



holding the reins

SHIAMAK DAVAR WAS BORN TO PERFORM. HE PROVED THAT ONCE AGAIN, HAVING REINVENTED HIMSELF WITH HIS SHOW *I BELIEVE*. NO ONE DOES IT QUITE LIKE HIM. AND TO MAKE THINGS A TAD MORE DRAMATIC, **APARNA S SHARMA** GOES ON A HORSE-CARRIAGE RIDE WITH THE ACE ENTERTAINER

PHOTOGRAPHER SAISH KAMBLI

Shiamak Davar makes his presence felt even before he arrives for this interview-cum-shoot. There's a flurry of activity in the hotel room. Two of his assistants are arranging his paraphernalia and making sure everything's under control. Suits go in the closet (our stylist is impressed with his taste in clothes), make-up is set up near the window (we have a glorious view of the Arabian Sea), his special *diyas* are lit in the bathroom (he likes to take in their soothing energy wherever he goes). And we wait. His assistant Puneet informs him over the phone that we're in room 1961 – the year he was born in. Two hours go by. But, unlike with other celebrities, we don't mind the delay.

He makes you smile, in spite of yourself. Whether Shiamak Davar is having a conversation with you or performing on stage, he gives you special attention. And who would mind that? During his shows, the audience loves nothing more than when he makes them get up and dance. As he did during *I Believe*, the Broadway-cum-pop-cum-Bollywood extravaganza he recently held in Mumbai. That he is popular and that anything Shiamak and his dancers enact exudes exceptional finesse and exuberance was evident by the terrific response the show received. Some, like actress Tabu, were moved to tears; Amitabh Bachchan applauded it on his blog. And while it also received some criticism for a lack of consistency in the theme – spirituality – we simply enjoyed an evening of spectacular entertainment, wherein the performances were not repetitive (as the troupe's performances occasionally are) and the energy rubbed off on us.

When I ask Puneet what makes SDIPA (Shiamak Davar Institute for the Performing Arts) stand apart from other dance schools, I expect a spiel on dancing skills and techniques. But "his

faith in God” is the instant reply – which are also Shiamak’s exact words to me later – and much to my surprise, Puneet, all of 22, sits back and gives me an impromptu discourse on God, spirituality, following the right path, and suchlike: Shiamak’s teachings, essentially. “My life changed after I joined the institute six years ago. I used to be very quiet, and now I’m a confident person. I was meant to come here.” He doesn’t see himself doing anything else, but work with Shiamak, in the future. That’s the kind of loyalty Shiamak’s team feels and – “He looks after us more than our parents do,” says Puneet – that’s the kind of influence he has on his instructors.

There’s no doubt that Shiamak’s focus is, and always has been, his school. Something that he started 25 years ago with seven students (including his friends: Singer Lucky Ali, actress Kitu Gidwani and his girlfriend of the time, model Rachel Reuben) in Bombay has now grown to an institute with 250 instructors, 25,000 students annually and classes all over the

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country as well as in Australia, Canada, Dubai and London. “Every single day, all my instructors in India visit NGOs to teach street children or physically/mentally-challenged kids,” he says. “That is something they have to do. If they really love teaching these kids, then I know they are genuine teachers. That’s how I judge people. I don’t select dancers; I select human beings.”

His school is also the reason Shiamak has been selective about movies: “I’ve worked bloody hard for 29 years to get where I am and I’m not going to give it up to be a choreographer in films. I want to do much more than that. And the satisfaction I get with training kids and giving something to the masses is very important because I had no platform. Having said that, my Bollywood experience has been damn good.”

Everyone sat up and took notice of the refined dance moves, not to mention the toned dancers vis-à-vis the flabby extras of former films, in 1997’s *Dil To Pagal Hai*. “People must realise that India and dance are modern today,” Shiamak says emphatically. “And the reason I’m known as the guru of contemporary dance is because

I have integrated my form of western dancing with all forms of Indian dancing and created my own style.” He then worked on Subhash Ghai’s *Taal* (1999) and *Kisna: The Warrior Poet* (2005). “I think my best piece of work is in *Kisna*, which nobody saw,” he laughs, “and then I did *Bunty aur Babli* [2005] and *Dhoom:2* [2006].” Up next is the Aditya Chopra-directed *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*. “I’m very excited. I learn so much working with Aditya; he’s a genius.”

While Shiamak likes the works of choreographers Saroj Khan and Vaibhavi Merchant, he gets nostalgic about dances from old Hollywood and Hindi movies. “The choreography back then was solely dependent on the dancer. I saw it in Helen and Shammi Kapoor. I don’t see that today, except in Madhuri [Dixit-Nene] and Hrithik [Roshan].”

When he was seven, Shiamak spent his weekends at Basant Studios in Bombay watching movies being made. “My granduncle Homi Wadia and grandaunt [Fearless] Nadia were from the film industry. So I’d be living on the sets...it was a fascinating place for me.” He never did enjoy school (Cathedral & John Connon) much except for the competitions he won, playing the piano and singing Elton John and Billy Joel songs.

But it was during his years at Sydenham College that Shiamak discovered his first love – theatre. “I cannot experience the joy of theatre in films,” he says, pauses to spray some perfume all over himself, and rattles on: “I started with Alyque Padamsee. I did the role of Che Guevara in *Evita*. I did many musicals, including *Grease*. I used to get Rs 100 a show and there were only three shows on the weekend. So we would go and splurge the 300 bucks at the Shamiana or Trattoria. Those were the best days of my life.”

Propping up his legs on the table – “You don’t mind, do you?” – he goes back to stories of his childhood. “I was a legend in my living room,” he muses, suddenly spraying some more perfume. “I thought I was this huge legend. I would open the curtains in the hall and enact scenes from movies, driving my cousins and uncles and aunts up the wall. I didn’t even know I had the potential for dance. It was much later that I started taking part in dance competitions. But before that, I was actually an actor.”

It’s little wonder then that posing flamboyantly on the Victoria (horse carriages in south Mumbai are called thus), comes naturally to Shiamak. He clearly revels in everything that has a touch of drama. He must be rather uncomfortable – to say the least – in the suit under the blazing sun, but he doesn’t complain. In between grinning for the camera, he talks to Mastaan the horse. “I’m crazy about animals,” he says, adding, in his staccato style: “I’m crazy about the sun, I love water, I love nature, I love Bombay. I live in Vancouver sometimes, but Bombay is my home; it’s where the soul is, it’s a place full of memories, it’s been a place of struggle, adventure – it’s fabulous.”

What a livewire. There’s no stopping Shiamak Davar. He’s constantly thinking of the next thing to do – and to do it with panache. “I’m choreographing Amitabh’s world tour. I’m trying to do my album – in my lovely Hindi,” he chuckles. And, has plans for yours truly (a former student of SDIPA) too. “You must start dancing again!” he coaxes, wrapping me in a bear hug. “Promise me you’ll come to class. I’m waiting.” □

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Location Courtesy National Centre for Performing Arts. Inquiries, (022) 22833737; The Oberoi, Mumbai, Inquiries, (022) 66325757