

TROPICAL LIFE

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THEATER REVIEW

The fatal melancholy of fashion icon Blow

BY BILL HIRSCHMAN
Special to the Miami Herald

For some unbridled personalities, style is life. But for a style addict like fashion icon Isabella Blow, it never provided enough substance to fill the hole in her soul. Watching Blow wrestle with her past on the eve of her seventh suicide attempt provides a cautionary tale in Mad Cat Theatre Company's insightful, witty and thought-provoking world premiere of Jessica Farr's *Blow Me*.

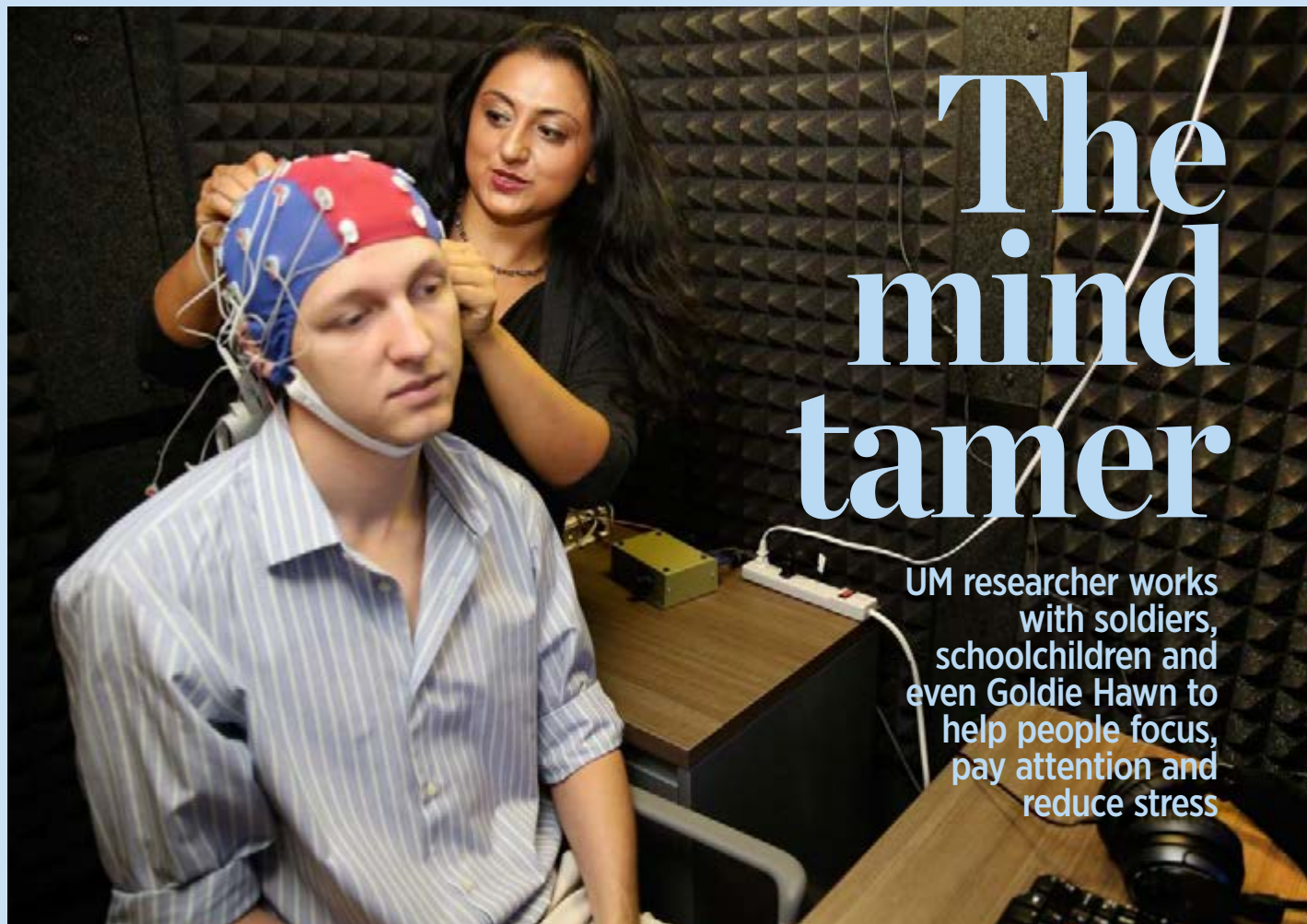
Farr and director Paul Tei's fever dream of that night depicts a tragic death spiral of a real-life woman, relieved by droll epigrams tossed off by Blow and her coterie like a latter-day Algonquin Round Table.

The play swirls around a bravura performance by the superb Erin Joy Schmidt. She creates a memorable portrait of a flamboyant 24/7 persona constructed for a world of people seeking celebrity as its own self-validation.

• TURN TO 'BLOW ME', 4E



'BLOW ME': Erin Joy Schmidt plays Isabella Blow.



The mind tamer

UM researcher works with soldiers, schoolchildren and even Goldie Hawn to help people focus, pay attention and reduce stress

GREGORY CASTILLO/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

STUDYING THE MIND: Amishi Jha demonstrates an electrode cap used to measure brainwaves on student research assistant Adam Burton, 21, at UM.

BY KITTY DUMAS
Special to The Miami Herald

Amishi Jha, Ph.D. is probably one of the most influential women you never heard of.

She's everywhere: smiling next to media mogul Arianna Huffington, meeting with the military in Washington, advising her friend Goldie Hawn, speaking to leaders at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, with the Dalai Lama in India.

At 42, Jha, a neuroscientist and associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, is the ultimate oxymoron — a rock star in the field of contemplative neuroscience. She studies how practices like mindfulness meditation change the structure and function of the brain, increasing attention and working memory while minimizing stress.

Practiced for centuries by Eastern cultures, mindfulness is defined as paying attention in the present moment.

Although she is following in the footsteps of giants in the field, they say Jha is blazing her own trail. Her work is influencing such disparate fields as the military, primary education and business. Jha currently has five active research grants with the U.S. Army, which is trying to help soldiers train and protect their minds as well as their bodies amid multiple deployments and life-altering injuries.

U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Walter E. Piatt and his soldiers had just returned in 2009 from back-to-back deployments to Iraq when he expressed to an army doctor a desire to help prepare soldiers mentally and emotionally. The doctor connected him with Jha, who came to speak to military leaders about her research.

Now commander of the Seventh U.S. Army Joint Multinational Training Command, stationed in Germany, Piatt says within five minutes of listening to Jha's presentation, she had described challeng-

es soldiers were facing after multiple deployments. "She pretty much described me," he said in a telephone interview. "It was not the nicest thing to hear, but she was very accurate."

"Her study really interested me because we train all the time to get better, and we see results," he says. "We weren't doing anything for our minds, just giving soldiers information."

To administer the training for her research, Jha enlisted Elizabeth Stanley, Ph.D., founder of the Mind Fitness Training Institute and associate professor of security studies at Georgetown University. Stanley, a former U.S. Army military intelligence officer, developed the mindfulness-based training.

"We fight now in a cognitive struggle with an enemy that can't be defeated through technology. They've taken our strengths, big weapons and technology,

• TURN TO AMISHI JHA, 4E

THE MIND TAMER

Jha's work helps us focus and minimize stress

• AMISHI JHA, FROM 1E

and changed the game," Piatt says. "They attack on their terms. They don't care about civilian casualties. Our best weapons in that fight is the soldiers' minds.

"You're not letting your mind wander, you're focusing straight on. This is what her technique teaches you to do, focus on the task."

In addition, he says, according to research, soldiers who do not receive the training are more predisposed to serious levels of stress and trauma.

"In the military," Piatt says, "we all suffer from post-traumatic stress. Everyone does. The first thing we have to do is admit that. We now acknowledge that."

Soldiers who are taught before deployment can regulate their stressful thoughts by increasing focus on the present moment, rather than continually reliving stressful events or worrying about the future.

After receiving mindfulness training, a group of soldiers wanted it for their spouses. Jha raised the money to provide the trainers.

"I have enormous respect for her and what she's doing. She's done some fundamental work," says Jon Kabat-Zinn, the pioneering scientist, meditation teacher and author of the classic work, *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. "She's such a leader in the field and so young."

Kabat-Zinn, whom Jha calls a mentor, now sees her in that role.

"She's mentoring a whole generation of young scientists," he says.

Breezing into the Jha Lab at UM, Jha is dressed in black except for the tan cowboy boots, her flowing black hair right out of a shampoo commercial. Jha is relaxed, animated and unreserved. Her passion and ability to connect with any audience, say those who know her, are part of what has made her so successful.

"We know now in 2013 that exercise keeps the body healthy," Jha says. "... but we have not come to the cultural understanding that the mind, just like the body, needs regular exercise to be operating at its full healthfulness."

Jha's work has led to a collaboration with actress Goldie Hawn, who after Sept. 11 established the now Miami-based Hawn Foundation, enlisting educators, scientists, psychologists



PHOTOS BY GREGORY CASTILLO/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

WORKING IT OUT: 'I am so not the poster child for calm and balance. I am a continual work in progress,' says Amishi Jha, above with an electrode cap and, at right, working with Martin Paczynsk, a post-doctoral fellow at UM.

and child advocates to build a curriculum to teach children how to create a sense of well-being and resilience.

Based on research that shows the damaging impact of stress on the part of the brain that controls executive functioning and learning, Hawn's foundation developed the MindUp curriculum, designed to decrease stress, improve academic performance and concentration. After meeting Jha at a conference six years ago, Hawn asked her to be an advisor and later a board member.

"She was just a great mentor. ... We have a wonderful collaborating relationship and also a friendship. Amishi is a pioneer and a star," Hawn says.

Jha says she came to UM, moving with her husband Michael Bonanno, a computer programmer at the School of Law, and two children, because the university was open to innovation. Since she arrived in 2010 from the University of Pennsylvania, Jha has secured \$3.5 million in new grants for her research, adding to the millions in research dollars she has garnered over the years.

The lab, where Jha and her team work, is housed in the university's new neuroscience building, itself a statement of the universi-

ty's commitment to research into brain functioning, says Leonidas G. Bachas, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Jha collaborates with Scott Rogers, founder and director of the Institute for Mindfulness Studies at the UM School of Law's Mindfulness in Law Program. In 2010, the two co-founded the UM Mindfulness Research and Practice Initiative to foster research, implementation and collaboration across the campus.

"She gets people excited and motivated," Rogers says. "She takes these very complex themes and concepts and makes them comprehensible to everybody."

Locally, Jha is partnering with Valerie York-Zimmerman, president of Mindful Kids Miami (MKM), a nonprofit organization she founded with a goal of reaching Miami Dade students. They will conduct a school-year long research study at St. Thomas Episcopal Parish School in Coral Gables, focusing on mindfulness training on teachers and ultimately on their students.

As part of her research for the Army, Jha says, she wanted to study a civilian environment where employees have a predictable cycle of intense mental stress. She chose accounting, and approached the



Coconut Grove accounting firm Kaufman Rossin.

Nearly 200 employees volunteered for the two-week training.

"The typical mindfulness training is 31 hours in eight weeks. That's a lot of time to ask folks to give us," Jha says. "We're systematically trying to reduce that time to see if we can get similar benefits."

Despite years of hard work, no one seems more surprised by the steep trajectory of her success than Jha, who originally thought she'd become a medical doctor, before a stint in a local hospital uncovered a fascination with the brain.

"It is really weird," she says. "So many times I'm like, 'How the heck did I get here?'"

Jha found her calling as a result of her own suffering.

"I was grinding my teeth. I had two small kids. I had a full lab of grants I was managing, a full teaching load," says Jha, who was then a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

"I was at the end of writing a grant, and had to talk to some of my colleagues on a faculty retreat. I woke

up that morning, and I couldn't feel my teeth. I just looked at my husband, and said, 'I've got to quit my job.'"

That summer, Jha attended a lecture by another pioneer in the field, Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D., who showed images of two brains, one affected by positive emotions and the other by depressed thoughts.

At the end of his lecture, she raised her hand and asked, "How do I get that brain to look like that brain?"

"He just said meditation. And that was all he said. I thought, 'What is that?' You can't use that word [in the scientific community]. But it stuck in my head."

Growing up in a Hindu family, Jha says, meditation "was part of the culture, but it wasn't something I personally engaged in."

When she was a year old, her family moved to Wheaton, just outside Chicago, where she grew up.

After hearing Davidson, she bought Meditation for Beginners, and began practicing 10-minute exercises.

"By the end of the summer I felt better," Jha says. "I still had my kids, my family,

my job, but I was much happier. People in my lab noticed I was more engaged, my husband and I would have real conversations without my running away, the children liked to talk to me," she says laughing. "... I was just able to show up and pay attention."

"That was an aha moment. I knew it was a topic that was so compelling that I had to study it," Jha says.

She shifted her research from basic neuroscience to studying how the brain pays attention to contemplative neuroscience, focusing on "how to get the mind to pay better attention using mindfulness."

Today, she is busier than ever.

"I am so not the poster child for calm and balance," she says. "I am a continual work in progress."

How does she handle the success?

"Turn around," she says. "No seriously turn around. Look on the floor right there," she gestures toward bright red cushions in the corner of her office.

"Even when I don't practice on that cushion every day, I am glad I see it. It anchors me."

