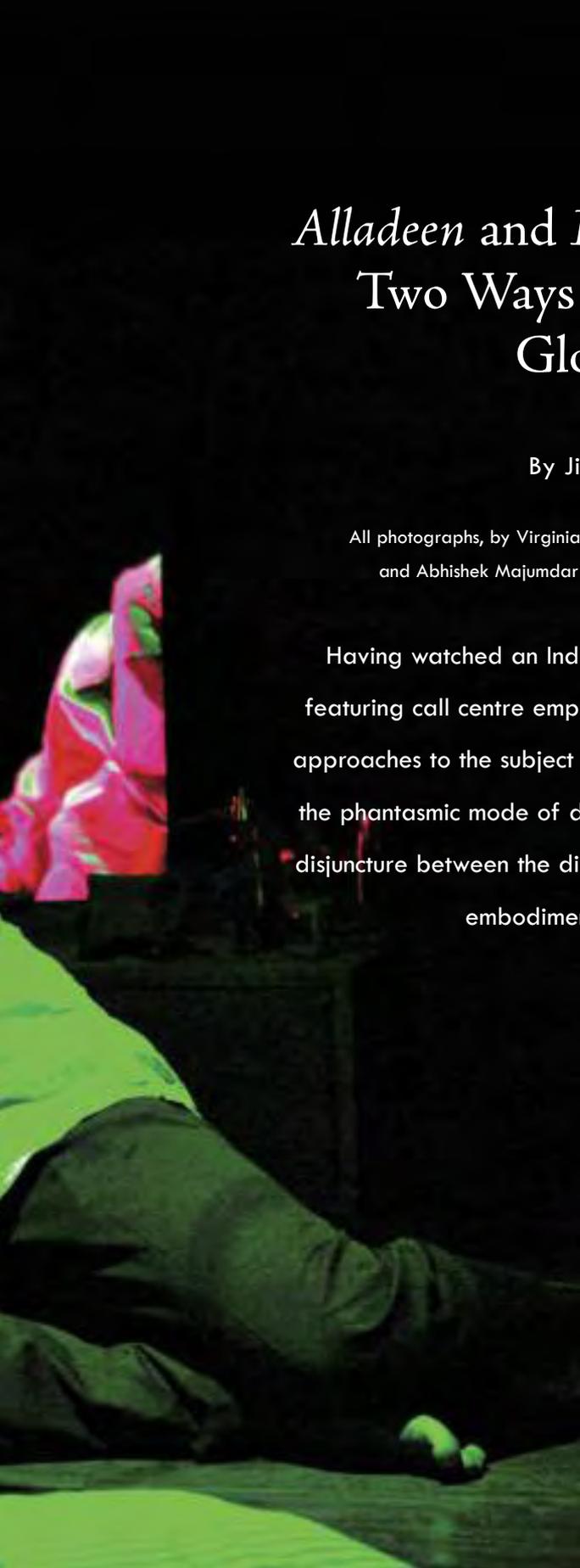
Shah Abdul Latif (or Bhitai as he is popularly known) is the pre-eminent Sindhi poet, widely regarded and revered as a Sufi. His *Risalo*, a compilation of his verses composed nearly three centuries ago, is a living, breathing presence all the way through from Kachchh to Baluchistan. Shalini Panjabi explores the proliferation of forms in which the *Risalo* continues to be read, quoted, recited and sung.



Beautiful Thing 1: Exploring Gender and Geometries

Parvathi Nayar

The premiere of Padmini Chettur's new contemporary dance work, *Beautiful Thing 1*, which emerged from a two-year workshopping process, took place at Adishakti's Theatre in Pondicherry in June 2009. Parvathi Nayar found it an effective and uncompromising piece of contemporary dance, which had an integrated approach to the body and questioned the notion of dancer as seductress.



Alladeen and Dancing on Glass: Two Ways of Looking at Globality

By Jisha Menon

All photographs, by Virginia Rodrigues, show Meghana Mundkur and Abhishek Majumdar in scenes from *Dancing on Glass*.

Having watched an Indian and an international play featuring call centre employees, Jisha Menon found their approaches to the subject vastly different. While one used the phantasmic mode of depiction, the other captured the disjuncture between the discourse on globalisation and the embodiment of its realities.