

Tapping into the healing powers of dance

IN CONVERSATION WITH MUNNI SUBHANI

"If you are happy and you know it, clap your hands... If you're happy and you know it, stomp your feet"—goes the lyrics of one of the most familiar songs/rhymes/jingles that we have been exposed to as children. This simple stanza above manages to capture what Munni Subhani, a Bangladeshi woman born in Chattogram – but now settled in Canada – has tapped into the pure, wild and yet simple joy of dancing. She is also tapping into its healing powers. And in the process, transcending borders, boundaries, and age groups.

It is, to some degree, reminiscent of historian and dancer Mark Franko's take on dance. He said, "Contemporary thought on dance is frequently split between a concept of dance-as-writing, and a concept of dance as beyond the grasp of all language, especially written language."

Munni Subhani is a firm believer of the latter. For her, dance is beyond written language, because she uses it as a means to communicate without the use of words, but just through movements. "I am not sure what to call it. I know I dance, I now know my dance can heal, and it helps me connect with people," she tells me as she reflects back on her life as a dancer, dating back to her childhood.

She grew up in a sprawling house in Chattogram, and her childhood was spent surrounded by doting parents and a lot of siblings, who always encouraged her love for dancing and singing.

Subhani recalls there was a school inside their house compound where she first chanced upon dancing, "I was just roaming around the house premises one evening, when I heard sounds of dancing from there. It was as though I was hypno-

tised by the sounds. I ran to the school compound, and the teacher—Shri Shankar Das Gupta—upon seeing me, asked me if I was interested in dancing. There's been no looking back since."

Now, well into her 70s, Subhani has made a life out of it. She is a trained Kathak dancer, and both she and her husband, Afzal Subhani, are also acclaimed singers.

"Music has been a part of my life since my childhood in Bangladesh, where I studied under a disciple of world-renowned dancer Birju Maharaj, and performed for foreign dignitaries and at international festivals. I continued to dance and sing when I moved to Toronto in the late 1970s, and I soon opened the Lamis School of Music and Dance, for my daughter."

But it was not until much later that Munni Subhani truly stumbled upon a gem—which she now calls therapeutic Indian exercise or healing dance.

"After working with a pupil with acute asthma to allow her to fulfil her passion to dance, I became aware of the power of dance as therapy and began teaching dance as rehabilitation, using movements based on Kathak, a north Indian classical dance. My approach to teaching dance has evolved, as have my students, who are of all ages and ethnicities, and come together for a range of reasons.

As a dancer and dance teacher, I have found that dance benefits not only the body, but the soul as well, boosting self-esteem, promoting emotional well-being, and fostering cultural connections."

It was through Munni's dance school that her fame first spread.

As Munni talks of her students in Canada and how their lives changed and

how patients who previously found it hard to even move their bodies because of various illnesses—asthma, spondylitis, arthritis, sciatica—were dancing fluidly with her, I am reminded of Helen Keller's visits to iconic dancer Martha Graham's dance studio. From Craig Brown's *Hello Goodbye Hello: A Circle of 101 Remarkable Meetings*, we read of the meeting between Helen Keller and Martha Graham.

At the studio, she experiences dance, through the vibrations on the dance floor, and even though she cannot hear the music or see the dance, she is capable of feeling it.

As she holds on to a dancer, Merce Cunningham, at Graham's studio, Keller experiences dance for the first time, and as he stops, she exclaims "Oh, how wonderful! How like thought! How like the mind it is!"

And Subhani too, manages to harness that joy of dancing. She caters especially to the older population, who have difficulty moving, suffer from immobility or bone problems, or have depression caused by the onset of old-age.

"Dance/movement therapy is the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual," according to the American Dance Therapy Association.

It is a creative arts ther-

apy that uses movement, and often times, verbal processing to observe, assess and intervene in a person's overall health.

Over the years, Munni Subhani's practice has taken her around many places in Canada, especially in Toronto, helping patients with mobility issues and mental health problems too. But the Kathak dancer now wants to expand her horizons, and believes there is immense potential for therapeutic dance in Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka.

"Many people in Dhaka make regular visits to the physiotherapist's office because of chronic pain in their backs, shoulders and knees. I believe dance therapy is an easy way out for such patients."

For, even the reticent Virginia Woolf, seemed to have a soft spot for the magic of dancing. In an essayistic entry from 1903, titled 'A Dance at Queen's Gate' and reproduced in a blog named *Brainpickings*, with her original spelling, 21-year-old Virginia writes: "We dance as though we knew the vanity of dancing. We dance to drown our sorrows—but dance, dance—If you stop you are lost."

Perhaps, we all should dance, to find lost movements and thoughts, and maybe Munni Subhani's therapeutic dance could well be the answer to the woes of our modern-day problems.

By Abida Rahman Chowdhury
Photo courtesy: Munni Subhani

