

Preeti Vasudevan on her latest choreography



New York-based dancer Preeti Vasudevan and I are talking about the importance of rituals. We are in London’s Hyde Park beside the Serpentine Lake on which Christo’s new sculpture — a floating pyramid of colourful barrels — gleams. For Vasudevan, rituals are companions to memories, they offer clues to identity. Her simplest and most important rituals bookend the day. She wakes at six for tea while everyone else in the house sleeps. And every night she puts her daughter, Ambaalika, to bed with an improvised story about a princess and her magical friends.

Storytelling lies at the heart of Vasudevan’s practice. Born in Chennai, she began taking Bharatanatyam lessons when she was four, and has since worked across several disciplines and forms. Her latest choreography, *Stories by Hands*, which will tour India in September with The Park’s New Festival, opens with a line, “English becomes too big for me.”

Power of Babel

Vasudevan says her body is multilingual with Indian roots, although Tamil is the language she is most at home in. The piece was conceived with multimedia artist Paul Kaiser, who has worked with dance legends such as Merce Cunningham, Bill T Jones,

and Trisha Brown. “Paul always felt I was a storyteller right from the start,” says Vasudevan. “While he liked my dancing, it’s my storytelling in an intimate situation that caught his eye, and he felt the rest of the world needed to experience this.”

Vasudevan is an animated speaker, even when she is not performing, using her hands and eyes to great effect. To distract her daughter as we talk, she points to a swan on the lake and instructs her to draw its picture and think of a story for him. “Storytelling is never linear,” she says. “That’s the point really.” I tell her the new piece is the most intimate work of hers I have seen. There are seemingly disconnected stories:

Vasudevan sitting on a swing with her grandmother, telling her she is going to leave her husband. Her daughter talking about the rooms of a new house. Her cousin Karthik’s tragic homicide story in California. For someone who has worked so long with the narrative platform of Bharatnatyam, was it liberating to depart from the stories of myths and gods, to tell the stories of one’s own life?

Preeti Vasudevan performs at The New Festival on the following dates

August 31 - Chennai

September 4 - Bengaluru

September 7 - Mumbai

September 12 - New Delhi

September 14 - Kolkata

September 18 - Hyderabad

Details on other performances, and passes, on prakritifoundation.com

The dancer jokes that she sometimes feels like a cheese cloth. The stories have to seep through you and mingle with every other story buried inside you. She does not see herself as a rebel who shuns a form to reinvent another. Rather, she takes the kernels of those myths she has known since childhood, and weaves them into the tapestry of her own life. “The Rama-Sita story has been key in my project as it resonated with the flaws of the epic, which led me into thinking of my grandparents and their lives together, which in turn led to my cousin’s homicide story. These are relationships, and the outcome is not to be judged but to be reflected upon. I feel there is no division now, and honesty is what is prime. Vulnerability leads. And that keeps the vessel deep.”

Rising strong

Vasudevan describes the sensation as being naked on stage, being watched, and yet feeling incredibly powerful and refusing to cover up and apologise. It begins in the

studio, where everything is stripped down. These are the most private moments, which no one else has access to. It is fragility and strength all at once. A raw space. It is where she says she finds the mask with which she can then come out and perform. “The mask is key to feeling powerful. It makes you the other, a powerful channel of communication. You become everyone suddenly. But when you reveal that studio self to the outside world, I feel you’re allowing that vulnerability to be seen.”

Now in her 40s, I ask Preeti how her relationship with her body has changed over the years, and how this has changed the way she dances. She uses an interesting word: richer. “I know I can’t do many things I used to be able to do, but what I can do has a lot more to say and is stronger and fitter in more ways than I was before.” It is a coming together of body and mind, of all the languages and disciplines collected over the years. A distillation. Mostly, she feels that she is 100% herself in performance on stage. Being on stage, she says, is being part of a continuum of artists, so you are never alone, even as a soloist. “It’s an incredible feeling when the light transforms you and the space is infinite. It’s a cosmic feeling, as if you become a myth yourself!”