

The Dancer and the Backlash

An acclaimed South Asian actor and classical dancer seeks to awaken U.S. audiences to what is happening in Gujarat

BY RANDY GENER

Darpana Performing Arts Group's issue-oriented stage piece, *Sampradayam*, rooted in classical Indian dance, is currently on a U.S. tour.

ALMOST NINE YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE Gujarat riots broke out in late February 2002—one of the worst episodes of Hindu-Muslim violence in the history of independent India. And yet the South Asian theatre artist who bravely took a stand against state government and police complicity in enabling the communal violence to spread finds herself still confronting the deep-rooted hatred of Gujarat's right-wing nationalist forces. "I became enemy number one of the state government and continue being so," says Mallika Sarabhai, the actor, danseuse, choreographer and human-rights activist.

We are speaking on the impressive campus of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts in the northwest Indian city that Sarabhai calls home—Ahmedabad. An oasis of serenity amid the whorl of heat, sweat, dirt, spices and urban development, the academy is a multidisciplinary gem, one of India's oldest performing arts institutions; its verdant grounds, which include a café, gallery and film studio, feel tucked away in this swirling industrial city. Ahmedabad is the former capital of Gujarat, India's only dry state (alcohol is prohibited here) located just south of the border with Pakistan. (Gujarat's capital of Gandhinagar is about 20 miles away.) Replete with mosques, tombs, pilgrim sites and a stunning textile museum (managed by the Sarabhai Foundation), Ahmedabad was once home to Mahatma Gandhi. Sarabhai and I are sitting on the sprung wooden floors of a sun-dappled rehearsal space that flows down into a gorgeous ruby-red amphitheatre, known as Natarani, situated on the banks of the river Sabarmati. Melodies from Indian musical instruments waft in the breeze. Gandhi's

famous ashram beckons a mile away. In two weeks, on Jan. 30, the anniversary of Gandhi's death, Darpana's yearly Festival of Non-Violence through the Arts begins. Slim, short-haired, intense, with kohl-rimmed eyes and a red-glitter bindi on her forehead, Sarabhai has come down the stairs to relate a bit of good news—and some bad news as well.

Thanks to a grant from the Asian Cultural Council, she and her 10-member Ahmedabad-based performing arts troupe are touring to at least nine theatres, arts centers and colleges in cities across the U.S. (including Charlotte, N.C.; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; Cleveland; Boston; Bronxville and Purchase, N.Y.) in October and November to perform a repertory of classical and contemporary dance-theatre works (such as *Nataraja Vandanam*) reflecting the ancient South Indian classical style of Bharata Natyam, as well as issue-oriented stage pieces (*Sampradayam*, *I Rise* and *Kaun*) that reinterpret poetic texts and question social mores hiding behind masks of wealth and power.

Now for the bad news: Ruefully, Sarabhai remarks on the cruel repercussions that shadow her ever since she openly criticized the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party-led state government for failing to stop the 2002 bloodshed. One dramatic remonstrance from the Gujarat government, led by Narendra Modi, is a persistent climate of fear and self-censorship in the arts, Sarabhai says. At one point, Modi tried to halt Sarabhai's television project dealing with development issues (women's empowerment, health, water and rural problems), because as a producer of TV programming Darpana

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production begins when Shepherd's office drone finds an old paperback copy of *Gatsby* and starts reading it aloud, not stopping until the lives of Daisy and Tom Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, Jordan Baker and Nick Carraway reach their tragic culmination. Every descriptive passage, every evocative detail, is uttered verbatim.

The book soon exerts a strange force on the reader's fellow employees (there are 13 performers in all). Small coincidences crop up and incidents in the novel seem to be mirroring the action in the office. Before long, his fellow workers begin inhabiting the characters from the novel's glittering world, and everyday objects become props in the story. A desk chair serves as Gatsby's roadster. Liquor bottles materialize from file cabinets during a wild party scene. Yet every so often, the reality of office life reasserts itself. Someone turns on an overhead fluorescent light or delivers a stack of papers.

The staging, in a unique way, echoes the theme of the novel. "One of the central ideas of the book is that a person can make this magnificent identity out of nothing and can overcome where they came from in some

way. However, the elements of who you really are keep pulling you back," reasons Shepherd. "That friction between the office reality and the reality being described is where the creative juice comes from."

AFTER AN INVITE-ONLY WORKSHOP of *GATZ* at the Performing Garage in 2005 became a word-of-mouth sensation, the Fitzgerald estate shut it down, and the show quickly acquired a reputation as an underground cult event. Since then, the company has performed *GATZ* all over the world, but has waited more than five years to bring the production home to New York (due in part to another *Gatsby* adaptation that was aiming for Broadway).

Shepherd has been with *GATZ* every step of the way, having now memorized the entire novel. Indeed, the actor seems to have a knack for extreme feats of physical and mental stamina (evidenced in his background as both a former computer programmer and an avid student of tae kwon do). Even before he tackled *GATZ* and *Hamlet*, Shepherd staged a one-man version of *Macbeth* in 1994, in which he played every single role. While Shepherd

can't exactly pinpoint why he's drawn to these kinds of Olympian acting challenges, he doesn't deny their appeal.

"Maybe it's a bit of a safety net," he muses. "Even if [audiences] think the acting is mediocre, if it's coupled with some sort of superhuman feat, they have to admit that, you know, you *did* read that entire book for seven hours. Or you *did* do *Macbeth*—all by yourself. So I do gravitate toward those things where people go, 'How did he *do* that?'"

As the marathon evening of *GATZ* draws to a close, Shepherd says that emotions in the theatre are always at a boiling point because of the cumulative power of the story. "There's a shared exhaustion. Everybody is tired, both actors and the audience, but also everybody has that same thrill that we're coming into the beautiful home stretch. And it's my job to deliver the words the best I can. If it doesn't work, it's not Fitzgerald's fault, it's not the director's fault. This is for me to do—and I love to do it." ❑

Arts reporter Christopher Wallenberg is a frequent contributor to this magazine.

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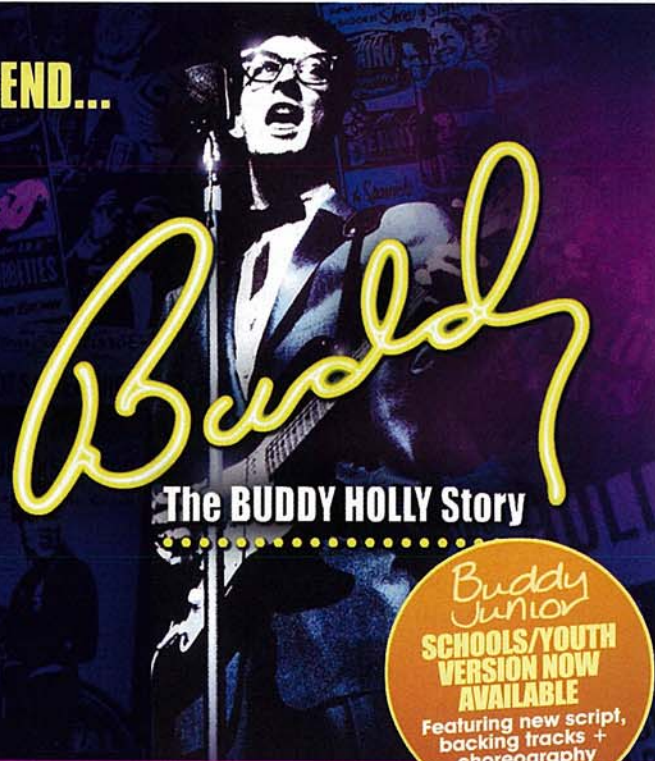
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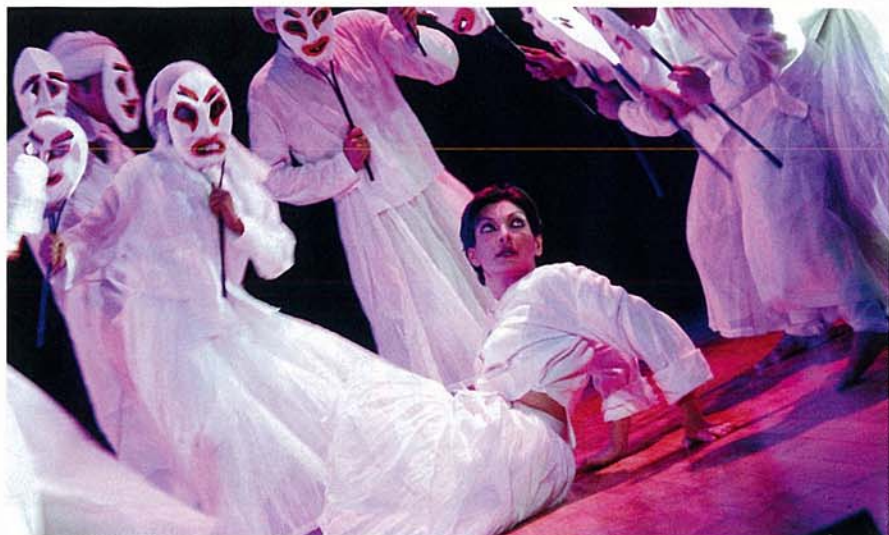
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cide in my home state. Civil society joined in the rampage and brutality. A 10-year-effort at building hatred toward this community paid rich dividends for the right-wing fundamentalists. People were silenced and became accomplices in this attempt at ethnic cleansing.” Taking up the cause of the victims of the mass upheaval—which independent human-rights observers have argued meets the legal definition of a genocide—Sarabhai filed (along with other petitioners) a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India accusing the police and the state’s chief minister, Modi, of aiding and abetting (if not demonstrably sponsoring) the politically motivated attacks on minorities in Gujarat.

Many Gujarati elites and fundamentalists turned against Sarabhai. They attacked her (and still do) as an “anti-nationalist,” “a traitor” and “a whore for the Muslims.” In 2003, the state brought trumped-up charges against her, false accusations of trafficking in illegal immigrants to the U.S., which curtailed her freedom to travel outside Gujarat without the court’s permission. Though for a brief time she went into hiding, she felt emboldened by the support she received



Mallika Sarabhai in *India: Then, Now, Forever*.

from human-rights activists and artists from abroad, who remember her best on film and in theatrical memories as the exquisite long-haired beauty who played the feisty Draupadi in Peter Brook’s Theatre of Nations epic *The Mahabharata*. Now 57 years old, Sarabhai was exonerated in 2004 by the Supreme Court, which also censured Narendra Modi as “a

modern Nero” who had stood by while the city burned. A year later, the U.S. revoked Modi’s visa on the grounds that he was responsible for “severe violations of religious freedom.”

The nature of the communal riots remains politically controversial in India. A dynamic politician whose identity-based appeal issues from the philosophy of Hindutva

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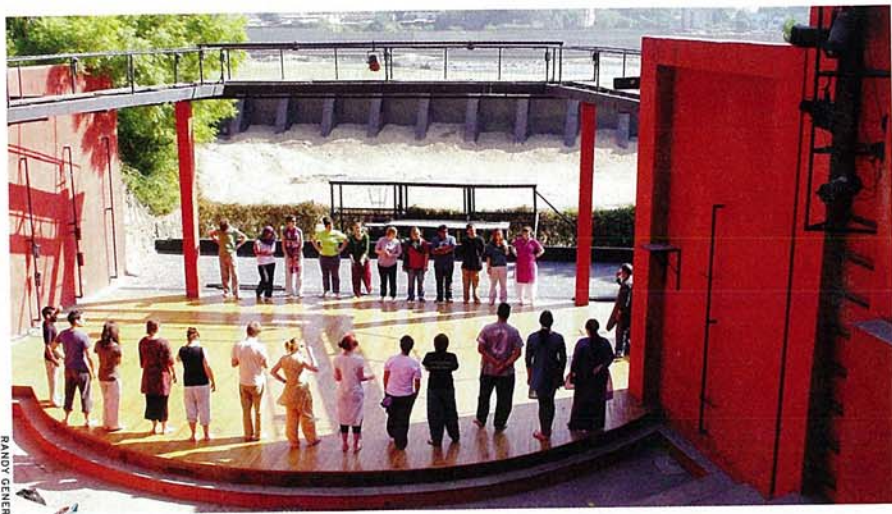


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A wall, still in construction, obstructs a view of the river Sabarmati from the Natarani stage.

Communications did not first consult with the state. Moreover, as part of a large-scale effort to develop the Sabarmati riverfront, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation proposed in 2006 to build its own theatre 500 meters from Natarani, Darpana's 450-seat venue, near enough to cause worries. Local critics viewed it as yet another attempt by the state government to teach Sarabhai a lesson, this time by directly undermining her theatrical activities. "Let there be more culture in Ahmedabad," Sarabhai told the *Indian Express*. "But why right next to Natarani?"

The proposal to build a rival amphitheatre was dropped, but already there is another threat: "See that Berlin Wall?" Sarabhai says, pointing to a looming cement wall that now obstructs a theatregoer's once-striking view of the river from Natarani's Greek-style seating. "The city of Ahmedabad is building that wall between our beautiful theatre and the river," she says. "That wall stands many feet high, 20 feet from the back of the stage. On top of that wall there is going to be a highway linking the south to the north of the city, parallel to the one that already exists—therefore not really necessary. I am trying to work with architects and sound engineers. I'd like to create a bubble over the theatre to make it sound-proof and performable but still open to nature."

For Sarabhai, touring abroad and in major Indian cities outside Gujarat is a financial and artistic necessity, a chance to renew national and international ties, as well as a peripatetic strategy of grass-roots advocacy. "Darpana," she says, "desperately needs to be put on a sound financial footing that does not depend on my performing to make it run. No arts institution can run like that. Darpana has been funded primarily through

fees I generate as a 'star' performer. That is a terrible burden on me, but it is also a very dire situation for Darpana, which is neither funded nor government-aided." In India, Sarabhai adds, "funding comes with strings attached, and we want our intellectual independence to be able to comment on anything we want." Since 2002, Sarabhai says corporate sponsorship has dried up. "If a corporate type is seen

coming in for a meeting," she continues, "that company's president receives a phone call reminding them that they do need government permissions to continue operating in the state. End of conversation."

Darpana lost every last rupee of sponsorship overnight when Sarabhai became a thorn-in-the-side of the state's rightwing nationalist leaders. Her public criticism of the Modi government's role in Gujarat's sectarian riots came after the 2002 cycle of retaliatory violence, which erupted after a train ferrying Hindus was set on fire, allegedly by Muslims, in a town called Godhra, killing 59 people on board and prompting Hindu mob attacks on Muslims across the state. The mobs stabbed, raped and set their victims on fire; they burned homes and businesses. According to the *Times of India*, 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed; another 2,500 were injured; more than 150,000 Muslims were displaced to relief camps. Unofficial estimates put the death toll as high as 2,000.

Sarabhai stated in a first-person essay published in the November '04 edition of this magazine: "There was a state-sponsored and government-encouraged anti-Muslim geno-

"Language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity." —Gustav Flaubert



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point of view. He stripped me of false vanity and modesty. Everything I've done since, in the field of performance, took root from those years of having to fight for my right to say what was right." From then on, in such sacrilegious plays as *Sita's Daughters*, a feminist take on the model Hindu wife of the *Ramayana*; *In Search of the Goddess*, in which she denounced as liars those who burn widows at their dead husband's funeral pyre; and *Shakti—The Power of Women*, in which she debunked male clichés of Indian womanhood, Sarabhai reappraised all sorts of Indian mythological, historical and modern female figures to show how they refused to accept an oppressive system.

Mallika Sarabhai's current innovation is to completely blur the boundaries of media genres and then to apply that hybrid aesthetic onto social developmental projects. She acts. She dances. She choreographs. She makes

films. She anchors TV shows. She edits and publishes books. She can paint Ganesha with her dancing feet (a portrait that former president Bill Clinton begged to keep). What binds them all is a stubborn desire to marry art with social-justice work. Darpana has partnered with the United Nations Children's Fund and received support from the philanthropic foundation ArtVenture to train what she calls "actor-activists" for a host of developmental projects, including the UNICEF Peer Educators Project, which uses theatre to educate and counsel Gujaratis about the importance of using iodized salt, registering births and maintaining personal hygiene in poor, rural villages. Darpana has recently embarked on a three-year project with the Boston University School of Public Health, a controlled experiment of art intervention on the diseases related to diarrhea.

Sarabhai has justly merited praise: In

2009, organizers of the World Economic Forum in Davos honored her with a Crystal Award for her work toward promoting global peace through arts and culture. In 2005, PeaceWomen Across the Globe included her among 1,000 women whom this Switzerland-based group collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Sarabhai's latest show is *Ramkali*, a Hindi reinterpretation of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, staged by Delhi-based theatre director Arvind Gaur. In this Darpana co-production with Gaur's Asmita Theatre Group, Sarabhai plays the eponymous double role of Ramkali, patterned after Brecht's prostitute, Shen Teh, who welcomes the gods despite her own poverty, is rewarded with money and with the advice to be good and do the right thing, but is cruelly left on her own to fend for herself. To protect herself in a world of corruption and exploitation, an Ahmedabad where honesty is a virtue that cannot survive, Ramkali creates a coarse male alter-ego who eventually dominates. Not coincidentally, *Ramkali* is festooned with songs and dances that mock the shoddiness of the current system, references to allegations of corruption and mismanagement related to India's preparations to host the Commonwealth Games (starting this month, if the athletes are lucky), and pointed allusions to Sarabhai's Gujarat foe, Narendra Modi.

"*Ramkali* very pointedly looks at pure, unadulterated greed," Sarabhai says. "You don't look to the gods [read: right-wing politicians] for solutions. Fear translates into violence. Politicians try to frighten the nation with cries of impending terrorist attacks, creating a hate and fear psychosis."

In 2011, Ahmedabad turns 600 years old. Darpana is planning a city-wide arts celebration for its InterArt festival (full name: Vikram Sarabhai International Arts Festival) at the end of December this year. "More people in the Gujarati mainstream accept me today than they did before," says Sarabhai, a firebrand with a myriad of avatars, all striving to channel her social activism. "More people have seen things from my point of view. I'm not trying to give a bad name to Gujarat. My work is to get people to see the issues, even if seeing makes them uncomfortable." ❏

Randy Gener received an Evan Shipley Hook educational grant from the Foundation of the American Theatre Critics Association to support his travel to India.

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(or Hinduness), Modi has publicly dismissed attempts at renewed focus on what role he might have played in the riots. Now serving a third term in office, he is viewed as a force of prosperity, new investment and security—a vanguard for a “vibrant Gujarat” (as dubbed by the state government’s biennial global investors’ summit). For cultural tourists, Gujarat is an amazing adventure. More important, there has not been a single incident of sectarian violence in Gujarat since the 2002 riots.

But while the ghosts of this city’s savage past refuses to leave Modi’s side, Sarabhai, too, has remained a magnet for abusive epithets—attacks that continued when she decided to run in the 2009 Lok Sabha (lower house) elections as an independent candidate from Gandhinagar to challenge the might of BJP leader LK Advani. She lost. Running for office, she says, “has given me a much deeper understanding of the rot in the system.” As for how she’s perceived among Gujarat’s various religious communities, Sarabhai says, with a smile, “Hindus think I’m pro-Muslim. The Muslims think I’m pro-minorities. I think I’m pro-anybody who’s getting a raw deal.”

IN INDIA, THE SARABHAI NAME IS

synonymous with dance, dance history and its promotion. Sarabhai’s parents founded the Darpana Academy in 1949. At the time, South Indian classical dance and music, based in Carnatic music and languages, were alien to and deeply misunderstood by the local Gujarati. The notion of Gujarati girls from decent families learning classical dance and taking it up as a career was deemed too unconventional. In teaching Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi and Kathakali in Ahmedabad, Darpana literally created an appreciative audience for these dance forms and has been widely imitated. Today the Sarabhais represent three generations of aristocratic lineage. At the academy, I watch Sarabhai’s 26-year-old son, Revanta, spinning in place on his bare feet in front of a flank of elderly musicians on rugs. It is a rare sight to behold: a bona-fide *male* Bharata Natyam dancer. The lanky young man in black tracks and yellow kurta was tuning up for his portrayal of Lord Shiva the following weekend opposite his mother’s tough-minded Draupadi in an intricate piece about a dance competition between the two Hindi gods.

Mallika Sarabhai’s father was the affluent physicist Vikram Sarabhai, the father of India’s space program. Her mother, the celebrated Bharata Natyam dancer Mrinalini



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Mallika Sarabhai in *Nataraja Vandanam*.

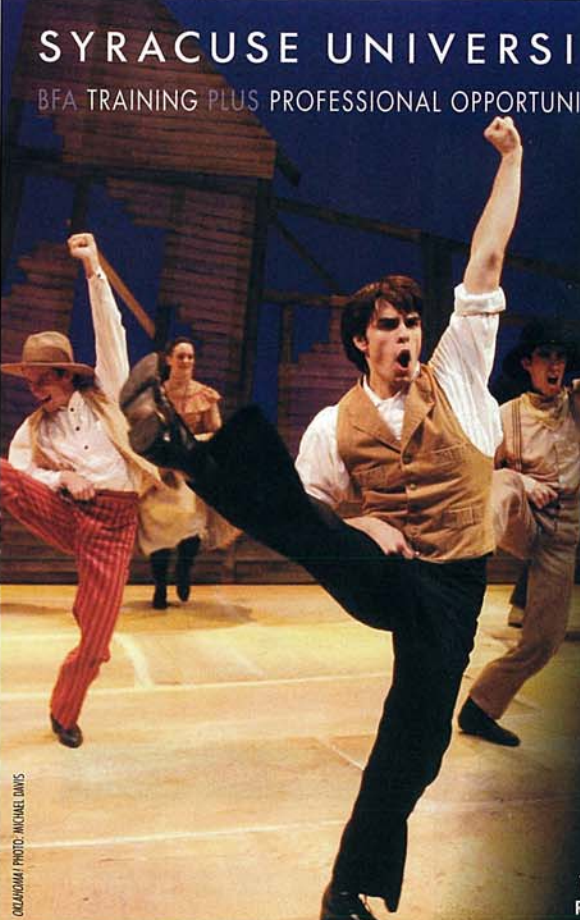
Sarabhai, who to this day writes politically engaged plays and dance-dramas, altered the course of Indian dance. In a 40-minute 1963 piece called *Memory*, about the psychological anguish of a woman driven to suicide because of her family’s inability to pay her dowry, Mrinalini Sarabhai became

the first classical Indian danseuse to use the syllabic structures of Bharata Natyam (called in Dravidian languages *sollukattu*, because the syllables correspond to a garland of musical notes) to convey emotion-laden insights into social issues like women’s rights and pollution. This innovation was modern and daring, because these bundles of *sollukattu* have been used for more than a thousand years only for devotional prayers to the gods. The finance minister of India’s parliament, who saw *Memory*, set up a committee to investigate dowry deaths—the first of its kind—and the central government followed suit.

This incident, which Mallika Sarabhai witnessed as a child, introduced her to the notion of dance as an instrument for confronting social injustice. Five years of working with Peter Brook, and living with her strong-willed interpretation of *Shakti* (sacred force) through the character of Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*, sealed the deal. “My first two years working with Brook were perhaps the unhappiest of my life,” Sarabhai recalls. “Yet he forced me into introspection, into learning how to garner all my intellectual faculties to make a winning defense of my

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