

The way to Bergamo

It was 1980. I was teaching Bharanatayam in Centre Mandapa in Paris. As I was starting the session, Milena (Director of the institute) came to me and asked if I would permit a gentleman, Renzo Vescovi, to watch my class. I was fine with that. In came an Italian guy who sat in a corner throughout the entire class, simply observing. At the end of that session he wanted to talk to me. He asked, 'Would you be interested in coming to Bergamo to teach Bharatanatyam?' He seemed serious. Spontaneously I said, 'Yes, of course.' Then I asked, 'Where is Bergamo?' He seemed surprised that even before knowing the details I was willing to go to Bergamo or wherever he said! However, I gave him my home address and telephone number in Madras and asked him to get in touch with me by mail or telephone. (Those days, there was no internet facility and even having a telephone was considered a status symbol in a city like Madras!)

By the time I returned to Madras in August, I had almost forgotten about the proposal. One fine day in the end of 1980, Beppe, whom I had met in Paris knocked on my door. I couldn't believe at first that he was really there to meet me. My parents received him. But when my mother came to know that he was there to invite me to Bergamo to teach Bharatanatyam, she was totally against the idea. She didn't like the idea that after spending 8 full months in Paris, almost immediately I was again going abroad for 3 months. She called me inside and concluded in one sentence, 'Give that gentleman some snacks and coffee and politely refuse the offer'. Over. I knew heart of hearts that once my mother took a decision, it was a Himalayan task to even raise the topic with her again, let alone convincing her! But I was not going to give up. Here was Beppe all the way from Italy believing that I was seriously interested in the project. I called my father aside and managed to tell him in a nutshell (until that moment I had not told him about it!). He asked Beppe for some details about Teatro Tascabile Di Bergamo. Beppe readily handed over some records he had about the theatre. Then, my father told Beppe that he would need some time to think about the offer. Beppe said that he would come back after a month or so on his way back from Kerala to Bergamo. After about a month or so, there he was! Beppe promptly came home asking for our decision. My father asked Beppe to send a formal proposal and he agreed and left. My father was happy that the matter was temporarily postponed. (My mother did not like our entertaining such idea anyway. Her idea was to get me married off to a nice guy!). After about 15 days or so I received a pack through courier. There was a letter from the Director of the Theatre, Renzo Vescovi, inviting me to come to Bergamo for a period of 3 months to teach and to perform in Italy.

I realised that now a storm was brewing at home. My mother was totally against my going anywhere for such a long period. She told me how difficult it was making even a simple telephone call from Madras to France when I was there for 8 months. (My mother was working as a senior supervisor in Madras Telephone Exchange and she knew exactly the difficulties involved in international calls. (Those days, every international telephone call had to go through a telephone operator in the telephone exchange in Madras. There was no direct dialling system to call from home. Every 3 minutes the operator, who would be overhearing your conversation, would ask if you wanted to extend the conversation and then extend the connection time. Sometimes the lines were not clear. To add to the trouble there was this issue of time difference between the two countries). However, I was very eager to give it a try. My father was supportive of me. However he respected my mother's opinion. After a couple of days, he gradually persuaded my mother to consider the offer. She read the letter reluctantly

and then said that she would ask for Milena's opinion and then take a decision on the basis of that. We also contacted Mr. Janakiram, a gentleman who was with the UNESCO to verify if the Bergamo theatre was bonafide. Both came back with few, if any, information. However, Mr. Janakiram assured me that he would help me in case of any problem.

In the meantime, TTB was calling me frequently to know of my decision. I had somehow convinced my mother by this time to let me go. One day I was told that TTB had sent money to Alitalia asking to issue me the prepaid ticket. Alitalia had issued a one-way ticket to Bergamo even though TTB had paid for a return ticket! This again created suspicion among my family members. We decided to drop the idea and sent a telegram to TTB saying that with regret I was dropping the idea of coming to Bergamo. Next day I got a call from the director of the theatre Mr. Vescovi asking for reasons. My father explained. It was agreed that I would be given a return ticket to Milan. Next day I got a call again to confirm that the return ticket had been issued. I had to go to Bombay to get my Italian visa. I knew no one in Bombay and had no idea of how long it would take to get my visa. Through a distant relative of ours, my mother got the address of a South Indian family in Bombay. I took the help of that family for staying overnight in Bombay, went to the Italian Embassy and managed to get my visa in two days. Thankfully my flight had already been booked and I took off from Bombay as planned.

It was 18th of January 1981. I landed in Rome to take a connection to Milan. As I left the plane, I was told that Alitalia was on strike and the entire airport was almost empty. There was no one to guide me through. I had to take my suitcase to get customs clearance if I had to get out of the airport. There was only some police presence. I had just \$20 in hand. *As per the Indian Govt restrictions at that time, I was allowed to take only \$20 for travel). I wanted to make a telephone call to Bergamo to tell the organisation that I was stranded. But I could not get coins for the \$ bill. The airport authorities were talking in Italian and one guy came to me and said, 'Take a flight back as you cannot go to Milan now'. I told him that I was not leaving the airport nor taking a flight back without meeting my friends in Milan. After all it is TTB that has paid for the full ticket and I would rather go up to Milan, meet them and then return! After a while, when I realised that there was nothing I could do within my powers, I thought of my mother, apologised to her in my heart for having been adamant in my taking up this venture against her advice. I sat in a corner, took out the picture of my family deity and quietly prayed. After about 5 minutes, there came a lady in police uniform. She asked me in English what I was doing there. I explained to her the situation. She took me with her to some officers, spoke to them who asked me for the documents from TTB. I had them in my suitcase, I said. This lady helped me find my suitcase. I gave the officers the papers along with proof of my having performed for the UNESCO in Paris, for Mr. Raymond Barre, the former PM of France, and the Aga Khan. They looked at each other and said 'go'!. The lady officer told me that there was one last flight going to Milan from the domestic terminal and if I took my suitcase and go on my own following the signboards to the domestic terminal perhaps I could catch that flight. I rushed to the domestic terminal with my suitcase on a trolley only to see that the gate was closing. I argued my way and the attendants took my suitcase and I boarded the last plane to Milan!

As I came out of the airport in Milan, Beppe was waiting for me with a cheerful young lady receiving me with a big smile. Beppe introduced her to me. She is Susanna Vicenzetto.

It was about three quarter of an hour drive to Bergamo. (My father had shown me on the map where Bergamo was!). As we were nearing Bergamo, Susanna pointed out to me... 'Look there. Do you see the hills? That is Citta Alta of Bergamo'. My first thought was, 'Wow, it looks like Tirupati!' We reached the theatre first as Susanna said that there was one message waiting for me. I had no clue of who could have left a message even before my landing in Bergamo! It was Mr. Janakiram's voice message. He said in Tamil (as he did not want TTB to understand!), 'I hope you have a nice time in Bergamo. In case you sense any problem, just call me. I will make suitable arrangements to pick you up from there'!

It had been planned that I stay at my student Susanna's house and that she would take care of my class schedule, my stay, my food arrangements etc, etc. She was to be fully in charge of my stay in Bergamo. I felt quite happy because she was warm, welcoming and very enthusiastic. She was very particular that I had a comfortable stay.

After eating something, I wanted to rest a while as I was exhausted by then. But Susanna said that TTB group was going to Milan for a show and the theatre group was enthusiastic about taking me too if I was interested. I could not refuse as she looked very excited to take me to 'one of the best shows' in Milan. I joined the group. It was a nice theatrical production but, on my way back, I was almost half asleep. I was introduced to the Theatre director Mr. Vescovi. He was very formal and we exchanged pleasantries. He asked me if my flight was ok. I wanted to tell him then and there, my not – so pleasant experiences. But since he had invited me to his place for lunch the next day, I reserved it for then.

Second day. I went for meeting Renzo over lunch. He was again quite formal. When he asked me how my travel was, as though I was waiting for that question, I just vented out my anger that I had been containing all along! Patiently he listened to all I got to say. At the end of it, he asked me if I wanted to write to the press how unpleasant it was. 'I do not want to go that extent. I just wanted to tell someone how I felt,' I said. He looked baffled and didn't know what to say.

Then when I calmed down, as we started having lunch, Renzo came with an audiocassette. He asked me if I would be interested in telling him what the music was. When he played the music, I couldn't believe what I heard. It was Venkatesa Suprabhatham of Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi. (An ardent devotee of Balaji, I felt that I was being blessed as I was starting my association with TTB and Renzo). I explained to him the significance of Suprabhatham. Next, he came with another cassette. I listened to it for a while and could not recognise anything specific. It was the pleasant sound of waves, birds and breeze. I asked him what it was. He said, 'This is the sound of Kalakshetra'. I was astounded. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would be meeting in some remote corner of Italy a person who loved India, Indian music and the sound of Kalakshetra so passionately.

Then he came with some dance theory book, asked me about 'Kangula' & 'Langula' (Same hand gesture with different names). Also in another book he showed me the word 'jathi'. He wanted to know the meaning as, according to him, it did not make sense in that particular sentence. Actually it should have been 'jaathi' as it was about 'pancha jaathi'. I explained to him the differences between 'Jathi' and 'Jaathi'. Later, often I used to tease him for having 'tested' my knowledge of Bharatanatyam in this way!

Next day, I visited TTB. In simple terms, 'a mini paradise'. A small yet beautiful theatre. As I entered, there were a few steps going down. Then there was the entrance hall with beautiful pictures of Indian dancers, office room, space for actors to keep their work-related stuff and instruments and adjacent to these, there was this beautiful small auditorium with about 100 seats. Sweet sound of sitar, flute and salangai (dance bells) welcomed me as I entered.

Susanna introduced me to the artists who were seriously rehearsing there. Ludovico was practicing on his metal flute, Maria Teresa on sitar, others were practicing on stilts. Luigia & Tiziana were practicing Orissi on their own with video in front of them! It was fascinating to see how they were rehearsing with their guru's video in front of them.

Then Renzo came. He said that Susanna and Ludovico would be my main students and I would have seminario (workshops) in addition. Susanna and Vico wanted to show me what they had learnt in India. They performed Alarippu (Tisram), Jathiswaram (in Kalyani ragam) and Varnam (Mohamaana yen meedhil in Bhairavi). I was astounded. The precision & formations greatly impressed me. I told Renzo that it was almost unbelievable that they had learnt so much in a matter of just three months during their stay in Kerala. Given that it takes years of hard work for foreigners to understand the culture, tradition and to learn a complex composition like varnam, it was a remarkable feat. Renzo seemed pleased with my remark but did not say anything further. I wondered, 'Does he know Bharatanatyam? Does he have a clue of what a remarkable talent Susanna & Vico are?'

That evening Beppe performed Kathakali. Renzo was presenting the show explaining the significant parts in Italian to those uninitiated in Kathakali. The dance, music, mood and the ambience- everything- made me feel as if I was in Kerala watching a show. It was 'Poothana moksha'. Till date I remember vividly this performance of Beppe. His portrayal of Poothana, the she-devil's evil intention with which she enters Gokulam to kill Krishna and how, on seeing Krishna, her evil intentions vanish and instead, she starts adoring Krishna. All these were very beautifully portrayed by Beppe. His bhava showing the transition from evil to becoming a devotee of the little Krishna touched me instantly. I was moved to tears of joy seeing a soul-stirring performance that day.

Next evening there was Orissi performance by Luigia and Tiziana. Renzo was presenting the show with enthusiasm and excitement. He seemed to follow every hand gesture of the dancers and every word of the song they were dancing. When the show began, as the lights gradually came up, I saw a sculpture at the centre of the stage. The music started and that was when I realised that it was actually a dancer (Tiziana). Then, as the performance unfolded, Luigia presented superbly choreographed bhava-based compositions and Tiziana, mostly nritta-based. What was incredible was that they were accompanied by an all-Italian orchestra! Beppe was singing. Teresa on Sitar, Vico on flute and Susanna on Pakhwaj. It was amazing. It looked very professional. As they concluded the programme, I was overwhelmed with emotion.

How is it possible for a group of Italians to reach this level of understanding and performing of any form of Indian art, that too in such a short period? It was mind blowing to know that every artist in the group learnt several forms of Indian arts simultaneously while they specialised in a couple of them. It was beyond my

comprehension. (As if to prove the point, Beppe sang 'Ninnu kori' in Mohana ragam, a varnam in carnatic music style with superb diction).

This place, the people, the mood, the ambience reminded me of my Kalasagara, back home! 'Kalasagara' my institute was run in the small auditorium that was built for this purpose behind our house. The day would start with veena and music classes and continue throughout. One could here the sound of music and dance in the house throughout the day. TTB to me started resembling Kalasagara. I began to realise that I have started loving the organisation's vision and work and that this was the kind of organisation I want to be a part of. The shows, the classes, the rehearsals all made such an impression in me, I was totally fascinated by everything the group was doing. That night I could not sleep.

I sat down and wrote a detailed letter to my mother.

The next day it was time to begin regular sessions with my students. Susanna, Vico, Renzo and I sat down to chart out a plan. Based on what they had already learnt I wanted to teach them further. But Renzo asked me to work on their adavu-s (basic dance movements) and make a video of the changes and corrections. We set out with a plan for the next one month. In the classes, during the initial days, Renzo sat behind in the gallery quietly and at times asked me questions about what can and cannot be done in Bharatanatyam. Coming from India, that too from Madras, where we followed conservative methods of teaching, it was strange that I was being asked questions. Back home the students just did what they were told to do, whereas here I had to explain every move, every word and every sentence. This made me think. Think a lot, I did.

I started pondering over the compositions I was teaching. I spent, when alone, contemplating on how and what I was dancing. I repeatedly danced every move in front of my students before teaching them just to be sure of what was being taught. I discussed every move that Susanna and Vico were unsure of. I explained the explicit and implicit meaning of every song, the tala structure, the significance of the ragas and the 'dos and don'ts' with regard to bhava. Renzo, without saying in so many words, made me think of every move, every word and every bhava I was teaching before teaching my students. Unknowingly, I was learning to teach foreigners. This experience laid the foundation for my honing the technique of teaching non-Indians.

TTB was in citta alta (upper city) in Bergamo. The view of Bergamo city from above is very beautiful. I visited Bergamo during the winter season. It used to snow frequently and the city looked out of the world when it was fully covered with snow. Susanna's house was in citta bassa (lower city). Every day we used to drive along the curved roads to reach the theatre in citta alta and the view was magical. One day I told Susanna that I wanted to walk up the hill. So, we decided to walk up to the class the next day. The view was really breathtaking. I took as many pictures as possible. 'I would perhaps never be able to see Bergamo as magical as it is now', I thought! The next week Susanna told me that they were rehearsing in a church and I would be free the whole day! I took the opportunity to walk up alone that day. Susanna had told me about the steps that go up to half the route and I wanted to try that route on my own. Susanna was worried that I might lose my way! (There was no mobile phone those days!). I convinced her that I was capable of finding my way. I am glad I did. The walk up was memorable. I stopped every now and then, looked back as if to take in all the breathtaking views. When I reached the church to see the rehearsals, Susanna was happy that I reached safe and I was so happy that she 'let' me go on my own!

Those days, it was tough for a strict vegetarian to even explain to Europeans what it really meant. When I was in Paris, Milena had arranged for Indian vegetarian food to be specially prepared for me. Due to that perhaps, I somehow assumed that even in Bergamo I would get Indian vegetarian food! When I first told Susanna that I was a vegetarian, she perhaps had not comprehended the implications and the 'complexities' of what was going to follow! I told her that as a strict vegetarian I would not eat any food that is contaminated with meat. I would not eat meat, fish, egg and such other products. She was baffled. However, she wanted to know what I would eat! I said rice, bread, vegetables and dairy products. That was a big relief for her. She managed to cook something vegetarian for me. I had taken with me some dry pickle and spicy dal powder. I rationed them and ate very little from my pack everyday and ate alongwith whatever she made. At times I too cooked whatever vegetable was available.

One day Susanna was very cheerful. She said, 'Usha dear (this is how she always addressed me), you are working so hard and if you eat like this every day, you will die soon! So, I brought something special for you to support your health'. I asked her to first tell me what it was before putting in my mouth. She said it was fish eggs! That's it. I jumped from my chair! I gave her a LONG lecture about what it is being a STRICT vegetarian. Poor Susanna. At the end of it she decided to learn some Indian recipes to cook for me.

The classes for TTB and the practices were all held in the small theatre that was in the centre of citta alta. It had a nice auditorium too. Though small for a compact audience, it was very professionally done. Every care had been taken to keep the lighting and sound absolutely professional. Here, I gave Bharatanatyam performances twice a week, mostly during the weekends. Renzo would present it in Italian with introduction to Bharatanatyam and also give the explanation for every dance that was performed. I would do the demonstrations simultaneously. For this, I had to explain to him every composition that I performed. Since I stayed for three months, I had taken with me from India professionally recorded music to dance. In India I was used to improvising while dancing as I always had live orchestra. But when I had to explain to Renzo the nuances, I had to keep in mind exactly what we both had decided to present during the demonstration and remember to perform the same way for recorded music. The first few programmes were a bit of a challenge as I had to restrain myself from improvising. After a few shows, on some occasions, just before the show I would tell Renzo to change his presentation according to what I wanted to do on that particular day. He too found it a bit daunting initially, but as we continued in this fashion, over a period it was clear to both of us. I got used to most of the explanations as I got familiarised to some Italian words as markers and he got used to my demonstrations too. As weeks passed by, at times suddenly on the stage I would improvise, and at the end of the show he would come and ask me for explanation...it was fun.

Renzo was very fascinated by the geometric lines in Bharatanatyam based on the Kalakshetra style. During demonstrations he used to analyse the conservation and the movement of body energy while executing specific moments. Recitation of jathis in talam and thattumettu were also his favourite. He used to say, 'It is fascinating to see how in Bharatanatyam, while doing the thattumettu the feet follow rhythm, the hands interpret the poem and the face portrays the bhava'. According to him, if you considered thattumettu as an orchestra, the feet movements were the percussions and the hands and face were the other instruments.

Renzo was also very particular about the sound and lighting arrangements for the shows. Every time, every care was taken to see that the lighting was done according to the choreography, the mood and the bhava. He used to discuss with me each and every composition and then decide the lighting. Over a period I learnt from him the art of doing lighting for Bharatanatyam programmes.

As Susanna and Vico had learnt with several teachers before they started with me, it was a trifle difficult for me to teach them my choreographies based on Kalakshetra style. Renzo too felt that working on the basics of Bharatanatyam before embarking on new choreographies was the right thing to do. But Vico was not quite happy about it. He also felt that I was correcting him more than Susanna. Both were older than I was and I hesitated initially for a few days wondering if my way of insisting on the technical aspects was right or not. I did not know if I should discuss this further with Renzo as he stopped coming to see the sessions any longer. Actually I felt that Renzo had lost interest in what we were doing and that was disappointing. There was also this problem of difference in style that was gradually getting to be a bit of an issue. After giving it a good thought, one day I had an open chat with Susanna & Vico. I told them that fixing the basics is the best way to move forward. Susanna readily agreed. Vico did not say much but seemed to accept it. From then on, it was just concentrated work everyday.

One day I asked Renzo why he was not coming to see the progress of Susanna & Vico. I was really proud of them and my work and it was somewhat disappointing that that was not being recognised (acknowledged). Renzo just said, 'Initially it was necessary for me to assess how you three worked together and after a while it was clear to me that it was going on fine and I am fully confident that you will take further care...they are in safe hands. There is no need for me to be there to guide you'. I was really delighted to hear this. I was hardly 25 at that time and it really felt good. I regretted having misunderstood Renzo to think that he had lost interest.

During this period (3 months to be exact) I had many opportunities to see TTB actors practice different styles of dance, music, acting and singing. It was amazing to see them put in hours of training everyday. (Later, I coined the words 'TTB product' to refer to anyone who was hardworking). At times they practiced with the video monitor in front of them. Luigia & Tiziana practiced Orissi with the video kept next to them playing their guru Aloka's dance. Renzo used to sit in front of them, compare their postures and expressions and correct them. When you see artists work with such passion, it is instantly infectious. Whenever I had some free time, I used to watch them practice. That was when I began loving Orissi.

Workshops (seminario) were conducted regularly. Students who were not part of TTB used to take regular workshops in Bharatanatyam in evenings. It was such a nice feeling to see those who had never been to India taking serious lessons in Bharatanatyam in Bergamo! It was a new experience for me. But what I had learned while teaching Susanna and Vico and from answering Renzo's questions helped me a lot with regard to these workshops. By now I knew more or less what sort of questions would come from the students and was well prepared.

One day Renzo came with a project. It was for the Italian TV RAI UNO. It was a documentary programme titled 'Feet'. We had to present something about Indian dance and also the significance of dance movements involving complicated leg and feet movements. Renzo, Susanna and I went to Rome for the shooting. The director of

the show was fascinated to see how in Bharatanatyam we show 'feet' with hand gestures.

After we finished the shooting for the TV, Renzo rushed for some official engagements. Susanna and I went on a whirlwind tour of Rome for an hour in a cab. Rome was really awesome.. However, not for long Renzo and Susanna could enjoy for they were unable to find even one Indian restaurant to get me food. Renzo spent a long time dialling several Italian restaurants asking if they would make rice and vegetables. Finally, we found a restaurant making rice, the Indian way. I managed to get boiled vegetable and pomme frite and I ate rice with tomato ketchup! Renzo and Susanna were very uncomfortable seeing me eat my vegetarian food this way. They never thought of suggesting Italian vegetarian food (due to politeness?) and I had no clue of Italian vegetarian food. We used to laugh about this for very many years thereafter.

Back in Bergamo we continued with our classes. Susanna and Vico video- recorded simultaneously all the adavus and all the compositions they had learnt with me.

Again Renzo came with another project. This time it was for the Televisione Svizzera Italiana in Lugano, Switzerland. We were invited to do a two part documentary film on Bharatanatyam. We spent several hours and worked on the details for the documentary. The first part was on the nritta (technical) aspect and the second, on abhinaya. It was decided that each part was to start with my teaching and then extend that with my performance. There would be Renzo's simultaneous commentary. I wrote down meticulously all the aspects I wanted to cover to teach and to perform. I took with me 4 different sets of costumes and jewels. Renzo took with him all the books that we might need for this (He had a huge collection of books). Just a week before the shooting, Renzo started having high fever. That did not stop him though from his preparations for the project.

We all set off for Switzerland by two cars. At that time, I did not have visa to enter Switzerland. We started getting worried as we were reaching the Swiss border. Luckily the Swiss Police let me in along with the others when they checked the documents.

We reached the TV centre. The shooting was to last two full days. Renzo was still suffering with high fever. But he was determined to get on with the shooting. Susanna, Ludovico, Tiziana and I were there. Tiziana did some adavus and mudras as she had learnt some basics during the seminario-s. She then played the tambura when I had to sing for the class for the documentary. I changed my costumes and jewellery every time I shot a different composition. The entire team patiently waited every time I had to change, something that took several hours. Strangely there were no locks for any of the rooms in the TV Centre. I was afraid that I might lose my precious costumes and jewels. But Renzo said that in Switzerland no one would touch others' stuff and assured me that whether there was lock or not all my stuff would be safe. Amazingly that is how it was, both the days.

The first set of recording was done with great care. The adavus, explanation of the basics, korvais, mudras, etc were all well done to our satisfaction. We then went on to alarippu. After recording pushpanjali and alrippu, we saw the rush. Alas! The sound of my bells was missing. We had to re-record from the beginning. Everyone started, from the beginning, with the same degree of enthusiasm.

When I danced Thalattu (a lullaby, his favourite), Renzo was very particular about the special effects with lighting. He also wanted to show the moon in the background. It took quite a while to get this right and he was persistent. He also wanted a huge portrait of Nataraja in the background when I danced some pieces on Shiva. Choosing the right pictures and focussing them on the background took a long time. He tried hard to get the right image for that special effect.

The last piece was Thillana. The producer wanted me to begin from somewhere in the middle. Renzo asked me if I could recognise the melody half way through in my audio recording. Still young, my ego was hurt. I challenged him to play from any point and picked up from there. The entire crew was pleasantly surprised including Renzo and there I was, with all smiles full of pride. All along Renzo gave commentary in Italian. He managed to gather himself, still taking pills for fever. Only at the end of it when the shooting was complete, he just slumped in his chair to take a bit of rest.

We returned to Bergamo.

It was April. It was time to leave. Renzo and the members asked me if I could stay back for some more months / weeks. I could not. I had to return as I was working at a nationalised bank in Madras. I would lose my job if I extended my stay. At that time it was necessary for me to work as I was unsure if I would be able to sustain financially as a dancer in the future. Also, I had assured my mother that I would not extend my stay and would return after 3 months. I did not feel like leaving TTB. I wanted to join TTB and be part of the group but never had the courage to express my desire to Renzo or the others. I decided to return to Madras.

Susanna came home with a big smile one day and said, ' Usha dear! Be prepared. We are going to Venice'. 'What?' I exclaimed. I couldn't believe my ears. Visiting Venice was one of my silent desires. I had read a lot about Venice and seen the beautiful pictures. There were days when I used to think that I should somehow visit Venice at least once in my lifetime. But never in my wildest dreams I thought that I was going to really see Venice! Franco & Susanna arranged for a van and we set off. It was one of the most memorable trips of my life. On my way, Susanna told me that Renzo was very happy with the Bharatanatyam sessions in the three months of my stay and so had arranged for this to give me a treat!

The last day at TTB, I was asked to wait in the theatre. I didn't know what was happening. Suddenly, Lugia, Tiziana, Susanna, Franco, Vico, Beppe, all came in. They came in line playing music with band and dancing. As they were dancing, they left a huge gift for me. I found a lovely suitcase beautifully wrapped wishing me bon voyage and asking me to return soon. Renzo gave me a nice photo album to keep all my pictures taken during my Bergamo visit. I was moved.

The day I was leaving, Renzo came, wished me well and asked me to keep in touch. I didn't know at that time that I would continue my association with TTB for very many years to come. In between my visits to TTB, Renzo and I exchanged several letters discussing all that we both appreciated with regard to Indian dance, music, mythology and religion. I wrote to him about every Indian dance show that impressed me in India. Bharatanatyam or Orissi, Kathak or Kathakali, be it music concert or Theatre, Indian style or European style, I wrote to him in detail. He too would write to me about the books he read (he was a voracious reader). We would continue our discussions when we met next, wherever it was.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Twenty seven eventful years have passed by since then. Renzo introduced me to great artists, organised my performances in some of the most beautiful places in Italy for internationally acclaimed Festivals. I felt honoured when he introduced me to others as 'our Bharatanatyam teacher'.

I set foot into TTB with the simple idea of teaching what little I knew but never expected that I would gain, along the way, so much that our association would enrich my life forever.