

Martram – ‘create change’

Sangeeta Isvaran is a choreographer, performer, researcher and social activist who has developed her own practice of community theatre with many marginalised groups and here writes about some of her work

A dance-theatre workshop with sex workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India: It is break-time and we collapse to the ground after some vigorous dancing to the best dappaankoothu (street) music Tamil cinema has to offer.

In this exercise, I am definitely the student, these women know moves that I have never seen before, hamstrung by my middle-class, Bharatanatyam background! Impelled by a sudden thought, I ask Gita, “How does anyone know that they can approach you? I mean, you are in a sari and so am I. There seems to be no difference in appearance, gait or area of operation, so how do you find clients on the road (which is what she does)?” Her reply turns my mind inside out; she says, “A ‘good girl’ does not make eye contact” (a literal translation from Tamil to English). The entire success – and Gita was one of the most successful women in her profession – of her livelihood depended on her ability to communicate with her eyes... not unlike a Bharatanatyam dancer! Interestingly, her method to keep policemen in check is also with the same eye focus!

This chance conversation makes me go back and refer to the *Natyasastra*, *Abhinava Bharati*, *Sangeeta Ratnakara* and many other Indian texts, as well as a few books on animal behaviour (for dummies), that speak of eye movements, gaze and their interpretation from which I develop an entire series of techniques, using eye focus in empowerment exercises; games exploring the inward focus, outward focus, confrontational, meek, manipulative, inviting, I-am-the-boss and many more.

This is what Martram is – a deconstruction of different traditions of the performing arts, using their essential principles to develop a technique named Martram (a Tamil word meaning change), that one can use in education, empowerment, economic development and conflict resolution. Martram is a movement that combines high artistic quality with concrete social change. The possibilities are endless, each workshop triggers reflections on different aspects of the arts – Gita was a trigger to develop eye focus with a semiotic understanding of its role in communication.

Over the past 15 years, working with violence in many different kinds of communities – sex workers, street children, marginalised tribal communities, landmine victims, communities shattered by religious conflict, natural disasters and so on – over five continents, I have evolved a

technique that operates on five planes of understanding: the physical, the sensory, the intellectual, the emotional and the intuitive.

For example, the regular education system in India barely functions on one level – the intellectual – only the brain receives any attention (specifically the memory function) and the body a little. Conflicts, on the other hand, arise mainly from the emotional, intuitive, sensory and physical levels. Can we connect the dots and fill the gaps? Martram is built with techniques, games and structures that work on connecting and developing the five different layers of understanding through the arts. Everywhere people have





Left: Sangeeta Isvaran. Photo: Marko93. Above: Sangeeta performing with children

amazing stories to tell and these stories need to be heard, felt and experienced on every level. Empathy is the only true solution to conflict, though we are happy to compromise with the absence of physical violence. If a policeman can empathise with a prostitute then their conflict will end.

Research into different living art traditions and interactions with artists in different countries constantly unearths nuggets of truth that cut across cultural contexts as pivotal points of reflection and potential material for community development. For example, the classical dance-theatre forms of Cambodia – Lakhon Khol, Rabam Boran – are based on the Ramayana and have four basic training systems for the hero, heroine, monkey and demon types of characters. A very rudimentary analysis of the basic positions of the heroine type – her knees are always together apart from the ‘flying’ position, the elbows tucked in, she cannot show her teeth but must smile with closed lips, her eyes gaze without actually focusing on any point, her movements are never staccato – in contrast to the basic positions of the demon (and demoness) – knees wide apart, elbows and arms open, legs in rectangular position, loud laughs, staccato movements – display the idea of a ‘good’ woman rooted in the Cambodian socio-political context, and can be seen in everyday behaviour patterns of Khmer women.

Techniques developed from this art form provide excellent material working with empowerment and education of women not only in Cambodia but also in many other

cultures. In my first workshop with abused children in Phnom Penh, juxtaposing the traditional ‘Cha bon cho’ or basic Cambodian dance technique which is very restrained on one hand, with West African dance on the other provided a wild contrast that the children delighted in. And this energy-paradox works in Merida, Mexico as well, with girls rescued from similar situations.

Martram has currently found a home with The Aseema Trust, Chennai, run by V.R.Devika, Gandhian and Art educator. As she and I can attest, this kind of work is sometimes exhausting – physically, emotionally, indeed on all the five levels. One way to combat stress is to work in tandem with colleagues in India and across the world with many projects of exchange being built between India, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Brazil, France, the UK, Morocco and Indonesia and many more, addressing issues of gender, identity, conflict, poverty, human rights development, and so on. There are so many amazing people across the world doing seminal, life-transforming work in this field. I continuously learn from people living today – from texts, traditions and ideas carried over from the past. There is so much knowledge of human behaviour, interpersonal relationships and superb communication skills embedded in the traditional performing artforms scattered across the world that one has enough work and inspiration to dig for another 1,000 years!

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