

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



Veendum Bhagavante Maranam

Based on K.R Meera's short story of the same name

Language: Malayalam

Director: Hazim Amaravila

Company: Kanal Samskarika Vedhi, Thiruvananthapuram

It was Yasmine Reza who famously remarked that 'theatre is a mirror, a sharp reflection of society' and every play, in its own right holds up this mirror, forcing its audience to confront their conscience and beliefs. However, given the political climate of the country today, it is perhaps not enough to merely confront one's own morals and beliefs but also perhaps be explicitly shown the consequences of passiveness, of complacency, of silence. *Veendum Bhagavante Maranam*, a one-hundred-minute dramatic adaptation of K R Meera's short story of the same name perhaps best captures how art, and more specifically theatre poses a threat to society that struggles to separate morality from mysticism. I ought to specify at this juncture that linguistically, both the play and the short story remain beyond my understanding.

What I was told before watching the play was the background of the short story. K R Meera had written this post the assassination of Kalburgi. The next target for the right-wing fundamental group in the country was apparently K S Bhagavan, a renowned scholar. It is at this juncture that the play opened-Bhagavan was confronted by his armed assailant and as the tension began to rise, a voice from the audience yelled, 'Lights!' It was at this moment that the audience was introduced to the structure of the play - it veered between the rehearsal room and the actual story of which it was an adaptation of.

In retrospect, it seems as though the structure of the play is crucial as the 'play within a play' design exposes the actors and directors' fears with respect to the play and their lives outside the rehearsal room. Perhaps the most striking scene in the latter space is the love story that is woven into the 'real world' of the play. This love story presents a dichotomy - an inter-caste/inter religious love marriage that a senior member of the caste, who ironically plays Bhagavan in the play world of the play, takes offence to. What brings him around is police opposition to the staging of the play - their entrance is marked when the theatre troupe is engaged in a serious fight and with the police's exist, a sense of togetherness has taken over the troupe. A sense that seems to be saying that the 'other' is really marked by an ideological

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difference that is determined to curb any voice of dissent against them. The most pertinent aspect of this scene is that it confronts the audience with the exact question that seem to be unfolding on stage. What is the cost of speaking up or opposing those in power? The answer to this question perhaps lies in the experiences that the theatre troupe has faced in staging this play at different venues as Hazim Amaravila, the director of the play states at the very end – threat from local groups, censorship etc.

However, for me, the success of the play wasn't in any of the questions it confronted me with during the performance of the play. Some context might prove to be useful here. The play ends with the play's policemen cordoning off the stage and instructing the audience to leave the premise as it is now a crime scene. Reluctantly, the auditorium begins to empty itself. Right next to the exit, the pistol introduced in scene one seems to have gone off. The play ends. It is not the triggered bullet that has upset me – Chekov has adequately prepared me for this moment. It is, rather, the mundaneness of standing in a queue for the next play that is upsetting. The play hasn't left my mind and what it has left behind is far more haunting than the reality it brought on stage. It is my role as a spectator of the play, as a spectator of the horrors that the current government has unleashed on its minority. A role that has allowed for passiveness and indifference that seem to be uprooting the values of freedom and expression that the play stood for. Perhaps what shook me most about this play was not its reflection of society – that I was aware of and prepared for – but its reflection of me, an individual and the role I have been silently and guiltily playing to unconsciously help create this society.