



DRAMA QUEEN

Padmini Rangarajan has always been passionate about puppetry. In 2005, she decided to add pedagogy to her longtime passion and started Sphoorthi Theatre for Educational Puppetry, Art & Craft. By using puppetry as a teaching aid, she tries to create instruments of social awareness. She tells **Lipi Bharadwaj** that she is also attempting to revive and contemporise the lost art of puppetry.



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I used to teach my son by using puppets. He liked it, and spoke about it at his school. His teacher then asked me to come and perform for the kids. That was my first public performance," she says recalling the beginning of her journey.

She started using puppetry as an aid in teaching subjects like Math, Science, and English. Now, her performances usually revolve around social causes, like child labour, female infanticide, teenage suicides and sexual harassment. "Most of my presentations talk about values that we already know of but have forgotten. My presentations try to give out a lesson," she explains.

She usually writes her own stories for the presentations and also adapts from folklores. "I have adapted and rewritten stories like Robert Browning's version of *Pied Piper of Hamelin*, and *A Spark Neglected Burns the House* by Leo Tolstoy. I have also adapted Kannada stories like *Punyokti*," she says.

When asked why she chose puppetry, she said, "It is the base for any theatre. Puppetry encompasses all art forms. It involves drawing, sculpting, storytelling, music, dancing. Puppets don't have a voice of their own; you're giving them a voice."

She believes that technology doesn't leave any scope for imagination. "For example, when you watch a cartoon on television, 80% of it has already been done. You're just taking in what they're serving you. Whereas, when it comes to puppetry or storytelling, a lot is left on people to imagine. When a story is narrated with the words 'Once upon a time there lived a King...' you try to visualize the time this king lived in, you visualize how he must have looked. It's the same thing with puppetry", she explains passionately.

Padmini Rangarajan is the recipient of the Tata Fellowship for Folklore 2012 and is currently doing research on the traditional puppetry of Ammapuram, AP. "My aim is to keep puppetry alive. I want to bring puppetry in

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the mainstream. I want to fit it with the contemporary theatre acts," she says. And this hasn't been easy. She explains, "When people ask me to perform at their schools, or events; they do not pay me much. I try to explain to them that I have to pay the artists who make the puppets, and have to pay the team that works with me. I also have to pay the *autocoolas* and *tempocoolas* who transport the puppets and other props. The little money I get is all spent in preparations for other shows. I or my team is hardly making any monetary profits out of this. The passion and love for art is what drives us."

One project that she wants to do is 'Stree' which would celebrate womanhood. "I am not a feminist, but my dream is to take the concept of *Nacadurga* and show the power of a woman. This would involve dance and puppetry to narrate the story of women," she smiles.

Padmini has recently become the subject of a documentary **Magic in Our Hands**, a multi-layered film project by Vicky Hart, producer and founder of Hart in Media, and Professor Claudia Orenstein of the theatre department of Hunter College in New York. The film documents Padmini's passion and hard work to promote puppetry, and how she's using it to generate awareness about various social issues.

Website: www.sphoorthitheatre.com
Email: sphoorthitheatre@gmail.com