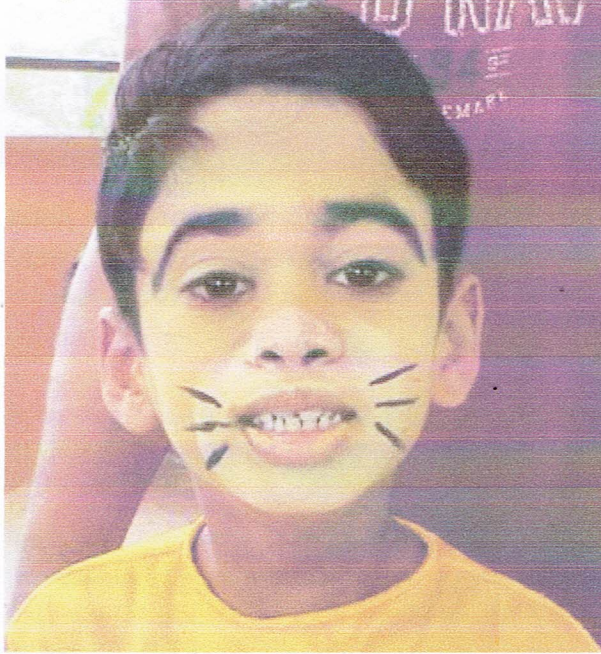


# STAGE OF INNOCENCE

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**By: Durba Ghosh**

*This production of The Lion King with 40 autistic children of Bubbles school will make this Valentine's a special one*

Autism is not a mental disease. It simply refers to a different cognitive capability. "Just another person in the crowd," is how dancer and choreographer Diana Tholoor likes to talk about the children she has worked with for the last three years at Bubbles School for Autism, teaching them the tactics of being on stage. The school, since its inception in 2003, has reached out to over 500 children and their families.

Choreographed and directed by Tholoor, 40 children of the Bubbles School will perform a special edition of The Lion King. Tholoor, a Sadguru National Awardee for Social Excellence, established Chrysallis Theater Company in 2000 and has worked with disabled children for decades, propounding the cause of integration in the performing arts.

But working with the children at Bubbles School had its own challenges, she admits. "We had to understand the needs and capability of each child. If they were intolerant to noise or dark places, we had to work towards dispelling that," she says. Indeed, she worked with the kids for three years to make them stage-ready.

In the first year, Thloor drew up a curriculum chart to teach them in theory about the nitty-gritties of being on stage; which way to face and why, how to respond to certain stage cues, moving in rhythm to music and how to deliver lines. "It wasn't much about dance. The aim was to familiarise them to stage," Thloor says.

In the second year, children were actually put on a stage and made to rehearse. They were taught the play of light and sound and its importance. The goal was to enable them to walk up to, on and off the stage, independently. Finally, in the third year, Thloor picked up a formal script, *The Lion King*, to direct. She trained the children for over a year. "The *Lion King* is every kid's favourite. It has multiple characters, so all the children can participate. It also has a lot of layers, enough to up the ante for the children," Thloor says.

Is she happy with the results? Yes. She believes the children have shown visible evidence of being more social, and confident of walking up on their own. Their articulation as well as flow of speech has improved. "But the most significant improvement was in their intellect. The script was 25 pages, and they knew each line by heart. Their emotive skill was fantastic. Some did even better than some professionals," Thloor gushes. The results have come on the back of repeated attempts and "a lot of patience". Initially, the kids would just stand and stare, while some would break down and start crying, having to do something outside their comfort zone. "The process had to be repeated again and again to get them used to it," she explains.

These are some of the benefits of art therapy, she points out. "The habit of rehearsals puts people at ease and makes them confident of being themselves in front of anyone," she says. "I don't know what the audience will expect, but what these kids have achieved is exceptional. The production looks neat and professional." Proceeds from the performance will be ploughed back directly into the school fund to help improve the infrastructure for the resident children. Next year, Thloor hopes to choose a more complicated script "because the difficulty level has to be notched up," she says.