

Breaking boundaries

Pioneering dance artist **Astad Deboo** has lead the field over the last 40 years in widening access to dance and is a role model for artists across India seeking to reach out into communities

For the past 40 years Astad Deboo has been performing and seeking new directions in dance. His quest for dance never stopped and he never looked back. He packed his suitcase and started travelling all over the world to explore and experiment in dance including encounters with the Martha Graham technique in 1969 and Pina Bausch in 1980.

Around the 1980s Astad started working with young students of Action Players of Kolkata, a deaf theatre company. He worked with the group and devised methods which helped these sensory impaired people to move and dance.

Astad fondly remembers his first encounter with Action Players, “They were a group of talented actors who had silently resolved on taking up the challenge of dance. I worked and workshopped with them. These sessions attempted to focus attention on synchronisation, familiarising with different spaces, and mirror exercises for reflexes. I also worked with the deaf community in Mexico and Hong Kong. There too the approach for the sessions was with a deep sense of commitment and respect”.

Astad worked with the actors assiduously and after a year of workshops, they put on a performance that made everyone feel proud. This began Astad’s work with communities through dance and other people began to see how much work through dance can be done to instil respect, confidence and pride amongst disabled children.

In the mid 1980s Salaam Bombay, a film by Meera Nair focusing on the plight of children who have lived their lives on the streets of Mumbai, resulted in establishing the Salaam Balaak Trust (SBT) which provided street children opportunities for studies in school and better living. Astad was asked by the trust to develop dance with the young

students. He gave them lessons in his own style. They mastered it and enjoyed working with him. Recently during the 150th birth anniversary of poet Rabindranath Tagore, Astad revived his earlier solo on Tagore and brought some of the young performers from SBT to be a part of this work.

Astad has established the Astad Deboo Dance Foundation to create awareness about contemporary dance and also help sustain the efforts of non-government organisations to educate and create a platform to give an opportunity to street and deaf children to realise their potential. It uses world music, movement and alternative theatre forms like puppets and masks as well as poetry. Astad says, “The purpose is to develop these people in dance, and to support them to understand their own potential and explore movement creating dance and choreographic works. They are young adults who have a passion for hard work and are blessed with extraordinary talent. It is not easy to get a grasp of technique and vocabulary of my dance. When they came to me they only did Bollywood dance numbers. In 2011, we did a show ‘Interpreting Tagore’ in Mumbai, then we performed at Hyderabad, Kolkata, Delhi and we moved to Gangtok in Sikkim. Later in the year we have performances in Bangalore and Chennai”.

Watching them perform one indeed realises that Astad reaches out to the community in a special way without making them feel that they have any disability. This approach is most welcome and has helped several young students to perform with confidence and joy. Through the last two decades Astad has trained over 400 disabled students in dance and worked with a wide range of communities including Martial Artists and this work has been shown and recognised across the world.

“Since I had worked with Action Players group in Kolkata, Galludet University in Washington, USA, the largest University for the deaf in the world, invited me to work there. Their aim of expanding the scope of the work and exploring the possibility of bringing the hearing-impaired communities of both USA and India resulted in working together in a festive atmosphere of sharing our methodologies of training.

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Astad Deboo Dance Company. The young dancers in the company were street children who were trained by Astad at Salam Balak Trust in Delhi. Photo: Vipul Sangoi www.raindesign.info

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“A breakthrough was achieved during the Young Scholar’s Programme in Washington. The subject was: India. So I did a basic exposé of Indian dance theatre, field trips in Washington wherein they visited a Hindu temple; an exhibition of worshipping Hindu gods, at The Smithsonian; called on an Indian home where the hostess organised a fashion show. I invited Indian dancers who lived in Washington DC area to demonstrate. In the second phase, the Americans travelled to India and workshoped and performed. In the third phase the Action Players, 21 in all, travelled to the USA. The idea was that hearing-impaired students from many cultures could come together and push the boundaries of expression further and further. This was a real exchange of dance techniques and ideas.

“This reminds me of my first work with the Action Players, ‘The Dancing Dolphins’ we had explored basic concepts such as space, the possibilities of the body, and physical synchronisation. I was able to tap into the resources of the Action Players for an extended period. They began to internalise dance, and in their exploration of abstract movement and rhythm they communicated with each other as dancers. This was done through an elaborate pattern of counts.

“Our participation in the International Festival ‘Deaf Way II’ in Washington gave us an opportunity to work before the

community of deaf and hearing-impaired people. We were inspired to learn that more than 8,000 deaf and hearing-impaired people would attend the festival. The event had attracted more than 2,000 entries of which only 25 were selected and our group was one of them.

Since 2000 Astad has been associated with the Clarke School for the Deaf in Chennai and with this group he created his first full length production, *Contraposition*, and opened the 25th Deaf Olympics cultural component in Melbourne Australia 2005. This group also did 75 performances in India and overseas and the last show was at the Presidential Palace of the President of India in 2007 at the invitation of President Dr. Abdul J Kalam.

“By performing both in India and abroad, I have been trying to ensure that the notion ‘there is no such thing as an ideal dance structure’ is accepted. I have tried to make audiences aware of the physical apparatus and how much dance can do to make the body more mobile, flexible, expressive, even sensitive, among the deaf and hearing-impaired in India, Hong Kong, Mexico, the USA.

“In the future I have plans to work in Bangalore with schools where hearing-impaired students are educated. I believe that in spite of my busy performing career, my engagement with less privileged communities will never stop. I have realised that my work and performance with disabled students has spoken volumes to all people.”

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Article based on an interview with and written by Dr Sunil Kothari.