

# Steps' Mother

With the *Mudra* Dance Festival woven around the theme of motherhood this year, a personal essay on when a dancer becomes a mother. **By Dr. Anita R. Ratnam**

**T**here is no getting away from it. It is not something you can push under the carpet or hide behind your *ghungroos*.

If you are a woman and a dancer, then dance is your eldest child, you are married to your body and you are a mother to movement. That alchemical bond between the spirit, body and the navel of memory is sacrosanct. Married or unmarried, divorced, separated or in a social relationship you can term 'complicated', there is nothing complex about a woman and her body that absorbs, morphs and shape-shifts as it grows and the dance grows alongside it. You are a parent who nurtures and forms the growing bubble of kinetic clay that takes shape through your limbs and torso.

What is it like being a mother? What is it like to be a mother and a dancer whose body is singularly stubborn and independent? I always believed that life would deliver me as a dancer first and all else next. I knew I was good and that I would always be in the spotlight. But a mother? I had never planned on being a mother to anything but dance. I did dream of a handsome man sweeping me off my feet. But children? I knew that being a mother was not going to be easy and that I did not have the stamina to stay the course of motherhood.

## THE FIRST HICCUP

But life has its way of knocking you out of the ballpark. I fell in love and my career never caused a hiccup as I cruised for about five glorious years in New York. Then, out of the blue, I realised I was pregnant. Nobody spoke to me about the awful moment of realising that something was happening to my body. The body that I had nurtured and dieted and exercised and whipped into shape was going to wave me a cheerful goodbye. A narcissist, I was apprehensive about handling a media career and my

growing waistline. First, I thought I was too old to be a mother. I was 30, an age when my mother had already had three children and I was nine years old.

Fortunately, my gynaecologist told me I was his youngest patient. He had patients who were having their first child in their forties. When I told him I was a vegetarian, his eyebrows disappeared

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into his forehead. "How will you get the protein the baby needs?" he demanded. A prescription filled with vitamins was handed to me with strict instructions to drink a small glass of port wine four times a week. "For good blood," he clarified, when I protested about alcohol for the foetus. And so, my baby grew inside my body. My waist expanded, but also my voice, my energy and my smile. I literally glowed and could memorise full pages of speeches and scripts in an instant. My hair grew thicker and I felt like soaring.

## NINE MONTHS LATER

The moment of birth is an unforgettable experience. Though excruciating back pain and unbearable spasms did make

me wonder – how did women actually go through it? Not once, but many times over? With a tennis ball pressed into my lower back for support, my daughter slid out smiling and silent. After 40 weeks of a person being created inside my body – now heavy and flabby – felt light and weightless. I had prayed for a daughter, and here she was. Aryambika – the divine one, the mother of the universe, the giver of everything, my little goddess. How was I ever going to

get back into shape and move again? The nurses had the answer. In less than four hours, I was hauled onto my feet, taken for a hot shower and made to walk the length of the hospital corridor. In India, new mothers would rest and recuperate, but in New York, women were popping babies and striding back to work in one week. There was a no-nonsense attitude when I was asked to take unsteady steps up and down.

So this was it. No time for patience, waiting for the body to heal or readjust itself to a new weight and a new sense of gravity. I had gained 14 kilos during pregnancy and lost 10 of them during the few hours of birth. But what about those chocolates that filled my room? "Eat them all," a friend urged. "This is the only time you can eat chocolate and not gain weight," she helpfully supplied.

## ROAD TO RECOVERY

Recovering your physicality after a baby is hard. The first birth is perhaps easier since you are younger and your body can spring back to the original form. But it is never quite the same. The proportions of



Prateesha Mohapatra not only followed her mother Sujata into Odissi, but also her father Ratikant and grandfather Kelucharan Mohapatra

your shape change subtly and, perhaps, forever. I hit the streets of New York to regain form and confidence. I walked, ran, strolled, jogged through parks daily until I was back to my pre-baby weight. But my blouses would not button up and my size-six jeans still felt snug. So be it. I was a mother first, and a dancer second. Was that a betrayal to my art? Was I being untrue to my first calling? Was my daughter my second born? These questions, 27 years later, still haunt me.

I wholeheartedly agree with dancers who choose not to become mothers. It takes too much time away from the silence of contemplation, research, thought, practice, rehearsals, creation, touring and the actual grit and grime of a dancer's life. So many of our divas have been single, married or divorced, but never mothers. Maternal instinct is subsumed into the passion that is poured into your art itself. The energy required to nurse, guide, educate, nurture, feed, clothe, bathe and raise children is a life's work unto itself. Being a *guru* with many students is not the same. The act of giving birth gives a dancer a new set of challenges. Not just the dancing body, but the very rhythm changes. There is a whole new person who demands attention, psychic choreography and a constant gardening of personality and temperament. It is draining, tiresome and frustrating. Unless we acknowledge this, we will be failures as mothers.

For me, being a mother and a dancer was doubly tough. I was fortunate to have my mother, grandmother and sister acting as a triangular cordon of protective love around me. When I travelled, my daughter would look at me silently, wistfully, her eyes wise beyond her years, somehow understanding that I had to leave. When I returned from a long overseas journey and was jetlagged, she would sit beside me reading silently, knowing not to disturb me, but soaking in my presence after weeks of not hugging her. I missed her innocent smell, her gorgeous smile and her uncanny memory for detail. I found myself wandering off in rehearsals or choreography sessions, worrying about her food, homework, exams, class projects. I had my second child two years later – also born in New York. This time, my labour was half as long and much less painful, but my body took twice as long to regain any semblance of shape.

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Jhelum Paranjape

### THE DIFFICULT CHOICES

Being a mother forced me to make choices based on time, exam schedules and special days, or when my children were on stage – acting, dancing or standing in as trees or flowers. I have cancelled some important shows just to be in the audience and for them to know I was watching them. But I confess that I felt a little cheated when not able to dance for a dignitary, a visiting head of state or a royal. Being a mother became more important than being a dancer. Sometimes, I am envious of dancers who are not tied down by motherhood in all its messy magic. There are no teenage tantrums, no strange boyfriends or girlfriends, no strain on money and resources needed to raise them.

I could have built a studio, published books and created an auditorium, if I did not have to put money aside for education and independent homes for my kids.

Ironically, it was dance that took me away when the three people I loved most dearly took their last breath – my father, mother and grandmother. Each of them had told me to honour my word to presenters. At each of these moments, I was torn with guilt. Was I the irresponsible daughter? Was dance more important than being with those who raised, loved and shaped me? I am still conflicted when memories flood back on anniversaries.

### THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Dancing mothers with dancing daughters can share something very special. A star dancer will often nurture her daughter's talents and pave her entry into the highly competitive world of performing arts with more ease than when she entered the fray. And it is a boxing match. Dancers are "athletes of the soul", as Martha Graham puts it, and the stage is like a gladiatorial arena. Daughters of dancers are also at the disadvantage of being compared to their famous mothers. A smile, a gait, a turn of the head, the holding of a pose or a *mudra*, is inevitably compared and more often than not, the daughter suffers in comparison. Rarely do you see a dancer move beyond the shadow of her famous mother. Ultimately, it is dependent on the *rasa* created by the new entrant. For the mother, it is a tough tussle.

How does she step back, cautiously, and

Bharatanatyam dancer Dakshina Vaidyanathan performed first with her famous mother Rama when she was just eight years old



Anita Ratnam's career spans four decades with numerous awards conferred for her work



allow her child to own the spotlight? For how long can the duet be maintained? When does the mother wind down? These mothers double up as mommagers – dancing and managing their daughters' careers simultaneously.

No matter how much I do and how many honours and applauses I receive, I am still told that I did the right thing by having children. I am frequently told how lucky I am compared to dancers who are single and/or childless. No, I think to myself. A dancer's life is a solitary one, filled with the neuroses of doubt, uncertainty and stumbles. Anyone around her will be half-lit, the glare of the spotlight diminishing even with the ones she loves dearly. She will always be held by the navel of our memory, and in a lifelong tango between duty, art, creativity, sense of responsibility and mothering. ■

*Mudra Dance Festival will be held from 24th to 30th April at the Experimental Theatre.*