

'I cleaned toilets'

Ashley Lobo paid his way through college, sponsored his dance classes in Australia, cleaned toilets, did door-to-door selling, and finally returned to India to set up a 'dream' dance school...

Family...

My father is a retired army officer, grandfather a pianist, mother a renowned classical opera singer and theatre personality. My elder sister is an opera singer and the younger is a painter. Ever since I can remember, I was into theatre and music. My lullabies were my mother's opera rehearsals! And, in Mumbai, if you're Catholic, you grow up dancing.

My first lesson...

In junior college I discovered the opposite sex and my grades came crashing down so much that my mother refused to pay my fees. She said 'you are intelligent, but if you going to college only to pass time, do it with your money.' I said 'alright' and got a part-time job working with a clearing forwarding company.

Dance was never a career option...

I was passionate about dancing. It was a sense of who I am. But it wasn't a career option, only a hobby — we did shows over weekends. In 1987/88, I stopped dancing to focus on my job. When I was offered a shift to Delhi, I agreed, partly to escape the distraction of dance. Delhi brought with it a dance audition, and I'd left Mumbai to escape dance! It was the audition for *West Side Story*, a dance drama. I gave it a shot and ended up choreographing it. All leading dailies featured me as an upcoming choreographer — I'd arrived! My career got a rethink.

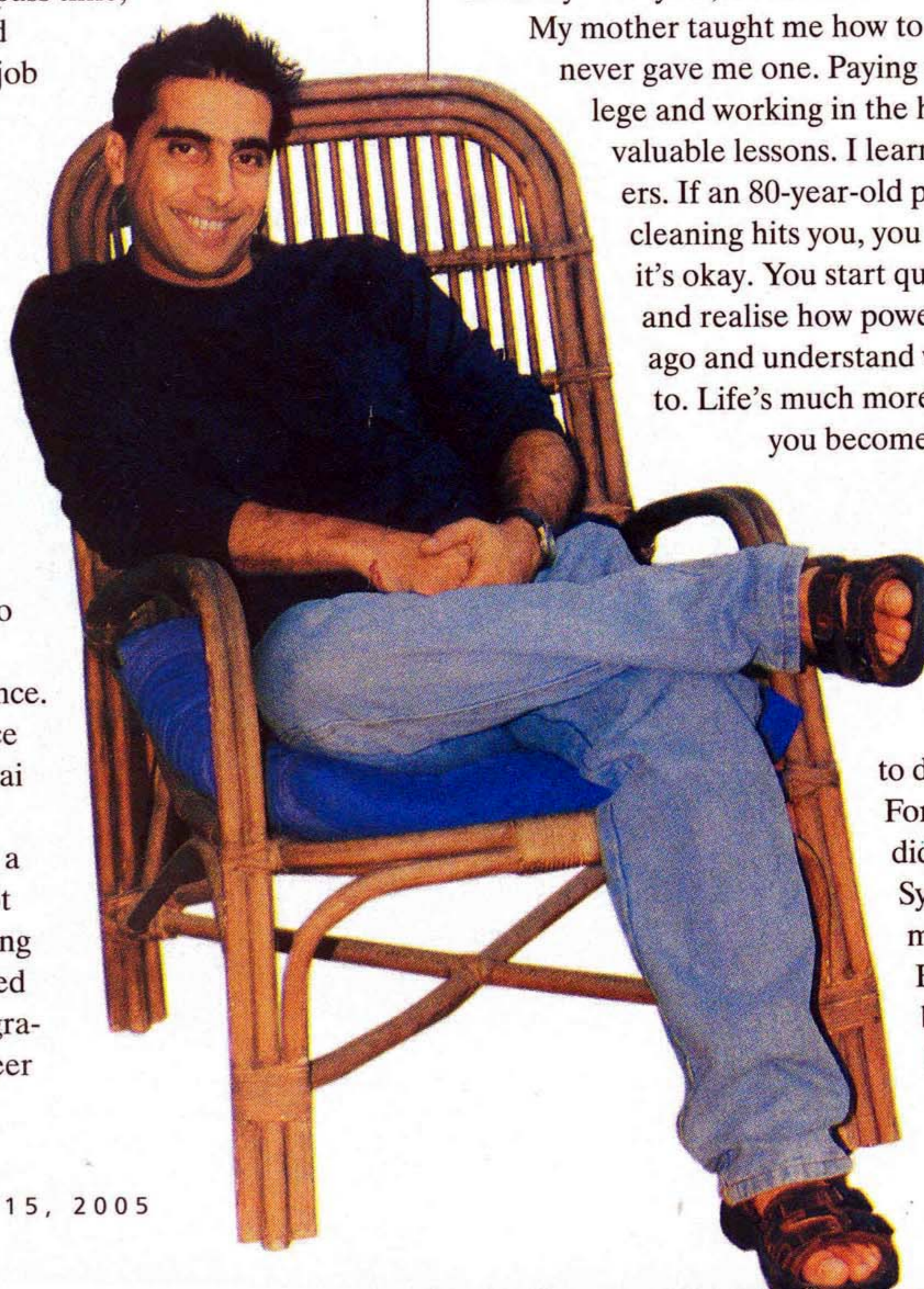
Dance became the focus...

I was 21. I thought perhaps I should do dance. My mother suggested I go to Australia. She gave me an advance of 8000 dollars, payable back in a year. I stayed there for nine years, learnt classical dance, ballet, jazz and modern dance forms. Since I had to pay back mom, I worked in a hospital in the mornings and went for dance class in the evening. I cleaned toilets and floors; then assisted the nurses by feeding and administering medicine to patients; and finally became an activity therapist. It was tough because I was doing six hours of difficult dance also but this continued for three years. Within the first year, after paying my dance fees, I was able to pay off my mother. In my third year, I went on to dance professionally.

My mother taught me how to hunt for a fish but never gave me one. Paying my way through college and working in the hospital taught me valuable lessons. I learnt how to respect others. If an 80-year-old patient whom you're cleaning hits you, you still smile and tell him it's okay. You start questioning his history and realise how powerful he was 15 years ago and understand what he's been reduced to. Life's much more than what you see; you become more of a thinker.

Money management

After performing for two years, I had a back injury, and was told I'd never be able to dance professionally. For the next two years, I didn't dance at all. I left Sydney and the painful memories to go to Brisbane and help my brother-in-law with his business. I was again short of money; I'd



made a lot from dance but blown it up! Managing the hospital bills was the second lesson in money management. I did door-to-door selling and cut fish from 6 am to 2 pm. I saved 4000 dollars, opened a small business and then saved 35,000 dollars. From that I financed myself to come to India on a holiday in 1994. Meanwhile, I'd started dancing casually.

The dream surfaces...

In India, I met Lilette and Lushin Dubey who remembered me from *West Side Story*. Lilette was directing *Me And My Girl* and wanted me to choreograph. On the sets, I met my wife Ramanika who was playing the leading lady. Soon, there were other offers. Within six months, I did four productions. The Indian dance industry had grown with the cable television boom but the dancers were untrained. I thought of setting up a school and help develop the industry. But, after marriage, we went to Australia, where I continued dancing and running a business. If I had to come to India, it was essential to have a strong financial base.

Homecoming...

Ramanika and I were comfortably settled in Australia but I wondered whether I should set up a dance school in India so that no one would have to go through the situation I had to. It wasn't easy borrowing mom's hard-earned money and being constantly worried about how I'd repay it. Also, I felt philosophically indebted. I'd thought that if I ever made it big as a dancer, I'd come back and set up a dance school in India. Ramanika reminded me of that dream and shook me out of the comfortable groove I'd settled into. "The enemy of a great life is a good life," said she. We sold the business and set off for India. I told Ramanika, "We must be crazy. People die to come here and we're going back to start from zero. We don't even know if it will work!" But I had a gut instinct. The worst that could happen was it wouldn't work — losing two years of our lives and just going back to start afresh. But we wouldn't actually lose because if we didn't do it, then years later we would wonder 'what if?' We returned in 1999 to Delhi. Through Ramanika's connections, we began to build. I went to the principal of Bluebells School with nothing but a dream and she believed in me. Thus was formed Danceworx with 100 students; today we have 1600!



"I don't know whether I've reached where I wanted to. Perhaps I never will, else the artist in me will die."

Inspiration

I respect my father for his principles and honesty. My mother for her work ethic and tireless energy. There are others, like my first boss who told me to have a vision for myself, a theatre director who told me 'you can be anything you want, you have it in you'... I was lucky not to be denied the experience of struggle. It has made me what I am.

Self-doubt...

Two of my dancers died. I was very close to them; they were like my kids. I was their mentor, dealing with their minds. I lost the dreams. I took time off.

Dance in India...

Bollywood is going international. The dance industry is growing. But there are hardly any trained western dance choreographers today. I don't think I'm special; just that I completed my education. There's room for 500 more!

Vision...

Vision is very important. If you had five seconds to live, what would you want to remember of your life? Did you waste it? Or did you make it worth the while?

Have I arrived?

I don't know whether I've reached where I wanted to. Perhaps I never will, else the artist in me will die. I have a vision — I want each of my dancers to become 10 times bigger than me. I see myself in each of them.

ASTHA GUPTA 