



VIDEO

GHOSTLY PLEASURES

► See that infamous pottery scene up close at Ghost the Musical


THE SUNDAY TIMES

Beautiful Thing by Sonia Faleiro

A tour de force of reportage that follows a Dickensian cast of characters through the seamy world of Bombay's neon-lit dance bars

Stanley Stewart Published: 24 July 2011



Night moves: Bombay bar dancers in 2005 (Indranil Mukherjee)

Beautiful Thing is the gritty documentary to *Slumdog's* fairy tale, a harrowing and heart-breaking account of those forced to turn to the hidden world of Bombay's dance bars in order to find food and shelter.

The hierarchies of the sex industry are as complex as the Indian caste system. The lower orders are the waitresses in the so-called "silent bars" who offer customers hand relief to go with the beer and nuts.

Films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* have made us superficially familiar with the dark side of Bombay. Now a new book arrives to inform us that we don't really know the half of it. In

Doubleclick
Omniure
Revenue Science

more than half the city's population — live in slums.

Above them are the brothel prostitutes ruled by fearsome madams in every category of establishment from Falkland Road shanties to Juhu beach villas. More elevated are the five-star girls who waft past the doormen of luxury hotels to loiter by the pool with a drink, a bikini and a copy of Hello. But looking down on them all are the bar dancers.

Over the past 30 years there has been an explosion of dance bars in Bombay; their exponential increase has exceeded even the Indian economy's much-vaunted 8% growth rate. In 1984 there were only 24 dance bars in Bombay. By 2005 there were 1,500.

Bar dancing is the Indian equivalent of lap dancing, without the nudity or the lap. The dance girls — who need to offer more than a passing facsimile of Bollywood beauty — perform on a low stage for customers who throw them money. Occasionally they will drink with the customers, in order to entice yet more money from them. No bar dancer will admit to sleeping with the customers but the bar's big spenders usually manage to buy their way into a favoured dancer's bed. Stories such as that of the con man Abdul Karim Telgi, rumoured to have lavished more than £100,000 on a bar dancer, keep their dreams alive.

When Sonia Faleiro, an award-winning reporter and novelist, accepted a magazine assignment for an article on Bombay's dance bars, she thought she knew what to expect — voiceless women, exploited, oppressed, trapped in Bombay's dark underbelly. What she found was Leela, outspoken, indomitable and fiercely independent. Drawn into Leela's orbit, Faleiro stayed to write a book, spending the next five years exploring the neon-lit world of the Night Lovers bar and its cocky denizens, determined to live life on their own terms. "I don't dance for men," Leela says, "they dance for me."

As a child Leela had watched her father, an alcoholic schizophrenic, beat and rape her mother. When she hit puberty it was her turn. Unable to force her to feature in his pornographic videos, he sold her to the local police who took turns to rape her. At the age of 13, she decided it was time she took control of her own life. Stealing money, she took a train to Bombay, the city that promises salvation for millions of rural Indians. After a brief stint in a child brothel, she escaped through a window, and made her way to Night Lovers, a dance bar.

The cast of characters in *Beautiful Thing* is Dickensian, as is the teeming, shabby world of slums and brothels and bars through which they struggle to navigate a course. Faleiro sketches them and their world with wisdom, empathy and an unerring eye for the details, the vulnerabilities and the asides that illuminate character. There is the one person Leela loves, the arrogant, childish Priya, with her film-star looks and her tragic marriage to a customer. There is Shetty, bar owner and Leela's "husband", a martyr to threatening gangsters, avaricious police, temperamental dancers and chronic constipation. There is the small-time hood Tinkoo, abandoned by the age of eight, apeing the male icons of Bollywood, too soft-centred to be a proper pimp but aware there is only one sure-fire business: the business of women.

There are the hijras, the transsexuals, whose wild parties invariably end in tears or fights. There are the gangsters, suave, charming, deadly. There are comic Falstaffian turns such as Aunty, an elderly madam dressed like a Cabbage Patch Kid, tending the gardens around her picture-postcard cottages, while her girls are giving blowjobs to the customers in the bedrooms. There is Ameena, dying of Aids, because she cannot afford the 90p for child care while she is in hospital. There is Apsara, fat, passive, dependent, who in late life suddenly manages to transform herself from victim to pampered and feared madam. It is an opportunity only made possible by stealing money from her own daughter — Leela.

Beautiful, capricious, charismatic and blessed with a stubborn optimism that is both a blessing and a curse, Leela is the ultimate survivor. The tragedy at the heart of this book is that the only strategies for survival available to her are corrosive and ultimately ruinous. To an educated middle-class writer such

as Faleiro, the dance bar, with its cloying “kustomers” and its sexual compromises, does not look much like Leela’s longed-for independence. But all things are relative. Do not compare my life to yours, Leela warns. Compare it to the life of my mother.

In 2005, Bombay’s dance bars were closed by an ambitious Maharashtrian politician who deemed them “likely to deprave the public morality”. Overnight, 75,000 bar dancers were out of work. Night Lovers closed, Shetty went back to his wife, the gangsters began plotting ways to make money from this new prohibition and Leela faced penury. The trajectory that took her from abused village girl to bar dancer, her bra stuffed with 100-rupee notes, had reached its zenith and began the long descent back to earth. When Leela suddenly disappears, Faleiro goes in search of her, following her faint trail through the nether world of low-rent prostitution that makes Night Lovers look like the Tiller Girls.

Faleiro’s prose can sometimes be a trifle choppy and her copy editors should have been more alert. Hindi is sprinkled rather too liberally throughout the text for a non-Indian to follow with ease. But these are minor complaints in what is a tour de force of reportage, whose depth, insight and resonance make it the equal of the best fiction. It is Faleiro’s great achievement that she has portrayed the tragedy of this world without a shred of sentimentality. In this she has done justice to her characters for whom sentimentality — like romance, love and honesty — are luxuries they can rarely afford. “Tears,” the dancers say, “are the indulgence of those who haven’t suffered enough.”

By book’s end Leela has caught hold of another life buoy of dubious reliability. She has met a gangster who offers to arrange employment for her in a dance bar in Dubai. Faleiro sees her off at the airport. The indomitable Leela seems smaller, diminished; Faleiro has reason to believe she might have contracted HIV. Leela asks her to look into her eyes. She asks her if she sees any fear. Faleiro admits that she does not, that in the frightening world of Bombay’s sex industry she has never seen Leela afraid. This is Leela’s only triumph: her own unquenchable spirit.

Police watch

Corruption in Bombay’s dance bars was endemic, with the biggest culprits often being the police, who demanded regular protection money (‘hafta’). Shetty, the owner of the dance bar in which Leela worked, paid this hafta, but also built a concealed room at the back, so that, warned about forthcoming raids, he could quickly hustle his girls out of sight. The police weren’t always so accommodating, though. When one inspector decided he needed a new set of furniture, he sent his men to Shetty’s to ‘borrow’ what he wanted. ‘It went without saying that these borrowed items were never returned,’ explains Faleiro.

Canongate £12.99/ebook £13 pp225. [Available at the Bookshop of £10.99 \(inc p&p\) and £13 \(ebook\) on 0845 271 2135](#)