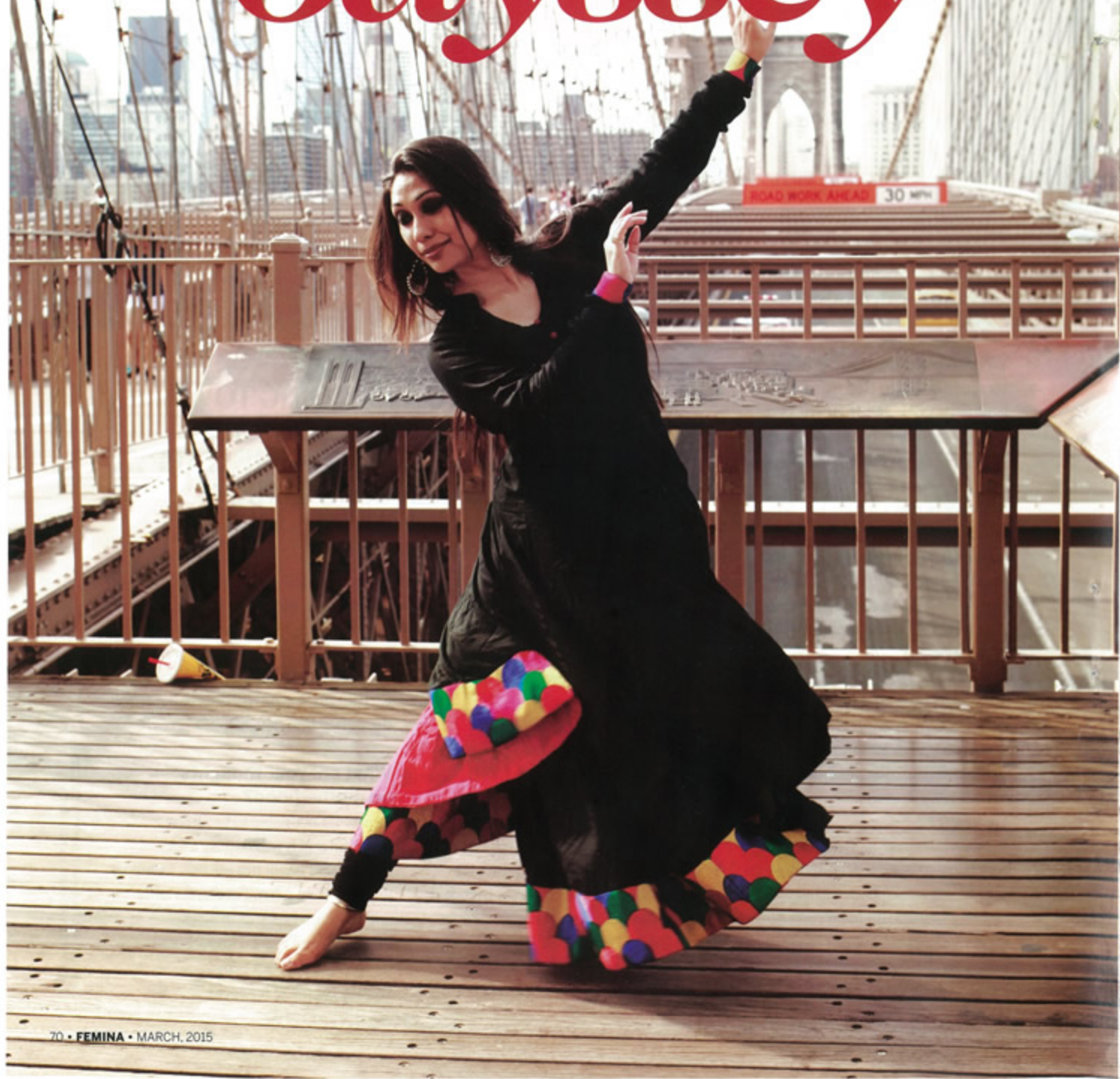


HEROES *real women*

The dance odyssey





The world is a stage for Kathak danseuse Sanjukta Sinha, who, with her classical yet contemporary dance styles wishes to bridge the gap between the old and the new. Being one of the leading dancers of her generation, she intends to invite the youth to take up classical dance forms in a more serious way, she tells **Forum Chhaya-Pathak**

You know your Sunday afternoon is put to good use when you get to interview a beautiful Kathak danseuse who has made a mark internationally. It is a treat to watch Sanjukta Sinha perform gracefully as her hands sway in the air and her lean body swirls swiftly to the classical-fusion music as her kohl-eyes express more than words.

As I reach Kadamb, the school for dance and music, set up by Kathak exponent Kumudini Lakhia, I am taken in by the calmness of the noon and the quaint architecture of the 47-year old building. It makes the perfect backdrop for my meeting with this Bengali beauty, born and brought up in Lucknow and who has now made Ahmedabad her home. A perfect example of multiculturalism herself, Sanjukta's efforts to contemporise the classical dance to appeal to the audience globally is evident in her costumes, style, techniques, movements and music. "The idea of experimenting and newness promises growth;

it pumps in freshness to the ancient, traditional style making it more appealing to the dance connoisseurs across the globe," reveals Sanjukta, who describes dance as *joie de vivre!*

FOLLOWING TRADITION

Sanjukta's cultural inclination and liking for different forms of art was evident since childhood. She was barely seven-years old when her mother—who was a Bharatnatyam dancer herself—enrolled her into a month-long dance workshop with Pt Birju Maharaj. "All my batch-mates were 20-year-olds, making me the youngest of the lot. However, I was also the brightest of them all, and soon caught the attention of my Guru," says Sanjukta reminiscing about her first tryst with Kathak. Her quick grasping power and flexible movements made her eligible to become the disciple of Pt Arjun Mishra, (disciple of Pt Birju Maharaj) at the Kathak Kendra, Lucknow. At 10, this was a huge achievement in the world of Kathak. This gave way to an eight-year long dance penance, >

with Guru-Shishya parampara in practice. "It was the toughest period of my life. Besides juggling between my academic studies and dance, I spent years without friends and outdoor games. I remember going to the academy directly from the school, and dancing in school uniform. There was a time when I used to carry two to three tiffin-boxes as I had no time to come home for lunch. And no matter how tired you are, you cannot say 'No' to your guru," says Sanjukta who started performing solo from the age of 12 onwards.

Sanjukta, as a child was brought up in a modern way, in an open-minded family. So, to adhere to strict norms and following traditions of the *guru-shishya parampara*, where she was denied the right to question, was initially very tough for her. As an artist, she longed for freedom of expression, in words as well as dance movements.

THE QUEST

The search for freedom and a learned Guru brought her to Ahmedabad, to Kumudini Lakhia, or Kumiben as she fondly calls her. "She is the best thing that happened to me, as she groomed me in more ways than one, much beyond dance, movements and techniques; she groomed me into a wonderful human being," praises Sanjukta.

"Guru-shishya parampara preaches about respecting your guru by sitting on the floor, a level lower than your guru. But Kumiben taught me to respect my spine as a dancer, and sit on the chair, even when she was around. She taught me the importance of the biggest relation between my body and soul. And most of all, she gave me the freedom to question whenever I was in doubt." After nine years under her mentor's guidance and having given innumerable group performances, Sanjukta has now graduated to performing solo.

ON THE WORLD PLATFORM

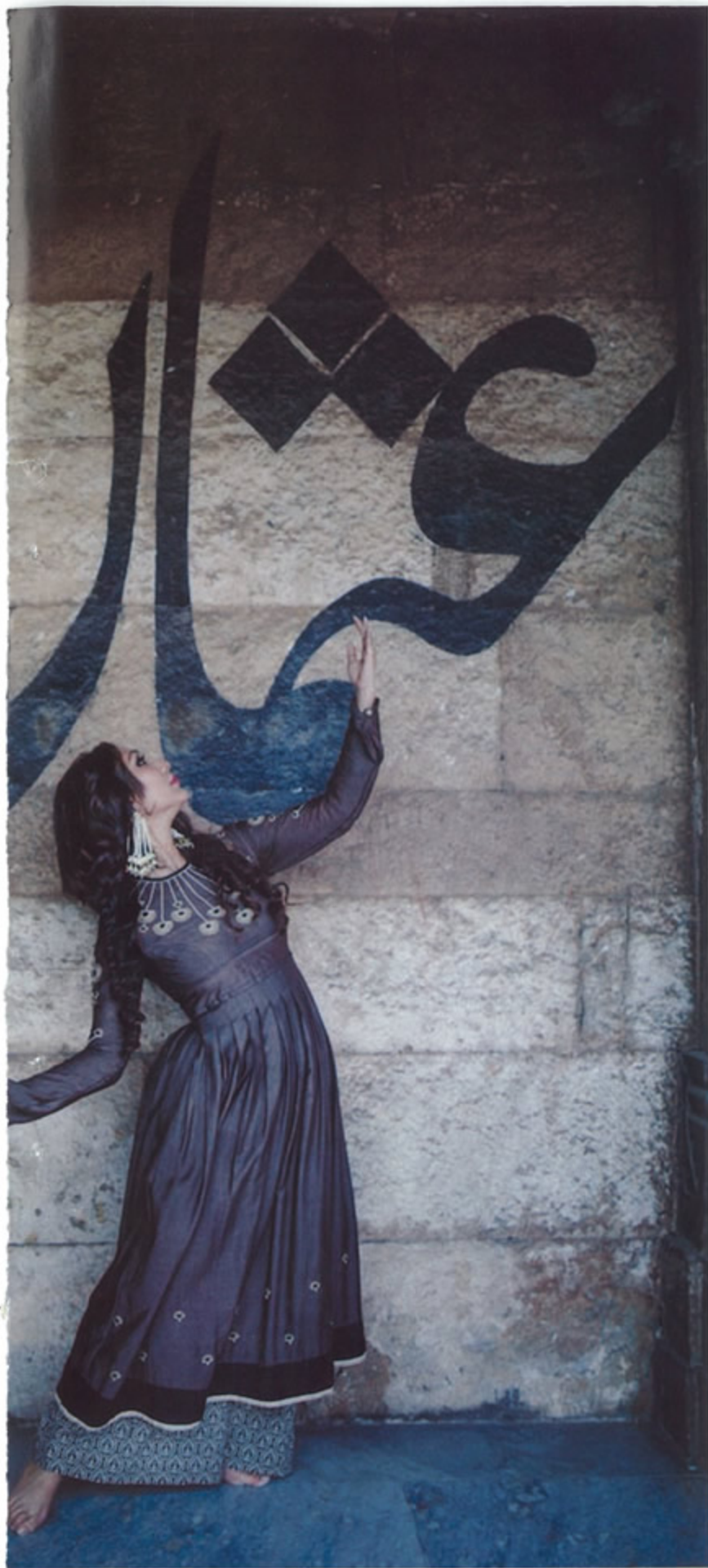
Besides India, she has been travelling across the globe, in an attempt to get people across the world to appreciate classical dance. Sanjukta has performed at all major cities—be it London, Paris or New York. Of late, she has been busy touring the world and showcasing her work in

Japan, Rome, Turin, Milan and Belgium. Last year, she was invited by the Indo-American Arts Council to perform at the Erasing Border Festival, New York, USA. Here, she performed by the banks of the Hudson with The Statue of Liberty as the backdrop. "It was an honour to represent India at a festival, which was an initiative to promote Indian classical dance forms." Sanjukta presented Gati Pravah, Tarana and Shiv Tandav, which earned her rave reviews in *The New York Times*. Going down the memory lane, she holds the performance at the Belgium Dance Festival (2011) close to her heart. "The dance was curated by the renowned dancer Akram Khan, and I was the youngest among prominent internationally-acclaimed dancers there," she says.

One more performance, which is special to Sanjukta, is the group performance at the India Show in Lahore, Pakistan (2014). Artistes from Kadamb were invited by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, to perform at this international event. "On reaching there, we realised that people there (in Pakistan) are very similar to us, and we felt as if we were performing in our homeland," says Sanjukta.

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BIG ASPIRATIONS

For Sanjukta, dance is the love of her life, and she dances because it makes her feel complete. She also aspires to inspire and encourage the youth of today to take up classical and contemporary dance more seriously. Talking about her own experience, she says, "There have been instances when my friends have chosen a jazz concert or a ballet over classical dance. Today's generation does not want to do something that has been here since ages. The talented lot is keen to experiment by introducing fresh elements to age-old forms of art. So, to attract the youth and appeal to the masses, we need to work on the presentation and packaging of the existing dance forms. Classical and contemporary, both are excellent in their own ways. I want to bridge the gap between the two and want them to be on one platform."

She has started teaching Kathak to over 150 young dance enthusiasts in Japan and Italy. According to her, Kathak, like yoga, is much more appreciated internationally than in India. Talking about her teaching experience she says, "Japanese students are very focused, while students in Italy are enthusiastic about all things Indian. So much so, that they got a small photo of Goddess Saraswati and made sure they bow down before the deity before beginning the dance session."

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

With her first ever solo production coming up later this year, she is putting in more hours and efforts for rehearsals. The 50-minute dance piece will be choreographed by Padma Bhushan awardee Kumudini Lakhia, Miriam Petertz, a Sufi contemporary dancer, and Sanjukta's dance partner Akash Odedra, who resides in England. "A lot of thought process and expertise is being put in for my first ever solo production. It will premier in India in October, and later will be showcased world over," Sanjukta says excitedly. On a parting note, she expresses gratitude for the guidance and teachings of Kumiben. "I treasure her words, and wish to continue the legacy of her work." 

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEVANSH ZAVERI