

## Lushin Dubey and the Evolution of her Art

By Prabha Chandran

What does it mean to be an Indian woman? Statistically speaking the odds of having a rich, fulfilling life are dim. From womb (feticide) to cradle (less nutrition) to childhood (less education) to adolescence (sexual abuse, even rape) to marriage (honor killings/dowry deaths) to motherhood (every 10 minutes a woman dies from pregnancy related causes) to adulthood (poorer than men) to widowhood (ostracized, denied property) it is a perilous journey. True, there is another picture too: well-educated, healthy, independent women who are making a wonderful contribution professionally and socially... but these women remain a minority in India, albeit a growing one.

"I am attracted to socially relevant subjects," confesses actor Lushin Dubey, who has tackled some of these tough themes in her two decades evolution as an artist. "Ten years ago I decided to change gears," she says, using her art to shine an uncompromising light on attitudes and norms that diminish us as Indians and especially as women. "As one achieves professional success, the desire to give back and to add meaning to one's art is never far. Theatre is my space," says Lushin, "others may write or do social work, this is what I do."

If it seems like an easy way out – pretending to be someone on stage for a couple of hours – then you haven't seen Lushin perform this role. She pours herself into her protagonist and is gut wrenching as Aruna Shanbaug, the nurse who was sodomized and brutalized by a dog chain wielding hospital worker in the hospital basement. She bled all night, turned semi-comatose and never woke even 42 years later. It's an incredibly painful story, like Nirbhaya, it was a case that shook the country...but these things tend to slip away as other events take up news space and the dialogue shifts.

By resurrecting *Aruna's Story* in all its poignant details, Lushin reminds us "the workplace is still not safe for women." Aruna's death, her vegetative existence for more than 42 years, is part of the narrative of this nation's struggle with violence against women. How Lushin brought this story to the stage is an integral part of her activism. "I feel very strongly about gender issues," she says, "why should men be the ones to propose marriage, to adopt certain roles in society? Why can't a woman do it? Why is there so much rape?"

This questioning is at the heart of her motivation as an artist and Lushin waited years for Pinki Virani, to give her the rights to the script. Pinki's own involvement in Aruna's story is well documented. Apart from painstakingly researching all angles, Pinki went to court to get justice for Aruna when her own family gave up. As a result of her unrelenting efforts, the law was changed in two respects: If a rapist leaves a woman in a permanent veg state then the perpetrator is tried as a murderer and can expect life imprisonment or hanging in the rarest cases. Second, the law now accepts passive euthanasia when the patient is brain dead. If a person is in a permanent vegetative state, life support

may be removed and pain management palliatives used to keep the patient comfortable.

The two women had long exchanges on the stage adaptation and agreed the play must humanize Aruna, show the girl behind the public persona of a comatose rape victim. In a brilliant *coup de theatre*, Lushin assumes multiple roles in this solo performance where she literally morphs into different characters by the seemingly simple ruse of changing caps and wraps in differently lit areas of the stage. Here is a young Aruna singing her favorite Bollywood numbers on Chowpatty beach, here she is again studying to be a nurse, here she is the journalist who documents the story, here she is the rapist, her whole body changing physically in a dramatic opening sequence where the rape is enacted in all its awfulness through voice and stance. She is both rapist and victim, story teller and improviser and encompasses the gamut of human emotions in this play which feels like a Greek tragedy.

Written and directed by Arvind Gaur with whom Lushin has done *I Will Not Cry* and *Bitter Chocolate*, the play is a demanding one-woman show. "No two solos are the same," says Lushin, "because you improvise when you are on stage in response to the audience reactions. I have a very strong connect with the audience. 49% is what I do on stage, and 51 % what I try to sense, what I am injecting into the audience - in other words keeping myself awake to their pulse, and their journey with me ."

Lushin attributes her heightened powers of observation and strong intuition partly to the fact that she was a middle child, "always looking to see how others were reacting," always interested in enacting. She won her first international award for acting in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and with sister Lillete, joined Barry John's Theatre Action Group in Delhi at 14. Never formally trained as an actor, she learned her art on the job coming of age with *Othello in Black and White* at the Edinburgh Fringe First festival. "After 17 years, an Indian group won it, so it is something I really value. I co-produced it and played Desdemona," says Lushin.

Ask her if there is a downside to theatre and she will tell you that in comparison to cinema, theatre's reach is limited. "That is why you can keep a play running for 15 years and do 500 performances whereas when I do a film, every one seems to have noticed it." Her first play, *Untitled*, using puppets, has been running for over 10 years and has completed over 300 shows including five tours to the U.S. and has been staged in many prestigious institutions.

It is the stage and theatre that "has given me a sense of self worth, has kept me joyful, happy and fulfilled," says Lushin who is a practicing Buddhist. "Theatre defines me, it has provided me with a channel for expressing my creativity and it has challenged me to prove that I can write." She has also written a book on *Gandhi: A Path to Greatness* which was published by Scholastic for children, who are another abiding passion.

"I cannot give up my children's theatre," says Lushin, who started Kids World with cousin Bubbles Sabharwal in 1989. The duo has trained thousands of

children over the years using many in their plays. In *Les Miserable*, for instance, they had a cast of 250 kids. Lushin's interest in working with children comes from her years spent teaching children with special needs following a Masters in Education from the US where she spends time to be with her family.

While the reviews for *Aruna's Story* are still not in, the audience voted with their feet at two sold out performances in Delhi. Lushin teams up with Save the Children and Cry to raise money for their causes through her plays and this one is a timely reminder that Nirbhaya is unfortunately not the first or last victim of a brutal rape. She is certainly doing her bit to motivate her audiences to do something about it.