

Dance frees them to fight abuse

Malini Nair | TNN

New Delhi: Having grown up on Kalkaji's footpaths, Nita, 17, is no stranger to the horrors that confront a woman on Delhi's streets. The long abuse and malnourishment tell in her frame, but up on a stage at the YWCA auditorium she has full control of her life, surrounding space and body. She and 37 other sexually exploited homeless girls in the 12-22 age group are choreographing a performance in which dance and real life meet with happy consequences.

Helping the dancers are two master teachers collaborating with the Battery Dance Company (BDC) of New York. The renowned company runs an outreach programme, Dancing to Connect, to address issues of exclusion in society. On Wednesday, the choreography will be staged at FICCI Auditorium as a part of Catalyst Conference, a programme on sexual abuse.

"Dance is not learnt, it is created daily in our lives. If you can breathe you can dance" is Slovenian dancer-



MOVING TO THEIR OWN BEAT

choreographer Tadej Brdnik's philosophy for the workshop. Brdnik asks the girls, drawn from two shelter homes in the city, to interpret their names using their bodies. Some use their limbs, others twist their torsos, but one teen only moves her head and shoulders, eyes lowered. "Even in that jerky awkwardness there was dance, so we gave her a partner who did the

same movements as her. It became a choreographed awkwardness," says Brdnik.

Sanved, a Kolkata NGO that specializes in dance therapy, is collaborating with BDC on the project. The underlying philosophy of the workshops is to help the youngsters realize that they have some control over their lives and they don't have to resign themselves to abuse and

humiliation. Lydia Tetzlaff, another master teacher, says the girls "show no rancour, no hesitation at all in working with each other. The level of trust and helpfulness is amazing".

The freedom from structure is a bit unsettling for the girls, who would much rather do some unbridled Bollywood moves. "There will be some frustration, some boredom, some lack of concentration and that happens everywhere. But in the end, this has to be their dance," says Brdnik.

EmancipAction, an international NGO working to end child sex-trafficking, is organizing the event. Laura Entwistle, founder & CEO, said, "We wanted to bring new people to the table—young leaders who could bring their skills and networks and resources to bear on the issue". The BDC itself will also perform on Wednesday, and dancer-activist Mallika Sarabhai will stage her acclaimed solo work 'I Am Not That Woman'.

(Names of the participating girls have been changed)