

FROM DANCE TO DIVERSITY

Shereen Saif

Dance Theatre is young in the Emirates, having been seeded in the 70s it is said, with the arrival of expatriates in the region. Today, theatre is practiced in a vibrant space of fusion and interaction with several cultures. Even as there are constraints of what is culturally and politically appropriate, issues of censorship and religious approbation, fortunately, there is a potential to grow due to the support of government organisations that are keen on nurturing the arts. Shereen Saif is one such expatriate in Dubai. Born in 1979 in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, she is a Dubai-bred Indian born artist with a practice that spans dance, theatre, storytelling, voice acting and visual arts. A founding member of 'Star Too' — Dubai's first experimental theatre project, she was also an artist-collaborator in 'Trance-Forms', an initiative of the Emirati-French Cultural Programme: Dialogue with the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Having participated in the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship's [SEAF] 8th Cohort, 2021, and as she sees herself as a traditional-contemporist, Shereen Saif shares with us her multi-disciplinary experience.

"We can't always choose the music life plays for us, but we can choose how we dance to it." — Anonymous

"Deeply rooted in the Indian ethos my art practice seeks the sacred in the mundane and the mundane in the sacred. The seeds for this were sown in my formative years in the laid-back emirate of Ras al Khaimah. I was 10 when my mother enrolled me in one of the only Bharatanatyam classes available there back in the late 80s. Later, in my 20s and 30s I started to spend considerable time in India and came under the tutelage of some of the finest artists in Mohiniyattam and Kathak.

Even as dance became my default language of expression, I chose to explore theatre because classical dance as a medium was not enough for me to express my thoughts in full. This is what led me to theatre over a decade ago, training in both Western and Indian theatre methods from Stanislavski to Navarasa Saadhana. Today, situated in the meeting grounds of the East and West — I am perhaps, a by-product of one who was raised as a third culture kid.

In 2011, I came to be associated with 'Star Too', the UAE's first experimental theatre project. Between 2011-

2014, we worked on devising original, multi-disciplinary, multi-media theatre productions. This sparked an interest in exploring installation art, and in 2014, I created my first immersive video installation 'The Unmanifested' at Dubai Culture's SIKKA Art Fair in collaboration with filmmaker Swapna Kurup. Spurred on by this experience, over the last seven years I have been creating work that combines movement, material, text, music, video art and technology.

When I started out as an artist here, there were very few opportunities to see art let alone participate. And the reason for that is that even as the UAE turns 50 this year, it is a young country compared to the rest of the world. For the major part of its history, the UAE has focused on economic development and it is only in the last 10-15 years that the arts scene started to bloom as a result of both individual and institutional efforts. Today the home-grown performing and visual art scene is vibrant, multi-cultural and collaborative and artists have a lot more choice. There is also more space for creative explorations that push the





Above: A scene from 'Amorphous' 2016. SIKKA Art Fair. Dubai. Below: The Bird Tree from Ashputtel, 2020
Image courtesy: The Artist

envelope and challenge traditional thinking. It is an exciting time to be here as things start to take off.

In a journey that began with classical dance and expanded into theatre, voice acting, visual arts and storytelling, I sometimes wonder where I find myself. The answer is all of the above. Having a wide range of interests, experimenting and changing course now and then has been essential to finding my hybrid language as an artist. In the eternal generalist versus specialist debate, I veer towards the former.

I am drawn to craft as much as I am drawn to technology. My aesthetics embrace both the classical and contemporary. If I were to give my artistic practice a label, I would say I am a traditional “contemporist”. My intention lies in preserving the legacy of the past and challenging the notions of the present.”



Shereen Saif [b. 1979, in Kerala] is a Dubai-bred Indian born artist with a practice that spans dance, theatre, storytelling, voice acting and visual arts. Her multi-disciplinary approach to arts has resulted in creative collaborations that combine movement, theatre, music, video art and technology. Most notable include ['Silent Conversations' 2019], her photo-video-AR installation inspired from her association with the Deaf community in the UAE, her avant-garde 'Virtual Reality' work with conceptual artist Patrick Lichty ['We Are' 2018], dance video installations in collaboration with film maker Swapna Kurup ['The Unmanifested' 2014, 'Amorphous' 2016] and her collaboration with iconic American painter and video artist Judy Rifka ['INTERactive' 2016]. Shereen is a founding member of Star Too — Dubai's first experimental theatre project and was an artist collaborator in Trance-Forms, an initiative of the Emirati-French Cultural Programme: Dialogue with the Louvre Abu Dhabi. She was also part of the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship's [SEAF] 8th Cohort [2021].



Re-Birth, 2022 [Save Nature Series]. Wall mural in black ink. 120 x 120 in. By doodle artist Sijin Gopinathan, Dubai, UAE.

Several plant species depend on birds to pollinate flowers, spread seed and eat pests. The loss of plant species could change our ecosystem. According to statistics, several million birds die every year. Save our birds! Save nature!

With compliments from a Well-wisher