

Perfect Pair

by Luz Maria Martinez

Her eyes gaze at you and you can not help but gaze back. You follow her every move, every flick of her finger, every sway of her arm, every turn of her graceful neck. She dances and you cannot help but watch, riveted, hypnotized by her movements as much as by the music.

Then there is another dancer—as graceful and as confident but with a wisdom far beyond the first dancer’s age. She moves and you feel her pride. She moves and you feel her dignity. She moves and you sense her spirit.

Two women, two generations, dancing life on stage. Tehreema and Indu Mitha.

Tehreema and Indu Mitha are not just dancing peers, although as partners they complement each other perfectly. They are a mother-and-daughter team and their personal knowledge of each other is perhaps one of the factors that gives their performance its distinct character.

In the beginning, it was Indu who was teaching daughter Tehreema the basics. Today, it is Tehreema who is making mother Indu dance.

An army officer’s wife, Indu moved from one military post to another while her children were growing. Wherever they were, Indu would always start dancing classes for girls who flocked to her as soon as they learned that she was a dance teacher. “I would have about eight little girls. Tehreema would be among girls whose ages ranged from seven to 15 at that time. When I examined them at the end of the year, I would always have trouble cutting marks from Tehreema, both in the theoretical and the practical. It was really then that I realized how very talented she was. I thought Tehreema was only having fun.”

“Everywhere we went, because it was a new place, my mother would start from ABC,” remembers Tehreema. “Because I had to go through it again and again, my

Sharing center stage.



In Pakistan, dance is a major social issue. Tehreema says "it is not dancing per se that is frowned upon, but dancing by women."

basics became very strong." As she grew older, Tehreema continued to learn how to dance and Indu never stopped her. When Tehreema went on a visit to India, Indu encouraged her to learn dance there also. Later, Tehreema also learned classical singing which gave her a background to the music that goes with the dance. Indu is glad that Tehreema had taken up music in addition to dance. "I think that her music education helps her, gives her some confidence in dealing with musicians."

But while Tehreema continued to learn to dance, she did not think of becoming a professional dancer until 1990. In Pakistani tradition, one is not considered a serious dancer until she has given a solo performance, which Tehreema gave in 1986. In 1990, Tehreema felt she wanted to just dance and see if it could support her financially. "I've always been interested in so many things," says Tehreema. "I've done drama, I've done music, I've

done painting and I love to teach, whether it's with children or adults. But it came to a point when I said to myself that I can't be a jack of all trades. If I'm to excel in something, I would have to choose one field where perhaps I can incorporate everything else. But that decision didn't come consciously. It just started happening. I became more and more involved in dancing because I'm happiest when I'm dancing and I'm content to let everything else take second place."

But Tehreema's passion for dance did not easily find expression in Pakistan. Even Indu, who had been very supportive, was also apprehensive at first. "When she wanted to take up dance professionally, her father and I were anxious. Tehreema was unmarried then and she would have to provide for herself because we would not be able to provide for her. We were afraid that she would not be able to live on it. But I think she did prove to herself that she can."

Apart from the financial uncertainty, dance in Pakistan it is equated with prostitution. Like in many Asian countries, Pakistani women are taught to sit with their knees together, to keep their heads down and to be polite. Tehreema says "there's no physical activity for girls. They are not encouraged to do anything physical to express their inner selves."

In Pakistan, dance is a major social issue. Tehreema says "it is not dancing per se that is frowned upon, but **dancing by women**. That is why all these years, I really have not been able to perform on our own stages under the title 'Dance.' My performances have been mainly at foreign halls owned by foreign embassies like the International School in Islamabad, which is considered foreign ground. This is why for me, just to exist in Pakistan as a woman dancer is a cause, and to have a group of dance 'students who who will stick to it will be a major miracle."

But Pakistani girls have not always been prevented from dancing, at least not during Indu's childhood. "During my childhood one could learn and there was encouragement for learning to dance. Girls of the educated class were expected to have some cultural interests: singing, or playing an instrument, or dancing."

Still, Indu concedes that dancing for girls was only tolerated as a hobby. "My own family would have been perfectly happy for me to keep it as a hobby, to dance as an amateur in public performances, which I did when I was still in my parents' home. I think perhaps my decision to dance was a little peculiar for my own family. Because

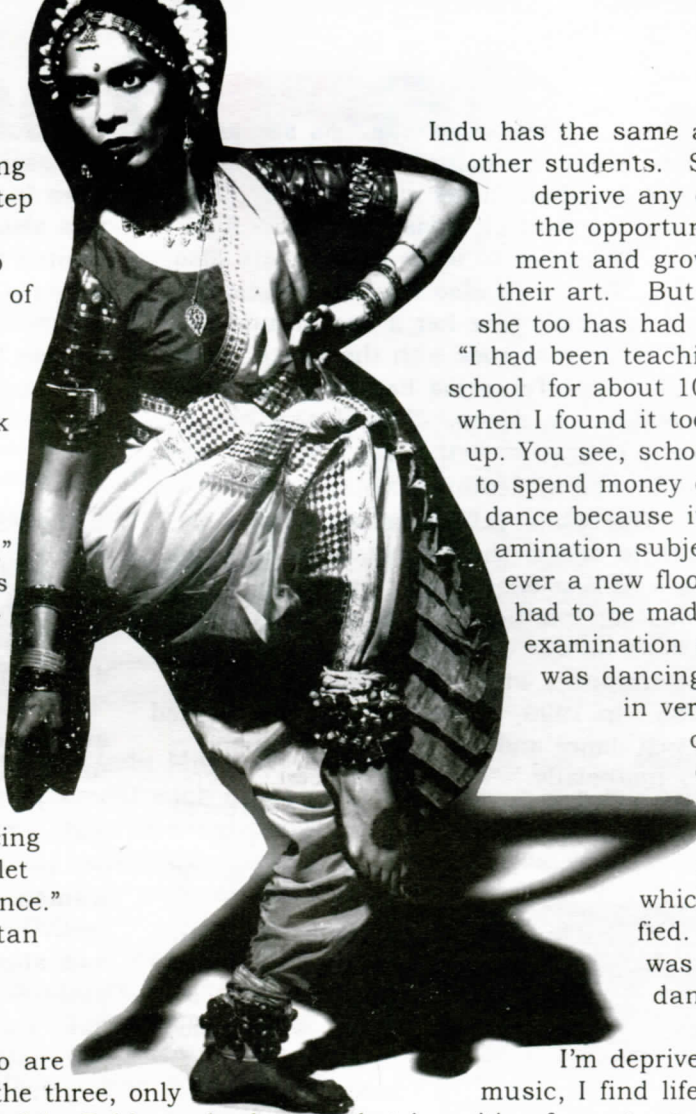


they are educators, they thought anything less than that is a step down. It took a long time for my father to realize that so many of his children were deeply interested in the arts.

“So I don’t think that this negative view of dancing is something that’s happened over time,” continues Indu. “It’s always been there—this negative view—in certain people’s mentality, in certain strata of society. Even now, they’ll go and watch what they call dancing girls but they won’t let anybody at home dance.”

Because Pakistan suppressed dance, there are only two other dancers apart from Tehreema who are in the country. Of the three, only Tehreema was trained in Pakistan by her mother Indu.

Indeed, Tehreema regards Indu as her guru. But as a teacher, Indu did not interfere when Tehreema began experimenting with dance styles and techniques that radically departed from her own teaching. Tehreema says that Indu was instead “very encouraging. When I did my first modern dance in my style and not hers, she didn’t say what the musician then said to me: ‘this is ridiculous.’ Instead, she said, ‘Well, if you want to do it, why not?’ and ‘Why don’t you work on this a little more?’ or ‘Try it this way.’ She never discouraged me and that has been great. She is a very open-minded person, always keen to communicate and learn from other artists.”



Indu has the same attitude towards other students. She did not deprive any one of them the opportunity to experiment and grow and mature in their art. But as a teacher, she too has had her low points. “I had been teaching dance in a school for about 10 years and when I found it too tiring, I gave it up. You see, schools can’t afford to spend money on facilities for dance because it’s not an examination subject. So whenever a new floor or a new room had to be made, it went to examination subjects and I was dancing with children in very small rooms or on floors made of bricks. So I went back to teaching in the classroom for which I’m also qualified. I thought that was the end of my dancing.

“But whenever I’m deprived of dancing and music, I find life is like the earth that is waiting for water to come. So I went back to teaching a few talented children after school hours. That was quite pleasant. But I still didn’t think I would dance again.”

Tehreema in Indu’s Eyes

Had it not been for Tehreema, Indu would perhaps never really dance again.

Tehreema was on a tour one day, accompanying her husband who, incidentally, also happens to be in charge of lighting, sound and other technical aspects of Tehreema’s dances. The couple passed a place where Tehreema felt something was terribly wrong. “It took me a long time to figure out that my memory of that place was different. I realized that it will never ever again look the way I remembered it

as a child because of the quarrying that is going on there now. My child will never see that place's beauty that I saw it when I was a child. By the time he grows up, there will probably be no hills left."

Tehreema had been so moved by the destruction of the place that she did a dance story about it. "I went to my mother and said: 'I want to make this dance and I think that we should do it.' I don't want to do the dance without it being meaningful." The dance Tehreema composed, *Ata Hai Yad* (As I Recall), which she and her mother performed, was a classical dance portraying the destruction of the environment and its impact on women. "To this day," Tehreema says, "when my mother dances, I still find her so graceful."

Yet, coming back to the stage to dance was unsettling for Indu. "I was very nervous about coming back to dancing on stage." In addition to readjusting to the stage, Indu is also nervous about performing with Tehreema who had become a very impressive dancer. At the NGO Forum during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Indu and Tehreema performed a series of dances. Indu says, "the day before our performance in Huairou, we rehearsed in our hotel room and as I watched Tehreema do the first dance, I said to her, 'I'm frightened to go on the stage after you.' I also didn't watch her dance the first day because it would have taken the confidence out of me."

"But I do appreciate what Tehreema does. She works very hard and there is a perfection in her work that I know I never would have achieved. She has trained her body much more strongly and strictly than I ever did."

"You see, in my youth, professional masters did not take us seriously. Because they thought we were only going to dance in drawing rooms, they did not teach us like they taught their professional students! I had to work things out in my head because they did not teach us theory. I read as much as I could although there's really not very much to read, especially in

Pakistan. Books were mostly from India. I used my little grounding in western music to try to understand music that is much more complicated and a rhythm style that is very, very difficult and sophisticated. But I do feel that the grounding in western music—which I studied when I was a child of eight—helped me to understand the more complicated things precisely because it was so simple. Also, I am not afraid to ask help from professionals who are one-third my age and I find that they respond."

"Tehreema's body movements are new. They are not wholly alien to us but they are not part of the dance style that we learned. She's teaching her group to crawl and do waves and turns on the floor. At first I found this very strange, because only 'singing girls' sit on the floor and wiggle in our vulgar films. But I realized that what she's doing is wholly different."

"My daughter even got me to do a role in a contemporary dance. Initially, I felt that the role did not fit me. But I got used to it and after having more time with it, I now feel more comfortable doing it."

"I find that I could easily accept and adopt different dance styles because my dance education had not been rigid. Watching my famous choreographer friend dance on her toes used to put me off. It seemed to me western and Anglicized. Then, when I worked with her, she made me do it and it was very much against the grain. But I have learned that some things need to be done in new ways. I had to push at the walls of stylization that were put into my head."

"I think it's very important to have more than one kind of dance training. I found that among my students, those who, for various reasons, are limited to one classic style find it very hard to adapt to even folk dances. People who've had too rigid an education in anything, I think, lose their creativity. It's very hard to find dancers who are both creative and rigid in their training. So sometimes I think I did well in not learning too much!"

Tehreema's Themes

Some of Tehreema's dances are classic while others are modern. But regardless of the style, the dances' themes are all very radical and controversial for Pakistan. One such dance is about a woman who decides to have an illegitimate child, which is an extremely sensitive issue in Pakistan. "I am actually very pro-choice," says Tehreema, "but in my country, it is very traumatizing for a woman to have a child out of wedlock and bring it up. The dance shows how the girl is suddenly forced into maturity when she discovers that she is pregnant and her beloved deserts her. That dance, although a solo, addresses mothers and asks for understanding and support for their daughters. We used a traditional *raag*, the words of which speak to the mother about the woman's pain and abandonment.

Another dance focused on a woman who attempted to free herself from societal bonds but who ultimately chose death rather than continue to be chained.

"All these stories, all these themes are from inside me," says Tehreema, "and I object and feel offended when, sometimes, women's groups come up to me and say, 'Why don't you make a dance on women's liberation?' I make dances about women because I am a woman. Because I feel and see what's around me, I naturally make dances about what matters to me.

"Dance is a vehicle for saying a lot of things you want to say, for projecting a lot of what's happening around you. You don't have to put up a banner and say, 'I'm doing a dance for women.' That's being very superficial. We make dances about women because it is our concern. Dance is about the universe."

Indu thinks the same way. "I don't think Tehreema takes these themes up in the sense that they are women's issues. I think to her it's a personal story. You know, our culture, our country, before independence, went through a strong phase of motivated dancing—to use a wide term. Before independence, Indian dance was greatly modernized and it generated a

fashion of taking up what were then the political themes: anti-imperialist, anti-British themes. So meaningful dance themes are not new to us.

"The great Bengali and Nobel Laureate winner Rabindranath Tagore wrote a dance drama about a woman with whom a young man fell in love. But the woman thought of herself as a man. Not that she dresses as a man but that she's interested in things that people would think are masculine—such as martial arts or science or mathematics or a career. But the man was a friend whom she felt she could not turn down. So she begged the gods to give her grace and femininity. They married but after a few years, he was bored with her and he left.

"It is obviously a theme for a modern woman to take up and I've been thinking of doing it in a much more modern context. I'd like to show that if you are going to give all these up for femininity, you're a fool. You must develop both. So in that sense, I don't find feminist themes strange. It's something that comes from what you live in, from the times that you live in."

The Dangers of Dance

Tehreema's dream now, after proving herself as a dancer, is to have a company of five to six dancers. "I have so many ideas in my head but some of them cannot be done by two or three people. I need several dancers to do them. The problem is you cannot simply draw people into dance in a place like Pakistan."

Right now, a group of nine students—all of whom except for two are women—perform with Tehreema. But none of them is really attached to Tehreema's group and none of them have studied long enough to perform solo. Tehreema has been teaching them for only three years. In the Pakistani tradition, one cannot be called a dancer until one has danced solo. Until then, one is only a student.

As for Indu, she finds joy in getting other people involved in the different aspects of the dance performance. "I've enjoyed drawing other people into the group

very much. I like getting mothers who have learned music but have given it up because of their children or people who learned to sing or to dance a long time ago to come back, join us and do a character role.

"I remember walking down a road some years ago. In a little congested market, somebody jumped out of a small shop: 'Auntie! Auntie! Don't you recognize me?' She remembered she had come to spend the holidays in a small army post where they expected to have a very dull time but she said 'it was the loveliest holidays we had because you taught us a dance and you directed us in a play.' It was a wonderful compliment! To think I have spread the joy of dancing to so many people! That has been a great pleasure."

Tehreema however thinks that it will be a miracle to get women to come and stick to dance because "the minute girls hit the age of 15, parents pull them out. Or when they get married, their husbands forbid them to dance. All the years of training go to waste."

Still, Tehreema continues to hope to attract girls to dance. How will she do it?

"Well, basically, by performing. After the performance, somebody will come up

and say, 'Do you give classes because I'd like to learn.'

"Unfortunately, our performances are very limited because we cannot advertise openly. The government is hypocritical in its attitude towards dance. You see, the government does not really allow it but at the same time they allow interviews to be published in the newspapers. But I cannot go out and put up a banner and say 'dance performances in so and so a place' in our local lan-

guage. We have militant extremist groups— male Muslim groups—which are very organized and which might walk in and break my limbs and break the whole place down. They are a minority but whether you like it or not, they are very organized and they are funded and very dangerous. I have to be very careful about putting up a poster or letting people know where I live."

The future for dance, according to Tehreema, is not very optimistic. "The economic and social situations are becoming worse. We are going backwards. In my teens during the late '60s and early '70s, we were much more progressive in Pakistan. I wouldn't say that women had much power then but, generally, the atmosphere was more progressive at that time. Right now, we find ourselves fighting for the freedoms that we already had then. I think that the economic situation, being as it is, squeezes our middle class and if there is no strong, educated middle class, it will be hard for a society to be liberal."

Indu however believes otherwise. "I think we are starting to come out of fundamentalism. When foreigners tell me 'Oh, it's dreadful. Pakistan is going through this stage of fundamentalism and puritanism,' I say to them 'Which culture has not? The Americans started off with puritanism. The British had the theater closed down for 64 years during Cromwell's time even if they have had such a long theater history.' So what is there to be worried about? I've never been worried about it because I feel that, at least, we can keep it going, even privately, and we do."

But whatever the country's situation might turn out to be, Tehreema is determined to stay in Pakistan and to stay there as a dancer. "I know that if I leave Pakistan, I would have more of a chance to create all the things I want to create and to form that company I want to set up. But I know I will continue dancing in Pakistan. The country is unappreciative of dance in general, but if I leave, I know that life would also be very, very difficult for me. Pakistan is where I belong. Pakistan is where my dancing is meaningful." ❧

