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Watch Astad Deboo perform to Bulleh Shah's poetry

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Updated: Dec 04, 2016 11:36 IST



Danish Raza
Hindustan Times



Astad Deboo is considered one of the greatest contemporary dancers in the country. (Amit Kumar)

“Maati kudam karendeey jaar,

Vaah vaah maati de gulzaar;

Maati ghora maati jora, maati daa aswaar,

Maati maati nu dorave, maati daa chankaar.

“The soil is in ferment, O friend

Behold the diversity.

The soil is the horse, so is the rider

The soil chases the soil, and we hear the clanging of soil

“Maati kudam karendee yaar,

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“The soil is in ferment, O friend

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These words from Sufi poet Hazrat Bulleh Shah's poem Maati (Soil) are the inspiration for Eternal Embrace, Astad Deboo's solo performance to be premiered in India marking the closing of the three-day Natya Ballet Dance Festival. 69-year-old Deboo, one of the country's best-known contemporary dancers, has collaborated with Japanese music composer Yukio Tsuji for the performance that explores the tensions between annihilation and infinity, the ephemeral and the material world.

Last year, the Metropolitan Museum (Islamic Wing), New York, asked Deboo to do a piece which had a Sufi slant to it. Deboo's shortlisted a few of Bulleh Shah's poems. Maati was chosen from that collection. The name was changed to Eternal Embrace because “The cycle of life and death is inevitable. We have to go back to the soil,” said Deboo.

Astad Deboo and Yukio have been working together for the last two years. “There was a lot of back and forth on the music when we came on board for Maati. For the performance in Delhi, we rehearsed in New York and then in Mumbai. It took us around a month to get it right,” he said.

Deboo, considered a pioneer of Indian contemporary dance, began learning Kathak at the age of six. His hunger to learn different dance forms made him leave Bombay for New York in 1969 with a backpack. “There was no Internet or Google. Everything was learned first-hand. I embarked on the journey with a *dekha jayega* attitude,” recounts Deboo who went on to learn the Martha Graham modern dance technique at the London School of Contemporary Dance. He also trained with Pina Bausch in Germany's famous Wuppertal Dance Company, Germany, and with Alison Becker Chase of the Pilobolus Dance Company in America. “I treat each day, each experience and each meeting as a gift,” he says.

All the while, his gut feeling told him what to learn and what to leave out. “I was clear that if my learning in a class or session was zero, I wouldn't go there again. There is no use learning a thousand odd techniques if it is not visible in your performance,” he says.

The initial years after his return to India were tumultuous. He said a majority of people in the dance fraternity considered him *achhoot* (untouchable) as his technique was different from traditional Indian dance forms. “I struggled for 10 years. They believed that I was corrupting the traditional form. I got very few platforms to showcase what I had to offer. Thanks to some intellectual friends in Bombay and the media at large who stood for me, I managed,” he says.

He said society in general and artists in particular are more accepting now than when he was trying to get acknowledged. "Ma doors are open now."

Deboo wishes people's current understanding of contemporary dance was more nuanced and deep. "The use of the word contemporary is blasphemous. People across age groups tell me they are learning contemporary. When I ask them contemporary mein kya? They have no answer. They are just a little agile and flexible. What they offer is pure entertainment with no depth," says.

The Natya Ballet Dance Festival is the first-ever dance festival conducted by the Natya Ballet Centre (NBC), a dance institution in the national capital, established in 1960.

The festival includes performances, talks, lecture demonstrations and film screenings showcasing established artists as well as ancient dance forms.

There has been a lot of discourse on classic and contemporary dance forms but we have neglected the traditional or the non-institutionalised ones. Through the festival, we wish to make up for this loss," says Nikita Maheshwary, NBC's creative director.

Maheshwary's idea of contemporary is something that is relevant today's urban and rural society today. "It needs to come from the root but at the same time it needs to have the breathing space to develop its own identity. Many times, traditional practices do not allow this," she says.

What: Eternal Embrace, a performance by Astad Deboo Dance Foundation

When: 7:00- 8:00 PM, December 3

Where: Meghdoot theatre, Sangeet Natak Akademi , Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, Mandi House

Entry: Free

Call: 7042454801

NATYA BALLET DANCE FESTIVAL (DAY THREE)

10.30 - 11.50am

Discussion

Pioneers of Indian Dance: Moderated by Ashish Mohan Khokar

Panelists: Anita Ratnam and Lubna Marium

12.00 - 1.00 pm

Talk

Negotiating Bangladeshi Identity Through Dance

By Lubna Marium

2.30 - 3.30 pm

Lecture demonstration

Ottanthullal- Moderated by Ashish Mohan Khokar

Performance: Suresh Kaliyath

3.40 - 4.40 pm

Lecture demonstration

Tibetan Opera

Moderated and performed by Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts

4.50 - 6.10 pm

Talk

Tracing the contemporary- Chandralekha and Beyond

By Sadanand Menon

7.00 - 8.00 pm

Performance

Eternal Embrace

By Astad Deboo Dance Foundation

Venue for all events: **Meghdoot, Sangeet Natak Akademi**

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