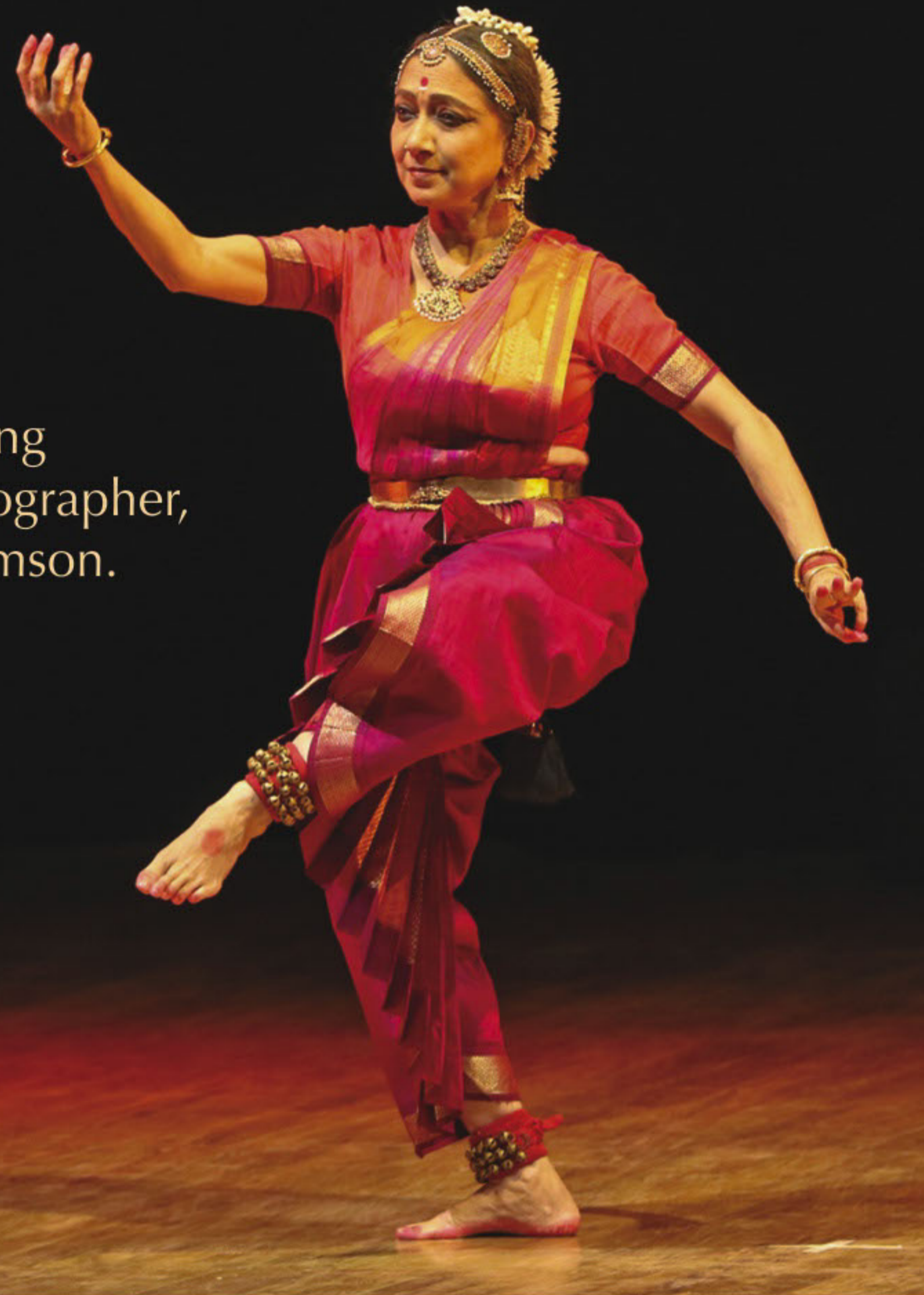


A LIFE OF NRITYA

An intimate chat with pioneering Bharatanatyam Dancer, Choreographer, Instructor and Writer, Leela Samson.

NAZIBA BASHER

PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



When the news of Leela Samson coming to perform in Dhaka, Bangladesh, hit the newspaper stands, in the middle of April, every passionate dancer in the country had butterflies in their stomachs. It was after all, THE Leela Samson. I, just like those other dancers, was on my toes to come face to face with this living legend of a Bharatanatyam dancer. Samson travelled to Dhaka with her troupe *Spanda*, a company she formed in 1995. From April 21-23, the group presented a three-day Bharatanatyam Festival titled "Roop Bahulya", and have begun a Bharatanatyam dance workshop from April 24-28 at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA). Shadhona and Srishti Cultural Center, in association with BSA, have organised the programmes.

A leading Bharatanatyam dancer, Leela Samson's life as a dancer was no less than a wonder.

"It's strange, the way life works," says Samson, in her soft, almost soothing voice. "I was sent to Kalakshetra, founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale, at the age of nine. She was not my direct teacher. I was trained by some of her senior disciples. But when I started performing in dance dramas directed by her, I had the honour of getting her direct criticism and guidance. Those inputs from her always stayed with me."

Her memories with and of Rukmini Devi, who is considered the most important revivalist in the Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam from its original 'sadhira' style, still bring a smile to her face. "She was such an awesome figure of a woman. She was a theosophist and a direct disciple of Annie Besant. So her philosophies of life were very inclusive of all religions. She frequently talked about higher aspirations, and philosophies. Her instructions were not like a regular teacher," she smiles, "Dance, to her, was like a higher offering, not a form of entertainment. Her life, whether it was reviving old textiles, her animal welfare work, or her work at the national level for culture, was inspirational and exemplary. That's what she passed on to us." Samson had her Arangetram (graduation) in 1971.

She then moved to Delhi where she taught dance at Shriram Bharatiya Kalakendra, and was also associated with Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. She regularly performed with Odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal, and had set up a flourishing career as a soloist. Her performances were captivating since back then, and she is still known for her technical virtuosity.

"When Rukmini Devi had fallen ill, she had asked me to accompany her during a tour in China. I helped her look after the company then. After she passed, I went



back to Kalakshetra and spent a year there to write the biography on her and her life." The book, *Rukmini Devi: A Life*, was published in January 2010. "After Rukmini Devi, though, there was nobody who had that fire in their belly—to take the institution further with the same amount of zeal," she says, "The then director, Mysore S. Rajaram, who taught me Carnatic vocals during my time in Kalakshetra, called me in. I was not prepared, but they took my interview

to think about in this regard."

Today, at the age of 64, Leela Samson still exudes the epitome of grace, elegance and beauty. The way she moves her hands while speaking also has a hint of dance and art in it. She embodies the ideal Bharatanatyam dancers, and teaches one how to be one. "You just have to do it (dance)! You have to love it. You have to be happy with it. A lot of it is about the affection you have for what you do. Love dancing, and dancing will love you." ■

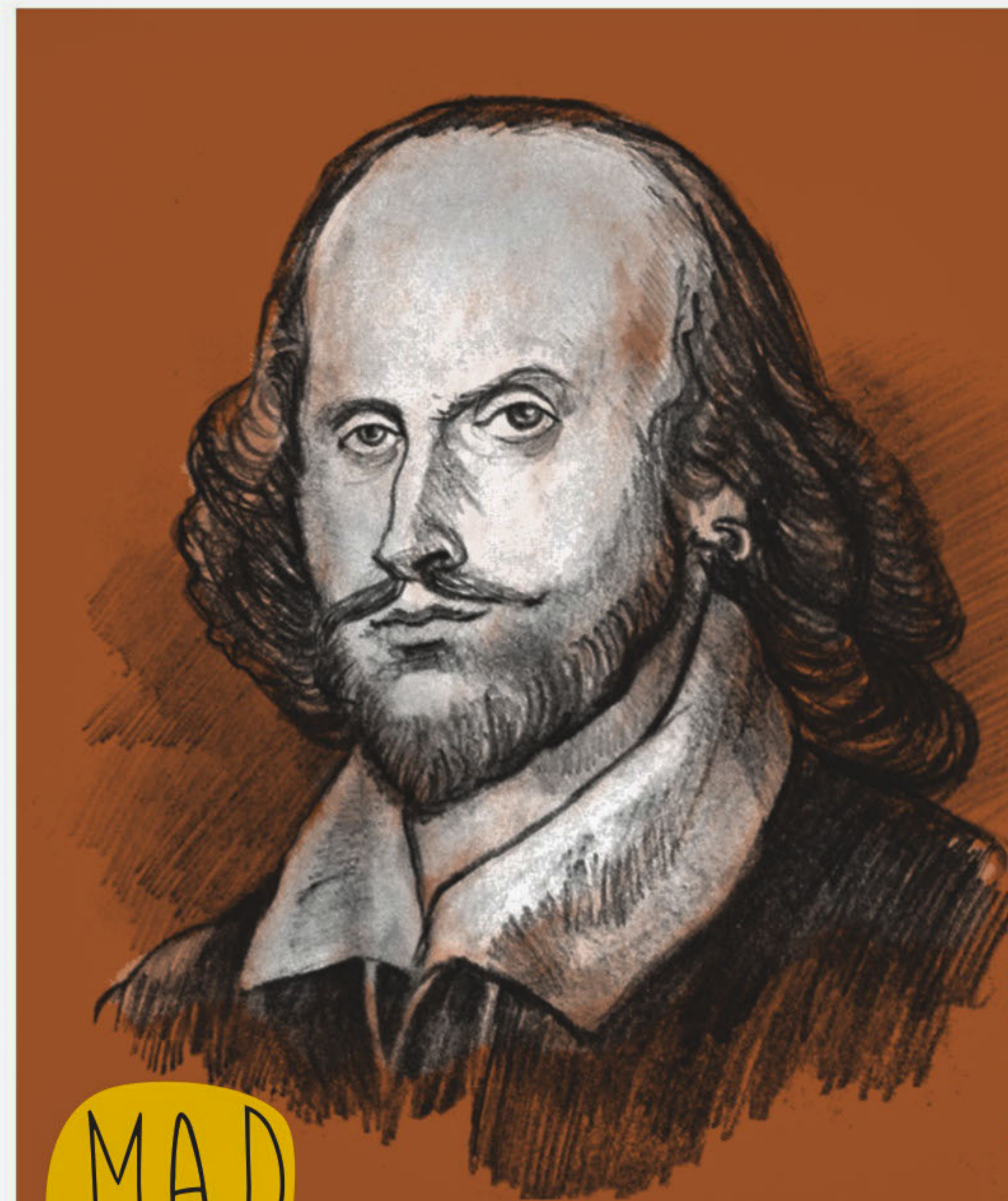
PERSONALITY

anyway." She was then selected as the director of Kalakshetra in 2005. "It was a hard decision for me because I was doing well with my solo career and had already established *Spanda*. But I thought maybe I should give back to the institution that has given me so much. I tried to bring back that fire and wonder. I don't know if it worked, but I know I tried my best."

After retiring from the post in 2012, Leela Samson went back to being a soloist, and also revived *Spanda*. Some of the dancers that she has trained and mentored went on to become big names in the field of Bharatanatyam or elsewhere. American Bharatanatyam dancer Justin McCarthy, actresses Aditi Hydari and Swara Bhaskar, even our very own Anisul Islam Hero, are some of the famous names that have been mentored by Leela Samson.

Apart from India, Samson has taught in countries scattered across the globe, including Italy, the US, the UK, and more. She has even given lectures and taken workshops in noted universities such as Princeton and Columbia.

Of dancers and dance enthusiasts in Bangladesh, she says, "There's a healthy scenario of dance here. The dancers seem to be naturally inclined towards the arts. One problem will be language. It was also a problem for me since I didn't grow up in Tamil Nadu. I had to make an effort to learn Sanskrit and Tamil, the root languages in Bharatanatyam, since most of the *sahityas* (literature) are written in these languages," she says, "You can also adapt to the times and make Bangla songs. But someone has to take the time and create new *Varnams*, *Shabdams*, *Padams* and *Javeris* (Bharatanatyam dance items) in the local languages and then maybe compose them in Carnatic *sangeetam* (music). But then, sometimes, if you change the language, the whole thing may lose its identity. So there's a lot



MAD GENIUS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

(26 April 1564 (baptised) – 23 April 1616)

William Shakespeare does not need any elaborate introduction. He was an English poet, playwright, and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet, and the "Bard of Avon". His extant works, including collaborations, consist of approximately 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages."

If music be the food of love, play on.

A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool.

Doubt thou the stars are fire, Doubt that the sun doth move, Doubt truth to be a liar, But never doubt I love.

No legacy is so rich as honesty."

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA AND BRAINY QUOTES

STAR DINARY



LUCKILY SAVED

A few days ago, I came across an alleged hijacker in front of Dhanmondi Women's Complex at around 7 pm. After finishing my work, I was returning home by rickshaw. All on a sudden, a young man popped up from nowhere and stopped my rickshaw. It was a busy road and he was acting in a way so that it seemed like we know each other and no one could understand what was actually happening. As soon as he stopped he was seen with a hand inside his shirt suggesting the firearms he was carrying with him and also confirmed me that the other men were taking positions behind my rickshaw. "We are like brothers and I don't have any intention to harm you. But look, I need to buy heroine and I need money. So please cooperate," he says calmly. Then he asked me to show my wallet where I had only tk 1,000. The amount could not please him and he returned it right away. Then he asked me to show my mobile. I had an iPhone with me which of course I was not ready to give away just like that. I was also carrying a camera in my sling bag. I was nervous, but I decided to keep calm. I held my breath and told him showing my press card that I am a journalist. "I also don't have any intention to hurt since we are like brothers. So please cool down," I said. "So you think that makes me scared?" his voice cracks. Then the next moment he asked me for the money that I had with me and this time more politely. I was lucky that my blind trick worked out and I could get rid of him by giving tk 1,000 only and saved my camera, iPhone and most importantly my life. *Turjoy Chowdhury Dhanmondi, Dhaka*